

THE EARTH IS ONLY BLUE FROM SPACE

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[pp. 22-32; 92-117]

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[pp. 22-32]

Since I’ve been able to think clearly, and that hadn’t long been the case back then – only for a few months, I reckon – I’ve collected rare words. Well, I say *rare*, but they’re actually more like unique words, and by that I mean they describe a very specific thing for which there’s no equivalent in other languages. Like *Ling*, for example, one of my three – no, five – favourite words.

It comes from China and describes the sound made when two jade stones knock against one another. I’ve never held jade stones, and wasn’t even sure what jade is, because where we lived on the housing estate almost everything was made of concrete, with a few pebbles here and there at most. Yet ever since I’d read the word in one of Mr Reza’s old books, and kneaded it around in my mouth like Hubba Bubba, I could imagine how it sounds.

Ling.

As with all of my unique words, I wrote it down in the notebook with the brown leather binding, given to me by my mother, which I kept hidden in a shoebox under my bed. The words, most of which I had stumbled across in old books or dictionaries, vary greatly: some monosyllabic and unassumingly plain; some proud and boastful, with lots of vowels; some unpronounceable and, in a mysterious kind of way, beautiful. Many come from languages that sound so peculiar I wondered whether they really exist, or whether someone – someone as well-read and imaginative as Mr Reza – had made them up.

The thing with the words and the notebook was my secret, by the way, it’s best I say that right now. Even though it’s not a secret any more. But back then it was my monster-biggest secret (even bigger than the fact I once peeked into the girls’ changing room before P.E. and saw Sabrina Kabautzky’s epic breasts; *epic*, by the way, means very big).

I had sworn to myself that I would never tell anyone about my notebook, and I kept my promise. Well, until I told Juri that is.

Juri, and I’ll get to this later, was more beautiful than the most beautiful word I knew, and of course a thousand times more beautiful than Sabrina Kabautzky. I’d hoped to impress her with my unique words, though I was also afraid she would just laugh at me. She didn’t, of course. She chuckled instead, which was perhaps even worse. Because the chuckle was difficult to interpret, and I wasn’t sure: was she chuckling with me, or at me?

That’s how it was. And it’s all part of the story. Although actually I was wanting to talk about something else.

I wanted to talk about how I was missing a word. No matter how often I came across new words and noted them down in my book, I still couldn’t find it. It was the word that described what had happened to me. The word that described what it’s like when you have to leave the place you love the most. The place was Klein Krebslow, although none of us called it that. We simply called it ‘the estate’, and it wasn’t anything all that special, except that it was my home. And even I never particularly loved the estate until I realised I had to leave it.

That was two years ago. I was 13, and it was summer, which is hardly surprising because back then it was somehow always summer. Though when you really think about it, that must be nonsense. But what isn’t nonsense, and what I remember more than just hazily, is that this summer was unbearable and hot. It wasn’t unbearable because it was hot, but because my entire life was ruined (*ruined* is a different, more elegant word for *fucked up*).

Because they had lied to me and betrayed me.

They are my parents.

They = parents = ruined = fucked up.

That's what I was thinking as I lay there in bed with my eyes closed. In the room to the right of me, separated only by a thin wall made of some kind of plasterboard, slept Nina, my little sister. In the room behind, my parents were getting ready for bed. I was the only one who couldn't settle.

Usually when I was too worked up to sleep but too tired to read, I would imagine the characters in my favourite novels crawling out of their books and coming to life. I pictured them stretching and leaning, then carefully tiptoeing to the edge of my birch veneer bookshelves, sitting down, and with their legs swinging in the air, telling me of their adventures. Harka, the son of the Great Bear, and Frisco Kid were usually there, and sometimes, when his raft carried him to my riverbank, Huckleberry Finn too.

But some time ago now, Harka and the others had disappeared. And as hard as I tried, as much as I pleaded with them to return, they never came back. They had abandoned me. I didn't know whether it had something to do with the clear-thinking thing that had inflicted itself on me, or with Sabrina Kabautzky's epic breasts.

All I knew was that the only person I could rely on now was myself. I, Sascha Labude, the... well, the hero of this story, and probably the loneliest person in the former German Democratic Republic, or for all I knew the Federal Republic too. It didn't really matter which. The decisive thing was the *lonely*, and also that no one came up with the idea of pronouncing my name in a French way. Because I hated that. Not bewd or budé. Just La and Bude like buddha, pronounced the American way.

I opened my eyes. The metal blinds on the window reflected the lights of the cars that were gliding through the night out on the motorway. They lurched drunkenly through my room, the white cones of the headlamps and the red, dull shimmer of the brake lights.

When we moved in here, my father, whose voice back then hadn't yet dried up like a trickle in the gutter, said: 'Do you hear the road, do you hear the sound it makes? Like the rushing of the waves in the Baltic Sea!' But to me

it just sounded like cars racing along. I didn't say this to him, of course; I just nodded silently.

I hadn't given much more thought to my father's words. But ever since I'd found out that we were moving away, and soon, very soon, in just four weeks, it had become clear to me what he'd meant. Even though the rushing still didn't sound like the Baltic Sea, I liked it, probably because it was all I knew. But my parents didn't understand that.

