



JULIA FRANCK

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About the Book

Käthe is a Jewish sculptor living in East Berlin. A survivor of the Nazi era, she is a fervent socialist who has been using her political connections to secure more significant commissions. Devoted entirely to success, Käthe is a cruel and abrasive mother. She barely acknowledges Ella's vulnerable loneliness and Thomas's quiet aspirations, and her hard-nosed brutality forces her children to build an imaginary world as a shelter from the coldness that surrounds them. But the siblings find themselves enclosed by the Berlin Wall, and unable to pursue their dreams.

Heartbreaking and shocking, *Back to Back* is a dark fairytale of East Germany – a moving personal story of love, betrayal and disillusionment within a single family that reflects the greater tragedy of the world around them.

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* and the US magazine *Kirkus Reviews*. *Back to Back* is her second novel to be translated into English. She lives in Berlin.

Also by Julia Franck

The Blind Side of the Heart

Back to Back

Julia Franck

Translated From The German By Anthea
Bell



Harvill Secker
LONDON

The cards
Fall
Luck falls
From one
To another
On and over
A face falls
The eyes fall
Under the table
And over . . .
The players
Shout
And God
Is silent
Smiling to see that
Now
Clubs are trumps
Luck falls
Under the table
And over

And God
Is silent
And smiles
Tormented
At man falling
From living by the cards
To death by cards
Silent
Unyielding
And over

12 August 1961

Swaying

THE BOAT LAY hidden in the reeds; they had found it a few days earlier by the landing stage, rocking on the water, and the wind drove it into the marshy inlet, along with leaves, twigs and larger branches broken off in the storm and washed ashore. It was not tied up, it obviously didn't belong to anyone. One oar lay in the boat, the other was floating a little way off among the branches.

Thomas and Ella took the things they would need from the house and down the steps to the yard: a quilt, two small saucepans, potatoes, carrots and a chunk of bread. They also took a box of matches, some paper and an empty wine bottle, because Thomas thought they might want to write a message and send it by bottle post. Finally they carried the camping stove and a flashlight over the marshy ground; in October it got dark early, and in the morning there was hoar frost on the leaves and the blades of grass. They would be cold.

They had been on their own in the house for the last two weeks while Käthe was working in the quarry. Just before she left, Eduard had walked out after a row. Thomas and Ella had been looking after themselves; they had boiled potatoes and mixed salt, chives and water with curd cheese, they had been to school, they were ten and eleven and they could do all those things. When Käthe returned at the end of those two weeks, they hadn't meant to do more than tidy the place up a bit: they had washed the dishes, and while Ella was still drying them Thomas had begun scrubbing the kitchen floor; they scoured the dark marks off the door, they polished the handle with ashes, washed the door frame with

soap, whacked the doormat with the carpet beater and scrubbed it in the rain butt. Gentlemen, today you see me polishing up door handles, and soon I'll sing everyone a song, said Ella.

Laughing, Thomas always put his hands over his ears at that announcement; he didn't want to hurt Ella's feelings, but she rarely hit the right note and changed the tune just as the fancy took her. The chandelier would really shine if you polished it up. The smell of brass clung to your fingers. It was fun; they would get the house into such a state of perfection as it had never known before. Thomas dusted the books and the shelves with a dry duster, then wiped the shelves over with a damp cloth, he sorted the art books by period and size, works of literature by alphabetical order, and political writings by subject. In a rumbling voice and looking through their dead father's field glasses, he called across the expanse of the room: Miss Ella, with all this splendid literature available what will you borrow, a romantic love story or an adventure novel? Are you studying the tale of the Trojan War and all that fighting over Helen? I'll be happy to make out a borrowing slip for you. Ella took no notice; she was lying under the table with a knife and a sponge, cleaning its underside, something that obviously no one had done for decades. Remains of something clung tenaciously to it, traces of food, maybe, or wax. Ella had soaked the Italian damask tablecloth in the zinc tub in the garden. It needed a thorough wash; over a long time, crumbs and dark stains of sauces and wine had made themselves at home on it.

If Ella and Thomas hadn't wanted to get their house-cleaning done in two days, Thomas would have enjoyed playing the part of librarian; he was going to draw up a card index for the library and its future readers, he would design borrowing slips for all the books. When she hung the saffron-yellow tablecloth on the washing line, Ella's arms hurt from the hard work of wringing it out. Armed with a toothpick and

a cotton-wool ball, she climbed on a stool to clean the picture frame of the Sicilian landscape. The cobalt-blue sky shone over the rocky countryside where only olive trees would grow. But the shiny stuff coating the frame stained the cotton-wool ball dark, and Ella was afraid she might get not just the dirt but some of the paint off as well. She even tidied the workbox, winding cotton back on reels and embroidery silks around pieces of cardboard, she sorted the buttons into three black boxes and put needles into their little envelopes in order of size. Probably no one but Ella had used that workbox since the housemaid was fired. She played alternately the part of her distinguished grandmother and the seamstress; with her mouth pursed, and in her grandmother's stilted voice, Ella commented on her own handiwork in French: *Alors, c'est si parfait!*

Perfetto, perfettamente, Thomas replied in passing, and his tone of voice, rustic and theatrical, imitated Käthe's criticism of her mother's upper-class French.

