

Translated excerpt

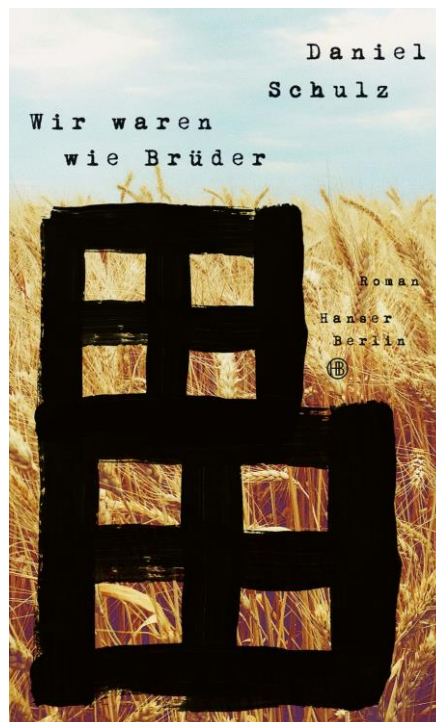
**Daniel Schulz**  
***Wir waren wie Brüder***

Verlag Hanser Berlin, Berlin 2022  
ISBN 978-3-446-27107-4

pp. 87-91, 139-143, 186-190, 196-200

**Daniel Schulz**  
***We Were Like Brothers***

Translated by David Burnett



## At night

I run the fingertips of my left hand over the little bumps of the wood-chip wallpaper. They feel like little pebbles. If I keep on doing it, the skin on my fingertips gets dusty-numb, as if I've been scraping off sand from the wallpaper, or little shards of glass. I don't know how long I've been doing this, the night expands time and compresses it as it pleases. The dust from the wall settles in the grooves of my skin where the police would take their fingerprints and sucks all the feeling from my fingers as if they were dying. I rub them on the bedspread, but the dead feeling doesn't go away. I stick them in my mouth, all four except for my thumb, one after the other, and suck on them like a baby. Luckily no one sees me.

I roll onto my left side and see my alarm clock on the dresser, the hands glow dimly in the dark, it's one o'clock. From the stove I hear muted voices. Slowly I push the covers back, wait five seconds, put my left foot on the floor, then my right, wait another five seconds, creep up to the stove on my tiptoes, wait yet another five seconds, then gently turn the knob to open the slats in the stove in slow motion. If you do it too fast it can rattle like two milk trucks crashing at an intersection. When they're slightly open, like blinds, I look through. The lights are out in the living room, the only bright thing is the television. My father is sitting in his chair. A woman and a man on the screen are conversing, she has a perm, through the slats all I recognize of him is his suit. Boring. I sneak back to bed. I pull the covers up to my neck, then kick them off, I'm sweating.

The skinheads stabbed a bum in Neuruppin, that wasn't very long ago. It was on the radio. He was sleeping on a park bench, drunk. They approached him, yelled at him, kicked him.

Supposedly they were wearing steel-toed shoes. Kicked him in the stomach and the head until he stopped moving. One of the skinheads smashed a beer bottle over his head. Then another

one pulled a knife and stabbed away. Seven-inch blade. I read that in the *Märkische Volksstimme*, in Markheide they call it the *Meckerstimme*, the “whiner’s rag.”

Once, back in the GDR, when we were chasing Mario for some stupid reason, Uwe said we all have to kick him, otherwise we’re cowards. There was a guy from Kleinau with us that day who only joined us now and then, everyone thought he was crazy. Whenever he was angry he’d grin and look right past you, which was kind of creepy. When he started kicking Mario, Uwe stood right beside him to make sure the crazy guy didn’t overdo it. There was surely no Uwe there when it happened in Neuruppin. Why couldn’t Mike defend himself against the guy with the knife? Why does he even practice wushu? When you’re in a fight it’s as useless as judo, all you learn is stupid throws instead of how to land a good punch.

My eyes itch as if there were sand in them. My arms are leaden, my legs too, but everything inside me is wide awake, my stomach grumbles, the acid keeps coming up my esophagus. When our teacher used to tell us in class about how the Nazis killed Communists, I didn’t think that dying was the worst part about it. The worst thing was that you were defenseless once the Nazis had caught you. In the evening someone knocks on your door and you think it’s probably the next-door neighbor. And then you open the door and they nab you, and there’s nothing you can do when the Gestapo or the SS torture you in a basement. The only chance you have to do anything is when they’re at your door. You might still manage to whip out a gun, or at least a kitchen knife. Maybe they’ll shoot you, fine, but at least that’s better than being at their mercy later.

