

# Crossing the Line

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**p 10-33**

## Julian Niemöller, 1961

### Eins

I knew by the smell of the sheets that I was in the West. In East Berlin we didn't have washing powder with the scent of flowers. I turned over and looked blearily at the window. The morning mist trickled down the edges of the curtain and into the bedroom. I struggled to separate my dreams from the fragments of memories that were slowly coming back to me. Yesterday evening, after work, we'd gone to the Chitchat, a popular club where lots of Americans hung out. We'd danced. Had a drink. Had too much to drink. It had got late. I didn't feel like going back across the border.

There was a girl... I tried to remember her name. I'd met her at the Chitchat. She was there with a girl who knew Walter. She had short black hair. Was a good dancer. Paula. That was her name. Moving drowsily, I turned over again. The space beside me was empty. A dent in the pillow. That was all. She'd suggested I sleep at hers. She lived nearby. I dug deeper, but couldn't remember when we'd left the Chitchat. Or what we'd done after that. Had we...? I could tell I was still wearing my underpants and had my socks on. The rest of my clothes were scattered across the room.

From the kitchen came the rattle and chink of cutlery and plates. I gave the sheets another sniff and rolled out of bed. If I didn't move too quickly, the headache wasn't too bad. I didn't bother to pick up my clothes, but walked through the chains of beads and towards the sound in the kitchen.

I squeezed my eyes shut in the bright light. The sound of cups and spoons, plates and knives went right through me.

"Good morning," said a cheerful voice.

I opened my eyes again.

A girl with long blonde curls stood at the sink. She studied me with an amused smile. The window was open and a fresh breeze made the hairs on my arms and legs stand on end. Slowly I realized I was wearing only my pants and socks. But it was too late to hide.

"Do you prefer your boiled egg hard or soft?"

"Soft," I mumbled without thinking. My cheeks were burning, but she'd stopped looking at me. She'd laid the table for two.

"Where's Paula?" I asked hesitantly.

"Gone to work."

On a Sunday? What kind of work did Paula do? But I didn't ask any questions.

"I'm Heike." She smiled.

"Julian," I mumbled. I felt like I needed to explain my presence. That I should say something to make me seem less like some weird stranger.

The table was laden with chocolate spread, jam and butter – all brands I'd never eaten before. I looked at the jars and read the labels, trying to act naturally. Heike put the eggs into eggcups and sat down across from me.

"So you're from over there?"

I gave her a look of surprise. She could tell that from my underwear?

"Yes."

She smiled.

"Paula's got a soft spot for Ossis."

"What?" My face must have looked even more surprised. A soft spot... Like people have a soft spot for stray cats?

Heike laughed at my expression.

"She's a communist. Everyone's equal. No ranks or stations anymore, no rich and no poor. Everyone working according to their abilities and receiving what they need. It's all she ever talks about."

I sniffed and spread a thick layer of butter on a slice of bread. I wasn't really in the mood for discussing politics with a girl from West Berlin on a Sunday morning. I cut my bread into soldiers and dipped one into my egg. Heike was still looking at me with a smile, both hands around a big mug of aromatic coffee.

"I live in East Berlin, but I work in the West," I explained with my mouth full. "I'm a bricklayer at Reitmann & Sohn. It was one of my workmates, Walter's, birthday yesterday so we went out to celebrate. Paula was there too. The two of you are friends, are you?"

"Cousins. You know something? I've never been to East Berlin."

"Never? Why not? You could just walk over there in no time."

"I don't know. It never really occurred to me. I've only been living in Berlin for a year. I actually come from a little village. But I wanted to get away from there. So I came here and moved in with Paula." She smiled. "The big Berlin adventure, that kind of thing. The city where it all happens."

"The city where another war is going to break out, you mean."

"Do you really believe that?"

I shrugged my shoulders.

"Do you think the Russians are going to occupy West Berlin?"

"The Allies have made it clear that they don't want to leave, even though it's actually within the Russian sector." I put another piece of bread into my mouth. "But I don't pay much attention to politics," I said before she could counter with some Western argument.

"Have you always lived in Berlin?"

"Yes, apart from in the war, when I lived with my great-aunt in the countryside for a while, but I don't remember much about that."

"I love the city," Heike said with a smile. "Cars everywhere, people strolling along the Kurfürstendamm as if the world belongs to them. The shop signs, the neon lights. The girls flirting with the American soldiers. It's like everyone is important here. Like everyone's having all kinds of amazing experiences. You can't help but join in. And then you feel important too. Everything's so exciting and fast. Just like in a movie." She gazed right through me, a dreamy look on her face.

I drank some coffee so she couldn't see my expression. Such a cliché.

