

The Hunger of Forgetfulness by Ralf Rothmann

Translated by Alexandra Roesch

My old aunt lived alone near the Goldmann Park in Berlin-Friedrichshagen, in one storey Biedermeier house, whose conservatory she used as an aviary, and the secluded street was usually so deserted that the incessantly chirping parakeets and greenfinches ceased abruptly when somebody did actually approach the fence.

After losing both the chairmanship of the planning department, as well as my proxy, I was transferred from Duesseldorf to the Spree, to take over the site management at the Adlergestell project, and the company kindly allowed me to choose between either lodging with the workmen in the container block or renting a cheap room in a guesthouse in Köpenick. For one thing, the workers shouldn't feel they were being supervised outside of working hours, and for another, anyone who, after twelve hours of slaving away in muck and dust, has ever tried to find peace and quiet in such a container block where the water in a glass on your desk shakes as soon as someone walks across the room next door and where the radios blare in dozens of different languages. Anyone lying in their sagging bed wanting nothing more than to sleep while being forced to listen to the never-ending slapping of cards behind sheet metal walls, to the bickering of cheap whores in the corridors, ordered at the same time as the pizzas, to the sound of men urinating into milk cartons that they then fling out of the window, to the farting and burping long after midnight. After a while, anyone would prefer even a lonely tent on the canal embankment. So I chose the guesthouse.

At least there you were disturbed less. But the room with all its nooks and crannies, a wardrobe full of wire clothes hangers and an obscurely patterned carpet was rarely cleaned; the dust mice under the furniture had almost become rats, and there was no water pressure in the shower. Greenish-black mould sprouted in the fridge in the kitchenette, and the owner or leaseholder, who had hung a German flag above the key hooks and who looked as if his haircut did the thinking for him, the shaved neck, listened to my complaints, but did nothing. I even had to change the sheets myself and when, in the process, I found a used earplug under the mattress and delicately placed it on his counter, he merely said: "That's not ours. It's completely quiet here".

So I talked to Aunt Else. She was my mother's youngest sister and had stayed in the former GDR following my grandparents' divorce – for "reasons of the heart", as she often emphasised. She had rented out the apartment on the first floor of the house, but there was also a refurbished coach house in the garden, where her husband used to have his office, a professor of ornithology, whom I only knew from photographs, and who had died two years earlier, and I sprayed some of the whipped cream from the can onto my cake and realised too late that the expiry date had passed, weeks ago.

My devout aunt, paid-up member of some apostolic community, prayed before every meal and hosted Bible-study groups. My demotion within the company at an age where others assume management responsibility, the foreclosure on our villa, the divorce from Helen and our daughter's drug problems were surely not things she would consider respectable circumstances, lost in thought she fed the birds. But the fact that I liked her tea and cake, occasionally shopped for her and had replaced the odd light bulb seemed to count on the plus side, and so I scraped the cream from my piece of cake and, still chewing, followed her out into the garden. That is one of those sad things about old people's houses; they have often passed their sell-by date.

The slabs of concrete on the path to the coach house were cracked and covered in moss. My new abode behind the hydrangeas had a high ceilinged-room with arch-top windows and whitewashed walls, against which stood a dusty piano, a leather sofa and several cupboards full of books that also housed one or two volumes of the dark blue classics. There was an adequate kitchenette with a camping table, and a spiral staircase granted access to the creaking gallery under the sloping roof, where I banged my head during this initial viewing. There was just about enough space for a wide bed, for my uncle had removed half of the pitched roof and turned it into a terrace with an awning and brick barbeque – a perfect place for a beer after work, as long as you didn't forget the mosquito repellent. Across the roofs and gardens one could see the lake, its wooded banks, where the wild boar wallowed at night and where young people lit their fires at the weekend.

Here I was also on the same level as the flat at the front of the house and I could see my aunt's lodger at his desk almost daily. A gaunt man in his mid-seventies, he normally wore woollen waistcoats or sleeveless pullovers, and the top button of his shirts was always done up. A strange grey aura surrounded him, which was not just due to his hair; the large horn-rimmed glasses with clearly defined reading segments added some grave partial shadow to his face, and his narrow lipped mouth, pulled down deeply at one corner was like a slash through the notion that he could ever have possessed a trace of humour. But the emotional or historical depth of such faces is probably over-estimated; they are often simply expressions of gouty old age or badly positioned dentures.

According to my aunt, Dr Wagner had been a leading employee of the former GDR's foreign trade mission, with focus on South East Asia and was passing his retirement by writing a book about the borough of Köpenick, to which Friedrichshagen also belonged. He displayed iron discipline. When I opened the terrace door in the morning and performed a few stretches, still in my shorts, he was already pounding the keys of his 'Optima' typewriter so hard with both index fingers that it almost hummed.

