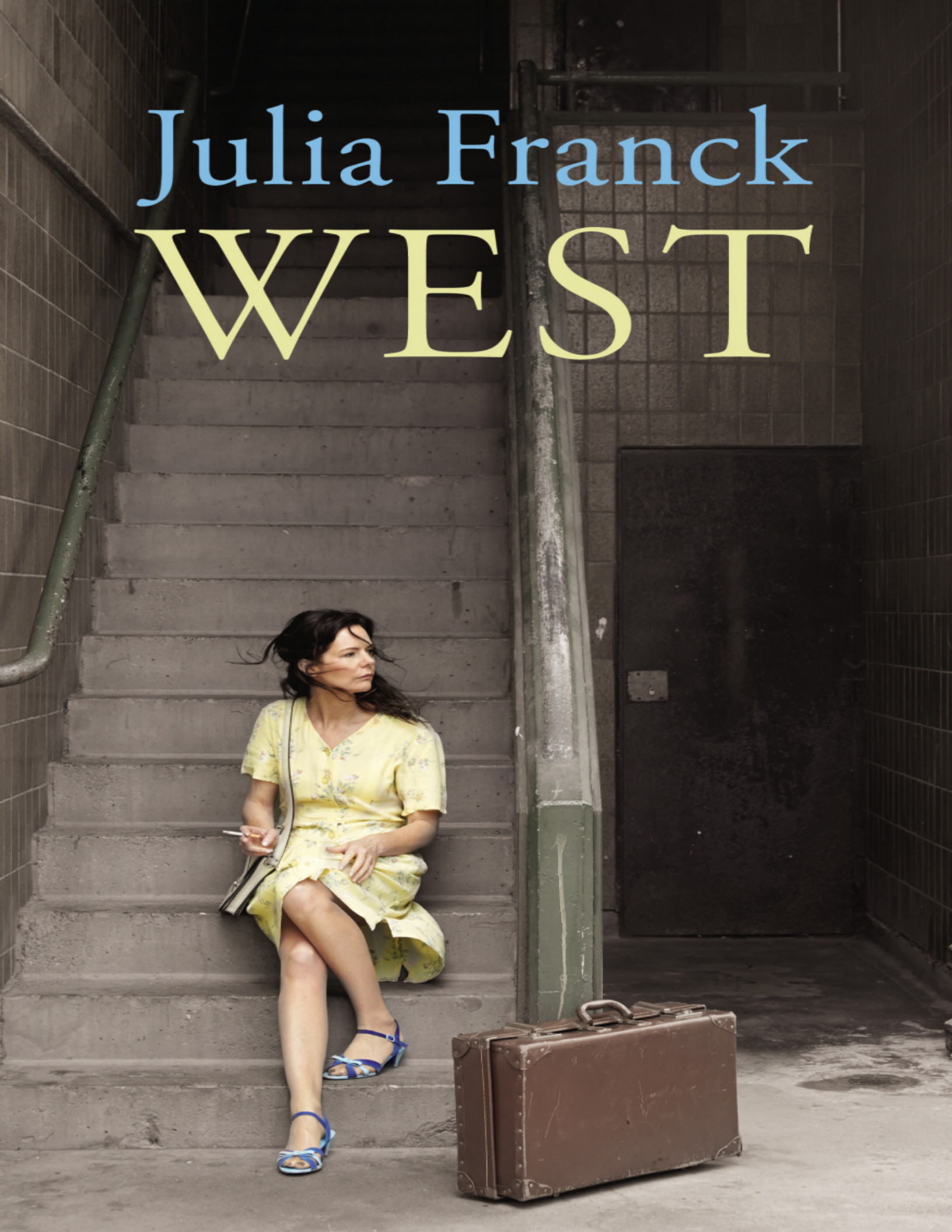
Julia Franck
WEST

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About the Book

Scientist Nelly Senff is desperate to escape her life in East Berlin. The father of her two children has supposedly committed suicide, and she wants to leave behind the prying eyes of the Stasi.

But the West is not all she hoped for. Nelly and her children are held in Marienfelde, a processing centre and no-man's-land between East and West. There she meets Krystyna, a Polish woman who hopes that medical treatment in the West will save her dying brother; Hans, a troubled actor released from prison in the East; and John, a CIA man monitoring the refugees for possible Stasi spies. All lives cross here, and the cramped confines of the camp breed defamation and violence.

West is a devastating portrait of a mother in turmoil, trying to do the best for her children, as she attempts to escape her past and start a new life.