'You'll soon get used to the new flat,' they said. 'It's only a few streets away. It isn't so bad, you'll see.'

But that was a lie. It was very bad, and I didn't want to get used to it, and our new flat, which was at the end of a terraced block, wasn't just a few streets away either, but a whole 8.4 kilometres, roughly the length of all the words from the books in my birch veneer bookshelves laid out alongside one another (I had done a rough calculation in my head). And the new flat didn't look 'dead chic' either, as my parents kept claiming; to me it looked like the home of people who thought they were better than everyone else. And for me, that certainly wasn't 'the new world'. Because seriously, what person in their right mind would come up with the idea of constructing a new world out of red brick and plastic windows and ultra-ugly carports?

But my parents said they wanted to get away from here. 'We can't stay on the estate any longer, the only ones left here now are the dregs of society, and they never sweep the staircase.'

But if only the dregs lived here, as they said, did that mean we were dregs too? Or were we not dregs on account of the fact that my mother always swept the stairs? Was that a characteristic of the dregs of society, that they didn't care about the staircase? And if so, then why was I allowed to play with their children? As long as they didn't give me any sweets, that is, because my mother was always afraid I might swallow one of them. As if anyone had ever choked to death on a fruit gum!

My parents were getting themselves entangled in contradictions, that much was clear. But no one besides me was willing to see that. Or maybe I had misunderstood. After all, there was a great deal I didn't understand. Like the fact that I was born in a country that no longer exists.

I mean, how can a country just disappear? This was something that no one, no matter how often I asked, was able to explain to me. Even though my parents and the teachers at school attempted to, over and over again. They talked to me as though I were a child. Presumably because, in their eyes, I still was.

‘Sascha,’ my mother said, ‘the old country came to an end.’

‘Our old country,’ said my father.

‘We live in capitalism now,’ said my mother, ‘in the market economy.’

‘In the so-called social market economy,’ said my father.

‘We have a new leader and new money,’ said my mother, ‘and now we can buy evvvverything.’

‘We *could*,’ said my father.

‘Even yoghurt, Toffifee and Coca-Cola,’ said my mother.

That sounded good to me, of course, even though I was almost never allowed to drink Coca-Cola nor any of the others, the fake colas. But what I found very funny (*funny* as in strange, not funny ha-ha), was that the old country was supposed to have come to an end. Just like that. I couldn't get my head around it. Because I was still here, and so was the estate, so were the streets and the houses and the trees. And it didn't seem like any of the other people had drowned or been swallowed up by an earthquake or, for all I knew, a black hole (I had learnt about those from Juri). I mean, I could still see them.

They no longer drove Trabants, admittedly, but cars like second-hand, lipstick-red Mitsubishi Galants – like us. And they didn't go to Usedom on holiday any more, but flew to Majorca – not like us, unfortunately. But they,

all of these people, seemed very much alive, and as far as I could tell, apart from these external details they had stayed more or less the same. And isn't it the people who make a country what it is? Or is it a country that makes the people? These were the questions I asked myself, but I didn't find any answers.

It was all so complicated. The old was still there, yet at the same time it was gone. It reminded me of something Juri had once told me about the sun and the stars.

She said that when we look up at the sky, we never see the proper sun, but only ever the sun from 8 minutes and 20 seconds before. Because that's how long its light takes to reach the Earth. And the same thing was true, Juri explained, for the stars. Their light takes hundreds, thousands, millions of years to reach us, and when we stare up at the sky, we're never actually seeing the stars themselves. We only see a pale, dull reflection; we see their past, without knowing whether they're still alive in this moment, or long since extinguished.

The old country, it seemed to me, was like one of these stars. Even though I could still see it, it had burnt out long ago. But what did that mean for us on the estate? Were we too just something from the past now, or did we have a future?

I realised I was getting ensnared in my thoughts, like in thorny undergrowth. I couldn't make my way any further forwards. And as always when I ended up in this dead-end, which was too narrow to turn around in, a thought flared inside me, filling me with fear and at the same time flooding me with hope: what if all of it, my entire life, was nothing but a dream? A bad simulation I had ended up in by accident? Something fabricated, the sickest (*sickest* is an impolite way of saying *the worst*), most messed-up sham? Or some inane joke?

What if I woke up and realised that everything was as phony as Danilo Pawelke's gold watch? What if we didn't move away from Klein Krebslow?

What if my father found his voice again, and everything went back to being like it was before?

I kicked the overly-warm blanket down off me, reached under the bed for my book of unique words and ran my index finger over the lined pages. If my mother were a word, I thought, it would be small and angular. And my father would be a long, difficult, hyphenated word, written in a shaky, unsteady hand, because he could never make a decision. Not even about whether he was happy or not. And what kind of word would Juri be? Probably one in capital letters, with looping flourishes and little squiggles.

I began to draw in my book...