And when I cast a last glance at the Spree estuary and the Müggelsee before going to sleep at midnight, he was still crouched at his desk, reading with a magnifying glass, and the only change was that the horizontal creases between his eyebrows were a little deeper than in the morning. Incidentally he never reacted when I smiled or raised my hand in neighbourly greeting; he seemed to see through me, and it was only after a while that I imagined that the lowering of his head was followed by a short, barely perceptible raise – but he might in fact just be a correcting his line of vision when he missed a line. Yet I decided to interpret it as a nod. Which it probably was.

One morning when I went over to my car on the opposite side of the road – a dark green Bentley Arnage, a good ten years old, the last souvenir from the good old days, he stood before it and peered through the window with interest. He was wearing a jacket with elbow patches and seemed to be on his way to the supermarket, as he held one of those mutely patterned bags in his hand that are used for shopping around here. I jangled my keys to warn him. Nonetheless, my reflection in the window seemed to startle him. He smiled bashfully, the light blue of his eyes darkening for a heartbeat. "Nice piece," he said and rearranged the hair at the back of his head. "An investment. They also make weapons and tank engines, correct? But you should take better care of the seats. Isn't that ostrich leather?" I shook his hand. "No, no", I said, "just ordinary goat. I actually like the traces of time. And as long as my ex-wife's lawyers haven't decided whether I can keep the car or not, I'm not even going to empty the ashtray". Like many of the old folk in this area, he smelled strongly of curd soap, and given his frail appearance, he had extraordinary hands. They were pale, soft and no longer very strong, obviously, but their size would have done a builder proud. "But you don't smoke" he said, smiling. He introduced himself with his academic title, something I actually find rather tasteless and a bit contrived; it makes me think of my childhood, of the sheriff badges made of straw.

However, when I asked in which field he had completed his doctorate, this was apparently too indiscreet or intrusive; as if to give me more time to realise this, he stared at his cheap shoes for a moment and I noticed that he wasn't wearing any socks. Finally he made a dismissive gesture: "Oh, let's forget it. That was in a previous life."

Then he asked me how I liked it in Berlin, specifically in Friedrichshagen, which he called "our Fritzen hamlet". I liked living in this borough, where people hung their duvets out of the windows to air. I liked the ornate latticework and the cobblestones everywhere, the parks full of old, often huge trees, the unobstructed lake, but he brushed over the bonnet with his fingertips and shook his head. "You can tell the truth, it's alright ... I sometimes find it too stuffy here, too petty-minded, spiritless. But the distances are short and you know who you are dealing with. In old age that's an advantage." By saying this he probably wanted to indicate that I, too, was no longer young; in any case, he winked at me. He turned out to be surprisingly well informed about my work at the Adlergestell, the construction of new apartment towers surrounded by a green belt, where they even had elevators for the cars.

He knew of our problems with legacy waste – the ground was riddled with ammunition – of the estimated building schedule and the amount of the contractual penalties, several million, should we not be on time. And he knew that I was broke. "Oh", I mumbled and ostentatiously looked at my mobile. "So you already interrogated my aunt?" His tight-lipped mouth open, he held his lower jaw with his thumb and index finger, as if checking the position of his dentures. Then he briefly closed his eyes. "I do not interrogate anyone, dear sir. That never was and is not my thing. I had to arrange external trade relations, a tiny part of it." He pointed to my number plate. "Sometimes even in Duesseldorf. A nice place, especially on the Rheinwiesen and in the old part of town. That wonderful beer that you get with the roast chicken and pork tartar sandwiches! Almost as good as our Köstritzer beer. But, to be honest, the people were not my cup of tea. Everything was a touch too gaudy, even back then. Only nouveau riche Russians surpass the bad taste of wealthy people from Duesseldorf, don't you think? – I preferred Duisburg. I liked Duisburg. The people had something honest about them".

It was too soon to be pedantic about this and I took a deep breath. "Oh, they still have that," I said. "Especially when they smash a bottle of Schnapps over the back of your head, at the Corpus Christi fair, for example. And despite all the refinement, it's also so very cosy in 'your' Duisburg, the countless chimney stacks and cooling towers in the aromatic air, the smoking landfills and the brackish canal ... almost as nice as Bitterfeld." The sunspots behind the reading segment of his lenses slipped down his cheeks when he lifted his head. "No," he said decisively. "I must disagree. It did not smell that bad anymore back in the 80s. What's more, I was generally working in the harbour and where there are ships, the sky is bluer anyhow, correct? Where there are ships, there is hope." I stopped myself from asking what the former GDR had traded back then, apart from weapons and dissidents. I presumed that this would only be answered with a pitiful smile or with a reference to Meissen porcelain or optical articles from Jena. Perhaps the confidence precariously balanced on the tip of his chin had lost its foundation, but not the historically correct and in his eyes still applicable idea, just marginally dampened by the Zeitgeist – and that I knew absolutely nothing about it, was presumably proven by my car. I had a hard day before me, three hundred cubic metres of fresh concrete, and I opened the door and sank into the seat. Yet if he found this abruptness impolite, he covered it up well. In the park two squirrels were chasing each other across the lawn, a wild zigzag, making the dewdrops fly. He extended his arm, looked at his watch and said with an expression in which I thought I recognised some of the perpendicularity of his desktop: "By the way, Mr Engineer, you should not be wasting time chatting. You need to get to work!"

