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33 Bogen und ein Teehaus

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33 Arches and a Teahouse

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PROLOGUE

The Pripyat, a mighty river of almost eight hundred kilometers, originates in the Ukraine close to the Polish border. Hungry for adventure, it veers into Belarus and sends its roaring waters through the Pinsk marshes, transforming them into a wild lake landscape during the spring thaw. In its final stretches the Pripyat flows back into the Ukraine and empties into the Kiev Reservoir, a few kilometers south of the nuclear reactor Chernobyl. The city located there bears it name, even though it no longer needs a name.

Pripyat only turned sixteen. Its restless ghost roams, as if it still had business to attend to here on earth. Pripyat belongs to the undead, ravaged by an invisible foe in its youth. Its inhabitants left if without saying goodbye, believing they would soon return. All that remained were its buildings. Swallowed up by forest, these buildings never ceased telling the stories of those who once lived there.

Books and notepads still lie open on the desks of abandoned schools. Toys lie strewn in preschools as if they were parts of a puzzle yet to be put together. A visitor might think the children are about to come back and go on playing. Yet everything is covered with a thick coat of gray, sticky dust, like objects dozing away for centuries in a long forgotten attic. Pripyat is a ghost town.

The worst nuclear disaster ever caused by human failure took place here thirty years ago in the former Soviet Union, present-day Ukraine. Some of the locals died immediately from the radioactive fallout. Others died an excruciating death soon afterwards, and many still suffer from serious illnesses. One way or another, all of Pripyat's inhabitants are victims of that nuclear disaster that struck unexpectedly on a mild April night, a deafening explosion followed by silence, never to go away again.

A disproportionate number of young families lived in Pripyat. The city had been specially built for the engineers and workers of the nearby nuclear reactor. They came with high hopes. They were pioneers hand-picked by the Soviet government, whose knowledge and skills, combined with state-of-the-art technology, would give rise to something special. Countless reports attest to the young city's aspiring and upbeat character. Those who had managed to come to Pripyat had accomplished something in the Soviet Union.

That April, residents were eagerly awaiting the coming of spring, whose harbingers had long since been in evidence. A particularly harsh winter lay behind them. Not suspecting that this winter would be the last in their beloved town, they looked forward to the local fair, scheduled to open in May. The giant Ferris wheel with its lemon-yellow cars had been set up

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weeks before, a gentle giant with a thousand arms, each hand holding out a promise to these people racked by cold.

No one suspected that this giant too would be helpless against the unimaginably cruel fate awaiting every one of them. No one suspected that they would flee their town before the Ferris wheel would turn a single time. No one suspected that some of them had only a few weeks or months to live.

When this catastrophe hit the people of Pripyat out of nowhere, bringing horror scenarios of pain and anguish, they weren't the only ones who were scared to death. The claws of this horrible specter reached out towards millions around the world. People wondered if they too were contaminated with radioactivity. Children asked their parents questions that had no answers. Some saw the end of the world approaching. Desperate individuals took their own lives.

Not even the experts could say what this tragedy meant for planet Earth. People around the world drew closer, like a single organism holding its breath and trembling with fear. Deathly silence and universal horror had gripped the entire world.

The entire world – but not me. While the overwhelmingly powerful images of nuclear disaster came through the flickering television screen and were visible to my eyes, an invisible hand in my head seemed to condense them into a single pixel, filing it away among a thousand other insignificant things. My world was small back then. Very small. But incredibly dense. As dense as a black hole that sucks in and absorbs everything in the galaxy around it until nothing more is left.

My world consisted of nothing but my parents, my two older brothers, my little sister, and me, pilgrims from Isfahan, caught up in our own immeasurable disaster.

We had just reached Germany right when the disaster struck. After fourteen months on the run we had finally found a place to rest. We hid underneath a bell jar. It was our safe haven, a small, subsidized three-room apartment in Heidelberg. We shut ourselves off from the world to gather our strength, to finally find time to say goodbye to our homeland and realize what had happened to us.

My job was to make the long journey to school every day on an unfamiliar tram, absorbing thousands of spoken foreign words. I had to learn a new language. I had to discover a new world, the Europe we had long and passionately dreamt of. I had to find a good fairy who unconditionally accompanied me, giving me hope and comfort. I had to understand all the strange things these strange foreigners in this strange land did.

My job was to understand the many letters and bulletins from school, and translate them for my parents. I had to endure all the hostilities and nasty remarks of my classmates, unable to defend myself with words.