About the Author

Julia Franck was born in Berlin in 1970. Her novel *The Blind Side of the Heart* won the German Book Prize and sold over a million copies in Germany alone. It was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and the Jewish Quarterly–Wingate Literary Prize, and was named one of the best books of the year by the *Guardian*. *West* is her third novel to be translated into English.

Also by Julia Franck

The Blind Side of the Heart
Back to Back

For Oscar, Emilie and Uli

West

Julia Franck

Translated from the German by Anthea Bell

Harvill Secker
LONDON

Nelly Senff drives over a bridge

THE CHILDREN WEARILY lowered their arms; they had been tenaciously waving, at first with enthusiasm in spite of the lack of any response, then probably out of habit and the pushiness of children. They must have been waving for an hour, their mouths pressed against the windows where they left wet kiss marks in the condensation on the glass; they had also rubbed their noses on the glass, they had continued waving until Katya told her brother, ‘I can’t keep this up any more, come on, let’s stop,’ and Aleksei nodded as if giving up at last, bringing their farewell to an end, was a good idea. The car took us a little further forward again; the brake lights of the small van in front of us went off. Under the flat-roofed superstructure a uniformed man stood in the twilight, indicating that we were to come closer, and then immediately raised both arms in the air. We stopped with a jolt, the engine stuttered and flooded. It had been like that for four hours; maybe we had covered three metres in those four hours, maybe ten. The Bornholm bridge must be a few metres ahead of us, I knew that, but we couldn’t see it; a plain, broad building with a narrow carriageway passing through it hid everything coming towards us from view. The small van was waved over and guided into another lane. The lights flickered and came on, except for one of them on the right that stayed dark. I wondered when they ever got time to do any repairs in this place. Perhaps between twelve midnight and two in the morning. You could see how the shadow ahead of us came closer until it disappeared under the bonnet of the car. Soon after that it was climbing over the windscreen, over our faces, and at last it ruthlessly

swallowed up the car like everything else: the shadow of that broad roof, of the building that bridged the carriageway and hid the view ahead. The building consisted entirely of cardboard and corrugated iron. The sun in front of us sank behind the houses and shone once more in the window of the guardhouse tower high above us, as if with the enticing promise that, by following it, we would be sure to see it again in the West tomorrow. Then it was gone, leaving us here in the twilight with only a few fiery streaks in the sky, and the shadows were swallowing up not only us but the entire city behind us, when Gerd ground out his cigarette, breathed in deeply, held his breath, and told me he had wondered ten years ago when I would finally make this journey. He whistled through his teeth as if casually, but at the time, he pointed out, I had only just met that man, and he could tell me that today, now that I was sitting in his car and my journey led only in this one direction. I couldn’t get out, whereupon he laughed; he had always, he said, imagined holding me naked in his arms.

Gerd lit another cigarette, curling his tongue round it from below, started the engine, stopped it, started it again; the ashtray was brimming over. I collected the cigarette ends with my bare hand and stuffed them into a small plastic bag that I had been careful to bring with me in case the children felt sick. I was the one who felt sick now. I didn’t want to be naked in Gerd’s arms. I’d been successfully fending off that idea until this moment when, with a little whistle through his teeth and a few harmless words, he made my efforts ridiculous. Even the fact that I was in his car, with my children on the back seat of it kissing the windows, and we were in the process of crossing this bridge didn’t make it an exciting prospect.

Katya held her nose and asked if she could open the window. I nodded, and ignored Gerd’s groan. I had imagined for some time that Gerd would spare me having to listen to what he wanted out of thoughtfulness, and in the knowledge

that I didn’t want him to touch me at all. Then again, I’d hoped that he had forgotten my body as far as possible. Not very well, maybe, but still I hoped he’d made the effort. An effort that I had appreciated, but now he wasn’t making that effort at all, or if he had then it failed at this moment. The man whose name he certainly had not forgotten, although he didn’t speak it, had been the father of my children. But that wasn’t the reason why I suddenly felt repelled by Gerd. I was repelled by his refusal to acknowledge why we were sitting in his car. We were sitting in it solely to get across this bridge, and maybe also for another reason, but definitely not with the aim of sitting together undisturbed in a very small space. Cool air came in from outside, smelling of petrol and slightly of summer, but more of night and the coming cold. Twilight. A uniformed police officer came over to the car and bent down on Gerd’s side so that he could get a better view of the interior. His torch shone a little light on our faces; the beam was faint and flickered, as if it would go out any moment. He checked our names and faces in turn. I looked into a pallid face with a broad, low forehead; his eyes were deep-set, forced all the way back into their sockets by his cheekbones, a Pomeranian face, no longer youthful although he was still young. He tapped the back door with his flashlight and said we couldn’t stop here with the windows open, they had to be closed for safety reasons. After he had checked the children’s papers, he said, ‘Get out.’ My door stuck; I shook it until it sprang open and got out.

