



## **Alef**

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Novel, 416 pages

Publication date: March 23, 2021

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### Chapter 1

#### **The last child**

On the swelteringly hot August afternoon in 1984 when Maja was born, a truck loaded with five tonnes of grit hurtled through the barriers at Checkpoint Charlie, speeding along at 60 kilometres per hour. Inside the truck, crouched on the steel floor of the driver's cab, was Aunt Susi. Maja's mother wanted to be racing towards freedom too, instead of bidding a definitive farewell to her own in a stifling delivery room. And so, as she squeezed Maja out of her uterus, she was thinking about her sister Susi. And wondering, in between contractions – their sole purpose seemingly to tear her body in half – whether Susi was still alive. Whether the soldiers had fired their guns. Whether the barrier-locking mechanism had kicked in before the truck was across. Or whether, perhaps, Susi had already received documents and was now sat in a train on her way to Hanover – or Hamburg? – clutching her new West German money in her hands. She wondered when she would see Susi again, and



how old the child whose head had just torn open her perineum would be by then. A few months? A few years? An adult?

Maja's mother and Susi had often voiced their shared dream of fleeing to the West, but Wolf, Maja's father, always posed counter questions whenever the subject came up. "How exactly do you imagine life over there to be? Do you really think we'd be better off? Isn't it kind of ridiculous to give up a real life – and not a bad one, you have to admit! – for some vague idea?" And then, like always when he wasn't sure what to say next, he would veer off into philosophical musings: "Isn't it naive to think everything could be better? Isn't it wrong, even? What if capitalism is much worse than they say? When all is said and done, this is our home. In spite of everything. Why can't we just be content with what we have?"

And then he would refer to the survey he always mentioned at such moments, in which psychologists had established that, twelve months after a momentous stroke of fate, people returned to being as happy or as unhappy as they had been beforehand. In other words: nothing ever changes. People stay who they are. And Astrid was unhappy everywhere; Wolf knew that very well.

Maja's mother, however, saw things differently. Firstly: she, once named Astrid Klatt, and since the birth of her daughter predominantly *Maja's mother*, had an almost symbiotic relationship with her sister Susi. With only eleven months between them, they were like twins. Susi needed Astrid and Astrid needed Susi. That was why Astrid preferred to stay as close to her as possible. Or at the very least, not separated from her by a sniper-guarded, unscalable wall. Because the two women, who had grown up in a house with a mother who was never there and a father who couldn't be away



often enough; a house that was always freezing cold – regardless of how much coal they shovelled into the stove; a house where there was never any chocolate but always plenty of schnapps, had grown intertwined. Like two beech trees whose branches sway in the wind until they chafe, and there, right where the bark has torn open, merge into one branch. To snap this branch in the middle and toss the halves into two different countries; that simply wouldn't do. The mere fact that they'd been living in different cities before Susi's escape wouldn't do, but this was down to Astrid never wanting to be where she was (this being the second reason for Astrid's dream of fleeing to the West). Because no matter where she was at any given moment, Maja's mother had a tendency for dreaming herself elsewhere. In the icy house where they grew up, she had dreamt of four walls without the father she referred to as *the horror* ("Is the horror gone?") and who only brought out the worst in them. In the squat in Prenzlauer Berg, the pre-war building that she shared with Susi and her constant rotation of boyfriends, Astrid dreamt of a home with a man who belonged to her and her alone. On the top floor in Sandstrasse, 200 metres as the crow flies from the Elbe, with *Wolf and Astrid* on the doorbell nameplate and a shared bathroom halfway down the stairs, she dreamt of a new-build apartment with their own bathroom. In Taklerring, in a newly-built two-bedroom apartment in the Groß Klein neighbourhood, with a fully fitted, windowless bathroom, she sat with Wolf and Maja on the eleventh-floor balcony, watched the ships coming into the Rostock port and dreamt of the great wide world. With a pair of binoculars in one hand and an atlas in the other, she looked up the unfamiliar flags and wondered whether she would ever see these places with her own eyes. *Probably not*, she thought. At least when her sister was with her, Astrid's restlessness subsided a little. But now Susi was