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My stomach and I had to get used to the bland and unusual food in the cafeteria. I had to get used to all the pretty-looking but tasteless fruit and vegetables, to the rice that wasn't aromatic, to the many potatoes, and the beverages that were way too sweet.
I had to learn to distinguish between official letters and junk mail. I had to grasp officialese and the German authorities who wrote it, struggling through countless application forms each of which had to be submitted on time. I had to make sure that each signature was in its proper place.
I had to endure the rants of older people who wanted to send us where the sun didn't shine. I had to silently put up with the bothersome but well-meaning pats on the shoulder of older people.
My family and I simply had no time for the disaster of the century.
That was how we missed Chernobyl.

PART ONE

IRAN

From above, Iran looks like a sitting cat, its head turned in our direction, observing us. On its back it carries the gigantic Caspian Sea. Between its front paws, on its soft belly, stretch the massive Zagros Mountains. A mighty river has its source here which the Persians call Zayandeh Rud, "life-giving river." The torrential river shoots a thousand meters down the mountain.
Reaching the plains, it traverses the proud city of Isfahan. The flirtation between city and river doesn't last long, however, because the life-giving river dies out as soon as it leaves the city. Like a wild bee after the act of love with its queen. There the vast earth transforms into a dangerous marsh and a giant salt lake, the radiant white spot where the cat's heart beats.

Nearly a century ago sat a very busy young man by the name of Abbas-Ali in his office. He was a proud Isfahani, and had just become the boss of the largest salt company in Isfahan. Sacks of salt were stacked around his desk. One of the few people who could read and write, Abbas-Ali was well respected by everyone. One day officials of the emperor entered his office and brought him a message. "Esteemed Abbas-Ali, we are messengers of Emperor Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shah of Persia, the Great. On his behalf we declare that from this day on, by order of Emperor Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shah of Persia, the Great, all citizens of Persia must bear a surname along with their name. To this end they will be issued a family register."

The young Abbas-Ali, whom his great grandchildren would one day lovingly call Baba Abbas-Ali, was quite surprised by this and asked politely: "Please excuse my great ignorance and my unworthy question. But what is a family register?"
The officials explained that this is a book that records for all time how each person is called by his first and last name and whose child he is: "This allows us to better tell people apart, oh worthy Abbas-Ali. We therefore entreat you to think of a surname, quickly. We have a long way behind us and an even longer one ahead of us, and the merciless sun is about to set."
Abbas-Ali was not prepared for this, so he had to think about it first. He looked around, pondered the matter with pursed lips, and playfully rubbed his nose. Then he spoke to the weary officials: "Well then, when I look around all I see is salt. My father dealt in salt and my grandfather too. I feed my own children by trading this marvelous commodity. So let me be called "son of the salt," the "salt-born" – Namakizadeh. And since I hail from Isfahan, I would like to be called Namakizadeh-Esfahani."
That's how my mother's name came to be. To this very day she still recalls how her grandfather, Baba Ab-bas-Ali, would tell this story.
The Isfahani call the marsh by the salt lake "Gav Khuni." The water here isn't deep, but dangerous. "One false step and you'll disappear forever into the boggy ground. Just stay away from Gav Khuni! And don't get too close to the river either, because it feeds Gav Khuni," mothers tell their children.
The Zayandeh Rud carried so much water through Isfahan and oftentimes swelled so high that people drowned in it. Again and again you would hear about this or that person whom the river had carried off, only to disappear in Gav Khuni. And yet the Isfahani loved their river. It brought them joy and served as a meeting place. Many a bridge spanning the river has seen countless people come and go over the centuries. The most beautiful of them is the four-hundred-year-old Si-o-Seh Pol, the "bridge of thirty-three arches." A bridge with thirty-three arches in its walls and stairs leading directly to the water. The broad, covered bridge has teahouses inviting you to linger. This is where the Isfahani celebrated, where they strolled, sang, drummed and danced. This is where lovers met when the arches were illuminated from below at night and the water reflected the bridge, glittering like a thousand sequins.
My parents, too, spent many lovestruck hours on this bridge and in the parks along the riverbank when my father, a young doctor, and my mother, a young nurse, met at the hospital.
The bridge was empty in the early evening. Then more and more people came out of their homes, all dressed up and in the mood to promenade. The peddlers saw their hour come. They praised their wares in a loud and uniform singsong. They sang "Baghaliiiiii,"

“Djigaaaaaar,” “Ballaaaaaaaali” – the scent of fava beans, grilled liver, and roasted corn on the cob drove people to the food stalls. And the more the streetlights and the starry sky tried to outshine each other, the louder the joyful cries of the children. Some families strolled together through the night, and grownups bought their children the ice-cream they so craved. That’s when things came to life on the Zayandeh Rud, the “life-giver.” When I was four, the bridge was my favorite spot in the city.

