



**Sasha Marianna Salzmann**

**Glorious People**

Novel

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## **SKIPPING STONES**

Of course I wanted to know what had happened, what exactly took place before Edi was beaten up in the yard. She was lying on the grass, her hair all pale and dirty. My mother was kneeling beside her, Auntie Lena was yelling at them both, and all three were waving their arms around as if they were casting out evil spirits. When they saw me, they started to cry, one after the other, like a Russian doll, the tears of one merging into the tears of the next, and so on. First my mother let rip, then the others joined in, as if they were singing a howling, wailing round. I couldn't make head or tail of any of it.

Okay, so it wasn't hard to guess why my mother came over all misty-eyed when she saw me standing there after the long radio silence—but Lena and Edi? They seemed to be having it out with each other. Mother and daughter, one of them lying on the ground as if she were the other's shadow—or, if you prefer, one of them growing up out of the other's feet, like a shrub with broken branches. Auntie Lena was wearing a green trouser suit that hung loosely on her body; I almost didn't recognise her. I had worn her daughter's babygros, sat at her kitchen table revising for tests and exams, rung her doorbell in the middle of the night when

things got too much at home—but that was a long time ago and for a moment I wasn't sure it was really Lena, standing there yelling at her cowering daughter: 'Why were you hanging around out here? What were you doing?'

Edi looked the worse for wear but not drunk, though she claimed in all seriousness that she'd seen a giraffe in the yard, wandering around between the tower blocks, pecking at the grass, peering in at windows. This may be the East, but as far as I know we've no giraffes round here. You don't get them in these parts.

She hadn't been here long; you only had to look at her hair and clothes to know that—especially her clothes. I'd never seen much of Edi, even when she still lived with her parents and I did my homework at their kitchen table. I was too young for her, and anyway, she never came in to make herself a sandwich or a cup of tea when I was around. The door to her room had a milky glass panel and through this I could see her switch her light on and off for no apparent reason, day and night. On and off, on and off. Once, the glass was broken; only a few jagged shards stuck out of the frame. No one mentioned it and I asked no questions and soon there was a new pane of glass, as if nothing had happened. Edi was pretty unobtrusive back then—black hair, black jeans, black top. If I met her on the street now, I'd walk right past her, she dresses so brightly these days. I only recognised her because her mother was standing next to her, shouting at her. And because it was my mother trying to make the peace. Over and over they launched into the same string of reproaches, Auntie Lena saying furiously to my mother, 'Why didn't you tell me—?' and my mother retorting, 'It's nobody's business if I'm dying.'

Not a good moment for me to enter the fray; she was mid-sentence when she caught sight of me, and she suddenly stiffened, as if time had sprung a crack. SNAP. She looks at me, I look at her.

Her hair is grey these days and she had a crushed look to her, though she'd clearly made an effort with her appearance. She dyes her hair—has done for a while—and I daresay it had started out the evening neatly styled too, but now it was straggly and dishevelled, and you could

see the silver roots. The skin under her eyes sagged—but maybe that was because I was standing over her; everyone looks weird from that angle. She seemed small. Over the crown of her head I could see her hands; there was dirt in the pattern of lines. She must have tried to pull Edi up onto her feet.

I wasn't surprised she was in town. Uncle Lev had slipped me the news that she'd be at the party at the Jewish Community Centre—in fact, he'd paid me an official visit to inform me and to demand a family reconciliation, a festive reunion. He came in a clean shirt, his nostrils flaring; he had the best intentions, but I had to disappoint him. When he saw that he wasn't getting anywhere, he tried to guilt-trip me—you can't break with your own mother; you have to love her no matter what—but I don't think I'm obliged either to love or not to love her; she's my mother and that's all there is to it. Things are what they are.

I went out just because I felt like it that evening—wandered around, watched the evening strollers, nothing special. The streets smell different at dusk, sourer, and I like that, but this particular night I smelt burnt sugar and heard shouts and thought I'd go and have a look.

At first I was glad it wasn't my mother lying beaten up on the ground—then I realised that was the extent of my feelings. Live. Leave me in peace.

