

Punching the World

Novel

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Sample translated by Jake Schneider

Chapter 2

Sometime in the next few weeks came the first snow of the year. The mound of dirt next to the foundation pit looked like an igloo. The gray stones of the walls merged with the all-covering blanket of snow. Philipp mixed the watercolors with his wet paintbrush until they made little bubbles. With the ocher and brown, he painted his first bird. Like a pear with wings. Then he dipped the brush back in the paint and made two plumper pears next to it. *Upon a hazel branch I spied / three little sparrows, side by side.* The teacher had written the poem on the board. Then she handed out brown paper. A better background for the white paint of the snowflakes. Philipp gave the sparrows winter hats and little scarves. Little slits for eyes.

“So they’re asleep?” the teacher asked.

“Yeah,” said Philipp.

“Are they hibernating?”

“No, they’re just extra cold.”

She went to look at the other children’s sparrows. The thin hazel branches and thick snowflakes.

Then she came back to Philipp and hunched down by his table. “I heard your parents are building a house,” she said.

“Yeah.”

“What do they do again?”

The same question from different people. Philipp answered, as he thought he should. “My dad’s an electrician and my mom’s a nurse.” Dad, who was smarter, would say this was nobody’s business. Especially not all those teachers, doctors, pencil-pushers, fat cats, and politicians.

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Dad walked alongside his boss down the narrow street to the construction site. The lights were still on at the neighbors' houses. The warm air of the radiators was making the curtains sway. Soon it would be time for the first Christmas decorations. Candle arches, Moravian stars. Incense drifting up from whittled figurines of chimneysweeps and miners.

“What happened to all the officers?” the boss asked.

“They still live here,” said Dad. “Mostly retired, but some have jobs.” They passed a house with a metal fence. “That guy looks out the window all day,” he said. “In the summer, he hangs out in the garden and waters his flowers. Morning and night.” He turned and pointed at a pair of houses. They both had the same brown plaster walls. The plots across the road had two garages each. There were tire tracks in the snow. “That one is a driving tester.”

“A driving teacher?”

“No, he sits in the back seat during the test and notes down all the mistakes. His name's Mierisch,” Dad said, “nasty man.” He went on to say that the next house belonged to a former teacher who was now a school principal.

“It's nice and quiet here,” said the boss, changing the subject.

A woman walked by, nodded at the two men, and withdrew into a house. They turned off the street. Across the thin layer of snow to the foundation pit.

“Do you get help from your parents?” the boss asked. He steadied his feet, shifted his weight, and tried to slide a little down the street. Balancing his knees like an ice skater.

Dad said that his father was going to help with the painting. And his brother. “He still lives at home. Never moved out.” His wife's father was too sick to help, he said.

“Sick with what?”

“Diabetes. And he had a stroke two years ago.”

“Damn,” said the boss.

Dad nodded. “He’s had speech difficulties ever since. Can’t drive anymore either.”

A few rocks were sticking up from the dirt and the snow. They didn’t feel them through their steel-toed boots, so they knocked them into the pit.

The boss balled his fists in his coat pockets. “I don’t know how they figured this would go,” he said. “Everything they promised us.”

Dad watched his breath rising in the air and didn’t respond. Qualifications nullified, retraining, more retraining, adult education. At one point, he’d calculated whether he could feed the family for a little while on unemployment. Now his brother was a geriatric nurse and he was an electrician. They both used to build transmissions.

“Take Uwe,” said the boss. “He’s home alone because his wife makes a better living over there.” He pulled out a lighter, rubbed on the plastic habitually, shook it, and finally lit a cigarette. “He showed up drunk yesterday.”

Dad shook his head and turned away from the smoke.

“He’d kill himself if I let him go.”

The snowplow drove past them. A little orange truck. Plowed some dirt from the roadside onto the road. The scattered chunks of road salt made circles on the wet asphalt. Bumps in the middle like little blackheads.

“His face is swollen and he smells,” said the boss. “Not long ago, a customer complained to me, she was so shocked when she saw him. I got there late, traffic jam near Räckelwitz. That roadwork. Said she thought he was a bum. Or one of those gypsies, the way he slunk across her property.” He coughed, then dropped the cigarette butt in the snow.

Dad noticed a fox scampering across the field. “Where did Uwe apprentice?” he asked.

“Some state factory in Bautzen,” said the boss. “Building train cars, or whatever they did down there.”

The fox sprinted past the neighbor’s fence. The old officer had spotted it by then, no doubt. Maybe, most likely, he had a gun. Then he could shoot the thing.

“He lived with his parents for years, helping out and taking care of them,” the boss said. “Not sure exactly. Then he became an electrician, so a total 180. Like you, basically.”

“Maybe he can help me,” said Dad, and motioned toward the walls sticking up from the pit. “No commitment. Main thing is, he gets out of the house and has something to take his mind off his runaway wife. A little money, a little company.”

The boss turned around and took a hard look at Dad. His reddened nose and ears, his forehead, his pointy chin. Then straight in his eyes. He stuck his hands in his pockets and rubbed the lining. “Uwe is a good man,” he said.

Chapter 3

Dad walked past the neighbors' gardens to the construction site. The garden beds were covered in snow. The ground floor had been finished. There was a temporary front door. He walked through puddles of road salt and slush and finally started walking around them after his cuffs were wet. At first he didn't even notice the man who sitting on a wall fragment, kicking his heels against the rocks. Bony frame, unbuttoned coat. His shoes were too thin for the winter let alone a construction site. Dad stopped and faced him.

"I heard you need help," said Uwe, and stood up. He stuck out his hand. "The boss told me," he said.

Dad looked at him with his arms at his sides. "That's right," he said. Paused. "Actually, I've been meaning to ask you." He hadn't seen Uwe in a while. Not at work or in town.

"Just say the word and I'll go," said Uwe. He was wearing his old work clothes and had brought a bucket, a shovel, and a wooden stepladder. There was also a black gym bag leaning against the wall.

"Well, if you have the time," said Dad. He walked past Uwe and opened the front door.