We work together with an architectural firm from Mitte, and the structural engineer, who visited the building site every now and again, was at least ten years younger than myself, in his early forties, with no trace of either a paunch or grey hair. He usually wore three-piece suits, without a tie, and when he took off his Budapest shoes and slipped into his wellies in the open car, for a moment I could glimpse his muscular calves. I found it very invigorating that the structural analysis, which in the West was the domain of ever-doubtful spectacle wearers in limp overalls, was overseen here by a good-humoured sportsman, especially as there was a subtle scent of "Allure" about him, and when we lent over the plans so as to discuss a detail, I often moved closer to him than necessary. Without this resulting in a change in his objectivity, he did not move aside an inch, which I, not without reason, interpreted as responsiveness. Sometimes during discussions, he would shift his wedding ring forward a bit and pretend that the skin underneath was itching, and one evening we went out for dinner. His name was Dirk and, despite his dangerously crooked teeth, he laughed an almost dirty, uninhibited laugh and after we had drunk a bottle of Chardonnay and a Schnapps at the bar, it was he who, after our tentative embrace in the car park, followed this up with a firm grasp and said: "Will you show the way?" His wife, an interpreter, was currently working in St. Petersburg, and so he was able to stay overnight and awaken me in a way that Helen had not been able to bring herself to, even when we were young. Afterwards he wandered through the coach house naked, plunked around on the piano and made breathtakingly strong coffee.

He brought me a cup to bed, lit two cigarettes and when he bent down to blow the smoke over my chest hairs, it dawned on me that I had said farewell to love too early on. Bells chimed somewhere. The sun was shining and the swallows were flying high. It was Saturday and we had breakfast outside under the stern gaze of Dr Wagner, who had presumably just eaten his lunch. A toothpick between his lips, he thumbed through a copy of the "*Neues Deutschland*", and Dirk took a sip of orange juice and mumbled into his glass: "Oh ..." When I asked him what that was supposed to mean, he smiled dryly and glanced towards the lake over the rooftops. "Up until twenty years ago, Friedrichshagen was a coveted borough amongst respective officers," he said. A red chapter in itself. They all had boats down there, like the Nazi big shots before them. They all lived in a high rise near the market that became known as the Nazi bunker and the sailing clubs are still full of old Chekas." I told him that Dr Wagner had had nothing to do with the Ministry for State Security and had been in the foreign trade mission, but he gave a scornful grunt. "Yes, yes, you West Germans will still believe what they tell you. Now they all claim to have been innocent bystanders or subversive resistance fighters. But, you know, we have a different take on it. My father was a vicar, which meant that I wasn't allowed to complete my higher education and we often stood at the window, he and I, and looked at the neighbours passing by and counted them: one, two, Stasi. One, two, Stasi. And we were almost always right as it turned out later." Then he pushed away the plates and pulled me into bed once more, where with cheeky humour and elegant abandonment, just like that, he eradicated my silly habit of bringing my expectations down to the level of their feasibility. Is there anything more healing for a man than to find himself to be a good and strong lover?

The following Monday, I had just got back from work and planned to oil the squeaky garden gate, when my aunt beckoned me in and handed me a tray. On it, a terrine of soup, a basket of bread and a bottle of *Köstritzer* beer. As at her age she had difficulty climbing the stairs, she asked me to bring it to Dr Wagner, who was sick. I was surprised. In the morning he had been sitting at his desk as usual, typing, thumbing through books and cutting out newspaper articles, but she shook her head. "Something chronic, not nice."

The old wooden stairs, worn down at the edges, creaked with each step, the smell of soap got stronger and I had barely knocked on the door with the chiselled brass handle when I heard an almost cheerful "Come in!" Covered up to his knees by a tartan blanket, the sick man lay on the sofa in his study and raised his white eyebrows. "Well, this is a surprise!" He closed his book, something by Clara Zetkin. "Room service?"

His breathing was audibly laboured and I placed the tray onto a chair and shook his hand; he had tiny puncture marks on his fingertips. His stained pyjama top was not quite closed; an almost violet scar ran vertically from the hollow under his larynx across his chest and as I ladled some lentil soup onto the plate, I asked how he was. "Oh well," he said. "The old ticker. Already plagued me in my childhood. Now there is better medication ...". He indicated towards a sideboard, the foil strips and packets that lay in front of a row of antique Buddhas. "But time is ticking in all these pills, time that I no longer have. Even though there is still so much to do."