It looked as if there had been a small fire here a short while ago; we were standing next to a heap of charred paper—crinkly, soot-coated bundles tied up with string—rather beautiful, actually. I seem to remember the smell of Coke and bitter caramel; it tickled our noses and made Auntie Lena sneeze. Whoever had tried to have a little picnic here between the tower blocks had either been driven away or had to leave in a hurry, but none of the women would tell me how Edi fitted in, or why half the Jewish Community mischpocha were hanging out of the second-floor windows gawping at us. The women were crying, but they didn't want to give themselves away. Typical socialist behaviour—when you're feeling emotional, you make a big show of how hurt you are, but you try to control yourself all the same.

All around us were balconies with identical flags fluttering at their railings, as if the people who lived there would forget where they were if they didn't have that little bit of cloth flapping in the wind. The really funny thing about this is that for many of the residents—the ones I know, anyway—the flag on the railings has nothing to do with the emblems on their passports.

None of the women wanted to return to the party, but they couldn't be left out in the yard either, Edi dirty and bleached and battered, Lena with her eyes puffy from crying and my dishevelled mother who had just announced that it was nobody's business if she was dying. I asked them if they'd like to go back with me to freshen up and have a cup of tea. It seemed the right thing to do, to offer them a sit-down at my kitchen table. We walked quickly, without speaking, as if afraid of being followed. I could hear the rubbery sound of my soles on the asphalt.

When we arrived, Auntie Lena made straight for the sink, held a flannel under the cold water and pressed it to Edi's forehead. I flicked the switch on the kettle, ignoring my mother's rapt glances, her wide-eyed inspection of my sofa, the way she took in every crevice, as if trying to commit it all to memory. It was her first time here; she even looked lovingly at the open bags of crisps on the floor. I ignored, too, the hissing voice in my head telling me that the flat was small, dingy and dark. The only free wall was covered by a huge Path of Exile poster with a dark, forbidding sky and spurting blood. There was a smell of barbecue sauce from the box of chicken wings next to my keyboard. The curtains were drawn, the computer was on, the screen was filled with battling nations hell-bent on wiping each other out. The roar of the ventilator filled my lungs.

We said nothing for a while. I could tell that Mum's hands were trembling because the tea in her cup was rippled, as if tiny stones were skipping across the surface, but her face was calm and her eyes big and round, as if she couldn't believe she was seeing me. I couldn't believe it either.

You shouldn't criticise people for not being heroes, she had said to me the last time we'd argued—or maybe it wasn't the last time; our arguing had neither beginning nor end, it was an unbroken chain of resentful mutterings. They weren't even reproaches; they were just noise. But when I asked her why, if that was the case, she expected me to be someone I couldn't be, she had no answer. She wouldn't—or couldn't—answer any of my questions. And she had no questions for me—still doesn't.

She sat there with her silvery copper-beech hair alongside bleached Edi and her emerald-green mother, all three of them rocking their heads, ever so gently, almost imperceptibly, as if waves were coursing through their shoulders—as if electricity were running up their necks. The little stones continued to skip over the surface of the cooling tea, faster or slower, depending on their size—hop, hop, hop, sink.

We made an effort, talked a bit, exchanged coordinates—tentative words, clumsy dance steps, but not bad, considering.

## I

### THE SEVENTIES: LENA

From close up, the wall looked green. Lena knew that if she took just one step back, she would see the stripes and patterns of the wallpaper—fine black lines like flower stems running crosswise from floor to ceiling. But she didn't look up. Her mother had pulled her by the ear and planted her right here. Lena stared at the green patch; there was nothing else and the nothing made her eyes ache. She was bored and needed a pee; more than anything she was bored, but she'd sooner have burst than said a single word. She wouldn't wet herself—she was too old for that, almost a school girl—and she wouldn't do her mother the favour of crying. Besides, she knew that Father would be home any minute; he would rescue her. He would shout at Mother for shouting at her, Lena would confess all, and then her parents would quarrel and she'd have the evening to herself, maybe go round to Yury's, or look at the book Father had brought home for her. She could read, she knew she could. She might not recognise all the letters, but when her father asked her, what does this say, she dug a tooth into her tongue, screwed up her eyes and almost always got it right. And Father was a teacher; he'd never lie to her. Soon she'd go to school like him, and then she'd be able to write her name and spell out the other children's names and the different types of animals and all the birds, which she knew you told apart by the zigzag edges of their wings and the curve of their beaks. Maybe a few other words, too. She was looking forward to school; at last there'd be an end to the boredom and she wouldn't have to spend so much time alone, with her mother always at the chemical works, sending people running up and down the aisles, and her father stumbling from one classroom to the next—maybe she'd see more of him, when she started school; she might.

