Rowohlt Verlag – Highlights

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Eugen Ruge
In Times of Fading Light
fiction
432 pages
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Enthrallingly expansive in its geographical and temporal sweep, this story of a German family tells of years spent in exile, of the revolution of 1989 and beyond. The masterful narrative makes halt in Mexico, Siberia and East Berlin, climbing the summits and charting the abysses of the 20th century along the way. The result is both a stunning panorama and a monumental German novel that makes history itself tangible through the history of one family. A novel of immense stature, founded on its humanity, its precision and its humour.

In Times of Fading Light focuses on three generations. The grandparents, Charlotte and Wilhelm, still convinced Communists, return to the fledging East Germany at the beginning of the 1950s to do their part in establishing the new state. Their son Kurt returns from the other direction, having emigrated to Moscow and found himself banished to Siberia. He returns with his Russian wife to a country mired in petit bourgeois values, yet also brings with him an unwavering belief that they can be changed. The grandson, meanwhile, feels increasingly constricted in a heimat that was not of his choosing, and heads to the West on the very day that his grandfather, the family patriarch, turns 90. The glittering lights of a political utopia that once shone enticingly seem to be gradually fading as time wears unwaveringly on.

In Times of Fading Light is a novel about a family and about a political ideology. Carefully composed, this novel is a piece of art, yet it seems absolutely effortless and accessible, a book for a wide audience of readers.

- Winner of the German Book Prize
- Winner of the Alfred-Döblin-Prize
- 50,000 copies sold since publication
- Rights sold to Italy (Mondadori), Finland (Atena), France (Éditions Les Escales), Netherlands (De Geus), Spain (Anagrama) and the U.S. (Graywolf Press)

Eugen Ruge: In Zeiten des abnehmenden Lichts

Sample translation by Jerome Samuelson

1966

Ten years ago that very month they'd come out of Russia. The same pale sky had shrouded the fields. Here and there, if one looked closely, buds sprouted already, but from a distance the countryside had been just as drab as today, the towns just as deserted, and Kurt remembered staring out the window of the van at the *out there*: supposedly his native soil.

For the occasion they'd spent the last of their money on gold teeth, a front tooth for each, so they would look "respectable" in Germany. They'd stowed their "good" things in an extra little suitcase so they could put them on just before arrival after several days' on the train, but the very moment Kurt disembarked and saw Charlotte and Wilhelm on the platform he felt shabby in his carefully-mended coat and shapeless trousers that just before debarking had still seemed adequate to him. Wilhelm had special-ordered a van, clearly expecting a huge amount of luggage, but when they'd gone through their things in Slava almost nothing seemed suitable for life in Germany. Their possessions reduced themselves to two valises and a backpack. He'd ended up taking less out of the Soviet Union than he'd brought into it twenty-two years earlier, when he was fifteen.

He'd been thirty-seven when he returned, and even though he received—as a kind of restitution—an immediate appointment to the Academy of Science (that is, the "correct" academy, as Kurt liked to emphasize in order to clearly distinguish it from the Neuendorf Academy), his new start had been anything but easy. He was probably the oldest doctoral student the Institute had ever had. Twenty-two years in Russia had tainted his German. He didn't know what was permissible and when one should laugh. Coming from a world where "good morning" was the f-word, he had no sense for how to interact with dignitaries, let alone for appreciating the subtle network of alliances and animosities in the socialist scientific establishment. For a whole year a rather well-meaning superior thought he had to keep him occupied translating Russian texts. Even three years later he'd mostly been accompanying his boss to Moscow as his interpreter.

He'd just been to Moscow again. And even though the city had never seemed so dirty, so rough, so stressful as during this visit—the long distances, the drunks, the ubiquitous "officials" with their glum faces, even the famous Metro (of which he'd always been a bit proud, since he'd participated in its construction as a young man in the Subotniks) had gotten on his nerves, the crowds, the noise, the guillotine-like slam of the automatic doors (and why did this damned Metro lie *two hundred meters* beneath the earth and—even more astonishing—why hadn't he wondered about it at the time?); on Red Square his camera had slipped from his grasp, and in the Novodevichy-Cemetery, where conscience mandated a ceremonial visit (because he'd been there with Irina to honor the graves of Chekhov and Mayakovsky) he got caught up in a cold rain, an April rain such as only Moscow can offer, capable of killing people—as unpleasant and abhorrent

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as all that had been, he couldn't deny that he'd also felt gratified by the sudden regard that they in this country were now showing him, after ten years: the ex-prisoner, "banished for life".

Last time—accompanying his boss—he'd had to share a hotel room with a Rumanian colleague. This time they'd even picked him up at the airport and he'd gotten a double room to himself at the Hotel Peking (although idiotically lacking a bath—typical for the pompous hotels of the Stalinist era). The renowned Yaroslavsky had waxed enthusiastic over his new book, had introduced him as *the* expert in his field and eventually even undertaken a personal tour of the city, and Kurt had felt malicious pleasure in concealing how familiar he was with it all: the Manezhnaya, the Hotel Metropol and…oh, look, the Lubyanka…

It was only the inadvisable flirtation with the little Soviet historian that he'd rather have forgone, Kurt thought, as the Trabbi, with a melodic sigh, weaved through one of the featureless locales, a Mahlow or Kahlow—since Kurt usually took the train he still didn't know the names of places on the southern bypass of Berlin. Doing such things among colleagues was stupid. Moreover, the woman wasn't particularly attractive, even—compared with Irina—shamefully unattractive, but with one look, one glance, he was finished. It had to be. Recently on television (West German television, of course) he'd heard about a theory according to which all art, all science, all human striving had one ultimate goal: the act of sex. Nonsense of course, from a Marxist standpoint. But still somehow not to be rejected out of hand.

—So tell me, Irina inquired. How was it?

—Stressful, Kurt said.

And that was the real truth.

And it also was the real truth that he'd been at the Archive every day. And that he'd had to give an unscheduled lecture at the symposium. That the publisher had given him an advance and that the newspaper editors had requested an article. That Yarusalimski had invited him to dinner and given him a tour of the city—all of this was the truth, and as he spoke he almost began to believe that with all of this there had been absolutely no time for a fling.

That he'd also felt longing—was the real truth. And that he'd been lonely amidst all the well-disposed people, none of whom however he knew particularly well, that he might have dared to even hint at the issues that bothered him—for instance, the question of the extent to which his colleagues thought that the danger of re-Stalinization in the Soviet Union was possible after the loutish but nevertheless congenial reformer Nikita Khrushchev (without whom Kurt would still be "banished for life" beyond the Urals)had been removed as Party Chief.

—And I was at the Novodevichy, he said.

And Irina said:

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Would you light me a cigarette?

What she actually said was: vood yoo lite me zigaret? And Kurt said:

—I lite yoo zigaret.

