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Günter Grass
The Tin Drum



Günter Grass

THE TIN DRUM

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
Ralph Manheim

V I N T A G E

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BOOK ONE

The Wide Skirt

Granted: I am an inmate of a mental hospital; my keeper is watching me, he never lets me out of his sight; there's a peephole in the door, and my keeper's eye is the shade of brown that can never see through a blue-eyed type like me.

So you see, my keeper can't be an enemy. I've come to be very fond of him; when he stops looking at me from behind the door and comes into the room, I tell him incidents from my life, so he can get to know me in spite of the peephole between us. He seems to treasure my stories, because every time I tell him some fairy tale, he shows his gratitude by bringing out his latest knot construction. I wouldn't swear that he's an artist. But I am certain that an exhibition of his creations would be well received by the press and attract a few purchasers. He picks up common pieces of string in the patients' rooms after visiting hours, disentangles them, and works them up into elaborate contorted spooks; then he dips them in plaster, lets them harden, and mounts them on knitting needles that he fastens to little wooden pedestals.

He often plays with the idea of coloring his works. I advise him against it, taking my white enamel bed as an example and bidding him try to imagine how this most perfect of all beds would look if painted in many colors. He raises his hands in horror, tries to give his rather expressionless face an expression of extreme disgust, and abandons his polychrome projects.

So you see, my white-enameled, metal hospital bed has become

a norm and standard. To me it is still more: my bed is a goal attained at last, it is my consolation and might become my faith if the management allowed me to make a few changes: I should like, for instance, to have the bars built up higher, to prevent anyone from coming too close to me.

Once a week a visiting day breaks in on the stillness that I plait between the white metal bars. This is the time for the people who want to save me, whom it amuses to love me, who try to esteem and respect themselves, to get to know themselves, through me. How blind, how nervous and ill-bred they are! They scratch the white enamel of my bedstead with their fingernail scissors, they scribble obscene little men on it with their ballpoint pens and blue pencils. No sooner has my lawyer blasted the room with his hello than he slaps his nylon hat down over the lower left-hand bedpost – an act of violence that shatters my peace of mind for the duration of his visit, and lawyers find a good deal to talk about.

After my visitors have deposited their gifts beneath the water color of the anemones, on the little white table covered with oil-cloth, after they have submitted their current projects for my salvation, and convinced me, whom they are working indefatigably to save, of the high quality of their charity, they recover their relish in their own existence, and leave me. Then my keeper comes in to air the room and collect the strings from the gift packages. Often after airing he finds time to sit by my bed for a while, disentangling his strings, and spreading silence until I call the silence Bruno and Bruno silence.

Bruno Münsterberg – this time I mean my keeper, I've stopped playing with words – has bought me five hundred sheets of writing paper.

Should this supply prove insufficient, Bruno, who is unmarried and childless and hails from the Sauerland, will go to the little stationery store that also sells toys, and get me some more of the unlined space I need for the recording of my memories – I only hope they are accurate. I could never have asked such a service of my visitors, the lawyer for instance, or Klepp. The solicitous affection prescribed in my case would surely have deterred my friends from bringing me anything so dangerous as blank paper

and making it available to this mind of mine which persists in excreting syllables.

'Oh, Bruno,' I said, 'would you buy me a ream of virgin paper?' And Bruno, looking up at the ceiling and pointing his index finger in the same direction by way of inviting a comparison, replied: 'You mean white paper, Herr Oskar?'

I stuck to 'virgin' and asked Bruno to say just that in the store. When he came back late in the afternoon with the package, he gave the impression of a Bruno shaken by thought. Several times he looked fixedly up at the ceiling from which he derived all his inspiration. And a little later he spoke: 'That was the right word you told me. I asked for virgin paper and the salesgirl blushed like mad before getting it.'

Fearing an interminable conversation about salesgirls in stationery stores, I regretted having spoken of virgin paper and said nothing, waiting for Bruno to leave the room. Only then did I open the package with the five hundred sheets of writing paper.

For a time I weighed the hard, flexible ream in my hands; then I counted out ten sheets and stowed the rest in my bedside table. I found my fountain pen in the drawer beside the photograph album: it's full, ink is no problem, how shall I begin?

