

The Aughts by Hendrik Bolz

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[pp. 7-19; 39-50]

Non-Fiction/Memoir, 336 pages

Publication date: February 2022

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Intro

I CAN'T STOP RAVING
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I CAN'T STOP RAVING

Signal left, swerve into the fast lane, pass, pass, pass, signal right, pull back in, get passed, signal left, swerve into the fast lane, pass, pass, pass, signal right, pull back in, get passed. I'm snaking up the A24, the agricultural desert flies past outside. The autobahn is absolutely jammed with commuters, tourists, day trippers, they all want to get out of the dusty, hot city for the weekend. Signal left, into the fast lane, pass, pass, pass, signal right, pull back in, get passed, signal left, into the fast lane, pass, pass, pass, signal right, pull back in, get passed. My destination is an Airbnb on the Baltic coast, more or less my old hometown, where my old buddy Sven wants to throw a laidback weekend-long stag party. Unlike me and many others, he never left Stralsund, instead he did an apprenticeship in the kitchen of a hotel on Rügen, met a girl, and now works as the head chef in a prestigious seafood restaurant. His fiancée is a nurse, a son's on the way, a house has been built, and now, finally, there's supposed to be a wedding. I haven't seen him in ages, it's been thirteen years since I moved to Berlin, thirteen years! Insane how fast time goes by.

Signal left, fast lane, fast lane, BRAKE, a truck veers out, great, this could take a while. As a young German rap fan from the East German periphery, Berlin was always the place I wanted to be as a kid, a mysterious place where everything popped and sizzled, the city that really made you tough, the coolest city in Germany, the place where I wanted to belong so badly. Among the informational materials a university sent to me on the Baltic Sea in 2008 was a pamphlet on a student dorm complex on the lake Schlachtensee, it was supposedly very close to the uni and a room cost just 170 euros. I'd heard about the district, Zehlendorf, in a Bushido track dissing Fler ("Back then in Zehlendorf – you were nothing, man! I made you into what you are! Me! Me!!!") and nine square meters sounded like a decent amount of space, so I packed my duffel bag and moved into that prison cell, which consisted of just a bed, a dresser, and a desk. As soon as I stepped through the doorway I was already on the mattress, the draft was so bad that during my first Berlin winter, a washcloth I stuffed into the gap regularly froze rock-hard. The shared

shower, on the other hand, was air-tight, and, as a result, full of mold; when we told the custodian about the situation, he held out a bottle of cleaning fluid and said, “Get rid of it.” None of it bothered me, for me it couldn’t be spartan enough. Much more annoying were the people in Zehlendorf, on the street, in the bus, in the subway, at the university – they bore no resemblance to my Berlin. This wasn’t the city of gangster rappers, it was a city of fat-cats and students, a city of villas, limousines, yachts, fancy clothes, manicured gardens and stock portfolios. A city of lawyers and doctors on the one hand, and a city of dreadlocks, parkas, canvas totes, hacky sacks, revolutions, committees, and grubby clothes on the other. Capitalists and their rebellious hippie children. Either way: a city of rich assholes.

“HENDRIK, HENDRIK. HEEEEENDRIIIK!!??? HEEELLLLLOOOO!!??? EARTH TO HENDRIK!!!! DO YOU HEAR MEEEEEE?????”

Anastasia shakes my seat from behind, I look at her quizzically in the rearview mirror.

“CAN YOU PLEASE PLEASE PLEASE TURN THE MUSIC DOWN, I’M ON THE PHOOOOONE!”

I CAN’T STOP RAVING

I CAN’T STOP RAVING

I can’t stop raving

I can’t stop raving

“...ugh... Thanks a lot,” she leans back again and looks out the window. “...so I just went to Stefano’s and confronted him straight up, and he was all What the fuck? Ha ha ha, yeah, well, and then...”