gone. Crouched on the steel floor by Rico the lorry driver, while she, Astrid, was alone in this labour ward, struggling to give birth to a child she wasn't even sure she wanted. That last part didn't bother her, admittedly, because she believed people always had children without being sure they really wanted them. Only stupid people wanted children and had no doubts. Only the stupid were so blind that they didn't grasp what a child would do to their own lives. Only the stupid couldn't comprehend what a child would hold in store for them. Stupid people wanted children in order to forget their own stupidity. But Astrid wasn't stupid. She knew that this child – who was already making it very clear who the boss was right here in the delivery room – would change everything. It would shackle her. To a place; to a man; to a life in which, out of sheer responsibility for another human being, it would never again be possible for Astrid to make a decision to her own advantage. And this child would make her feel love – a love so vast, total and permanent that it made her afraid. Because that kind of endless love was always accompanied by the fear of losing it, and this fear caused women to make strange decisions. And this was called motherhood. Astrid was now two people. Forevermore. Ever since she had felt the first kick from deep inside her belly – not a gentle, butterfly-like kick, but a forceful one, almost a shove – Maja's mother had known that she would never be alone again. And while that seemed to reassure other women, stupid women, so much so that they had one child after the other, like bleating sheep allowing themselves to be led to slaughter, it plunged Astrid first into panic, then into grief, and ultimately into resignation. Astrid hadn't been alone since she was eleven months old. You might think this would make her afraid of being alone, but the truth was she longed for it. Because from a very young age, Astrid had loved it when things went like clockwork,



and hated having to be considerate of others. Considerate of her mother, who was shrouded in constant darkness; of her father, shrouded in a fog of beer and schnapps; and of her sister, shrouded in longing for approval and passion. All Astrid had ever wanted was to be alone. Even though she would never have admitted it, because who was she, the Big Sister practically from birth, to suddenly speak of her own needs? And yet: if someone had asked her what she really wanted at this very moment in the delivery room – in this moment between life and death, between heaven and hell, between the end and the beginning – she would have told the truth for the first time ever: Alone, is what I want to be. Alone, and then to die.

Wolf, Maja's father, was oblivious to all of this. When Astrid's water finally broke, the starting pistol for the contractions, Wolf was scoring a goal. It was the first goal of his life. Wolf Pagel wasn't the goal-scoring type, and so it was as much of a surprise to him – even more so, in fact – as it was to everyone else. He had been mooching around at the edge of the pitch, trying to get in the way as little as possible, when Ecke, who was his workmate and sort of his rival too, passed the ball to him. Ecke had downed three shots before the game and thought he was passing to Trotzky, who was a very good striker, and if anyone could score against the team from the rayon factory, then it was him. Instead he passed to Wolf, who didn't get his foot out of the way quickly enough and accidentally sank the round leather ball into the net. After the surprise goal, he felt as though the world stopped turning for a moment. It was by no means a bad feeling, but it came to an abrupt end when his mother, Elfriede Pagel, née Klemm, rushed onto the playing field. And in the very moment that Wolf was thinking, *now that's taking things a little too far, if even my*



*mother...*, Elfriede was already yelling: “I can’t believe your Astrid is in the hospital and you’re here dithering about on the football field!” After which the world continued to turn, a little quicker than before even, and Wolf set himself into motion with his overly long, beanpole-thin legs, jumped onto his bicycle and rode off into the wind, which was blowing across the Elbe and into his distinctive face with its crooked nose and thick moustache, to the far end of the city. Pedalling with all the force he had gathered in his brief moment as a celebrated goal scorer.

At the labour ward, however, he was soon brought to a halt by the heartless senior nurse, whose moustache was almost as magnificent as his: “You can’t go in there,” she grunted at him, pointing all one metre and ninety-two of his excited self towards a drab row of chairs before hurrying onwards, her moustache leading the way. On one of the chairs sat another poor bugger who had been damned to inaction, and who misinterpreted the disappointment in Wolf’s eyes (at the realization he wouldn’t be there at the birth of his child) as disappointment that his life, so as it was, was about to end right here in front of the delivery room. Wolf did what he had been told to do; he sat and stared at the wall, now nothing but a beating heart. A heart pounding so forcefully – from excitement and happiness and fear and worry – that he wouldn’t have been surprised if it had jumped out of his rib cage and bounced up and down the hospital corridor like a ball. Even though Wolf wasn’t allowed to go to Astrid, he still felt as though he was right next to her, because her groaning and panting echoed through the entire corridor. It reminded him of an injured animal fighting for its life with its very last strength, and Wolf found that terrifying and impressive in equal measure. Just as he found Astrid – this woman



with the crew cut and the big mouth – terrifying and impressive in equal measure, even when she wasn't giving birth to his child.

Meanwhile, Wolf's mother Elfriede was hurrying along Zollstrasse. She flung open the door beneath the "Zum Stillen Winkel" sign, her right arm stretched far in front of her (an arm which was short but all the stronger for having to stand in for the left, which had been lame since her escape across the icy Baltic Sea). Her pale blue eyes searched the smoke-filled room for Strong Hermann. She found him at the bar – she had always been able to spot him by his gleaming, wheaten blonde hair – and shared the happy news with him. Maja's grandfather, who had never understood anything about money but always a great deal about boozing, promptly reached across to the bell to ring in a round for the entire bar. It was mid-August, and that bell ring would use up the remainder of his monthly pay check. Elfriede – unlike Hermann – knew that very well, but for once she didn't think about it. She didn't think about the fact that she would have to go on credit with the baker and the butcher. She didn't think about the fact that she would have to go cap in hand, yet again, to her well-off Aunt Minna. Instead, Elfriede clinked her glass against Hermann's, because even though they rarely knew how to engage with one another, this was something they were good at.

