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In Times of Fading Light

Written by Eugen Ruge

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell

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IN TIMES OF FADING LIGHT

The Story of a Family

Eugen Ruge

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell

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for all of you

The Main Characters

Wilhelm and Charlotte Powileit
(Charlotte Umnitzer by her first marriage)

Werner and Kurt Umnitzer,
her sons

Irina Umnitzer, née Petrovna,
Kurt's wife

Nadyeshda Ivanovna,
Irina's mother

Alexander Umnitzer,
son of Kurt and Irina

Markus Umnitzer,
Alexander's son

IN TIMES OF FADING LIGHT

2001

He had spent two days lying like the dead on his buffalo leather sofa. Then he stood up, took a long shower to wash away the last traces of hospital atmosphere, and drove to Neuendorf.

As usual, he took the A115. Gazed out at the world, wanted to see if it had changed. Had it?

The cars looked to him cleaner. Cleaner? Kind of more colorful. More idiotic.

The sky was blue, what else?

Fall had insidiously crept up on him behind his back, sprinkling the trees with little dabs of yellow. It was September now. So if they had discharged him on Saturday, this must be Tuesday. He'd lost track of the date over these last few days.

Neuendorf had recently acquired its own expressway exit road—by "recently," Alexander still meant since the fall of the Wall. The exit road took you straight to Thälmannstrasse (which still bore the Communist leader's name). The street was smoothly paved, with bicycle lanes on both sides. Renovated apartment blocks, insulated to conform to some EU norm or other. New buildings that looked like indoor swimming pools, called townhouses.

But you had only to turn off to the left and follow the winding Steinweg for a few hundred meters, then turn left again—and you were in a road where time seemed to stand still: narrow, lined with linden trees, sidewalks paved with cobblestones, with bumps and dents where tree roots had risen. Rotting fences swarming with firebugs. Far back in the gardens, behind tall grass, were the uncurtained windows of villas that at present,

in attorneys' offices far away, were the subject of legal dispute over the return of such properties to their original owners.

One of the few buildings still inhabited here was number 7 Am Fuchsbau. Moss on the roof. Cracks in the facade. Elder bushes already crowding in on the veranda. And the apple tree that Kurt always used to prune with his own hands now rose to the sky at its own sweet will, its branches tangled in wild confusion.

Today's Meals on Wheels offering stood in its insulated packaging on the fencepost. He checked the date on it; yes, Tuesday. Alexander picked it up and went on.

Although he had a key, he rang the bell to see whether Kurt would answer the door. Pointless—anyway, he knew that Kurt would *not* answer the door. But then he heard the familiar squeal of the door into the corridor, and when he looked through the little window Kurt appeared, ghostlike, in the dim light of the small front room just inside the entrance.

"Open the door," called Alexander.

Kurt came closer, gawping.

"Open the door!"

But Kurt didn't move.

Alexander unlocked the door and hugged his father, although hugging him had been less than pleasant for some time. Kurt was smelly. It was the smell of old age, and it had sunk deep into his pores. Kurt was still smelly even when he had been washed and his teeth were brushed.

"Do you know who I am?" asked Alexander.

"Yes," said Kurt.

His mouth was smeared with plum jam; the morning home health aide had been in a hurry again. His cardigan was buttoned the wrong way, and he was wearing only one slipper.

Alexander heated up Kurt's meal. Microwave, safety catch switched on. Kurt stood there, watching with interest.

"Hungry?" asked Alexander.

"Yes," said Kurt.

"You're always hungry."

"Yes," said Kurt.

There was goulash with red cabbage (since the time when Kurt nearly choked to death on a piece of beef, the Meals on Wheels service had been asked to send meat only cut up small). Alexander made himself coffee. Then he took Kurt's goulash out of the microwave, put it on the plastic tablecloth.

"Bon appetit."

"Yes," said Kurt.

He began to eat. For a while there was no sound apart from Kurt snuffling as he concentrated. Alexander sipped his coffee, which was still far too hot. Watched Kurt eating.

"You're holding your fork upside down," he said after a while.

Kurt stopped eating for a moment, seemed to be thinking. But then he went on; tried to push a piece of meat from the goulash on to the end of his knife with the fork handle.