I always picture these things in black and white, like an old movie. They used to show these Soviet films with the subtitles at the bottom of the screen, Red Army versus the Wehrmacht. The Soviet tanks always drove from right to left, my father once told me, from East to West, an unstoppable flow of vehicles moving towards Berlin.

That's how I imagined it back then, underneath the Tarzan tree. That we steamrolled the Fascists. And now they're running loose here.

I get up again and sneak over to my desk at the window. I push the blinds aside just enough to look out. No more lights on in block no. 3. Wait, no, there's a TV, two, three. They're unemployed, they can watch as long as they want. I let go of the blinds.

The dagger is hanging to the right of my desk. It belongs to my father, he has it from his days in the National People's Army. For parades. It's dull, I'm not allowed to sharpen it. But it's long. Almost ten inches, I've measured it a few times. I press a little pin in the hilt, that's the only way to get the blade out of its holder. It gleams in the bit of moonlight that comes in through the blinds. I hold the dagger and extend my arm, aiming the tip at an imaginary foe. That's how Uwe, Lars, Mario and I used to play with swords, back by the sand hills. I pull my hand back as if I'd changed my mind and wanted to put the knife away, but then, jab, I stab away, once, twice, three times into the darkness. I still hold the weapon in my outstretched hand, breathing easily, and try once again to be as fast as I was before, a thrust to the left, one to the right, left, right. It swishes softly when the blade whizzes through the air. When the Havelburgers first mentioned on the bus how the little boy in Starow had to eat dog shit, I was on the verge of secretly sharpening the blade. You have to use a weapon to its advantage, and a dull knife is useless. The stomach acid rises again. I don't know why that happens to me sometimes. I almost asked my mother the other day, but then I remembered that she nearly took me to the psychiatrist once just for giving her the silent treatment. You're stubborn, she said, and yet sometimes I just don't know what to say. No, I screamed, I'm not going to any loony bin.

Three times I stab away, throat, stomach, eye, three dead fascists. I can't see their faces, I never see faces in my dreams, but I can hear the crunching sound when the dagger goes in.

My arms are getting heavy. The acid is gone, and I'm getting tired. Three skinheads. I wouldn't have a chance against them. They'd burn me one, like the worker at the produce-sorting plant, and I'd go flying into the corner like him. If my mother weren't so stupid we'd still have my father's gun. Back in the GDR, his Makarov was sometimes on the top shelf of the wall unit. It's not there anymore. I looked everywhere. With a gun like that I could easily handle three guys. Even seven.

I whizz the knife through the air one more time. Bam! It bangs against the wall, I lunged a little too far.

I try to stick the knife in the case but can't find the damn slit. Footsteps. I throw it on the bed and jump in after it, pull up the covers and then the door opens. The light from the hallway makes little glittering bright spots dance behind my squinting eyelids.

## **Fight pants**

I've just gotten myself a soft-serve ice-cream from the vending machine on Bahnhofstrasse when I see Mario. He's carrying an antenna, probably five feet long, the thin black end bobbing up and down over his shoulder. We tried our hand at CB radios, but I don't have the money for good equipment and the cheap used one I bought died on me before long. "Why didn't you just take my old antenna?" I ask him. I'd just have to unscrew it from the windowsill at home. Then somebody yanks him from behind by his right arm, a guy with a square face like Dolph Lundgren and a haircut that looks like his mother put a bowl on his head and cut off everything sticking out underneath it. He says, "Come on, you little squirt, let's get this over with." Says it in a calm, almost fatherly way.

His face looks familiar, but I don't have time to think about it, since he's about to punch Mario. He takes a swing, I hold back his arm and say: "Hey, dude, what the fuck?"