The floor was covered with files, and on the walls hung maps and photos of buildings. I recognised the town hall of Köpenick, its beautiful Gothic brickwork, the fire station in the Bölschestraße and the Forsthaus am See, and remembered my aunt's words; he was working on a book about the borough. I stuffed two pillows behind his back, placed an atlas on his lap and put the steaming plate on top. "And what exactly are you writing, if I may ask? A travel guide?"

He took his time answering. After wiping the spoon on his sleeve, he stirred the soup and I don't know why, once again I perceived this pause to be a criticism. He was probably just hungry. "A what?" he asked, smacking his lips. "Well yes, you could call it that. It's a journey through time, so I am writing a guide to the past. Into the darkest past mind you. Ever heard of the Köpenicker Blutwoche?" Shaking my head, I sank into an armchair and he nodded meaningfully, as if he had already thought as much. "Nothing? Absolutely nothing? Was that not in your history books?" Once again I had to negate, and he palpably relished the terrain of superiority that I thus conceded to him; his tongue pushed out his cheek. "Well, that was a brutal episode, you know. Thirty-three, when the fascists came to power, there was of course already a black list of the undesirable persons and left wingers in the borough, and from the 21st to 26th June, the SA combed street by street and pulled them from their houses. They were not gentle, that goes without saying. There was beating and shooting and those who in their innocence believed they could hide in the police station were the worst off. Even though they were not yet marching under the Swastika, the policemen immediately handed anyone seeking help, injured or not, over to the mobsters. And they gave short shrift." He pulled a bit of gristle from between his teeth and laid it on the atlas. "My father also got killed that week."

Then he tore up a piece of bread, biting the soft bit off the crust. "I am sorry," I said, and he looked over the rim of his glasses. His left pupil had a minute grey spot on it. "I would like to believe you, Mister. But it does make one sad to see that a large part of the nation has no idea of what really happened back then – and therefore does not understand why we did everything possible so that it would not be repeated."

He pointed to the photo of the Köpenick town hall with his spoon. "That's where they were bundled off to; and to the court jail and to various SA Sturmlöcher – provided that they did not refuse. If they did, they were simply massacred immediately, right in front of their wives and children. They were led through the town in long rows, communists, socialists, trade unionists, liberals and also the first Jews, and the bewildered family members walked along on the other side of the road but were not allowed to get closer."

In that hall with lots of colourful glass, where nowadays you get your smart ID card, which once again contains everything for tomorrow's henchmen, they were beaten and tortured with willow switches for days on end; the prison chapel's cross vault echoed with the screams. There are reports according to which the SA people tipped bucket loads of beaten out brains and chopped off fingers, noses or genitals into the gutter, to the dogs.

But none of you want to know about that. We put the culprits on trial, at least those that could still be caught after the war. Many were sentenced to death. But you ... you prefer to listen to the organ grinder when he sings of the endearing Hauptmann von Köpenick."

During these last words his voice had quavered, his eyes became teary, and he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. Then he passed me the empty plate, and the spoon dropped onto the carpet. I had to lump in my throat. "But now you are writing a book about it," I said a little uncertainly and bent down. "That will be an eye-opener for many people, right? What exactly happened to your father?"

Dust and hair stuck to the metal and he plucked at the skin folds around his neck and stared out of the window for such a long time that I felt indiscreet again. But finally he turned his head, held two fingers against his temple like a barrel and rapidly cocked his thumb several times. Strangely he grinned in the process. "And you had to watch?" I asked.

He waved it aside. "I am not as old as all that. My mother was two months pregnant with me; they hadn't even got married yet. But her shock became my heart murmur. Well, then she raised me alone until the end of the war. We had already secretly been learning Russian, when the Soviets were still behind Warsaw. That is why she wasn't raped; we were able to stay in the apartment and we always had cabbage." He winked at me. "You have to be canny, right?"

I nodded, took away the atlas and laid it on his writing desk littered with typescripts. In front of the fax machine stood a bust, barely ten centimetres high, a dirty yellow Lenin with empty eye sockets and a pointy beard like a wedge, and when I weighed him in my hand, Dr Wagner said: "A gift from Mozambique - the socialist one, of course. I think it might even be ivory." He yawned, and his false teeth slipped. Then he motioned toward the beer next to the terrine. "Nice of your aunt, my thanks. But you have it. My blood would foam what with all the medication I have taken." Grinning, he licked his lower lip, a lightning quick movement with the tip of his tongue, and suddenly there was a sparkle behind the glasses. "And who knows, in the end I might also get myself a toy boy for the nights."