You can begin a story in the middle and create confusion by striking out boldly, backward and forward. You can be modern, put aside all mention of time and distance and, when the whole thing is done, proclaim, or let someone else proclaim, that you have finally, at the last moment, solved the space-time problem. Or you can declare at the very start that it's impossible to write a novel nowadays, but then, behind your own back so to speak, give birth to a whopper, a novel to end all novels. I have also been told that it makes a good impression, an impression of modesty so to speak, if you begin by saying that a novel can't have a hero any more because there are no more individualists, because individuality is a thing of the past, because man – each man and all men together – is alone in his loneliness and no one is entitled to individual loneliness, and all men lumped together make up a 'lonely mass' without names and without heroes. All this may be true. But as far as I and Bruno my keeper are concerned, I beg leave to say that we are both heroes, very different heroes, he on his side of the peephole, and I on my side;

and even when he opens the door, the two of us, with all our friendship and loneliness, are still far from being a nameless, heroless mass.

I shall begin far away from me; for no one ought to tell the story of his life who hasn't the patience to say a word or two about at least half of his grandparents before plunging into his own existence. And so to you personally, dear reader, who are no doubt leading a muddled kind of life outside this institution, to you my friends and weekly visitors who suspect nothing of my paper supply, I introduce Oskar's maternal grandmother.

Late one October afternoon my grandmother Anna Bronski was sitting in her skirts at the edge of a potato field. In the morning you might have seen how expert my grandmother was at making the limp potato plants into neat piles; at noon she had eaten a chunk of bread smeared with lard and syrup; then she had dug over the field a last time, and now she sat in her skirts between two nearly full baskets. The soles of her boots rose up at right angles to the ground, converging slightly at the toes, and in front of them smoldered a fire of potato plants, flaring up asthmatically from time to time, sending a queasy film of smoke out over the scarcely inclined crust of the earth. The year was 1899; she was sitting in the heart of Kashubia, not far from Bissau but still closer to the brickworks between Ramkau and Viereck, in front of her the Brenntau highway at a point between Dirschau and Karthaus, behind her the black forest of Goldkrug; there she sat, pushing potatoes about beneath the hot ashes with the charred tip of a hazel branch.

If I have made a special point of my grandmother's skirt, leaving no doubt, I hope, that she was sitting in her skirts; if indeed I have gone so far as to call the whole chapter 'The Wide Skirt,' it is because I know how much I owe to this article of apparel. My grandmother had on not just one skirt, but four, one over the other. It should not be supposed that she wore one skirt and three petticoats; no, she wore four skirts; one supported the next, and she wore the lot of them in accordance with a definite system, that is, the order of the skirts was changed from day to day. The one that was on top yesterday was today in second place; the second became the third. The one that was third yesterday was next to her skin today. The one that was closest to her yesterday

clearly disclosed its pattern today, or rather its lack of pattern: all my grandmother Anna Bronski's skirts favored the same potato color. It must have been becoming to her.

Aside from the color, my grandmother's skirts were distinguished by a lavish expanse of material. They puffed and billowed when the wind came, crackled as it passed, and sagged when it was gone, and all four of them flew out ahead of her when she had the wind in her stern. When she sat down, she gathered her skirts about her.

In addition to the four skirts, billowing, sagging, hanging down in folds, or standing stiff and empty beside her bed, my grandmother possessed a fifth. It differed in no way from the other four potato-coloured garments. And actually the fifth skirt was not always fifth. Like its brothers – for skirts are masculine by nature – it was subject to change, it was worn like the other four, and like them when its time had come, took its turn in the wash trough every fifth Friday, then Saturday on the line by the kitchen window, and when dry on the ironing board.

When, after one of these Saturdays spent in housecleaning, baking, washing and ironing, after milking and feeding the cow, my grandmother immersed herself from top to toe in the tub, when after leaving a little of herself in the soapsuds and letting the water in the tub sink back to its normal level, she sat down on the edge of the bed swathed in a great flowery towel, the four worn skirts and the freshly washed skirt lay spread out before her on the floor. She pondered, propping the lower lid of her right eye with her right index finger, and since she consulted no one, not even her brother Vincent, she quickly made up her mind. She stood up and with her bare toes pushed aside the skirt whose potato color had lost the most bloom. The freshly laundered one took its place.

On Sunday morning she went to church in Ramkau and inaugurated the new order of skirts in honor of Jesus, about whom she had very set ideas. Where did my grandmother wear the laundered skirt? She was not only a cleanly woman, but also a rather vain one; she wore the best piece where it could be seen in the sunlight when the weather was good.