He lit two cigarettes, one for Irina, one for himself. Inhaled the smoke and now really felt the exhaustion that his tale about stressful Moscow had evoked. He was even shivering. He observed his shamefully attractive wife and, already a little excited, thought about the evening that lay before him.

Sasha had preferred to stay home. It used to be that he'd never have missed an opportunity to come along to the airport, but the phase in which he wanted to become an aircraft designer had passed. Instead he was now taping the latest styles of music on American Sector Radio with his recorder and running around until dawn with questionable friends, among them a fast girl from another section of his class who came from a semi-asocial background and already at twelve packed an impressive bosom under her grubby blue sweater.

Sascha's reaction to the little gift Kurt brought him from Moscow was accordingly restrained —it was Yuri Gagarin's *Moja doroga w kosmos, Road to the Stars.*

—Thank you, he droned, without glancing at the book.

He had to start paying more attention to the boy, Kurt decided. His Russian was getting increasingly rusty. Even his progress in school left something to be desired; recently he'd brought home a "C". A "C"! Kurt couldn't remember ever having gotten a "C". A "C", Kurt figured, was already in the indecent range.

He'd futilely sought a gift for Irina in Moscow. What could one get for Irina? Irina was virtually allergic to any kind of Russian folk-art, and besides, Kurt had concluded that actually, in the Land of the Great Socialist Revolution, only crap was available. So at the last minute he bought a bottle of "Sovietskoye Champagnskoye" that, after Sasha was in bed, he unwrapped with sweeping apologies. Then he took a hot bath. Irina uncorked the Champagnskoye and disclosed to him, after drinking herself into a tiny buzz, the surprise: the bedroom was finished. He'd already sensed it but nonetheless was amazed…felt—yet again—guilty before Irina…Strange, that: for five years he'd been convinced that Irina was overdoing her remodeling; for five years he'd been trying (albeit vainly) to limit the remodeling to bare essentials, and to be completely honest: what he'd really wanted was a proper paint job and be done with it. After all, he was in a hurry! Time, his postponed life, was running out. Nights he'd been getting panic attacks. It alarmed him when Irina had some walls basically ripped open, when he saw pipes and wires hanging out, all the bits and pieces that somehow had to go back into the walls. He'd even…this also happened…left the house, slamming doors, when he heard that Irina spent a huge sum because it just had to be *this* door, *this* type of wood, *this* shade of red. But he had to admit that

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somehow Irina was right in the end, even (and this was puzzling) if she was always wrong in the particulars.

It was a glorious, a wonderful bedroom. It was basically quite simple, only the bed, a single-piece, frameless double (one, however, not to be had in the whole DDR) and the old wardrobe that Kurt had first simply laughed at. The carpet was white, the walls were white too; just the wall at the head of the bed was crimson, and on this wall, flanked by two light fixtures, hung a gigantic, oval mirror enclosed in a wide, baroque, gold frame, tilted in a way that left no doubt as to its purpose.

—The workers probably figured that out, Kurt murmured.

—And they figured right, Irina said, directing his hand under her dress, where Kurt identified a patch of naked flesh swelling subtly between slip and stockings, forming a little cushion….

—Crazy, Kurt said, some time later, as they lay on the bed cuddling each other. In the champagne daze, when they'd somehow been over and inside each other, he'd even had a momentary feeling that he would duplicate himself—not just in reflection but *in fact.* For moments, he explained to Irina, it had seemed to him that he had more than two arms and legs and more than only one "chui", he said—they used Russian for scandalous things.

And Irina, still flushed, wrapped her legs around his body and whispered into his ear:

—I think I should ask my friend Vera over sometime….

The next morning Kurt got up late: at eight. It was Sunday, and over the years Kurt—calling on all his discipline— had gotten used to *not* working Sundays. He'd even gotten to enjoy work-free Sundays.

He came into the kitchen in pajamas and bathrobe, stood there and declaimed, with the pathos with which he declaimed every poem, one of the four-liners he used to compose while shaving to cheer up his family.

From Moscow I come a-hopping
And feel my strength a-popping
With cheer already a-laving
I infect you all while I'm shaving.

Sasha grimaced. Irina smiled in silence while pouring Kurt's chamomile tea. —Irina insisted that he drink one cup of tea before coffee because of his stomach, and Kurt indulged her.

Irina sprang it on him at breakfast: she'd be gone again for awhile. Goikowic, the Yugoslav actor and star of that Cowboy and Indian film that DEFA, the German Film Corporation, proposed to shoot, was coming today.

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Kurt swallowed. A breadcrust stuck in his throat. Ever since Irina started working at DEFA (he didn't actually know what *as*) she kept on disappointing him. […] Yes, obviously Irina had a right to work too. Even if it was pretty strange work, hanging around the DEFA guesthouse guzzling vodka with motley actors. Or driving around with this Indian… Kurt had seen a photo: Mr. Muscles. Had himself photographed half-naked. Incredible.

Lunch is on the stove, Irina said. I'll be home by four.

After Irina had left, Kurt, still in his pajamas and robe, went to his room. He turned up the heat. Sat on the radiator. Examined, while his backside pleasantly soaked up the heat (yes, the gas furnace had been a good idea too!), the wall of imported bookshelves that Irina, by some dubious (hopefully not criminal) means, had managed to get him. For five years he'd been dragging boxes of his books from one room to another. Now here they stood in perfect order, a sight that always pleased Kurt—but just why he'd included Krichatzki (the tattered little Latin grammar he'd dragged around the camp for ten years) among his own work suddenly seemed unclear to him. He took the book out but didn't quite know where to re-place it: it wasn't for reference and didn't fit into any period. He put it back.

Then he turned to his Moscow colleagues' lectures and journals, scraps of paper with names and addresses, the usual junk one has after such a trip. Most of it was crap, of course. After carefully transcribing them into his directory he'd never use most of the telephone numbers. Nearly all of the lecture manuscripts would lie around the room until, after an appropriately decent interval, he would throw them away. Kurt put aside the copies they'd made for him at the archive and dumped the rest into the waste basket, then retrieved the scraps with addresses and telephone numbers and sorted them. Suddenly found himself holding a nameless number, needed a few seconds to figure out whom the number belonged to …For a moment he was tempted to keep the number in revenge for Goikowic—but then he remembered last night and the golden mirror, his wondrous duplication, the promise that Irina breathed into his ear which, the moment it was made, merged with an image that was now coming to mind once again at the very moment the doorbell rang.