Heike gave a short laugh. "You must think I'm strange for thinking those sorts of things are so fantastic. You've been living here all your life..."

"No, I don't think you're strange. You've just described exactly what everyone in East Berlin thinks is so fantastic about West Berlin."

"Everyone in East Berlin, except for you?" she asked.

I shrugged. "It has its attractions. But I couldn't live here. It'd all get too much for me."

"So you like slinking back to your anonymous concrete block at night?"

I looked up from my egg.

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that. I really didn't mean anything by it," she quickly apologized.

I went on looking at her. She'd said herself that she'd never been to the East. So why was she judging it?

"Sorry," she said again, more quietly.

We went on eating in silence. Heike clearly didn't dare to broach a new subject and I wasn't up for more discussions about East and West. The egg and the coffee eased my queasy stomach a little, but my head felt as if someone had poured it full of cement last night, and the cement was now setting. After my last swig of coffee, I looked at my watch. Nearly eleven.

"I should go. My mum's going to be worried because I didn't come home last night."

"You can have a shower if you like," Heike said tentatively. "It'll do you some good. The last door in the hallway. I'll give you a towel."

Heike was right. The warm water of the shower relaxed me and it even seemed to wash away some of the cement inside my head. I dried myself and got dressed. Heike had cleared the table and washed the dishes. There was a small cardboard packet in the middle of the table.

"I... um... that's for you. For your mum. She might not mind you staying out all night quite so much now." She smiled shyly.

I looked more closely at the packet. A pair of brand-new tights.

"Paula told me that women in the... I mean... that tights... aren't so easy to get hold of... over there."

She was right. And my mum loved tights from the West. I hesitated... Was my Ossi pride stronger than the thought of making my mum happy?

"Thank you. She'll be really pleased." I took the packet from the table and smiled. "And thanks for the breakfast and the shower!"

Heike beamed. "You're welcome."

As I walked down the stairs, I tried to picture Paula's face, but I couldn't get Heike's smile out of my mind.

When I was almost at the border, it started raining. I was so deep in thought that I didn't notice Wolfi Wanker until it was too late. We'd been in the same class at school. He'd been a strange little boy with an important father, and the other kids often bullied him. They called him Wolfi Wanker. There was a rumour that our teacher had caught him at it in the toilets.

Instead of ignoring the bullying, he made a fool of himself and yelled that his dad was going to teach them all a lesson. His father didn't do anything, though, so the others just laughed even louder. He'd moved to Dresden later, but he was now back in Berlin and stationed as a border guard, interrogating people who wanted to cross the border from East to West. His father had seamlessly switched the Nazi Party for the communists, although, according to the propaganda, there hadn't been any fascists in the DDR for a long time now, and Wolfi Wanker had the same kind of opportunist love for power.

"Passport," he ordered, as if I didn't know the drill. I'd never had much to do with Wolfi. As far as he was concerned, though, all his classmates were the same and now it was their turn to be bullied. He took my passport and studied it for an excessively long time.

"Do you know what day it is?" he asked, without looking up.

"Sunday," I answered curtly. The cold drips dropped down into my collar. Wolfi was standing inside his shelter and clearly felt no need to hurry.

"Sunday. What's a cross-border labourer like you doing in the capitalist West on a Sunday? Aren't our women good enough for you?"

I was too stunned to reply.

"Yeah, I know your type. You're a bunch of swindlers. Profiting from the cheap rents here, our social security and the low prices, and then raking it in over there in the West, playing the capitalist bigshot and screwing American women." He spat on the ground.

I wanted to grab him by the collar of his uniform and snarl that it was none of his damn business where I earned my money and how I spent it. Admittedly, I made way more in the West because the exchange rate was so incredibly good, but for him to make out I was some kind of profiteer... But I didn't do anything to Wolfi. He was on duty. I didn't want to get into trouble. No one in the East was very keen on cross-border workers like me. They thought it was betrayal of the State, a state they didn't have a good word for themselves. If they got the chance, they'd do exactly the same.

"What's in that bag?"

"Three million dollars in ten-dollar bills."

He grabbed my bag and yanked the zip open.

I put my hands in my pockets. The rain trickled down from my eyebrows and into my eyes.

Wolfi Wanker rummaged through my clothes. Then he dropped my bag. It landed in a puddle.

I tried to swallow my irritation.

"What's this? Smuggling too?" He held up the packet of tights. "Do you know the penalty for smuggling?" He leaned forward so that his face was five centimetres from mine.

I bent down to pick up my bag. The whole side of it was soaked.

I zipped it shut again. Clenched my fists until the knuckles were white and gritted my teeth.

"I'll have to confiscate these. This is going in a report." He went to put the tights in his pocket, but couldn't because he was still holding my passport.