"You're holding your fork upside down," Alexander repeated.

He spoke without emphasis, without any undertone of reproof, to test the effect of the mere statement on Kurt. None at all. Zero. What was going on inside that head? A space separated from the world by a skull, and still containing some kind of ego. What was Kurt feeling, what was he thinking when he picked his way around the room? When he sat at his desk in the morning and, so the women home health aides said, stared at the newspaper for hours on end? What was he thinking? Did he think at all? How did you think without words?

Kurt had finally shoved the piece of meat from the goulash onto the tip of his knife and, quivering with greed, was raising it to his mouth. A balancing act. It fell off. Second try.

What a joke, come to think of it, reflected Alexander. To think that Kurt's decline had began, of all things, with language. Kurt the orator. The great storyteller. How he used to sit there in his famous armchair—Kurt's armchair! How all and sundry would hang on his lips as Kurt the professor told his little stories. His anecdotes. And another funny thing: in Kurt's mouth everything became an anecdote. Never mind what Kurt was talking about—even if he was telling you how he nearly died in the camp—it always had a punch line, it was always witty. Well, used to be witty. In the distant past. The last consecutive sentence that Kurt had managed to utter was: I've lost my powers of speech. Not bad. Brilliant, compared with

his present repertory. But that was two years ago. I've lost my powers of speech. And people had genuinely thought, well, he's lost his powers of speech, but otherwise . . . Otherwise he still seemed to be, at least to a certain extent, all there. Smiled, nodded. Made faces that somehow fitted the context. Put up a clever pretense. But just occasionally he did something odd, poured red wine into his coffee cup. Or stood around holding a cork, suddenly at a loss—and then put the cork away on a bookshelf.

Today's quota so far was pathetic; Kurt had managed only one piece of meat from the goulash. Now he was using his fingers as he wolfed it down. Looked surreptitiously up at Alexander, like a child testing his parents' reaction. Shoved goulash into his mouth. And more goulash. And chewed.

As he chewed, he held up his fingers, covered with the sauce, as if taking an oath.

"If you only knew," said Alexander.

Kurt did not react. He had finally found a method: the solution to the goulash problem. Stuffed it in, chewed it. The sauce ran down his chin in a narrow trail.

Kurt couldn't do *anything* these days. Couldn't talk, couldn't brush his own teeth. Couldn't even wipe his bottom; you were lucky if he sat on the toilet to shit. The one thing that Kurt could still do, thought Alexander, the one thing he still did of his own accord, the one thing that really interested him, and to which he put the very last of his clever mind, was eating. Taking in nourishment. Kurt didn't eat with relish. Kurt didn't even eat because he liked the taste of his food (his taste buds, Alexander felt sure, had been ruined by decades of pipe smoking). Kurt ate to live. Eating = Life, it was an equation, thought Alexander, that he had learned in the labor camp, and he had learned it thoroughly. Once and for all. The greed with which Kurt ate, stuffing goulash into his mouth, was nothing but the will to survive. All that was left of Kurt. It was what kept his head above water, made his body go on functioning, a heart and circulation machine that had slipped out of gear but still kept working—and would probably, it was to be feared, keep working for some time yet. Kurt had survived them all. He had survived Irina, and now there was a very real chance that he would also survive him, Alexander.

A large drop of sauce formed on Kurt's chin. Alexander felt a strong

urge to hurt his father, to tear off a piece of paper towel and wipe the sauce roughly away from his face.

The drop quivered and fell.

Had it been yesterday? Or today? At some point in the last two days, when he was lying on the buffalo leather sofa (motionless, for some reason or other taking care not to touch the leather with his bare skin), at some point during that time the idea of killing Kurt had occurred to him. He had played out variants of the scene in his head: smothering Kurt with his pillow, or maybe—the perfect murder—serving him a tough steak. Like the steak on which he had nearly choked. And if Alexander, when Kurt went blue in the face, staggered about in the road and fell unconscious to the ground, if Alexander hadn't instinctively turned him over to the stable position on his side, so that as a result the almost globular lump of meat, chewed to a gooey consistency, hadn't rolled out of Kurt's mouth along with his dentures, then Kurt would presumably be dead now, and Alexander would have been spared (at least) this last setback.