He quickly stuffed the scrap into the pocket of his robe and strode to the door, the image evoked by the promise's memory still lingering in his mind. It was an image from the previous summer, vacationing on the Black Sea where they'd been with Vera, coincidentally, as they'd chanced upon Vera in the transit lounge; Kurt had known her only fleetingly, one of Irina's former colleagues from her time at the Neuendorf Academy Archive who, it had turned out, was part of their travel group and who, it also turned out, since she recently divorced, was taking a solitary retreat to Nessebar, and from there—from the beach at Nessebar—the image, fleeting as it was, passed through Kurt's mind in the ten, twelve, or fourteen steps between the desk and the door. It had turned out that all three of them were visiting a southern shore for the first time in their lives, and all three, stepping onto the beach at Nessebar, had been surprised at how *hot* the sand had been. Kurt had to hop from one foot to the other and the women did likewise. There they were, all three, hopping about in an absurd little dance, and dancing along with them, revealed in

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some miraculous manner or simply because of a loosening belt, were Vera's *things*. Not coming up with any other word for them, Kurt really thought of them as *things*, massive, white *things*, laced with tiny blue veins. They were still dancing in Kurt's face as he opened the door and beheld a round, ruddy, crooked-smiled mask that fractions of a second later resolved itself into the features of his Party Secretary, Günther Habesatt.

—*Oh!* Kurt said.

—Excuse me, Günther said, shifting from one foot to the other like he had to pee badly.

But Günther didn't have to pee. He stood awhile in the middle of Kurt's room, still shifting from one foot to the other, expressing admiration for the building, the room, and the imported bookshelves. Declining a cup of coffee, he asked for a glass of water instead before lowering himself onto one of the already somewhat shabby lounge chairs that came from Charlottes' house and into which Günther's body spread out as in a bathtub. Kurt secretly despised fat people. Günther was a nice guy as a rule, helpful, not a schemer, but still a rather weak, pliant person. This, in any case, Kurt believed he could conclude from the fact that Günther, though reluctant (or in any case giving the impression of reluctance), let himself be appointed Party Secretary. They had even approached Kurt, but he had—naturally—turned it down.

Once the glass of water had disappeared into his large body with no apparent swallow, Günther looked around the room again as if he might have overlooked someone. Then, with a softened voice, wobbling head, and rolling eyes, he began to explain why he was there. The matter was as simple as it was stupid. Paul Rommel, a rather high-spirited and not entirely disciplined member of Kurt's team, had discussed in the journal *Historical Review* a West German colleague's book which critically commented on the so-called United Front politics of the German Communist Party in the late twenties. Then he had sent his review to the West German colleague with his apologies for its negativity. He added that his entire team found the book clever and interesting *but unfortunately the GDR hadn't gotten nearly to the point where one could openly discuss United Front politics …*

To write something like this to a West German colleague was, of course, incredibly foolish, but… there was something Kurt didn't quite get. With growing discomfort Kurt listened as Günther related the affair's evolution which, in sum, resulted in the demand on the part of the Research Division of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED) for Comrade Rommel's harsh punishment, to be decided tomorrow, Monday, at the Party meeting, and on this occasion—*you know of course how it is*—"spontaneous" statements from Rommel's colleagues, especially those on his team, and very especially from Kurt, the team leader, were expected, and he wanted to inform Kurt beforehand, Günther explained, in confidence of course.

—And how, pardon me, do *you* know the contents of the letter?

Günther didn't seem to understand.

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—Well, from the Central Committee of course, he said.

—And the Central Committee…?

Günther rolled his eyes to the ceiling, lifted both his fat arms, let them fall and said:

—Right.

After Günther had gone Kurt put on some work clothes and went out into the yard. The weather was fine and one must make use of fine weather. He took out his rake but there were hardly any leaves, so he mulled over what might need pruning. But he wasn't sure. Buds were already coming out and it was probably too late to prune. Although he'd given up any intention of pruning he kept trying, without success, to find the shears. He found some tulip bulbs instead and decided to plant them. He walked around the garden awhile looking for a suitable spot, but couldn't make up his mind. His stomach issued a growl that Kurt decided to recognize as hunger. He took the bulbs back to the shed.

Coming into the house he heard loud music from Sasha's room. He knocked on Sasha's door, went in. Sasha turned down the music a little. He was sitting at his desk, his tape player supporting a textbook directly before him. He was just about to write something in an exercise book.

—You can't do homework in all this noise, Kurt said.

—It's just biology, Sasha informed him, while he played with a little silver cross he was wearing around his neck on a short chain.

—*Oh*, said Kurt. So you're a Christian now?

—Nope, Sasha corrected him. This is a hippie cross.

Hippie—Kurt knew the word from television, West German television, where there was a lot of talk lately about hippies: longhaired creatures whom Kurt associated—he wasn't sure exactly how—with the kind of music that was coming from Sasha's tape player and who—this was clear enough—fundamentally avoided work.

—So, said Kurt, now you want to be a hippie.

Sasha grinned.

Kurt turned around, just about to leave the room, but then stopped.

—My whole life, he said, I try to show you how to work. And you…

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And suddenly he heard himself screaming:

—You're turning into a hippie. My son wants to be a hippie!

He seized the tape player, which fell silent with an anguished belch, and marched off. Not until he got to his room did he notice that he'd torn out the cord.

While showering—he wasn't really dirty but one usually showered after yard work—the scene was still running through his mind. He was angry (at himself) but tried all the harder to justify his sudden rage…Surely there was no acute danger of Sasha becoming a "hippie". But his lackadaisical attitude, his laziness, his lack of interest in anything Kurt considered important and useful…How does one get across to this boy what really matters? No question the kid was intelligent, but something was lacking, Kurt thought. *Something inside.*

For the second time in a single day Krichatzki came to mind: the little Latin book he'd carried through the camp. He considered momentarily what pedagogical use this experience might offer. That he kept working to improve his Latin proficiency *even in the labor camp*—something of this sort was coursing through Kurt's mind. But he had to admit it was nonsense. He didn't study Latin in the camp. He was hungry. And hunger had made him so stupid that sometimes he'd asked himself if the damage was still reparable. It certainly had come pretty close, Kurt thought, and vaguely recalled, as he started working his legs with the body-brush, the strange and half-insane states of mind that possessed him, the voice that gradually took him over, detached, vigilant, and always—strangely enough—in the third person: now *he* is freezing…now *he* is in pain…now *he* has to get up…

STOP: wrong program. Brushing after a cold shower was a morning ritual he'd inadvertently slipped into. Kurt put away the brush, examined himself in the mirror…Some day, he thought, he'd write it all down. When the time was ripe.

Then he got dressed and started warming up lunch.   It was beef goulash and red cabbage. Sascha came in, *sans* Hippie cross. Sat down at the table, hunched, his eyes boring into his plate. He poked his fork around in his red cabbage, shoving leaves into his mouth one at a time. Even now, at twelve, he had the habit of eating everything separately: meat and side dishes. But Kurt decided to overlook all this. Instead, he tried "reasonable" once again:

—I've always let you listen to your music, haven't I?