The truck chugs along in front of us, putting the brakes on my need for speed; Julian, too, visibly relaxes now and takes the AirPods out of his ears. He’d sunk deeper and deeper into the passenger seat during the drive, more and more tense, shrinking, and I’d barely noticed, I just kept gradually pushing up the tachometer and the volume on the music. Dune, Members of Mayday, Blümchen, Bushido, Sido, Böhse Onkelz, Onkelz, Onkelz, the music of my youth to set the mood for our little excursion, very slowly raising the volume, louder and louder, until your ears rang, until it hit you physically, the bass and the energy, and you couldn’t hear your own thoughts anymore. How many of the Berliner music and media types knew pretty much every Bushido song by heart? Definitely not Stefano.

Especially at the beginning of my Berlin period those types of differences had really bothered me, I couldn't get a foot in the door with the cultural techniques I'd acquired in my youth. Somebody like me, with a bomber jacket, Picaldi jeans, Air Maxes, an artificial tan, and a buzzcut, who was an openly avowed fan of German rap, who scarfed down currywurst and fries at the cafeteria every day and who took the bus to the McFit gym in Lichterfelde during any break between classes, represented a total curiosity to my new college acquaintances. At a party in our dorm, for instance, I came back from the bathroom and some long-haired guy had taken my seat, my partially-drunk beer still sitting in front of him. Told that he was sitting in my spot, he acted bemused, my name wasn't on it, the chairs were there for anybody, and so what if he stayed put, what was I going to do about it, hit him? I stood there, seething and trembling, and suddenly all eyes were on me. To be honest, I really did want to punch him in his smug fucking face, take back my seat, and make sure nobody else would ever pull some shit like that on me again. That's how I had been taught, that was how people got by in my childhood. Here, though, that somehow didn't seem to fit, the other students would laugh or be shocked, what kind of person was I, where in the hell was I from? What always stung the most was that when I started to tell them about the East German aughts, about drugs and violence, about the lack of perspective: "On the Baltic coast? Oh, yeah, I was there on vacation recently," or: "Yeah, yeah, you Easterners want to be gangsters now." There was no common language. I left my half-drunk beer on the table, got a new one, and a short time later did an Irish goodbye. Bunch of losers here.

I CAN'T STOP RAVING
I CAN'T STOP RAVING
I CAN'T STOP RAVING
I CAN'T STOP RAVING

Truck's out of the way, lane is clear, GAS GAS GAS, signal left, into the fast lane, pass, pass, pass, signal right, pull back in, get passed, signal left, into the fast lane, pass, pass, pass, signal right, pull back in, get passed. We reach the highway interchange at Wittstock, the autobahn splits, Hamburg one way, Rostock the other, and suddenly it's empty, now it's only the real people on the road, we're nearly there. Intuitively, without the others noticing, I put the song on repeat and turn it up using the steering wheel controls.

I broke off my studies at the Free University not long afterwards, finished a different degree instead, and over the years, step by step, shed my stranger anxiety and soaked up the big city: May 1 in Kreuzberg, Fête de la Musique in Mauerpark, techno parties in derelict buildings and squats, stealing bottles of liquor from house parties, puking in filthy bar bathrooms, falling asleep in college seminars, working at a call center, as a ticket-taker at the Olympic Stadium and Max Schmeling Arena, as a server at the Ritz Carlton and the Adlon, taking leisurely walks in Grunewald, strolling through long museum corridors, currywurst, Grill Royal, hipster music parties at Prince Charles, standing around at rap concerts, starting my own rap group, performing at concerts, small shows at first, then larger and larger ones. I've seen a thousand trends come and go: skinny jeans, colorful tattoos, long beards, horn-rim glasses, ironic streetwear and purposefully bad-taste clothing, bomber jackets, high fashion. Soon enough I knew the city as well as you could, had good friends here and a story associated with every street corner, I felt at home, had arrived, a true big-city kid. It was all too easy to suppress my background.