"No, you won't. Because then you won't be able to keep them yourself!" I snatched my passport from his hand and strode away.

"I'm going to report this!" Wolfi Wanker yelled after me. "You can be sure of that, Niemöller! I'm reporting it!" His voice was shrill.

I resisted the urge to run. He wasn't going to come after me anyway, I told myself. I headed down the first side street I came to, where I gave a rubbish bin an almighty kick. It fell over with a clatter. I felt like going back, giving that shithead the beating he deserved and dragging him and his fine uniform through a puddle. What gave him the right? He had absolutely no reason to... Smuggling... Why did he have to act so superior and why did he pick on me all the time? I hadn't done anything...

The next time I saw him I wasn't going to let him just walk all over me! Thoughts of revenge in my head, I began to run. I raced the frustration out of my body. That bastard had spoiled my memory of Heike.

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## Zwei

For the next week, Heike kept going through my mind. When Walter invited me to go to the Wannsee with him on Sunday, he mentioned that Paula was going too and gave me a meaningful wink. I didn't dare to ask if Heike would be there.

The rattling of Walter's moped woke up the entire neighbourhood and prompted a disgruntled snort from my father. I grabbed my towel and headed downstairs. Walter was wearing white shorts, white shoes and a striped polo shirt. He looked like an American movie star.

"Good morning," he called cheerfully above the noise of the engine.

I greeted him and hopped on behind him. It was indeed a fine morning. Perfect for the long ride to the Wannsee, more than 25 kilometres away, right through West Berlin. The border guards looked disapprovingly at us – we were like a couple of decadent Americans – but they let us through. We zoomed past closed shops and sleeping houses as the sun climbed higher behind us. The engine was making such a din that we couldn't talk to each other, but that didn't matter. I closed my eyes and felt the wind in my hair. One day, one day I would buy a moped. When the State gave me an apartment of my own, like my brother Rolf. As long as I was living at home, my father had forbidden it. He thought it was immoral and unnecessary. I had a bike and that was good enough.

We clearly weren't the only ones who wanted to spend a day at the Wannsee. Dozens of people were setting off from the bus stop, carrying chairs, picnic baskets, beach balls and airbeds, and heading for the entrance of the swimming complex. The lake was a popular spot with just about everyone in Berlin. But we drove on by. I couldn't stand the crowded beach. Fortunately, neither could Walter and the others. And no one seemed to know about our favourite spot, a tiny beach among the trees, just a couple of kilometres further on.

Walter parked his moped in the soft sand. Heini, Ernst, Charlotte, Max and a girl I didn't know were already there. They'd scattered their bags around, and the girls were getting changed. Walter had introduced me to his Western friends, but I only went along when he invited me. I didn't have

many other friends. My school friendships dried up pretty quickly when I started work in the West. I didn't care. Walter's gang were a fun crowd and they didn't look down their noses at me. As Walter took out his stuff from under the saddle, three other girls arrived. They were all wearing denim shorts, big sunglasses and straw hats, which made them look like triplets.

I unrolled my towel and began to get undressed. When I pulled my shirt over my head, I found one of the triplets standing there right in front of me.

"Hey, big guy," she said. "Why didn't you call me?" She pouted. Her fingers danced across my chest. It was Paula.

"We don't have a phone."

She gave me a quizzical look. Do they really not have phones in the East? I could see her thinking. She decided to accept my weak excuse.

"I'm glad you're here." She turned around, took her towel out of one of the big bags and spread it out next to mine. I watched her as she lay down. I still couldn't remember much about what had happened the previous weekend. Nothing, I thought, but the way Paula was behaving suggested otherwise.

And the rest of the day, too, she acted like we were a couple. We swam, played football, let the sun dry us off... and all that time Paula had her eye on me and kept bothering me with idiotic requests. Would I put sunscreen on her back? Could I pass her bag over? Did I want to go into the water with her? Did I want a biscuit? It made me uncomfortable. As I rubbed sunscreen onto her back and felt her arms around me in the water, an uneasy feeling kept gnawing away at me. It wasn't until I saw Heike that I realized why.

It was late in the afternoon by then. I was playing cards with Walter, Max and Paula, when Heike turned up at the beach with half an oil drum full of food.

"Here comes the barbecue!" shouted Max. The boys filled the drum with sand and then piled on wood, paper and coal, working with a practised routine. They clearly didn't need any help. A grill on top and, less than ten minutes later, the meat was sizzling away. The spicy scent of the hamburgers reminded me that all I'd had to eat since the morning was a few biscuits.

The last swimmers came out of the water, the towels were drawn closer, and everyone sat down around the fire. Heike put out bowls of lettuce and tomatoes and sweetcorn. I looked at her, but she didn't pay me any special attention. Walter went to fetch a bucket full of bottles of beer.