I was almost glad about this tone and placed Lenin, who by the way had naked shoulders, back onto the table. "Well, why not?" I said. "That might be good for the heart." But Dr Wagner shook his head. He removed the pillows from behind his back and groaningly sank lower. "The what? You have ideas, young man." With his thumb he tapped against the scar on his chest; one could see the rough puncture marks. "In the Ruschestraße they used to call me chicken. There is no longer a heart here. There are a few wires and tubes, a battery and nothing more." Then he pulled the woollen blanket up under his chin.

Following this conversation, the silence in the gardens, which I enjoyed in the evenings with a glass of Merlot, was no longer the same. Where in the past it had often seemed to try to transform itself into some sort of mystical substance, untouchable and only vaguely verifiable by the fact that the stars seemed to shine a little brighter here than over the city, it now sometimes seemed oppressive, eerie even, as if it were made up entirely of constricted voices. And then I was glad about the sudden hissing of the swans on the lake or the rumbling of a freight train beyond the woods.

More and more often, work gobbled up half the weekend and so Sunday tea times with my aunt became a dear and restful habit, especially as our chats remained an exchange of conventional clichés and good wishes, a "health is of the utmost importance!" in all variations – with her sometimes giggling as if we were talking about something entirely different in an ingenious secret language. In those moments I thought I recognised an almost anarchic or frivolous depth to her auntie-ness, which fascinated me just as much as the discovery that there had been religious book stores in East Berlin, or even a professorship for something as delicate as ornithology. When I took this opportunity to ask her what had gone on in the Ruschestraße, she had to think for a while. "Oh yes," she finally said. "How could I have forgotten? That was the Stasi's outpatient clinic. They even treated your uncle."

I dipped my Streuselkuchen into the tea. "Really? Was he also with the firm?" Her eyes grew wide. "For heavens sake! No, he had a heart attack, his first, and in those days it took forever for emergency services to arrive. So Dr Wagner put him into his Lada and hurtled down there. We did not have to wait at all, he was treated immediately and that probably saved his life. For a while at least. I can't even bear to think of it ... we had to stretch our coffee with pea flour and they had palm trees in the lobby. There was a bar with free sparkling wine and Cappuccino, and the officials could buy Western goods at the kiosk – for East marks, one to one. Why do you ask? Are you building there too?"

Two days later I had something to eat with Dirk in the "Spindel" and when I told him that he had apparently been right with his assumption regarding Dr Wagner, he simply raised an eyebrow. "It's not as if I can see what they did when I look at them; there are enough self-righteous faces in the West too", he said. "It's more that I can see that they and their many thousand civilian informants would do it again any time and that's what's really depressing. Concepts and programmes are always some form of limitation. They switched their brains off back then and continue to live without remorse today. Hollow sacks of skin and bones, completely devoid of feeling. But what the hell; at the end of day they would not be able to cope with their emotions anyway. That wasn't something we learnt back in those days." He clinked his glass against mine. "Come on, drink up. We have things to do ..." "Oh really?" I asked, grinning. "Something important?" He nodded. "Even castles in the air need a statistical engineer."

The summer turned out to be unusually hot; if you didn't pay attention, the cement dried out faster than you could set it. My aunt barely left the house and Dr Wagner also seemed to have deteriorated further. Small oxygen bottles stood on the windowsill, a whole row, and plastic syringes and catheters lay in the rubbish bin. An estate car with the logo "Mobile Health, Diabetic and Wound Care" was sometimes parked in front of the door when I came home from work, and one evening, when I had been sitting at my kitchen table for hours on end and had had enough of the sums and measurements on my screen, I went across the dark yard and knocked on his door. His "Yes?" sounded a little shaky, but then he seemed pleased to see me. He folded back the tartan blanket, sat up and switched on an additional lamp. The pale blue pyjama with the delicate piping was obviously new. "Thank you," he responded to my enquiry after his health and smoothed out the creases on his chest. "As long as I can still complain, everything's fine. Please, have a seat."

I shifted a few books and files from the armchair, and he smiled wryly. Although I had not seen him at his observation spot for a long time, he was fully informed about my visitors. "The candles were burning late at your place last night," he said. "And not only them, I presume. Didn't you tell me that you were married? What are you now, back to front or normal?"

I shrugged and indicated towards the big pile of manuscript sheets lying next to the telephone, held together by a rubber band. "Above all, I am tired at the moment. How is work? Are you making progress with your book, comrade major?"

He pretended not to have heard what I said – or had he not noticed it at all? "In principle, yes, the rough draft is finished," he said and scratched his neck. "But the more you research, the more complex it becomes. I am corresponding day and night regarding the list of the dead and injured and I really don't want to see the next telephone bill. But forgetfulness is a monster with a huge appetite ... the few eye-witnesses still around are over eighty and mostly very ill, and the three or four historians who dealt with the Köpenicker Blutwoche at all don't know any more than I do, and the Westerners even less. My only hope lies with a few comrades who used to work in our archives. And I can promise you one thing; this book will be the first one that lists every victim without exception. I am not making my exit before it's done."