Lena bit her lower lip because she could feel something warm and wet dribbling into her pants. Her fist tensed. She had broken a cup, but not on purpose—Mother knew that. Lena

had picked it up because it was beautiful—more beautiful than anything in the one-bed flat—and because there was a danger to touching it; nothing must happen to it, ever. It was made of thin, cold china with a curved handle in the shape of Father’s ear—bulgy at the bottom and pointy at the top—and it had a blue lattice pattern broken at intervals by six-pointed gold bows that gleamed like fish scales. The rim and base were finely painted, as if the cup had been sewn together with thread of gold, and it was clear as day to Lena that no one would ever drink out of this cup. It was an ornament and it stood on the sideboard next to a faun figurine that Lena didn’t like to touch because it left dust on her fingers, and because she was afraid of its hairy goat’s legs and cloven hooves. Lena wasn’t sure if such animals really existed. Might she come across one in the woods? Did they all have curved pipes that they played to lure children like her, and crooked horns next to their ears for skewering the children when they caught them? Lena tried to avoid looking at the faun when she passed the sideboard. But the cup was different; sometimes she just had to hold it. It was filigree, and shimmered like Mum’s jewellery, which was even more out of reach, because it was kept in a box right at the top of the cupboard—and because it wasn’t something she shouldn’t be interested in anyway, Mum said. The cup shattered; she didn’t know how—her hands hadn’t been the least bit slippery. All Lena could remember were the screams—first hers and then her mother’s—and the pain in her ear, and now the wallpaper that she’d been staring at for hours, days, an eternity.

She had been holding herself so tense to keep from wetting herself that she hadn’t heard her father come in. Now snatches of words drifted down the passage from the kitchen to her.

‘...the Leningrad china...’

‘...no way to discipline a child...’

‘What do you know about discipline...’

‘I’m a teacher...’

‘And I’m her mother...’

Father was losing. Lena bit her lip even harder and raised her head; she hadn't noticed it drop onto her chest. She stared straight ahead at the wallpaper, trying to think of her grandmother, Mum's mum. She would have helped her out of this. She wasn't as soft and warm as Father, knew how to speak her mind and had a loud, clear voice, just like her daughter. Sometimes, when the two of them were talking, their words sounded like whip cracks. And now Mother was cracking the whip at Father and he was growing quieter and quieter, so that Lena could no longer hear him, although he was just the other side of the wall.

Soon Grandmother would come and fetch her. Summer lay ahead and that meant Sochi and the seaside and the house on the edge of town with its smell of musty wood, and the hazelnut trees whose branches Lena would shake. And once—at least once—she would climb into a tree herself and her grandmother would plant her fists on her hips and call up to her and then she would shake Lena out of the branches like a nut. A whole summer away from Mum. But not yet—Grandmother wouldn't come for a long time. It might be days or weeks. Lena felt a stinging in her pants.

[...]

Heroes Avenue, a narrow cement path leading from the archway to the holiday camp, was lined with the busts of young men. Most had short-cropped hair and some had peaked caps; only a few wore Pioneers' neckerchiefs of stone. They were set on concrete pedestals as tall as the children, who had to crane their necks to see them. The group leader patted her bun, straightened her mustard-coloured dress, which looked like trampled leaves after the long journey, and pointed out one or other of the statues—did anyone know what this young person here was called—or this one? Dozens of pairs of eyes turned and stared. The main attraction was a boy with a high forehead and a square hairline that started somewhere over his ears. He wore a boat-like forage cap at an angle on top of his head and looked very, very serious—almost angry. His

neckerchief was knotted tightly over the top button of his shirt, and if the statue had been more than a bust, Lena was sure he'd be wearing a leather jacket. She had seen this wide-eyed, straight-browed face somewhere before, but she couldn't think where and made no effort to remember his name. The group leader had, in any case, no patience with children who shouted out answers, and took it upon herself to explain that Pavel Morozov was a Pioneer hero who had defied the kulaks and paid for it with his life.