"Mind your own business, asshole, the dumbass knows exactly what's going on, at the disco, last Saturday, why don't you tell us about it!" Mario's eyes are as big as plates. "No idea, man." Square Face isn't satisfied. "Don't lie, scumbag!" he screams, "we'll settle it right now and get it over with." He tries to free his arm, shake me off like a hamster that's sunk its teeth into his finger. He yells at me and I yell back. I'm suddenly pretty pissed, since this is one of the biggest streets in Starow, people are coming out of the stores and no one does anything. Two guys in carpenter outfits walked right past us, laughing like morons. Maybe I'm allowed to be pissed, since there's two of us and the guy is on his own. Mario is pale as a sheet. Suddenly Dolph Lundgren lets him go, turns around and clears out. When he's a few yards away he calls out: "We'll meet again!"

Three weeks later I'm outdoors in Markheide with Laika on a leash ahead of me, panting like a little steam engine. We've just walked her favorite route behind block no. 4 and are heading to the garages. All of a sudden a black Ford Fiesta stops beside us and out jumps Square Face in person, and he's got someone with him who looks like him, just an older version, probably his brother or cousin, some relative in any case. He doesn't want to fight, he says, just wants me to get down on my knees and apologize for getting in his way.

And instead of doing what he says, I start to argue: "How come? He's my friend."

"Okay," says Square Face, and he gets all wild-eyed, "okay. Then let me just put on my fight pants first." And he reaches into the trunk of his car, takes off his cut-off jeans and puts on another pair just like it. I grin, even though I'm afraid he'll punch me in the face, I try to wipe it off, the grin, but don't really manage, and he sees it and it makes him even angrier. He chews while he's changing, like he's crushing rocks with his teeth.

The other guy, let's call him Square Face II, takes the dog leash out of my hand. I think, crap, now the shit's gonna hit the fan, and I search inside myself for the anger I felt three weeks ago in Starow, but don't find anything.

He even lets me have the first punch, and the two Lundgrens piss themselves laughing because of the way I hold my arms, look at him, you look like a faggot dancing, and they laugh even harder when I say, "No feet." That was a rule here in Markheide, before the Wall came down, when we got into fist fights on the lawn between the blocks.

Then Fight Pants gives me a full karate kick, and suddenly I'm lying there in front of a garage door covering my head with my hands, and he kicks me, balls to the wall, luckily he only hits my stomach once, but he lands his foot on my rib cage multiple times, then he wants to go for my face. He lets it rip like Lothar Matthäus, has to exert himself, he's obviously got the wrong shoes on, always remember to wear sturdy shoes, our shop teachers used to tell us,

he obviously wasn't paying attention. If he'd kick with the right footwear, with steel-toed boots or something like that, I would have been done for ages ago, but all he has is his gray tennis shoes, and my arms are in his way. Even now I hear the voice inside me. Fight pants, hee-hee. My back bangs against the garage door with every kick.

I used to think that if it's do or die, if I can't run away and the other guy starts punching me, I'll just hit him back. Of course, when I was ten I also thought I could do magic. But the punching, I actually practiced that. You can still see the streaks on the wall of my room, I wanted to see if I could hit where I was aiming. It really took a toll on my knuckles.

The garage door is made of blue-painted sheet metal, and it sounds like a church bell, dong, dong, dong, every time I bang against it.

"Are you out of your mind?" An angry female voice.

"Fuck off, Jacqueline!"

"Stop it, man, you're gonna kill him!" She really lets him have it.

And then he stops, just like that. When I lift my head I see her, younger than me, long black hair, gentle face. She lives in block no. 4, we've seen each other before.

Jacqueline says, "He's already down, you won, that's enough."

Fight Pants looks down at me. "Remember one thing, bucko, if you've got a big mouth you'd better be able to back it up." Those are his last words, then he turns to go. His buddy tosses me the dog leash. They get in the car and drive away.

I get up and dust myself off. Nothing hurts. That's the shock, says a voice in my head. But my nose is bleeding, I notice that. Jacqueline stands next to me, she looks at me without pity, more astonished, like she'd just seen a butterfly in autumn. She says, "Nothing wrong with punching someone in the face now and then, but kicking them when they're down, I really



can't stand that." I say, "Thanks," she nods, turns around and leaves. Laika barks and barks. She was probably barking the whole time.

Rescued by Jacqueline from block no. 4. If people get wind of this, I'm bound to be everyone's punching bag. Even worse is that I now know for sure that my arms are really just full of air. Yes, my friend, you're a victim, welcome to Suckerville, you now live on Pussy Street.