Uwe grabbed the gym bag and set it down on the bare cement floor with a sound like a glockenspiel. He opened it and moved the loose tools inside. Shifted packets of screws, nails, and wall plugs and finally located two bottles of beer. He put them both on the floor. Then Dad gave him a tour of the downstairs.

This will be the living room, that's the kitchen, and here's the little bathroom with a shower. Upstairs will be the boys' room, the master bedroom, and a bathroom with a tub. It was dark and cold in the rooms. Debris in the corners and dust in the air. Dad

leaned on a wall and stroked it with his palm. A cold gust of wind blew through the gaps in the walls where the windows were going to be.

“You haven’t come to work in a long time,” Dad said. His voice echoed.

Uwe looked out through the rectangular hole in the wall. The field was covered in snow. The sky and the horizon were hazy. “Sent home,” he said.

Dad looked at him, said nothing. He heard a car drive down the street. It stopped nearby. Finally, they could hear footsteps. A knock on the metal door. Dad went to the entrance, followed by Uwe, who stood in front of his gym bag. Blocking the beer bottles.

Tobi was startled to see the man in the corner. Uwe’s face was in the shadows. Except for the tip of his nose lit up by the light from outside.

“Uwe, this is my younger son, Tobi,” said Dad.

Uwe shook Tobi’s hand.

“Oh hi,” said Mom, surprised. She was carrying a tote bag. There were three folding chairs leaning against the car.

Dad introduced Uwe as his coworker who had stopped by to help.

“I only brought three chairs,” says Mom. “I didn’t realize.” She put down the tote bag, then shook Uwe’s hand.

Tobi walked around the rooms and felt the bare walls as Dad had. He didn’t lift his feet as he walked. It sounded like sandpaper under the soles of his shoes.

Dad arranged the three lawn chairs in a semicircle at the center of what would be the living room. Facing the window even though it had been dark for some time. Uwe watched. Didn’t move at first, not even when Dad and Mom sat down and offered him the third chair. He wanted to work. That’s what he had come for. He used to work with Dad often enough, back in the day. Quiet and effective. Then with the boss. Then only

solo. Not with customers. Not on the phone. The last thing he'd done was sort through the cable drums in the storeroom.

Tobi walked around and visited the grown-ups occasionally.

“Do you want a sausage?” Mom asked him.

Tobi shook his head.

Mom reached into the bag and took out two cups, a Thermos, and a plastic container of frankfurters. Uwe took his coffee with cream and sugar. Stirred it by jiggling the cup. The streetlight went on. Mom looked at Uwe's feet and, when she thought he wasn't looking, at his face. Then at Dad, who was sitting next to her sharing the other cup of coffee. Chewing a frankfurter like chewing gum.

“We weren't planning to stay long,” she said. “If you want, we can give you a ride, Herr.... uh...” To Dad, she said: “Or do you have a lot left to do?”

“No, not really,” said Dad and smiled. “We've done plenty for today.”

Outside, the neighbors were pulling into their garages.

“Uwe,” said Uwe, and paused.

Dad and Mom stared at him. As they had all along. As the neighbors had through their windows. Their faces red and sweaty from the radiators.

“Uwe will do,” he said.

Tobi grabbed a sausage from the plastic container in the tote bag.

“I can walk,” said Uwe. “I live close by anyway. By the playing fields.”

“We're driving past there,” Dad said.

Uwe sat next to him in the car. His bag was in the trunk. He winced with every pothole that made his bottles clink, every regularly spaced groove in the concrete-slab pavement. His eyes were closed, but he squeezed them every time. It's impossible to hide bottles behind cable drums. Maybe behind big ones, but he wasn't supposed to

touch those. Then he'd knocked a bottle over. It was so sad to see the beer leaking onto the cable insulation.

Dad stopped the car outside the club house. Uwe got out and took his bag. He reached for it before Dad could pick it up. "Thanks," he said, and shook Dad's hand.

"Thank *you*," said Dad, closing the trunk.

The engine didn't start up right away. Dad wouldn't answer Tobi's questions. Who was that guy? Why was he there? Dad watched as Uwe made a turn and disappeared in the darkness between two streetlights. His gym bag over his shoulder. His thin jacket open to the wind that made it billow at the back.

Chapter 4

At recess, Philipp had a chance to observe the principal. He would stand on the schoolyard by the old flagpole, which the custodian had fitted with a basketball hoop. Philipp noticed that Herr von Stein didn't lift his feet as he walked on the gravel. He noticed the way he drew a cigarette from his pocket, rolled it between his long, thin fingers, and leaned against the flagpole. Philipp tried to hide behind the curtain and took a bite of his sandwich from his lunchbox. Depending on the strength of the wind and the coldness of the air, the cigarette smoke was easier or harder to see. It rose slowly and seemed to get trapped in Herr von Stein's gray hair.

"Philipp, away from the window," the teacher said. She pulled one curtain aside and drew the other in front of the window.

Phillip spun around. The other kids had already taken their seats and opened their books.

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On Saturday, Uwe was standing outside the door again. He smiled when he saw Dad. "I brought coffee," he said. He flipped open his jacket and pulled a Thermos from the inside pocket. A promotional giveaway. It had been keeping his right side warm.

They sat down again on folding chairs in the living room, back in the middle of the bare space. Their breath rose towards the ceiling with the steam of the coffee like a race between two ghosts. They didn't have mugs. They just passed the Thermos cap back and forth.

"More supply problems," Dad said.

Uwe blew on his coffee. "Which company?" he asked.

"Käbisch," said Dad.

Uwe nodded.

They fell silent. A car drove by and the two of them listened, but it drove away.

“Why do you come here if there’s nothing to do?” Uwe asked.

Dad shrugged. Because he wanted to see his house. Because he wanted to be alone.

“I don’t know,” he said.

It hadn’t snowed or rained for weeks. The ground had frozen, thawed, turned to slush, and frozen again. Some mornings, the neighbors ran the engines of their cars for a half hour before getting in and driving off.

“Did you ever meet my wife?” Uwe asked.

Dad shook his head. Of course not.

“Her cheeks were always red like the rocks at the clayworks. No matter how hot or cold it was. Always red. Like she was embarrassed of something. But she was never embarrassed.” The Thermos was empty. Uwe put it on the floor.