"Did you notice that I haven't been to see you for a while?"

Kurt had started on the red cabbage now—some time ago he had reverted to the infantile habit of eating his meal in separate parts, first meat, then vegetables, then potatoes. Surprisingly, he had his fork back in his hand, and it was even the right way up. He went on shoveling red cabbage into his mouth.

Alexander repeated his question. "Did you notice that I haven't been here to see you for a while?"

"Yes," said Kurt.

"So you did notice, then. How long was it? A week, a month, a year?"

"Yes," said Kurt.

"A year, then?" asked Alexander.

"Yes," said Kurt.

Alexander laughed. And to him it really did feel like a year. Like another life, when the life that preceded it had been ended by a single banal sentence. "I'm sending you to Fröbelstrasse."

That was all.

"Fröbelstrasse?"

"The hospital there."

Only once he was outside did he think of asking the nurse whether

that meant he ought to take pajamas and a toothbrush with him. And the nurse had gone back into the consulting room and asked if that meant *the patient* ought to take pajamas and a toothbrush with him. And the doctor had said yes, it did indeed mean *the patient* ought to take pajamas and a toothbrush to the hospital with him. And that was it.

Four weeks. Twenty-seven doctors (he'd been counting). Modern medicine.

The assistant doctor who looked like a high school kid in his last year, who had examined him in a crazy reception area where people severely sick with something or other were groaning behind screens, and who had explained the principles of diagnostics. The doctor with the ponytail (very nice man) who claimed that marathon runners don't get sick. The woman radiologist who had asked whether, at his age, he was thinking of having more children. The surgeon with a name like a butcher, Fleischhauer. And of course the pockmarked Karajan look-alike, Dr. Koch the medical director.

Plus twenty-two more of them.

And probably another two dozen lab assistants who put the blood they'd taken from him into test tubes, investigated his urine, examined his tissues under microscopes, or put them in centrifugal devices of some kind. And all with the pitiful, the positively outrageous result, that Dr. Koch had summed up in a single word.

"Inoperable."

So Dr. Koch had said. In his grating voice. With his pockmarked face. His Karajan hairstyle. Inoperable, he had said, rocking back and forth in his swivel chair, and the lenses of his glasses had flashed in time with his movements.

Kurt had finished the red cabbage. Was starting in on the potatoes: too dry. Alexander knew what would happen now if he didn't put a glass of water in front of Kurt at once. The dry potatoes would stick in Kurt's throat, he would have a noisy attack of hiccups, suggesting that he was about to bring up his entire stomach. Kurt could probably be choked to death on dry potatoes, too.

Kurt, funnily enough, was *operable;* Kurt had had three-quarters of his stomach removed. And with what stomach was left he ate as if he had been given an extra three-quarters of a stomach instead. Never mind

what meal arrived, Kurt always cleared his plate. He had always cleared his plate in the past, too, thought Alexander. Whatever Irina put in front of him. He had eaten it up and praised it—excellent! Always the same praise, always the same "Thanks!" and "Excellent!" Only years later, after Irina's death, when Alexander happened to cook for him now and then—only then did Alexander realize how humiliating that eternal "Thanks!" and "Excellent!" must have been for his mother, how it must have worn her down. You couldn't accuse Kurt of anything. Indeed, he had never made demands, not even on Irina. If no one cooked for him, he would go to a restaurant or have a sandwich. And if someone did cook for him, he said thank you nicely. Then he took his afternoon nap. Then he went for his walk. Then he looked at his mail. Who could object to that? No one at all. That was exactly the point.

Kurt was dabbing up the last of the potato with his fingertips. Alexander handed him a napkin. Kurt actually wiped his mouth with it, folded the napkin again neatly, and put it beside his plate.

"Listen, Father," said Alexander. "I've been in the hospital."

Kurt shook his head. Alexander took his forearm and tried again, speaking with emphasis.

"I," he said, pointing to himself, "have been in the hos-pi-tal! Understand?"

"Yes," said Kurt, standing up.

"I'm not through yet," said Alexander.

But Kurt did not react. Shuffled into the bedroom, still with only one slipper on, and took his pants down. Looked expectantly at Alexander.

"Your afternoon nap?"

"Yes," said Kurt.