When my mother sees my face she starts to bawl and wants to go straight to the cops. Luckily I manage to dissuade her. First, it wouldn't do any good, and, second, living as a tattletale is pretty dangerous. My father wants to ask the Ox, that's his coworker who hangs around with boxers in Berlin. He could send a few guys around. I'm grateful, because for a few brief minutes I don't feel like a total wimp and have the luxury of imagining Fight Pants outside his house one evening being ripped apart by four musclemen. In the end we don't do it. Because, who knows, Ox's men might wind up killing the guy.

## **Fishing ballet**

“Your parents are sweet,” says Mariam. We’re lying on our bellies, the meadow grass right under our noses, the Havel flowing twenty yards away. My parents and I always drive to the same spot to fish. Mariam says it’s her favorite place to sunbathe. But I’ve never seen her here before. Her dog Micki is roaming around here somewhere. Like a little yellow lion, he sat beside us for a while, panting. I don’t see him anywhere right now. Mariam says he’ll find his way home on his own.

My father skips along the bank, as if this were the Bolshoi Theater. Then he stops, standing on his right leg, the left one bent in the air, a fat crane. Casts his line, and the lure buzzes out across the water. Reels it back in, and starts all over. It’s supposed to attract fish. My mother holds her rod in the river and lets the float drift along the surface, occasionally glancing over at my father and giving him the finger. Once she turns around and yells, “Who is this guy? You know him?” My father laughs and says, “See you later! Looks like you’re ready to go back home.” He’s got the car keys.

“When they’re not fighting they’re pretty cool.” I keep my head up, as if I were still looking out at the water, and turn my head so far to the left, towards Mariam, that it hurts. She looks pretty fantastic in her bikini.

“Are you letting it grow?” Mariam pulls on my hair, behind my right ear, tugs at it pretty hard. “Uh-huh. Why, you think it’s lame?” I cross my arms and lay my forehead on top. Blades of grass tickle my nose.

“Well, a real haircut would probably suit you better.” That’s what my mom says too. And Grandma Lisbeth. And Volker and Dominik and the whole parking-lot gang.

“What do your new friends think about it?” She gets along well with Dominik, but she couldn’t stand Volker and Sandro when they all went to the same school together in Havelburg.

“Nothing much.” My voice sounds muffled in the warm hollow between my head and the meadow. “They don’t mind.” Mariam of all people has to open her big mouth. She was going with the slim one, Sandro’s friend. He had SS runes tattooed on his lower lip, not on the outside, of course, but inside. Volker and Dominik told me that. Something sharp stabs me in the ribs, I flip onto my side and land directly on our seltzer-water bottle. It makes a loud clank, luckily nothing breaks.

Mariam laughs, she’s facing me now. In her right hand she’s holding a little stick.

“Ha-ha,” I say, and lie down next to her again. I can’t stop looking at a spot between her breasts, there are four little moles there, the corners of a kite in the autumn wind. Her apple perfume fills my nostrils. Mariam scratches her leg, I can see the red streaks up close like through a microscope. I’d like to touch that spot, brush it with my fingertips, just to know what it feels like. Warmth floods my veins and stomach, and I have to think of something else. Math, or something like that. “Can I ask you something?” I say.

She looks me in the eye, did she blink? Or was it just a stray flash of sunlight? “Sure.”

“Do you know the feeling when you like someone, because he’s cool and helpful and everything, then all of a sudden he starts talking total bullshit and you don’t know what to say anymore, because it can’t be the same person. And your brain freezes up and you can’t speak.”

Mariam raises both eyebrows. “I wouldn’t want to live in your brain. All cluttered like our attic.” She smiles, but not in a smug way, just because. “Sorry, I didn’t know who else to

ask.” Mariam turns over onto her stomach again and I look at her behind. There are two little dimples right where her legs begin. Her ass is smiling at me.

If I dared to keep talking, I’d tell her I’m letting my hair grow because of Volker and Dominik, and because of Mario. Since Sandro’s birthday we no longer talk about politics. “There’s no point anyway,” Volker said, “you know what we think and we know what you think, and that’s that.” Of course, they still keep talking big. And all the bullshit they feed me just simmers inside me. I had to do something. They get upset about my hair at least once a day, I hope they’ve got stomach acid coming up their throats all the time like me. I’d like to tell Mariam that. But after what I’ve just said, better not.

