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Sektion 20

Written by

Paul Dowswell

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SEKTION 20

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To
J and J
and
DLD

PROLOGUE

November 1972

Ilse Grau did not like her new job in Building Number 1 of the sprawling Normannenstrasse complex of the Stasi. She had been assured that it was a real honour to work for the boss himself – Comrade Minister Erich Mielke – but she wasn't convinced.

She didn't mind getting up early, the long trundle to work on the draughty tram, or her hot sweaty job in the kitchen, but she hated having to serve Mielke his breakfast. There was something about him that made her shiver. Maybe it was the rumour that he had been the commander of a Stalinist death squad or maybe it was the little statuette of the founder of the Soviet Secret Police he kept on his desk. Whenever she looked at Mielke's face, she felt as if she was staring into a dark, empty cellar.

She followed the instruction on preparing his breakfast, pinned to the kitchen wall.

'Two eggs, cooked for exactly four and a half minutes.'

Ilse laid out the tray precisely as the directive instructed. Serviette on the left of the egg, knife on the right. Bread, salt and pepper just so, with a smaller tray for coffee and milk.

'Get that wrong and you will be straight down to the basement, doling out slop for the cells,' her supervisor had said.

Double-checking that she had followed the instructions to the letter, she placed both trays on the only trolley in the building with wheels that went in the direction they were supposed to, and pushed it the short distance to Mielke's office.

'Kommen Sie herein,' he barked, and she took a deep breath and entered.

He was sitting at a plain desk with four telephones. The brown curtains behind the desk were almost identical to the ones she had in the small apartment she shared with her sister's family in Blaschkoallee. The violent red swirls of the carpet on the floor were designed more to hide the dirt than please the eye. The room smelled of furniture polish and stale sweat and tobacco. Mielke had sat at that desk since 1957 and there was now an indelible hair-oil stain on the wood panel where he sometimes leaned back to rest his head.

He smiled and held up a hand, but his eyes were devoid of sparkle. Frau Grau had never looked at his face long enough to notice but she had seen photographs. Officially approved photographs. They showed his eyes looking in two slightly different directions. It was most disconcerting.

He beckoned her to leave the tray at the side of his desk, which was already covered with the day's papers and documents. The one he held in his hand failed to

interest him. Authorisation for two teenagers, recently fled to West Berlin, to be abducted and returned to East Germany where long prison sentences awaited them. They were to be eliminated if they showed the slightest resistance. Mielke approved the request in the time it took for Frau Grau to leave the room, then reached for a teaspoon to crack open an egg.

CHAPTER 1

Ten months earlier

It was Tuesday afternoon. That meant politics. It was their first lesson with Herr Würfel since the Christmas break and he was in full flow, reading a speech by General Secretary Honecker.

Alex Ostermann noticed his reflection in the classroom window next to his desk. My God, he looked bored. He tried to rearrange his features into one of earnest appreciation. He also noted, with some satisfaction, how long his hair had grown. Well over his ears and down on to his collar. He wondered how much longer he could grow it before Herr Roth, the school Principal, wrote to his parents to complain.

Beyond the window the sky was a low blanket of grey, and gusts of wind blew dead leaves to and fro in the school yard. A cold draught was seeping in through the ill-fitting window. For now, it was just enough to keep Alex from nodding off.

Herr Würfel was doing his best to keep them interested. He read Honecker's speech as though it was Goethe or Shakespeare. Words flew by: 'historical mission', 'class struggle', 'scientifically founded goals'; oft-repeated phrases that Alex barely understood.

Alex wished he was at home in his bedroom listening to music or playing his guitar, even if it was a cheap plastic one from Bulgaria. It made a loud buzz when you plugged it in and would never stay in tune. But it was a vaguely similar shape to the guitar he really wanted – a beautiful instrument of wire, wood and mother of pearl, the Gibson Les Paul. They were made in Kalamazoo, Michigan, wherever that was. Alex had learned this from a smuggled guitar catalogue which he'd pored over as keenly as other boys in the school had ogled that porn magazine Nadel's cousin had sneaked in to him from West Germany.

Alex's politics lesson had become a noise in the background, like the hum of fluorescent-tube lighting.

The noise stopped. You always noticed a noise when it stopped.

'Ostermann, what did I just say?' said Herr Würfel.

Alex hadn't got a clue.

'I'm sorry, sir,' he said. 'For a moment there I lost your thread.'

The rest of the class sniggered. Würfel turned to Nadel. 'General Secretary Honecker, sir, he said the wisdom of the working class informs the directives of the Socialist Unity Party.'

Würfel smiled proudly. Nadel was one of his star pupils. He was lined up as a possible candidate for the Stasi – the Ministry of State Security. You couldn't apply for a position there. Würfel had put Nadel's name

forward only last week. He hoped the recent incident with the pornographic magazine would be overlooked. After all, there were worse things than looking at naked women.

'Ostermann,' sighed Würfel, 'are we boring you? Perhaps you would like to remind us of the significance of the symbols on our national flag?'

Alex could have reeled them off in his sleep. He sat up and tried to sound enthusiastic. 'The hammer represents the workers, Herr Würfel, the wheat garland, the peasant farmers, and the compass, the intelligentsia.'