"Well, let's change that diaper, then."

Kurt shuffled into the bathroom. Alexander was just thinking that he had understood, but in the bathroom Kurt took his padded undershorts down a little way and pissed on the floor, his urine rising in a high arc.

"What do you think you're doing?"

Kurt looked up in alarm, but he couldn't stop pissing.

By the time Alexander had showered his father, put him to bed, and mopped the bathroom floor, his coffee was cold. He looked at the time:

around two o'clock. The evening home health aide wouldn't come until seven at the earliest. He wondered briefly whether to take the twenty-seven thousand marks from the wall safe and simply walk out with it. But he decided to wait. He wanted to do it in front of Kurt's eyes. Wanted to explain to him, even if that was pointless. Wanted Kurt to say yes to what he was doing—even if "yes" was the only word he ever uttered now.

Alexander took his coffee into the living room. Now what? How could he pass the time? Once again he disliked himself for falling into the rhythm of Kurt's days, and that dislike linked up of its own accord with the pronounced dislike he already felt for the room. Except that now he hadn't been here for four weeks, it seemed even worse: blue curtains, blue wallpaper, all blue. Because blue had been the favorite color of Kurt's last love . . . idiotic, at the age of seventy-eight. When Irina had hardly been in her grave for six months . . . even the napkins, even the candles were blue!

The pair of them had acted like high school kids for a year. Sending each other amorous postcards, wrapping the love tokens they exchanged in blue paper, and then Kurt's last love had probably noticed that his mind was beginning to go—and made off. Leaving behind what Alexander called "the blue casket." A cold, blue world where no one lived anymore.

Only the dining corner was still as it used to be. Although not entirely . . . it was true that Kurt hadn't touched the wood veneer wall covering—Irina's pride and joy, real wood veneer on the walls! Even the jungle of souvenirs (Russian Irina's word for it when she really meant jumble) was still there, but not exactly as it had been. When the room was redecorated, Kurt had dismantled the wildly proliferating collection of souvenirs that had spread over the wood veneer walls for years, dusted the various items, chose "the most important" (or what Kurt thought the most important), and arranged them back on the wood veneer walls "in casual order" (or what Kurt thought was casual order). In the process, he had tried to make "functional" use of the holes for nails already present. It was Kurt's aesthetic of compromise. And that was exactly what it looked like.

Where was the little curved dagger that the actor Gojkovic—who, after all, used to play the big chief in all those Indian films from the

DEFA state-owned film studios!—had once given Irina? And where was the Cuban plate that the comrades from the Karl Marx Works had given Wilhelm on his ninetieth birthday? Wilhelm, so the story went, had brought out his wallet and slammed a hundred-mark bill down on the plate, thinking that he was being asked for a donation to the People's Solidarity welfare organization for senior citizens.

Never mind. Things, thought Alexander . . . they were only things, that's all. And for whoever came here after him, just a heap of old junk.

He went across to Kurt's study on the other and, so Alexander thought, more attractive side of the house.

It was not like the living room, where Kurt had turned everything upside down—he had even replaced Irina's furniture, her beautiful old glass-fronted display cabinet had gone in favor of some horrible kind of fiberboard flat-pack unit; even Irina's wonderful and always wobbly telephone table had gone; and so had the wall clock. The absence of the friendly old wall clock was what Alexander held against Kurt most of all. Its mechanism whirred every hour and half hour, to show that it was still on duty, even if the case with the chime inside was missing. Originally it had been a grandfather clock, a longcase clock, but following a fashion of the time Irina had removed it from its tall case and hung it on the wall. To this day Alexander could remember going with Irina to collect it, and how Irina couldn't bring herself to tell the old lady who was parting with the grandfather clock that its long case was really superfluous to requirements; he remembered how they'd had to ask a neighbor to help them load up the clock complete with the entire case, and how that huge case, which they were taking away only for the sake of appearances, stuck out of the trunk of the little Trabant, so that in front the car almost lost contact with the ground . . . well, unlike the totally redecorated living room, in Kurt's study all was still, in a positively ghostly way, as it used to be.