But now it was a Monday afternoon and my grandmother was sitting by the potato fire. Today her Sunday skirt was one layer

closer to her person, while the one that had basked in the warmth of her skin on Sunday swathed her hips in Monday gloom. Whistling with no particular tune in mind, she coaxed the first cooked potato out of the ashes with her hazel branch and pushed it away from the smoldering mound to cool in the breeze. Then she spitted the charred and crusty tuber on a pointed stick and held it close to her mouth; she had stopped whistling and instead pursed her cracked, wind-parched lips to blow the earth and ashes off the potato skin.

In blowing, my grandmother closed her eyes. When she thought she had blown enough, she opened first one eye, then the other, bit into the potato with her widely spaced but otherwise perfect front teeth, removed half the potato, cradled the other half, mealy steaming, and still too hot to chew, in her open mouth, and, sniffing at the smoke and the October air, gazed wide-eyed across the field toward the nearby horizon, sectioned by telegraph poles and the upper third of the brickworks chimney.

Something was moving between the telegraph poles. My grandmother closed her mouth. Something was jumping about. Three men were darting between the poles, three men made for the chimney, then round in front, then one doubled back. Short and wide he seemed, he took a fresh start and made it across the brickyard, the other two, sort of long and thin, just behind him. They were out of the brickyard, back between the telegraph poles, but Short and Wide twisted and turned and seemed to be in more of a hurry than Long and Thin, who had to double back to the chimney, because he was already rolling over it when they, two hands' breadths away, were still taking a start, and suddenly they were gone as though they had given up, and the little one disappeared too, behind the horizon, in the middle of his jump from the chimney.

Out of sight they remained, it was intermission, they were changing their costumes, or making bricks and getting paid for it.

Taking advantage of the intermission, my grandmother tried to spit another potato, but missed it. Because the one who seemed to be short and wide, who hadn't changed his clothes after all, climbed up over the horizon as if it were a fence and he had left his pursuers behind it, in among the bricks or on the road to Brenntau. But he was still in a hurry; trying to go faster than the

telegraph poles, he took long slow leaps across the field; the mud flew from his boots as he leapt over the soggy ground, but leap as he might, he seemed to be crawling. Sometimes he seemed to stick in the ground and then to stick in mid-air, short and wide, time enough to wipe his face before his foot came down again in the freshly plowed field, which bordered the five acres of potatoes and narrowed into a sunken lane.

He made it to the lane; short and wide, he had barely disappeared into the lane, when the two others, long and thin, who had probably been searching the brickyard in the meantime, climbed over the horizon and came plodding through the mud, so long and thin, but not really skinny, that my grandmother missed her potato again; because it's not every day that you see this kind of thing, three full-grown men, though they hadn't grown in exactly the same directions, hopping around telegraph poles, nearly breaking the chimney off the brickworks, and then at intervals, first short and wide, then long and thin, but all with the same difficulty, picking up more and more mud on the soles of their boots, leaping through the field that Vincent had plowed two days before, and disappearing down the sunken lane.

Then all three of them were gone and my grandmother ventured to spit another potato, which by this time was almost cold. She hastily blew the earth and ashes off the skin, popped the whole potato straight into her mouth. They must be from the brickworks, she thought if she thought anything, and she was still chewing with a circular motion when one of them jumped out of the lane, wild eyes over a black mustache, reached the fire in two jumps, stood before, behind, and beside the fire all at once, cursing, scared, not knowing which way to go, unable to turn back, for behind him Long and Thin were running down the lane. He hit his knees, the eyes in his head were like to pop out, and sweat poured from his forehead. Panting, his whole face a tremble, he ventured to crawl closer, toward the soles of my grandmother's boots, peering up at her like a squat little animal. Heaving a great sigh, which made her stop chewing on her potato, my grandmother let her feet tilt over, stopped thinking about bricks and brickmakers, and lifted high her skirt, no, all four skirts, high enough so that Short and Wide, who was not from the brickworks, could crawl underneath. Gone was his black mus-

tache; he didn't look like an animal any more, he was neither from Ramkau nor from Viereck, at any rate he had vanished with his fright, he had ceased to be wide or short but he took up room just the same, he forgot to pant or tremble and he had stopped hitting his knees; all was as still as on the first day of Creation or the last; a bit of wind hummed in the potato fire, the telegraph poles counted themselves in silence, the chimney of the brickworks stood at attention, and my grandmother smoothed down her uppermost skirt neatly and sensibly over the second one; she scarcely felt him under her fourth skirt, and her third skirt wasn't even aware that there was anything new and unusual next to her skin. Yes, unusual it was, but the top was nicely smoothed out and the second and third layers didn't know a thing; and so she scraped two or three potatoes out of the ashes, took four raw ones from the basket beneath her right elbow, pushed the raw spuds one after another into the hot ashes, covered them over with more ashes, and poked the fire till the smoke rose in clouds – what else could she have done?

