

LEVIN AUREL

The Last Fox

NOVEL

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Agriculture is highly mechanized. Drones and robots manage the weeds, while massive machines handle the harvest. The cities aren't much different: meat comes from labs and homes are air-conditioned. There's hardly any untouched nature left, and it seems that no one even misses the animals — at least, that's what Paris thinks. But what does he know? He's just a simple boy from one of the last farms in the country, who spends his free time hanging around the abandoned houses in the village, watching insects (the ones that survived) and selling his blood in the city. Oh, and he races (on a rusty bicycle) with the authorities, particularly with the nasty Schmidt, who has nothing better to do than drive around the district looking for trouble. This is Paris' life, until one day, everything changes.



Author

Alexander Levin Aurel was born in Northern Germany in 1993. He comes from a farm and has a master's degree in agriculture. That's all you need to know for this book.

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The creatures were woven together in a web.
If you cut one thread, the others would break one by one.

act 1

Half of my scars comes from people
and I have forgiven them.

Chapter 1
3295 Days

I woke up in the middle of the night. The window was open. It was quiet outside. I liked the silence. Usually. In the moonlight, I could see my brother and sister. They had snuck into my room and were lying next to my bed like a couple of puppies, on a thin frayed rug that they took with them everywhere. Inseparable, they were bundled up like two balls of yarn, covered with a small towel, their feet poking out.

When I was their age, the nights still carried the sound of crickets and owls, nightingales had nests in the bushes by the woods, frogs lived in our pond. They had never experienced it. The music of the animals had become less and less frequent until it had died out.

It had now been 3295 days. The last owl had died in a zoo six months after my eighth birthday. It had been a barn owl, snow-white, with a heart-shaped face and small round beady eyes, which had sounded more like a canary. Its name was Alba, the white one. *Tyto alba alba*, as it was written in my book, on yellowed paper, marked with a little red cross.

I had told my siblings about her. Bo and Luna imagined Alba gliding silently through the night as she hunted for mice. Because I didn't have the heart to tell them the truth. She had spent her life in a cage behind narrow bars, opening her wings only when a dead mouse was held in front of her beak for the visitors who passed by, clapping their hands.

My memory had faded. There were days when I wasn't sure if I'd ever seen her, or if it was just a story I'd told so often I believed it to be true.

I got out of my bed. The woodshed where my father kept his rusty garden tools was overgrown with flowering grass, as were the greenhouses. The trees at the end of the meadow

looked like sleeping giants who had watched everything and yet had been unable to do anything when our world changed forever.

As I lay down next to Bo and Luna, I listened to their breathing. It was shallow and punctuated by a few grunts that sounded like a tiny concerto. They calmed me down. Luna pulled my arm closer to her.

She mumbled something and turned toward me. "Pumpkin..." I heard. Surely, she was dreaming again of living with us inside a pumpkin, surrounded by a fence made of pumpkin seeds. Last year they had helped my father with the harvest.

Then I heard a rustling sound. It could be a rat. They had survived. Green poison baits that looked like sweets had been put out in many places by the rat control service after the last dogs and cats had died, until the first small children were poisoned. Sweets were expensive, at least if you had nothing else to eat.

I fell asleep again.

When I woke up, my room was empty. I was lying on bare oak floorboards that had survived looting, two fires and woodworms as big as fingertips. Next to me was a bowl my mother had painted herself, three blue swallows, with five defrosted blueberries. Bo and Luna managed to pull the rug out from under me every time without me noticing while sleeping, and then tried to soothe me with some fruit. The floor was hard, and yet they slept on it every night. When I sat up, my bones cracked.

Everything in my room reminded me of animals. An old blue plaster was gathering dust on my cupboard. A photograph of me as a toddler with a chicken in my arms hung on the wall. A real cow horn lay on my desk. Next to the shelf filled with animal books was a microscope. I had taken it from my old school after it had closed. There were also numerous boxes with preserved butterflies, small rodents, moles, a snake, spiders, a titmouse and a sparrow that I had found in

the containers behind the sports hall. It looked like Frankenstein's laboratory – only less alive.

Most of the schools had been closed. The few children who still lived in the countryside were picked up by buses or took one of the slow trains. The streets in the village were empty and life was like the last speck in a peanut butter jar. The houses that surrounded ours had broken windows and were overgrown with plants. The properties were worthless because hardly anyone still lived here by choice. Those who stayed simply couldn't afford to move to the city.