“I’ve had it!” My father throws his fishing rod on the ground. My mother stands there, bends over, straightens up, bends over again. “What’s wrong?” I shout. My father comes stomping like a rhino. “Your mother just caught a fish.”

“So what’s the big deal?”

He snorts. “Without any bait. She didn’t even put any dough on the hook!” My mother stands on the riverbank, she whinnies when she laughs, first like a single horse, then two, then a whole herd. Walkers stop and stare like carp, maybe my father can take one of them home. “You’re turning red again,” says Mariam.

“Hmm.”

“Do you find your mother embarrassing?” She squeals when I poke her in the side with my right index finger, then with the left, then with the right again.

Fifteen minutes later I’m carrying the tackle box and the blanket to the car, Mariam the bottles. My parents take the rods and the net. My father says he threw all the fish back in,

because they were all way too small. He looks at my mother triumphantly and says, “You weirdo.”

The two of them still look like Sandra and Alain Delon. Other parents look decrepit, weathered like ancient statues, but mine just look old when they get back from work.

“Is it true you were making out with Nancy Duziak?” Mariam is standing right in front of me grinning, the white of her teeth flashes in the left corner of her mouth. Criminals smile like that, and wolves in cartoons.

“What? No!” She kissed me. Back by the new lake, on the outskirts of Starow. Next to the industrial park. The factories there had to dig the place up as compensation, since they covered everything with concrete. Doe Eyes, Melanie that is, was there too, because Volker and her are an item, and she brought Nancy along. In the evening, when everyone was plastered, she suddenly stuck her tongue in my mouth.

“You know she’s going with Manual, don’t you?” Mariam keeps grinning. All of her teeth are flashing at me now. She still looks like a Wolf. But a real one.

“With who?”

“He was with you guys in Hagenswerder. The one they beat up.”

Hematoma. That’s the name I gave him. I can’t remember what some people are called.

Manuel sounds like a total geek. The kiss, at any rate, was just a bet between Nancy and Doe Eyes. They wanted to know if I was any good at it. Nancy says it was okay. When I think about it, I get a tingling sensation in my mouth, as if I were eating Cosmic Candy.

“First time?” Mariam pokes me in the stomach with her right index finger. I open my mouth, though I don’t have a clue what I even want to say. “Your parents are ready to go.” She hugs me, and black curls tickle my nose. Then she waves again, slips into a pair of loose black

pants, and walks up the cobbled street towards Havelburg. Her hips might be swaying more than usual, I'm not sure.

## Contracts

The former guardians of the GDR are snoring in my room. I see them lying on our air mattresses when I turn my head to the left. Grainy twilight seeps through the blinds and into my room from the moon and the streetlamp at the corner of block no. 1. All the men have skinny legs and fat bellies, except the one right next to my bed, he looks in shape and has a mug like Faceman from *The A-Team*. He was with State Security at the border, control unit, maybe they had to be good-looking there.

To the left of him: the guy who always snorkels for two minutes, as if he were diving in shallow water, then crescendos to a loud sawing noise, until it breaks off and everything goes quiet, only to start all over again. He was in Department 1, a kind of secret police within the People's Police, they made sure that none of the cops stepped out of line.

A little but farther to the left, directly against the wall: thinning brown hair, face like a dried pea, a deep and growling snore, as if it were coming from deep below the surface of the earth. Main Directorate for Reconnaissance with State Security, that is to say foreign espionage.

And at our feet, lying perpendicular to us, sleeps the biggest one of all, a good six and a half feet tall, he snores with a whimper like an out-of-tune violin, he was with the Felix Dzierzynski guard regiment.

My father, of course, is over in the bedroom with my mother. If he did lie down with them, though, the National People's Army would join their slumber party.

Tonight it was almost like being back in the GDR. Laughing men, potato salads with egg, and on the round table in the kitchen the requisite bottles of corn schnapps and "Gold Crown"

brandy. A party with colleagues, here in our home. My father invited them all, for his birthday. And my mother prepared the food the way she used to back in the GDR.

The men talked about the past, the usual anecdotes about everything that went wrong in the GDR and what was better, and about '89. About how they refused to obey orders when they were supposed to shoot at protesters, and how they took the guns away from their commanding officers. For their sake I hope at least some of it is true.