“Do you know where she is?” Dad asked. Maybe he shouldn’t have.

“No,” Uwe said. “I haven’t heard anything from her since. She didn’t even take much. All her stuff is still lying around.”

Dad looked at him and raised his eyebrows. Uwe looked out through the hole in the wall.

“I chased after her,” he said. Paused. “I grabbed her hard by the arm, but she broke free. She really fought. Then I fell on my knees and begged and pleaded.”

“And she didn’t say anything?” Dad asked.

“She didn’t even look at me,” Uwe said. “I have no idea if she cried.”

Uwe wore a thin jacket and never did up the snaps. Sometimes he wore a baseball cap. They couldn’t start building again until January. In the meantime, he and Dad sat on the folding chairs in the living room. Drank coffee and ate sandwiches.

The neighbor from across the road stopped by sometimes and asked through the window-hole why nothing was happening with the construction. He asked about the dimensions of the house. The number of rooms, of square meters.

“We’ll get there,” Dad said. And added, snootily, “Don’t you worry.”

The neighbor left and Uwe laughed. “They can’t leave well enough alone, these people,” he said.

“They all want to know if I have some golden goose or something.”

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“Where do you know each other from?” Mom asked. The TV was on.

Dad was lying on the couch. Fresh from his shower. With bare feet and wet hair.

“From work,” he said, and turned town the TV. Tobi and Philipp were in the next room.

“Did you ask him if he could help you?”

“He came on his own,” Dad said. He had no idea what he should tell her, and if. He stood up. The cushion smelled like his shampoo.

“He must have known we were building a house,” said Mom.

“The boss must have told him,” he said.

Mom picked her legs up onto the couch. Close to her body.

“Uwe doesn’t say much,” Dad said. “I only hear about him from my coworkers. All kinds of stories.” He took a sip of apple soda and put the glass gently back on the coffee table. If he wasn’t careful, the glass would bang on the tiles. He didn’t want a coaster. “You know how people talk,” he said.

There were pickles left over from dinner. He went to the kitchen, skewered and ate each pickle one by one, then drank the vinegary pickle juice from the plastic container.

Mom watched him. “He lives alone, doesn’t he?” she said.

Dad looked at her in surprise. “Yes, he does,” he said after a pause.

“Did he tell you why his wife left?” she asked.

Dad shook his head. He took a sip of apple soda to wash away the pickle juice.

“That he was reporting on her to the Stasi?” she said.

How could she possibly know? “I don’t believe that,” he said.

Chapter 5

The house was finished before Tobi's first day of school. They still had to pave the driveway and the patio. Holding his festive cardboard school cone, Tobi stood in front of the low hedge in the garden. On the fresh, pale grass. Smiled for the cameras. In the photos, the hedge reached up to his calves. His bangs were combed into his face. He didn't say a word, just turned and smiled as his relatives asked him to. His two grandparents, his Uncle Sven.

During the official welcome-to-school ceremony in the gym, Mom and Dad had waved at him. He'd gripped the cone tightly. Didn't move a muscle. Mom and Dad had sat on the bleachers near the climbing poles that went up to the ceiling. The seats were so low that their knees reached their chests. Philipp had stood with his grandparents at the entrance. Colorful bunting decorated the walls of the gym.

Next to the microphone, there was a birch sapling in a plastic bucket filled with sand, bearing tiny school cones on its branches. And pictures of the new pupils. Including one of Tobi. He saw it and lost sight of it again. A boy behind him was blowing at the pictures, making them wave around gently, tangling their strings. Someone whispered for him to stop. One of the kids. From the audience, people were pointing. Tobi could feel the cold breath on his neck. It felt nice.

The roof truss, which was finished in the spring, had looked like a whale skeleton resting on the walls. He'd climbed around the scaffolding with Philipp. They'd go out one window and cross the scaffolding to go in another one. They could reach every room without walking through the house. Inside, the grandparents and Uncle Sven were painting the walls. In the rooms whose paint had dried, Uwe fixed lights to the ceiling. The man looked so lanky and pale. His face hollow, as if someone had cut the flesh out of his cheeks. Philipp sucked in his face and Tobi laughed. Then they ducked. Put their hands over their mouths and went to another window. Mom and Dad were somewhere

or other. The garden was a muddy brown patch with boards on top. The volcano was still there but would be carted away soon.

Tobi turned toward the next camera and smiled. His cheeks trembled a little. The wider he smiled, the more he trembled. The outside walls were painted pale green and when the sun was high in the middle of the day, they almost looked white.

In his room, Grandma was sitting on his bed, running her hands over the fabric of his duvet cover. “Do you like it?” she asked.

Tobi went over to her and looked around as if entering the room for the first time. “Yeah,” he said. The rug was yellow with dark triangles. Tobi had a dirt stain running straight across his pant leg.

“You finally have your own room and your own bed,” said Grandma. You’ve finally gotten out of those apartment buildings. Probably what she meant.

Tobi sat down at his new desk, on his new desk chair, and spun around a little.

Grandma went to the new wardrobe and opened it. “So much space,” she said, amazed.

When Tobi looked out the window, he could see the chestnut tree in the front yard.

“Everything’s so bright and cheerful,” said Grandma. “You have to keep it clean so it stays that way.”

Then she went to Philipp’s room next door. Philipp had a green rug and the same sloping ceiling with a window in it. His room was a little smaller and was next to the parent’s bedroom.

The table was set with the gold-rimmed dishes. There were five cakes laid out irregularly alongside coffee flasks and soda bottles. Mom had crafted construction paper name tags and pasted little school cones onto them. Tobi sat at the head of the table and smiled whenever anyone said something about his room or the welcome-to-school event at the gym. Everyone was excited, so he had to be excited too. As he sat, he slowly ran

his fingertip around the edge of his little name tag. Maybe it would ring out like a half-full crystal wine glass.

“Herr von Stein has a very gray face,” said Grandma.

“He had a stroke,” said Mom.

“But he already looked so bad when he was your teacher.” Then Grandma helped herself to a piece of the cake that she had baked and brought.

The forks screeched on the plates. Cups clinked on saucers. Spoons were set down on top. Sunshine and white curtains. Everything so new you could smell it.