I left my room, the floorboards creaking as I walked barefoot through the hallway, whose walls were covered in old paintings and picture frames with cracked glass. Our kitchen was country-style, the individual wooden doors of the cupboards were painted in bright colors, cast-iron pots and pans hung from the ceiling above the stove, next to bunches of herbs. Bo and Luna were already sitting at the kitchen table in light blue school uniforms with their legs dangling down, waiting for my father. Every third morning, he would swap his fruit or vegetables from the garden for a loaf of bread from the neighbor. Sometimes it was a tomato and sometimes a few strawberries or mushrooms and peas. Our goods were also sold in their bakery, one of the last in the country. My father also traded the rats he caught with him or sold them to other villagers and people from the district. You could smell through the open windows when there was fried rat or rat curry again or when they were grilling the rat on a skewer with caramelized vegetables.

I looked through the kitchen window, which faced the street, and saw my mother looking at the marjoram on the windowsill that she let bloom every year.

My mother was an unadorned person with many fine scars on her arms from the rose thorns in the garden. Her hands were rough, so rough that, according to my father, she could sand the kitchen counter with them. She had dirt on her face and her hair was tied up with a flowered scarf.

Luna jumped up, glanced at the protruding strand of hair on Bo's head, licked her hand and flattened it. Then she switched on the old radio, which stood next to the stove and crackled merrily when she turned it on, and filled our parents' kettle with water for tea.

"He brought us clean water," the voice on the radio said solemnly. *"The man we have to thank for this is celebrating his fiftieth birthday."* Several voices spoke in amusement, an incessant cackling came from the loudspeaker.

I was glad that my father wasn't sitting at the table, throwing a shoe at the radio. "Oswald Schwarz," I whispered. His name remained unspoken, everyone knew who was spoken about.

"It's not the only anniversary that's getting closer and closer," said a shrill voice. *"Preparations for the national holiday are in full swing."*

Luna changed the radio channel, placed a prepared metal bread tin on the table, clung to my collar to pull me towards her and gave me a peck on the forehead. "Don't forget your bread. Have you packed your bag? Dad said he doesn't want to have to drive you to school again."

"Is Dad still angry with you?" asked Bo. He was short of breath and had to take a breath every five words. He sucked them in through his mouth like a fish washed ashore.

"Dad probably needs a few more days," I murmured.

The authorities had caught me hanging around the abandoned houses in the village. I had been arrested next to 3 Village Street. It's where the lady with the longest neck in the whole region of Northdam lived, wrinkled and old from all the cigarettes, with eyebags the size of water bombs, who stood at the garden fence every day – counting cars, leaves falling from the tree, raindrops. Her late husband had worked for the authorities, a beetle-like man with thick horn-rimmed glasses. And it was said of the officials, the old-fashioned ones, that their petty minds could fit in a square on graph paper. I wasn't sure whether Mrs Rosenbaum hadn't recognized me – and had mistaken me in the twilight for a vandal or even a burglar – or whether she had become too much like

her husband. There was certainly enough carbon paper in her house.

It had cost my father two sheepskins, a roll of leather and several horns from our old cows, for a lawyer from the city. The official in our district, his name was Schmidt, found me inspecting a pair of cracked binoculars from a spray-painted desk that was missing several drawers.

Schmidt was a scrawny man whose pants were always too loose, with small, deep-set eyes, a sharp nose like a shark and pointed cheekbones. He swam a hundred lengths a day in a pool behind his house, filled with unicorn blood and a drop of self-righteousness – at least if my friend Daria was to be believed. He could have just brought me home scot-free, but he didn't. We probably wouldn't have been able to pay him enough. Every year on New Year's Eve, when young people came out of town to drink alcohol and set fireworks and throw stones at the abandoned houses and smash them with baseball bats, he had their parents bribe him. It was an open secret, but the town mayor's children also partied here.

I glanced at Luna and Bo. They were spelling the word 'bastard' with breadcrumbs. They had often heard our neighbor Paul Bishop call Schmidt that when he sat in the kitchen having tea with my father. He not only grumbled about Schmidt, but also about his wife's back pain and varicose veins.

My friend, Daria, had been with me in the abandoned house, in the next room, and had not been seen, although she could only have been hiding in a ransacked medicine cabinet or behind a torn, moldy shower curtain. I was sure Schmidt had taken a look in the bathroom.