Sascha poked at his red cabbage.

—Haven't I, Kurt repeated.

—Yes, Sascha said.

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—But when your enthusiasm for beat music starts making you into a hippie, then I must say that your teachers are right when they forbid such things. Do you carry that thing around school, too?

Sascha poked at his red cabbage.

—I'm asking you: do you take that thing to school, too?

—Yes, Sascha said.

Kurt noticed renewed anger boiling up inside him.

—So you're really that dumb?

Kurt, chewing two hundred times as his internist had advised, put aside his utensils and regarded his son, who continued to poke at his red cabbage. Regarded the delicate wrists (more exactly: his right wrist; the other had vanished beneath the table), the long, curving eyelashes that he'd inherited from Irina (and which annoyed Sascha because they supposedly made him look feminine), the unruly hair that came from him, from Kurt (and which caused frequent irritation at school because the small-minded director saw the influence of western, decadent youth culture in every millimeter that overlapped the ear). And suddenly he sensed a boundless, almost painful need to protect this mortal from all the uncertainty that lay before him. But how?

That night his stomach was growling. In the morning Irina insisted that he try the rolling exercise. Later that morning, holding a heated pillow underneath his sweater against his stomach, Kurt tried to get a little work done on his new book about Hindenburg, then set forth with a dose of chicken soup in his belly.

Party sessions were always on Mondays. Since the Wall went up the trip to the Institute had gotten long.   Earlier, the S-Bahn had gone directly though West Berlin and for those instructed not to set foot in the western sectors there had been special trains that didn't stop between Friedrichstraße and Griebnitzsee. Now there was the "Sputnik" that traced a wide orbit around West Berlin. To connect with it Kurt had to take the shuttle bus to the Drewitz station, and from there go one more station to Bergholz, which lay on the Sputnik route. Fortunately he only had to go to this trouble once in a while, for one of the good things about the notorious shortages in the GDR was a lack of office space, so that workers at the Historical Institute were called upon to use their—what they termed—domestic workplaces. Kurt usually scheduled his team conferences on the mandatory Mondays and dodged the rest whenever he could, got himself excused, as a resident of Neuendorf with the longest distance to travel, from the less important events, even played hooky, excusing himself with transport delays that were hard to check or pleading his beleaguered health: the stomach problems that he, without saying it directly, attributed to his imprisonment, which usually evoked an abashed sympathy. Not that any of this had troubled his conscience. On the contrary: he regarded every missed meeting as additional time to work. What

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mattered to Kurt were written pages, and in this respect—the number of scholarly publications—he held the unchallenged record.

It was five minutes on foot from the Friedrichstraße. The Institute was diagonally across from the University in the Clara-Zetkin-Straße, a former girls' school built in the Founders Epoch, sandstone façade blackened over the years by coal soot and, after twenty years, still pocked by the bullets of the final days of the war. A pretentious staircase led past the porter up to the mezzanine, which the Institute's leadership had taken over. Kurt's department was on the top floor. The rather modest assembly room was already packed by the time Kurt arrived; they had to get more chairs from the main office. The additional chairs crowded into the back of the room while the front, where the three presiding members were just taking their places, got increasingly sparse.

The presiding members consisted of Günther Habesatt, the Institute Director, and a guest from the Research Division of the Central Committee of the Socialist Unity Party, whom Günther introduced as Comrade Ernst. The man was about Kurt's age. He wasn't very tall, decidedly shorter than Günther and the Director, with short, grey hair, and a face that seemed to be constantly smiling.

After Günther— now formal and without rolling his eyes at all—opened the meeting and announced the only item on the agenda, Comrade Ernst took over. Flanked by Günther's grave countenance and the Director's emphatic nods, Comrade Ernst began to report on the *ever more complicated international situation and increasing class conflict*. In sharp contrast to Günther, he spoke fluently, almost eloquently, in a thin but penetrating voice which, when he wanted to emphasize something, softened in a rather ingratiating way—and suddenly his manner of speaking seemed familiar to Kurt. Or was it his strange habit of paging through his notebook without glancing at it while he spoke of *revisionist and opportunistic forces* among which, according to Comrade Ernst, the *arch enemy* was to be found, and with the term *arch-enemy* his voice softened, and Kurt noticed—Paul Rommel, who obviously had been sitting there all along, not far from the committee table, gray, shriveled, staring off into empty space: it's all over, Kurt thought. It's all over for Paul Rommel, expulsion from the Party, summary dismissal; suddenly everything was clear to him. At this point it no longer had anything to do with Paul Rommel. It no longer had anything to do with some damned letter. What was happening here was what Kurt had been dreading a long time or, more precisely, ever since Khrushchev's removal (but actually long before that). Kurt figured there had been indicators enough, only they hadn't really been indicative at all but rather quite substantive: the last Plenary, where they slammed critical writers; the dismissal of the Minister of Culture; the breach with Havemann— *that* was it, it was *here*; it was in the Institute in the form of this man with a face that seemed to constantly smile, with the voice that softened ingratiatingly, with the notebook that he kept paging through without looking while he lectured the assembly on *the role of historical scholarship in the struggles of our time* and the *connection between partisanship and historical truth*.

It had gotten quiet in the room, a quiet unreceptive to throat-clearings or rustling after the speaker ended. Now it was Rommel's turn: self-criticism. Kurt listened as Rommel, in fits and starts,

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forced out a rote-memorized text, every word agreed on beforehand. Kurt heard his swallows; pauses grew unbearable until words like *hostile…irresponsible…acted…*slowly took on the shape of sentences.

Then Günther asked for statements. The department head “spontaneously” responded, condemned his colleague Rommel who had so sorely disappointed him and then, to the approving nods of Comrade Ernst, apologized for his *lack of vigilance*.

Then it was Kurt’s turn, according to the rules. Kurt felt everyone’s attention shifting to him. His throat was dry. His head was empty. The sentence that issued from his lips surprised even him:

—I’m not sure I’ve understood what this is all about, Kurt said.

Comrade Ernst squinted hard, as if he could barely see Kurt. One might still believe he was smiling, but his face had turned mean and swinish.

For a moment there was silence, and then Günther leaned toward swine-face. It was now so quiet in the room that Kurt could hear what Günther was whispering:

— Last week Comrade Umnitzer was in Moscow.

Swine-face looked at Kurt and nodded.

—Comrade Umnitzer, nobody is forcing you to make a statement here.

And turning to the general gathering he expanded:

—This is no show-trial, right, comrades?

He laughed. Somebody laughed with him. When the next colleague started speaking Kurt noticed his hands were trembling.

His hand was still trembling when he raised it to vote Rommel’s expulsion from the Party.