My grandmother's skirts had barely settled down; the sticky smudge of the potato fire, which had lost its direction with all the poking and thrashing about, had barely had time to adjust itself to the wind and resume its low yellow course across the field to southwestward, when Long and Thin popped out of the lane, hot in pursuit of Short and Wide, who by now had set up housekeeping beneath my grandmother's skirts; they were indeed long and thin and they wore the uniform of the rural constabulary.

They nearly ran past my grandmother. One of them even jumped over the fire. But suddenly they remembered they had heels and used them to brake with, about-faced, stood booted and uniformed in the smudge, coughed, pulled their uniforms out of the smudge, taking some of it along with them, and, still coughing, turned to my grandmother, asked her if she had seen Koljaiczek, 'cause she must have seen him 'cause she was sitting here by the lane and that was the way he had come.

My grandmother hadn't seen any Koljaiczek because she didn't know any Koljaiczek. Was he from the brickworks, she asked, 'cause the only ones she knew were the ones from the brickworks. But according to the uniforms, this Koljaiczek had nothing to do

with bricks, but was short and stocky. My grandmother remembered she had seen somebody like that running and pointed her stick with the steaming potato on the end toward Bissau, which, to judge by the potato, must have been between the sixth and seventh telegraph poles if you counted westward from the chimney. But whether this fellow that was running was a Koljaiczek, my grandmother couldn't say; she'd been having enough trouble with this fire, she explained, it was burning poorly, how could she worry her head about all the people that ran by or stood in the smoke, and anyway she never worried her head about people she didn't know, she only knew the people in Bissau, Ramkau, Viereck, and the brickworks – and that was plenty for her.

After saying all this, my grandmother heaved a gentle sigh, but it was enough of a sigh to make the uniforms ask what there was to sigh about. She nodded toward the fire, meaning to say that she had sighed because the fire was doing poorly and maybe a little on account of the people standing in the smoke; then she bit off half her potato with her widely spaced incisors, and gave her undivided attention to the business of chewing, while her eyeballs rolled heavenward.

My grandmother's absent gaze told the uniforms nothing; unable to make up their minds whether to look for Bissau behind the telegraph poles, they poked their bayonets into all the piles of potato tops that hadn't been set on fire. Responding to a sudden inspiration, they upset the two baskets under my grandmother's elbows almost simultaneously and were quite bewildered when nothing but potatoes came rolling out, and no Koljaiczek. Full of suspicion, they crept round the stack of potatoes, as though Koljaiczek had somehow got into it, thrust in their bayonets as though deliberately taking aim, and were disappointed to hear no cry. Their suspicions were aroused by every bush, however abject, by every mousehole, by a colony of molehills, and most of all by my grandmother, who sat there as if rooted to the spot sighing, rolling her eyes so that the whites showed, listing the Kashubian names of all the saints – all of which seemed to have been brought on by the poor performance of the fire and the overturning of her potato baskets.

The uniforms stayed on for a good half-hour. They took up positions at varying distances from the fire, they took an azimuth

on the chimney, contemplated an offensive against Bissau but postponed it, and held out their purple hands over the fire until my grandmother, though without interrupting her sighs, gave each of them a charred potato. But in the midst of chewing, the uniforms remembered their uniforms, dashed a little way out into the field along the furze bordering the lane, and scared up a hare which, however, turned out not to be Koljaiczek. Returning to the fire, they recovered the mealy, steaming spuds and then, wearied and rather mellowed by their battles, decided to pick up the raw potatoes and put them back into the baskets which they had overturned in line of duty.

Only when evening began to squeeze a fine slanting rain and an inky twilight from the October sky did they briefly and without enthusiasm attack a dark boulder at the other end of the field, but once this enemy had been disposed of they decided to let well enough alone. After flexing their legs for another moment or two and holding out their hands in blessing over the rather dampened fire, they coughed a last cough and dropped a last tear in the green and yellow smudge, and plodded off coughing and weeping in the direction of Bissau. If Koljaiczek wasn't here, he must be in Bissau. Rural constables never envisage more than two possibilities.