"Can Daria still see you?" asked Luna.

"Can you read my mind?"

"Is her father as strict as Dad?"

"Stricter!"

"We can hide her in the shed, no one will find her there," added my brother.

Luna banged on the table. "Not even that bastard!"

They sneezed one after the other and blew the crumbs off the table, a load of moist air landing on my face. They were twins, and it was as if they shared a single beating heart. My siblings were the best this world could produce. I would trade all my boxes of dead animals for them.

Bo was already trying to help me get dressed so I wouldn't miss the bus. Before my father came into the house, I had left through the back door. The bus stop was at the other end of our village. I took the path through the dewy grass, past the fireplace and the greenhouses. The grove that surrounded our home transported us into a strange world. Like a fairytale forest, it protected us from what was out there, from the monsters that were devouring our world.

I lived in Zuckerfabrik, a village that had once been famous for its beet sugar, until they closed the gates of the last factory for good. Life in the countryside, especially in a remote, deserted place, might sound like hell on earth to many. For me, it was paradise.

Our home, an old farmhouse, had the charm of a post-apocalyptic resort. Our neighbors' playground equipment was overgrown with roses, the fences had fallen down. The bricks of the buildings had chipped edges and lime stains. Patinated bronze sculptures lined the path, which my mother had found in neighboring gardens. The agricultural implements that had been pulled by our cold-blooded horses stood abandoned in a row next to the shed, as if in a museum.

Signs led us through our garden, to the vegetables, the herb beds and the fruit trees, as if they had been written for a group of tourists. A yellow VW Beetle was parked by the gnarled oak tree in front of the apple trees, rusting away leisurely. A scarecrow repurposed from a mannequin dressed in a hat and wellies was a relic from the time of the crows. This place was paved with curiosities.

On rainy days, my father could be found in his workshop. He turned everything old into something new. He built lamps from branches and bent pipes. Rusty bicycles served as stands for washbasins. Our wardrobe was a branch hanging from the

ceiling. Two yellow rocking chairs made from old armchairs with floral patterns stood in our living room. He built clocks out of old spokes that hung outside and inside. One of our bookshelves was an aging ladder with paint stains, another was an out-of-tune piano.

I grew up with the smell of homemade jam and pumpkin pie, of fresh grass and damp earth. Daria and I could run around naked in the summer and jump straight into the pond behind the greenhouses. Watching the stars at night and dreaming of foreign galaxies, on a blanket in the meadow, wrapped up thickly in cotton jackets – my father had sold our wool jackets a few years ago to repair his car. Sneaking through the forest and singing and shouting as loud as we wanted. But life in the country had changed when you crossed the boundaries of our property.

Even before I had left the forest, I smelled it. A cloud with the scent of woodruff wafted past me like poison gas. Gigantic, black machines drove silently over flat stretches of land with a soft hiss of their spray nozzles. Even before the harvest, at the end of July, they sprayed every plant. I put my sleeve over my mouth, the wind whipping in my direction.

I walked on along a sandy path. It was the “shortest” way to the bus stop. The wheat fields lay to the left and right as far as the horizon, behind me was the small green island where our house was. I saw my mother in my mind’s eye, looking at her little flowers on the windowsill and hoping to see a ladybug or one day even a bee sitting on them. I had never seen a real bee myself, apart from the one impaled in my glass box. But I thought I could still remember its humming, which had been whispered to me by the wind as a child. Today I only knew the buzzing of the machines and the chirping of the drones and wished I was lying on the hard ground again, listening to my siblings’ breath.

Then I heard a whistle that seemed to be calling me. It was the one tune I could remember. It began like the melody of a song thrush. I quickened my pace.

When I reached the bus shelter – the sign was dangling from a screw on the pole, the wood was weathered, the back wall had been kicked out board by board – I took a cautious look inside. “Are you lost or have you just been avoiding my father?” I asked.

Daria was sitting in front of me in a blue and white flowered dress and matching headband. She must have come to our house last night. She had a key to it and her own room upstairs. It had originally been intended for guests, but Aunt Augustine and Uncle Murphy hadn’t visited us since his heart operation – he couldn’t stand the long train journey – and neither had anyone else. Daria was our only guest. She had gone with her parents for the weekend to the lakes further north, where stately homes were strung like a string of pearls.

She jumped up to hug me and almost threw us in front of the approaching bus. Her first words were drowned out by a deafening honk.