He had shadows under his eyes and the narrow lips were grey-blue, and although I obviously thought him right and admired his willpower – I found the bookish zeal, with which he wanted to transform the hideous into something countable, dubious. After all, I dealt with facts all day long, at best, facts are reality; they may be tough or irrefutable or you simply can't deny them, but in the end they leave you cold. The truth lies elsewhere.

"With all due respect to your list of victims ..." I said. "I would find it far more shocking if you were to write down some of the details you told me about the last time. For instance about the willow switches from the Erpetal, where everyone goes walking on a Sunday. How they are soaked in water overnight so that they were nice and springy again the next morning for the deadly beatings. Or about the cleaning lady who was forced to wipe up the blood of her husband and sons."

Whatever you said and however right it sounded – with the meaningful pause that passed before he gave a response, he seemingly not only wanted to give you the opportunity to recognise your own mistake; in this mental vacuum, you were also meant to feel more stupid than you actually were. He shook his head and tugged at the collar of his new pyjamas. Something seemed to be itching him.

"That would be typical of you," he said. "You turn everything into a television show, don't you? But a person with ideals that mean more than earning money and driving a Bentley, who lays out his life accordingly, do you think that is plucked out of thin air? It is rooted in innumerable people suffering, young man, and every one of them – every single one! – means everything, a catalyst in history." Again he clutched at the back of his neck, this time with both hands. "Damnation, what is this? What have they given me this time!" I leant forward and tugged the price ticket from his collar.

"Thank you!" He unscrewed a bottle of water. "My father, a simple butcher's apprentice, who loved his roses in the front garden, old root stocks, and who wanted nothing more from life than a small chunk of family happiness and a bit of social justice, had to die over there on the Breestpromenade because he was in the union. If I hadn't kept that in sight, I might also have gone over to the West, could be. But I did not want to live in a country where once again the fascists were judges, minister or even chancellor. I wanted to help create a society where such beasts could no longer have a place."

His expression had darkened beneath the furrowed brows; the hand with the water bottle was shaking and his breath came in quiet gasps as he drank. But I too was suddenly angry about a perception of history that got along without self-doubt and in which the words Stalin, Stacheldraht and Bautzen evidently did not exist. I had to think about the practice of execution in the GDR, the unexpected shot to the back of the head, and was just about to begin a reply that would also consider his own past, when some water spilt onto his pyjama top. I was then able to see the scar through the thin material, the dark pink line, and I handed him a tissue.

I am not the type to drive home a point. At the end of the day, everyone probably manipulates their biography to shine golden. I stepped to his desk and looked across the yard. The door and all the windows of the coach house were open and there were no lights on anywhere. Except for the screen of my laptop, parked between the dirty dishes in the kitchen, where the stars rose and fell, again and again. "Time to go, I'm afraid," I said. "Work is calling. Let me know if I can help you, alright? Here's my card next to the telephone. I think I'm quite a good reader; at least my daughter always liked it. And I have a very good secretary who could do some typing for you. It is super quick." He took another sip, eyes closed, and raised a hand, a silent greeting. The fingers were swollen at the joints, and for the first time I noticed his wedding ring.

In the meantime, problems started mounting at the building site. With increasing pressure from deadlines, it became obvious that I am an architect, a man of design and planning, and not of execution. I was not able to choreograph the lumbering ballet of arriving and departing craftsmen, convoys of labourers, movement of earth, deliveries of building materials and churning machines in a convincing way, and the foremens' respect waned – which, of course, did not go undetected in Duesseldorf. My possible failure with this project was part of their calculations, and sometimes I was so exhausted in the evenings that the winding garden path between the hydrangeas seemed never-ending, almost not manageable, and I stayed in the car and stared at my aunt's little house.

In between bulky *art nouveau* villas and designer cubes made of wood and glass, almost comforting in its crookedness, much about it and its solid construction reminded me of the spirit of my student days, when you still talked in human dimensions and the old foremen checked the taste of the earth before they decided upon the depth of the foundations. When you laid bricks layer by layer in a standard format and left the building shell to rest for weeks before plastering them. When you put burning newspaper into newly made fireplaces to see if the flue worked, and left the interior plastering to air for days before putting in the doors and windows. Roof tiles were tapped lightly against one another before being laid – only those that rang lasted long –, clinker bricks were rubbed down with bacon fat after being sealed and bread and salt was buried under the threshold. For you were building for people, for their lives, and not for the investor.