The desk still stood at an angle in front of the window—for forty years, every time the interior of the house was painted it had been put back on precisely the same pressure marks already left by its legs on the carpet. The seating corner with the large armchair where Kurt used to sit with his back bent and his hands folded, telling his anecdotes, was also the same as ever. So was the fitted Swedish wall unit. (Why Swedish,

come to think of it?) Its shelves were buckling under the weight of books they held; here and there Kurt had fitted another shelf that didn't quite match the color of the rest, but the cosmic order remained the same—a kind of final backup recording of Kurt's brain: there were the reference works that Alexander himself had sometimes used (but mind you put them back!), here books on the Russian Revolution, there again a long row of the works of Lenin in their rust-colored brown bindings, and to the left of Lenin, in the last compartment of the wall unit under the folder sternly labeled PERSONAL, stood the battered folding chessboard—Alexander could have taken it out with his eyes closed—together with the chessmen carved at some time in the past by an anonymous inmate of the gulag.

All that had been added in forty years—apart from new books—were a few of what had originally been large quantities of souvenirs brought back from Mexico by Alexander's grandparents. Most of them had been given away or sold in haste after their deaths, and even the few things with which Kurt, curiously enough, had not wanted to part hadn't gained admittance to the "jungle"—allegedly for lack of space, in reality because Irina had never been able to overcome her hatred of anything that came from her in-laws' house. So Kurt had "provisionally" found room for them on the fitted wall unit in his study, and there they had "provisionally" stayed to this day. Kurt had hung the stuffed baby shark from a hook on one shelf with gift ribbon—as a child, Alexander had been fascinated by its rough skin; the terrifying Aztec mask still lay, faceup, in the glass-fronted part of the unit containing all the little schnapps bottles; and the large, pink, spiral seashell into which Wilhelm had fitted an electric bulb—no one knew how—still stood on one of the lower shelves, although without any electrical connection.

Once again he thought of his son, Markus. Imagined Markus going around this house, in a hooded jacket and with headphones in his ears—that was how he had last seen him, two years ago—imagined Markus standing in front of Kurt's book-lined wall and kicking the bottom shelves with the toes of his boots; imagined him handling the things that had been collected here, estimating their usefulness or saleability. Not many people would want to buy the works of Lenin from him; he might get a few marks for the folding chessboard. Probably only the stuffed baby shark and the

big pink seashell would interest Markus himself, and he would take them home to his own place without giving much thought to their origin.

For a second he wondered whether to take the shell with him and throw it back in the sea where it had come from—but then the idea struck him as corny, like a scene in a TV soap opera, and he thought better of it again.

He sat down at the desk and opened the left-hand door of the storage space below the top of it. For the last forty years, the key to the wall safe had lain in the ancient photographic paper box right at the back of the middle drawer, hidden under tubes of adhesive—and it was still there (it had suddenly occurred to Alexander that the key might have disappeared, thus wrecking his plans, but that was a silly idea).

For safety's sake, he put the key in his pocket—as if someone might yet try taking it away from him—and then sipped his cold coffee.

Strange how tiny Kurt's desk was. Kurt had written all his works on that small surface. He used to sit here in a medically extremely unwise position, on an ergonomic catastrophe of a chair, drinking his bitter-tasting filter coffee, and hammering his works out on his typewriter by the hunt-and-peck method, tack-tack-tack-tack, Papa is working! Seven pages a day, that was his "norm," but sometimes he would announce at lunchtime: "Twelve pages today!" Or, "Fifteen!" He had filled a complete section of the Swedish wall unit like this, shelving measuring one meter by three meters fifty, filled with the works of "one of the most productive historians of the German Democratic Republic," as he had been described, and even if you took the articles out of the journals into which they were bound, and extracted the essays contributed to anthologies, and arranged them all in a row—together with the ten, twelve, or fourteen full-length books that Kurt had written—his writings still occupied a total expanse of shelving that could almost compete with the works of Lenin: a meter's length of knowledge. Kurt had toiled away for thirty years to fill that meter of space, terrorizing his family all that time. Irina had cooked and done the laundry for the sake of that meter of space. Kurt had been awarded orders and decorations for that meter of space, but he had also earned reproofs and once even an outright reprimand from the Party; here he had bargained over the print run of editions with the publishing house, which was always contending with paper shortages, he had fought a running battle over phrasings and titles, had had

to give in, or use cunning and persistence to achieve some measure of success—and now all of it, all of it was wastepaper.