They tidied up all the rooms, square metre by square metre, cleaned and straightened up the whole house as it had never been tidied before. They had washed the curtains in the zinc tub under the elm tree, and hung them on the washing line in the garden to dry in the wind. They ironed them smooth - Käthe wouldn't believe her eyes. They were maidservant and manservant, singing a duet of admiration for their employer in tones of goodwill. Just once, the tenor of their conversation about their mistress changed - only recently she had raised her hand in anger to the maidservant over a stolen jar of apple compote, striking the girl so hard that she was knocked almost unconscious. Manservant and maidservant weighed up their mistress's kindness against her violence, wiping down kitchen surfaces as they talked. They cleaned the oven with a piece of wire wool, making such generous use of scouring powder that they emptied the container; they tidied up the larder, and found a nest of nine tiny, naked mice in a basket full of old

shoes. The soft pink of the little creatures' skin trembled in time with their rapidly beating hearts, they didn't squeak or squeal, maybe they were too young for that. Thomas picked up the basket, took a boot out and looked at the nest. Little naked mole-rats, he said, his voice soft and velvety. Ella was disgusted by the blind little creatures. She didn't want to look at them. Ella was in favour of drowning them in the water butt, Thomas was against it. If he took the baby mice down to the cellar their mother would never find them again, and they'd die miserably. So as an animal expert he decided to lure the mother mouse into a trap, and then he could take her down to the cellar alive as well. He put a piece of cheese into a deep stoneware jar and covered it with a board, leaving only a little crack open. That afternoon he found the mouse in the jar, heard her jumping up at the walls inside it and slipping down them again and again. Thomas took the mouse in the jar and the basket containing her litter over the veranda into the garden, and from there to the door of the coal cellar. Ella followed close on his heels; she knew he couldn't go into the cellar. He didn't dare go into the dark, he was afraid of it. He knew how to get Ella to bring coal up instead. If you fetch the coal, I'll do your maths homework. If you fetch the coal, you can have some smoked sprats. If you fetch the coal and take it to the hazel bush beside the cellar door, I'll carry it up the steps and into the house, and what's more I'll heat the stove all week and chop the firewood.

Please, Thomas said, handing her the jar and the basket, you only have to put them down on the floor and take the board off the jar, then they'll do fine on their own.

What do I get in return?

A story this evening.

It'll have to be a long one. And something else.

What?

Because that's not enough.

I'll carry your bag to school all week, I promise, and I'll do your maths for you, and your German homework as well.

Oh, all right. Basket in one hand, holding the jar well away from her with the other, her arms outstretched, Ella staggered down the steps into the cellar. At the bottom she fell full length. He heard the mouse squeaking, the jar was broken, only the basket with the litter of baby mice in it had landed intact next to Ella's head. She struggled to her feet, her trousers torn, her knees sore, her hands black and grazed.

Hesitantly, one foot at a time, Thomas went down the steps and tiptoed into the darkness. His fear of the dark and the fright he'd had didn't cancel each other out, but it must have been the cold making his teeth chatter. He stopped on the bottom step and held out his hand to her. Sorry, he said, putting an arm round her shoulders. Then he examined her knees, helped her up the steps and took her indoors, where he washed her injuries and put iodine on them.

Later, Ella and Thomas had beaten the carpets and swept the floors, then wiped them with a damp cloth. When they were dry, they had rubbed in beeswax, then brushed the floors and finally polished them shiny with a cloth. They had been cleaning the house for hours, and then they fell into bed well after midnight, exhausted. Next morning they got up early, while it was still dark outside, and set to work without stopping for breakfast. They lit all the stoves in the house, including the bathroom stove; it was possible that Käthe might want a hot bath when she got home. They scoured the bathtub and wiped down the doors, they hung the freshly washed curtains at the windows they had cleaned. At midday they put more coal on the stoves; acting the part of stokers they took the ash bucket out with the rubbish and cleaned the outside of the dustbin, they raked up the leaves under the elm tree, pulled dead plants out of the flower beds and swept the steps from the veranda down to the garden. Ella went all round the house with a feather

