

Original Title: *Skolen* (2013, DK), 139 pages  
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Publisher: © Høst & Søn/ Rosinante & Co., Copenhagen, Denmark  
Foreign Rights: Stinne Hjortlund, stinne\_hjortlund@gyldendalgroupagency.dk  
English working title: *The School*  
Published in German as: *Opfer*, © Hanser Verlag, München, February 2016, trans. Friederike Buchinger  
Published in Dutch as: *Uitbraak*, © Clavis, Amsterdam, May 2015, trans. Maaïke Lahaise  
Genre: Young Adult 12+

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This project has been sponsored by the Danish Arts Council    White Ravens Award, 2014



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### **Abridged Sample: *The School* (2013) by Jesper Wung-Sung**

Translated from the Danish by Lindy Falk van Rooyen  
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I

The school's tile roof curled like sealing wax. Behind the red-brick building the sports ground lay like a stubble field of yellow grass and, in the foreground, flanked by the flat rooves of one new- and one old wing that together with the main building mimicked the form of a triptych, the schoolyard glittered like polished diamond embedded in asphalt – but it was even warmer before the oven in the new wing's art room, where the spider performed its ever slower, yet steadily more desperate dance behind the glass.

“You'll be sent home, if you don't make the grade.”

There was one, there were two, there were three; it was the fourth spider of five. The history teacher was ill and, as even Benjamin's father was standing in for another teacher already, the pupils had a free period; they were four in the art room.

They had been five, but Simon had run home to fetch his bag. Liam had been taunting him, just as he now taunted the dead spider, and Simon had had some difficulty loosening his grip on the handle of the door. He had indeed forgotten his bag – Simon forgot everything – but Benjamin could see that Simon didn't like their joust with the spiders. He had been game in the beginning, but right after the first one, his expression changed. His gaze began to flicker, his body could not keep still, and his laughter became shrill, hysterical.

They had grown up together, Benjamin and Simon. Simon's mother lived on a rented smallholding at the end of the road. It was a place Benjamin had never liked because it looked like a scene from a horror film. And it was such a sinful mess. Simon's mother lying silently on the couch. Different men were always hanging around, scowling through a sea of bottles and cigarette smoke. But Simon would always be sure to find his way to Benjamin.

Benjamin realized early on that Simon was not like other children. His mood swings were extreme. He could be quiet and introverted one moment and run screaming into Benjamin's house the next; charge through the front door, sprint through the house, up and down the stairs, open all the doors, and disappear out the back door – leaving everything open behind him. Simon could say the same thing not just 10, but a 100 times a day. He shifted from one obsession to the next, smacking all and sundry on the backside, for instance – not particularly helpful when you were in a supermarket. Or: thank goodness there wasn't a biker's clubhouse in the vicinity when he got into one of those moods.

Simon shouldn't be in school at all. And Benjamin had said so to his dad one day – he was the headmaster, after all. His father had looked at him, and said: If we don't make room for Simon in our school, how can we expect the world to?

Simon had been confused, close to tears, when Liam had called him a wimp. Simon looked up to Liam, just because Liam was the biggest and strongest boy in school, and because he liked to thump his palm between Simon's shoulder blades – as if they were friends.

But because Liam thought Simon was dumb – and therefore harmless – Simon wasn't the one who received the brunt of the onslaught. Others had it coming much worse. Elias, for example, who now got a clout on the back of the head.

“That was *your* spider, mate. Bloody badly behaved.”

“Bloody-bad,” said Elias, wincing, his blood-drained head suspended between his shoulders, anticipating the next blow.

“Now it’s papa’s monster-spider’s turn.”

The spider filled out Liam’s large hand. They had never been so big before. This one had a yellow cross over its broad back, curved mandibles and a hint of fine, red hairs on its legs. Perhaps it was a new species of spider. The heat smacked into their faces as Liam opened the glass oven door and flung the spider inside.

“Are you keeping time?”

Benjamin nodded, his eyes resting on the clock. The spiders’ behavioural pattern was always the same: first, contraction into a ball, then, the search of the oven for avenues of escape, both above and below, and finally – the force of heat being constant and unbearable – a flight towards the light, a leap up against the glass. Ultimately, also this spider will shrivel up, become indistinguishable from the pit of the oven, disappear. The same can be said of human experience: first there is anticipation that runs riot in all directions, then, a fascination that dances passionately for a moment, and finally, disintegration into a lump of pain in an otherwise black empty oven.

This is why Benjamin’s stare rested on Liam’s profile, rather than the spider behind the pane. Liam’s nose was a rock face: a sudden break in the middle, thereafter free fall. Benjamin had never asked whether he had broken it – a question like that could cost you one. Also Liam ought to be stowed away someplace. Like a cell, thought Benjamin.

He let his gaze glide discretely away from Liam and the oven. They were sitting on a row of chairs, like in a theatre. Two chairs were free next to Elias. It was impossible to read his expression, protruding pale as dough. It was just a week to the school dance and the classroom was filled with signboards, props and colourful costumes. Benjamin turned his head to steal a glance at Kate, who was sitting behind them on the windowsill. She returned his look with bland expression, then fixed her stare on the oven again.

Liam hadn’t commented Kate’s failure to sit on the chairs, and Benjamin knew very well why. Of all the pupils in school, there were only three, who Liam left in peace.

Benjamin, because his father was the headmaster; or rather – not so much because of his father’s position – but because the headmaster was who he was: Johannes, proprium.

Maja, because Liam – like half the boys in school – was in love with her. Maja, who just now was sitting on the steps in front of the school, letting the sun tan her golden legs, which made Benjamin suspect that Liam – perhaps even Benjamin himself – was thinking about her as he watched the spider press itself against the glass.

Kate, because she was odd: thin, dyed black hair, pierced eyebrows, chin and bottom lip. Because she said strange things. Because her father had blown off his own head with a gun. Because she had been a little girl when he did it. And most of all, because she had been a little girl who’d *seen* him do it.

“It’s murder.”

Kate’s tone wasn’t accusing, it sounded more like, for her, the solution to a mathematical problem had finally sunk. Liam answered without taking his eyes off the last three, trembling spiders.

“Yeah, of course it’s murder. But if it had stayed away, it would never have been caught. And who knows: if we didn’t curb their population, they might multiply, invade us, and take over. Then you’d hang suspended in a web reading books till you’re eaten, Elias! It’s still moving! That must be a new record?!”

The door swung open, the handle crashing into the wall as Bernhard Abrahamsen, the biology and physics teacher, stared at the four pupils in furious disbelief. He was one of the old guard, the kind of teacher who could fly off the handle on a moment’s notice. They hadn’t expected a teacher in the middle of a period, and now he had caught them red-handed. He stepped towards them. Two paces. Abrahamsen was so livid, there was a loss for words in his red head. He opened his mouth, but all that came out was a stream of blood, from nostril to upper lip. And then he fell flat on his face. In the silence that followed, Benjamin was left longing to hear the sound of Liam’s malicious laughter.