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... when a strange smell suddenly reached my nostrils. It must have drifted into my room through the window, which was ajar, between the slats of the blinds. Pungent, Mr Reza would have called it, because Mr Reza spoke the

best German even though he was from Persia, or rather, Iran, which had once been Persia.

Before I could assign the smell to something, I heard swift, light footsteps approaching from the bedroom next door; it had to be my mother.

'Bodo, come quickly!' she called in a flustered tone, and all at once I realised what the smell was.

I dashed over to the window.

'Bodo!' called my mother.

'What the hell?!'

Hearing my father curse as I stood there by the window in my pyjamas, my first thought was: it's the monster-big catastrophe, and if it's a dream, if it's *my* dream, I'd like it to end now and for me to wake up! But I didn't wake up, because it wasn't a dream.

My second thought was, *she* didn't do that, no, *she* can't have done that! And my third thought I can no longer remember, but my fourth was: has Juri completely lost her mind?!

And perhaps it would've been better if I hadn't thought that. Even if it probably wouldn't have changed anything. But sometimes, despite how tiny and insignificant we are, we believe we can contribute to changing the entire world and the course of events. Like when your parents ban you from watching the World Cup quarter-finals, and Germany (in other words the Federal Republic) loses, and you think: if I'd been allowed to watch, we wouldn't have lost!

But it's only become clear to me now that this is nonsense. That the world is so much bigger than we are, each person no more than a tiny word consisting of even tinier letters in an endless stream of languages.

In the end, as far as the universe is concerned, we're irrelevant.

And yet, looking back now, it seems to me that this was the moment when I lost Juri forever. There’s a unique word for this which is also in my notebook. It comes from a language called Boro, which is spoken in Assam. I had no idea whatsoever where that is. But that doesn’t matter. The important thing is the word. It’s called *onsra*, and describes the feeling that you’ll never again be able to love as much as you once did.

[...]

[pp. 92-117]

Outside, the heat that had been building all day long still had the estate in a stranglehold. Just a few clouds were gathered in the sky. I jumped onto my bicycle; it had just gone 6 o’clock. But instead of veering off into Benno Voelkner Weg and riding home to number 12, I decided to head in the opposite direction.

I crossed Lomonossow Allee and pedalled down the Andrej Sacharow Ring, past the playground, where a light wind made the two swings squeak back and forth in an uneven rhythm. Only by the little substation, which was behind the final block of flats and scrawled with illegible graffiti and two swastikas, did I come to a halt.

I leaned my bike against it and, with my rucksack on my shoulders, strolled along the narrow path that wound through the surrounding grass up to the two heating pipes which encircled the northern part of the estate like a silver ribbon. The pipes were made of aluminium or steel – in any case from some kind of metal that glinted in the sunlight. From the top of them poked up a small roof, like a shark fin.

I grabbed the fin and pulled myself up. Then, with my arms outstretched like a tight rope walker, I balanced a few steps along the frontmost pipe before taking off my rucksack and sitting down.

The metal beneath me was warm from the sun, and from the water that gurgled its way through the pipe along the many kilometres from the power station into the city, which lay to the west of the estate and which I only ever set foot in when my mother wanted to buy me clothes. Here, on the other hand, I came frequently; it was a good hiding place. Hardly anyone ever strayed down the path that led to the heating pipes. No one could see me. That's how it felt, anyway.

Behind me blossomed large green shrubs which muffled the sound from the motorway. The Sacharow Ring lay abandoned before me, the parked cars lined up like coffins. I let my gaze wander.

To my left, beyond the last blocks of flats along the Ring, stretched a wild, overgrown field out of which electricity pylons jutted up into the sky. They were connected to one another by cables that sliced up the few clouds. If you went close to the pylons, and I knew this because I had been there on occasion with Sonny, they emitted a humming sound, and the air around them seemed to shimmer.

Even further back, beyond the field and pylons, beyond the borders of our estate, this small world which at the time didn't seem all that small to me, almost at the horizon, where nothing shimmered, towered the silo and the chimney of the old disused iron foundry, with a slender birch tree growing out of it. The power station's red lights blinked monotonously as though they were trying to tell me something. I opened the zip of my rucksack and pulled out a Marlboro and my notepad with the brown leather cover.

'Are you in love?' Sonny had asked me.

I thought about it as I clamped the Marlboro between my upper lip and nose, breathing in its aromatic scent. I wouldn't smoke it. I never smoked when I was alone. Smoking wasn't something I did on account of liking the taste; instead, it was kind of a test of courage, like swiping cigarettes in the shopping centre, that I set myself to impress others, or rather, Sonny, who in spite of his asthma couldn't be talked out of lighting up now and again.

'Are you in love?' he had asked me, and I had said 'no'. But I wasn't sure. There was a strange sensation stirring inside me for which I had no words. Is that how it felt to be in love?

Being in love was something I knew only from books, where it was described with lots of adjectives and flowery metaphors: someone was head over heels, or crazy for someone. Someone had fallen for someone. There was a spark. He or she had butterflies, felt dizzy, their heart pounded.

