RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Blind Side of the Heart

Julia Franck

Contents

About the Book

Amid the chaos of civilians fleeing West in a provincial German railway station in 1945 Helene has brought her seven-year-old son. Having survived with him through the horrors and deprivations of the war years, she abandons him on the station platform and never returns.

The Blind Side of the Heart tells of two World Wars, of hope, loneliness and love, and of a life lived in terrible times. It is a great family novel, a powerful portrayal of an era, and the story of a fascinating woman.

About the Author

Julia Franck was born in Berlin in 1970. She studied the anthropology of Native Americans, philosophy, and German language and literature at the Free University of Berlin. *The Blind Side of the Heart* won the German Book Prize, Germany's most prestigious literary award. She lives in Berlin.

The Blind Side of the Heart

Julia Franck

Translated from the German by
Anthea Bell

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

There is nothing bad to fear; once you have crossed the threshold, all is well. Another world, and you do not have to speak.

Franz Kafka, Diaries, Volume 12, 1922

PROLOGUE

A SEAGULL STOOD on the windowsill, uttering its cry, as if the Baltic itself were in its throat, high as the foaming crests of the waves, keen, sky-coloured, its call died away over Königsplatz where all was quiet, where the theatre now lay in ruins. Peter blinked, he hoped the gull would take fright at the mere flutter of his eyelids and fly away. Ever since the end of the war Peter had enjoyed these quiet mornings. A few days ago his mother had made up a bed for him on the kitchen floor. He was a big boy now, she said, he couldn't sleep in her bed any more. A ray of sunlight fell on him; he pulled the sheet over his face and listened to Frau Kozinska's soft voice. It came up from the apartment below through the cracks between the stone flags on the floor. Their neighbour was singing: *My dearest love, if you could swim, you'd swim the wide water to me*. Peter loved that melody, the melancholy of her voice, the yearning and the sadness. These emotions were so much larger than he was, and he wanted to grow, there was nothing he wanted more. The sun warmed the sheet over Peter's face until he heard his mother's footsteps, approaching as if from a great distance. Suddenly the sheet was pulled back. Come on, come on, time to get up, his mother told him sternly. The teacher's waiting, she claimed. But it was a long time since Herr Fuchs the teacher had minded whether individual children were present or absent. Few of them could still attend school regularly. For days now his mother and he had been going to the station every afternoon with their little suitcase, trying to get a place on a train bound for Berlin. If one did come in, it was crammed so full that they couldn't

climb aboard. Now Peter got up and washed. Sighing, his mother took off her shoes. Out of the corner of his eye, Peter saw her untie her apron and put it to soak. Every day, her white apron was stained with soot and blood and sweat; it had to be soaked for hours before she could take the washboard and rub the fabric on it until her hands were red and the veins on her arms swollen. Peter's mother raised both hands to her head, took off her nurse's cap, pulled the hairpins out of her hair and let it tumble softly over her shoulders. She didn't like him to watch her doing that. Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, she told him: And that too. It seemed to him that she meant his little willy and with some repugnance was telling him to wash it. Then she turned her back to him and passed a brush through her thick hair. It shone golden in the sun and Peter thought he had the most beautiful mother in the world.

Even after the Russians had taken Stettin in the spring – some of the soldiers had been sleeping in Frau Kozinska's apartment ever since – their neighbour could be heard singing early in the morning. Once last week his mother had sat down at the table to mend one of her aprons while Peter read aloud, because Herr Fuchs the teacher had told him to practise that. Peter hated reading aloud and he had sometimes noticed how little attention his mother paid when he did. Presumably she didn't like to have the silence broken. She was usually so deep in thought that she didn't seem to notice at all if, in mid-sentence, Peter suddenly read on to himself instead of aloud. He'd been listening to Frau Kozinska at the same time as he was reading to himself. I wish someone would wring her neck, he heard his mother say abruptly. Startled, Peter looked at her, but she just smiled and put her needle through the linen.

The fires last August had completely destroyed the school and since then the children had met Herr Fuchs the teacher in his sister's dairy, where there was hardly ever anything for sale now. Fräulein Fuchs stood behind the empty counter

with her arms crossed, waiting. Although she had gone deaf, she often put her hands over her ears. The big shop window had been broken out of its frame, the children sat on the windowsill, and Herr Fuchs the teacher showed them numbers on the board: three times ten, five times three. The children asked him to show them the places where Germany had lost battles, but he didn't want to. We're not going to belong to Germany any more, he said, adding that he was glad of it. Where, then, asked the children, where will we belong? Herr Fuchs the teacher shrugged his shoulders. Today Peter planned to ask him why he was glad of it.