‘No,’ the uniformed police officer called to me over the roof of the car, ‘not you, only the children.’

I sat down in the car again and turned round. ‘He wants you two to get out,’ I repeated, at the same time reaching for Aleksei’s hand to hold it tight. But my own hand met thin air; only now did I notice that I was trembling. The doors closed. The man said something to my children that I couldn’t make out, as he pointed to our car, shook his head

and clapped Aleksei's thin shoulder. Then I saw them following him into the low building. There was a neon light on above the dark window. I waited for a light to appear, but the window stayed black. Perhaps a roller blind had come down inside it. Or there was a special layer on the glass to prevent you from seeing in, while it was possible to see out from inside, just as you could see through the bronze mirror windows of the Palace of the Republic. The king looked out and could see his people, but those outside saw blank panes, were dazzled by their brightness and could not see through them. If they had been on the same level as the king and his windows, looking straight at the mirror glass, they could at least have seen their reflections and met the unconcealed curiosity of their own gaze. But the little people stood down below in the square, seeing nothing but the sky reflected up there in the windows. Their glance was not returned. However, the panes of the window here were particularly black, deep black, black as coal, raven black, and the longer I looked at the window the more unnatural it seemed to me. No brightness, no orange glow. All the light soaked up long ago. No raven, no coal, no depths. Only black. The window was nothing but a dummy. Gerd ground out his cigarette and lit another.

'Nice and quiet here.' He was enjoying these minutes alone with me. They'll ask Katya and Aleksei why we wanted to cross the bridge, I thought. They'll take them separately into a room without any windows, sit each child down on a chair and say: We want to know something, and you must tell us the truth, do you hear? And Katya will nod, while Aleksei will look at his shoes. Look at me, the servant of the state will tell Aleksei as he pats him on the back, like an old friend, a colleague, someone to be trusted. Not knowing that even if Aleksei did raise his head he could see only the man's vague outline, because his glasses weren't much good any more. He liked looking at his shoes; they were the furthest part of him from his eyes, yet they belonged to him,

he knew just what his shoes looked like. Perhaps the official would threaten him, perhaps he would tug at his arm so that Aleksei wouldn’t forget how much stronger a man like him was. Perhaps there would be three of them facing Aleksei, five of them, the whole room could be full of uniformed servants of the state, members of the People’s Police, of State Security, border soldiers, men in high places, apprentices, assistants – but then that individual man would lose some of his authority. Why does your mother want to cross the bridge? Has she known the man with you for long? Does she love him? Have you seen him kissing her? And her kissing him? How do they kiss each other? Would you like to have a father from the West? Has he brought you children presents? What kind of presents? Ah, then he’s a capitalist. Isn’t he? Silence. What could Aleksei say? There were only wrong answers. Something was darting about at the base of my spine; I could call it fear, but it was only a flickering sensation. Wrong answers. Aleksei didn’t even know that, but maybe he was beginning to guess it. Will they detain us? What would that piece of paper, that permit, count for if they simply made me disappear and put the children in a home? Compulsory adoption. There were rumours of such things. Enemies of the state in particular, but also enemies of socialist democracy, and more especially people who fled the country, were those whose children were taken into the care of the state. Irretrievably and never to be found again. Later they could always say I had died of a pulmonary embolism. They could say that about whomever they chose. The stories you heard hardly differed – only the names of the people in the stories differed. Why would anyone here bother to make up an imaginative story, and for whose benefit? Since facts are also inventions and subject to a consensus of opinion, no one will be able to prove that I didn’t create an uproar and I wasn’t ill – only Gerd could do that. In so far as he wasn’t one of them, it was a good thing that I was sitting here with him in the car, that it was his car.

Keep the darting sensation down, don’t panic. He couldn’t disappear just like that, the king would be in difficulty, great difficulty, we weren’t all that important to him, not even Aleksei, not even Katya. Little fishes. Tiny little fishes. True, they had swum away from the shoal, they weren’t swimming with the current any more, but they were tiny enough to be overlooked. What do you think capitalism has in store for you? That’s what Katya’s teacher had asked a few weeks ago, when she kept Katya back in the classroom after lessons for a private talk. Doesn’t your family believe in peace? You do remember, Katya, don’t you? Didn’t you too want to help the poor children in Vietnam? Didn’t you bring rice to school and collect raw materials? And whose fault is the poverty in Vietnam? Well, whose fault? Who lets so many children in the world go hungry? Haven’t you learned anything at school? In kindergarten, in the day nursery? Don’t you know that capitalists are your enemies? Katya had come home with swollen eyelids. She didn’t want other children to go hungry because of us, she didn’t want to go away to live with people who let other children go hungry. She cried half the night. She would certainly be interrogated along those lines now. And what did you say your future father was? No, a cabinet-maker isn’t quite right. He’s a capitalist. Yes, an enemy. What about your real father? What happened to him?