We cracked jokes, ate and laughed. Heike was sitting across the circle from me. As I ate my meat in silence, I stared at her through the shimmering hot air over the barbecue. She felt me looking, and she smiled at me. I wished I was sitting a little closer. But the circle was round.

When we'd finished eating, we stoked up the barbecue to make a campfire. It was getting dark, but the temperature was still pleasant. Max picked up his guitar and played some popular tunes by Chuck Berry and Elvis. He chose some slow ballads and Paula came over to lie beside me. I mumbled an excuse and got up. I wasn't in the mood for her clinginess. I walked to the edge of the water. There wasn't a single sound coming from across the lake. The water was black and the silhouettes of the trees surrounding our little beach were growing darker and darker. Somewhere far away on the water a bird suddenly took flight. I sat down on the sand, looking out over the lake. The guitar and the voices behind me merged into a gentle background murmur.

I hadn't heard her coming. Heike sat beside me on the sand and looked out over the water.

"Not in the mood for a singalong?"

I looked at her, not really knowing how to respond.

"Or not in the mood for Paula?" She smiled.

"Oops, was it that obvious?" I asked with a wry grin.

"Oh, no. Well, maybe not to her." She gave a short, husky laugh.

"I really can't remember what happened that night," I confessed. "But, whatever it was, Paula seems to be reading too much into it." She probably didn't want to hear any details.

"Don't worry. Nothing happened. She told me so herself."

She told her?

"Women talk about that kind of thing," she said with a laugh. "Paula tends to get a bit carried away. Don't let her push you into anything."

She laid her hand on mine for a moment. Her palm felt warmer than the sand.

"How did your mum like the tights?" A few ducks flew across the water.

"She was really pleased," I lied. "Thanks again." Damn. I should have said thanks straightaway.

Behind us, Max was singing "All I Have to Do Is Dream" by the Everly Brothers. The others were listening in silence. The strumming of the guitar sounded fragile in the darkness. Heike moved closer, resting her head on my shoulder. Quietly, she hummed along. I put my arm around her and we sat there like that until the song was over. But even when Max started another, faster tune and more voices joined in, Heike stayed with me. The only movement was her finger drawing little circles on my thigh. I gently stroked her upper arm with my thumb. And when she looked up at me, I kissed her.

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## Drei

I floated through the rest of the week on my memory of that Sunday. I tried to put Paula out of my mind. It was cowardly to avoid her, but what was there to explain? She was being pushy. Or was I scared of bumping into Heike? Had it been the atmosphere, the campfire, the warm evening? Had she had a bit too much to drink?

Walter nudged me as we were finishing up at the end of the day.

"I think you've got a visitor," he grinned. Heike was standing by the fence around the building site. She was wearing denim shorts and a white blouse.

Feeling awkward, I walked over to her. How was I supposed to greet her? Just say hello? Give her a kiss?

She took the decision out of my hands by throwing her arms around my neck and kissing me on the lips. I could feel Walter watching us.

"Hello!" she said cheerfully. "Are you done for the day?"

I looked back. Walter signalled that I could leave.

"Yep, just this minute."

"Good. Then we can go. There's a good film on at the City." She smiled.

A little overwhelmed, I let her drag me along. The City was one of the border cinemas where East Berliners were allowed to pay less to see the film. They showed American movies that never made it to cinemas in the East, or European films that came out much earlier than in the DDR. Before the film, they showed the week's news, from a Western point of view. I was too proud to pay the East price, so I took my Westmarks out of my pocket and bought two tickets. I can't remember now what the film was about or what it was called. But I do remember the soft touch of Heike's arm beside me. I didn't go back across the border until very late that evening.

It wasn't at all strange or uncomfortable. It felt like we'd known each other for ages and had been together for years. She often came to the building site and we'd go off into town for dinner or head to a pub with Walter and the gang. We didn't discuss politics or East versus West. We talked about films, music, our favourite drinks and what we planned to do in the future. We were on the same wavelength when it came to a lot of things.

Heike worked as a typist for a large furniture company. She made up the purchase orders. It was funny to hear her let off steam about the infuriating colleague who sat across from her and about her boss, who thought he could constantly tell derogatory jokes to the women who worked for him. Whenever I laughed at her stories, she forgot her irritation and burst out laughing too. We came up with dozens of ways to make her boss look like an idiot.

Paula had reeled in some other guy in the meantime and wasn't interested in me anymore. When she was spending time with her new flame, I went over to Heike's place. She cooked for me and made breakfast.

After a while, she asked the inevitable question. "When are we going to your place? When are you going to take me to the East?"