So Elfriede and Hermann were getting drunk. Astrid's sister Susi was racing – selfishly! – amid screams into a new life. Astrid was groaning from the labour pains or the rage that she would never again be alone. And Wolf was sitting around doing nothing, while others – in this case Astrid – were doing the work for him. Essentially,



things were just as they always were. Until, behind the door, a cry rang out and a new life began.

Wolf greeted this life with tears of joy. He had always wanted a child. While his workmates had exchanged tips on how to stop anyone “landing” them with some “unwanted brat”, women on the street had sometimes been baffled to catch him gazing longingly into their prams. But at their age – he was 36 and Astrid almost 28 – Wolf Pagel had long since given up hope of ever becoming a father. Under socialism, people had children young, and he was almost old enough to be a grandfather. Wolf actually had a son somewhere in Prignitz, whom he had conceived at the age of 27 with a salesgirl named Renate, but Renate had wanted nothing more to do with him after she found out that Wolf wasn’t the unskilled worker (salary: 1400 Marks) she had presumed him to be when they first met. Once she discovered that Wolf had only been sent to the production line on probation, and was actually an assistant (with ambitions!) to the head bookkeeper in the sewing machine factory, she gave him the brush-off. She wasn’t getting herself involved in that. After all, everyone knew that the professional classes in East Germany were the real poor buggers. Renate married Hans-Dieter from the assembly line and dispatched Wolf out of her life. *Leave me be! I don’t want any trouble!* She didn’t want him to see his son, whom she and Hans-Dieter named Stephan, ever again, and Wolf didn’t hold out any great hope that Stephan would seek him out. Because Stephan surely believed that Hans-Dieter was his father, and for Renate, Hans-Dieter and Stephan, that was the end of that. So Wolf tried to think about Stephan as little as possible. In the beginning, of course, he had regularly driven out to Prignitz regardless, hiding behind the garden



fence in an attempt to get at least a brief glance of the boy. But then Renate, Hans-Dieter and Stephan had moved away, and after a conversation with Trotzky, who wasn't only a good striker and his best friend but also a reasonably good lawyer, he had decided to forget Stephan. Because Trotzky, whose real name was Toni Bernstein – he had been given the nickname by his colleagues because he was a bit of a revolutionary, always in opposition to absolutely everything, as a matter of principle – had given him a friendly clap on the shoulder and said: "You're getting carried away, Wolfy, let it go. You may be his biological father – although to be honest I'd have my doubts even on that, have you had a good look at that girl? – but you don't have any rights. Let the boy grow up in peace." And the last thing Wolf wanted was for Stephan not to grow up in peace. Because Wolf probably knew better than anyone what that meant. After all, his father was Strong Hermann.

And so Wolf gave Stephan the most valuable gift he could imagine, and wondered less and less whether Stephan loved painting as much as he did and whether his eyes were as brown as his mother's or a mixture of all colours, like Wolf's. That was when Wolf realised: pain is a funny thing. It comes and goes, it wrenches you this way and that, and eventually, when you can no longer imagine life without it, it disappears. That was the moment in which his grief over his son, his only connection to the future, became a dim memory. A feeling that no longer shattered him. A feeling, well-nursed and nurtured, behind a thick layer of protective glass inside a room he never again set foot in.



The question whether he had ever really gotten over the loss never arose in all the years that followed. But the answer came in the vast number of tears that flowed out of him when he saw Maja for the first time. She was his child. She was his future. The idea of starting over appealed to him, of unreservedly getting to know and love a human being who was his own flesh and blood. The idea that everything was open once more, that the entire future had laid itself down before his feet like a silk carpet – it was intoxicating. And he firmly resolved to always be a good father to Maja. Because that was what it was all about: he, Wolf, would be there for his child. Not like his own father, this man whom everyone called Strong Hermann but who was more deserving of the name *Terrible Hermann*, who ruled their home so strictly that Wolf's mother wasn't even allowed to go bowling with her work colleagues. And that was the least of it.