Peter stood at the washbasin and dried himself with the towel: his shoulders, his stomach, his willy, his feet. If he did it in a different order, and he hadn't done that for a long time, his mother lost patience. She had put out a clean pair of trousers and his best shirt for him. Peter went to the window, tapped the pane and the seagull flew up. Now that the row of houses opposite was gone, along with the backs of the buildings and the next row of houses too, he had a clear view of Königsplatz, where the ruins of the theatre stood.

Don't be too late home, said his mother, as he was about to leave the apartment. Last night, she said, a nurse at the hospital had told her there were going to be special trains laid on today and tomorrow. We're leaving. Peter nodded, he had been looking forward for weeks to travelling by train at last. He had only ever been on a train once, two years ago, when he was starting school and his father had visited them. His father and he had gone by train to visit a colleague of his father's in Velten. Now the war had been over for eight weeks and his father still didn't come home. Peter wished he could have asked his mother why she wasn't waiting for his father any longer, he'd have liked her to confide in him.

Last summer, on the night between the sixteenth and seventeenth of August, Peter had been alone in the apartment. His mother often worked two shifts back to back during those months, and she had stayed on at the hospital after the late shift to work the night shift as well. When she wasn't there Peter felt afraid of the hand that would come out from under the bed in the dark, reaching up through the gap between the wall and the sheet. He felt the metal of his clasp knife against his leg, he kept thinking how fast he would have to whip it out when the hand appeared. That night Peter had lain face down on his mother's bed and listened, as he did every night. It was better to lie in the very middle of the bed; that way there was plenty of room on both sides for him to see the hand appear in good time. He'd have to thrust the knife in fast and firmly. Peter sweated when he imagined the hand coming up; he saw himself so paralysed by fear that he wouldn't be able to raise the clasp knife to strike it.

He remembered exactly how he had taken the velvet of the heavy bedspread in both hands, one of those hands also clutching the knife, and rubbed his cheek against it. Faintly, almost gently, the first siren sounded, then it howled, rising high to a long, penetrating screech. Peter shut his eyes. The sound stung his ears. Peter didn't like the cellar. He kept thinking up new ways of avoiding going down to the shelter there. The siren sounded again. His heart was beating fast, his throat felt tight. Everything about him was stiff, rigid. He had to breathe deeply. Goose down – Peter pressed his nose into his mother's pillow and drew in the smell of her as if it could satisfy his hunger. Then all was still. Terribly still. Peter raised his head and heard his teeth chattering; he tried to keep his jaws together, he clenched his teeth with all his might, lowered his head again and pressed his face into the goose down. As he rubbed his face against the pillow, which meant that he had to move his head back and forth, something underneath it crackled. Carefully, he put his hand

under the pillow and his fingertips touched paper. At the same moment a sinister roaring sound filled his ears, the sound of the first bombs dropping. Peter's breath came faster, there was crashing and splintering, glass couldn't withstand the pressure and the windowpanes broke, the bed where he was lying shook and Peter suddenly felt that everything around him was more alive than he was. Silence followed. In defiance of the events outside, he drew out a letter with his free hand. Peter recognized the writing. He laughed wildly, he couldn't help it, oh, his father had entirely slipped his mind although he would always protect him. That was his writing, look, his M for My, A for Alice. The letters stood firmly side by side, nothing could touch them, no siren, no bomb, no fire. Peter smiled lovingly at them. His eyes stung and the writing threatened to blur. His father was sorry about something. Peter had to read the letter from his protector, he had to read what it said, as long as he was reading nothing would harm him. Fate was putting all Germany severely to the test. The sheet of paper trembled in Peter's hands; that must be the shaking of the bed. As for Germany, Peter's father was doing his best. She asks if he couldn't work in one of the shipyards. Shipyards, of course, sirens were howling but not ships' sirens, the other kind. Peter's eyes streamed. Civil engineers like him, said the letter, were urgently needed. There was a hissing very close, as if it were right outside the window, a crash, a second and even louder crash. They were finishing work on the Reich Autobahn, there wasn't much to do in the east. Not much to do? Once again Peter heard the roaring, the smell of burning tickled his nose at first, then it became acrid and sharp, but Peter was still smiling, he felt as if nothing bad could happen to him with his father's letter in his hands. Alice. Peter's mother. She reproached him, said the letter, for writing so seldom. There was smoke in the air but it didn't smell of smoke; was that a fire crackling? It had nothing to do with her origins. *It*, what was *it*? And what

origins, what was his father writing about? A remittance? Did that say remittance? Things were happening, wrote his father, that changed matters between them.