Someone knocked on the front door. The bell wasn't connected yet. Dad slid back his chair on the tiles that had been installed on the whole ground floor, stood up, and went into the hall. The others at the table watched him and stopped their conversations. The hall brightened when he opened the front door. They could see it through the little window in the living room door.

“No, come in,” Dad said. “No, it's no trouble at all.” He closed the front door.

Someone took off their shoes and slipped off their jacket. Tobi recognized the sound. No zipper. Tobi held tight to his cake fork and looked toward the door. Around the edges of his glass, little bubbles were rising in his apple soda.

Dad came back into the living room and Uwe followed him. He was holding a little present wrapped in colorful paper. He was wearing a short-sleeved shirt tucked into his jeans.

Uwe was so thin it looked like his clothes floated around him without touching his body. “Hello,” he said, and stood near the cluttered table.

The relatives seated around it sized him up. Dad got a chair from the kitchen and set it down by the table. Next to Uncle Sven and Grandma. Grandpa shook Uwe's hand.

Then Uwe stooped over the table and gave Tobi the gift. “Have fun at school,” he said. Smiling. He looked like he was almost about to tell a joke.

“Thanks,” said Tobi and placed the wrapped gift next to his plate.

“Coffee?” Dad asked.

“I’d love some.”

Uncle Sven didn’t talk, just ate cake piece by piece until he had tried all five. Now and then, he’d bump elbows with Uwe. Who apologized and hugged his arms close to his body. Uwe had taken a quick glance around the table and tried to match the parents to the grandparents. Then he looked at the ceiling. At the walls, top to bottom.

“A lot has happened,” said Dad, noticing Uwe’s inspection.

“Yes, it’s nice,” said Uwe.

“What did you train for?” Grandpa asked.

“Building train cars in Bautzen.”

“They used to build TV antennas,” said Grandpa.

“Yes,” said Uwe, “and camping trailers. Until ’80 or so.”

“Did you work there then?” asked Grandpa.

“No, I missed that.”

Tobi got up and took the present to the next room, where he sat on the sofa. He heard Grandpa say something else about his old job. That he could walk or ride his motorbike to work. The gifts were arranged in front of the new wall unit. The big school cone was sitting on the floor, its tip slightly bent because Tobi had put it down so many times for photos. He undid the top ribbon and pulled out a few pieces of candy. A few colored pencils came fell through the netting at the opening onto the tiles.

“Not yet,” said Mom. “The others want to watch you unwrap it.” She picked up the pencils and stuck them back inside the cone. She put a chair in the middle of the room between the wall unit and the sofa and told him to sit there. “But wait a minute before you start.” She went back to the table and took the last sip of her coffee.

Tobi sat down on the chair and clutched his school cone. First Grandma sat on the sofa. She was amazed at the size of the gifts. The sheer variety of wrapping paper. The colors and shapes. The funny pictures decorating it. Next came Dad and the other grandparents, then Uncle Sven, who'd brought a chair from the table and sat off to one side. Mom leaned back on the armchair. Phillip sat on the floor. Tobi watched as they approached, handled his gifts, sat down, and stared at him. His feet were waving in the air. He'd put down the school cone, just for a second.

“Watch out, Tobi! The tip!” Mom shouted.

It felt like they were all closing in on him. They formed a semicircle around him. Like at the circus. With him in the ring. but without the trampled wood chips and the smell of horses. The clowns and acrobats. A man announcing Tobi's number. Children pointing at him. Tent fabric fluttering in a gust of wind.

Dad grabbed some more chairs and slid them around the tile floor. He offered them to his parents so they wouldn't be so cramped on the sofa. Then Uwe walked in. Tobi glanced at him without moving his head. Uwe leaned on the wall, his hands crossed behind his back. Those strange eyes. In the hallway, someone closed the bathroom door. From the kitchen came the rattle of the dishes Mom was loading into the dishwasher.

“What are you waiting for?” asked Grandpa.

“I'm supposed to wait until everyone's here,” said Tobi, and looked at Dad.

“Who else is coming?” Philipp asked.

“Kathrin and Andreas,” said Dad.

Mom returned from the kitchen and nodded at Tobi. Then he undid the ribbon again and yanked out the colored pencils. He set them on the floor in front of him. Philipp picked them up and said he had got the same ones. Tobi pulled out a pencil case, notebooks, a sharpener, erasers, and more and more pieces of candy, and placed them on the floor one by one. Someone picked up each item and passed it around to the

others. Until they were back on the floor at Tobi's feet. Like sandbags in a flood, passed down the line. Hand over hand. Everything skipped over Uwe, who was standing by the wall. He waved them away when Mom held them out.

"My school cone was half-full of newspaper," said Grandma, "but in the pictures it looked like the fullest one." She laughed and unzipped the pencil case.

"Just look at how many thousands of designs there are on school cones these days," said Dad.

"Mine was a hand-me-down from my sister," said Grandpa, "and I wasn't allowed to put it on the floor. So the tip wouldn't get bent. In case another kid needed a school cone someday."

A backpack in front of the wall unit was wrapped in a ribbon and contained a matching gym bag: dark-green with big dinosaurs on it. They had glaring eyes and gaping mouths. Held their claws up in the air and were supposed to glow in the dark. Tobi opened the backpack, took out the gym bag, and put it back in. He walked past Uwe from the living room into the hallway. Then upstairs to his room. No one noticed he wasn't sitting on the chair anymore.

Chapter 6

When spring came, Philipp's fat sparrows were still on their branch. The snow on their bodies never melted. The flakes didn't become thicker or thinner, didn't turn into raindrops. Easter eggs seemed to join them. Tulips made out of crumpled paper and stuck onto painted cardboard. And a tall sky over a lawn as narrow as a finger. The Easter eggs were supposed to look like the Sorbian kind, but that was hard to pull off. The sparrows kept each other warm no matter how cold the school got.

"Philipp, such nice sparrows you painted!" Frau Wenzer said. "Do you want to paint them on the garage door?"

The class turned to look at him.

Philipp shrugged. "Can do," he said.

