

Orkun Ertener

What happened so far (and never should have)

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Finn and Paul have been inseparable since early childhood. Now, shortly before their A levels, everything is different. Their future is uncertain, and this frightens them. And then there's Khalil, who has suddenly come between them. Unpredictable and erratic Khalil, whom Paul idolises, and Finn doesn't trust an inch.

After Paul has a bad accident, he has to accept that his memory doesn't extend beyond a day. In the rehab facility, Paul receives an alarming letter from Khalil, which leads him to fear the worst. Paul convinces Finn that they must stop Khalil. So, they embark on a road trip, which takes them from Cologne via Berlin and London to the G20 Summit in Hamburg. And changes everything forever.

- **A book about friendship and how it feels when a single moment changes everything forever**
- **The new novel by Orkun Ertener, recipient of the prestigious Grimme Preis television award**
- **For readers of *Blackbird*, *The Goldfinch* and *Why we Took the Car***

Orkun Ertener, born in 1966, lives with his family in Cologne. He writes predominantly for TV and has received numerous awards for his work, e.g. the Adolf Grimme Preis for the series *KDD-Kriminaldauerdienst*, which he developed. His first novel, *Lebt*, was number one on the crime fiction bestseller list, and was praised by critics and readers alike.

Translated by Bradley Schmidt

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As always, the feud erupted before Easter.

Finn had no intention of participating, and didn't understand what motivated the others, but he was impressed by the declaration of war, which had already been posted online by mid-February, an elaborately produced clip with a thumping metal soundtrack. Masked men wearing black hoodies with the CCC label and easy for Finn to identify, marched through the night with burning torches, had the logo of their gang tattooed on their upper arms in an artfully illuminated vaulted space, fought with a stubborn pig and the German spelling until they all ended up in an empty pool, covered with paint. The wealth of ideas and the high cinematic quality of the video, the result of nights of teamwork in which Paul and Khalil had played a major role, remained as hidden from the adult grumblers as the ease that permeated each image. Last year, the material damage had mainly consisted of cleaning costs, which Dr. Hanke, the headmaster, had hot-headedly calculated to be in the tens of thousands at a plenary meeting was. And even back then, national newspapers and television magazines, in addition to the local press, were occasionally interested in the school feuds, which had become a tradition in the city and were raging more nastily from year to year.

This time, Hanke and the other headmasters in the city wanted to prevent the worst from happening, and in the delicate phase before the exams there could hardly be anything worse than an increase in media interest. After the city's largest local newspaper published a pointed article about the feud video and triggered a flood of comments in its online edition by grumpy readers who were worried about their tax money and the quality of education and character development in today's schools, serious warnings and threats were

the order of the day at all the grammar schools. Finn's school was stricter than the others, after all, Goethe Gymnasium was home to the *Classic Combat Commando*, which had released the film on several video platforms. Everyone could remember that the Commando members of the previous high school graduating classes had carried out the feud very thoroughly and with delight, and the new video left no doubt that the next class wanted to keep the tradition alive. That is why Finn wasn't surprised when the school administration immediately declared the CCC a terrorist organization and banned the group from assembling on school grounds, wearing clothing with the emblem of the commando, distributing leaflets, posting stickers, and anything else that might serve to prepare for feud. With severe punishments, including exclusion from high school examinations, not only the hard core of the activists was threatened, but also the army of sympathizers: Anyone who supported the video on the web by liking it was blacklisted and lost the right to examination advice from the class councilor. Apparently, teachers had been delegated to check the internet daily. Finn didn't need any more advice and didn't feel like justifying himself to Paul, so he clicked the thumbs up and had his peace.

Open protests against the school management's harsh measures were only made by individual parents, veterans of long forgotten fights, who had waited a long time for a sign of rebellion among their children and now gratefully took advantage of the opportunity to reproach Dr. Hanke for authoritarian actions in emails and phone calls. The CCC, however, liked the hard line. The bans increased the thrill and also had the chance to significantly increase the attention that should be avoided. Trained in dealing with the intricacies of the Internet, the officers of the school's army let the repressions of their school directors leak out without wasting any heated words, thus triggering press inquiries from all over the country, which spoiled the work days of Hanke and all other school directors. The journalists

were getting ready for the upcoming battles, the combatants had long since been.