It had been such hard work, deciphering that letter. If only he'd been able to read better, as well as he could now almost a year later, at the age of nearly eight, perhaps he could have believed in the power of the letter to protect him, but the letter had failed, Peter hadn't been able to finish reading it.

When he set off for the dairy and Herr Fuchs the teacher that morning, everything was all right and he didn't need a letter from any father to help him through the night now, not ever. The war was over and today they were leaving, Peter and his mother. Peter saw a tin can in the gutter and kicked it. It made a wonderful clattering sound as it scudded along. The horror would be over, it would be left behind, not a single dream would ever remind them of it. Peter remembered the first air raids in winter, and once again he felt his friend Robert's hand as they scrambled over the low, white-painted fence at the roadside. They were about to cross the street near the Berlin Gate and jump down into the ditch by the newspaper stand. Their shoes had slipped on the ice, they had skidded. Something must have hit his friend, severing his hand from his body. But Peter had run on alone over the distance they had yet to go, as if he had been speeded up when his friend was torn away from him. He had felt the firm, warm hand, and it was a long time before he let go of it. When he realized, later, that he was still holding Robert's hand he couldn't just drop it in the ditch, he had taken it home with him. His mother had opened the door to him. She had made him sit on a chair and encouraged him to unclench his fingers. Then she crouched down on the floor in front of him, holding one of the white fabric napkins with her initials on it, and waited; she had stroked and kneaded his hands until he let go.

To this day Peter wondered what she had done with it. He gave the tin can a hefty kick, sending it rolling over to the other side of the street, almost all the way to the dairy. It still felt as if he were holding Robert's hand – then, next moment, as if the hand were holding him, and as if his father referred solely to that incident in the letter. Yet he hadn't seen his father for two years; he had never had a chance to tell him about the hand.

Last summer, that August night when the bombs dropped, when Peter had read his father's letter, he'd been able to decipher only every third or fourth sentence. The letter had been no help. His hands had been shaking. His father wanted to do what was right by the mother of his son, he wrote, he would be frank, he had met another woman. There were steps to be heard on the staircase and another little sound so close that, for the fraction of a second, it stopped your ears; then came a crash and screaming. Hastily, Peter skimmed the remaining lines. They were to be brave, he was sure the war would soon be won. He, Peter's father, would probably not be able to come and see them any more, a man's life called for decisive action, but he would soon send more money. Peter had heard a noise at the door of the apartment, hard to say if it was a shell howling, or a siren, or a human being. He had folded up the letter and put it back under the pillow. He was trembling. The smoke stung his eyes, making them stream, and waves of heat from the burning city were coming closer.

Someone took hold of him and carried him downstairs to the cellar on his shoulders. When he and the others crawled out into the open air, hours later, it was light outside. The stairs up to their apartment were still there, only the banisters had come away and were lying on the steps. There was smoke in the air. Peter climbed the stairs on all fours, had to clamber over something black, then he pushed open the door of the apartment and sat down at the kitchen table. The sun was shining right on the table, shining so

brightly that he had to close his eyes. He was thirsty. For some time he felt too weak to stand up and go over to the sink. When he did turn on the tap he heard only a gurgling and no water came out. It could be hours before his mother was home. Peter waited. He fell asleep with his head on the table. His mother woke him. She took his head in both hands and pressed it against her, and only when he put his arms round her did she let go. The door of the apartment was open. Peter saw the black thing in the stairwell. He thought of the screaming last night. His mother opened a cupboard, threw sheets and towels over her shoulder, took candles out of a drawer and said she had to go straight out again. She told Peter to help her carry things; they needed bandages and alcohol for use as a disinfectant. They climbed over the charred body outside the door of their apartment. It was the shoes more than anything that told Peter this had been a human being, the body was so shrivelled, and he saw a large gold pocket watch. Something that was almost a feeling of happiness flooded through him that morning, for the watch couldn’t possibly have belonged to Frau Kozinska.