One day my favorite aunt and her husband came to visit us. They had come to listen to the radio with my parents. It was the first time they weren’t playing cards together. When the news was over, my father turned the radio off.

“This shah has really worn out our patience,” he said. He meant the Iranian emperor, who had given himself the title “Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, Shahanshah, the Last Emperor on the Peacock Throne.” The adults were proud of me for being able to recite his full name. On this day they talked a long time about him. But the things they said were bad. I had always thought the shah was great. His wife, Farah Diba, was the most beautiful empress in the world to me, and both of them had spectacular crowns. I had drawn pictures of her and her children, the prince and princess, many times.

“The Shah has taken it too far. He lives in the lap of luxury while people are starving in the streets. Just look at his palaces,” my mother said.

“We have to do something about it. Enough talk. It’s time to act,” said my aunt, and stood up. “Who’s coming along? I’m going to Shah Square right now to speak out.”

My father got up too. “Exactly. It’s now or never,” he said resolutely. Then he looked at me. I was lying on my belly on the floor, my head propped in my hands, listening to the adults. “You’re coming too. Put your shoes on,” he said to me.

“But won’t it be too dangerous?” asked my mother.

“You heard it yourself on the radio. There are families on the square. They won’t shoot at innocent children.”

We walked to Shah Square. I loved this square, because I could look off into the distance here. The square was huge. The younger of my two older brothers had once worked out together with my father that the square must be as big as thirteen soccer fields. I had never seen a soccer field. But I knew a soccer field was very big, my brother having told me. I believed what he said. I could trust him. He was just a year older than me, but he went with me everywhere like an invisible guardian angel. He was lean, nimble, joyful, athletic, and popular. He opposed the injustices around him with deliberation and infectious enthusiasm. He conquered his foes with wit and charm. And he was very clever. I marveled at how he didn’t eat all his sweets at once. I often asked him: “Why don’t you eat them all?”

Each time he answered my question with plenty of patience and understanding: “I’m saving the rest for times of need.”

That impressed me a lot, and I vowed next time to save something of mine for "times of need," even though I didn't really understand what "times of need" actually were.
The square, in other words, that was no doubt as big as thirteen soccer fields, was full of people that day. They chanted words I didn't understand.
"Papa, I don't see anything. I'm scared," I said, tugging on the hand of my father.
He stood there with shining eyes and looked into the crowd. He didn't notice my little hand.
"Papa, can I sit on your shoulders? Please!"
At this point he woke up. "Oh, of course!"
He took me with his large hands and put me on his shoulders, which to me were always like a powerful ship that would never sink.
I smelled my father's hair and no longer felt fear. I stuck my nose in his soft black hair and opened my eyes wide. As wide as the eyes of a five-year-old can get.
I saw a sea of people. I looked right and left and even behind me. People everywhere. No streets, no trees, no cars were visible. They had climbed on top of whatever was on the square. In the trees hung more people than they could actually support. They danced and drummed on the hoods of cars. And time and again a wave went through the crowd. My father and I too were repeatedly hit by a wave.
I recalled our last family vacation, when all of us, my cousins, their parents and our grandparents, drove to the Caspian Sea. We took a ride with a speedboat. The noise of the motor was too loud for my ears and I had to hold them shut. I saw how the water crashed against the tip of the boat and shot down the sides with lots of foam. Then suddenly the boatman stopped the motor and the boat stood still in silence. After a while the waters calmed and the grownups said we should all be quiet so we could hear the tranquil sea. Then the boat started rocking. Each wave that the sea sent against the boat gently raised it up then let it sink again. My big brother said I should close my eyes, and I heard the rocking of the boat at sea. I was sad when the grownups starting talking again and the boatman started up the motor. Now the waves were starting up again. Each wave that hit my father buoyed us up. I closed my eyes. My father let me sit on his shoulders for quite a long time. When I got tired he took me in his arms and carried me home.
That night I dreamt of a singing sea. The waves sang revolutionary slogans: "God alone is great, long live our leader!"

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