With the beginning of the last regular week of school in their lives, the Monday before the Easter holidays, the city's high school graduates of fought their first battles. Traditional weapons were used: Paint and flour bombs, whistles and horns, water pistols, aerosols, garish war paint, odd costumes and threatening gestures, deafening battle songs, megaphones. In previous years, rival schools had been attacked during teaching hours, often causing collateral damage to students in the lower grades and their teachers. This time the warring parties agreed to fight nightly battles on neutral territory. Journalists were almost always present, and the police also arrived to break up the encounters, alarmed by angry residents or bored press who wanted to get some useful pictures. The yield was meager. This year as well there were only minor skirmishes, especially in the fight for the school flags to be captured and defended. The fights did not have consequences worse than soaked and dirty clothes, apart from widespread hoarseness and the effects of high alcohol consumption the morning after. Every morning, a tipsy Paul told about his night's heroic deeds, fortunately always so overtired that he expected no more from Finn than an appreciative smile.

The decisive battle was scheduled to take place Thursday night. The CCC, which had been officially informed of the imminent joint attack by several enemy schools, had gathered its troops in the green area between the small school alley and the four-lane main thoroughfare. The school management's domiciliary rights didn't apply there. At the closed school gate, a banner with the Classic Combat Commando lettering hung above a very accomplished copy of Warhol's Goethe, which had been made the year before last by a commando member who had taken art class. Six students, Paul and Khalil among them, stood as flag guards on the sidewalk, which the headmaster had unceremoniously defined as school grounds, but no one could take any notice of them tonight. The class was almost completely



assembled, on the green strip opposite, barely a park with a few trees and three benches, about a hundred wildly costumed high school graduates, plus half a dozen print journalists and two camera teams. The pupils prepared the last flour and paint bombs, had themselves interviewed, chatted, bawled, sang, kissed and drank. The journalists were too sober not to be alienated by the noise around them and waited impatiently for the output of their night shift. The students were looking forward to the climax of their week of celebration with much more fever, many of them hoping for a few coals of memory to warm themselves with the upcoming time of uncertainty.

Finn, whom Paul would have left no choice that last evening anyway, was here because Daria was here, and Daria was here because they all were. But she was no lamb. When all hands were up, you could see regularly and yet each time you were surprised that her hand stayed down. Daria never hesitated to confront a teacher or a whole group with her point of view alone, much less to call Finn a comfortable, lazy idiot when he behaved like a comfortable, lazy idiot, but she still cared a lot about cohesion and the politeness of good humor. Daria liked to fit in, as discreetly and patiently as possible, but there was always a residual distance. She almost always saw the big picture, which most others, Finn included, couldn't see anymore. If Finn had ever asked questions, he would have asked Daria if her inner freedom, which attracted him almost as much as her eyes, the vibrato of her voice and every millimeter of her incredible body, could have something to do with her origin. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Daria's parents had landed in Finn's hometown, where she was born as the youngest of four children. Although Daria talked about her parents' life as if it were a banality that was familiar to everyone in one way or another, there seemed to be things in her that were not covered. Finn suspected the source of her strength was to be found in these gaps, but he didn't ask any questions, it was too early and too late for dances on the ice. They hadn't been together for long, if it could be called that at all, more than burning kisses and short, delicious

moments under her T-shirt had never happened before. Considering the short time left until graduation and Daria's seriousness, it was not to be expected that more could happen. There was an attack of wistfulness, which he hadn't seen coming, Finn only got a grip on when he put his arm around Daria's hip and pulled her close.

"Absolutely insane," he said.

"What? Berit Landmann's boobs?" Only Daria could speak so innocently vulgar. Finn was incredibly lucky.

"The press. What do they want to do with all those interviews?"

Daria kept staring at Berit's boobs, which hardly had room in her cut-up T-shirt. Finn was surprised that David Lohse, in whose mouth Berit buried her tongue, kept his hands under control.

"They're really not bad," said Daria. "Do you think I can touch them?"

"I can ask her if you want. She talks to me again."

Daria broke free from Finn's embrace and looked at him defiantly.

"Oh, yeah?"

"She asked if she could copy your math test. She wasn't there last class."

"Sounds romantic."

"Indeed," Finn said and took Daria in his arms again. "Unfortunately they didn't have any champagne or candles in the copy shop."