The photograph of the handsome man in the fine suit, leaning on the shiny black bodywork of the car with one arm elegantly crooked and glancing up at the sky, clear-eyed, as if he were looking at the future or at least at birds in the air, still stood in its frame on the glass-fronted kitchen cabinet. Peter’s mother said that now the war was over his father would come and take them to Frankfurt, where he was building a big bridge over the river Main. Then Peter would be able to go to a proper school, said his mother, and it made him uncomfortable to hear her telling these lies. Why doesn’t he write, asked Peter in a moment of rebellion. The post isn’t working any more, replied his mother, not since the Russians came. Peter looked down, feeling ashamed of himself for his question. From now on he waited, with his

mother, day after day. After all, it was possible that his father might change his mind.

One evening, when Peter's mother was at work in the hospital, he had looked under her pillow. He wanted to make sure. The letter had disappeared. Peter had opened his mother's desk with a sharp knife, but he found only paper and envelopes and a few Reichsmarks that she kept in a small box. He had searched his mother's wardrobe, he had lifted her ironed, neatly folded aprons and her underwear. There were two letters from her sister Elsa there, sent from Bautzen. Elsa's handwriting was such a scrawl that Peter could read only the opening words: Dear little Alice. He hadn't found any more of his father's letters, not a single one.

This morning, when Peter entered the dairy, Herr Fuchs the teacher and his sister were not there. The children waited for them in vain and looked at the other people who came into the shop, first diffidently, then boldly, and opened all the cupboards, crates, tubs and cans. The people cursed and swore, there wasn't a drop of sour cream left, not a bit of butter. An elderly lady kicked a cupboard and the door fell off.

As soon as the last of the grown-ups had left the shop the oldest boy knelt down on the floor, expertly lifted one of the tiles, and underneath it there was a cool storage space. One of the boys whistled and the girls nodded appreciatively. But the space was empty. Whatever had been inside it, butter or money, wasn't there any more. When the boy looked up and his disapproving glance happened to fall on Peter, he asked why he was all dressed up like that. Peter looked down at himself in his best shirt and only now did he remember that he had to be home in good time. That was the last thing his mother had told him.

Even in the stairwell, he could hear the pots and pans clattering. His mother had been on night shift for the last week and spent her days cleaning up the apartment, as if it

had ever been dirty; she polished the floors, dusted the chairs and cupboards, cleaned the windows. The door of the apartment wasn't locked and Peter opened it. He saw three men round the kitchen table, and his mother half sitting, half lying on it. The bare behind of one of the men was moving back and forth level with Peter's eyes, and his fleshy buttocks wobbled so much that Peter wanted to laugh. But the soldiers were holding his mother firmly. Her skirt was torn, her eyes were wide open, Peter didn't know if she could see him or was looking straight through him. Her mouth was wide open too, but no sound came out. One of the soldiers noticed Peter, held the waistband of his trousers closed and tried to push him out of the door. Peter called for his mother. Mother, he cried, Mother. The soldier kicked his legs, hard, so that Peter collapsed outside the door. One foot kicked his backside and then the door was closed.

Peter sat on the stairs and waited. He heard Frau Kozinska singing: *A bird on a green bough sat singing its song, on a cold wintry night, yet it sang loud and long*. But this was summer and Peter was thirsty, and the trains would soon be going. He wanted to leave with his mother. Peter pressed his lips firmly together. He looked at the door and the gap where the lock had once been. There were still splinters of wood on the floor. Peter's teeth nibbled scraps of thin skin off his lips. Soldiers had visited his mother once before, only a few days ago; they'd had to kick the door down, knocking the lock out. They had stayed all day, drinking and bawling. Peter had kept on hammering at the door. Someone must have pushed something up against it on the inside, perhaps there was a chair wedged under the handle. Peter had peered through the hole left by the missing lock, but there was such thick smoke inside that he couldn't make out anything. So Peter had sat on the stairs, waiting, as he was sitting now. You couldn't sharpen your teeth. Peter carefully chewed a scrap of skin that he had nibbled off. As he bit his lips he rubbed both forefingers over his gums. Although his

mother kept his nails as short as possible, he always managed to loosen the skin over his gums with his forefinger, using the place where the nail lay embedded.

When the door finally opened last time the soldiers had stumbled out into the stairwell one by one. They went downstairs and knocked at Frau Kozinska's door. The last of them had turned and called something up to Peter in German: I have a lad like you at home, keep an eye on your mother. And the soldier, smiling, had wagged one forefinger. When Peter went into the smoke-filled kitchen he had seen his mother bending over in a corner of the kitchen, smoothing out a sheet. You're a big boy now, she had said without looking at Peter, you can't sleep in my bed any more.