Or so Alexander had believed. After the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification, he had thought that he could chalk that at least up as his own triumph. A line, he told himself, had now been drawn under all that. The alleged research, the half-truths and halfhearted arguments on the history of the German labor movement that Kurt had assembled—all of it, Alexander had thought, had fallen along with the Wall, and nothing would remain of Kurt's so-called oeuvre.

But then, at the age of nearly eighty, Kurt sat down in his catastrophic chair again, to write his last book in secret. And although the book did not become an international success—yes, twenty years earlier a book in which a German Communist described his years in the gulag might indeed have been an international success, only Kurt hadn't been brave enough to write it then—although it did not become an international success it was still, like it or not, an important, unique book, a book that would "live," a book such as Alexander had never written and now probably never would.

Did he want to? Hadn't he always said he felt drawn to the theater for the very reason that the theater was ephemeral? Ephemeral—sounded good. As long as you didn't have cancer.

Midges danced in the sunlight, Kurt was still asleep—although they say old people don't sleep as much as they used to. Alexander decided to lie down for a little while himself.

As he was about to leave the study, his eye fell on the folder labeled PERSONAL, a word that had always made him want to open it, but he had never dared to—although as a teenager he hadn't shrunk from looking at his father's collection of erotic photos. Until Kurt put a security lock on the cupboard door.

He took the folder out. Scraps of paper, notes. Copies of documents. On top, several letters written in violet ink, the usual color in Russia many years ago.

"Dearest Ira!" (1954)

Alexander leafed through them . . . typical of Kurt. He had written even his love letters accurately on both sides of the paper, in neat

handwriting, all the pages filled to the last line, and the lines themselves at a regular distance from each other, never moving apart or crowding together at the end of a letter, never spilling over into the margin of a page anywhere . . . how on earth did the man do it? And then there was the irritatingly effusive manner in which he addressed Irina:

"Dear, dearest Irina!" (1959)

"My sun, light of my life!" (1961)

"My darling wife, my friend, my companion!" (1973)

Alexander put the folder back and climbed the stairs to Irina's room. He lay down on the large sofa, which was covered with some kind of teddy-bear fabric, and tried to sleep a little. Instead, he kept seeing the pockmarked Karajan character rocking back and forth on his swivel chair like a clockwork figure. The lenses of his glasses flashed, his voice repeated the same thing over and over again . . . oh, the hell with it. He must think about something else. He had come to a decision, so there was nothing more to think about now, nothing to decide.

He opened his eyes. Looked at Irina's cuddly toy animals sitting on the back of the sofa, neatly arranged side by side just where the cleaning lady had lined them up: the dog, the hedgehog, the rabbit with its singed ear . . .

Suppose they had all been wrong?

It was absurd, he thought, that right to the end Irina had described this room to him as *your room*. He could suddenly hear her voice in his ear again: *You two can sleep up in your room.* Yet it would be hard to imagine a room representing the perfect if delayed fulfilment of a girl's dream better than this one. Pink walls. A rococo mirror, slightly damaged, but genuine. An escritoire desk painted white stood at the window. Irina had liked to pose here in pensive mood to have her photograph taken. And the delicate probably-also-rococo chairs, too, were posing in the room so attractively that you didn't like to sit on them.

Indeed, as soon as he tried imagining Irina here, he saw her sitting on the floor in her solitary orgies, listening to her old cassettes of the singer-songwriter Vysotsky and slowly getting drunk.

And there was the telephone, still the old GDR phone that used to stand downstairs. Still the same phone on which she had said, tonelessly, those four words.

"Sashenka. You. Must. Come."

Four words from the lips of a Russian mother who had prided herself on *never in her life* having asked her son for anything at all.

And after each word, a long, atmospheric crackle, so that he was tempted to think the connection had been broken and hang up.

And how about him? What had he said?

"I'll come when you've stopped drinking."

He stood up, went over to the white-painted escritoire with the secret compartment where they had found Irina's stash of bottles after her death. He opened it, began searching it like an addict. Dropped on the sofa again. There were no bottles here now.

Or had he said "boozing"? I'll come when you've stopped boozing.