Of course I was well aware that we always stayed on her side of the border. And I remembered what she'd said to me when we first met. That she'd never been to East Berlin.

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## Vier

When Walter turned off his portable radio, I knew work was over for the day. Instead of stopping to chat, I shut myself up in the foreman's van and got changed as quickly as I could. I'd taken my real Levis and my white shirt. Today was special. I wanted her to go out with the stylish Julian, even though it meant I was really going to stand out on the other side of the border. I didn't care. I put on my bright red Western shoes and stashed my work clothes and safety boots in my bag. I shouted goodbye to Walter, who was still tidying things away in the yard and I left. The sun was shining and I was whistling an Elvis song that had just been on the radio.

Paula wasn't in – and that was fine by me. When I reached the top of the stairs, Heike was waiting for me at the door to their apartment. She was wearing a flared skirt with a short jacket and she'd pinned up her hair and put on lipstick like we were going for a real night out. She looked a bit like Marilyn Monroe in her younger years.

"So, are you ready for your visit to the Socialist Paradise?"

I saw a flash of doubt cross her face, but then she smiled and held out her arm. I took it, like a real gentleman, and we walked down the stairs. Outside, she let go of my arm.

We went the long way round to the border, because I didn't want to bump into Wolfi Wanker. I wasn't going to let him humiliate me in front of Heike! When we reached the border, I could feel

that she was holding her breath. The soldiers did a thorough job. They asked for our passports, studied the photographs and our faces and returned them without saying a word.

Then the soldier spoke. "Show me your bag," he asked. Heike looked at me, her eyes wide. I handed it over, quietly humming the tune that was in my head. The soldier looked up with a suspicious frown on his face, but then zipped my bag shut. "All right. Go on through," he growled.

As we walked on, Heike grabbed my hand. "That was an Elvis song!"

I kept up a brisk pace. At home I'd had a good think about the route we'd take. I wanted to show her Alexanderplatz, the main square in East Berlin. My itinerary included anything that might impress her. But now that I was walking beside her through the streets and neighbourhoods that I'd chosen to take us to those few highlights, I realized how shabby they'd look in comparison to the busy streets and avenues in the West, with their neon lights. And how gloomy the streets in between them were. As soon as you turned off the main roads, you were in rundown neighbourhoods, where there was no paint left on the walls. Ruins with the holes and the rubble of the war alternated with inhabited houses. Weeds grew rampant between the bricks. The people walking by wore old-fashioned clothes.

When we reached Gendarmenmarkt, I saw the square through her eyes. I'd always been impressed by the French Church. The large columns and the round tower had an old-fashioned grandeur that you rarely saw anymore. But now I noticed that there were holes in the roof. The statues were missing arms and heads. My shoulders sank. What could I actually show her?

We moved on to the newer parts of the city. Heike was polite, she looked at the statues of Stalin and the other communist leaders. She dutifully admired the socialist high-rise buildings and the many new construction projects. She kindly ignored the long queues and the empty display windows. She didn't frown at the sight of the communist slogans. But I still couldn't shake off the feeling that I was disappointing her. So I made an escape to the park. Trees and benches and greenery were the same in every political system.

I sighed with relief. In the Volkspark in Friedrichshain, people were out walking with pushchairs, children were playing football and girls sat giggling on the grass. The Fairy Tale Fountain was spouting water to complete the idyllic picture. We looked at the fairy-tale figures flanking the fountain.

"What's your favourite fairy tale, Julian?" Heike suddenly asked.

I'd never thought about it before. But Heike had. Sleeping Beauty. Her grandmother had a spinning wheel too. And from fairy tales we moved on to grandmothers and the scent of gingerbread and winter evenings and other children's stories. We chatted and laughed and I forgot the city behind me and my failed attempt to convince Heike that this country had some beauty to offer too.

When evening started to fall, we left the park. I'd promised my mum that I'd take Heike home for dinner. It hadn't been my idea, but I didn't want to disappoint Mum. Heike was nervous. As we walked up the stairs, she smoothed her skirt three times. I gave her an encouraging nod and hoped my father would behave himself. We weren't even five minutes late, but he was already sitting at the table, waiting.

Heike greeted him politely. He grunted something back. Mum came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on her apron. She was nervous too.

Mum really had done her best. She'd made a stew and outdone herself. Heike complimented her. I'd never seen Mum blush before. The rest of the conversation felt forced. But Dad didn't subject her to a cross-examination and Franziska answered Heike's questions.

"I'm a member of the Freie Deutsche Jugend. The aim of the FDJ is to strengthen our friendship with the Soviet Union and to support all peoples of the world in the struggle against the imperialist system."