She hadn't looked at him, unlike today. He had never seen such an expression in his mother's eyes before. They were icy.

It was hard for Peter to wait outside the door. He stood there, he sat down on the stairs and stood up again. Peter tried to see something through the gap left by the lock when it was broken out. He stood on tiptoe on the last step and leaned forward. That way he could easily lose his balance. Peter felt impatient, his stomach was grumbling. Whenever his mother was on night shift she came home in the morning, woke him to get ready for school and had a meal waiting when he came home at midday. She made soup with water, salt and fish-heads. Later she took the fish-heads out and put some sorrel in the soup. She said it was healthy and nourishing. Very occasionally, when she had got hold of a little flour, she made it into small dumplings and simmered them in the soup. There'd been no potatoes since last winter. There was no meat, no lentils, no cabbage. Even in the hospital they had nothing but fish to feed to the children. Peter's eyes were fixed, as they had been before, on the closed door and the hole left by the lock. He sat down on the top step. He remembered that after last time

his mother had asked him to go and find a new lock. There were locks everywhere, in every building, in every godforsaken apartment. But Peter had forgotten.

Now Peter was chewing at the ragged skin round his thumbnail, where you could pull it off in long, thin strips. If he hadn't forgotten about the lock, his mother could have locked the door. Peter's eyes wandered over the charred door frame in the abandoned apartment next door. You could see the marks left by the fire everywhere; the walls, ceilings and floors were black. He and his mother had been lucky, only the apartment above them and their old neighbour's apartment next door had burned out.

Suddenly the door opened and two soldiers came out. They were clapping each other on the back, in high good humour. Peter wondered if he could go into the apartment. He had counted three men before, so one of them must still be inside. Peter quietly got to his feet, went to the apartment door and opened it a crack. He heard sobbing. The kitchen seemed to be empty. This time none of the soldiers had been smoking; it all looked as clean and comfortable as it had in the morning. His mother's cleaning rag lay on the kitchen dresser. Turning, Peter saw the naked soldier behind the door. Legs drawn up, head in his hands, the man sat on the floor sobbing. Peter thought it a strange sight, because the soldier was wearing a helmet, although otherwise he was entirely naked, and the war had been over for weeks.

Peter left the soldier sitting behind the door and went into the next room, where his mother was just closing the wardrobe. She was wearing her outdoor coat, she took the small case off the bed. Peter wanted to say he was sorry he'd forgotten the lock, sorry he hadn't been able to help her, but he got out only a single word and that was: Mother. He reached for her hand. She shook his off and went ahead of him.

They passed the sobbing soldier sitting on the kitchen floor behind the front door of the apartment, they went downstairs, they walked straight along the street to the fish quay. Peter's mother, with her long legs, walked so fast that he had trouble keeping up with her. He hopped and skipped along, and as he scurried after her, almost running, a great feeling of happiness came over him. He was filled by the certainty that they would be catching the train today, they would be setting out on their great journey, the journey west. Peter guessed that they wouldn't be going to Frankfurt, perhaps they'd go to Bautzen and his mother's sister, but first they would travel in the direction of Berlin. Once upon a time his mother used to tell him, as he dropped off to sleep, about the river, the beautiful market place in Bautzen, the wonderful smell in her parents' printing works. Peter clapped his hands and began to whistle, until his mother suddenly stood still and told him to stop it. Once again Peter tried to take her hand, but his mother asked if he couldn't see that she had the case and her handbag to carry.

I can carry the case, Peter offered, but his mother wouldn't let him.

Peter had often been to the fish market with his mother. One of the few fishwives still working there knew her well. She was a very young woman, her face still burned from last August, so that you could hardly see her youth. While the burns appeared a blemish at first, that blemish might have protected the young woman these last few weeks. She was the only one who still put up a big red sun umbrella early every morning, just like back in the old days, people said. In the old days – and by that they meant not so very long ago – the whole fish market had been full of big red sun umbrellas. They had disappeared over the last few years and months. It was from this fishwife that Peter's mother often fetched the fish for the children, eels, zander, bream, tench, pike, sometimes a fish from the sea that had found

