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The Transfer

By Elle Harvey-Turner

Concrete mountains soar above the pearly plazas, rising from the ashes of the Third Reich, reaching towards the cerulean sky, dusted by the first freckles of pale pink. Silver streets carve into the landscape, winding around statues and arches, as loyal citizens flow through the paths; a young boy can be heard whistling 'Unsere Heimat' as he skips home from his Thälmann Pioneer meeting, the tune drifts through the surprisingly warm, spring air and Max can hear it from his apartment window.

Max shuts the window. He feels uncomfortable and slightly too hot: opening the window did little to alleviate the sticky feeling, but it did welcome a small army of insects into the living room. Max sighs. He walks back over to the television, it is a large, beige box with a 19 inch screen stuck on the front; this sleek design is undermined, however, by the long antenna piercing through it: multiple metals rods held together by a concoction of glue, masking tape and hope, and it stands proudly facing west. Max leans over and turns on the converter.

"...And the goal is saved by Helmut Roleder in goal for VfB Stuttgart..."

Max sits down on the sofa and grins. This is a relatively rare occurrence as he is not what one might call an optimist, he has never really seen the joy in life; he didn't want to die, no, but at the same time he felt that life wasn't all that he wanted it to be. His mother said he was too smart for his own good, but most people came to the conclusion that he was just a miserable person; the type of person that didn't cry when they were born, but simply sighed, rolled their eyes and got on with life. However, Max did have one true love in life, one small glimmer of light in his grey world: football. He lived for the thrill of the game, the roar of the crowd and the absolute ecstasy of scoring a goal; he was the captain of the BFC Dynamo U18s and soon, hopefully, he will be wearing the armband for the GDR team as well.

He found that watching the game was a poor substitute for playing, but it was still a thrilling break from life; Max could almost feel the energy radiating off the players, as he sat, perched on the edge of the sofa watching every pass with a critical eye. Max had always preferred the Bundesliga to the DDR-Oberliga, perhaps it was the players: there was more money in the Bundesliga, or maybe it was the type of game: he found that the Bundesliga suited a slower but more skilled type of gameplay, or it could just be the thrill of-

"You're not supposed to be watching that."

There are some people who Max swears have been blessed with the power of teleportation. One second you are alone in your apartment, and then suddenly, your little sister is standing directly in front of you; her big eyes staring into your soul.

"Frau Brandt says I should break any antenna facing west."

"Well, I say I should break your arm." Max replies. It wasn't his best comeback, but he's hot, sticky and annoyed, and he could not care less about establishing a witty rapport with his irritating little snitch of a sister.

"Max, can you please stop bullying your sister." Max could hear the sound of a door shutting as his mother returned home. Max sighs. His mother must have selective hearing, as it seemed that only he ever got into trouble.

“And can you turn that rubbish off!” His mother had now strode into the room and was fiddling with the converter. The screen flickers off.

“What was that for? I was watching that!” Max exclaims. His mother spins around, giving him a look and placing her finger in front of her lips in a shushing motion.

“What if the neighbours heard you watching Western television?” Her voice had lowered to almost a whisper. “What if the-” she paused, and then she looked around, as if she expected someone to be listening in on her. “What if the Stasi heard?”

“I’m pretty sure the Stasi have better things to do than judge my taste in television.” Max laughed, feeling slightly bemused at his mother’s behaviour. “And everyone watches Western television, it’s not as if-” Max hears his mother sharply inhale. He looks into her large, frightened eyes and realises that she is completely serious; one of her hands is fiddling with her skirt, the other held in front of Max as if to stop him from speaking, he can see it shake slightly like a candle flame caught in a breeze. Max decides to stop talking.

“I bought some salad and cold food on the way home, I thought we could have an early dinner tonight.” His mother stands up and plasters a smile onto her face. “Max, can you set the table? Susanne, you can help me with the salad.”

Dinner was a quick and quiet affair. Susanne made some small talk with her mother about school, and Max sulked about the missed football match. Stuttgart probably won, they were the better team, but Dortmund did have some good players; it was probably an exciting match, probably quite high scoring as well-

“Max, are you even listening to me?” He jolts back into reality. “I think you two should both have an early night tonight- you both look as if you could do with one!” His mother smiles and gives a half-hearted laugh at her own joke, but her hands are clutching the table edge and her knuckles are turning a painful shade of white. Susanne didn’t seem to notice anything wrong, as she hugs her mother, wishes her good night and leaves the room; Max, however, doesn’t make a move to stand up, but instead sits and watches his mother for a few moments.