But was my heart pounding? Were there butterflies fluttering in my stomach? Is that what being in love felt like? Did it feel the same for everyone? Were there symptoms, like with an illness? I didn't know. I had never been in love, and perhaps love was just another word that meant a different thing for each person. (For my parents, for example, it meant they had to argue all the time.)

The only thing I knew for sure was that my thoughts orbited around Juri like the stars around the centre of our galaxy, if I understood correctly what she'd said at school.

I could see her face before me. Her red hair, tucked beneath the bright green headscarf with the white polka dots; her smile, with the little, crooked tooth; her green eyes, their pupils enclosed by a yellow circle, staring at me. She had looked at me, I was sure of it.

She had looked at me and smiled and her eyes had lit up. Which could of course mean all manner of things. That she simply liked smiling, for example, and that her eyes lit up after she'd amazed the entire class with her epic presentation about the universe.

I sat there, and as more and more clouds gathered above me, I gave in to the thoughts that were tumbling around in my head. It was an indecisive sky; it could burst open again before night fell, or not. How could I get Juri to notice me? I took out my notepad.

Sometimes when I read through it or noted something down, I could lose myself as though I were in a whirlpool. It felt as though some invisible force

were pulling me down, and then I would hit the bottom of a well. There was no danger there, instead it opened out into a room, offering shelter. A room that no one else had access to. I could wander around in it or lay down on the floor and stare up at the ceiling. The room looked different every time.

Now and then it resembled a gigantic drawing room in an old villa, with a stucco-adorned ceiling and worm-eaten floorboards that creaked as I walked around on them. Another time I found myself in an empty hall, several metres in height, that was propped up with heavy metal poles, the walls echoing my voice when I murmured to myself as though I were at the top of a mountain. Or, like this time, I would end up in a crooked old hut that looked like it could collapse in on me at any moment.

The hut was perfectly circular and the floor at an angle, as though it were leaning against an incline. There were three windows, but when I tried to look through them, everything was blurry. Blue, white and grey, as if behind streaks of water, almost like in the car wash with my father.

I paced up and down the room. It was approximately five metres in diameter, and as I didn't know what else to do, I began to spin around, faster and faster, until the contours dissolved so much that the room seemed to disappear. But when I stopped and tried to catch my breath, the round hut was still there, and a thought occurred to me that I couldn't get out of my head.

You don't have any talent. That's what Sonny had said to me when he was interviewing himself. The sentence appeared before me suddenly, allowing me to examine it from all sides. It stung to admit it, but maybe Sonny was right. Maybe that was why Juri took no notice of me. I had no talent, nothing to make me stand out from everyone else, nothing to lift me out of the faceless mass of chimpanzees.

There was one thing: I hadn't yet forgotten how to dream, something also evident from the fact my mother often called me a 'dreamer'. But I suspected that this wasn't a talent, and that it wasn't the same as chasing a dream as eagerly as Sonny did his.

Sonny was brilliant, he knew what he was capable of and what he wanted. He had his fingers and his keyboard, and presumably soon a white Steinway too, with which he would become as famous as Elton John. My mother also had a dream: it had once been England, now it was her career. My father, on the other hand, didn't have anything (apart from his beloved Mitsubishi) since he'd lost his cables and had evidently been struck dumb with horror over it. There was no way I wanted to end up like him, pinning everything on a car. But what did I have? What was my talent? Was it my invisibility? Surely that was more of a defect.

I didn't know what to dream about, nor who or what I wanted to be. I mean, I wasn't even sure who I was right now. On the other hand, didn't everyone have something they were really good at? Something that fulfilled them and saved them from the strangeness of life? That's how it was in every single one of my beloved books at least. But how was I supposed to find this *something*?

My thoughts raced. They were revolting and full of self-pity, and I wished I could banish them from my brain, but no matter how hard I tried I just couldn't defend myself against them. I could feel the walls of the circular hut pushing towards me, closing in tighter and tighter.

Perhaps my invisibility was to blame for everything. If no one could see me, then how was I supposed to see myself? No, it was the other way around! As long as I didn't see myself, no one else would be able to either.

The walls of the hut were now so close that I could touch them when I stretched out my hands. They felt rough and cold, and then I suddenly remembered what Mr Gröhnwald had said in physics class about the Earth, the sun and socialism. *'Do you know it's true? Or do you just think you do?'*

That was it! I had to make sense of my thoughts. As I opened a new page in my notebook, the walls of the circular hut shrank back away from me and disappeared. Looking around, I saw that I was in an attic, filled to the rafters with huge objects. I couldn't make out what they were because they were

covered with white sheets. Light fell through a window on the ceiling, making the specks of dust floating around the attic shimmer.

I took a pen from my rucksack and, in two strokes, drew a table on the white, newly opened page. On the left, I noted the things I knew, and on the right, the things I only thought I knew.

