

Looking to the West by Pavla Horáková

summary

The heart of the novel unfolds in communist Czechoslovakia in the late 1980s. Although the totalitarian regime outwardly embraces Gorbachev's policies of *perestroika* and *glasnost*, in practice, it continues to stifle free speech, persecute dissidents, and violently suppress peaceful demonstrations. The protagonists, elementary school students David and Marta, come from families that represent the silent majority—Czechoslovaks who remain largely indifferent to politics, neither challenging the system nor actively supporting it. Instead, they focus on their private lives, particularly their material well-being. Meanwhile, Western consumer goods steadily infiltrate the country through various channels, becoming coveted symbols of status and success. Toys, electronics, cosmetics, and clothing are not just objects of desire but also markers of social hierarchy, especially among children.

David and Marta live in Prague, where the Iron Curtain feels more porous than in the heavily fortified border regions. Many aspects of the regime have become little more than hollow rituals—such as the Pioneer Organization at their school or the obligatory celebrations of Labor Day and the Great October Socialist Revolution. Thanks to their parents' prestigious positions, both children enjoy access to coveted Western goods. Fourteen-year-old David, ever pragmatic, has already mapped out what he sees as the easiest legal path to travel and acquire luxury items: enrolling at the Diplomatic Academy in Moscow. His greatest fear is that his older brother, whose growing anti-regime sentiments verge on activism, might sabotage his plans—either through open dissent or by defecting to the West.

Ironically, it is Marta's family that ends up emigrating—just months before the fall of communism. Their sudden departure abruptly severs her bond with David, a relationship that had been on the cusp of growing beyond a fleeting summer romance as they prepared to enter high school. But was the timing of their escape mere misfortune, driven by the whims of Marta's ambitious mother? Or was it all part of a carefully orchestrated plan—one masterminded by Marta's stepfather, who'd left behind a police uniform in their abandoned apartment?

The fall of communism in 1989 reshapes David's life—though not entirely. He ultimately studies his chosen field in the Czech Republic and builds a career as a bureaucrat in European institutions in Brussels. During his university years, he reconnects with Marta, who has returned to a free Prague after a decade in Canada, eager to fulfill the childhood dreams once beyond her reach. Her status as a foreigner with access to hard currency makes the transition easier. Their reunion ignites a passionate, months-long affair, but in the end, David walks away—for the sake of his own self-preservation.

Even twenty-five years later, as they approach fifty, he refuses to see Marta at their planned class reunion. The prospect of facing his former classmates—and the unspoken question of whether he has truly become a better person in a free world than he would have been under a communist dictatorship—is more than he can bear.

David's and Marta's stories unfold in alternating chapters. Teenage David, an active agent in his own life, tells his story in his own voice. Marta, on the other hand, is shaped more by external forces in her youth, retreating into an inner world of her own—so her chapters are narrated by an omniscient storyteller. In the prologue and epilogue, set in the present, their perspectives are reversed, hinting that the balance of free will between them has shifted over time.

– Pavla Horáková