There was a garage in the schoolyard where the custodian used to keep his tools. The door had just been installed. The roof was probably asbestos. It was next to the bicycle stands, which had a yellow roof of wavy plastic, and served as the soccer goal during recess. The principal had decided to use it as toy storage. For balls that often landed on the neighbors' property. For old wooden crates, for shovels, and for those elastic hoops that the girls liked to stretch between their feet. Only the teachers could open the door, get toys, and distribute them.

Philipp wanted to paint something epic. Not flowers or the sun or colorful polka dots. None of that girly stuff. He sat outside the bottom left-hand corner and looked at the other kids. The ladybugs and clouds were dripping onto the gravel like candle wax. They made little trickling streams that gathered more and more colors on the way to the ground. Philipp grabbed a paintbrush, dipped it in brown paint, crouched by the empty space, and started painting.

"Are you painting a tree?" the teacher asked. The other children glanced at Philipp before trying to wipe up the paint trickling from their clouds.

“I’m painting a fire mountain!” said Philipp, making the cinder cone even wider.

“But wouldn’t you rather paint a tree?” The teacher pointed at the other kids’ pictures. “Look. Or a cloud. Here, this flower has come out nice too.”

“That looks like poop,” said a little boy.

“Paul, we don’t speak that way.”

“Yeah, Philipp is messing up the whole picture,” said one girl.

Philipp put his paintbrush back on the garage door. Painted over the brown mountain again and again. He pressed hard. Held the brush with a fist. The paint dripped onto the gravel. Philipp’s picture was at the bottom edge, just above the ground, so he left a brown stripe where his brush had slipped off the garage door.

“I told my brother a story about a volcano,” Phillip said. He was trying to explain himself.

“But you’re not painting that for your brother,” the teacher said. “You know the garage belongs to the school.”

Phillip went over to the bucket of red paint, dipped in his brown paintbrush, and poked it hard against the cinder cone. Now it looked like an eruption. Like the fire was really coming out of the mountain.

“Frau Schütze, can you tell Philipp to please stop?”

“Do you hear that, Philipp? The others don’t like that.”

Philipp held the paintbrush away from his body and looked at the volcano. He took a few steps back and noticed that the red was blending into the brown. Thick droplets were hanging off the bottom lip of the door like drips from a leaky drain pipe. The other kids stood were standing close to Frau Schütze, close to the garage. Now there was neither a mountain, nor an eruption. No fire, no earth. Philipp could see that the colors had blended together. It looked like a rusty wound. A filthy brown pit.

“See? That’s not a volcano,” said one boy, turning to the teacher. “Frau Wenzler, can we paint over it?”

She approached Philipp and put her hand on his shoulder. Stood in front of him so he couldn’t see the door.

“Why were you so stubborn about painting that?” she asked. Philipp looked up at her. He’d explained that already. For Tobi. He would see the volcano and remember. The moment on the mound of mud and the book that Philipp had told him about. Remember him. He wanted to Tobi to remember him when he saw the garage door.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” he said.

“May the other children paint over the picture?”

Philipp scratched at the gravel with his feet. There were splashes of red paint on his shoes. If he said “no,” there was nothing they could do anything about it. Nobody could force him to them paint over the picture. It was his picture, his volcano. “Okay,” he said quietly.

Frau Wenzler raised her head. Philipp could hear her sigh. “And that’s all right with you?” she asked.

Philipp nodded.

“Then you should go back to the classroom now. The others will be right there.”

It took four days before the paint of Philipp’s volcano on the garage door had dried enough to be scraped off. At recess, with the curtain blocking half his face, Philipp watched Herr von Stein feel the coat of paint, then wipe his finger on a handkerchief. Once a day. Finally, he lit a cigarette, looked up at the window, at the curtain drawn halfway across the window. With Philipp’s shadow behind it. And he walked past the flagpole and disappeared behind the garage.

Chapter 7

Mom helped Tobi put on his backpack. Philipp stood next to them and watched her. Watched the way she pulled at the straps and adjusted something. She waved from the car and drove down the narrow driveway to the main street.

“You’ve got to be careful on the jungle gym,” Philipp said. “You can slip after it rains. And you only get balls and stuff if you ask.” He liked this role. He was definitely the bigger, older brother now.

Some kids ran past Tobi. He heard a whistle. Loud and shrill. The kids turned around and slowed down. Most of them were bigger than him. He was curious about the old man with the gray face standing outside the entrance.

“That’s Herr von Stein,” Philipp said.

Tobi sat in the back row of the classroom and leaned back against the wall. The bottom part was smooth and shiny, as if it had been polished. Slippery and cold. The top part was rough like a normal wall. There were two wooden beams attached to it with laminated posters hanging from them. Nobody talked. It was completely quiet except for a few individual voices from the hallway. The light was off. A boy with dark hair sat next to Tobi. He buried his face in his arms. Tobi tried to see if he could recognize him from the side. Most of the kids were from Neschwitz and the surrounding area. Maybe he’d seen him before. Maybe he was Sorbian.

The ceiling light was off. Two of the fluorescent bulbs in the front flickered then finally went out. The teacher stood in front of the blackboard. A woman, Mom’s age, maybe younger. Light-brown, shoulder-length hair.

“Stand up, everyone,” she said and waited for kids to rise to their feet.

Tobi stood up meekly, wobbled, and held onto the back of his chair.

“Good morning,” said the teacher.

A few of the kids repeated after her.

“Good, take your seats.” She was holding a hand puppet. A white cat with orange stripes. “I’m Frau Wenzel,” she said, “and this is Mimi.”

Some of the kids greeted the cat. “Hello, Mimi!”

Tobi didn’t say a word. He wanted to move even closer to the wall. Make himself small. Smaller than he already was. The room had a strange, wet smell. The building was old and dark. Drawings on the wall. One of them must have been by Philipp. During summer vacation, they’d followed Uwe. They’d hidden, laughing, behind bushes. The most pitiful apartment building of all.

The boy next time sat up, saw the cat, and turned to Tobi. “Where’s the cat from?” he asked. He wasn’t whispering. He didn’t know that you’re supposed to whisper in school.

The boys and girls turned towards him and Tobi.

The teacher changed tack. “This is Mimi,” she said, “and what’s your name?”