Maja was born, tearing Astrid's perineum, and by way of greeting relieved herself on her mother's hospital gown. Only then did she cry. She screamed with such might that Astrid wanted to cover her ears. 3,400 grams of bawling life. She screamed and screamed, and eventually she was done and began to suckle contentedly at Astrid's bosom, which seemed to have doubled in size in the minutes since the birth. Maja's mother looked at her child and knew at once that she would be her first and last. It wasn't that she didn't love her. She loved her daughter instantaneously, something which almost surprised her given that she didn't know this human being suddenly lying in her arms. But she looked at this little girl, with her tiny, broad nose, her dark hair and eyes as blue as the sky outside the hospital room window, and thought: I'll never get it this perfect again. She looked at Wolf, saw his tears (thought: *and*



*certainly not with him*) and handed him the bundle. Wolf cradled the future in his arms, breathed in her scent (which was exactly as he had imagined it to be) and whispered in Maja's ear that he was her Papa. That he would never let her down. And in that moment, he genuinely believed it. Then he kissed Astrid, whom he admittedly no longer loved but would now never be able to leave, because she had given birth to his only future.

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The first days, weeks, even months of Maja's life were a delightful daze for everyone, filled with the kind of happiness and hope that can only be found in beginnings. Wolf flourished, and Astrid smiled as though she really meant to be happy this time. Even Elfriede, a woman whose heart had been drained of love back when the Russians came, tenderly stroked her stubby fingers over Maja's soft cheeks. And Strong Hermann, who wasn't that strong at all before the war and used to have legs as spindly as Wolf's, nodded first at Maja and then at his son. Which meant something almost like an embrace.

Admittedly Maja made it easy for them to love her. She slept seven hours straight every night and only ever cried when she was hungry. She let herself be nursed without resistance and took the breast milk wonderfully. When she was just two days old, she smiled at her parents. Science speaks of the so-called reflex smile, but to Wolf it felt as though this smile blasted open the armour that had grown around his heart. He swore that he would do everything differently to his parents. His



mother had tried to be a good mother, but she simply wasn't able. She had lost warmth and such things on the 31<sup>st</sup> January 1945, when the Russians descended upon her hometown, taking away her father and raping and beating her beloved nanny. When Elfriede and her sister hastily buried the nanny before fleeing, they buried their faith in humanity along with her. Motherhood without this trust was a futile endeavour. And Wolf's father, a man who had gone off to war waving his flag and returned with a broken gaze, had never even tried the business of being a father. From Wolf's birth onwards – the boy was premature and came into the world puny and screaming – he had regarded him as a disappointment. This disappointment only grew and grew. Like a balloon being inflated with air breath by breath. Little Wolf, always sickly, always quick to tears, was an aesthete. He wanted to paint and write poems. His father, Strong Hermann, had different ideas: there was no place for aesthetes in his world, and certainly not in his house. But no matter how often he tried to beat the aesthete out of his son, Wolf simply laid down on the floor and played dead. He never put up a fight, never argued back. His fighting spirit was never roused. Only when Wolf turned 18, by which point he already towered a head over Strong Hermann, did his father give up the educational efforts and leave his son be. But the disappointment never faded from his eyes. Even as he took his last breath, in "Zum Stillen Winkel", with his glass tightly gripped in his rough labourer's hand, his expression darkened as he thought of his son and realised that Wolf would now be the only man with his surname; his face clenched like a fist, then he dropped dead. But despite this, Wolf tolerated things at home very well. Until Astrid came into his life, he lived as a bachelor under one roof with his parents and Aunt Minna. As an appendix of his mother, who neither indulged nor protected him from Strong



Hermann, but who, when Strong Hermann and the stingy aunt weren't looking, laid an extra slice of bacon in the sandwiches he took to work with him, where Wolf Pagel, whom most of his colleagues recognized from afar by his height and thick moustache, was responsible for the fact that they were building sewing machines. Sewing machines that before the war were sold under the name *Singer*, and now, in East Germany, as *Veritas Household Sewing Machines*, and in West Germany in the *Quelle* catalogue. Later, when Wolf, Astrid and Maja moved to Rostock, where Wolf was to teach at the university and Astrid wanted to get her PhD, he saw his parents only once a month. When his father died, shortly after the move, Elfriede visited them frequently in Rostock. These regular visits were sufficient reminder to Wolf, despite the love and gratitude he felt toward his mother, of all the things he wanted to do differently with Maja.

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The first contented days, weeks, even months after Maja's birth would probably carry her through the years that followed, even her entire life. Because this life, Maja's life, wasn't made to be simple and uncomplicated. And even Maja herself wasn't made to be simple and uncomplicated. Above all, she led a life in which there was always something missing. First, she lost her father. Because even though Maja's father was initially happier than ever before, then the Berlin Wall fell, and reunification destroyed everything. It ripped his hopes and dreams to shreds, leaving him as a shell of a man. Then Maja lost her mother too, because the reunification



brought Astrid far too much happiness, far too many opportunities to stay away from home, and far too many reasons to raise a glass to something.

Then Eitan came, and Maja lost herself.