I knocked on the window.

‘Why are you knocking on the window? Stop knocking on the window.’ Gerd leaned back, avoiding my eyes; he was probably terrified of losing his nerve.

I knocked on the window.

‘Stop it.’

I knocked twice, copying the rhythm of his order.

He groaned, and I passed the palm of my hand over the pane.

‘How long have they been in there?’ I asked, staring at the black window of the low building.

‘No idea, I didn’t look at the time. Twenty minutes, maybe.’

‘Longer than that.’

Gerd didn’t reply; he was smoking. Since the uniformed police officer had gone away with my children, the door hadn’t opened once. No one had gone into the building, no one had come out of it. The door was so firmly closed that I wondered if I’d been mistaken, and my children had gone into an entirely different building with a door I’d been overlooking all this time. Or maybe they’d been taken into the building I was watching and then taken out again somewhere else, and I’d never noticed. Through a back door. Maybe an underground passage led to a remote police camp, straight to the Central Committee, to the dark, blue-green vaults of State Security. There’d be only one way out of those vaults, and it would lead to a dungeon in the copper palace. There might be another intricate labyrinth with special dungeons under the square where the palace stood, dungeons where the children of refugees and fugitives were locked up and made to improve themselves. Until they were ready to be taken into socialist families by citizens loyal to the state. Into families that couldn’t exist, maybe. And I was waiting here in vain for my children.

‘Did you see them going in too? There. Do you see that hut? They’re in there.’ I heard the uncertainty in my voice, but I pointed to the hut with the dummy window.

Gerd’s eyes followed my finger. He laughed, letting out air once with a brief, vigorous snort, and shrugged his shoulders wearily. ‘I don’t know.’ He glanced around. ‘They all look the same.’

The huts stood in a straight row, all with a narrow door on the left, a dummy window on the right and a neon light over it. Except for the huts at the ends of the row. As far as I could see, their windows were not dummies, and light shone out of them. Gerd snorted again as he breathed out. ‘You

don’t think they’re going to keep your children there, do you?’

Keep them there. Not here. In his thoughts Gerd was already on the other side of the bridge. I wasn’t. Gerd laughed. ‘You’re a funny one – you really think they have nothing better to do than take little kids into custody?’

‘Not just little kids.’ I tried to laugh with him, not really successfully. ‘In our country you never know.’

‘In our country?’ Gerd laughed again, and tears suddenly rose to my eyes. I turned away to keep him from seeing them. ‘In our country the first thing I’m going to do is invite you all out to eat. A huge plateful of *pommes frites.* I’m ravenous.’

I was just mopping tears off my face with my sleeve, and had turned to the window so that Gerd wouldn’t laugh at me for crying on top of everything else, when a doughy face appeared right in front of mine. Another uniformed man knocked on the glass from outside.

‘Window,’ I heard him say, his thumb pointing insistently down. I turned the handle; the window squealed as it descended into the side of the car.

‘Open the boot.’

I looked at Gerd, who was still grinning. He took the key out of the ignition. ‘Here you are.’ He reached his arm out in front of me and towards the man, who took the key from his hand and disappeared. Although the fresh air was pleasantly mild, I wound the window up again. I could hear the boot being opened. Things were taken out; there was knocking at the underside of the car. Soon after that I saw two officers disappear into one of the huts with our cases.

A fly was buzzing at the bottom corner of the windscreen; it flew into the glass again and again, its small body seemed to hit it with a muted, dull, heavy sound, but it still kept going, buzzed, stopped for a moment, rammed the glass and fell silent. Then more buzzing. I felt the shelf below the dashboard, and soon located the exhausted but buzzing

body of the fly under my hand. I slowly let my hand lie flat until the fly was tickling me between my forefinger and ring finger, its delicate little wings still moving all the time, buzzing, tickling me so much that I pressed those two fingers together as firmly as possible on the shelf. It struggled, but it couldn't escape. The space between my fingers and the plastic seemed too large; at intervals, I could still feel the struggling wings. I thought of the whitish fluid that would be squeezed out of the fly if I pressed hard. Suddenly there was a loud knock on the window. I saw only the fist, no face, a uniform; the door was opened. I almost knocked into the man as I fell out. He caught me.

'How often do I have to say it?'