Then came 2015 and the so-called refugee crisis. Rightwing populists celebrated their first few successes, refugee housing centers were attacked, Facebook flooded with hate. Something surfaced that I hadn't seen coming at all, and it really hurt. In my leftie West German bubble a new image, a new meme, or a new scathing comment popped up by the hour, it seemed, and the entire region was condemned in popular satire magazines; it made my entire body twitch and itch, imperceptibly at first, then ever more intensely. When suddenly it was said that the East needed to finally get its shit together, otherwise they might as well put the Wall back up or just drop a bomb on it, should never have taken in all those ugly, unemployed backwoodsmen in the first place, I suddenly felt targeted, too, felt like a stranger, separated out and rejected, and felt compelled to defend my old home turf. My magic urban world developed deep fissures, I was confused, offended, and simultaneously ashamed – because I also found what was happening abhorrent, it scared me and it reminded me of something I'd carefully buried, something waiting impatiently in the depths of my cerebral cortex and my gut to be addressed.

COME AND TAKE A TRIP WITH ME
TO A LAND WHERE LOVE IS FREE
FOLLOW ME INTO THE LIGHT
EVERYTHING'S GONNA BE ALRIGHT!

Suddenly I notice I can't keep my spittle down properly. I nearly choke. Something tightens in my throat. I take the bottle of water from the pocket on the door, gulp some down, and leave the open bottle between my legs. Pass, pass, pass, pass, pass, pass, pass. Let's just get there!

Time and the road fly by, I barely register the promotional signs at the state border saying "Mecklenburg-Vorpommern does a body good" and "Welcome to the land where you'll want to live," and suddenly we're already at the exit for Kavelisdorf. Somewhere around here I went to summer camp as a teen, just before I started high school, which is twenty-two years ago now. It feels as if I've lived two completely disconnected lives.

Zugezogen Maskulin, the name of my rap group, references previous groups that included the rappers Kool Savas & Takloss, and Fler & Silla: Westberlin Maskulin and Südberlin Maskulin, my old heroes. While we put out albums, were celebrated or decried as critical darlings, and climbed the pop charts, the topic of East Germany wouldn't let go of me, I went down a rabbit hole I haven't managed to get out of to this day. I rummaged through the history of the fall of the Wall, eastern Germany in the 90s, through my own childhood experiences, dug into the DDR, the later years, the earlier years, and whenever I thought I'd fully explored a room, I found a doorway to an entirely different corridor. This history filled whole buildings, no, whole cities. I rummaged through the Soviet Union to Stalin, Lenin, then back to Hitler, even further back to Prussia, and then all the way back to the front again, to my own youth, my northeastern aughts. Soon it became clear to me that it wasn't normal that, for instance, nearly everyone was unemployed, that rightwing extremists set the tone, that nobody ever called the police when something happened. That along with many other kids of my generation I had been born into an exceptional circumstance, had grown up with experiences that differed dramatically from most West Germans of the same age. For far, far too long it had been said that there wasn't any difference anymore between Westerners and Easterners of our age, that nobody born in 1988 could possibly feel "East German" simply because, like me, barely anyone talked about it.

Now the topic seemed to pop up everywhere I went, including, among other places, at a high water mark of my career: our performance at the Brandenburg Gate for festivities surrounding the 30th anniversary of the fall of the Wall. We performed the satirical antiwar song

“Endlich wieder Krieg” – “War Again at Last” – and shot plumes of smoke out of our weapons until the stage was nothing but a swirl of white fog. In the audience sat Angela Merkel and Frank-Walter Steinmeier, cameras from around the world were recording the spectacle, from the mouths of the 60,000 guests came loud boos – and it was the greatest feeling in the world. The republic had made a bit of progress in the meantime; effort was made not to put on another dull celebration, and to allow critical voices to have a say within the framework of the anniversary. Also, by now it was generally understood that, in the East, resentments existed that wouldn’t be fixed by just continuing to assert that the topic was over and done with, enough already. By now it had become clear to me that there was a huge lack of discourse, and, in order to move forward together, people would need to finally start a conversation. And that to do so, they’d have to tell their own stories.