“You better go to bed as well Max, you’ve got the Dresden match tomorrow- you need all the rest you can get!” She was smiling as she said this, but Max noticed that her eyes never met his gaze. Nevertheless, he stands up, thanks her for dinner and wishes her good night, before he leaves the room and goes to bed.

Max awoke to the feeling of confusion: somebody was shaking him awake. He must be late for school- he must have slept through his alarm again- but no, wait, he can’t be late because it’s still dark outside- it must still be night, so why is he being shaken awake?

“Max, Max, wake up! Maximilian!” He hears his mother say in a panicked whisper.

“What- what’s going on?” Max rolls over to face his mother and rubs his eyes “What time is it? It’s still dark out-” His mother shushes him and slaps her hand over his mouth.

“We’re doing it Max- you’re going to the West.” His mother whispers with a slight smile, but her wide eyes betray her anxiety. “I’ve been able to get in touch with my brother- your uncle in West Germany, and he’ll take you in. He will drive you over the border and his son will drive your sister over”

“What?” Max blinks slowly as he attempts to process this information.

“Max, get up! You have to be quick: the border closes at midnight, I’ve packed you a bag, everything’s sorted. Max, hurry!” His mother frantically gestures to him to get out of bed, her hands shake with a sort of nervous excitement. Max gets out of bed and his mother thrusts a rucksack into his hands. “Come on Max, quickly!” Max follows his mother into his sister’s room; everything feels fuzzy, as if this is the dream and perhaps the dream he was just having was real life? “Put your rucksack on your back, we can’t risk your sister waking up so you’ll just have to carry her.” Max can feel a headache developing, he feels tired and

confused and he doesn't really know what is happening. "Max, please! We don't have a lot of time!" He slings the rucksack onto his back and scoops his sister up bridal style.

His eyes are still struggling to adjust to the darkness as his mother opens the front door and they start the trek down the stairs. The steep concrete steps are not quite long enough for Max to comfortably place his feet on them, causing him to descend the stairs sideways with his feet slightly turned towards his right. He reaches level 8. Every step feels like a marathon, as he slowly extends his leg, feeling for the next step, before feeling confident enough to transfer his weight onto it. Level 7. He feels unbalanced due to the weight of his sister, and he doesn't have enough hands to hold onto the rail for support as he takes step after step into the dark void. Level 6. Each of his, and his mother's, steps echo like gunshots around the stairwell; he tries to quieten his breathing but it still sounds worryingly loud compared to the quiet night. Level 5. Max knows that there is no room for error, walls are thin and people are light sleepers: even the slightest stumble or exclamation could wake his neighbours. Level 4. His sister occasionally stirs in her sleep, and every time Max feels as if he's about to be sick; what would happen if his sister woke up? Level 3. She would probably scream- that would wake the neighbours, definitely, but what would happen to them then? Level 2. They had no excuse for being up at this time- his mother could be captured by the Stasi, maybe they would send her away to some far away town or they would most likely just put her in a local prison. Level 1. His sister would be sent to an orphanage, and he probably would too- or maybe he would also be sent to prison- he is helping his mother with this after all. He can now feel his heartbeat in his throat and it feels like his chest is collapsing in on itself, he tries to concentrate on his breathing: in...1...2...3 and out...1...2...3, and in...1...2...3 and out- he reaches level 0.

They walk out of the front doors of the apartment building, and his mother carefully closes the doors behind her to stop them from slamming. Max feels relieved that he is now outdoors, away from prying ears and thin walls; he knows, however, that the most dangerous part of his journey is yet to come. He follows his mother as she walks, quickly and silently around the back of the apartment building until they see a sleek, black Dodge Charger that would have blended into the dark night, if not for the white Volkswagen Beetle parked beside it. Max notices that they were parked in a blind spot: they are parked close to the corner of the apartment building, so they are not overlooked by any spying windows, but the building shields them from the gaze of the surrounding apartment blocks.