THE THINGS I KNOW	THE THINGS I ONLY THINK I KNOW
My name is Sascha Labude	My parents love each other
I like love my parents	The old country has disappeared
I love like my sister	The dregs of society don't sweep the stairs
Sonny is my best friend, he'll be a great pianist someday	A pregnant pause has nothing to do with being pregnant
Sonny adores loves Elton John	There are more than 200,000 words in the German language
I loathe the Pawelkes	There are 7,000 languages in the entire world
The Earth revolves around the sun	That means: in the entire world there are more than 7,000 different words for 'love'
Socialism didn't win	I am invisible
Marlboros are the best cigarettes	a) Because no one sees me
Sabrina Kabautzky has epic breasts	b) Because I don't see myself
On the estate, there are around 150 girls	I am not at all invisible
On the estate, there's only one girl like Juri	Juri looked at me and her eyes lit up

After a while, the pen in my hand came to a standstill. I brooded on, but nothing else came to me. Just as I closed my eyes, unsure whether mine were even capable of lighting up, I was startled by a rattling sound, drifting across to the heating pipes from the Sacharow Ring.

Opening my eyes again, I saw an old man pattering his way down the street on his moped, a green Simson, to be precise. I knew the man, even though I had never spoken to him. Everyone knew him. He was always clean-shaven and had long hair that was flecked with silvery strands and combed back to the nape of his neck; and even when it was oppressively hot, like today, he wore black woollen trousers, ironed with a sharp crease, and a blue rollneck pullover beneath a black leather jacket.

I had no idea what the man's name was, but often saw him wandering around the estate, his gait limping and gaze lowered, scanning the street for things. And by 'things', I mean rubbish: carelessly discarded drink cans, scrunched-up packaging, bottle caps, shards of glass, plastic bottles and all kinds of other stuff.

He would gather it all up from the street with his right hand and stow it away in a plastic bag that he wound around his left hand. I didn't have the faintest idea what he planned to do with it. Nor would I ever have asked. To be honest I was a little afraid of him, and kept my distance.

Because there were all these really absurd rumours about him. They wandered ghost-like through the estate and all joined together in the same conclusion, namely that the man had lost his mind. This was why many called him 'the crazy old man', or simply 'the madman'. The reasons for his insanity, at least if you believed the rumours, seemed to vary greatly.

Some said he was from Afghanistan, a former soldier who had been wounded (the limping leg!) in some war or another, no one could say exactly which, and that he'd lost his memory and for some reason ended up here, of all places.

Others said he'd been a Persian secret agent and used to have a family: a wife and two children who had died in a car accident, after which he, the madman, had lost his mind.

Others still said he came from Albania and was a drug dealer, and that he only maintained the façade of the confused old man in order to be as inconspicuous as possible. Although if you asked me, it's the exact opposite of inconspicuous to spend all your time picking rubbish up off the floor. But what did I know? All of it could have been a lie, or true. Probably it was both.

I watched him now as he parked his moped on the pavement, switched off the ignition and propped it, with a jolt, on its stand. The pattering sound had ebbed away. Besides one man who stepped out onto his balcony in his vest and lit a cigarette, the Sacharow Ring was once again quiet and deserted, the evening sun hanging low above its roofs.

The madman took his plastic bag from the handlebars, walked a few steps, then stopped and bent over. Presumably he had spotted something on the floor. What he couldn't see was that, behind his back, two guys were striding purposefully towards him. I recognised them even from a distance; everyone in the estate would have been able to. It was the Pawelkes, Danilo and Enrico. Only the practised observer could tell them apart. Each of them, my mother would have said, looked like they would answer to the other one's name.

Danilo was wearing cargo pants and black Doc Martens (ten hole), and in spite of the heat, a green bomber jacket with shiny orange lining, and around his wrist a wide, gold-glittering watch. His hair, apart from the dark, gelled island on the top of his head, was cropped so short that his skin shimmered through at the sides.

Enrico, whose hair was just as dark yet a little longer, was slightly shorter and two years younger than his brother. In his left ear glinted a golden earring, and he had on worn-out, pale trainers and a black T-shirt with the

hem stuffed into the waistband of his rolled-up jeans, which is also where he always tucked his butterfly knife, keeping it in plain sight.

The Pawelkes were now just 50 metres away from the old madman. Like two roaming coyotes whose spittle begins to drip from their chaps as soon they sense their prey, they drew closer and closer. The madman, however, didn't seem to have noticed them. Only once they had planted themselves behind him did he stand up, his plastic bag still in his hand, and turn around. The Pawelkes were now right in front of him. Danilo smirked at him disdainfully and Enrico, with a practised flick of his wrist, flipped open his knife. The madman was cornered.

From the heating pipes I could only see him from behind, but I pictured his expression, his eyes widening with horror as he looked at the Pawelkes. Danilo said something, the old man shook his head. Danilo yelled at him, his mouth torn wide open. The old man seemed to be pleading with them.

I couldn't make out what Danilo was yelling; I was too far away for that. All I could hear was the hum of cars tearing along the motorway behind the pipes. But one thing was clear: it didn't look good for the madman.

Enrico spun his knife through the air right in front of him. The madman flinched, lifting his hands in front of his face in defence. Then Danilo suddenly pushed him.

The man lost his balance, stumbled backwards a few steps and fell, hitting the pavement hard. The rubbish from his bag spattered out all around him. He lay there trembling on the floor. I thought I could see blood trickling out of a spot on his head, through his silver hair. But maybe I was just imagining it.