Me, for instance, I come from the East, and not Berlin’s Friedrichshain or Prenzlauer Berg districts, not Potsdam or Leipzig’s Connewitz quarter. Nope, another East, on the edge of Germany, where you couldn’t even pick up Western TV stations during DDR times, a valley of the clueless in Vorpommern. I come from the beautiful Hanseatic port of Stralsund, known to average Germans only because of the great vacations you can take there, maritime museum, aquarium, world heritage sites, brick Gothic architecture, the pirate Störtebeker, Wallenstein, fish sandwiches, harbor cruises. Only a handful of tourists mistakenly stray into my old neighborhood, Knieper West, where I grew up in a complex of apartment blocks originally built to house 20,000 DDR residents.

My story and that of my forefathers plays out in East Germany, it’s there, in Leipzig, that the DDR threw me into the world on its deathbed, in 1988, just as the weekly Monday peace demonstrations at the Nikolai church were steadily attracting more participants. It was there, in a society in upheaval, that I came of age, at a time that exacted something from the new states and new citizens, pounded by the chaotic collision of two systems, with all the depredations and distortions that came with that: coldly crushing processes of transformation, a vacuum, anomic situations, rightwing violence, deindustrialization, empty factories, scrub grass growing over rusty train tracks, elbows flying, individualization, social disintegration, a sudden glut of drugs, vestiges of dictatorship, political grief, resignation, declining birth rates, gangster rap, rural ghost towns, mass unemployment, devaluation, relegation, shame, debt, silence, silence, silence.

JUST TO GO AND TAKE MY HAND
I WILL SHOW YOU PROMISED LAND
STAY WITH ME IN PARADISE
SO OUR FUTURE CAN BE NICE

“Wow, Julian, look, how pretty! Why don’t we live here?” Anastasia whipped out her phone and started to take pictures of the landscape. Left and right endless expanses of green fields, spanned by a lustrous deep-blue sky, reminiscent of the famous Windows green fields wallpaper except for the gigantic white wind turbines planted everywhere. More and more of them, an entire army, soon there’d be more turbines than residents in Brandenburg and Mecklenburg-Vorpommern. While in the West there are more people than ever before, in the East the population has dwindled to levels not seen since 1905.

When I mentioned my plans for the weekend, my buddy Julian had immediately been up for it, and wanted to come along at all costs. Picturesque nature, take a break, go swimming, get some sun, take walks, grill out, drink with nice people in idyllic M-V, leave the big city to its own devices; it sounded so enticing that soon his girlfriend, Anastasia, signed on as well. I made sure not to show my posse the pictures of the party Sven and the others had posted on Facebook yesterday. The catch in my throat was slowly getting worse, at this point I couldn’t even get water down, I had to spit it back into the bottle, and I wished we would just finally arrive.

It’s 2021 and there’s still something I can’t shake, no matter how many skins I shed I cannot wipe it away, something that sits impatiently awaiting to be addressed. But what is it exactly? Beneath the memories of endless days at the beach, Störtebeker festivals, the magnificent town square, of boat trips, vacations, soft ice cream, sunscreen, plates of seafood, and chalk cliffs, there’s another part of my youth still buried. A part that I didn’t want to talk about anymore at some point and which nobody really asked about, another Hendrik, a dark stain, hastily hidden, papered over, covered with makeup. A place where freezing rain spatters against dirty windows, blank faces stare into space, harsh words are seared into psyches, sneering laughter rings out. A place with overflowing ashtrays, the clink of empty beer bottles, where a bong tips over and putrid water seeps into the carpet. A place that leaves a chemical aftertaste in your throat, where hardened fists slam into defenseless bodies, left for dead after a fight, a place with trashed playgrounds, blood on the padded ground, dulled children’s eyes, cracking bones, emergency room lights. With the smell of shit from the surrounding fields, ugly apartment blocks painted in

bright pastel colors, bomber jackets, screeching seagulls, bells ringing out in the harbor, herring heads, rumbles of thunder, storm surges, blacking out.