'What?'

'Come with me.' The officer roughly took my bare arm and hauled me along beside him. I stumbled over the shallow step. Inside, a corridor stretched ahead, looking much too long for the hut; maybe it ran all the way through two or three huts. My guard pushed me into a room on the left, where they seemed to be expecting us already. Two almost identical men sat behind the narrow table. They too wore uniforms, but not the uniforms of the People's Police. It wasn't worth the trouble of trying to work out which state service they belonged to. Games of hide-and-seek, illusions, were all a part of dressing up in uniforms. They were so similar that they had to be twins, or at least brothers.

'Sit down. So you're leaving the country to marry Herr Gerd Becker?'

'Yes.'

'You're moving into an apartment in West Berlin together, I suppose?'

'Of course.'

'And your future husband has already furnished it, has he? He's been living there for some time, I believe?'

I nodded confidently. 'Yes, of course.'

While the twin on the right was asking the questions, his brother leafed through the files, apparently looking for something.

‘Look, all this is down in my application forms. Only last week I went to see State Security, and all their questioning was about Herr Becker.’

‘Really? What questioning, Fräulein – Frau Senff? Nelly Senff. You’ve been married before?’

‘No, you know I haven’t.’

‘Not even to the father of your children?’

I shook my head.

‘What did you say?’

‘No.’

‘But now of all times you want to try marriage, do you?’

Now of all times? Patience, I told myself, patience, don’t lose your nerve now, and I said, ‘Yes, I do.’

‘How about the father of your children?’

I looked straight at the right-hand brother. ‘You know about that.’

‘What? What do we know about? Aren’t you going to answer us?’

They’re trying to get on your nerves, I thought, that’s all, they just want to get on your nerves. What kind of satisfaction did these petty officials, self-important as they were, get out of such questions and answers?

‘So a man from the West is a better prospect, is he?’

I nodded, shrugging one shoulder. What did I know about men from the West in general or a particular specimen of the genre, and his suitability for what purposes? Gerd was helping me with the illusion; he was very good at that.

‘Your mother didn’t marry either. Seems to run in your family, eh? Living in sin. Illegitimate children. You really expect us to believe that you’re getting married over there?’

‘It couldn’t be done, just like that.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘For my mother. It couldn’t be done, just like that. Different laws, different customs. First they couldn’t get married, then they didn’t want to any more.’

The twins looked at me blankly. Until the one on the right, without turning his head, said to the one on the left, ‘Jews.’ The one on the left leafed through the papers, tapped one page with his finger, and muttered something that sounded like, ‘I don’t believe it . . . not these days.’

‘Your mother was Jewish?’ The one on the right was staring at me, open-mouthed.

‘She still is. Yes. No, I mean she isn’t a believer. Not any more. Not in God, anyway. She believes in communism, but you know that.’

‘Did you know that?’ he asked the other officer. ‘Was she famous?’ As soon as a German hears of a Jew who is still alive he thinks the Jew must be famous. The imputation of fame seemed the only way for the Jew in question to have escaped the Germans’ own killing strategies. Anyone who did escape must be famous, not least because he or she had escaped. The man on the left leafed through the file and pointed to various pages. ‘Your mother was born in ’24, your father in ’22, but he died in France in 1950. What’s this? During their return from exile?’ The man on the left turned the page, the man on the right stared at me. ‘Then your grandmother went back to Berlin with your pregnant mother? And you were born here.’

I didn’t reply. After all, these things must be in their files.

‘Why Berlin?’

‘I told you, she believes in communism now.’

‘Communism is not a matter of faith,’ observed the man on the right.

‘It isn’t?’

‘No, it’s a matter of conviction, of a proper frame of mind. You didn’t attend a socialist school? What school did you go to, then?’

What school did I go to? Did he think there were still schools specially for Jewish children, or did he think Jews simply didn't go to school?

'The Marshal I. S. Konev School,' said the man on the left, laughing and punching his brother in the ribs.

His brother, who obviously couldn't believe it, checked by glancing at the file.

'Five years before us,' the one on the left whispered to the one on the right.

A certificate for good studies at a socialist school. Maybe they didn't have them yet in my time. Katya had any number of such certificates, *for good studies and exemplary social out-of-school activities*, and she had insisted on taking those certificates to the West with her, even though they were hardly likely to be childhood milestones in the career of a potential heroine there. After all, she hadn't collected all that waste paper for nothing, as she explained to me, although when I asked she couldn't tell me what else it had been for. The children weren't even allowed to take home the originals of their school reports. Copies were handed out so that what belonged to the state would remain with the state.

I crossed my legs and didn't answer.