What I definitely wasn't imagining, though, was that Danilo stepped towards the old man and spat next to him on the floor, before raising his arm. A black Doc Martens boot swung through the air, and a scream rang out across the estate.

Danilo had struck the old man in the stomach. Whimpering, he doubled over on the ground as Danilo raised his arm once more. But Enrico grabbed his brother by the shoulder and held him back. After a few, seemingly endless seconds, the Pawelkes retreated. They didn't run, but instead distanced themselves slowly, with stately strides. As though they had nothing to fear, knowing full well that no one on the estate could touch them.

My hands, which had been clasped around my notebook, were shaking. Besides me, no one else seemed to have seen what had happened. The man who had previously been stood smoking on his balcony had disappeared, and the madman still lay on the floor, his arms and legs splayed out awkwardly. He wasn't moving.

There was no way I could just leave him there like that! But what if the Pawelkes found out I had helped him? Perhaps it wouldn't be a bad idea to stay in my hiding place for another few moments, just to be sure Danilo and Enrico didn't come back.

As I grappled with my cowardice, I saw someone come rushing out of the passageway that led to the inner courtyard, kneel down next to the old man and carefully take his hand. I don't know why, but the gesture seemed to hold a strange familiarity. As though they had known each other for an eternity.

I felt dumbfounded.

The someone was a girl, and the girl, of that there was no doubt, was wearing a bright green headscarf with white polka dots, from beneath which glimpses of her red hair could be seen.

Chapter 6

What was Juri’s connection to the old madman? Had she moved here with him, was he her father? No, that couldn’t be! The madman had lived on the estate long before Juri. Could he be her grandfather, perhaps? That was possible, but at the same time an idea capable of blowing my mind. There was no way Juri could be related to someone who spent their time picking up rubbish from the floor!

And yet – maybe he was the reason why Juri had always disappeared right after school. I couldn’t wait to tell Sonny.

The next day, during lunch break, we snuck off to a dark corner near the school garden and I reported what I had seen.

‘You what?’ asked Sonny.

‘I saw the Pawelkes beating up the old madman,’ I said. ‘And then Juri came to his rescue.’

‘Juri? Your astronaut?’

‘Yes... I mean, she’s not an astronaut and she’s certainly not *my* astronaut. But yes, her! She ran over and then helped him up, really gently.’

Sonny fell silent and stared at me wide-eyed. His expression held both curiosity and a hint of doubt.

‘Crazy, huh?’ I said.

‘Crazy’s a good word for it, Major, given the context.’ Sonny grinned. The astonishment that had briefly taken hold of him had swiftly ceded to his usual self-assurance.

'But hey, what were you even doing there?' he asked. 'Weren't you planning to go home?'

'Actually yes...', I answered, 'but I wasn't in the mood for all the stress.'

'With your parents?'

I nodded.

'Are they arguing again?'

'On and off.'

I received a look which was a little too sympathetic to feel believable. Arguing parents was, as I've already mentioned, something that went beyond Sonny's powers of imagination.

'But I don't care about that right now,' I said. 'I'd much rather know why the Pawelkes were beating up the madman.'

'Mmm...' mumbled Sonny. 'Maybe it was over drugs? I mean, you know he's allegedly mixed up with the Albanians...'

'It's possible,' I interrupted him. 'In any case, we have to find out. And I also want to know what Juri has to do with it all.'

'Aha, now I know why you're so keen on this whole thing!' cried Sonny. His smile oozed self-certainty. 'But has it ever occurred to you that Juri might just have happened to be nearby? That she saw the old fart lying there, done in on the ground? And just helped him? – I mean, apparently there are people who do such things...'

You didn't have to be a genius to know what Sonny was getting at, and that's why it was clear even to me.

'Yeah, I know, I could have helped him too.'

'Could have?'

Sonny folded his arms across his chest, and the reproach echoed as loudly as the final chord he played at a concert before standing up from his piano and bowing before his enthused audience.

‘Okay, *should* have,’ I said. ‘But I was scared. I was scared shitless! There, are you happy?’

The school bell shrilled and we traipsed back across the playground towards the classroom. Sonny walked alongside me without saying a word. The scepticism in his expression had expanded so much that there was no room left for curiosity. Perhaps he thought I’d lost my mind. But I knew what I’d seen.

‘Believe me, Sonny,’ I whispered as we stepped back inside the school building, ‘it really looked as though Juri and the madman knew one another. She put his arm around his shoulder, helped him to the entrance of his block, opened the front door and took him upstairs. Do you get it? She knew where he lives!’

‘Labude, everyone knows that. The old madman lives in the Sacharow Ring at number five. Or, wait, it could be number six. Am I right, or am I right?’

Sonny was an unbearable know-it-all and always had been. The problem was that, unfortunately, he was usually right. Was it possible that I really had just imagined the whole thing? Or had he managed to shovel his corrosive doubts into my brain? I peered along the corridor. Juri was nowhere to be seen, and she’d been absent from the first four classes: double German, biology and maths. Where was she?