Then he was thirsty. After the assembly he went downstairs to avoid the siege on the toilets on the upper floor, and when he opened the door to the men’s room one floor below—he found himself face to face with Rommel. Rommel looked at him and extended his hand.

—Thanks, he said.

—For what, Kurt asked.

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He was reluctant to take the hand. When he grasped it anyway, it was cold and damp. But, Kurt hoped, already washed.

Just before six Kurt arrived at the East Station, earlier than usual. The train left promptly but then stalled one stop before Bergholz: breakdown. The attendant was asking for a little patience. Not that a breakdown on this line was that unusual. But the mumbling of the other passengers suddenly got on Kurt's nerves. He tried to think but it seemed like the stalled train was also blocking his thoughts. He debarked, defiantly crossing over the tracks, and went on his way. Although it had already started getting dark, it wasn't even ten kilometers to Neuendorf. He knew the area; one autumn he'd gone mushrooming here. But instead of taking the road, which followed a circuitous route through a neighboring village, Kurt set out on a path from Schenkenhorst that would lead him a bit northwest and back to the road—he could always rely on his sense of direction.

He walked briskly despite a weakness in his knees from hunger. At the East Station he'd already considered having a currywurst, had let it go, worried about stomachaches. Now the hunger was gradually drifting down into the hollows of his knees. They called it a sugar deficit. Nothing to worry about. Kurt knew how long a body could keep functioning: a long time … The sky was clouding over. Automatically Kurt increased his pace. Images of the party meeting kept coming back: the swinish face. The eyes. The thin, grating voice: *This is no show trial…* Of whom did this man remind him?

The path was now leading directly into the forest. It was already significantly darker here than in the open, and Kurt hesitated. Should he go around the forest? But what sort of forest was this, anyway? A little wood. How often had he marched through the taiga? How many nights had he spent in the taiga! In spite of all he stormed forward in double-time. But now the path was bending ever more toward the east. Not to lose his orientation, Kurt took a sharp left and marched in a beeline into the darkness over soft, mossy ground … and suddenly he knew:

Lyubyanka, Moscow, 1941.

Now he saw him. The resemblance was uncanny: the small eyes, crew-cut, and even the way he'd opened his file, paging through the papers without looking:

—You've openly criticized Comrade Stalin's foreign policy.

The issue: after the "friendship treaty" was concluded between Stalin and Hitler, Kurt had written something in a letter to his brother Werner: the future will show the advantage of making friends with a criminal.

Ten years hard labor.

For anti-Soviet propaganda and forming a subversive organization. The organization: he and his brother.

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The forest's soft floor now felt unpleasant to him. Off in the distance he thought he could hear the snarl of crosscut-saws. The frightful, eerie roar of the giant trees as they turned slowly on their axes and plunged into death… And after a while images came too, fleeting, random: roll-call at minus 30 degrees; gazing up at icy barrack ceilings, a sight that adhered to the memory of the rank exertions of 200 barrack-mates getting ready for the day, their exhalations, breath rotted from hunger, the stench of their foot rags, their stale sweat, piss…Sometimes he didn't even believe he'd lived through this, that he'd *outlived* it. The forest was getting thicker, branches were striking his face. Once again his little Krichatzki Latin book came to mind, carried to labor assignments in his breast pocket—his only remaining personal property except for his spoon. The last proof that somewhere out there another world existed—*for this reason* he'd not traded his Krichatzki (cigarette paper) for food, had hauled it into that winter, the very worst, 1942/43, until there was nothing left to trade, especially not bread, which everybody kept for himself, 600g for meeting quota, which means, all severe weather coefficients considered, three cubic meters of wood for a team of two, fourteen trees a day, all by hand, one-meter ties, stripped; at 90 per cent it's 500g, bad, soggy bread, any less you starve; at 400g you no longer can make the 400g quota, and it's downhill from there. At some point you get the look, the look they get before morning finds them lying stiff on their pallets. Then they carry you out the way you carried out others, past the guard post where they stop short and the guard snuffs out his smoke and takes this hammer—rules are rules—and bashes your—the dead one's—skull in…

Kurt had leaned against a tree, it was a pine, he could tell by its scent, he'd closed his eyes, his forehead touched the bark. Individual images kept flashing but gradually his mind grew quieter. Now there was a different noise. It came from the immediate vicinity: a kind of groan. An animal, a large animal…Kurt knew the rules: play dead. Lie on your stomach and play dead, and if he rolls you over (because bears do that) then hold your breath. Stop breathing.

Kurt stopped breathing, tilted his head to the right, and looked past the pine into a small clearing in which was parked, at a distance of ten or fifteen meters, a little blue car, a Trabbi, that was bouncing up and down quickly and regularly.

They're fucking, Kurt thought: Trachajutsja …

He took out his glasses and checked the plate number—not Irina. Not the Indian. Kurt took a deep breath. His throat tickled and his breathing turned into deep, silent laughter.

He set a wide, respectful course around the rocking vehicle and made off, quiet as a clam.

A few drops were coming now but no real rain yet. Apparently a storm was hung up over the Havel basin. Kurt had his bearings again and was striding out in an even pace. No, he wasn't in the taiga here. Here were neither labor camps nor brown bears; only blue Trabbis in the woods in which people fucked. If that's not progress, Kurt thought.

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And, to be honest, wasn't it progress when they expelled people from the Party instead of shooting them? What did he expect? Had he forgotten how ponderously history moved? Even the French Revolution had drawn endless confusion in its wake. Heads had rolled. A self-anointed revolutionary general had immersed all of Europe in war. It had taken this bourgeois revolution *decades* to attain its goals. Why should a socialist revolution be any different? They'd gotten rid of Khrushchev. Another Khrushchev might come along someday. Someday a socialism might come along that deserved the name—even if not in his lifetime, in that tiny splinter of world history which he'd just happened to witness and which, damn it all, he intended to use—at least what remained of it after ten years in the camp and five of banishment.

He heard a rattle behind him: the Trabbi was coming. Kurt stepped to one side and, contrary to his usual behavior, raised a hand in greeting. Blinded by the headlights and seeing no one, he nevertheless felt a heady sense of conspiracy with the strangers in the car who—quite obviously—had just deceived somebody.