On one such evening, my mobile rang. The number on the display was anonymous and after I had unlocked it, at first I only heard a crackling and gurgling, and I thought of Lara, our daughter, who was studying English in Swansea and who sometimes called me from a telephone box on the cliffs, usually high. I already had her name on my lips but then I saw Dr Wagner in his dressing gown behind the window on the first floor and was shocked by his paleness, its grey severity. His hair was mussed up, and he held a transparent breathing mask to his face and waved me up. On his forehead was a plaster.

My aunt, who was listening to hymns, as she did every evening, gave me a plate of cheese sandwiches and fanned-out sour gherkins for him. His door was ajar, and the window to the garden was also open, and he sat on the sofa, an oxygen bottle next to him amongst the pillows. His glasses lay in front of the Buddha statues. "There!" he croaked and indicated towards the writing desk with a shaking hand. A red light was blinking on the fax machine and the strip of paper that hung down to the floor moved lightly in the evening breeze. "That is solidarity! You can rely on our brothers. The definitive list, you remember? All the injured, all the dead; right up to my father. I told you I would make it. The Grim Reaper can come for me now."

He leant back, the dark blue terry cloth gown slipped, and at the same moment I saw the tube between his knees, I also noticed the smell in the room. The urine bag was in his pocket and although Dr Wagner noticed my glance, he did not mention it. "The only remaining problem is the writing. I just can't read the scribbles anymore," he said, his mouth wide open – the lower part of his dentures was missing – as he gasped for air. But there no longer seemed to be any and he quickly held the mask to his face. Now his voice sounded as if it were coming from another room. "You wanted to help me, didn't you? Would you have this typed up for me?" He turned the valve of the oxygen bottle. "It won't be at your cost."

I made a dismissive gesture, ripped the paper strips from of the machine and carefully tore them into individual sheets, half a dozen. The originals had been typed on the paper of a "VEB Lößnitz, production site Schneeberg," with a mechanically challenged machine that displaced the E, and the ribbon must have been quite worn. The list, entitled Köpenicker Blutwoche, was sorted alphabetically.

Behind each name, in addition to the date of birth, marital status and number of children, it showed the address at the time and, in most cases, underneath, also listed the date of death and the killing method: "Stabbed. Shot. Beaten to death in a tunnel under the Spree. Strangled behind the Alte Försterei. Drowned in the Müggelsee." In the case of those who had survived the week, you could read: "paralysed following the abuse; died in 1968," or "blind as a result of the beatings; died in 1990," or "went insane after witnessing the beating and mutilation of his father; died in a psychiatric clinic in 2002." Every so often there was a short description like "trade unionist, part of the anti-fascist struggle since 1930" or "craftsman, pacifist, author of religious tracts" or simply "social democrat" or "communist".

There were no spaces between the lines, some of which had been transmitted in a flurry of pixels by the old fax machine, with long, black spots in between, and I stepped to the window and held them up against the light. "I can't decipher it all, I'm sorry; it would be better to have the original," I said. "But you should rest now, my dear fellow, your work is done. I mean, at the end of the day such a list would be complete even if it contained just one name, wouldn't it? – By the way, the last name on the list is Uhl. I cannot find a 'Wagner' anywhere ..."

The sick man put the oxygen mask aside and stretched out on the sofa, putting his feet under the tartan blanket; he was looking at the ceiling, at a few brown watermarks, and I was amazed that even now he did not fail to let a reproachful moment pass before giving me an answer. Once again, he tugged at the folds of skin at his throat. "The fact that you are forgetful about history is probably part of your socialisation", he said. "Never mind. But the fact that your memory is already going at your age...poor Germany. Didn't I tell you that my parents were not yet married the day of the tragedy? Radzuweit was my father's name, killed on 25th June. Take a look!"

I sat down on the office chair, took the magnifying glass from a pile of newspapers and scanned the lines again. Dr Wagner cleared his throat, trying to get rid of something. "He liked roses, the rare varieties, but I already said that. He won prizes at exhibitions. His parents' house is still in the Hillestraße, quite pretty. 'Maximised energy efficiency'. Westerners live there now with their computer children. Jewish I think. Not poor at least. They grow organic vegetables and want to start an action group against the airport ... have you found him?"

The cheap fax paper stuck to my fingers, yet underneath the magnifying glass the words and numbers were flowing like liquid. "Yes," I finally said and pointed to the last page, to the handwritten addition 'Further Victims'. "I had overlooked this. Here it says: Emil Radzuweit, born on 4th May 1909, butcher's apprentice. Shot."

He coughed, his head turned red, a dull red, the veins at his temples swelled and he pulled a stained tea towel from between the pillows and spat into it. "My mother told me that he blocked the path when someone was being taken away, a left-wing musician. He was courageous and had a good heart," he said hoarsely. "But the cowards just shot him down. Three shots to the chest. And later they had successful careers over with you in the West."