its way in from the lagoon, they were glad of any kind of fish at the hospital, and in spring Peter's mother had brought home a shad. By the time they reached the quay the fishwife had long ago set up her crate on her little wooden cart, with the sun umbrella right above it. There was a smell of tar and fish in the heat of the summer day. Cats lived among the ruins of the fish quay. Peter watched a thin tomcat run along the bank, rolling slightly from side to side, and jump down on to the little wooden landing stage. There wasn't a single boat left now where the broad, solid, flat-bottomed boats used to rock side by side with the fishing smacks. The cat dipped one paw into the water, its head jerking back again and again as if something had alarmed it. Was there a fish there or not? Peter's mother opened her handbag and took out some banknotes. This was what she owed the fishwife, she said. The fishwife wiped down her hands on her apron, where thousands of scales glittered, making it look like a robe, a mermaid's robe, as she took the notes and said thank you. Her eye fell on the case, and when his mother shook hands with her she said: Have a good journey. The fishwife's lips had almost escaped injury; they looked plump, full and young. Her voice rippled as if she were about to start chuckling. She had no eyebrows left and her eyelashes hadn't grown back very far yet. Peter liked it when she turned aside and cast her eyes down, sounding embarrassed as she said something like: Well, good luck, then. He felt that she was looking at him and it was him she meant. He stood very close to his mother and laid his head against her arm, rubbed his nose over her elbow as if by chance, until she moved aside and changed her case to the other hand.

They walked briskly to the station. But even as they were going down the steps, a uniformed nurse with a big belly came towards them, obviously a colleague of his mother's, saying that the special trains weren't coming into Stettin,

they’d have to walk to the next station in Scheune. The trains were leaving from there.

They went along between the tracks. The nurse was soon breathless. She kept close to Peter’s mother and he walked behind them, trying to understand what they were talking about. The nurse said she hadn’t been able to sleep a wink for thinking about the corpses they’d found by night in the hospital yard. Peter’s mother did not reply. She said nothing about the soldiers and their visit. Her colleague was sobbing; she said she really admired Peter’s mother for taking action, although everyone knew that there was something, well, not quite right about her background. The nurse laid a hand on her big belly, puffing and panting, but she wouldn’t dwell on that now, she said. Who’d have the courage, after all? She herself could never have taken one of those stakes to thrust it into a woman’s body and pull it out again, impaled like animals they’d been, with their female parts shredded. The nurse stopped, leaning heavily on Peter’s mother’s shoulder for support, she breathed deeply, the survivor kept on calling for her daughter, she said, but the daughter had bled to death long before, lying there beside her. Peter’s mother stopped and told the nurse brusquely to keep quiet. For God’s sake shut up.

The narrow platform at Scheune was crammed with people waiting. They sat on the ground in groups, suspiciously watching the new arrivals.

Nurse Alice! The cry came from a group sitting on the ground, two women were waving their arms in the air. Peter’s mother followed the voice of the woman who had obviously recognized her. She crouched down among the seated group. Peter sat down beside his mother, and the pregnant nurse followed them but stood there looking undecided, shifting from foot to foot. The women whispered together, and two women and a man went off with the pregnant nurse. When a woman needed to pee, she took

several other people with her for company, if possible. Ivan was said to lurk behind the bushes waiting to attack women.

Several more hours were to pass before a train came in. The people crowded round it even before it stopped, trying to grab handles and rails. It almost looked as if the crowd itself were stopping the train, bringing it to a halt. The train didn’t seem to have enough doors. Arms flailed, feet kicked, people struck out and brought sharp elbows into play. There was swearing and whistling. Those who were too weak were pushed aside, left behind. Peter felt his mother’s hand on his back as she propelled him through the crowd, he had fabric against his face, coats, a case struck him in the ribs, and finally his mother picked him up from behind and raised him above the shoulders of the crowd. The conductor blew his whistle. At the last moment, Peter’s mother fought her way the crucial final metre forward, pushing Peter, shoving him, forcing him into the train with all her might. Peter turned, holding her hand tightly, clutching it, the train jolted and began to move, the wheels were going round, Peter held on to the door, held on to his mother too, he’d show her how strong he was. Jump! he cried. At that moment their hands lost touch. The people left on the platform were running along beside the train. Someone must have pulled the emergency brake, or perhaps the engine was labouring, because the wheels squealed on the rails. A fat lady in a hat at the back of the crowd called out: Sausages, there’s sausages over there! Sure enough, many people turned to look at her, stopped, stood on tiptoe, craned their heads to see who had uttered that cry and where the sausages were. The fat lady took her chance to fight her way several metres forward. The crowd pressed Peter’s mother and the case into the train. Peter put both arms round his mother. He was never going to let go of her again.