“I thought you’d never come. You almost missed this glorious can of sardines.” She pointed at the silver bus and raised an eyebrow. “The road through the woods will never be a shortcut, Paris Meisner.”

I smiled at her. “And our house will never be on your way to school.”

My grandmother always said that there are no shortcuts and no detours in life and that paths should not be measured in miles and time not in seconds.

I had known Daria since I was a child and I remembered the day when she appeared out of nowhere in our garden, wearing a mint green dress. And fished the dead fish and swollen frogs out of the pond with me and had my father burn them. It connected us like a magical smoke that would linger foul under our skin for days. Until one day she moved to the city.

But nothing kept her in a place that reeked of tire rubber, restaurant fumes and, when it was dry and hot, sewage. Like now.

The bus opened its door with a hiss. We boarded and scanned our ticket. Several skinny kids from the neighboring village with shaggy hair and holey sweaters sat on the last bench and slept. I sat down with Daria, she put her head on my shoulder, and looked out of the window. We lived in a world without animals. But I still remember how it all began.



Nine years earlier.

A yellow barrier tape fluttered at the door. Scattered rays of sunlight fell through the broken windows, rusted bars, small stalls with smeared floorboards and gaps. We were in an abandoned pigsty. You could still smell them.

»Should we really be here? Didn't you see the barrier tape?« I breathed warm air into my frost-blue hands, barely feeling them, with a pale middle finger. »I forgot my gloves, maybe we'd better get back.«

Daria wrinkled her nose and scrutinized me. »Don't be scared, Paris.«

»It won't make it disappear.« And it was easy for her to say. She was fearless. I was always just in the wrong place at the wrong time. »But what could happen here? Right?« I whispered.

She pointed to the ceiling. »It could impale you.«

I looked up and saw an icicle hanging under the roof, sharpened like a pencil and half our size. Then she suddenly ran off.

»Daria,« I shouted, her footsteps echoing through the stable, »wait for me!«

I could just see her hair flying in the wind, peeking out from under her cap, before she disappeared outside behind the stable door. Then I heard it: a squeak.

When I arrived at the yard, it had stopped. One building was next to the other. They looked like the abandoned soldiers' barracks in Summerfield, a few hours away. I looked

around, to the bare field with transmission towers, a fixed tractor on the right, a polished black automobile on the left. Fog drifted over the ground, the cold crept under my jacket.

»Daria?« I whispered.

The squeal reappeared. I approached a green metal container with rusty edges.

The lid was heavy, the muscles in my arms trembled. I put one hand on the edge, covered with the sleeve of my jacket, and with the other I held it open above my head and looked inside. I was startled. The container was filled with piglets that had not yet been collected. Round, empty eyes looked at me, pink skin stretched across their bodies, splashes of excrement that looked like freckles. The top piglet seemed almost alive, preserved by the cold.

A crack in the distance, a pained groan, I turned around. The lid slipped off. It fell down onto my hand. I heard several bones break, but I didn't feel it. The crashing sound echoed across the yard and through the stables.

I carefully pulled my hand out from under the metal like a rotten, mushy fish. Drops of blood fell on the frozen ground.

I approached the voices. Behind the corner of the shack stood an older man with a gray stubbly beard, of ordinary height but broad-shouldered, wearing a plaid flannel shirt. I had never seen him before. He held Oswald Schwarz by the collar, his pitch-black hair lying disorderly in his face.

»You damn fool, you've done enough, you and the others,« the old man said with a raspy voice. He pushed Schwarz to the ground, into a frozen puddle, and put his finger to Schwarz's forehead. »There are no more animals here, so you'd better stay out of my forest! If I see you there again, I'll shoot a hole in your head.«

»Now, now, I didn't think *you* were so crude. The forest has made you forget what was once taught to you.« Oswald Schwarz was a slim man with green eyes that dug into your thoughts like a dagger. Under a coat he always wore his dark suit with a white pocket square. Leather gloves hid his hands as if to hide the dirt under his fingernails. He reached for the

old man's jacket and smiled. »Horribly cold, isn't it? I wasn't looking for animals. You know who is.«

The old man brushed Schwarz's hand away. »You'd better do as I tell you! You don't want a single word about you to leave this place.«

»Paris,« Daria whispered from behind. I winced. »We'd better go now.«

»Scared?« I asked with a frozen smile. My narrow chest straightened with satisfaction.