Now it was raining in earnest. There was the scent of rain and forest with a hint of two-stroke exhaust. Kurt breathed deeply, breathed it all in, sniffed at the departing Trabbi, and the sweet stench of exhaust suddenly seemed to him the scent of sin. It was wonderful to be alive. Wonderful—and astonishing too, and, as so often in moments like these, when he could hardly believe *that he was really alive*, he simultaneously thought: Werner *wasn't* alive anymore: his little big brother. The stronger, better looking, universally-admired brother…But while the thought of Werner normally evoked a trace of bad conscience, Kurt now felt something else, something new that wasn't in his gut (like a bad conscience) but someplace higher, in his breast, in his throat. It was something that constricted the throat and expanded the chest; something that Kurt, after a little time passed, identified as grief. It wasn't as bad as he'd thought. And strangely enough it didn't differentiate itself from the happiness he was feeling but rather combined with it, forming a great, world-embracing sensation. What pained him wasn't Werner's death so much as his unlived life. At the same time, however, he suddenly found it comforting that he was able to think of and remember Werner; that so long as he, Kurt, was alive, his brother hadn't vanished completely, that he—unlike his mother, who blocked her ears whenever somebody mentioned Werner!—preserved his brother within himself, preserved him from a second murder; as rain water poured down his face the (admittedly unscientific) thought seized him that he could live for his brother, breathe for, smell for, yes, and even—now he thought of that night's wondrous duplication—even fuck for him, Kurt thought, and suddenly Vera's *things* appeared in a completely new light. Fuck, thought Kurt. In the name of his murdered brother.

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1958 (Extract)

Infinity.
Achim Schliepner said that one can't count up to infinity.
Alexander lay on his cot dreaming of counting to infinity. He dreamed he would be the first to count to infinity. He already knew how to count. He counted and counted. Counted himself to dizzying heights. Millions, trillions, a trillion billion, a thousand million trillion billion… And suddenly he was there: infinity! A wave of applause. Now he was famous. He was standing in an open black "Chaika", the legendary Soviet State Limousine with its massive chrome and fins like a rocket. The vehicle was moving slowly down the street. To the left and right throngs of people were lined up like on May Day, waving at him with little black, red and gold flags …
Then a book struck his head. It was Mrs. Remschel. She made sure they slept. Non-sleepers got a book on the head.
His mom came to pick him up. It was already getting dark.
–Mom, when are we going to Baba Nadja, anyway?
-Oh, Saschenka, it'll be awhile.
-Why does everything take awhile?
-Just be glad it will take awhile, Saschenka. When you're grown up, all of a sudden everything goes very quickly.
-Why?
-That's just the way it is: when we get older, time passes more quickly.
Baffling news.
By then they were already at the co-op. The co-op was about half-way. It was a long way, especially mornings. The way back always seemed shorter to him. He wondered whether the reason was that afternoons he was already a tiny bit older.
At the co-op you got milk for coupons. The store lady filled the jug with a big ladle. Mrs. Blumert always did it before. But they'd arrested Mrs. Blumert. He knew why, too: she'd sold milk without coupons. Achim Schliepner had said so. Milk without coupons was strictly *verboten*. That's why Alexander was horrified to hear the new store lady say:
-That's OK, Mrs. Umnitzer. Just bring me the coupons tomorrow.
His mother was still searching through her pocketbook.
-But I don't want any milk, Alexander said.
-Pardon?
The horror had settled in his voice. He could barely speak.
They left the store, his legs barely carrying him. His mother knelt beside him.
-What is it, Saschenka?
In single syllables he shared his fears. His mother laughed.
-But Saschenka, there's no way I'm getting arrested!
He began to cry. His mother lifted him up and kissed him.
Lapotschka, she called him. Little paw.
At the bakery he got a piece of Bee Sting Cake. The honey's sweetness mingled with the salt of the tears on his lips. Gradually the world came into order again.
-But Mrs. Blumert got arrested, he said.

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-Oh, nonsense! Mom rolled her eyes. We're not in the Soviet Union, you know!
-Why?
Oh, I'm just babbling on, Mom said. But don't you even think of telling Granny that people get arrested in the Soviet Union.

They lived on Stein Way. Granny and Wilhelm lived on the first floor. They lived upstairs: Mom and Dad and he.
Dad was a doctor. Not a real doctor, but a doctor of typewriter writing. Dad was very tall and very strong and knew everything. Mom didn't know everything. Mom didn't even know proper German.
-So, what's "krysa" in German?
This knocked Mom right out.
Then again, Mom had fought in the war: against the Germans.
-Did you kill some?
-No, Saschenka, I didn't shoot anybody. I was a medic.
All the same it filled him with pride. His Mom had won the war. The Germans had lost. Strangely enough, Dad was a German too.
-Did you fight against Mom?
-No, I was already in the Soviet Union when the war started.
-But why?
-Because I fled from Germany.
-And then?
I cut down trees.
-And then?
-I met Mom.
-And then?
-You were born.
Born; he imagined it as boring a hole into the earth. Something like with Granny's lawn sprinkler. It had a long stake with a point that bored into the lawn. The rest was still unclear. Something to do with earth.

Sundays he crawled in bed with his parents. He stuck a finger in his butt and said:
-Smell.
- *Eeek!* His father shouted, and sprang from the bed.
Baffling news: even your own shit stinks.
Then they did morning exercises with hula-hoops.
- Now *this* is cool, Mom said.
Because Mom was cool. Dad wasn't so cool. He was always wanted to keep old things.
-My shoes are still quite good, he said.
But Mom said:
-They're not cool anymore.

Striking: the odor when Mom singed the feathers off the chicken over the gas.
Lucky: that Dad liked the white meat better.
Incomprehensible: that his parents napped without being told.

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Later, chess. Dad spotted him two castles, but he always lost anyway.
-Morphy beat his father when he was six years old, his father said.
But not to worry. He was only four. He still had time. A lot of time to beat his father at chess.

Days of the week: Monday through Friday. And he knew this too: there was Firstfriday and Secondfriday. Because Secondfridays he went to Granny's.

First, into the tub. Comb your hair. And then—he could feel it coming—Mom picked up the scissors.
-Now sit still.
-But it prickles!
This was it—the typical Going-to-Granny Feeling: just washed, bathrobe, and little hair-ends prickling his neck.

Granny-world. Everything was a little different here. And he even talked differently, a little complicatedly:
-Granny, do we do our secret again today?
-Of course, my dear.
First the table was set. Alexander dashed diligently back and forth between the kitchen and the *salon,* as Granny called the big room.
The table setting rules (valid just on the lower level of the house): napkins, in silver rings, furthest out. Then the knife, then the fork. And then the bread-board. The spoon was laid across the bread-board. They needed the spoon for Granny's famous lemon-mousse.
Lemon-mousse was Alexander's favorite food. He didn't really know how that had happened. Actually he didn't like lemon mousse at all. But it so happened that it was his favorite food—at Granny's.
The butter was to be where Wilhelm could easily get it.
That's it.
In the process, they did their secret.
Their secret consisted in the fact that they ate toast in the kitchen. They called it a bread-munchie. The problem was this: bread-munchies made Wilhelm sick. It also made him sick when others ate bread munchies. It gave him goose-bumps, Granny said. So they had to eat their bread munchies secretly in the kitchen. With jam.
Until Wilhelm appeared.
-Well, hombre?
Wilhelm clapped a hand roughly over his face.
Wilhelm had a small head but large hands. That was because Wilhelm had been a laborer at one time. Today Wilhelm was a bigwig. But he still had laborer hands. One of these alone would cover Alexander's face. Alexander swallowed and choked; the toast was still in his mouth.
-So, let's see what kind of monkey-feed you rustled up, Wilhelm said, and strutted off into the salon.
-Wilhelm's joking, Granny whispered to Alexander.
Alexander assumed Wilhelm's funniness was because he was not his real grandfather. This was also why he was simply called Wilhelm. If he were called "Grandpa" Wilhelm by mistake, Wilhelm would pop his teeth out. It gave Alexander the creeps.