'Who knows what kulaks are?'

'Enemies!'

'That's right. But why?'

'Because they betrayed us.'

'Yes, and how did they betray us?'

Lena knew that the kulaks had been peasants who owned land and she knew that ownership was forbidden, but this was the first she had heard of children reporting their own parents to the kolkhozes for hoarding corn or livestock. It seemed that Pavlik Morozov had done just that: he had reported his father to the village chief for hoarding stocks of grain and for this, his grandfather had stabbed him to death together with his little brother when they were out in the woods, picking berries. Lena lingered a moment longer at Pavlik's cut-off torso, when the other Pioneers had raced on down the avenue. She stared into his lidless eyes and sneezed.

That night, Pavlik's high forehead hovered over the end of Lena's mattress and sneezed whenever she glanced up at him, a strange, open-eyed sneeze—hachoo. Lena got the hiccups, she was so scared; her belly started to gurgle and cramp again. She could hear the girls in the next beds talking in low voices, and tried to make out what they were saying, hoping that their murmuring would soothe her and make her forget that knife flashing in the cranberry bushes. But they didn't seem able to get the Pioneer hero out of their heads either. They whispered that Pavlik and his brother had not only been stabbed to death, but chopped to bits with big knives and gobbled up, because that was what the kulaks did—they killed their children and ate them.

They had an insatiable hunger and refused to share with the community, and so trucks had come and taken them away, and when their children were put into homes, they turned out to be every bit as greedy as their parents, tearing the flesh from each other's bones and eating it, leaving their little brothers and sisters out in the snow to freeze to death, and then boiling up the corpses. Pavlik Morozov was a rare exception.

Lena stayed awake all night, watching the bodies of the other Pioneers rise and fall under their blankets; in the dark dormitory it looked as if someone had dumped grey earth over their curled-up forms. The big white bedsteads had legs on castors and saggy-bellied mattresses as soft as bread. They stood far apart from one another, each shadow distinct. Some girls snuffled in their sleep; the girl next to Lena chirped like a cricket all night long.

Lena ran her hands over her upper arms to calm herself, up and down, up and down, as if trying to smooth her gooseflesh. When the reveille sounded, she leapt out of bed. She was the first in the washroom and the first out on the parade ground, where she stood at a neatly swept fire pit and waited until the others had joined her, and the trumpet at her ear had blasted every last thought from her mind. The Pioneer who had blown such a fierce reveille wore a shirt hanging loosely from his shoulders and tucked clumsily into his shorts; he looked to Lena like a half-inflated balloon letting out little puffs of air. Behind him, a huge board headed *DAILY ROUTINE*, read:

1. *Get up 8 a.m.*
2. *Gymnastics 8–8.15 a.m.*
3. *Tidy dorms and lavatories 8.15–8.45 a.m.*
4. *Rollcall and hoisting of flag 8.45–9 a.m.*
5. *Breakfast 9–9.30 a.m.*
6. *Free time 9.30–9.45 a.m.*
7. *Grounds maintenance 9.45–10 a.m.*

The next items were obscured by the bright red flag with gold fringe that hung from the trumpet, but at number 10 the list resumed and Lena could read: *Free time*, and then *11. Lunch, 12: Afternoon nap, 13. Tea, 14. Group classes, 15. Free time, 16. Supper, 17. Communal activities, 18. Evening rollcall and lowering of flag, 19. Evening toilet, 20. Sleep.*

The camp had been cut out of the forest and was crossed with cement paths that stuck out from the parade ground like fat splayed fingers. These paths poked their fingertips into low-slung wooden shacks with lean-tos; some led on to the vegetable patches and fields beyond; one pointed further still at the plastic-sheeted greenhouse quivering in the heat. Lena followed the paths, reading the signs on the buildings in letters as big as her body: *GIRLS, BOYS, LIBRARY*. Between the long dais where the welcome speeches had been given and the sports field with its running track, football pitch and parallel bars, a banner was strung up with the slogan *WE ARE IN FAIRYLAND*. Over the parade ground, a billboard proclaimed, *CHILDREN—THE CAMP BELONGS TO YOU!* and beside it another sign warned against leaving the grounds. In the dining room, which was fully glazed on two sides, enormous letters had been stuck to the glass all along the windows on the left: *WHEN I EAT I AM DEAF AND DUMB*.