Once on board, they stood in the corridor, people were pushing and shoving, children had to stand on suitcases. Peter was happy to stand on theirs; it made him almost as

tall as his mother. When she turned, as she kept doing, her hair tickled him. It was pinned up but a lock had fallen loose. She smelled of lilac. Beside her, the door to the compartment with seats in it was open, and two young girls stood there on their cases in short-sleeved dresses, holding on to the overloaded baggage rack. The first sparse little hairs were growing in their armpits and Peter craned over his mother's shoulder to get a better look at their dresses, which curved out here and there. Peter felt the pleasant friction of his mother's coat rubbing under his chin. She must be sweating, but she hadn't wanted to leave her coat behind. The train jerked and slowly began to move. Outside the window, those who hadn't managed to board it moved by. One of the two girls was waving and crying, and Peter saw that little hairs were sprouting under her other arm too.

Hold tight, his mother told him, nodding her head towards the door frame of the compartment. Her little nurse's cap was still perched on her blonde, pinned-up hair, although they weren't in the hospital. Are you dreaming? Hold on tight, she snapped. But Peter put his hands on his mother's shoulders, thinking of the soldier who had been sitting sobbing behind the door. He was glad they were getting out of that place at last, and he wanted to fling his arms round his mother. Then someone's elbow struck him in the back, pushing him against his mother so hard that she almost overbalanced, the case under Peter's feet gave way, tipped over, and Peter fell on top of his mother. She staggered back into the compartment. She would never have cried out, she just uttered a sound of annoyance. Peter put his hand on her hip so as not to lose touch with her. He tried to help her up. Her eyes were sparkling angrily, Peter said he was sorry, but his mother didn't seem to be listening; her mouth stayed closed, her lips were narrowed, she pushed his hand away. Peter wanted her attention at any price.

Mother, he said, but she didn't hear him. Mother, he repeated, taking her hand again. It was cold and strong, and

he loved it. Next moment the train jerked, people tumbled against each other, and his mother held tight with one hand to the baggage rack and with the other to the door frame for the rest of the journey, while Peter clung to her coat without her noticing or being able to prevent him.

Just before Pasewalk the train stopped on an open stretch of line. The doors were opened, and the passengers pushed and shoved each other out of the train. Peter and his mother let the mass of humanity sweep them along until they reached the platform. A woman was shouting that her baggage had been stolen. Only now did Peter notice that they had lost sight of the pregnant nurse. Perhaps she hadn’t gone back to Scheune at all after answering the call of nature? Peter’s mother was walking fast now, people came towards them and stood in their way, Peter was jostled repeatedly and held his mother’s coat all the more tightly.

You wait here, his mother said when they came to a bench. An old man had just that moment got up from it. Trains leave for Anklam and Angermünde from here, perhaps there’ll be tickets. I’ll be right back. She took Peter by the shoulders and pressed him down on the bench.

I’m hungry, said Peter. Laughing, he clung to her arms.

I’ll be right back, she repeated, you wait here.

I’m coming with you, he said.

She said: Let go of me, Peter. But he was already getting to his feet to follow her. At that she thrust the little case his way and pressed him and the case back on the bench. Now that Peter had to hold it on his lap he couldn’t reach for her any more.

You wait. She said that sternly. A smile flitted over her face, she patted his cheek and Peter was glad. He thought of the sausages back in Scheune, that lady had been shouting about them, maybe there’d be some sausages here, he’d help his mother look for them, he wanted to help her anyway. He opened his mouth, but she was determined

to have her own way, she turned and plunged into the crowd. Peter watched her go and spotted her by the door to the station concourse.

He badly needed to pee and looked around for a toilet, but he wanted to wait until she was back. After all, people could easily lose each other on a station like this. The sun slowly set. Peter's hands were cold, he held the case firmly and jiggled his knees. Small particles of colour from the case stuck to his hands, deep red. He kept looking towards the door where he had last seen his mother. People streamed by. At some point the family sitting on the bench beside him stood up and others sat down. Peter kept thinking of his father, building a bridge over the river Main somewhere in Frankfurt. He knew his name, Wilhelm, but not where he lived. His father was a hero. What about his mother? He knew her name too, Alice. There was something suspect in her background. Once again Peter looked at the door to the station concourse. His neck was stiff from sitting like that for hours, staring the same way. A train came in, people picked up baggage, reached for their nearest and dearest, you had to hold on to everything. Anklam – the train wasn't going to Angermünde, it was for Anklam. The crowd was happy so long as it was going somewhere, anywhere. It was after midnight now and Peter didn't need to pee any more, he was just waiting. The platform had emptied, so presumably those who were still waiting had gone into the station concourse. If there was a ticket office wouldn't it have closed long ago? Perhaps there wasn't a concourse beyond that door at all, perhaps this station had been destroyed like the one in Stettin. A blonde woman appeared at the far end of the concourse; Peter stood up, jamming the case between his legs, he strained to see, but it wasn't his mother. Peter stayed on his feet for a while. When he was sitting down again, gnawing at his lips, he heard his mother complaining of the way he persisted in peeling off bits of his body and eating them, he could see her expression of