“I’m going get off at the next exit, I need to take a piss,” my voice echoes in my head.

It’s 2021, 31 years after reunification, thirteen years after my move from Stralsund to West Berlin. It’s 2021 and there’s still something I can’t shake, no matter how many skins I shed I cannot wipe it away, something that sits impatiently awaiting to be addressed. It’s 2021 and, to me, East German stories are the most fascinating in the world.

Here is mine.

[...]

Huffing Gas

Psssssshhhht.

Tino captures the gas from a lighter in a plastic bag with “Markant” written on it. When the store had opened in our neighborhood, on Women’s Day in 1969 under the name “Supermarket 8th of March,” it was considered a showcase of modernity. Groceries, household utensils and appliances, drug store items, stationary, toys, everything under one roof, the largest and most modern store in the entire northern region of the DDR. The housing blocks of Knieper West had been built earlier, on formerly green pastures, to address the population growth being spurred on by the flourishing port. Hundreds of modern buildings containing 8200 apartments in all, with central heating and hot water instead of coal ovens and bathrooms in the hall. Along with the apartments came schools, daycares, and pubs with names like the Watering Hole, the Temple, Beer Bar, and Stralsund City. Here engineers lived side by side with handymen, cleaners, and teachers – socialist serial housing for about 25,000 people, with no social segregation. It was a model of successful urban development, anyone who managed to get an apartment here had lucked out. In 1994, nearly one in four East German residents lived in these

types of housing blocks, whereas in the West it was just one in sixty. The housing shortage in Stralsund was serious, five thousand individuals and families were already on the waiting list, Knieper West was quickly filled and the Supermarket 8th of March pulsed with life. During my childhood, a few decades and a different system later, most of the people shuffling down the halls were beige retirees whom we deftly sidestepped after our shoplifting raids, our pockets stuffed with stolen goods. Sometimes a lonely young skinhead in an oversized white apron was stocking the shelves. Apparently he had the misfortune to still have somebody looking after him and who must have convinced him to take this apprenticeship, and as a result he couldn't get drunk with his friends every afternoon.

Rain drizzled on my buzzcut hair. Tino paused, and with his hand clenching the bag shut, he held it up to eye level to check it out, shook it back and forth a little so the condensed gas at the bottom collected in a tiny puddle. "Needs more."

The bustling consumer life had shifted years ago to the big shopping center on the edge of Knieper West, beyond the woods known as Strelapark. For a long time after the fall of the Wall, people just had to make do, but then in 1995, finally, one after the next came Douglas, Intersport, Spielemax, Nanu-Nana, Media Markt, and, ultimately, a bit later, but most important of all, the crowning jewel, the beloved family restaurant with the golden seagull symbol: Stralsund's very first McDonald's.

Before that, I'd only ever had a chance to taste the magical American cuisine on rare trips to the beach in Warnemünde. Every time I rocked back and forth wildly in my child safety seat, scanning the horizon as soon as we got onto the Rostock autobahn, and screamed with delight when I glimpsed the auspicious logo, talisman of my squeaky colorful TV cartoon world. A few kilometers and a few minutes later, I was enjoying the flavor fireworks of my Happy Meal and was happier than ever as we drove past a field of sunflowers.

"That's enough, man, are you trying to kill me?" I rip the bag out of Tino's hand, hold it up to my mouth without hesitation, inhale and inhale, the bag inflates and deflates in front of my face, inflates and deflates, inflates and deflates, I get dizzy and suddenly my head feels pleasantly cool, my body tingles and becomes very light. The others stare, amazed because I'm so bold,

waiting expectantly to see what happens. I feel great, take the bag away from my mouth, let myself fall backwards onto the outdoor ping-pong table and stare dreamily at the gray expanse hanging lazily above our housing blocks. It hangs so low; if I were to stretch, surely I could touch it...