I rolled my eyes, but Heike smiled, nodded and ignored my sister's pompous tone. I desperately tried to find another topic of conversation, but couldn't come up with anything. We'd already had the chat about the weather.

"A little more stew?" Mum asked.

"Yes, please. It's delicious," Heike said politely. "It reminds me a bit of Irish stew. Oh, if you ever go to Ireland, you..." She stopped abruptly.

Mum would never go to Ireland and try the stew there.

"We went to the Volkspark," I said to defuse the situation. "It was pretty busy. Lots of people there."

Heike immediately agreed. "Such a beautiful fountain, isn't it? With all those characters from fairy tales."

"Yes. It is."

We fell into silence, looking at our plates and each of us running through topics in our heads to find something we could talk about, but nothing seemed appropriate.

The silence was finally broken when everyone was full and Mum began clearing the table. There was a knock at the door. I got up and went to answer it. It was Frau Schulze, our neighbour. Her three sons and her husband had died in the war. After the Nazi regime, she'd become a fervent convert to communism. She only listened to DDR radio and preached whatever she heard there as though she'd come up with it herself.

I wasn't planning to introduce Heike to her. Before she had the chance to ask her anything, I decided to take Heike home. I had to put up with a lecture from Dad about leaving so soon. Frau Schulze didn't need to know I was going out with a girl from the West. She already disapproved of me anyway. Besides, I hadn't brought Heike home to be inundated with communist arrogance.

"What unusual clothes that girl's wearing," I caught her saying as we left.

We didn't go straight to the border. We ambled through my part of the city, as the sun went down in hers. I'd given up showing her things. I was no longer seeing the streets through her eyes, but seeing her through my own. We didn't say much, but wandered hand in hand. She shivered and I put my arm around her shoulders, but when it got even colder, she suggested going home.

We said goodbye at the border. I kissed her.

"I thought it was a wonderful evening, Julian."

I frowned. The ugly city? The awkward conversation? Franziska's arrogance?

"Now I understand you better."

I was about to protest, but she put her finger to my lips.

"I know you're not like that, that you don't think the same way as Franziska, and that you don't really feel at home here. But you're a part of this country. And I think it was brave of you to show me all of this. It was very... honest. Thank you," she said quietly and she gave me a soft kiss on the cheek.

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## Fünf

When the doorbell rang, I opened one eye to peer at the clock. They were far too early. We weren't supposed to be leaving for the dacha, our little country house in the woods outside the city, until ten. I groaned and turned over. Hermann, my brother-in-law, was always early. I pulled the sheet over my head, but I could already hear Marthe and Florian's little feet running down the hallway.

"Hi, Gran!" Marthe shrieked. "It's my birthday today!"

As if we didn't know. For her birthday present, Heike and I had taken her to the zoo the day before and she'd told everyone she met, "Tomorrow I'm going to be thiiiiis many years old!" And she'd held up four fingers.

The front door closed. Gudrun, my oldest sister, said something. She sounded upset, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. And Hermann was speaking pretty loudly for him too. What was going on?

When I went into the living room, Dad was sitting by the radio. Mum, Gudrun and Hermann were standing around him, listening. They didn't even hear me come in, but were looking intently at the radio as if they could pull out more information just by the power of their stares. The newsreader was halfway through a sentence and I didn't know what it was about. Dad switched to the American station. "... and the people of Berlin expect the Western powers to take decisive steps with regard to the Soviet government," said the voice of the mayor of West Berlin.

"What's going on?" I asked.

"They've closed the border."

"Closed the border? Why?"

Gudrun shrugged her shoulders.

"That's what everyone's saying, that they've closed the border. With barbed wire. No one's allowed through."

"For how long?"

"They're haven't said. For good?"

How could that be? Why... When...? We'd crossed the border twice yesterday to go to the zoo. We hadn't noticed anything special. Everything was the same as always. So how...?

"I'm going to take a look." I quickly pulled on my shoes.

"Be careful," said Mum. "If the Russians..."

But I wasn't listening. Outside, I took off running. I followed the direction of the flow of people, racing past everyone. It wasn't the average Sunday morning people out on the streets. Men weren't wearing coats. They weren't bringing cakes from the baker's. Mothers were carrying babies in their arms instead of ambling along with a pram. Their peaceful awakening had been abruptly shattered. Agitation was blowing through the streets. Everyone was heading in the same direction, as if drawn by a huge magnet. The border. I could feel that force tugging at my body too. I didn't want to believe what Gudrun had said until I'd seen it for myself. They surely couldn't close the entire border, could they? We were one city, damn it! Two states, but one city. The people on the streets changed course. It was a loud hammering that seemed to be attracting them now. At the end of the street, the people came to a sudden stop.