'You don't look Jewish, though.'

'What?'

'You don't look like a Jewish woman. Or, well, let's say not a typical Jewish woman. But you must be Jewish if your mother is Jewish.'

'What does a typical Jewish woman look like, then?'

'You should know better than anyone, Fräulein Senff. Senff – that's a Jewish name, is it?'

I couldn't suppress a groan. 'It's my mother's surname.'

'Sounds kind of German,' muttered the man on the left, immersing himself in a red page of the file in front of him again.

I bit my lip and breathed out for as long as possible. If I didn’t breathe in, I tried to persuade myself, if I emptied myself of as much air as I could, then an explosion was practically impossible, or at least it would be a lot more difficult. The man on the left stood up, holding the file, and left the room, leaving behind the man on the right, who wasn’t the man on the right any longer but the only man sitting opposite me at the table, while three others whose rank and function were presumably of no significance stood on guard beside him. Without turning their heads, without moving a muscle, they were following every movement, or at least every movement of mine, out of the corners of their eyes. The only officer left closed the files, paused for effect, relishing the silence he had enjoined on the rest of us, finally smiled with his bloodshot eyes, which now disappeared entirely, and looked at me.

‘Frau Senff, what I don’t understand is why you should pack toothpaste and soap when you are arriving at your future husband’s apartment this evening – the apartment where you are going to live together. We’re wasting our time here if you hold us up any longer with these stories. Doesn’t he have any soap? Your fiancé, Herr Becker?’

I looked at the man in his unidentifiable uniform, felt the blood rush into my face, and closed my mouth. My tongue was sticking to my gums.

‘At a loss for words, Senff? Now then, come with me.’

I stood up and followed the only officer left down a narrow corridor and into another room. These rooms had no windows. The plastic flooring on which the soles of our shoes squeaked had a sharp, vaguely sweetish smell. A smell that reminded me of my children’s school satchels. Imitation leather. Embossed plastic. The same three models for years on end, generally only in two colours, brown and leaf green; the combination of yellow and orange was unusual. Years ago there must have been red ones.

I heard my heels on the plastic floor, felt myself unexpectedly putting one foot in front of another with a certain verve, a verve that might be thought to be cheerful, my skirt swirled round my thighs, I was almost dancing along, as if I were going to a ball and looking forward to it. A uniformed man opened the door, I gave him a civil and lively nod, another man closed the door behind me.

Inside this room I found myself facing about ten more officers. The air was full of smoke, one of the officers looked me up and down, my skirt came to rest. I folded my arms.

‘Sit down.’

‘Thank you, but this place of yours isn’t exactly comfortable.’

‘Sit,’ insisted the man who might be the senior officer present. I smiled confidentially at him. I was the only woman in the room. I was thinking that I would visit my uncle Leonard in Paris. He was living with his third wife on the outskirts of the Marais district. He had lived in America with his second, north of San Francisco on a small hill in the middle of the woods. Hummingbirds came flying to the big window looking out on his terrace, to drink the sugared water that he had hung under the roof in little containers. They beat their wings so fast that you could see how swiftly time passes. He felt that was reassuring. When he looked out of the window there was only woodland, and a little further down the slope they could see the eastern banks of the little lake behind the cedars. In summer there was often mist in the valley. The last time I had seen my uncle, three years ago, he told me that back in Paris with his third wife, he could forget everything even better; at good moments he could forget his own past, and sometimes himself. Perhaps Uncle Leonard would show me aspects of Paris not to be found on any picture postcard, the Charcuterie Panzer and the goods on display, not standing outside shops as they did here but hanging from the roofs on ropes. He would eat fresh mussels with me. I’d meet his two American sons,

who pursued various professions, doing a little of this and that without fully understanding anything, he said. That's what freedom makes of people, he said again and again, looking at me half pityingly, half enviously, because I seemed to have no freedom at all, and there was nothing for it but to embark on a scientific career. So close to my journey's end, I didn't feel the least inclination to take any more orders. But I was not going to do anything stupid. I sat down.

'You're a chemist?'

'You know I am.'

'You worked at the Academy of Sciences for four years.'

'I started there after finishing my studies, yes. But I haven't worked there for two years. I work for the Dorotheenstadt cemetery.'

'The cemetery?'

'Recently, yes. Because I applied for an exit permit.' I was surprised to find how little these border officials seemed to know. I had been asked the same questions several times in the last few months – and other people I knew had been asked them too. I knew it from their own mouths in some cases, in others I could only guess.

The uniformed man looked on through the files.

'Stand up again.'

'You want me to stand up?'

'That's what we just said, yes. And no questions. We ask the questions.'