When he looked at Berit, Finn could easily understand why he had been with her, but even easier, why he had broken up with her more than a year ago. Daria was not innocent in this, although after his break-up with Berit it had taken almost eight months until Finn realized that waiting didn't help. During middle school Daria had been in a parallel class, and only started having classes together in high school. Although Finn was basically reticent with his views and took a long time to arrive at an opinion, he was tempted to contradict Daria's German and History lessons from the very first second and got involved in discussions that almost always turned into duels. Without



exception, Daria and Finn always had opposing opinions, ploughing through each other's arguments, tearing them to pieces and arguing relentlessly until one of them suddenly put down their weapons in the end and agreed with the other person. The victory, the balance was more or less even, was a pleasant side effect for both of them, apparently it was all about something like truth, to which nothing helped them more than their unbridled quarrel. Nevertheless, it took two long years of high school until Finn got an idea of what it could still be about, and he wasted further months until he had the feeling that Daria had tested him long enough to be allowed to invite her to the movies. The fact that she immediately said yes sounded promising, that she suggested a matinee on Sunday in her next breath could, however, be nothing more than a polite sign, better to expect nothing, so he expected nothing when he met her in front of the cinema. No sooner had the lights gone out than she had her mouth on his, there was only her hands, her smell and the depressing certainty that the film could not last forever. To this day, Finn didn't know exactly what *A Perfect Day* was about.

"Will you take me out for a copy date sometime?" Daria asked whisperingly as they moved away from Berit and her breasts.

"I don't know if we're ready for that, darling."

Finn received a pat on the cheek, followed by a long kiss. He'd remember that pat as little as anyone had ever remembered it. Daria suddenly got serious, pointed over to the school, where by then more students were standing in front of the banner with Paul and Khalil.

"Second or third bottle?"

As Paul drank, it could have been water, but it was vodka. He only put the bottle down when Khalil reached for it.

"They just started here," Finn said, realizing he was protecting Paul again.

Paul drank a lot, not only during this special week. He didn't drink more than Khalil, but he couldn't take as much. It was too often that

Paul didn't get out of bed in the morning, his absences were just below the maximum allowance.

"I hope you can keep up with them," said Daria.

The trip. Starting at the beginning of July, almost three months together with Paul and Khalil through the States, from the East Coast to the West Coast and back through Canada, to finally drop Khalil off at his College in Providence and fly back from Boston. The flights had long been booked when Daria pulled Finn into her own clouds at the cinema.

Finn and Paul had been friends since first grade. They had started dreaming of their trip when they were ten or eleven, and each year they had more and more colorful pictures of what they would experience. Finn couldn't remember when it was decided that Khalil would accompany them. It was obvious. Khalil, whom Paul had brought along around two or three years ago. He had already been accepted at Brown and would be studying there, starting in September. Besides, he had family in Manhattan and Vancouver they could stay with.

"There's no way I'm keeping up with them." Finn's laugh turned into a sheepish look. "That wouldn't be the only reason not to go along."

Daria would be gone by the time he got back from America in October. As a volunteer in the voluntary service program from the German Foreign Office, she would spend a year as a trainee at a partner broadcaster of *Deutsche Welle* in Tanzania and then study law and politics in Münster. She just didn't know which master's course she wanted to take afterwards and whether her exchange year would take her to Paris or London. While Daria planned the coming years with the same precision with which Finn's mother designed her houses, he himself had only ever thought up to his high school graduation. Until then, everything had emerged from something else. He only had a few weeks left before the future arrived, while Daria still existed. Finn was able to extend the reprieve by three short months, but Daria only

responded to the offer in his last remark with a shy smile unusually for her. Keeping each other from once made plans was a bigger taboo than an invitation to a satanic orgy.

“My parents are staying the night in Duisburg,” said Daria, “rocking my sister’s baby.”

Even if it was a spontaneous consolation, it wasn’t a cheap one, certainly not a false one. Anything could happen in this strange week, but Finn hadn’t expected this. He understood right away, but he kept quiet, Daria should say it.

“I’m sure they would be overjoyed if you would take me home and look after me tonight.”

“I have a few meetings,” said Finn. “But I’m sure I can reschedule.”

Daria let him get away with it. The kiss she was standing on her toes for never happened. A flour bomb hit Finn on the head and Daria was also dusted white. The first attackers had snuck up and unleashed the storm, and in less than a blink of an eye later their companions appeared from all sides, jumped out of cars, from motor scooters and bicycles, came running with shrill cries. Cheers broke out among the Goethe students, and the photographers and cameramen, who were somewhat spared the attacks of water, paint and flour, also seemed relieved and amped up. Like everyone else, Daria and Finn reached for their loaded bags, which were waiting everywhere in cardboard boxes, threw and hit, were hit, made a lot of noise and laughter, surrendered to the overwhelming intoxication that gripped them all. Some tried to come to the aid of the flag guards at the school gate, but the opponents, an overwhelming majority, blocked the narrow road to the school and let no one through. Paul, Khalil and the other protectors of the banner remained on their own. As far as allowed by the fights in which he himself was involved, Finn looked to them again and again and was pleased that Khalil, who resisted more passionately than all the others put together, was already completely soaked and

stained with flour and paint. Not even he would be able to fend off the attackers in the long run.