The boy noticed the flickering fluorescent lights in the front and looked at them for a while. “Felix,” he said finally.

“Okay, Felix,” said the teacher. “You’ll get Mimi now and you can tell us something about yourself. And then pass it on so the next person can talk.”

Tobi didn’t want the cat. Didn’t want it in around him, didn’t want to put his hand inside. And he absolutely didn’t want to talk about himself.

“What did you say then?” asked Dad, spreading butter on a piece of bread and laying a slice of ham on top.

“That we live here,” said Tobi.

Philipp had hoped Tobi would mention he had a big brother in fourth grade.

“Is Felix the one who lives near the honey store?” Mom asked.

Dad thought about it. “That might be him.”

Then they'd walked two by two to the playing fields. Led by Frau Wenzler, who kept turning around. Everyone had to hold hands so nobody would get lost. Down along the school garden where the last of the tomato plants were spread far apart. The garden beds had the seed packages stuck in them. The gardening tools were stored in a tin shed. The stream flowed past them. Balls had gotten stuck in the high grasses of its steep, narrow banks.

"I could hear you guys," said Philipp. He'd thought about Tobi. About the introductions and the stupid cat the girls wanted to take home. He had to stand up. Trembling and sweating. "If you have any problems, I can take care of it." He'd meant to say that to Tobi before he went into class. In the car, when Mom was helping him with his backpack. He had planned what to tell him a while earlier.

Tobi was the first one assigned to be milk monitor. At lunchtime, he had to go to the foot of the basement stairs, where there was a wooden crate with little cartons of chocolate, banana, and strawberry milk. He had to hand them out and cross off who had drunk their milk. The empty cartons made sounds like gunshots if you stamped on them on the street.

Chapter 8

The property of the after-school center used to belong to the fire department. It reached all the way to a little quarry. In the summer, drunk junior firefighters would go swimming in it. They'd leap off ledges in the flat granite and land in a heavenly bed of birch leaves. In early April, they'd gather branches and dead tree trunks from the nearby woods and make big stacks of them. In the villages nearby, other firefighters did the same thing. Then they would set up folding chairs around the woodpiles and guard them. Against the other villages, against the punks and Sorbians. Constantly near each other. Competition, battle. They set alarms and shouted each other's names into the darkness so they wouldn't fall asleep. Holding beer bottles. Scattering cigarette butts around the chair legs. If a branch cracked in the neighboring forest, they'd stand up. A few of them would walk around and shine their flashlights between the pine trunks. If they managed to guard their woodpile until April 30th, they could burn it sky-high. That night, a line of smaller and larger fires from other towns would light up like a torch procession. The next day, the whole area stank. A blue haze hung in the air between the spider-shaped clotheslines of the single-family homes.

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Tobi was sitting in the workshop, when Grandpa found him with the help of one of the girls. She'd said she knew where he would be. Now she followed the row of little flat blocks with her eyes. They had labels like "Filling Station," "Parking Lot," or "Bank."

"Just a minute, Grandpa," said Tobi when he saw Grandpa. He and three boys were making a domino line like they'd seen on TV.

Grandpa was wearing a thick coat. "I won't wait long," he said.

"We're almost done," one of the boys said. "We just have to finish building this circle."

Tobi got up and climbed over the blocks. He lifted his feet slowly and balanced on one leg before lifting the other. He walked past Grandpa looking for an audience.

There was one photo showing Grandpa and Tobi from behind. They were walking up a hill. Up Hutberg or Heidelberg or Walberg. Grandpa was holding his hands behind his back. His right hand holding his left wrist. A road and pastures. Two farms. Tobi was about four at the time. He was trying to hold his hands together behind his back, too. But his arms were too short and his hands didn't touch.

A teacher entered the room. She shook Grandpa's hand. "They hardly do anything else," she said.

"Philipp used to spend more time outside with his group of boys."

"Does he like fifth grade?"

Grandpa nodded.

"Tobi really loosened up after first grade," the teacher added.

Tobi came back, saw the kids, and leaned back against the wall. One of the boys stood up and pushed the first block. They toppled, did a curve, left, right, up some stairs, made metronome sounds, sped up, branched off, reunited. And finally came to a stop. Felix flicked the row again. Then they got going again. Some of the dominoes were far apart, others close together. They stopped again.

"Rico built that part," said Felix.

"No, that wasn't my section," said Rico, next to the window. "I built the spinner."

Rico lived in the high-rise near the clayworks. His dad sold nutrition bars. Rico ate one every day. He got his haircut at the department store. They'd cut all his hair the same length. And it grew back just as evenly.

Felix chased the dominoes and kept flipping them. At most three or four would fall in a row before he had to jump in. Then they curved into the spinner and stopped moving altogether. They were much too crowded.

Grandpa was waiting in the car. He'd put the backpack in the trunk.

"Is there any egg salad?" Tobi asked. He had tiny splinters under the skin of his knuckles. He could feel them with each movement and thought he was pushing them even deeper in his finger. He could see them like tadpoles in cloudy water. He observed Grandpa from the side. Small, cloudy eyes. Always a little sad-looking but with deep laugh lines at the corners.

Grandpa smiled, maneuvered the little Opel around the little parking lot, and turned down the radio. "Yes," he said. As he spoke, his lower lip trembled. "Made some yesterday. It's done sitting now."

Oak, maple, and chestnut leaves were taped to the daycare windows. Cut out of orange, brown, and dark-green construction paper. They could make chestnut and acorn men in the arts-and-crafts room. They drove past the clayworks and the high-rises. Grandpa stopped the Opel in front of a pink concrete apartment tower. Housing association condos. The driveway was bumpy. Tobi put on his dino backpack and followed Grandpa upstairs. Philipp opened the door for them. When Mom was working nights and Dad had an assembly shift, he and Tobi would spend the night at their grandparents.