And then it's already over.

Stralsund followed a classic East German post-Wall path: in the years before the Wall fell, the population topped 75,000 at its height, afterwards people couldn't leave the city fast enough. In the historic town center, rain still leaked through the dilapidated rooves, the former glory of the old buildings couldn't overcome their structural problems. A lot of Stralsund residents moved to Rostock, or straight to Hamburg or other places in the West, first and foremost young women and recent graduates looking for career opportunities. The drop in the fertility rate after the fall of the Wall, when the annual number of births in the East German states halved, did its part, too. The city had already lost about 15,000 residents in the aftermath of 1989, and Knieper West slowly became empty and gray. The facades of the apartment blocks looked like a crazy quilt of pastel-hued plaster and gray washed-out concrete, and, in between, the aging streets. Grumpy figures leaned out of windows on pillows and cursed when we talked too loudly or played soccer among the laundry lines in the yards. An initial few families had built themselves houses in the surrounding countryside, the housing blocks were looked down on, and social segregation was in full swing. My daycare, my kindergarten, my primary school, my after school clubhouse – everything had been shut down. Boarded-up buildings, orphaned, vandalized playgrounds, sandboxes filled with weeds, Keep Out, there were simply no children anymore. Instead, retirement homes mushroomed, sometimes making use of the already existent vacant spaces. Every morning an army of sludge-colored zombies streamed out of all the entryways and into buses and took up every seat on their way to doctor's appointments, filled the space with a pungent cemetery scent, looked disgustedly at the remaining youths, the living and lighthearted.

"Your turn!" Tino nods to Basti. "Or are you still too scared?"

The massive high-rises cast long shadows, above us the seagulls screech, paint peels off the playground equipment, revealing the dark brown rust beneath. The four of us have come to the playground after school. Me, Tino, and Basti and Pavel, who are also in our new high school,

also live in Knieper West, and play for the same soccer club as Tino. Both of them have short, blond hair stood up with gel. Basti is a bit smaller and very athletic, there's not an ounce of fat on him, just muscle, Pavel on the other hand is almost as tall as I am, but a little fat, and his ears stick out. His father is the coach at the soccer club, he always tosses out cool turns of phrase.

"I'm not doing that shit." Basti takes a drag of his cigarette.

"Why not, because you're a homo?" Without waiting for an answer, Tino turns away and taps the bag questioningly against Pavel's chest.

"Nah, my skull is still buzzing."

"The only thing making noise inside me is my stomach." Tino hops onto a bench. "Okay, I'll just have to show you pussies how to huff gas properly."

Day after day the old folks grow more silent, move more slowly and more hunched over, their utopia, their life's work, crumbling, rejected of by their offspring. cursory greetings on the sidewalk, dreary conversations about kids and grandkids, unemployment, money troubles, relocation, illnesses, conversations that flag mid-sentence, no energy, no desire. "Wouldn't have happened in the old days." Tired eyes slinking home. The only adults visible on the street who showed anything like a lust for life are the "winos," the "dropouts," who, unshaven, in jeans jackets, were already raising their glasses to another day of freedom as the sun came up.

If you ignored the over-staffing of various operations, something referred to as "hidden unemployment," there was universal employment in the DDR. Under the constitution a "right to work" existed, based on the tenets of Marxism-Leninism, according to which humans could be liberated from animality and form more progressive societies through work. In accordance with this, every citizen received a job and with it a central point that anchored you solidly in the social structure through collective undertakings and organizations. The other side of the coin was the "duty to work," which was also enshrined in constitutional law, according to which anyone physically and mentally capable of it was obliged to work. Those disinclined to work were subject to paragraph 249, the so-called "asocial paragraph," which for repeat offenders could be punished with up to five years in prison. Not working, begging, prostitution, and homelessness were considered anti-socialist parasitism, and the single largest segment of the prison population during the DDR consisted of those convicted of failing to work. The origins of this law could be traced back to Prussia, and the Nazis later established the basis for imprisoning and even killing those deemed asocial. In the year 2000, various rightwing extremist youths in Mecklenburg-

Vorpommern latched onto this tradition and beat to death four homeless people. After Sachsen-Anhalt, M-V had Germany's highest per capita rate of rightwing crime.