While trying to avoid a projectile, Daria slipped and landed on the ground. Finn let himself fall and used the moment to hold Daria, but she dutifully freed herself from Finn's tender exuberance and quickly got up again. As she pulled Finn up, Daria pointed to the school gate: The CCC flag had passed into enemy hands. One of the opposing pupils crumpled it up and, accompanied by the triumphal cry of his comrades, ran off with the booty.

Paul managed to break through and chase him. Khalil, who like the others, was held by the enemy, took a while before he could shake them off and start the pursuit as well. The boy who had grabbed the banner ran like a football player, zigzagging past the obstacles in the park, holding the trophy of cloth to his chest instead of a leather ball. No Goethe pupil succeeded in stopping him, even Daria reached for him in vain. Although Finn had a real chance to seize the enemy, he let him pass, preferring to look at himself cheerfully as Paul, intoxicated with alcohol and bellicosity, pursued him with a glowing head and idiotic war cries. Paul was flanked by other Goethe students, who in turn were confronted by their opponents to shield their fleeing comrade as best they could. The first police siren could be heard when the flag robber had crossed the green strip and reached the busy main road. He wouldn't wait for green. Even though many drivers drove slower than usual because of the crowd in the park, most of them certainly out of curiosity, he couldn't just keep going. He hesitated long enough to lose his lead. On the sidewalk, Paul got hold of him and one end of the banner, immediately their respective companions were there and got tangled up, including Khalil. The photographers and cameramen caught up and danced around them excitedly. Finn wouldn't have been surprised if they had given stage directions. For a while he couldn't see Paul anymore. When Paul emerged from the crowd again, he had the banner in his hand, held it over his head for a moment, cheering, and ran off. Not back to the park, where the danger



of running into the enemy was too great. To the street. Intoxicated with victory, without looking back.

Paul was lucky. Finn would watch every accident video he could find on the Internet for the next few months, random cell phone recordings, lab recordings with plastic dummies, dashcam videos from Russia, everything. Over and over again, he would see, often in slow motion, a pedestrian who was hit head-on by a car would first crash into the hood and hit his head against the windshield, which usually splinters, only to be catapulted forward several meters and finally hit the ground. Usually the vehicle comes to a halt before it drives over the body lying on the road ahead, but not always.

Paul's accident was unusual. The driver of the car in front of which Paul suddenly appeared had already braked due to the tumult on the sidewalk and was not going faster than twenty, at most thirty kilometers per hour. He immediately went slammed on the brakes and pulled the steering wheel to the left. With this movement the car hit Paul just level with the right headlight, a calamity that a few centimeters would have prevented, a fraction of a single second. Paul was thrown to the side. Not a high arch, no spectacular picture, hardly more than a billiard shot. Paul came to rest at the edge of the sidewalk and did not move.

Screams as if from a single mouth. Daria. Grabbing Finn's arm, her face buried into his shoulder. The patrol car. The petrified faces of the students. The sudden cessation of the noise, the brief, grotesque silence. The police officers getting out and running. The traffic light, forever on red. Photographers and camera operators looking for the best perspective. Khalil pushing one of them aside to clear the way to Paul. A camera falling to the ground. Another siren, another flickering blue light. People looking out windows. The bus, the cars: like vehicles on a frozen merry-go-round. The banner on the pavement. Daria's hand, her hair on his cheek. Finn noticed details, tried to memorize them like facts he had to write a test about, but nothing fit together. As

if someone was shouting words at random, but insisting that they were sentences.

Only when Daria looked at Paul did Finn look at him again. Khalil knelt next to him and couldn't do more than watch the policewoman who immediately took care of Paul while her colleague spoke frantically into his radio. Two more patrol cars arrived. One of the police officers ran to Paul and helped his colleague with first aid, the others started to block off the road.

Khalil got up, looked down at Paul for a moment, then turned away, looked around and slowly walked towards a group of students who were among the attackers. Khalil stopped in front of the boy who had stolen the banner, and looked at him for a long time, completely expressionless. No one spoke, no one stirred, not even when Khalil began to beat the boy. The first punch hit his belly, the second hit his face. The boy fell to the ground. Everyone took a few steps back, no one intervened, no one made a sound. Someone seemed to need to be punished, everyone was lucky if it was not them. Khalil was able to kick his victim one more time before two policemen pulled him away. They needed the third colleague to push him to the ground.

They were both lying there. Khalil on his stomach, his hands fixed with plastic restraints, Paul on his back, hardly changed in position since the impact. Finn watched. He was standing.