The apartment always had the same smell. Of coffee, medicine, and dry air from the radiator. Tobi looked through the sliding glass door to the living room and saw that the TV was on. The ceiling lamps were on already even though it wasn't dark yet. The dining room was even warmer than in the hallway. Grandma was freezing at almost all times of year. She was so thin and gaunt. She leaned on the radiator and covered herself up to her shoulders. Read colorful magazines. At certain times of day, she'd look out the window at the treetops. Her favorite animals were magpies. Tobi went up to her and shook her thin hand. Smiled and sat next to her on the couch. The TV was on low

volume. An animal show was playing. The people at the Leipzig Zoo had such a funny way of talking.

“Have you finished your homework?” Grandma asked. He knew she would ask him that. He couldn’t remember a single time since he started school when she’d greeted him with any other question. “Be a good boy,” she’d say. “Not lazy like the other kids.”

“I finished it in after-care,” said Tobi. “It was just math.” He pulled the notebook out of his backpack, turned to the page, and showed it to her.

“You’d better copy that again,” said Grandma. “What a sloppy mess!”

“But I did it right,” said Tobi.

She put the notebook on the desk. “Sit down and write it again, nicely this time,” she said. Emphasizing every single word.

Tobi picked up the notebook but kept his eyes on the TV. He walked past the table without bumping into it.

Mom’s childhood bedroom had a desk and a couch in it. To keep Philipp from falling off the couch in the middle of the night, Grandpa put a chair nearby with its back by the pillow. Tobi slept on a mattress on the floor.

“I’ll do it by myself,” said Tobi, when Grandma sat down next to him at the desk.

“I’m just watching,” she said, and slid her chair closer.

Tobi could hear and even feel the air from her nose. She reached across the tabletop and touched his hand. He pressed harder with his pen. The line of the 5 became thicker than the other numbers.

Grandma’s breath smelled strange. Sickeningly sweet, somehow rotten, with a whiff of coffee. He only smelled it when she was sitting next to him like this. When she was almost blowing on him and grazing him with the air from her nose like a cat whisker. Sometimes he would wake up at night and hear a tomcat screeching. He made

a muscle with his arms until they started quivering. In the living room, Philipp was laughing about something on TV. Grandpa was in the kitchen stacking dishes. Then Grandma reached for his hand. Hers was cold, firm. She put it on top like she would on a kid's head. Pushed and pressed. Tried to guide Tobi's. Tobi made a fist around the pen and wouldn't let his hand move. He wanted to push her off. The anger rose up in him. The feeling he needed to free himself. With a shout or a jerky movement. His arm began trembling again, then he cried on the blotting paper.

“If you wrote neatly the first time, I wouldn't have to sit next to you,” she said.

Tobi wiped his tears with his sleeve. “It was all correct,” he said.

“But sloppy.”

“The teachers don't care about that.”

“Yes, they do.” She released his hand and pushed the notebook and the blotting paper aside.

A few more tears and he'd have to copy the assignment all over again. In a new notebook. You can't write on sopping wet paper. The clock ticked above the door. Cars were parking outside the house. Grandma switched on the desk lamp.

“Come quick!” Phillip shouted. He'd opened the door to the kids' room. The TV was on loud.

Tobi went into the living room, followed by Grandma.

On the armchair, Grandpa turned towards them.

“That's in America,” he said. The newscaster was commenting on a video, which played over and over. An airplane was flying into a skyscraper. The sky was blue, it was daytime. Then a second airplane flew into another skyscraper next to it. Grandma sat down, holding her hand in front of her mouth. Ashes covered the street. Grandpa ran his fingers through his air. Tobi stood at the door, motionless. Images of men. Footage from security cameras.

“Who is that?” Philipp asked. He looked at Grandma, who shook her head. Quickly and evenly, as if she were trembling.

“Is that a war?” Tobi asked.

There was a fire truck outside. It got closer, the siren became higher-pitched, the lights were outside the window. Grandpa turned up the volume.

Tobi sat on the floor. He looked up at Grandpa in his armchair. In front of all the Karl May books. Grandpa’s lower lip shivered, then he turned to Tobi. With wide-open eyes. Tobi couldn’t tell when he was looking at.

His eyes were searching Tobi’s face, from his nose to his ears, from his chin to his forehead, and when he caught Tobi’s eye, he only caught one. He had to say something now. “That wouldn’t happen in Germany,” he said.

Grandma covered her face with her hands. Philipp sat next to her, stiffly. He wanted to see it again, and again. How easily the tower collapsed. The ball of fire when the airplane flew into it. Then Grandpa turned off the TV. Grandma looked at him, closed his eyes, and let out a breath. As if saying thank you. Tobi leaned his head back on the couch. He could still hear the newscaster from the apartment upstairs. It was like listening to a voice through a closed door. Grandpa walked past Tobi into the kitchen. Away from the questions. He faltered as he stood up, opened the fridge, took out the egg salad, and stirred the bowl. Eggs, mustard, mayo, remoulade sauce. It wasn’t hard. There wasn’t a recipe. And still nobody had ever asked him.

Chapter 9

Tobi woke up, went to the desk, and took out a piece of paper. He drew a tank, as he would picture one anyhow, and made it drive through a red puddle. With the same red marker, he wrote “War” on top. Then a question mark. Downstairs, in the living room, Mom and Dad were watching TV. The blue-green glimmer of the screen made downstairs look like underwater. Tobi taped the piece of paper to his bedroom door and got back in bed. He heard chestnuts landing on the street. When a car drove past the house, the headlights made the branches cast big shadows on the walls of Tobi’s room. It was so peaceful here. Nobody screaming. Nobody dying. Nobody explaining anything to him. He didn’t know how you were supposed to act in a war. Only when Dad showed up first with the soccer balls, as always, loud and muffled, wherever he went, it sounded like distant explosions. He seemed to be going to the bathroom now. Tobi closed the tilted window and went back to bed. This time with his head facing the other direction. His blanket was too warm, so he flipped it over. With the warm side up. He could feel where his head had been on the pillow. When he woke up in the morning, the paper with the drawing was gone.

No tape residue. Nothing on the door to remind him of the drawing. With his index finger, he felt the spot where thought he’d taped the paper. No, he was positive. You don’t dream things like that. Tobi went into the kitchen where Philipp was sitting at the table, drinking the milk from his cereal bowl. Mom was leaning on the counter.

“Good morning,” she said.

“Morning,” said Tobi.