I stood up. My skirt was sticking to my behind.

'You applied for an exit permit in April the year before last. From May onwards, limits were placed on your contacts. You were carrying secrets?'

'No. I mean yes, another limit *was* to be imposed, but I wasn't carrying secrets.'

'Our information differs. Are you trying to lie to us?'

'No.'

'What were you working on at the Academy of Sciences?'

My shoes were pinching; I stepped from foot to foot and looked around.

‘Are you going to be much longer about it?’

‘What am I supposed to tell you? I’ve forgotten. And what I haven’t forgotten I have to keep quiet about, and you wouldn’t understand the things I don’t have to keep quiet about anyway. You’re not scientists, gentlemen.’

‘Oh, very clever.’ The official closed the file lying in front of him and whispered to the senior officer present, who was sitting just behind him.

‘Take her away.’ The senior officer nodded to a tall man with an unusually small head. The man was so tall that his trousers had clearly had to be let down; the dark green at the hem of the legs was like a border. The tall man took my upper arm and led me into a nearby room. Also without any windows.

‘Where are my children?’

‘Didn’t you hear? We ask the questions.’

I would have liked to sit down here, but there was no chair and no table in the room, and I wasn’t going to sit down on the floor in my skirt in front of this servant of the state. I looked at my watch. It was just after six. Aleksei and Katya would be getting hungry. Waiting without knowing what they were waiting for.

When I looked at my watch again it was ten past six, and then I was looking at it about every three minutes, the last time at five to seven, when an official came in with a woman in uniform.

‘Any incidents?’ The official looked enquiringly at the tall man.

‘No incidents,’ he said from high up in the air. By way of a salute, the very tall man put his hand to his small head.

‘Get undressed.’ The older official nodded to me with relish.

‘What?’

‘When you’ve taken off your clothes you can give them to my colleague here.’ His female colleague looked at me without expression. No names were given. For a moment I wondered what a guard like mine, a young if tall but small-headed officer, was called, what department he belonged to, what rank he might hold. Perhaps his actual name was Hauptmann, captain, his small head and low rank notwithstanding. But it must be possible to avoid such a confusing name, it could be changed by law, thus solving the problem, because a name like that would clearly be a professional disadvantage, making him look ridiculous, a disadvantage intolerable in a world of rank and order. The older official snapped at me, ‘Are you going to take much longer?’

‘Why should I get undressed?’

‘We ask the questions here, not you,’ repeated the tall man, with an encouraging grin.

‘What, get undressed in front of you?’ The border officers here probably learned only four or five sentences to be used as occasion demanded. Sentences that concealed their identities, but were enough for issuing the necessary instructions. I almost laughed.

‘Do you see anyone else here?’ The tall man with the small head stroked the little black pistol nestling close to his body. The laugh that burst out of me at this couldn’t be suppressed. ‘You want me to . . .?’

‘Come on, come on, we’re only human beings like you.’ The older officer sounded bored.

‘Human beings?’ I laughed nervously.

The door opened, and another uniformed man came in.

‘What’s up now? Where are her things?’ His voice sounded hoarse.

‘She’s being difficult.’

‘Shall we fetch reinforcements?’

‘No.’ I took my shoes off first. ‘No.’ Then my dress. The woman officer held out her hand, and I had to take the

things over to her.

‘Everything.’

I could do without another *Are you going to take much longer?* I decided not to think at all for a moment, took off my tights and underwear and gave those to the woman officer as well. I arranged the tights neatly before draping them over her arm.

‘Your jewellery too.’

I took off my necklace and handed it to the woman officer, who remained entirely impassive. And why would she feel involved in any of this?

‘Your watch.’ The tall man with the little head was stroking his pistol. ‘And your glasses.’

I looked at the watch once more: ten past seven. They didn’t have much time left. Suddenly I was sure that they would have been told to let us cross the border before midnight. Otherwise they would be breaking their own rules. There must be treaties between the two states making such stipulations.

‘Your ring.’

I looked at the uniformed man as if I hadn’t understood him. He pointed to my hand. I looked at my hand and shook my head.

‘The ring.’

‘I can’t, it won’t come off.’

‘Any ring will come off. Soap!’

I shook my head harder than ever. An officer left the room, presumably to get some soap.

‘If soap won’t do it, there are other methods here,’ the uniformed man whispered to me. I pretended not to hear him. I hadn’t taken the ring off since Vassily’s death, not when I went to bed, not when I went swimming, not when I was washing up, not when I was turning over earth in the cemetery and pulling up weeds, not when I washed my hands afterwards. Never.

The other officer came back with a piece of hard soap.

‘Are you going to take much longer?’