Mealtime seating was by numbered teams; folded paper signs at the head of each long table ensured that no one sat with anyone from the wrong age group. Lena saw the girls in her group kicking each other's knees and shins under the table and pulling each other's hair as soon as the patrolling Pioneer leader moved away. The girl across the table from Lena scraped her brass dish with her spoon and stared into Lena's eyes—it felt like a warning. She imagined that she was invisible and thought of the seaside. If there were a lake here or maybe even a river, none of this would be so bad.

## II

### EDI

[...]

Ignorance and escapism. That's all it was. Tatyana was possibly at death's door—her illness, at any rate, seemed serious—but when she rang after discharging herself for the weekend, all she could talk about was which dresses and trouser suits she should pack for the trip. When Edi asked tentatively if her state of health called for any particular action—was she perhaps on medication that she needed reminding about, or should they allow more time for breaks on the journey—she told Edi not to be ridiculous. Everything was fine; she didn't want another word said about it.

Edi lay in the bath, staring at the two Russian dolls on the front of Oksana Zabuzhko's book and wondering whether to pack *Field Work in Ukrainian Sex* for the weekend—or would it be embarrassing if her parents discovered that she read books in German with titles like that and Eastern bloc kitsch on the cover? She probably wouldn't have time to sit around on the sofa anyway.

In the square of window over the washing machine, the clouds turned the colour of processed cheese. Edi opened her mouth, as if to swallow the sky, or at least take a bite out of it. When she was little, 'cheese-slice tower' was her favourite game with her mother. They would pile the pre-packed squares between them, count to three and then throw themselves at the stack of cheese, tearing open the plastic wrappers, kneading the flabby slices into balls, stuffing them into their mouths: chew, swallow, chew, swallow—who could eat the most? They would laugh so much, they both ended up spluttering bits of cheese onto the table. Once Edi

got sick from all those cheese slices. She choked and gasped and spewed everything onto the floor. She couldn't remember what happened next. All she remembered was the yellowish white mess under her little feet and on the knees of her tracksuit bottoms. It was her first memory of the feeling of choking. Since then, an image had often popped into her mind: something small and insignificant—a tealeaf, say—blocked her windpipe, and that was it. Wham, bam, end of story. A stupid, pointless death—but such things happened.

She slid her whole body under the water and felt her hair turn light as feathers. It was still white blond and probably invisible against the enamel of the bathtub—just like her pale plate of a face. Only two apricot-kernel eyes floated on the bottom. She would have to ignore a lot of what was said at the weekend. Her hair was bound to be a topic; politics, too, of course. 'The thing about us...' the guests would clamour, and: 'They simply don't understand... They don't know what it means...' Sometimes 'they' was the Germans; sometimes it was people who had fled from countries other than theirs—and sometimes it was their own children who would schlep along to the party with them. Edi knew most of them; they'd run around on playgrounds together when they were little, and later bumped into each other regularly in the school corridors. They hadn't always ignored one another, but at some point Edi had stopped responding to their calls and invitations. She had nothing in common with them. They had nothing to say to each other any more. Most of them hadn't moved far. They wouldn't dye their hair until they spotted the first grey strands, and they were already doggedly stuck into continuing their parents' lives, as if following some predetermined plan—as if, by conforming, they could reassure their parents that they'd done the right thing, despite everything. Despite the lousy jobs, the lack of jobs, the sneaking suspicion that something had been irretrievably lost, even if there was money to spare at the end of the month. It seemed wrong to go against your parents when they'd been through so much. Edi felt tired just listening, and the effort of pretending to agree with everyone about everything turned her limbs to lead. She always had trouble keeping her eyes open and staying upright on her chair.