duster, getting cobwebs out of corners and dusting the paintings. Something in her chuckled when she came to the oil painting of the cherry blossom in the garden on the Wannsee. That picture, Käthe told admiring visitors when they looked at it, was a masterpiece. Their reverent nods always delighted Ella. A few years ago, when she was sick and had to stay in bed, and no one came to keep her company for weeks, she had tried to paint a picture of her family in oils on a wooden board. It had not been a success: she herself was huge, larger than her mother and hovering in the room, her brother looked like a gnome, the tiny twins were attached to their mother's breasts like rodents, and her breasts themselves, emerging from her blouse, were far from rosy – against the green fabric of the blouse they were a strident scarlet. It was true that Ella had only just started school at the time, but the picture had made great demands on her, and she knew she could never show it to her mother. Then, however, her glance fell on the cherry blossom beside the Wannsee, and she couldn't resist it; she had got out of bed and added tiny white dots to the grass on the banks of the lake with her brush. She had also added a hint of yellow, only a slight one, because white was never sheer white. And didn't they seem to be daisies if you looked at them closely? No one was to notice those little white dots, so that over the following years Ella kept altering tiny details of the great master's picture. There was no time for that today. She just smiled as she flicked the feather duster over the cherry blossom beside the lake. Thomas and Ella dusted every piece of furniture in the house, they rubbed down the chairs with warm, soapy water and then oiled them, leaving a glow as golden as honey on the wood. Only Eduard's room remained as it was; they were strictly forbidden to go into it. In secret, Ella opened the door; the room smelled nasty, of stagnant flower water. But Ella couldn't see a vase of flowers anywhere. Eduard's absence was a provocation to Ella; she felt she simply had to go into his room, as if she

were looking for something and wasn't sure what. She slipped in quietly, although there was no one within earshot, and she knew that Thomas was far off in the kitchen. The desk drawer was locked. How often had Ella tried to open that drawer already? With a hairslide, a safety pin, a stray key that she had found while sweeping under the carpet. Was she the person who had scratched the varnish round the lock?

They left everything exactly as it was in the studio, they didn't touch any of the wax models, although the older ones had layers of hairy dust sticking to them, and one of them had lost its arms through drying out and age. They didn't touch the plaster models either, all Ella did was stroke the rounded hips of the reclining figures. No one had told them not to touch, but it was an unwritten law that nothing must happen to these fragile models, and more particularly, children must not play close to them. The broken bits of sandstone in the bin under the gallery, the clay keeping moist, and the smaller scraps of marble on the windowsill, it was all left as it was. They didn't even pick up a broom to brush up crumbs, they didn't remove cobwebs here. Dusk was falling when Ella, her legs weary, went out into the garden to pick a bunch of mauve Michaelmas daisies. She also broke some bare twigs of bright red rose hips off a rose bush.

Thomas made lentil soup, although he'd never made it before and there were no cookery books in the house. He was breathing through his mouth as he did it, because it cost him an effort to fry the bacon. The smell of smoked meat frying made him want to retch; it wasn't that he liked pigs any better than, say, hares, but he disliked the idea of any animal being killed solely to be eaten. He suspected, however, that Käthe would think lentil soup inedible without any bacon in it. Ella made fun of the way he breathed through his mouth, saying he looked like a fish gasping for air. The bacon was sizzling over the flame; later, in the soup,

it would turn transparent and flabby. Thomas cut up the potatoes and carrots small, and he had bought celeriac because he remembered Käthe's grunt of pleasure at the mere mention of the word. He added two cloves of garlic to the pan. Nor did he forget the bay leaf; he spiked an onion with a bay leaf and a clove and put it in the pot for flavour. Käthe would never in her life have had such good lentil soup. Ella sat on the flour chest, swinging her legs and folding the napkins she had ironed, she watched Thomas cooking, and now she too was breathing in through her mouth.

I can hear her! Ella jumped up. There was a high-pitched clattering in the distance. It came closer, and now it was echoing across the yard as the sound was cast back and forth between the house, the studio and the shed. Nothing else made a noise like Käthe's two-stroke motorbike; its sound was unmistakable. Ella and Thomas went into the dining room and looked down to the yard from the window to make sure. There she was: Käthe with her leather pilot's cap on her head. She was bending over the wooden crate on the carrier and unstrapping a large, rather shapeless bag. Then her dog arrived, jumping happily around her now that he had caught up. He spent most of the time on the way home in the crate on the carrier. Käthe would let him out near Rahnsdorf, in the woods on the Püttbergen, so that he could run the last few kilometres. Dogs and children loved the tall dunes into which the sand had formed on the south-eastern side of the glacial valley where Berlin stood. 1954, there were woods as far as the stream of the Fliess and the banks of the lake, the Müggelsee. Isolated houses, a part of the city like a village on the edge of Berlin, the tall pines of the Brandenburg Mark with their red trunks rising above the tops of oak, maple and beech trees. Käthe seldom went out of the city without her motorbike, but she would have liked a car for transporting her materials and tools. Small sculptures fitted into the trailer of the

motorbike. And when she took models to be fired or cast, she had to telephone and claim friendship with neighbours who were really just acquaintances, so that she could borrow their car.