Once Sonny and I had arrived in our classroom, the school bell rang out once again. Just like every Friday, we had art with Mrs Schlott, a thin, fragile-looking woman who seemed to levitate around the classroom. Her brown eyes appeared enlarged behind the thick lens of her glasses as though under a magnifying glass; her voice whispered like a breeze brushing gently through long grass.

‘Hello, children,’ said Mrs Schlott.

Just as she was about to explain what we would be working on in class today, even though we already knew because we’d started it the previous week, there was a knock at the door.

‘Come in,’ breathed Mrs Schlott, and the door opened. In came – who else? – Juri, wearing her green headscarf with the white polka dots as always, but looking a little dishevelled.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs Schlott,’ said Juri. ‘I, well...’

‘Come in, dear. Quickly now.’

Juri darted in with her gaze lowered, evidently feeling guilty, and went over to her seat; as she passed mine, she threw me a look which left no doubt that it was intended for me.

I felt confused. Juri’s eyes, and I would have sworn this under torture, hadn’t lit up even a bit.

‘So, my dears,’ said Mrs Schlott, steepling her fingers, ‘now that everyone’s here at last, I’d like you to continue with your still lives. Enjoy.’

The hand on the wall clock above the door crept laboriously from one black stroke to the next. As Sonny, who was sitting beside me with the tip of his tongue clamped between his lips, cast onto paper with delicate brush strokes the white miniature Steinway which stood in model form before him, I turned around from time to time to look at Juri. I tried to catch her gaze, but she was staring at the piece of paper in front of her as though it had swallowed all her attention.

On her table stood a woodruff-green kaleidoscope. To me it seemed a rather unusual choice for a still life, because a kaleidoscope only becomes a kaleidoscope when you look into it and it turns and looks as though the glittering mosaics constantly create new shapes. But then again, what did I know?

I had arranged in front of me an apple, a wine bottle and a wine glass. Unfortunately they bore little resemblance to the apple, wine bottle and wine

glass on the colour-saturated paper in front of me, which was already beginning to buckle.

What I really wanted to do was jump up, rush over to Juri and ask what was going on with the madman, the Pawelkes and her. But I didn't dare. What if I made a fool of myself, what if Sonny was right and it was all just a figment of my imagination? I decided to wait. Most problems, as my father always used to say, end up resolving themselves.

After we had also survived chemistry (a mystery!) and English (no-one should ever think that someone's particularly good at something just because their mother is), Sonny and I strolled to our bicycles.

‘Let's go to the forest again today and carry on building Sonny's Palace,’ he said once we had reached them.

He had repeated the Sonny's Palace thing so often by now that I had capitulated. Our treehouse had now been officially baptised – in other words, by the two of us – with this name.

‘Okay, let's do that,’ I said, even though in truth I wasn't the slightest bit keen on spending yet another entire afternoon sawing up birch trees with a pocket knife.

Just as Sonny and I were about to head off to the forest, a voice called out from behind: ‘You were there yesterday too. I saw you!’

I turned around. Along with her gift for astronomy, Juri clearly also had a talent for popping up at the wrong moment.

‘Where?’ I asked. That was all I could get out.

‘Wherewherewhere?’ said Juri. Her hands were propped on her hips. ‘On the heating pipes at the Sacharow Ring!’

‘Oh right...’ I said, and it sounded like air escaping from an old tyre.

‘Why didn't you help him?’ she asked.

I clamped my hands around the handlebars of my bicycle. ‘I wanted to, but then... I...’

‘Hey, hey, hey’, said Sonny, taking a step towards Juri. ‘Calm down, okay? You can’t just have a go at my friend like that.’

‘And who are you to tell me what to do?’

Juri looked at Sonny as though she were seeing him for the first time. The two of them stood there in front of one another. As Sonny was a bit shorter than her, it appeared as though Juri was giving him a disparaging look. But Sonny squared his shoulders, presumably hoping to squeeze a few more centimetres out of his weedy frame, and held Juri’s gaze. His eyes seemed to emit sparks.

He was just about to take a breath, presumably in order to fling some insult in Juri’s face, after which things could possibly – I didn’t want to rule anything out – end up in a fist fight, when I interrupted: ‘So how do you know him anyway?’

‘Who?’ asked Juri, and turned towards me.

‘The old madman of course!’

‘Firstly, I don’t know what business that is of yours. And secondly, don’t call him that, Sascha!’

Juri stressed my name as though it were something poisonous, but in this moment, that wasn’t what grabbed my attention. She had said my name! She knew my name! That was all I could think about. By the time the fog in my head had cleared, a few seconds later, it was already too late. I watched Juri stomp off furiously down Lomonossow Allee. Why did I always have to act like such a fool?

‘She’s got quite a temper, your little cosmonaut,’ said Sonny. Juri suddenly stopped in her tracks. She turned around and headed back towards us.

When she was just a few metres away, and I was starting to fear things were about to escalate, she said: 'Come with me, I want to show you something.'

Both Sonny and I took a step towards Juri.