»Please, come now. There are more cars and men in black suits.« Then her horrified gaze fell on my bleeding, red-stained hand. »Paris Meisner, you little clutz! Not again!«

Suddenly, a dark figure appeared behind us. A sharp pain shot through the icy tingling in my broken hand as Daria grabbed it and squeezed, startled. I flinched, but kept quiet.

Chapter 2

Abandoned Pigsties

The bus driver was sitting in a cage. In the rear-view mirror I could see his eyes, milky brown with a bright spot of color. They were between the metal bars and grids that protected him from passengers. It was a long bus ride into town, but he never spoke a word, as if he had bitten off his tongue. Sometimes you could hear him rattling his cage when the children at the back of the bus were too loud.

The radio was on. One of the speakers on the ceiling of the bus had been creaking for months. The announcer's voice was known throughout the country, it sounded like the soothing rattle of a train. *"He outlived his five siblings,"* said the voice.

He was talking about Oswald Schwarz. Everything that surrounded us belonged to him. He had been born in Northdam exactly 50 years ago.

The voice continued: *"He ventured into the city with just a suitcase under his arm. I don't even dare to go to work with just a suitcase."*

His face appeared in my mind's eye: His mottled gray hair lay neatly combed to one side, a clean-shaven chin with the face of a fairground boxer. Once, he had lived in Zuckerfabrik. He and my father were friends when they were kids.

A loud rattling interrupted my thoughts. The bus drove through several potholes, the children in the back seat flew into the air. I heard a muffled sound. One of their heads had hit the window. They slept on unconcerned, as if nothing had happened.

Behind the window panes were greenish-yellow fields of corn and grain, without a single flower. Wild boars once ran through the cornfields, having been shot by the hunters during the harvest. My father had even told me about a time

when the countryside was dotted with cows and pigs, many years before their demise.

Back then, we had two dairy cows from the farm at the other end of the village that we had saved from slaughter. Plus three robust beef cattle, old breeds that fertilized our fields with their manure and kept the meadows short – they only ate grass, sometimes hay and straw. Eight chubby, black-spotted pigs, who romped around like dogs, had a good time in the mud near the potato field. Numerous colorful chickens were carried around the woolly backs of three sheep. My childhood home looked like the farms from the picture books or advertising magazines, which I could still find in the abandoned houses in the village under piles of paper several meters high.

I remembered, but my memory was like a snow globe that had been shaken a long time ago and whose flakes were now slowly sinking to the ground. I put my hand on the headrest in front of me and took a deep breath.

The picture behind the windshield changed. Sparrows and seagulls fell from the sky like shooting stars. Cows, pigs and chickens lay flat across the landscape as if they were just sleeping – the few that hadn't died in barns. My father had a photograph of them in his desk. They were piled up into walls of meat and bones and dumped shortly after – it was reminiscent of the bison of the Wild West, killed for soldiers' boots and drive belts. Trucks with stinking carcasses drove around from dawn to dusk. Even the newly bred pigs, supposedly so big you could ride them, were dying. Now the seas were an emptied supermarket, with only old fishing boats floating on them, one washing up on the shore every few months.

No one had foreseen it, except my father. He didn't think he was a wise man. There were flowers that thrived in the desert, there were flowers that thrived in the eternal ice. The animals were no longer adapted to their habitat. They all looked the same, he had said – except for the few mutants among them who had three horns or colored spots. They tried to keep us children from seeing the dead animals. The teachers at the village school shooed us away from the windows

every time a tractor with a lifeless cow drove past. As if they wanted to make the thought of animals disappear as early as possible and for adults to be the last generation with memory of them.

A hiss came from the loudspeakers. The radio announcer's reassuring voice again: "*Oswald Schwarz has escaped poverty. Now he is using his fortune to fight it. In his honor, the capital is holding a charity ball this evening. We are joining in and playing his favorite musical piece. The lines are now open for your donations.*" These words would be repeated several more times on the radio today, as they always were when something happened in the country. As if on an automatic loop. "*The national holiday is approaching.*"

Daria nudged me and pointed to the stables that passed by. We had been here as children. It was years ago, but the pictures stayed in my memory like piglets in the cold.



We looked at the dark figure behind us, standing by the pigsties. He was a mercenary with shod boots and a scar on his lip. His bald head was polished, steaming like fresh buns right out of the oven. He didn't move. More people stepped silently out of the fog.