Gudrun was right.

Just before the intersection with Bernauer Straße, the road had been opened up. Labourers were ramming concrete posts into the ground. Beside them were rolls of barbed wire. Volkspolizisten stood in front of the barbed wire, their submachine guns at the ready. Their faces were blank, as if they were staring not at, but through, the people in front of them.

I couldn't take another step. I couldn't manage even half a thought. All I could do was stand and stare. The rumbling sound of the drills breaking up the asphalt was deafening. It was as if I were looking at something that wasn't really happening. There were people on the other side of the barbed wire too. Just as motionless as we were. But on their side there were no police with their guns drawn. A cold feeling slowly crept over me. The posts. The construction troops. They were closing the border. Not for a few hours, as they'd often done before. They were ramming posts into the ground. This was serious.

Heike! She was supposed to be going with us to the dacha. Was she already in East Berlin? Had she got across the border? My thoughts raced off in all directions. What time was it? How long had the border been closed? Had she made it? The underground. Maybe the underground trains were still running! I moved away from the barbed wire fence. I had to go back home.

Now that I'd turned my back on the Volkspolizisten and their guns, I could feel the blood flowing through my legs again and I started running, away from the border. I slowed whenever I passed a girl with blonde hair. It wasn't Heike. It was never Heike.

I was completely out of breath when I got home. In the living room, Dad was still glued to his radio. Florian and Marthe were making an unholy racket. Mum and Gudrun were trying to discuss something above the noise of the children. No one was paying any attention to me. "Hey! HEY!" I yelled, until everyone was quiet. "Is Heike here?"

Mum looked at me. She shook her head. Her face fell when she realized what her answer meant. "Julian," she whispered.

I gritted my teeth. Maybe she'd still come. She was probably on her way.

"Julian, get ready!" Florian pulled at my sleeve.

"We're going to the dacha!" whooped Marthe.

But I ignored them.

"We've decided to go anyway," Gudrun said quietly. "There's nothing we can do here."

"But Heike..."

"Julian," said Mum again. "The border..."

"We could at least wait a little while!"

Dad looked up from his radio, annoyed. "Make up your minds!"

"Let's go," said Gudrun. "There's no point staying here. If fighting breaks out..."

I shook my head. I couldn't just go to the dacha until I knew where Heike was. Franziska came into the living room, wearing a pair of sunglasses and an absurdly large hat.

"Are we off?"

"Heike's not here yet," I barked at her.

"She can't come with us now anyway." She stuck her chin in the air.

"Julian." Gudrun put her hand on mine. "You know there's nothing we can do here. We promised Marthe and Florian..."

I nodded without listening.

"You go. I'm staying here."

As they left, I stood there in the middle of the living room, impassive as they walked past me. Like a stranded buoy in a retreating sea.

"Don't do anything foolish," said Mum, before she closed the door behind them. Once the noise of Marthe and Florian thumping down the stairs had died away, the house was completely silent. For minutes, I stood there, motionless, listening for someone to ring the bell. But all I could hear was the drone of the drills inside my head.

I looked at my watch. Heike should already have been here. I wanted to go outside. Maybe I'd bump into her on the street. Maybe I'd see her on the other side of the border.

There was a knock.

I rushed to the door and yanked it open. It was my big brother, Rolf. Disappointed, I went back to the living room. Rolf followed me with large strides.

"Have you heard?" His face was red. He'd probably run here all the way from his flat.

I nodded grimly. "They've all gone to the dacha."

"Now? While everything here..." Rolf sounded surprised.

I shrugged. "Gudrun didn't want to be in the city if another war breaks out."

Rolf sat down on the edge of the sofa. "Do you think that's going to happen?"

I shrugged again. "The Americans won't take this lying down, will they? All of West Berlin's been sealed off."

"The Russians are on standby too," said Rolf. "I've seen them riding through the city in trucks. No tanks yet, but they're keeping an eye on things."

I swallowed hard. Were they really going to unleash another war? Had they already forgotten the last one?

"Is the entire border really closed? Everywhere?"

Now it was Rolf's turn to shrug. "I only know what I've heard on the radio." He sighed. "So this is how the Party tries to keep us in the East, eh? Barbed wire."

"I'm going to the border," I said. Standing there worrying about whether there was going to be a war wasn't going to help. "Will you stay here?"

"No, I..."

But I didn't wait to hear Rolf's reply. "We'd agreed that Heike would come here and then we'd go to the dacha. Maybe she managed to get across the border somehow."

"I doubt it. But if you want to be sure, leave a note on the door."

Why hadn't I thought of that?

Dear Heike,

I've gone into town. Please wait here for me.

The others have already left for the dacha. Back soon.

Love, J.