'And which are you?' smirked Würfel. 'I don't see a guitar on the flag.'

The class laughed sycophantically. Alex laughed too. He wasn't going to let Würfel make him feel small.

Würfel sighed and turned to the class. 'Now, who can tell me why the Deutsche Demokratische Republik has need for only one political party?'

A forest of hands shot up and he pointed to a girl near the front. 'Because the working class is in power there is no social or political basis for opposition,' she answered faultlessly.

As the class finished Würfel put on a record for them to listen to – a collection of marching tunes by the Band of the Ministry of State Security. Alex caught a glimpse of the record sleeve. It was the sort of sickly pastel blue you saw on most Trabant motor cars and district council railings and doors. The band stood stiff and formal on the

cover photograph. *This is the music I'll have to play if I go to Hell*, he thought.

Alex had always gone to school on his bike but recently he had decided to walk. A new student in his class had caught his eye – a small, dark-haired girl called Sophie Kirsch. He knew she lived nearby and also walked to school. Alex kept hoping they would meet up.

On the way home that afternoon, he got lucky. 'Hey, Alex,' he heard a voice behind him. 'Wait for me!' They fell into step.

Sophie broke the awkward silence.

'Herr Würfel tried to make you look silly! Well, he didn't succeed.'

Alex blushed with embarrassment. 'I think I'm quite a disappointment to him,' he laughed.

'And a disappointment to us *all*,' she said with a wink. She dropped her voice to a whisper and began to mimic their teacher. 'How could you not be interested in the scientifically founded goals of the Socialist Unity Party? I think of nothing else.'

Alex laughed. He was flattered at how indiscreet she was being with him. He usually only had conversations like this with his sister or his best friends.

He searched for something to say. 'How do you like Berlin?' She had appeared in his class shortly before the Christmas break. He'd heard her family had moved from Magdeburg.

'I'm glad to be here, I suppose,' she said. 'Magdeburg was bombed to bits by the British in the war. A lot of it is still wasteland. Even more than Berlin – but there's so much more of the city here you don't notice it so much.'

Alex asked why they'd moved.

'My parents both teach at Humboldt Universität. Politics. Like Herr Würfel! I think they would get on very well. And my grandmother lives here. They wanted to be closer to her now she's getting older, to help my Auntie Rosemarie with looking after her.'

She paused and said, 'I quite like Berlin really, but it's odd being in a new town with none of your old friends around you.'

They started to talk about music. Sophie played the cello and had recently joined the school orchestra. 'Maybe I'll make some friends there,' she said. She told him she enjoyed playing the music they performed, especially the German composers – Bach, Mozart. 'It's all so elegant. It fits together so beautifully. We're good at that, aren't we,' she said. Then she lowered her voice. 'But I like rock music too.'

'Now that we're not so good at,' laughed Alex. 'But I'm trying. I play guitar a bit with my friends.'

She laughed, but neither of them felt it wise to say any more. They were discouraged from listening to Western rock music, let alone playing it. Alex was secretly thrilled that she had talked to him about it.

As they turned into Treptower Park on their journey

home, Sophie stopped to pet a pair of horses harnessed to a wooden coal wagon. On an impulse, Alex said, 'Here, come and look at this.' He took her to the vast Soviet war memorial at the heart of the park and pointed to one of the stone friezes.

A squad of Soviet soldiers, all wearing combat medals, were lined up in a ceremonial parade. One of them was kneeling before the Soviet flag, which he was holding up to kiss.

'Look,' whispered Alex, pointing for Sophie to see. 'He looks like he's blowing his nose on it.'

She burst out laughing, then Alex felt her hand on his shoulder. 'We'd better go,' she said, eyeing up the Soviet guard at the far side of the aisle, 'before Ivan there gives us a jab with his bayonet.'

As they walked home, Alex said, 'My grandma's always hated that memorial. She says the whole thing is a great big "sod off" from the Soviets to the people of Berlin. It says: "We are your conquerors. Behold our magnificence."'

Sophie gasped. 'Your granny said that?'

'In so many words,' said Alex. 'She's not very keen on the Russians.'

Sophie sensed his reluctance to say more. She respected it. You never knew, even with friends, what would get reported back. But she liked the way he had confided in her.

'I suppose someone's got to protect us from the Yanks,'

she said. 'Keep us safe from rock music and a decent pair of jeans.'

Alex felt he could trust Sophie Kirsch. He was sure she wasn't just playing along, trying to trick him into saying things that would get him into trouble with the Stasi.

The sun was going down now and a winter chill was biting through their coats. Alex said, 'We'd better get home before it rains.'

When they reached her apartment, she said, 'You know Emmy in our class?' Alex nodded. 'She's asked me to her party a week on Friday. Are you going too? It's over on Greifswalder Strasse, wherever that is.'

'Yeah, she asked me,' he said, trying to sound nonchalant. He had heard girls were put off if you seemed too keen. Alex sensed his heart beating a little faster. 'Shall I come round and collect you?' he asked.

'Yes please. It'll be nice to have someone to go with. Come at about seven? You can meet my mother and father too. That will be a treat for you both!'

Before he could answer, she'd gone.