The only person she didn't have to pretend with was Grisha, Dora-next-door's only son. Edi's mother had fallen out with Dora; she said the family was slovenly and that Dora drank schnapps with every meal. There were even rumours that she had occasionally spiked Grisha's porridge with it when he was little to stimulate his appetite—that would explain why the boy had turned out so funny-looking, with his too-short nose and straggly hair and centre parting. But Grisha had never drunk more than Coke when Edi offered to bring him beer from the petrol station. Together with a few others, they would climb the folding ladder onto the flat roof and stand around in small groups, looking down over the estate. Grisha tended to stick close to Edi. He drank his Coke in tiny sips and neither of them said much.

Once, Grisha was away for a few days. He came back, beaming like a twelve-year-old, and the next time they met on the rough tar and gravel roof, he drew Edi aside and it all came gushing out. He told her he'd run off to Prague with Rüzgar and that they'd spent the nights in clubs. Edi was the only one who knew about Rüzgar. She was also the only one who knew about Rüzgar's abortion.

It was years now since Edi had last spoken to Grisha—and as usual, she hadn't let him know she was coming to Jena. She had his details, but when someone has seen you being pushed across the schoolyard and forced into a corner and made to pull your pants down, you're not inclined to get in touch with that someone, even if you do have his number. She knew Grisha wouldn't be at the birthday party, because her mother had made a big thing about not inviting the undesirable neighbours.

Edi couldn't even remember what Dora's voice sounded like—only that she had eyebrows that looked as if they'd been drawn on with a spent match, and a cat that had been trained to give its paw. *People say it's unlucky if a black cat crosses your path—but so far, the black cat is the only unlucky one...* The Russian song buzzed in Edi's head—a song whose rhymes coated her mind like stewed tea. She hummed the tune under water.

Then she pushed herself up and got out of the bath, taking care not to slip on the tiles. A tense, throbbing feeling filled her jaw and spread over her scalp like hot porridge.

She really must call a locksmith.

Tatyana knocked on the frame of the open front door with a curled index finger—in front of her, the locksmith was crawling about on all fours, his rump sticking out onto the landing; she stepped over him as if he were a puddle. Edi saw her glance at his bald pate, then march on into the kitchen.

‘You’ve got Gorbachev visiting?’ she asked, opening the doors of the wall cupboards.

‘Why Gorbachev?’ Edi spluttered. ‘And what exactly are you looking for?’

‘Didn’t you see the birthmark on his bald patch? Like a continent.’

Edi watched as Tatyana took a large glass from one of the cupboards, filled it at the tap and drained the water in big gulps. She had little beads of water on her upper lip when she set the glass down, and gave a contented sigh.

‘No, clearly you didn’t. Did you at least notice his G-string?—What? What are you looking at me like that for? You think I made it up? Go and take a walk round him and have a peek down his bum cleavage. Well worth a look. A red lace G-string. *Du bist so wunderbar, Berlin!*’ She sang these last words—the jingle of a cinema ad for mineral water that was shown before every film in Berlin.

Edi went out into the passage, shot a wary glance at the locksmith, then took a few steps onto the landing and wondered whether to sneak right out of the house.

‘Ah, your ears are red. So I was right. You see.’ Tatyana was gulping her second glass of water. ‘All packed?’

Edi had tossed a bleached denim jacket and a pair of navy-blue crease-free trousers into her sports bag—also a black shirt that her mother would thoroughly disapprove of, but it couldn’t be helped; she didn’t have anything more elegant. She would wear her no-longer white

Adidas trainers because her mother would force other, *better* shoes on her anyway, so that she wouldn't show up at the party looking like a passing jogger.

To Edi's surprise, Tatyana nodded approvingly at the battered trainers. She'd had a pair like that, too, she said, back in the day—though they hadn't lasted long. Only as far as Moscow, where the soles dropped off in the snow; it had been minus twenty-five, if not colder, and everything had turned to ice: her eyeballs, the inside of her nostrils—even her buttocks had frozen together. She'd worn her Adidas because she was so proud of them—her first pair of 'West shoes'. She wasn't from Moscow and didn't want to feel like the country cousin, so she'd come in the smartest things she had, not realising how cold it would be in the capital.