Pssssssssssccchhhht.

Tino fills the plastic bag with gas, way more than before, he doesn't seem to want to stop. He keeps holding the bag up to the bright cloudy sky, there's a serious puddle already sloshing around the bottom of the bag.

"Do want to die? Let some of that out!" I reach for the bag, but grasp only air because Tino spins away from me.

"Ha ha, don't shit yourself, this is nothing. Yesterday with Kramer we did at least twice as much each time."

"Ooooooh, you and your Kramer are just the coooooolest! Why don't you let him fuck you up the ass?" Basti snorted and spat in the direction of a seagull that had landed and started picking at the tin foil we'd tossed on the ground from our lunches. "I'm not going to help you when you get fucked up, that's on you."

Even though so many people had already left the city, the unemployment rate at the turn of the millennium was still over 20 percent, putting it just ahead of Greifswald, Rostock, Neubrandenburg, and all the other municipalities in M-V – and double the national average. The centerpiece of the city's industry had always been VEB-Volkswerft, for a while one of the largest export companies in the country, at times producing a ship every ten days, mostly for the Soviet Union, and alongside the engineers, shipbuilders, and party secretaries, an additional eight thousand ancillary workers – metalworkers painters, electricians, carpenters, cooks – also found work. As it was put in "Der Weg nach oben," or "The Way Up," an official 1950 documentary made to mark the first anniversary of the founding of the DDR: "Just as according to plan new factories have come online, so, too, have new industries been created: our shipyards. On thousands of pilings set down in the Stralsund swamp, the Volkswerft has taken shape." And: "It wasn't a shipyard in the traditional sense. Here ships are produced on a conveyor belt. Better to expend a hundred drops of sweat for peace than to expend one drop of blood for war."

Forty years later, the introduction of West German democracy had turned everything on its head in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern, just as it had in the rest of the former DDR. Bases of the

National Volks Army had been dismantled, the subsidized fishing and agriculture sectors collapsed, and the once state-controlled tourism industry couldn't keep pace with western standards, meaning the number of annual overnight stays shrank drastically. In Stralsund, for instance, the creamery was sold off to a Dutch company and moved, and things like the sugar plant, the coffee roastery, and the vinegar and jam factory were all shut down. The shipyard on the Baltic, unlike most other DDR industrial facilities, was at least lucky enough not to be dismantled. Instead, with great effort, accompanied by heated debate, and to the displeasure of West German competitors, it was saved and slated for privatization. Under the auspices of the Treuhand, the party apparatus was dislodged, the facilities were overhauled, workers over the age of fifty were laid off with small severance packages, and, thus cleaned up, the Stralsund shipyard was sold off to the Vulkan Group, based in Bremen.

Tino has been huffing on the bag for ages now, in and out, it inflates and deflates, inflates and deflates, the big Tino Show. Basti rolls his eyes, goes out of his way to demonstratively throw his backpack onto his back, and starts to roll another cigarette. The bag inflates and deflates, inflates and deflates, inflates and...

"Uh." Suddenly Tino groans quietly, the bag sails from his hand, he looks directly at me for a second, face as white as chalk, eyes bright red, then he falls backward onto the damp spring grass.