Daria and I started walking, moving away from them, but a sinister-looking giant approached. He was twice my height, with coarse, dark pores on his nose, dressed in a worn suit. Daria scurried past him, he caught me by the hood and yanked me to the floor. A thud went through my body as I hit the concrete. I gasped for air.

The man grabbed me by the collar, he reeked of smoke. "Didn't they teach you kids not to eavesdrop on other people?" His flat hand rose up and slapped me in my face.

Daria came from the side and scratched him across the cheek. Several lines of scratch marks were left on his face. She shrieked as he grabbed her by the back of the neck. "You little brat!"

"Enough!" we heard.

The giant abruptly let go of Daria. A group of mercenaries stopped a few meters away from us, like bloodhounds waiting for their orders. So did the man with the scar. Oswald Schwarz stepped up, smoothed his suit jacket and combed his tousled hair. His trousers were torn at the knees. He looked at me more closely. "Is that little Paris?"

We didn't say a word. I held my cheek, which warmed my frozen fingers.

"Are you mute?" the giant asked.

The old man stepped in, stood in front of the gigantic man who had hit me and slapped him in the face. "Leave the children alone! If you touch them again, you'll lose another finger!" He turned towards us. "I'll take you home, you ragamuffins. Follow me to my car!"

I nodded cautiously. Blood ran out of my nose. We walked behind him to a rusty vehicle.

"Get in," he said.

We hesitated.

"I said: Get in!"

We fell silent again, holding hands as we sat in the back seat of the car. I smelled aftershave, which he must have spilled on his shirt days ago. He stopped in front of our driveway. The old man seemed to know us. I had never seen him before.

"What's your name?" I asked quietly as I got out of the car.

"Close the door," he murmured.

"Thank you."

He rolled down his window and looked at my hand. "You'd better see a doctor as soon as possible, son," he grumbled. "Bones shouldn't be exposed like that." He drove off and disappeared from the face of the earth.

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I will never forget their faces, those of Oswald Schwarz and the old man who drove us home. I often thought about that day. I wondered what had brought these people to this place.

How their lives had made them who they were? Their childhood, growing up? Small dots that are drawn together by strings and eventually form a picture.

I was able to fill in some of these gaps, at least about people who enjoyed the interest of the public, like Oswald Schwarz, through newspaper articles and stories. Most of them came from his own pen. Whether they were true or not was unknown. He owned one or two newspapers. I therefore considered it advisable to treat them – just like rumors – with caution.

Because in your life you heard a lot of rumors, about the little things in other people's lives that circulated in small circles, and the ones that would shake you to the core if they turned out to be true. Back then, there was a rumor that farmers had dropped infected piglets, like the ones from the green garbage container, with drones over other farmers' stables as biological bombs. Other voices whispered that it was criminals who picked up the culled animals in trucks at night, cloaked by the fog, to sell them to supermarkets wrapped in plastic. We were never supposed to know the truth. Everyone just chose the truth that made them sleep most peacefully. But there was this feeling that Oswald Schwarz was one of those criminals, even though that day he had been on his own property and everything he did was in accordance with the law.

I watched Daria as she slid a finger across her palm and stopped at her knuckles. She took my hand and did the same to me. It was tingling. I had two circular scars on either side of my hand. She tapped them with her finger, then looked up.

“Don't think I'm crazy, but do you think there are still animals?” she asked, without suppressing her voice, so that the whole bus could have heard. I wanted to cover her mouth and cautiously looked around at the other children.

One of the boys at the back of the bus had woken up and burped several times, the third time some sour gruel came up from his breakfast. Two rows in front of him sat a girl with flaming red hair, staring in my direction. I avoided her gaze. I

knew everyone on the bus, yet I had never seen her before. The commuters were always the same faces with second-hand music players in their ears or phones, if they could afford one. I hadn't noticed where she had got on.

I turned back to Daria and whispered in her ear: "Animals?"

"Yes, animals," she repeated.

For the authorities, nothing but what was written on paper existed. Not only were we living in a world without animals, it was becoming dangerous to talk about them: the ones that no longer officially existed. I had heard of a woman who had been locked up in an institution for several years, in a gray, fenced-in building south of the city, because she had firmly claimed to have seen a real squirrel. She had been unable to provide the authorities with a body, fur or paw prints.

These days, people preferred to keep quiet when strangers were present, and not just about animals – at least I did. Silence seemed to me to be the wisest course of action. That way, no little bird could whisper anything to the authorities.