Tatyana was still gabbling away as they approached the motorway. Edi wondered why she referred to Moscow as 'the capital' when she came from Ukraine—but she didn't ask. Tatyana, she thought, was like a jukebox: you threw in a question or comment and off she went, droning away to herself, regardless of whether anyone was listening.

The car was suffused with Tatyana's perfume; it was only a matter of time before they both had headaches. It wasn't a long drive—only two-and-a-half hours if the traffic was good—but already Edi felt as though they'd been on the road for days, with no notion of where they were going.

The gnarled clumps of mistletoe in the trees behind the noise barriers looked like swamp-green balloons that had got caught in the treetops. Mistletoe was a parasite that put down roots into the host plant to drink from it, but Edi knew, too, that if you cut it with the right tool (a golden sickle), it assumed magical powers. That, at least, was what it said in the comic that Edi's father used to read her at bedtime. His black-haired finger would point at the old man with the long beard and red cloak, who stood over the steaming cauldron, stirring up the ingredients of the magic brew. This potion, her father explained, made you *unbesiegbar*, but not *unverwundbar*—invincible, but not invulnerable. Over time, it had dawned on Edi that he was learning German from Asterix and Obelix. Sometimes he would repeat the words several

times before explaining them in Russian, though Edi couldn't always have said where one language left off and the other began. For her it was all one sound; it was Dadspeak.

Like the knives in a hand blender, the rotor blades of the wind turbines chopped the sky into little pieces. Signs announced the approach of a Kullman's Diner, a McDonald's, a petrol station. Edi glanced at the fuel gauge and took the turning for the service station, mumbling something about needing petrol. Tatyana seemed only too happy to stop.

'I'm going for a fag, want to come? Oh no, you pretend you don't smoke.'

The moment Edi cut the engine, Tatyana got out of the car and took a few steps away from the petrol pumps, the clapper-like tassels swinging on her suede boots.

Edi tried to breathe calmly, wondering whether to unpack her weed and go and join her. The sky was shades of washed-out grey, and the light filtered hazily through the treetops. Edi shivered, though it was warm for October. She pulled her checked flannel shirt tighter around her neck and went into the building to pay.

On a shelf in the front window, newspapers and magazines jostled for space, and there were more newspapers on the checkout counter, where the local daily stood stacked alongside chewing gum, condoms and liquorice. *Thuringia* leapt out at her in bold letters from the headline. What an ugly word, she thought. You couldn't make it sound melodious if you tried. Thuringia made her think of cheese-slice contests and of the hills around Jena that shielded it from wind and other aspects of reality—whenever it rained in the rest of the country, the sun shone in Jena, and whenever it was sunny up in the hills, monsoons descended on the valley. It made her think of the station called 'Paradise' where the fast trains no longer stopped, so that anyone wanting to get to or from Jena, who didn't drive and didn't trust ridesharing, was forced to make complicated travel arrangements involving several changes and long waits in provincial stations where the toilets had been out of order for decades. She thought, too, of the eleven-storey blocks on the estate with windows like arrow slits—from her parents' sixth-floor flat you could see the university hospital and more tower blocks, dotted about the landscape

like dominoes. She thought of the view from the roof and the shouts of her mother as she stood in the yard, wondering where her daughter had got to.

Edi handed her debit card to the spaced-out-looking cashier and walked to the door— then turned back, picked up a paper from next to the till, folded it down the middle and put change on the counter. She couldn't remember when she'd last bought a print newspaper. The word was little more than a metaphor these days. She was certainly never sent a printed copy of the 'paper' she wrote for.

She tossed the local newspaper onto the back seat, ignoring Tatyana's look.

'I've stopped reading the news,' Tatyana said. 'When I don't read about the world, I have the feeling it falls apart more slowly.' She made no move to get back in the car and stared challengingly at Edi. 'I'm hungry. I haven't had anything all day except for a few fags.' She gestured towards the fast-food place next to the petrol station with heavy wooden tables and benches fixed to the ground.

Great, Edi thought. Only just set off and already they were at a standstill. Then again, she'd only had a gooey peanut bar for breakfast herself.

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