Two weeks later, he had driven to the undertakers' to bring his mother back to life . . . or no, he had gone because there were still some formalities to be dealt with. But on the road he had become obsessed by the idea that he could revive his mother if only he spoke to her. And after he had walked around the block twice, trying to talk himself out of the notion, he had finally gone in, asked to see his mother, and was not to be dissuaded even when the knowledgeable staff said it would be better for him to remember her "as she was in life."

Then they had rolled her in. A curtain was drawn. He was standing beside a corpse, not particularly neatly laid out, that admittedly did bear some resemblance to his mother (apart from the face, which was too small, and the little pursed concertina-like folds of skin on the upper lip), he was standing beside her and didn't dare to speak to her, not in front of the two assistant undertakers waiting behind the curtain, so close that he could see their shoes below its hem. He touched her hand, just so that he'd know he had tried something—and found it cold, cold as a piece of chicken when you take it out of the refrigerator.

No, they had not all been wrong. There was an x-ray picture. There was a CT scan. There were laboratory tests. It was clear: non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, the slow-growing type. For which—how tactfully they put it!—there was as yet no effective treatment.

"So what does that mean, in terms of years?"

And then the man had rocked back and forth forever in his chair, looking as if it were unreasonable to expect him to answer such a question, and said, "You won't get any prognosis from me."

And his voice had rasped, like the sound of the old man's oxygen apparatus in his room.

Measurements of time. Twelve years ago, the fall of the Wall. Inaccessibly far away now. All the same, he tried to trace the course of those years—what did twelve years amount to?

Of course the twelve years before the Wall came down seemed to him disproportionately longer than the twelve years after it. 1977—an eternity ago! Whereas since 1989—oh, it was like going down a slide, like a ride in a tramcar. And yet certain things had happened in that time, hadn't they?

He had gone away and come back again (even if the country to which he came back had disappeared). He had taken a properly paid job with a martial arts magazine (and handed in his notice). Had run up debts (and paid them off). Had thought up a project for a film (forget it).

Irina had died: *six years ago.*

He had directed twelve or fifteen stage plays (in theaters of ever-decreasing importance). Had been to Spain. Italy, the Netherlands, the United States, Sweden, and Egypt (but not Mexico). Had fucked he couldn't remember just how many women, or what their names were. And after a time of sleeping around had entered into something like an established relationship again . . .

Had met Marion: *three years ago.*

But now that didn't seem to him like such a short time.

It occurred to him that he ought to have told her. After all, she was the only person who had visited him—although he had expressly asked her not to. And he had to admit that it hadn't been so bad. She had not, as he'd feared, been excessively concerned for him. Had brought him not flowers but tomato salad. How did she know what he would like to eat at that moment? How did she know that he was terrified of being given flowers in hospital?

Or to put it another way: Why was he unable to love Marion? Was she too old? His own age. Was it because of the two or three little blue veins showing on her thighs? Was it something to do with him?

"My dearest, darling Irina . . . My sun, light of my life!"

He had never written to a woman like that. Was it just the old-fashioned

thing to say, or had Kurt truly loved Irina? Had that pedantic old bastard, had Kurt Umnitzer the human machine actually managed to *love* someone?

The mere idea of it made Alexander feel so bad that he had to stand up.

It was just after two thirty when he went downstairs again. Kurt was still asleep. He knew that Marion was at the garden center; too early to call her, then. Instead, he called directory information. He had really meant to go straight to the airport, but now he called directory information, was given another number to call, finally got the right one, yet he still hesitated when it turned out that yes, he could book a flight for tomorrow, no problem. So long as he had a credit card.

He did.

"Well, would you like me to book it now or not?" asked the lady at the other end of the line, not discourteously but in a tone conveying that she didn't have all day to spend on this trifling matter.

"Yes," he said, and gave her his credit card number.

When he hung up, it was 14:46 hours. He stood in the dim light for a moment, waiting for some kind of feeling to follow—but it didn't. All that came into his mind was a tune—one of Granny Charlotte's ancient shellac records that had fallen on the sidewalk during their move and broken into a thousand pieces.

México lindo y querido
si muero lejos de ti . . .