Thomas went back to the kitchen, tasted the soup and burned his tongue. How was he to tell whether or not there was too much salt in it? He liked salt. Thomas turned down the flame. You taste it, he asked Ella, but she was already running past him. From the front hall they heard a clatter, and then the barking of Käthe's dog. Thomas followed Ella into the smoking room.

With her pilot's cap on her head, Käthe was standing at the long table with a stack of post in front of her: letters, newspapers, flat packages. Hello there, Käthe sang out in her high voice; she had heard Thomas coming into the room, but her eyes were on a newspaper as she hastily leafed through it. When she came home from a visit of any length to the stone quarry, even when she came up to the house after hours in the studio, she could suddenly break into song in mid-sentence. Cheeks slightly flushed, she licked her lips as, with the dog's leash over her arm, she opened a small envelope. She skimmed the lines inside it, uttering a sound like a little whinny. An invitation from the Artists' Association! Proudly, she propped it against the vase of flowers. She couldn't help sighing. She had been waiting a long time for that invitation. Impatiently she opened the next letter.

Ella sat down in one of the two deep armchairs at the table, watching Käthe in her pilot's cap looking through her post.

Thomas would have liked to hug Käthe; he was realising how much he had missed her. He liked her cheerful whinny, there was desire in it, a sense of rejoicing. When Käthe was out of earshot, Thomas and Ella would sometimes imitate her little whinny all of a sudden, on their way to school or going shopping. Thomas wondered whether to take her

pilot's cap and the dog's leash from her, the way you take visitors' hats and umbrellas when they come into your house. At the wrong moment, she might find such a gesture intrusive, for the cap and leash were a part of Käthe herself, and you don't just take such things away and hang them up on a hook. He liked Käthe's smell of leather and dog. But Käthe avoided hugging, it was as if she froze in physical proximity to anyone, she would press her arms close to her sides, stiffen her back, shake herself. There must be something she disliked about a hug; Thomas thought that was possible. She often used to tell the children: Don't cling like that - when they were only close to her. There were never any hugs. Nor had Thomas ever seen her hug Eduard or any other man. Maybe, as Käthe saw it, hugging was simply civility, doing a favour, showing affection that she simply did not feel. So Thomas stayed where he was, hoping she might put out her hand or at least look at him.

Käthe slit open a large envelope with her silver letter opener, produced a magazine and a letter and began to read. Without looking up, she reached her hand out to one side, searching for something in the air. Maybe Thomas was meant to take her hand?

Come on, then, she said, come here. Her hand flapped as her eyes gazed at the letter. Thomas took a step towards her, wondering whether she meant him, whether he should take her hand, or shake it; he took another step her way - but the dog got there first. Agotto licked Käthe's fingers, nipping her outstretched hand, rubbing his ears against her to make her pat his head.

Are you hungry, Käthe? I cooked something. Thomas put his head on one side. She must be able to smell the lentils.

Käthe nodded, briefly looked up and then turned back to her post. She nodded again, as if she had forgotten why first time. Thoughtfully, she put the letter away and picked up the next envelope. Ella-ella-ella, you'd better ask the good Lord to make you a pair of legs. The table isn't laid yet.

Ella stayed where she was in the huge armchair, sinking into it like a doll draped in fabric. She had put on her best dress, the check one, and her lace collar. She hadn't often worn the dress since her grandmother brought it back from London two years ago, and now the sleeves were a little short, showing her wrists. Ella's hair was brushed smooth, she had even cleaned her shoes until they shone - and not just hers, but all the shoes she had found on the shoe rack in the bedroom. Ella rubbed her finger silently over the green velour covering the arm of the chair. She was reluctant to stand up. The carefully arranged flowers stood between herself and Käthe, who hadn't opened the last envelope yet and shook her head now and then as she read, or made a sound of approval or disapproval. Ella was hoping for a glance, for a remark, however tiny.

What is it? Now Käthe did raise her head and looked challengingly at Ella. Do hurry up.

Taking no notice of her dress, no notice of her hair. Ella elaborately got to her feet; her left leg had gone to sleep, so she limped as she followed Thomas to the kitchen. Once in the kitchen, Thomas and she had only to exchange glances; their eyes expressed their growing suspense, their impatient waiting, it could be any moment now. Käthe's eyes didn't necessarily have to fall on the flowers, or the best dress and the shining clean windowpanes, but surely the smell of the polished floor would tickle her nose, Käthe would notice the rearranged bookshelves. And then she would have the taste of the celeriac and bacon and lentils in her mouth. How surprised she would be! Ella carried a carafe of tap water and three glasses into the smoking room.

Oh, for goodness' sake open a window, Ella, it's unbearable in here. Are you two aiming to make this house into a sauna? What a waste of money. We don't go heating the garden in October, understand?