"So?" she asked.

I shrugged my shoulders. "We can still dream."

"Well, I don't want to stop believing that there are still some." She smiled broadly and brushed a dark brown strand of hair out of her face. "Somewhere in the mountains where there are no people, or in holes deep in the desert."

Nobody believed it anymore. Even if the wind made noises that sounded like a howl or a squeak, in people's minds it was just the wind. It hadn't even taken ten years to banish animals to the realm of fairy tales, alongside fire-breathing unicorns and horned dragons.

"What makes you ask that?" I asked, scratching my nose.

Now she shrugged her shoulders. "Well, I was thinking about the pig farm."

"You too?" I rested my head against the window. "I heard a squeal back then."

"Paris..." She looked at me in shame, her head bowed. "Didn't I ever tell you?"

A forced smile emerged from me. “But it wasn’t you, you said.”

“I was lying. It was me. That was half an eternity ago. Are you angry with me?”

“No.”

She smiled and wiggled her head back and forth in front of me. “My father is having guests over again tonight. Important people, judging by the shopping lists. If you want, you can come over to our place and we can lock ourselves in my room with one of the food platters.”

“Next time. The roof of our little shed is leaking, I should help my dad with that. And we have aphids... plant lice.”

A petite girl turned around, a disgusted expression on her face, scratching her head. She was thinking of voracious head lice.

“You’d better make sure we don’t let a few hop onto your head,” Daria said.

The bus came to a halt. She gave me a kiss on the cheek and jumped up. She went to a different school than me, for the children of a higher class. The subway train, we called it the mole, would take her there. Officially there were no more social classes, at least that’s what they told those from the lower ones.

“I’ll save the leftovers for you.” She was ready to get out. “Are you skipping school again today?”

“Just the first few classes.”

“Don’t sell too much blood again, or your heart might stop beating.” She jumped out off the bus as the doors were already closing.

Daria took the subway deeper into the city. You could tell the social classes in the city by the train map, colorful rings on white paper. The closer you got to the center, the higher up the people were. With the exception of those who lived on secluded estates, you couldn’t find them on any map. At least if you believed my father’s stories and the rumors of the talkative townspeople I overheard.

In the library I had read about the former aristocrats, with their *blue blood*, whose veins had swallowed up all the red tones of the light through their snow-white skin. I looked at my forearms. The brown skin of the peasants, my brown skin, had once been frowned upon by them.

There were still people who believed in royal blood. If I had it, how much could I sell it for, I joked in my mind. Or would they put me in a cage like an animal?

No one with royal blood had ever had to ask themselves that question. Once, they were worshipped by the people like superstars. Today the royals were extinct. I didn't know if there were any left. They had been blamed for the death of the animals. Man had learned nothing from history and chased them through the streets like a herd of gazelles. *The mob*, according to my father, *had only seen themselves reflected in the eyes of the royals, just as the royal blood was not blue, but reflected the blue parts of the light.*

I looked out of the window. The city had changed. As a child, I often came here with my mother to accompany her to her choir performances. Nowadays, I tried to avoid this place as much as I could. The city was not empty and yet it seemed deserted, like a concrete desert. The parks were a tenth of their original size. Many trees had disappeared to make way for residential housing. In summer, the streets and buildings heated up as if they were on fire. And the air was impenetrable like a wall of fog.

A poster hung at the bus stop: *The city of the future is colorful.* A campaign by Oswald Schwarz. I thought of all the children from this city who had made fun of me because I lived in the country. Even adults eyed me when they heard about it. "Colorful" stops at the border. *Redneck, hayseed, hillbilly, bumfuck, cow herder, swineherd, nature lover, farmer, country bumkin, clodhopper, rube, backwater yokel, country fool, shitkicker, hick.* I had heard these words over the years as if they were insults.

I think city dwellers have always known, deep down, that the countryside and its people could survive without cities. It wasn't possible the other way around. People looked down on

me because I was from the countryside, but I think they just missed the country.

“Paris, it’s your turn.” A lady in scrubs entered the waiting room, small, white, sterile, odorless, with eight chairs. Here you paid in cash and, if the blood was clean, no questions were asked. Not even about my age. Blood was blood.

The needle disappeared into my arm. I looked alternately at the white wall and the red bag that filled with my blood, sometimes the bag was yellow-orange. It made me woozy. Every time, I had to think of something nicer, like freshly steamed potatoes, so that I didn’t fall off my chair – it had already happened once. Because I didn’t want to have to buy my own blood back for eight times the price after waking up on the floor with a head wound.