‘Please don’t.’

The officer reached for my hand and tugged at the ring.

‘Please don’t.’ My voice was strangely calm, as if it didn’t belong to me. I clenched my hand into a fist. The officer tried to open it up again, pushing each finger upwards separately.

‘Please. Don’t.’

In slow motion, I saw the ring being pressed, pushed, forced up my finger bit by bit, and disappearing into the officer’s hand. The soap was not used. I could feel neither the ring nor my hand. A little way off I heard a voice: ‘Please don’t. Please don’t. Please don’t.’ The older officer, the one still standing by the door, the one who usually gave orders, must have been imitating me.

‘You stay here,’ he told the younger man, so that the boy would keep an eye on me. Then he signed to his woman colleague, who followed him with my things. The ring hadn’t even left an impression on my middle finger. The boy was leaning beside the door, and looked as if he were enjoying himself. I suddenly thought of my brother, who had wanted nothing more before his adolescence than to wear a uniform, preferably a police or military uniform, but he was also fascinated by firefighters, pilots and sailors. He liked gold stars better than the silver or red ones. His professional ambitions were turned exclusively in that direction. I am sure he would have made a bad policeman. Not because of any inability to give orders and intervene spontaneously in a situation, those things came easily to him, but he found it hard to take orders, and wouldn’t tolerate them from anyone but my mother. So he was obliged to become an unskilled milling-machine operator. The boy here obeyed orders only too willingly, not least if they entailed keeping an eye on a naked woman. His eyes flickered restlessly over my body and its surroundings, they were so tenaciously watchful that I couldn’t even have sunk unnoticed into the

ground in my shame. I measured him up. Small head. Young. Very tall. I couldn't see any more striking details, nothing unique and individual about him. Maybe his skin was pale, but anyone's skin would look pale in that light. I wasn't even to know his name; I could only guess at it. His rank remained a secret; knowing it would have helped me to get my bearings. Only his outward appearance, to which I had been exposed for some time now, created what was certainly an unintended sense of familiarity. My nakedness seemed to embarrass him more than me. Suddenly the place turned pitch dark, and then the light came on again.

'Sorry,' said the tall boy, hardly able to conceal his amusement. He must have leaned back against the light switch. I folded my arms again.

After a while the door was opened, and the older officer said, 'Come this way.' The woman officer appeared in the doorway, presumably accompanying us for the sake of decency. To preserve discipline and good order. She had brought a hand towel for me, but it was too small to cover everything, my breasts and my private parts, and I would also have liked to cover the large mole just above the back of my knee, which I hated and found embarrassing. I wanted them to see that even less than my breasts and private parts. Our way led down the corridor into another room, where a man in a greyish-blue apron and glasses was waiting. He was putting a tube with an angle in it on a shelf, perhaps he was a handyman who kept the place in order and did repairs. 'There she is,' said the older officer, of me.

The man in the grey-blue apron didn't look at me, just wearily indicated the chair in the room with his head and told me to sit down on it.

'Why?'

'Routine.'

The chair was like a kind of throne, with broad armrests and a firmly fixed, high base.

'Up there.'

‘I need the lavatory first.’

‘What, now?’

‘Yes.’

‘The toilets are at the other end of the corridor, you can’t go there now.’ The officer was staring thoughtfully at my breasts, which wouldn’t stay covered by the towel.

‘There’s a bucket in the corner,’ said the man in the grey-blue apron, pointing to a white enamel bucket.

I squatted over the bucket, the towel slipped to the floor, and with one hand I clung to the nearest end of it, as if that connection made a difference to my nakedness.

My eyes fell on the one man who had come into the room without my noticing. I couldn’t decide whether this was the original right-hand man or left-hand man. That made it easier not to take his presence personally. The woman officer handed me some cellulose wadding.

‘Now, get up there.’

The upholstery of the throne was torn in several places, and foam stuffing was coming out of it. The foam was losing its consistency, fragmenting on the surface where it came into contact with air and fluids, anything rubbing it made little pieces of foam flake off. I couldn’t stop thinking. I thought to myself: Some women have had very different experiences. In the war. I looked around the room and saw one of the black panes opposite me; its frame was set flush with the wall, so that it could hardly have been a window to the outside world. Anyway, it was in the right angle between the door and the corridor along which we had come, so that it must be more likely to look into another room.

How dark was the night outside by now? The room had no other windows. I could see no clock, no instrument however small or improvised for measuring the passage of time, let alone showing the location of the room. On a shelf beside me, over an arm’s length away, lay various instruments side by side, some looking like syringes, empty syringes of various sizes, syringes filled with transparent fluid, syringes