Käthe cast one brief, reproachful glance at Ella. She poured herself a glass of water and emptied it in a single

draught. Käthe's cheeks were flushed, she passed the back of her hand over her forehead, now she was studying the sender's address on a letter with close attention. Indecisively, Ella shook her head. Maybe she'd overdone the heating.

Back in the kitchen, Ella rolled up the napkins, which were already folded in half, and put them in silver rings. She drew a heart on a piece of paper in red crayon, and then two smaller, intertwined hearts inside it. She wrapped the message in the green-and-white napkin that Käthe liked to use.

There was still some parsley in the garden. Thomas showed Ella the blue bowl. Ella cut several slices from the loaf of bread, as straight and as neatly as she could, put them in a basket and covered them with a cloth. They poured the soup into a festive tureen. Thomas carried the steaming tureen in, Ella brought the tray with the plates and spoons, the bread and the napkins.

Oh, this is too much! We're not mixing with every Tom, Dick and Harry!

Käthe was talking on the telephone as Ella pushed the door to the smoking room open with her elbow, holding the tray steady in her hands. They laid the table. Thomas ladled the soup into the plates. They waited. The phone conversation went on for quite a long time. Through the big double doors, they could see Käthe standing by the chest of drawers, gesticulating wildly; it was probably about some decision that her group had taken. While whoever was at the other end of the line tried explaining something to her, Käthe did a charcoal sketch on the back of a large envelope. No, Käthe did not agree – she waved her stick of charcoal in the air – I've said so already, not in any circumstances. An idea like that needs to make sense. After a while Käthe hung up and came to the table. Has Eduard shown up?

Thomas and Ella shook their heads. Eduard didn't tell the children when he was coming or going. He seldom said hello

to them, and if he did it was like a greeting to strangers; then, just to be awkward, he expected those strangers to reply politely. If they were all in the house at the same time, he regarded the children as part of the fixtures and fittings, like furniture or household pets: sometimes he noticed them, sometimes he didn't. There were times when he admired Ella's shoes, there were times when he admired her dress. It was perfectly possible that he had in fact been here during the last two weeks, maybe in the morning, but they hadn't seen him.

Not once? Käthe sat down and unrolled her napkin. The heart message, unnoticed, sailed to the floor. She tucked the napkin into the neck of her sweater, like a bib, and dug her spoon into the plate. Can't you even heat the soup properly?

We did. Thomas was watching Käthe slurp, chew and swallow. It got cold once it was on the plate.

Käthe shovelled spoonful after spoonful into her mouth. And I suppose there's no salad? She looked from Ella to Thomas and back again to Ella. What's the matter, what are you waiting for, why don't you eat up?

Bon appétit, murmured Ella.

Enjoy, said Thomas. No, sorry, there isn't any salad.

But surely there are still dandelions in the garden? Haven't you been eating any salad at all while I was away?

Thomas shook his head.

Ella said: Yes, we ate dandelion leaves. And carrots.

Käthe cleared her throat, spooned the last of the soup up from her plate and helped herself to more from the tureen. Ah, wonderful, at least this is lukewarm.

Thomas and Ella ate in silence, exchanging surreptitious glances. Under the table, Ella touched Thomas's shin with her foot, Thomas kicked gently back. It couldn't be long now before Käthe noticed the clean tablecloth, the freshly ironed curtains in the next room; in spite of the lentils and celeriac she would smell the beeswax and her eyes would go to the

shining floor, she would see the clean carpet. She could look out at the garden and see the veranda door, with the electric light reflected in its panes in the dark. There were no curtains over it, so Käthe couldn't help noticing the sparkling reflection in the glass.

What's that? With a sudden jerk of her chin, Käthe indicated the flowers standing next to the tureen. A spoonful of lentils disappeared into her mouth. What's the idea of that? Käthe looked from Ella to Thomas and back at Ella. Käthe was noticing things now, looking around her at last. Have you two given up talking? She brought her fist down lightly on the table.

Was that anger in her eyes? Was she joking, and would she laugh next moment? Thomas and Ella looked expectantly at Käthe. Ella couldn't help smiling now, a smile spreading all over her face. At last Käthe was seeing what magic her brownies had worked in the house.

You picked those in the garden? What's the matter, cat got your tongues? Käthe threw her spoon down in the empty soup plate with a clatter. Once again she struck the table, and the china clinked.

No more glances were exchanged. For an indefinite length of time, Ella just listened to the slight crackling in the stove, her smile had disappeared, fallen into the embers, there was a tingling inside her but she couldn't breathe. Her gaze was fixed spellbound on the tablecloth that she had taken off the line and ironed this morning. Whining, Agotto put his muzzle on the table.

How often have I told you the flowers in the garden aren't for picking? At least, you two aren't to pick any there! Agotto was whining miserably, whimpering.

It's autumn. Ella's voice failed her.