The Bremen-based Vulkan Group went bankrupt a few years after the purchase of the Volkswerft yard. Seven hundred million marks of public subsidies provided to the company, earmarked for the East, had been used to cover their own budget gaps. Five hundred seventy million intended for the Stralsund shipyard were now lost forever. The workers protested, closed down Rügendamm bridge and with it access to the ferry port, causing kilometers-long backups of trucks heading to Sweden, Finland, and Lithuania. The shipyard reverted to the Treuhand, and the entire procedure started over again. This time it was decided the shipyard had too many employees and that all workers who weren't directly involved in the assembly of ships would be outsourced from that point on. Painters, electricians, carpenters, at after school us kids argued about whose fathers had been hit hardest during the latest wave of layoffs. The operation, with its one thousand two hundred remaining workers, was able to be sold to the Danish company A.P.

Moller Maersk. Production ramped up again and a few of the recently cut workers had the dubious luck to be hired back to their old position, this time through a subcontractor and for a fraction of their original wage. Of the original 34,000 jobs at the Baltic shipyard, just six thousand five hundred were preserved.

“He’s just faking it! Let the idiot lay there!” Basti’s still calmly rolling his cigarette, I lean down over Tino. His eyes are closed, his face white in a way that can only be bad, and it doesn’t look to me like he’s faking it.

“Way to go, Tino, you got us, but it’s time to go!” No reaction, not even a twitch.

Basti: “TINO YOU ASSHOLE GET UP RIGHT THIS MINUTE!!!” No reaction.

I lean down closer, put my ear to his face.

“Hey, I don’t think he’s breathing!”

Basti comes over and kicks him. No groan, no movement.

Pavel bends down now, too, straining to hear Tino’s breath, immediately noticing the color of his face.

“He’s really not breathing...Fuck, what are we going to do now?”

“He’s just fucking with us!” Basti wants to believe this, but he doesn’t seem so sure himself anymore, either.

“HEY, TINO! YOU OK? WAKE UP!” I smack his white face, but again no reaction. So it’s really happened. Since elementary school the teachers have been warning us about huffing gas, apparently some kid in the area had died of it. It can all be over in an instant, one minute it’s all a laugh, ha ha ha, and then brain damage and death.

“What should we do now, man?” Pavel looks around worriedly, but there’s not a soul anywhere nearby. Basti throws down his backpack and jacket, ready to sprint off.

“Keep trying to wake him up, I’ll go to the phone booth.” Even if an ER doctor is able to save your life after huffing too much gas, according to our teachers you’ll still have brain damage for the rest of your life.

SMACK SMACK

Before Basti can run off, two hands shove me and Pavel in the back, knocking us from our squatting positions to the wet ground.

“GOT YOU!”

Tino, the bastard, is sitting up, smiling at us.

“Fuck, you should have heard you guys: WAH WAH WAH, WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO NOW, WAH? What a bunch of suckers. You were practically crying, ha ha ha!”

Basti: “Shut your mouth, you piece of shit, I knew the whole time, you stupid fuck!”

He jumps onto Tino and they wrestle in the grass. Tino quickly gains the upper hand, sits on top of his smaller opponent, holding his arms down with his knees and smacking him in the face.

Smack. “Go ahead and cry!” SMACK. “I’m going to go up to my parents’ place.” SMACK. “Steal smokes and beer.” SMACK. “And then I’m going to Kramer’s.” SMACK. “I would love to invite guys you along.” SMACK. “But you’re too embarrassing.” SMACK. “Little fucking children, crybabies, pussies!” SMACK. “Better stay home with your mommies!” SMACK.

Then he hops up, grabs his backpack and calmly trudges off, Basti shouting after him:

“FUCK OFF, YOU LUNATIC, I HOPE YOU FUCKING CROAK THIS AFTERNOON!”

Tino turns around, does a little dance with his middle finger raised, then makes a motion with hips like he’s fucking, and then he’s gone.

“Asshole,” “Fuckface,” “Piece of shit,” we roll cigarettes, mine looks like a wrapped piece of hard candy, and after two drags I’m already at the filter and it crackles loudly. We say our goodbyes, I take my Gameboy out of my bag and divert myself with Pokémon while I stumble through the apartment blocks, dizzy and sweating.

[End of Sample]