revulsion in his mind’s eye. Someone or other, Peter told himself, someone or other is bound to turn up. His eyes closed, he opened them, he mustn’t go to sleep or he wouldn’t notice if someone came looking for him; he fought against sleep, thought of his mother’s hand and drew his legs up on the bench. He laid his head on his knees and never took his eyes off the station door. When daybreak came he woke up thirsty, and the wet fabric of the seat of his trousers was sticking to his skin. Now at last he stood up to go in search of a toilet and some water.

THE WORLD IS ALL BEFORE US

TWO GIRLS LAY on a white-enamelled metal bedstead, taking turns to put their bare feet against the warm copper of the hot-water bottle. The little one kept trying to get the bottle over to her side of the bed, pushing with her toes and shoving with her heels. However, at the last moment her sister's long leg would stop her. Helene admired the length of Martha's legs and her slender, graceful feet. But the apparently effortless determination with which Martha claimed the hot-water bottle for herself, against Helene's wishes, drove her to despair. She braced her hands against her sister's back and tried to find a way for her cold toes to get past Martha's legs and feet under the heavy covers. The candlelight flickered; every breath of air caused by the scuffling under the blanket as it suddenly rose and fell made the flame gutter. Helene wanted to laugh and cry at once in her impatience, she compressed her lips and reached out for her sister, whose nightdress had ridden up, so that Helene's hand came down on Martha's bare belly, Martha's hips, Martha's thighs. Helene wanted to tickle her, but Martha twisted and turned, Helene's hands kept slipping away, and soon Helene had to close her fingers and pinch to get hold of any part of Martha at all. There was a tacit agreement between the two sisters: neither of them must utter a sound.

Martha didn't cry out, she just held Helene's hands tight. Her eyes were shining. She squeezed Helene's hands between hers so hard that her finger joints cracked, Helene squealed, she whimpered, Martha squeezed harder until Helene gave up and the little girl kept whispering: Let go, please, let go.

Martha smiled. She wanted to read a page or so of her book now. Her little sister's blonde eyelashes fluttered, the curve of her eyes showed under them. How fine the network of veins was round the eye. Of course Martha would forgive Helene sooner or later. All this just because of a copper hot-

water bottle at their feet. Helene's pleading was a familiar sound, it soothed Martha. She let the little girl's hands go, turned her back to her sister and pulled the quilt away with her.

Helene was freezing. She sat up. And although her hands still hurt she reached out with them, touched Martha's shoulder and took hold of her thick braid, which had little curls escaping from it everywhere. Martha's hair was both soft and unruly, almost as dark as their mother's black hair. Helene liked to watch when Martha was allowed to comb Mother's hair. Then Mother would sit with her eyes closed, humming a tune that sounded like a cat purring. She purred contentedly in several different musical registers while Martha brushed and combed her thick, long hair, grooming it like an animal's coat. Once Helene had been at the sink washing a sheet, and when all the soap was rinsed away she wrung it out over the big bucket, taking care not to splash any water on the kitchen floor. It was only a matter of time before Mother cried out. Her cry was not a high, clear sound, but low and throaty, uttered with the fervour of some large animal. Mother reared. The chair she had just been sitting on crashed to the floor. She pushed Martha away, the brush fell to the floor. She flailed out with her arms, violent, aimless movements, her hairslides and combs flying off the table, she hooked her foot round the chair, picked it up and flung it in Helene's direction. Her loud cries re-echoed as if the earth itself had opened up and was growling. The crochet work lying on the table shot right across the room. Something had pulled a strand of Mother's hair, tweaking it.

But while Mother shouted at her daughters, cursing them, complaining that she'd given birth to a couple of useless brats, Helene kept on and on repeating the same thing like a prayer: May I comb your hair? Her voice quivered: May I comb your hair? As a pair of scissors flew through the air she raised her arms to protect her head: May I comb your hair? She huddled under the table: May I comb your hair?