The flowers will wither now anyway. And if they don't wither they'll soon freeze overnight. It wasn't easy to defend Ella, but Thomas kept trying all the same. She was the elder

child, she was first to bear the brunt of all the blame, he was younger, Käthe loved him, he was sure of that.

Don't be impertinent. If I say none of the flowers in the garden are to be picked, then kindly don't pick them behind my back! Understand? Käthe took a gulp of water from her glass. You two can't even be left on your own for two weeks!

Thomas and Ella hardly dared to lower or raise their heads. Their feet touched under the table.

Käthe drained her glass and opened the newspaper that she had put on the chair beside her before supper. You can wash the dishes, I'm going down to the studio. One of you can take the dog for a walk.

Silence for a minute, two minutes. Were those going to be Käthe's last words? Ella banged her spoon down in her plate, splashing soup into the air. What about the twins, Käthe, when are you fetching them? Ella knew only too well that Käthe didn't like to be reminded of the twins. The twins were a nuisance. They couldn't look after themselves, at the age of three they couldn't be left alone while Thomas and Ella were at school. So in those weeks while she was away, Käthe usually took them to the Werder peninsula near Potsdam, where there was a reliable children's home.

The twins are coming back tomorrow, the Winters are bringing them. Käthe stayed hidden behind her newspaper as she said that; she had not reacted to the clatter of Ella's spoon, nor did the question about the twins impress her. Silently, Thomas rubbed his sleeve over his eyes.

Ella and Thomas looked at their half-full plates. They would have to eat it all up if they wanted to avert a row. There were only the little bits of bacon left on Thomas's plate; he had picked them out and put them on the rim. Without attracting Käthe's attention, he pushed them onto Ella's plate. Ella loved bacon, if she had her way she would eat nothing else, no lentils, no parsley, just bacon.

In silence, Ella and Thomas cleared the table. Ella washed the dishes, Thomas dried them. They couldn't think of

anything to say to each other.

Doors opened and closed, and Käthe marched through the kitchen and straight down the steps to her studio.

The two of them took the dog out to the Fliess, where the woods began on the other side of the stream. There was mist among the trees. They didn't talk.

Before the children put out the light at bedtime, Käthe opened the door to their room and said: There are bottles all over the back stairs. Didn't I tell you to clear them away? Do it tomorrow.

The door was closed, Thomas switched off the light. The ticking pendulum of the grandfather clock in the corridor could be heard through the door, it began to strike the full hour. Thomas counted along under his breath, it struck ten times.

Let's run away, Ella whispered in the dark.

Where to?

Doesn't matter.

She'll search for us.

Good. I look forward to that. She'll realise we're missing, maybe she'll think we're dead.

When?

I'm sure that boat will still be in the reeds. Think of it - our tracks go down to the water and then they disappear.

If Agotto helps her to look for us he'll stand on the banks of the lake howling. Thomas was lying on his stomach, chin propped in his hands, frowning. Ella could see that it gave him no pleasure to think of Käthe's anxiety, he was already feeling sorry for her. His defencelessness annoyed her.

Serves her right.

When?

Tomorrow, we'll take our things there after school. We ought to have something to eat with us.

I don't want to freeze.

For a while they lay in silence on their separate beds in the dark room.

How long will we stay away? Thomas's voice was unsteady. He certainly didn't want to frighten Käthe. He didn't like the idea of her anxiety. He tied one corner of his handkerchief round his finger.

She'll be bound to miss us by supper time at the latest. We'll stay out on the water until midnight.

We may hear her calling from the bank when she comes looking for us.

Let's hope so. Maybe. Maybe she won't look down by the lake, maybe she'll go to see the neighbours first and ask if anyone's seen us.

They had taken off their shoes and socks on the bank. With their socks tucked into their shoes, their trouser legs turned up, they had waded through the icy water to the boat to stow the last of their things away in the bows and under the seat. The reeds cut into Thomas's calves; he gritted his teeth and took a few steps back to take the camping stove and the basket of provisions from Ella. Finally Ella carried their shoes, all muddy from the marshy ground, out to the boat. They had forgotten to bring a towel, so they dried their frozen feet as best they could with the quilt. Putting their socks back on took some time, the boat was rocking, and the socks stuck to their damp, cold feet. Their shoes felt clammy as well.

Ready? Thomas waited until Ella had her second shoe on before digging the oars into the black water. He could still feel the bottom. He pushed the boat out. The blade of the second oar was broken, half of it was missing and the wood was rotten. Thomas put both oars in the rowlocks and rowed steadily, while Ella sang. The dark blue of evening was sinking into the mist.

Where do we go?

Ella shook her head. She felt chilly. How was she to know what the distant bank would be like, or what now lay behind them? So she said: Just out on the lake.