There was music at dinner: from the phonograph. A dark cabinet with a dome-like cover that opened up.

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Wilhelm was against music.
But he was the only one who knew how to use the phonograph. So Granny pleaded with him:
- Wilhelm, dear, put a record on for us, Alexander so much enjoys listening to Jorge Negrete.
Eventually Wilhelm took a record out of the cabinet, let it slip from its sheath, took a brush and, holding the record so that he was only touching the edge and the middle, ran it over the grooves in slightly exaggerated circular motions, again and again holding the record to the light. Then he searched a while for the nub that goes through the hole in the middle of the record, which one can't see while fumbling around above the turntable—a difficult procedure. Once it was accomplished Wilhelm set the speed, bent down, turned his neck until Alexander could see the top of his bald head, and lowered the needle carefully until there was that mysterious crackling sound…then the music started.
Jorgenegrete. Alexander imagined a town in Palestine. Because his parents didn't have a phonograph, Jorgenegrete was basically the only music he knew. But he really knew it:
Mexico lindo y querido
si muero lejos de ti
que digan que estoy dormido
y que me traigan aqui
Even though he couldn't understand a word: he could have joined in the refrain.

So, do you know why Indians are called Indians, Wilhelm asked, slapping a slice of bread onto the board. Alexander did know why Indians were called Indians. Wilhelm had explained it to him twice already. For just this reason he held back his answer.
-Aha, Wilhelm said, he doesn't know. Young people don't have a clue!
He slapped some butter on his bread and spread it in a single stroke.
-Columbus called them Indians because he thought he was in India. *Comprende*? And we go on calling them that. Isn't that a piece of nonsense?
He spread a thick layer of liverwurst on the bread.
-The Indians, Wilhelm said, are the original inhabitants of the American continent. America belongs to them. But instead…
He placed another sour pickle on his bread, or more precisely, he *threw* it on his bread, but the pickle fell off and rolled onto the tablecloth.
-Instead, he said, today they're the poorest of the poor. Disenfranchised, exploited, suppressed.
Then he cut the pickle, pushed the halves deep into the liverwurst and began chewing noisily.
-That, Wilhelm said, is capitalism.

After dinner Granny and Alexander went out into the conservatory. In the conservatory it was warm and humid. There was a sweet-salty smell, almost like the zoo. The indoor fountain was humming softly. Lying between cacti and rubber trees were things Granny brought back from Mexico: corals, shells, things made of pure silver, the skin of a rattle-snake Wilhelm had single-handedly killed with a machete. On the wall hung a sawfish's saw, almost two meters long and as weird as a unicorn's horn; but best of all was the stuffed baby shark, whose coarse skin gave Alexander the creeps.
They sat down on the bed (Granny's bed was in the conservatory because it was the only place she could sleep in peace) and Granny began to tell stories. She told of her journeys, horseback riding for days on end, canoe trips, piranhas that devoured entire cows, scorpions in her shoe, raindrops big as coconuts, and

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rainforests so dense that they had to use a machete to slash out a path which, when they returned, had already grown over again.
Today Granny told a story about the Aztecs. Last time she had told how the Aztecs had roamed the desert. Today they found the lost city, and because nobody lived there the Aztecs believed that it was the home of the gods and named the city Teotihuacan—*the place where one becomes God.*
-But Granny, there really isn't any God.
-There really isn't any God, Granny said and told how the gods created the fifth world.
-For the world had already ended four times, Granny said, and it was dark and cold, and there was no sun left in the sky; a single flame remained burning on the great pyramid of Teotihuacan and the gods assembled in counsel, and they reached a conclusion: only if one of them sacrifices himself would there be a new sun.
-Granny, what's sacrifice?
-It means that one of them had to cast himself into the fire, to rise into the sky again as a new sun.
-Why?
-Someone has to sacrifice himself so the rest may live.
Baffling news.

Mom put him to bed.
-Are you gonna snuggle with me?
-Not today, Mom said, I just did my hair.
Her garments whispered as she left.

Today he was feeling especially uneasy. Images haunted the darkness. He thought of the god that had to cast himself into the fire. Cipitalism, the word popped up. It smacked of heat: kipjatit, Russian for boiling. Piranhas were swimming around in a bubbling soup. Don't stick your finger in, his father said. Barefoot Aztecs were dancing on desert sands, their faces twisted in pain. Wilhelm, Wilhelm, cried Granny. Wilhelm came and doused everything with pickle brine. Mom, in a chic dress, was handing out shoes to the Aztecs. They were out-of-style women's shoes. The Aztecs scrutinized them, quite amazed, but put them on anyway. Then they wandered on through the pickle-brine soaked desert. Their heels sank into the yellow ooze.
Alexander woke up and puked: lemon mousse flavored. After that, three days of fever.

In April: birthday. He got a scooter (with air tires), a swimming ring and a Caterpillar bulldozer, electric. Peter Hofmann, Matze Schöneberg, Katrin Mählich and the silent Renate came. Peter Hofmann ate three pieces of cake. They played Blind Man's Buff.

Now that he was five the question came up again:
-Mom, so when are we going to Baba Nadja?
-Beginning of September.
-When's September?
-First comes May, then June, July, August, then September.
Alexander was furious.
-You said when we get older time goes quicker.
-When you grow up, Saschenka. Really grow up.

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-When will I grow up?
-You really grow up when you're eighteen.
-How grown will I be then? As big as Dad?
-Definitely bigger.
-Why?
-That's just the way it is. Most children grow taller than their parents. And parents get a bit smaller again as they age.
In German she said:
-A pound of ground meat, please.