'Not you, little one!' she barked at Sonny.

He flinched as though he'd been hit. And probably I should have defended him. Or at least insisted that either both of us came, or neither of us. But Juri's offer was so tempting that Sonny (who, by the way, would still have been my best friend even if I'd had other friends besides him) paled a little in comparison.

Sonny seemed to read my thoughts as though they were floating in a speech bubble above my head.

'Hey, Labude', he said, 'I thought we were going to the forest!'

'Are you coming or what?!' called Juri, who had already walked off ahead a few metres.

'I'll just go with her quickly,' I said to Sonny. 'And then I'll pick you up later from home, okay? I mean, I'm guessing you need to do some piano practice anyway...'

But Sonny didn't seem to even hear me. He jumped onto his mountain bike and set off without looking back even once. The reproach which radiated out from him was louder than any final chord. Oh shit, I thought.

I hesitated for a moment, then grabbed my bike and rode after Juri.

'Wait up!' I called, once I had almost caught up with her. 'Where are we going?'

'You'll see.'

I climbed down off my bike and pushed it alongside her. For a while we walked like that along Lomonossow Allee, which, by the way, wasn't a proper Allee, consisting of just a handful of consumptive linden trees dying a slow death. At the corner of the Sacharow Ring, we veered off to the right,

and Juri headed decisively towards number five. Shortly before we reached the door, she paused and looked at me – and this time she really did, there was no doubt about it.

‘Okay, listen up, Sascha.’

She had said my name again. I had no idea why she was always repeating it. No one did that besides my mother. And it wasn’t like we were on one of those American TV series that come on in the afternoon, where the people are constantly addressing one another by their first names as though otherwise they would forget who they were.

‘We’re going up to Mr Reza’s and...’, she said.

‘Mr Reza?’ I asked.

‘Yes, Mr Reza. You know, the one you watched getting beaten up yesterday.’

‘Oh, I didn’t know that was the madman’s name.’

‘Don’t call him that!’

‘Okay, then... Mr Reza’, I said. ‘But how do you know...’

‘Later, Sascha,’ Juri cut me off, just like Mr Gröhnwald in physics class, ‘I’ll explain later. First you can make up for the mess you made of things yesterday.’

‘And how do you imagine I do that?’ I asked. ‘What am I supposed to do, put on some kind of undertaker costume and bump off the Pawelkes?!’

‘That’s not such a bad idea,’ said Juri. ‘But for now I was thinking that the two of us go up there, and you tell Mr Reza you saw the whole thing and are willing to go to the police.’

‘Um, no?! I’m not stupid, I’m not grassing the Pawelkes in to the cops.’

‘Oh yes you are! I was with Mr Reza at the hospital this morning...’

‘Oh, so that’s why you missed the first three classes!’ I said.

‘Yes, that’s why I missed the first three classes.’ Juri echoed my words as though it were just some trivial matter and the most boring thing she’d ever heard in her entire life. ‘And do you know what the doctors at the hospital said? That those bastards broke two of Mr Reza’s ribs!’

‘Okay, Juri,’ I replied – somehow she had infected me with the forename thing too – ‘I’m really sorry about his ribs. That’s really bad. And you’re right, I should have done something yesterday. Intervened, called the police or an ambulance, even if I didn’t have my undertaker costume with me at the time. But... well... How can I make this clear? I know you haven’t lived on the estate long and you probably don’t know who the Pawelkes are, right?’

Juri gave me the most disapproving look imaginable. Then she pressed the doorbell, against which, written in faded script which must once have been black, was the name ‘Reza’.

‘It’s best not to pick a fight with them...’, I said.

The door buzzed, Juri leant against it with her shoulder.

‘... and under no circumstances should you ever go to the police about them...’

Juri pushed open the door.

‘... because the cops come and then they drive off again. But the Pawelkes stay, get it?’

Juri already had one foot through the doorway when she suddenly hissed: ‘I don’t give a shit about those fascist pigs!’

‘What?’

‘I DON’T GIVE A SHIT ABOUT THOSE FASCIST PIGS!’

This time Juri didn’t hiss, but screamed, and so loudly I jumped back and looked around me, but luckily there was no one else who could have heard. Just Juri and I.

Before I could say anything in response, like that it was better not to call the Pawelkes that, because they didn't like the F word, especially not in combination with the S word, otherwise someone would be for it, Juri ran up the steps and left me standing there.

I had somehow imagined *Mamihlapinatapai* differently.

I can't say whether Juri assumed I would run after her, or whether she'd already given up on me and just left me there. But what I do know is that something commanded me to follow her. Just before the door fell into the lock, I stopped it with my foot, and that may have been a mistake.

Now, at least, the thought occurs to me from time to time that it would have been better not to have run after her like some spineless *Hoschek* (which is yet another word for *idiot*). Perhaps everything would have been different then, and Juri would still be here.

On the other hand, I would presumably never have met Mr Reza, and he would never have been able to explain to me that life consists of coincidences; that it's nothing but a chain of odd happenings and occurrences which often only make sense later on, when you look back at them.

[END OF SAMPLE]