Thomas rowed. *Softly, down in the water, crazy, I lost the dream . . .* Thomas had often revised the lines of his latest poem, added to them, crossed them out. *The little elvers' joy in water, on the stone, it is always theirs, never my own.* Ella thought up a tune to go with it and hummed in time to his words. As she hummed she stamped her feet on the bottom of the boat, hoping that would warm them up. The sky above the lake was pitch dark now, they couldn't make out a light or see the bank any more.

My tummy's grumbling. On all fours, Ella crawled over to search under the seat for the basket of food. The bread was wet and cold. Soft bread? She tore a piece off, tried it. Not so bad after all. She offered her brother some, but he didn't want any, he had to row to keep from freezing. She chewed the bread until it tasted sweet in her mouth. She washed two carrots in the lake by holding them in the water and rubbing the earth off with her fingers. Thomas didn't want a carrot, so Ella ate both. She went on stamping her feet, but it was no use, the night air above the lake was implacable. Ella lay down in the bottom of the boat, wrapped herself in the quilt and tried to forget the cold. The splash of the oars made her sleepy. She turned from side to side, she lay tucked up as tightly as possible, knees to her chin, arms wound round her legs. But the damp had permeated her clothes and the quilt, Ella's back was cold and her feet frozen. Could she still feel her toes? Käthe would be alarmed, panic-stricken, she'd come looking for them. The first thing she'd notice would be the missing quilt. Ella dreamed, and knew it was only a dream when she saw Käthe running over the marshy ground calling out loud: Thomas! Ella! The cold stifled her cries. The waves grew larger, lapped louder and louder against the boat, broke on the bank, the stones of the landing stage, the wooden boat. Was Ella asleep or awake? Suddenly she couldn't hear the splash of the oars, she woke with a start, raised her head, and couldn't make anything out in the dark.

Thomas?

She heard only the waves.

Thomas?

Ella felt sick. She groped around, the quilt, the timber of the boat. Thomas!

What is it? Thomas sounded hoarse, he must have dropped off to sleep.

Why don't you answer me?

I am answering you.

I . . . I . . . Ella's hand worked its way up to the side of the boat, she felt her stomach churning, there was no stopping it; in a kneeling position she leaned over the side, the sudden pain made her body rear, she vomited.

What are you doing?

Ella was throwing up. She wanted to say something, but she had to throw up and still keep hold of the edge of the rocking boat. Now she felt Thomas's hand on her back.

Can I help?

Ella shook her head, although Thomas wouldn't see it in the dark. Ella got her arm over the edge of the boat, held her hand in the icy water, rubbed her fingers against each other and cupped them. The water of the lake tasted good, soft and sweet, its icy cold numbed her throat and took away some of the sour flavour in it.

Thomas had put his arm round Ella's shoulders.

What's the time? She turned to him, everything was still swaying, she felt dizzy, but the retching had gone away. Cold sweat stood out on her forehead, on her back.

Wait a minute. Thomas crawled over the bottom of the boat, looking for something. Ella heard the faint hiss of a match. Too damp. Thomas wasn't giving up, he rubbed every match several times to expose its tiny head, a third match, a fourth, until at last there was a little flame. The candle burned faintly, and Thomas had to shield the flame with his hand to keep the wind from blowing it out at once. Three thirty. He held his wristwatch to his ear.

Ella's dizziness overcame her, she closed her eyes. She imagined her brain like a water level in her skull, bobbing up and down inside it. Her brain glowed blue, it gave off tiny bubbles that popped with a faint sound before they softly broke. She felt Thomas putting her woolly gloves on her hands. They were frozen, stiff and cold. It took him some time because Ella could hardly move her fingers. Then he moved away, and Ella heard banging, bumping sounds. He raised her leg, the quilt; the boat was rocking, obviously he was searching for something under the seats. She wanted to ask what, but she couldn't speak. Her tongue was heavy and sour in her mouth. When the noise had died down again she blinked at him. In the light of the candle that Thomas had put in a preserving jar, she saw that he had jammed the camping stove between his knees. He was trying to light it.

The gas canister's empty.

Or damp, thought Ella.

I don't think damp is bad for a gas canister, why would damp affect gas? It's empty.

Who cares, Ella wanted to say, but she couldn't get the words out. Maybe she'd have to throw up again, even though her stomach was empty now.

Thomas scratched the gas canister with his fingernail. He smelled it. Nothing but the smell of burnt keratin left on his nail by the match.

How much longer were they going to stay out here on the water? Ella's nose was running, the handkerchief that her fingers could feel in her trouser pocket was a wet clump of cloth. Ella summoned up all her strength, she tried to open her roughened lips, move her mouth, wiggle her tongue. Let's go back. I can't stay out here any longer.

Thomas nodded, he looked at his compass. You take this, will you? I'll row. He handed Ella the little container.

Where do you think we are?