The smoke of the slowly dying fire enveloped my grandmother like a spacious fifth skirt, so that she too with her four skirts, her sighs, and her holy names, was under a skirt. Only when the uniforms had become staggering dots, vanishing in the dusk between the telegraph poles, did my grandmother arise, slowly and painfully as though she had struck root and now, drawing earth and fibers along with her, were tearing herself out of the ground.

Suddenly Koljaiczek found himself short, wide, and coverless in the rain, and he was cold. Quickly he buttoned his pants, which fear and a boundless need for shelter had bidden him open during his stay beneath the skirts. Hurriedly he manipulated the buttons, fearing to let his piston cool too quickly, for there was a threat of dire chills in the autumn air.

My grandmother found four more hot potatoes under the ashes. She gave Koljaiczek three of them and took one for herself; before biting into it she asked if he was from the brickworks, though

she knew perfectly well that Koljaiczek came from somewhere else and had no connection with bricks. Without waiting for an answer, she lifted the lighter basket to his back, took the heavier one for herself, and still had a hand free for her rake and hoe. Then with her basket, her potatoes, her rake, and her hoe, she set off, like a sail billowing in the breeze, in the direction of Bissau Quarry.

That wasn't the same as Bissau itself. It lay more in the direction of Ramkau. Passing to the right of the brickworks, they headed for the black forest with Goldkrug in it and Brenntau behind it. But in a hollow, before you come to the forest, lay Bissau Quarry. Thither Joseph Koljaiczek, unable to tear himself away from her skirts, followed my grandmother.

Under the Raft

It is not so easy, lying here in this scrubbed hospital bed under a glass peephole with Bruno's eye in it, to give a picture of the smoke clouds that rose from Kashubian potato fires or of the slanting October rain. If I didn't have my drum, which, when handled adroitly and patiently, remembers all the incidentals that I need to get the essential down on paper, and if I didn't have the permission of the management to drum on it three or four hours a day, I'd be a poor bastard with nothing to say for my grandparents.

In any case, my drum tells me this: That afternoon in the year 1899, while in South Africa Oom Kruger was brushing his bushy anti-British eyebrows, my mother Agnes, between Dirschau and Karthaus, not far from the Bissau brickworks, amid smoke, terrors, sighs, and saints' names, under four skirts of identical color, under the slanting rain and the smoke-filled eyes of two rural constables asking uninspired questions, was begotten by the short but stocky Joseph Koljaiczek.

That very night my grandmother Anna Bronski changed her name; with the help of a priest who was generous with the sacraments, she had herself metamorphosed into Anna Koljaiczek and followed Joseph, if not into Egypt, at least to the provincial capital

on the river Mottlau, where Joseph found work as a raftsmen and temporary peace from the constabulary.

Just to heighten the suspense, I'm going to wait a while before telling you the name of the city at the mouth of the Mottlau, though there's ample reason for mentioning it right now because it is there that my mama first saw the light of day. At the end of July, 1900 – they were just deciding to double the imperial naval building program – my mother was born under the sign of Leo. Self-confident, romantic, generous, and vain. The first house, known also as *domus vitae*, in the sign of the ascendant: Pisces, impressionable. The constellation of the sun in opposition to Neptune, seventh house or *Domus matrimonii uxoris*, would bring confusion. Venus in opposition to Saturn, which is termed the sour planet and as everyone knows induces ailments of the liver and spleen, which is dominant in Capricorn and meets its end in Leo, to which Neptune offers eels and receives the mole in return, which loves belladonna, onions, and beets, which coughs lava and sours the wine; it lived with Venus in the eighth house, the house of death; that augured accidental death, while the fact of being begotten in the potato field gave promise of hazardous happiness under the protection of Mercury in the house of relatives.

Here I must put in a protest from my mama, for she always denied having been begotten in the potato field. It was true – this much she admitted – that her father had done his best on that memorable occasion, but neither his position nor that of Anna Bronski had been such as to favor impregnation. 'It must have happened later that night, maybe in Uncle Vincent's boxcart, or maybe still later in Troyl when the raftsmen took us in.'

My mama liked to date the beginnings of her existence with words such as these, and then my grandmother, who must have known, would nod patiently and say: 'Yes, child, it must have been in the cart or later in Troyl. It couldn't have been in the field, 'cause it was windy and raining all getout.'

Vincent was my grandmother's brother. His wife had died young and then he had gone on a pilgrimage to Częstochowa where the Matka Boska Częstochowska had enjoined him to consider her as the future queen of Poland. Since then he had spent all his time poking around in strange books, and every sentence he read was a confirmation of the Virgin Mother's claim to the