Summer came.
First they had to haggle for permission to wear shorts. But quite soon, after a few days, summer took hold and subtly spread out to occupy the farthest reaches of Neuendorf, banishing the cold from the moist earth; the grass was warm now, the air was buzzing with insects and no one remembered the goose-flesh of their first day in shorts; no one could imagine summer ever ending.
Roller-skating. Steel wheels were cool. A huge racket. Wilhelm came out:
What absolutely outrageous monkeyshine!
Making bows. Arrows made from some unidentified shrub, tips wound with copper wire. Uwe Ewald shoots Frank Petzold in the eye. Hospital, colossal bawling-out.
Gorging on green apples with Matze. The runs.
Katrin Mählich got her fingers caught in the recliner.
In the sandbox over at Hoffmann's cities of Cardinal Beetles were built. There are masses of them now. The sun has warmed the rocks and they sit on them, motionless, in droves.
And just when summer grinds to a complete halt, when the days stop in their tracks, when time, despite all promises, stops passing and Alexander has almost forgotten, his mother says:
-Next week we're going to Baba Nadja.

-Next week, Alexander announced, I'm going to the Soviet Union.
Achim Schliepner didn't seem impressed.
-The Soviet Union is the biggest country in the world, Alexander said.
But Achim Schliepner said:
America is bigger.

The journey: a green coach. Sleeping coach, cozy as a little house on wheels. One could even order tea. The Kremlin was on the tea-glasses. Around the Kremlin a little Sputnik orbited.
Change wheels in Brest. Wider tracks for the Soviet Union.
-It's true, Mom, the Soviet Union is the biggest country in the world.
-Yes, of course.
He didn't remember anything. But he knew *everything.* Even the stench of the Moscow taxis: part burnt rubber, part gasoline. All Moscow seemed to smell a bit like a taxi.
Red Square: a queue in front of the Mausoleum.
-No, Saschenka, we don't have that much time.
The Metro: gigantic. He was a little afraid of the escalator. Even more of the doors.

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Then another three days on the train. Change trains at Sverdlovsk. Then another half day. And then, at last, Slava.

The house was small. A kitchen, one room. In the middle of the house, a stove. Baba Nadja slept atop the stove. Mom and Alexander slept in the bed.
The yard: a sauna, a barn. The black and white dog on a chain was called Drushba. Drushba meant friendship. Friendship howled. The chain rattled. Baba Nadja scolded:
-Friendship, shut your trap.
In the barn lived the cow and pig. The cow was brown and was called Marfa. The pig was just called pig. Just like Wilhelm, who was just called Wilhelm.
Very interesting: drawing water from the well. Baba Nadja had a kind of yoke that she set over her shoulders, a bucket on the left and the right, and then they were off. The well wasn't far away. They hung a bucket on a hook. It went down all by itself. Alexander was allowed to help crank it up.
Once a week bread came. Then a long queue formed at the store. Each received three loaves of bread. Even Alexander. The three of them got nine. Each cost eleven kopecks. They ate three loaves themselves, the cow got six. Softened in water. The cow ate noisily. She liked it.
There was electricity at Baba Nadja's. But there was no gas. Baba Nadja cooked everything in a corner of the stove. For tea the samovar was heated. There was black tea: morning, noon, and evening. The samovar hummed. Baba Nadja played Dummy with him, the card game.
Next day some old ladies came, wearing headscarves. They sang into the night. At first, cheerful songs. They clapped their hands in accompaniment, some even danced. Then they sang sad songs. Then they wept. At the end all embraced and wiped the tears from their cheeks.
-Too bad, Alexander said, that at home *we* don't all live in one room.

At home again. Secondfriday to Granny, now he had some stories.
-We rode five days on the train!
-That's very interesting, Granny said, but don't you want to tell that later at dinner, that way Wilhelm can hear it, too. It's all quite interesting to Wilhelm as well.
This seemed a little daunting. Granny encouraged him:
-We'll do this: I'll give a cue and you jump in.
Cue?
-For instance "Soviet Union", Granny explained. For instance, I say: I'd like to go on vacation in the So-vi-et Un-ion! That's your cue.

Wilhelm slapped butter on his bread.
-Today the Indians, he explained, are the poorest of the poor. Oppressed, exploited, robbed of their land.
Granny said:
- In the Soviet Union there's no exploitation and oppression.
-That's for sure, Wilhelm said.
Omi looked over at Alexander and again said:
-In the *So*-viet *Un*-ion there's no exploitation and oppression!
-Ah yes, said Wilhelm, you've just *been* to the Soviet Union. Tell us about it!
Suddenly Alexander's mind went blank.
-What now, Wilhelm said, don't you talk to ordinary people?

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-At Baba Nadja's, Alexander said, water comes from a well.
Wilhelm cleared his throat.
-OK, he said, might well be. When we were in the Soviet Union, Lotti, you remember, even in Moscow there were still wells. In Moscow, imagine that. And nowadays? You were in Moscow, weren't you?
Alexander nodded.
-There you go, Wilhelm said. And when you're grown up, nobody anywhere in the Soviet Union will be drawing water from wells anymore. When you're as big as your father, Communism will have long since emerged in the Soviet Union—and maybe all over the world.
Alexander found little joy in the elimination of all the wells, but he didn't want to disappoint Wilhelm once again. So he said:
-The Soviet Union is the biggest country in the world.
Wilhelm nodded, satisfied. Looked at him expectantly. Even Granny was looking at him expectantly. And Alexander added:
-But Achim Schliepner is stupid. He says America is the biggest country in the world.
-Aha, Wilhelm said, interesting. And turning to Granny:
-And they didn't vote this time either, those Schliepners. But we're onto them.

Kindergarten. Now he was with the big kids. Achim Schliepner was gone. Now Alexander was the smartest. Proof:
-I've been to Moscow already.
Not even Mrs. Remschel's been there.
-And when I'm grown up, I'm going to Mexico.
For when he's grown up, Componism will be everywhere.
By then Indians won't be exploited and oppressed anymore, won't have to wander around in hot deserts anymore. Nobody will have to sacrifice himself anymore. But rattlesnakes—they'll still be around, of course. And scorpions in shoes. But he knows all about that: shake your shoes out mornings—a simple trick. Granny told him that secret.

It's Sunday. Alexander is walking down the street with his parents. It is Thälmann Street. The trees are in vibrant color. It smells of smoke. People are raking leaves into small piles and burning them. One can throw chestnuts into the glowing embers that pop after a while.
They're walking in the middle of the street, hand in hand: Mom on the left, Dad on the right, and Alexander is explaining how he sees things.
-I get big then you get small again. And then you get big and I get small again. And so on.
-No, his father said, that's not quite right. With time we do get somewhat smaller, but not younger. We get older and eventually we die.
-Does everyone die?
-Yes, Sascha.
-Do I die too?
-Yes, even you die eventually, but it's a long, long, long time until that happens, so *infinitely* long you don't need to think about it yet.
Baffling news.

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Infinity: back where everything was lost in smoke, where the trees gradually got smaller, it had to be back there. They were going there, his parents and he. The cool air brushed his cheek. They walked and walked, with frightening ease yet barely moving at all.
If he smiled it was in embarrassment: because his ideas of growing big and small were so silly.

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