I stuck the note on the door and for the second time that day I walked down the stairs and outside. I took my bike from the courtyard and raced out of the street, heading West. If the Americans were going to do something about the closed border, it'd most likely be at Brandenburger Tor. There'd already been an insurrection there eight years ago. A strike by construction workers had turned

into a widespread protest. The Russians had brought in the tanks. The Volkspolizisten had shot the protesters with live ammunition. Would the same thing happen again today? I went faster. There were even more people out on the streets now. More police too. A truck full of soldiers went by.

When I got to Pariser Platz, there was no insurrection going on. Quite the opposite. I was struck by the deathly silence. Volkspolizisten stood side by side, their guns across their chests. They formed a cold wall in front of the rolls of barbed wire that lay on the ground here too. On the other side of the Brandenburger Tor, crowds of West Berliners stood curiously staring past the Vopos. On their side: no guns. On their side: a few police with their hands in their pockets. Behind the Volkspolizisten were tanks and water cannon. Aimed at us. No one on this side of the border dared to go any closer. Where were the Americans? Where were their bulldozers that could simply shove the barbed wire aside?

Pushing my bike, I followed the barbed wire. A little further on, a group of people stood talking. I walked over to them. Maybe they could tell me more.

Some West Berliners were standing on the other side of the barbed wire.

“Come on!” they suddenly shouted. They were beckoning and waving their arms. “Come on! Come to us!” They held down the barbed wire. A few people in the group didn’t hesitate. They ran to the wire, climbed over it. Before I knew what was happening, three people had escaped to West Berlin. Border guards came running up. Should I... Thoughts were racing through my head. Should I drop my bike and run after them to the other side? To the West? To Heike? Leave everything behind? I had nothing with me. I wouldn’t be able to say goodbye. But I was too slow. The border guards had called over the construction troops to lay more barbed wire. Two Volkspolizisten came running up with raised bayonets to keep us at a distance.

“Manfred!” The woman beside me ran towards the border. She was stopped by the Vopos. Manfred was standing on the other side. Ashen-faced. When he tried to run towards her, some West Berliners stopped him. They talked to him, tried to turn him around.

“Manfred, no, wait for me!” the woman called. She tore herself away, ran the five metres to the barbed wire and started to climb, but her sweater got caught and the Vopos grabbed hold of her again. Sobbing, she fell to the ground. The police dragged her away. No one did anything. We watched, as if paralyzed.

Very deep inside me, a bubble of panic was rising. They’d laid their barbed wire not only through my city, but straight through my life. I could already feel it tearing into me. Stupefied, I walked on with my bike.

The same scene everywhere. Silent people on both sides of the border, staring at one another as if they’d just awoken from a thousand-year sleep and didn’t recognize anyone. Empty faces of Volkspolizisten and the hammering of construction crews. A single British Jeep with three soldiers. As they drove up, everyone held their breath. The soldiers didn’t even bother to go up to the border. They looked around, shrugged their shoulders and drove away. That’s how concerned the Western powers were about our situation. The only real resistance I saw came from a bunch of West German troublemakers. Youths of about seventeen with quiffs and black leather jackets. They rode up on their mopeds with their portable radios, yelling insults and throwing stones at a group of Party officials. But before the situation could escalate, West German police officers had sent them packing. “No provocation.”

I wanted to turn my back on the border and walk away, but I couldn't. Just like witnesses to an accident, who don't want to see what's happened but still can't tear themselves away from the terrible sight. Maybe one spot somewhere had been forgotten. Wishful thinking. The Party forgets nothing and no one.

A crowd was forming on the corner of Friedrichstraße and Unter den Linden. Curious, I walked over to them. Some young people had climbed up onto crates. They had loudspeakers.

"Is this the State that will keep the peace? Peace can't be defended with tanks! Every citizen has the right to freedom! Reopen the borders! Berlin is one city!"

Men in long coats and dark hats mingled with the crowd. "You'd better move on. You don't want to be involved in this. Move along. Move along," they hissed.

The people looked at them fearfully, knowing who they were, and walked on. No one wanted trouble with the Stasi, the State Security.

I walked and walked and walked but, wherever I went, I saw the same scenes. The resistance was bewilderingly passive. Mainly on the Western side of the border, insults were being hurled at the guards, and choruses of people were chanting slogans. But the Vopos just kept staring in our direction with their blank faces and raised bayonets. Anyone who tried to escape was caught; anyone who got too close was threatened. Groups of worried people gathered everywhere. They whispered, waved their arms around, became agitated, but they didn't actually do anything. There was no response from the Allies. They'd abandoned us. They were letting the Party lock up its own citizens. No one wanted to risk a war. Our freedom meant nothing to them.