Thinking of the party gives me a fuzzy feeling in my belly, but it also makes we want to cry.

The Felix Dzierzynski guard regiment escalates its snoring whimper into a constricted howl, like a wolf that's gotten stuck somewhere.

Many of the guys who used to work for the Stasi work for insurance companies now, same goes for some from the police and the army. My father says there were no background checks, no one asked what they did before. Sometimes I imagine these men protecting each other now the way they were supposed to protect the GDR before. That there's a certain camaraderie among them, or at least a certain understanding. But that's not the case. Once they were drunk, they openly aired their opinions. The border guard from the Stasi was insuring a company that was supposed to go to the policeman. But Faceman claims he just happened to pick up the phone at the right moment.

The guard regiment had to give a few of its clients to my father. "Ingo kisses ass with the boss," the dried pea from foreign espionage said.

"You've got the most skeletons in your closet," my father countered. The pea somehow manages to figure out whenever the others have hooked a well-paying client, and then he shows up first and seals the deal.



My father used to command a tank battalion, so if a traffic policeman ever stopped him on the road he could tell the guy to go find another job. He was even invited to the subsecondary school in Markheide, where he showed us how a Kalashnikov works.

Nowadays he has to go door to door begging people for money in a way that they don't notice.

The work is having an effect on my father. He's telling other stories about the army than the ones he used to. No adventure stories, and no punchlines at the end. Just two weeks ago he talked about how his unit was mobilized when the Czechs began their uprising against the Soviets in 1968. He stood with his tanks outside the barracks, the motors were running, they were supposed to head to Prague, but the final order never came.

"Would you have opened fire at them?" I asked him. The hundredth rerun of *The Terminator* was playing on the TV. He said his commanding officers would have given his soldiers the news they needed to fire them up for battle.

Pictures of burned Russians, since the Czechs had thrown Molotov cocktails at them. "If it had been a matter of them or me, I would have shot at them, yes," he said. He'd surely be a war criminal now, or something of the sort.

Maybe he'd been lucky somehow, with all these strange guys from the insurance business.

Department 1 of the People's Police changes his snorkeling rhythm, now it's time for deep-sea diving, with long, bubbling gurgling noises he sucks the oxygen out of the room. I can practically feel how there's less and less air for me to breathe. A good salesman manages to convince his customers it was their idea to buy something. My father learned the tricks of the trade, and recites them to himself here at home now and then. To me it's mumbo jumbo, just like all the other mantras East Germans started chanting once the Wall came down, trying to

teach each other how the new system works. *Every man for himself. As long as you can make ends meet. You gotta look out for number one, because nobody else will.*

My father's insurance business is sometimes up, sometimes down. My parents close the door when they fight in the living room, but the walls are thin in prefab buildings, I can understand every word.

"You have to try harder, Ingo."

"Yessir, comrade, I won't just meet, I'll exceed the work target!"

"I'm serious."

"What do you think, Magdalena, that I'm out there putting my pubic hair in curlers?"

"Don't drink so much!"

"Here we go again, you don't know when to stop, do you!"

Sometimes I'm furious at my mother. In the GDR my father earned more than she did, and now it's the other way around. That should even the score. Besides, my father once showed her boss what's what. He pulled up in his staff car, in full dress uniform, with his army dagger and all his medals. After that my mother earned just as much as all the fellas running the plant farm.

Once I asked her if she thinks it's fair always bitching at my father now. Her face hardened into a monument. "You have no idea," she said. And it's true. I'd rather stay out of it. The more contracts my father signs for the insurance company, the more he says: I don't have a contract on me. That means he doesn't care about something. Should we get a brown couch or this green one? Whatever you think, I don't have a contract on me. Vacation on the Baltic Sea or Lake Balaton instead? You decide, I don't have a contract on me. Chocolate or vanilla, rice or pasta – he's never got a contract on him. I ask myself if he used to be the same or if

something is moldering inside him, the way some trees start to slowly rot from the inside out until they just fall over.

Silence. The big snoring concert is over. Maybe there's so little air left in the room that everyone lying on the floor has suffocated already. And while I wonder whether carbon dioxide rises, and whether I should open the window just to be on the safe side, I finally fall asleep.