Thomas looked around, there was no bank in sight; he put his head back, neither moon nor stars, nothing but

darkness. No idea. He rowed faster. If we keep going north-north-east, we ought to reach our side of the lake.

The wind was rising; a gust blew out the candle. Ella didn't need a compass to know where north was. She closed her eyes. Now and then she said: Over to port a bit. The wind was driving them too far east. A duck quacked, another duck, the children heard the flapping of their wings.

She couldn't move her toes separately. With her legs drawn up, Ella was half sitting, half lying under the clammy quilt, her head resting on the side of the boat, one eye open, the other closed. Careful! A little buoy was visible in the water. Ella craned her neck, but she still couldn't see the bank. Take it slowly, the fish-traps must be somewhere near here.

Thomas firmly raised an oar out of the water and held it aloft, he was sure they had come to a net. Then he sat down again. Thomas rowed, there was never a calmer, better oarsman.

Soon after that, they saw the first poles sticking out of the water. The marks on them and the arrangement of the fish-traps looked familiar to Thomas. He said something that was meant to encourage Ella, but she couldn't quite understand what it was. Ella and the cold had become as one, so much so that she felt hardly anything now, neither the cold nor herself.

They were rowing north. Shadows appeared out of the darkness, swathes of mist drifted by, parting for a few moments to offer a clear view. The bank traced a vague outline, maybe trees, a fairly long landing stage; now they recognised the place as Rahnsdorf from the two weeping willows and the faint lights. In the distance, Ella saw a red light, then a green one showed, the little harbour must be over there. They bore west and rowed past the first houses and the harbour itself. They recognised the boathouses; in the summer they had often played in one of them; Michael who went to school with them kept his boat there. They had

made a sail, in Käthe's studio they had soaked a large sheet in warm, liquid wax, they had dried it and sewn it and practised sailing with it as long as it lasted. But at this early hour there wasn't a human soul in sight. Ella watched the white clouds of her own breath; if they were still there she couldn't have frozen to ice yet. They did not put in and tie up the boat until they reached the stone landing stage. It was nearly four thirty, no sign of dawn yet.

Thomas clambered out of the boat. He held it firmly, close enough to the stones for Ella to get out of the boat and over the parapet, rolling rather than climbing. She couldn't bend her fingers; in her woollen gloves her fingers looked like a doll's, stiff and lifeless. Ella crawled on her knees, on her stomach; using the strength in her elbows and supporting herself on both hands, she hauled herself up on the landing stage. She could hardly walk, her feet were two lumps of ice, numb, she couldn't even feel her knee joints. She came down on one elbow, her left hip struck stone, one shoe fell off. She caught herself with her stiff hand, tipped over, and found herself sitting on the stones.

Thomas hurried over to her. Are you all right? With difficulty, he got her gloves off, took her hands, rubbed them between his own, and together they rubbed Ella's knees; she raised her legs to cycle in the air. Thomas leaned down a little closer to Ella and massaged her calves. She groaned and gritted her teeth to keep from screaming. Her body dropped back with a thud; she could hardly feel one shoulder.

Ella! Thomas shook her. Ella! He was bending over her, breathing the warm vapours of his breath into her face, but by the time it reached her it had cooled off again. What's the matter? Ella, say something! Ella didn't move, she was lying still, as still as she could. Before long Thomas, her little brother, would be shedding tears of desperation. He rubbed and pummelled her stomach, her chest, he bent down to

her nostrils, about to try artificial respiration. His voice was full of fear. Ella.

Her limbs really did threaten to freeze. All of a sudden Ella was afraid that any moment now the act she was putting on for him might turn real. She ought to laugh, so that he'd know she had been joking. But her mouth wouldn't obey her. Ella loved to scare her brother. She must laugh, she must, and she did laugh, a gurgle emerging from deep down inside her.

Ella! His relief and happiness to find that she hadn't died was so great that Thomas couldn't feel cross with her. He gave her a hug.

Help me. Ella couldn't raise her voice, it was a croak. Please warm me up.

Thomas went on rubbing her as hard and as fast as he could. The effort warmed him up too. He told her, smiling: your lips are made of ice, they look as if they have hoar frost sticking to them.

Ella cautiously moved her cold lips against each other; the skin on them was cracked and rough, but that was all. When she looked over Thomas's shoulder, she saw the beams of two flashlights probing the gaps in the mist, sweeping on over the water as if searching it.

They're looking for us!

No. Thomas had looked over his shoulder only briefly and then went on rubbing. It's the first fishermen going out to the fish-traps.

Hold on to me, I want to get up. Ella supported herself on Thomas.

In the wood, they could hardly see their hands in front of their faces, there were cracking sounds underfoot, they had to take care not to stumble. Once they stopped when they heard a rustling, a grunting, and then the trampling of several hooves. Wild boar might attack, better not get too close to them. Only when they reached the nursery garden could they make out shadowy shapes, the clearing with the