The "hungry 'gator." How did it go? He couldn't remember. Could you still get a record like that in Mexico? After half a century?

He went into the "blue casket," picked up his coffee cup, and took it to the kitchen. Stood by the kitchen window for a little while looking out at the garden. Searching, as if he owed her at least this moment of memory, for the place in the tall, golden grass where Baba Nadya used to stand for hours with her back bent, tending her cucumber bed . . . but he couldn't find it. Baba Nadya was gone without a trace.

He fetched the toolbox and went into Kurt's study.

First he took out the old chessboard that stood to Lenin's left and

folded back its flap. Opened the folder labeled PERSONAL. Took out a sheaf of papers, as many as would fit into the folding chessboard. Put them in it. Found a large, white plastic bag in the kitchen. Put the chessboard in the bag. Automatically, calmly, confidently, as if he had planned it all well in advance.

He would also put the money in the plastic bag later.

Then he unearthed the broad-bladed chisel from the toolbox—it had often been misused for such purposes before—and jammed the blade between the security lock on the door of the desk and its frame. There was a crack, wood splintered. Trickier than he had expected. He had to take all the drawers out of the other side of the space below the desk before the partition between the two halves would give way far enough for the door to open. Photographs spilled out. A pack of cards with erotic pictures. Videos. A few so-called adult magazines . . . and there it was, he had not been wrong: the long, red plastic box of slides. He had opened the box only once, had held the first slide that came to hand up to the light, recognized his mother, half naked, in an unambiguous pose—and put the slide back in the box in a hurry.

He fetched the laundry basket from the bathroom and placed all these things in it.

The only stove still in this house stood in the living room. It hadn't been lit for years. Alexander found newspaper, two wooden bookends from Kurt's Swedish wall unit—the owl-shaped bookends—and cooking oil from the kitchen. Soaked the newspaper in oil. Lit the whole thing . . .

Suddenly, there was Kurt in the doorway. Looking amiable and well rested. His thin little legs stuck out from his padded undershorts. His hair was all over the place, like the branches of the apple tree outside. Curious to see what he was doing, Kurt came closer.

"I'm burning your photos," said Alexander.

"Yes," said Kurt.

"Listen, Father. I'm going away. Do you understand? I'm going away and I don't know how long for. Do you understand?"

"Yes," said Kurt.

"That's why I'm burning these. So that no one will find them here."

Kurt didn't seem to think there was anything unusual about that. He

squatted down with Alexander beside the basket, looked into it. The fire was going well now, and Alexander began throwing the playing cards into it one by one. Then the photographs, the magazines . . . as for the videos, he thought, he'd put them in the garbage later, but the slides had to be burned. Only where was the box?

He looked up. Kurt was holding the box. Handed it to him.

"Well? What should I do with that?" asked Alexander.

"Yes," said Kurt.

"Do you know what's in there?" asked Alexander.

Kurt thought hard, rubbed his temples as he used to when he was searching for the right words. As if creating one last impulse of electrical energy in his brain by rubbing his forehead.

Then he suddenly said, "Irina."

Alexander looked at Kurt, looked into his eyes. He had blue eyes. Bright blue. And young. Much too young for the wrinkled face.

He took the box from him, tipped the slides out. Threw them into the stove, a handful at a time. They burned silently and fast.

He dressed Kurt, combed his hair, quickly shaved the patches of stubble that the home health aide had missed. Then he made coffee (in the coffee machine for Kurt). Didn't ask whether Kurt wanted any coffee. Then came the walk. Kurt was already hurrying to the door like a dog who knows the rules and is demanding its rights.

They went Kurt's usual round: *to the post office,* as he used to say, although the way to the post office was only a fraction of Kurt's daily constitutional, but Kurt always used to start out on his walk by saying, *I'm just going to the post office*—and even long after he had anything to post, he went on *going to the post office.* However, the presence of those twenty-seven thousand marks in the wall safe was the result of this pedantry on Kurt's part. For a while he could still remember his PIN, so he had been able to take money out of cash machines, and having nothing else to do at the post office, he withdrew cash. Always in thousands. He once came home with eight thousand marks in his wallet. Alexander had taken the money and put it in the safe. So he was the only person who knew about it.

They went along the Fuchsbau and past the neighboring houses,