The wrinkles between his brows deepened. Once again he turned the valve of the oxygen bottle and held the mask to his face. It fogged up and cleared to the rhythm of his breathing, and I got up and looked into the late sky, already lightly purple above the edge of the woods, which a few cranes were crossing. Young dogs were playing in the shadows of the trees in the park. Candlelight flickered in the Uferbar; a sail was taken in on the Spree, a steamer moored at the landing stage. The captain was actually smoking a pipe, and for a moment it was so still that you could hear the bicycle bells in the tunnel below the water. "It says something else here though, Mr Wagner."

When I turned back into the room, it seemed even darker, however, the whites of his eyes shone surprisingly clearly. He raised his head. A note had been faxed alongside the personal details, a section torn from an old newspaper; the columns were still set in Gothic type and the stamp underneath with the year 1946 was in Cyrillic script. "Emil Radzuweit, originally attributed to the left wing, repeatedly attended educational events held by the communist party," I read and turned on the light on the writing desk, moved the lampshade over the thin paper. "Expelled from the union due to repeated fist-fights on union premises, he did however join the NSDAP and the SA in March 1933. Part of the notorious assault group Wendenschloss, where he made his mark through exceptional bravery. On 25th June he entered the apartment of the orchestra musician Alfons Amthor, together with several comrades, injured him heavily and was shot dead by Amthor's brother, who was acting in self-defence. With a Browning FN."

Dr Wagner lowered the mask. The oxygen fizzled into space. In the twilight, his skin of his face with the oval imprint around nose and mouth seemed even paler, and the cheekbones twitched. "As I told you, in the Breestpromenade. You can see the spot from your terrace," he said, gathered the lapels of his dressing gown under his chin and closed his shadow-ringed eyes. "Next to the old garden gate. We often placed flowers there. Wild flowers. We were poor."

An air bubble wandered slowly through the filled urine tube and disappeared into the bag in his pocket, when he turned towards the wall, and I looked at the back of his head for a while, the flattened white hair. His spine was showing through the terry cloth, and his naked soles that poked out under the plaid were cracked and callused, just an old man's feet, yet they did not seem any larger than those of a child to me. With his thumbnail, he scraped off a sliver from the yellowed wallpaper. "He was a handsome chap," he mumbled. "For a while I had a photo, but then I lost it. Misplaced it. Mother always raved about his broad shoulders. Well yes, he had to lug sides of pork and quarters of beef around, so you get strong. That someone like that should be growing roses says something about his character, right? The butcher's roses. Another reason why I stayed here in this state and endeavoured to shape it - the sensitive potential of workers is certainly greater than that of so-called civilised people. They know something of life. They have a deeper longing." He shook his head, swallowed drily and rubbed the wallpaper sliver between his fingers. "Well, its all the same to me, my dear class enemy. History ..."

It became cooler. The sun could no longer be seen, but the shadow of the old Buddha figures wearing stylized topknots or gilded hoods, protruded above the walls right up to the cornicing, and I laid the sheet of paper on the writing desk and the magnifying glass back onto the "Neue Deutschland" and closed the window to the garden before stepping to his bed. He looked round over his shoulder and smiled tiredly, just one corner of his mouth lifting. "Will you type up the list for me?" The warm smell of urine that emanated from him was not actually unpleasant. The plaster on his forehead had come unstuck on one side, and gently, with the tip of my thumb, I pressed it back down. But it came loose again, and he nodded at me and fumbled wordlessly for my hand. There were two wedding bands on his finger.

And that was the night he died. The endless freight trains whooshed through the forests, the lights from the approaching and departing aeroplanes in the distant Schönefeld were reflected in the lake, the cranes called out, and he died without me noticing. Although I had barely slept, despite my exhaustion, and had constantly looked back at his window where the lamp on the writing desk continued to burn.

In the end, the bottle of wine was almost empty and when my mobile woke me, I was lying on the sofa, fully dressed. It was the woman from the mobile nursing care; she had found my business card next to Lenin. Shortly afterwards a doctor arrived and filled out the death certificate and I took the morning off to help my aunt, who was sitting on a camping stool in the garden silently plucking millet, with the formalities. For Dr Wagner had no relatives and there were no telephone numbers or addresses of friends to be found either.

Yet when we arrived at the graveyard in Assmannstraße a few days later, three men were waiting outside the chapel, serious old men dressed in grey windbreakers with a strange aura of pride and sadness, and Dirk nudged me. Their shirts buttoned right up, they greeted us silently and kept their hands clasped behind their backs whilst we crossed ourselves together with the vicar. Even during the Lord's Prayer none of them moved their lips. Chins raised, they looked over the wreaths and memorial stones into the wasteland on the other side of the fence, where thistles grew between the foundations of demolished buildings, and the dead man was barely lowered into the earth and the last blessing spoken, when they turned and left the graveyard. Each of them along a different path.