Two men step out of the shadows; the taller one smiles and waves at them before he opens the back door to the Beetle, takes out the back seats and removes the floor to reveal a space about 20cm deep at the bottom of the car. Max places his sister in the space and sighs in relief as the burning pain in his arms begins to recede; he then watches as the man opens his sister's mouth and places a pill in it, before pressing on her jaw to make her crush the pill between her teeth.

"It's only a sleeping pill." Whispers the man as he looks up at Max's confused expression. Max nods in response and watches as the man replaces the floor and the seats, closes the door, gets into the drivers seat and drives away, with Susanne stored under the floor of the car. Max hears a quiet sob from behind him and sees his mother, wiping her eyes with the back of her hand.

"This is a good idea, isn't it Max?" She asks quietly "You'll keep your sister safe won't you? She'll enjoy the West- I'm sure she will- and you'll be able to play football for one of those Western teams you like and-"

"It's a good decision mum, we'll be safe- I know we will. But aren't you coming with us? You can't stay here, the Stasi will arrest you- they'll know you helped us cross the border." Max tries to look into his mother's eyes, but she looks down at the floor.

"I'll cross tomorrow Max, you shouldn't worry." She shakes her head slightly and looks up at Max with a watery smile.

"But mum, what if people find it suspicious that I'm not at the game tomorrow? What if they realise we've left?" His mother shakes her head and places her hands on his shoulders.

"I'll say that you're sick and it's very contagious so no one can possibly see you." She smiles and laughs quietly. "I'll be fine Max, but you have to go- the border will be closing soon." Max looks over at the Dodge

Charger and notices that the seats and the floor have been taken out, the man gestures for Max to step in. Max's mother gives him one last hug and kisses him on the forehead.

"Please be safe Max, I love you." His mother rubs her eyes and looks down at the floor.

"I love you too mum."

He steps into the car, lies down in the back and places his rucksack beside him, he then watches as the man replaces the floor above him. Max can feel the floor just brush the tip of his nose, he feels trapped and mildly claustrophobic. The air smells musty with a slight hint of petrol, and his vision is smothered by darkness. He hears the engine start and feels the car begin to move. What if the Stasi realised that he and his sister were gone? His mother could be imprisoned, she would never be able to cross to the West. Max smacks his head on the floor as the car drives over a pothole. He closes his eyes and tries to will the pain away.

"...and FC Magdeburg has beaten FC Lokomotive 2:1 today..."

The radio must have been turned on. Max lies in silence listening to it, until a thought strikes him: what if they never get the chance to cross the border? His sister could wake up and shout for help, or maybe the border guards will notice the compartments they are hiding in, or maybe he will sneeze or cough or something and the border guards will hear him. What will happen then? He feels the car slow to a halt. They must have reached the line for the border crossing. Max can feel his heart beat in his ears like some sort of ominous drum. He's probably breathing too loudly, it definitely sounds like he is- they can probably hear him from outside the car- he needs to slow his breathing- he needs to be calm and chill and relaxed.

"Alt wie ein Baum möchte ich werden..."

The radio has been turned up; a song is playing on it now. Max feels the car move forward about a car length. He almost wants to laugh at the obnoxiously upbeat song playing, but at the same time his stomach feels as if someone tied it in knots and he has an awful sickly feeling in the back of his throat.

"...Genau wie der Dichter es beschreibt..."

He can feel himself shaking. He needs to stop it- they'll hear him for sure. Come on Max, deep breaths, you feel fine, you're safe, you're relaxed. The car moves forward again. The music stops.

"Documents, please." Max hears rustling from the front seat.

"Yes sure- here they are." Max holds his breath and prays that they will be allowed through. Time seems to grind to a halt as the guard looks over the papers and Max lays in the car, his eyes screwed shut and hoping that the guard will just wave them through.

"Ok, sir if you could just pull over here." Max resists the urge to cry. They should have just been allowed straight through- the guard knows something's wrong.

"Is there something wrong with my visa?" They will find him. He'll be put in prison- his future is gone- they won't allow him to play football for the National team anymore- they might even stop him from playing professionally. In the span of less than an hour his future has gone down the drain.

"No, we just want to search your car- it's not everyday we see people crossing the border at 23:30." Max just hopes that his sister crossed safely. He feels the car pull over. He hears the back door open. He holds his breath and hopes.