I got a plaster with a little heart on it and went to the reception. On the counter was a paper bag with an apple and a bread roll and several bills stapled together with a clip. The money looked freshly washed and ironed, not like the grayish crumpled bills my father gave me when I had to buy school books or oil filters for his car. It was charged by the milliliter – 584 ml. Next to my bag, I saw more bags filled with prescription drugs and spare antibiotics.

The building looked shabby from the outside, an aging concrete house with graffiti and bars that locked the doors after 6pm. Half of the windows were boarded up.

“Don’t chatter, don’t chatter,” I heard several times behind me. A group of people with a noose around their necks and a metal grabber in their hands were led past me like dogs on a leash. They were collecting garbage.

I walked on. In a side alley, I saw a couple of beefy kids from Block 55 holding a brown-haired boy. One of them had two nails in his hand. Two others were pushing the boy’s right hand on the wall. I stopped and looked in their direction.

Block 55 was the name given to the children of the urban lower class, named after Ordinance 55, which was supposed to guarantee them affordable housing. I didn’t even blame

them for their violence as they grew up playing video games and eating soggy convenience food in deep gray prefab buildings. Their parents, if they were still alive, could be found in arcades and bars. I thought of Menel Tiff, a rough, orange-haired boy I knew from school. He had often missed class because he had been tied to the radiator at home. Once, when his T-shirt had slipped up, I had seen bruises and belt marks on his back. The teachers knew about it, I had overheard them smoking outside the staff room more than once.

One of the kids from the block put the nail to the fidgeting boy's hand. The tip digging into the back of his hand. It reminded me of the old man at the pigsties holding Schwarz.

I wanted to shout something, anything, but I just stared at them. Silent. Another child picked up the hammer and took a swing. The nail went smoothly through the flesh and stuck in the wall.

"Look there," said one of them, pointing at me.

They turned their heads abruptly and looked in my direction. I shouldn't have done that. My parents had actually taught me not to stare at people (for too long).

Big mistake, big mistake, I kept thinking. Neither of us moved. I slowly walked back. But suddenly several of them started running and came closer and closer. I saw the boy they had grabbed yanking the nail out of his hand and sprinting off in the other direction.

They shouted my name. I was easy to identify from the scars on my face. I ran away as fast as I could and caught up with the group with the garbage grabbers.

"Don't chatter, don't chatter," I heard again. "As much as you clean the streets, the streets clean you."

A block later, I disappeared into the mass of people boarding a bus. Wrong place at the wrong time, I thought.

I put my head against the window pane, behind it the guys from Block 55 appeared, their hands beating against the bus.

"We know you!" shouted one of them several times as the bus set off. A boy with a hooked nose and greasy black hair, so greasy that he could smear his lips with it in winter. He had

a croaky voice: “It’s *your* turn again when we catch you, farm boy!”

I had to smile – I didn’t know why – and closed my eyes.

Why was blood so important in our society? It decided whether you lived in Block 55 or in an air-conditioned skyscraper or away from this world. Yet those who once held our world together had managed without any blood (pigment) at all. They had tubes, known as tracheas, which ran through their entire body to transport the gases they breathed. And they were the first to disappear. They had been these beautiful, winged creatures with black stripes that had flown incessantly from flower to flower, giving us much more than honey.

My parents cried when thousands of their bees lay around the hives like a Persian carpet. What followed was something no one would have thought possible: the death of the species. It was like a pebble that had been thrown into a lake whose waves were constantly spreading. People had always heard about the last leopard or the last rhinoceros, but no one had ever believed in the last cow or the last rabbit.

It was a strange world that had been left behind, especially for those who did not want to forget. Humans had replaced bees (and other pollinators like hoverflies, bumblebees and butterflies) with tiny drones and a sticky gel instead of protecting them. The drones were easier to pack in boxes. And they needed a paid update every year.

The traffic light turned green and the bus started moving with a jolt. On a wall from which the plaster was crumbling away, a text was sprayed in red paint: *The royals and trillionaires will lead us out of the crisis.* People had once believed this. Now several words had been crossed out or replaced, what remained was: *The royals and trillionaires are the crisis. They tell us fairy tales. No justice, no peace.*

The day came when every story began to crumble, if it was nothing but a story.