“Did you sleep well?”

Tobi looked at her as she wriggled her bare toes on the tiles. “Yes,” he said. He had no choice.

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Philipp went to the bathroom to brush his teeth. Dad was shaving by the mirror. He had black hairs growing on his shoulders. His arms were thick, but not muscular. Philipp spat out the toothpaste on the inside edge of the sink, so it wouldn't mix with Dad's shaving water. The spit glided into the water like a long raindrop. The black dots of Dad's beard stuck to it. Then it was sucked deeper into the water.

He walked along the cornfield past the officers' houses. The sun was going up. Taking an orange stand against the night. When he turned around, he could still see the light on in the bathroom. Dad always took ages. Felix was at the bus stop leaning against the concrete post of the wire mesh fence. He stood there every morning. Always a little off to the side. This year, at least he didn't have to wait with his mother. Cars and mopeds drove past over the leaves in the street. Then came the bus to Bautzen. At the intersection, there was a gate and a staircase down the steep hill. There were still tracks there. Leading through the woods to the clayworks. To make sure Philipp found his way from home to the bus stop, Mom and Dad had walked with him there before the first day of school. Actually, they had just stopped across the street from it and Dad showed Philipp the bench and the yellow sign. Then they'd turned back home, where some Danishes were defrosting in the oven.

The bus stopped, the door opened, and Philipp got in. Felix followed him. Philipp didn't have to show his bus pass. No one did. He said "morning" and walked down the aisle to the first empty seat.

Usually he sat near the back door and stretched his legs while the older kids sat up front. They wanted to chat with Spinne. "Dynamo screwed up again," someone said, and Spinne pointed at the sign, which read "No talking to the bus driver during the journey." They laughed. One day Philipp would sit up front too. And talk to Spinne about soccer.

The schoolyard. The fifth-graders were hanging out near the entrance and the big kids from all the other grades were farther way. Some eighth-grade boys were sitting on a boulder. The tenth-graders were by the bike racks. Wearing gym shoes and baggy hoodies. Philipp stood in a circle with some boys from his class. Whenever someone managed to pry a rock from the stamped-down ground, they would kick it around.

“D’you do your homework?” Axel asked. He lived with his whole family on the road into town. A big house that many people didn’t count as part of Neschwitz.

“Math?” Philipp asked.

“Yeah, the textbook.”

Philipp nodded. There was a big clock on the wall of the building. Triangular without any numbers. The time was correct but hard to read. It was above the office window. If the light was on, the door would soon be unlocked.

“Did you see the people jumping out the window?” asked Christoph, who shared a double desk with Philipp.

“They would have burned up anyway,” said Axel. “They smashed into the street, or onto cars.”

“Just imagine driving over there and someone goes splat on your car.”

“Or walking,” said Philipp. “And then...” He clapped his hands.

Axel and Christoph laughed out loud.

“I always thought something like that couldn’t happen,” said Christoph after a while. He was the only one who was going to be Confirmed.

“The Americans deserved it,” said Axel.

“Yeah,” said Philipp. But he didn’t know why.

“My Mom said they invade every country. For oil. Now someone’s taken revenge.”

“Unlike Germany, America wasn’t destroyed in the war.”

Philipp couldn't remember who had said that. They talked about war. About Germany. About America. He hadn't realized that America existed. As a real country with people in it. But now he did. Welcome to the world.

The bell rang. Seven-thirty. The Religion teacher closed the front door. He was wearing slippers on the stairs, holding the other door open. As he understood it, the slipper rule applied to him too.

"Morning," he said.

"Good morning! Shoes off!"

Philipp stuffed his jacket in the bottom locker. Went upstairs to his classroom. His seat was by the window. When the heater was on, he could smell the old curtains. They hung from yellowed plastic rails under the ceilings, partly in tatters. Whenever someone pulled them down, they'd be hung up again. The window was tipped open. The lights were on in the apartment blocks across the street. The clotheslines were empty. Leaves in the high grass that grew around the iron bars where the undershirts usually slipped out from the clothespins. Axel and Christoph had taken seats in the back of the room so they could see better.

"What's up?" Philipp asked.

"Herr Lubitz is walking to the bike stands," said Axel. Philipp stood on his chair and saw the Religion teacher walking past the school in his slippers. He took big steps, as if walking over a puddle, but stepped softly. The concrete slabs were glistening with moisture and sometimes it looked like Herr Lubitz was slipping a little on his rubber soles,

The bike racks had a roof over them. They were on the street that passed the school. At the entrance to the teachers' parking lot. Cigarette butts were floating in pools of rainwater and spit on a switchbox. Alongside packets of powdered ice tea. In the spring, the yellow pollen from the canola fields would form a layer on top. There

were two cars on the sidewalk with their windows down, playing music. Philipp could only hear the bass. Herr Lubitz approached the group of older boys and girls. Some of them were sitting on their mopeds. Other were leaning on one of their cars. They waved at him, said something, and laughed. Philipp didn't get it.

“What is he doing?” Philipp asked.

“Telling them off,” said Christoph, who was balanced on one foot on the seat of the chair.

“They don't want them hanging out there with the cars,” said Axel. “That's school property.”

Some other classmates came to sit by the window. Something turned on the light. That made it darker outside and their faces were reflected in the windowpanes.

“Hey!” someone shouted, and the fluorescent lights were switched off again.

Herr Lubitz was facing a group of tenth-graders and walking with a few of the boys. Eventually he turned to the drivers of the cars. They saluted from inside and they others laughed. They started their engines, moved off the curb, and drove away. One of them honked. Philipp smirked as Herr Lubitz watched the two cars leave. He looked at Axel, whose nose was almost touching the window.

“Who was that?” he asked. Axel had a big brother. He'd gone to the same school and then started an apprenticeship. He probably knew the drivers.

“One of them was Menzel,” he said.

A weird name.

Herr Lubitz walked down the concrete slabs to the entrance. The tenth-graders followed him, goose-stepping. The mopeds were parked and locked next to the bikes. They looked up towards the windows, including the one where Philipp and his class were standing, and gave everyone the finger.

Herr Lubitz didn't see the gesture. He stopped them right at the door. “Shoes off!”