

Napoleon Schmidt is Dead:
A Hystopian Novel

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Abstract

This dissertation consists of two sections: a novel, *Napoleon Schmidt is Dead*, and a critical commentary. The novel is set against the backdrop of East Berlin in the 1980s and tells the story of fifteen-year-old Anna, who starts to question the world she lives in. Strange notes and potatoes form a mysterious trail that Anna hopes will lead her to the truth. The price she pays is her freedom. Although the historical context is real, the novel draws on tropes of dystopian fiction to engender an atmosphere of paranoia. The novel is aimed at a teen audience and is a story of female friendship, rebellion and coming-of-age at a time when the status quo demands uniformity and punishes individuality. It articulates the sense of powerlessness experienced by teenagers within family structures, which is amplified through the restrictions of growing up under an oppressive regime.

The critical commentary is divided into five sections, each of which takes as its focus a specific author of dystopian fiction, tracing the ways in which these writers respond to each other's work. The commentary further investigates the origins and evolution of dystopian fiction, and considers its generic next-of-kin in that context.

The original contribution to knowledge lies in the development of the 'Feindt Principle', a proposal of a new sub-genre, 'hystopia', a new piece of hystopian fiction and the induction of Anna Burns' novel *Milkman* (2018) into the canon of hystopian fiction.

Napoleon Schmidt is Dead

Part One

Chapter 1

It was a coincidence, no more than that. There was a set of snowy footprints in the tiled atrium of my apartment building, fresh, obviously, as they had not yet started to melt. I followed them up the staircase, which led to the upstairs flats, for once not resenting the fact I had to tramp up three flights of stairs to get home. From somewhere above me, I could hear a doorbell ringing. At my feet, the snow crunched beneath my boots. The ringing stopped and I could hear someone pacing. On the second floor I encountered the postman. Snow still clung in patches to his boots. When he saw me, he made for the stairs, but I didn't get out of his way.

'Did you ring twice?' I asked.

'What? Yes. Do you know Frau Schmidt?'

I'd seen her outside, just a few minutes ago. That was what I told him.

'I don't have time to wait,' he said. His words echoed around the stairwell.

'You can't just put it through the letterbox?'

'It's a telegram. Needs a signature.'

'I'll sign for it.'

He looked unsure. 'How old are you?'

'Eighteen.' Fifteen, actually.

'And you live here?'

'On the third floor. With my mother.'

'Her name?'

'Ellen Peters.'

He considered this. He looked at his watch and sighed. 'Fine. You make sure Frau Schmidt gets it.' He held out a pen and pad.

'Of course.' I took the pen and looked at the piece of paper, at the other names on the page.

'I don't have all day,' he said.

I scribbled my name quickly and returned the pen and pad. I once read that honest people didn't avoid eye contact because they had nothing to hide, so, in order to reassure the postman that there was nothing wrong here, I stared at him.

He looked up at me. 'Is there something on my face?'

'No.'

He shook his head. 'You'll be held accountable if Frau Schmidt doesn't get it,' he said, and set off down the concrete stairs.

At about three o'clock, Frau Schmidt returned. I was hovering on the landing, outside my flat and could hear her unmelodic whistling as she shuffled across the entrance hall. I peered over the railing and there, on the floor below, I saw a hand holding onto the bannister, sliding upwards. I crept back into my flat and pulled the door to, staring at the keys hanging from the hooks next to the front door: one was labelled 'attic', another 'Weber', yet another 'Schmidt'. Some of our neighbours had deemed us trustworthy – or at least Mutti. And then I waited. I'd considered steaming Frau Schmidt's telegram open from the second the postman handed it over. But that wouldn't have made me any better than them. And the idea I was in any way like them made me uncomfortable, like seeing Mutti cry or catching the boys at school staring at my breasts.

Eventually, I knocked on Frau Schmidt's door. The radio was playing inside her flat, and I could hear clattering, probably of pots. I knocked again and heard

footsteps coming towards me. The door opened just enough to see her, but little else.

‘Anna?’ Frau Schmidt said. Her pale blue eyes studied me. ‘Everything alright?’

‘This came for you.’ I handed her the telegram.

‘Today?’

‘A couple of hours ago.’

‘I was buying flowers. It’s Napoleon’s birthday today.’ Her voice cracked.

I didn’t know what to say. His funeral was months ago.

‘Thank you for this,’ she said, brandishing the telegram. She was about to say something else when her phone rang. ‘Lovely to see you,’ she added and hastily shut the door.

Frau Schmidt answered the phone on the third ring.

‘Hello,’ she said. ‘Cemetery Pankow. Tomorrow? Six o’clock? I’ll bring flowers. We’ll go for cake after.’

I heard her ring off. There was something in her tone that made my pulse thump.

Back upstairs, I sat down and ordered my thoughts. I needed to speak to Knut. I wanted to call him there and then and tell him everything, but I knew better than that. Phones couldn’t be trusted. And you didn’t know who might be lingering outside your door, listening in. But a telegram and a phone call, and all on her husband’s late birthday. It was too big a coincidence.

It would have to wait until later, when I was going to his to watch a film. *The Sorrows of Young Werther*. To say that Knut was obsessed with the book would have been an understatement. I didn’t really care for it. As long as I didn’t have to read it again. Knut always said I shouldn’t be so dismissive of the classics. Seriously though, what could these old men possibly teach me about myself or the world I lived

in? He'd usually shake his head at that. He'd said to come over at five o'clock and asked me to bring four bottles of Karena. To which I'd said I wasn't a packhorse. That had made him laugh.

I wondered if he'd be able to tell from looking at me that I had important news. He noticed everything. Actually, that wasn't true. Knut tended to spot detail you didn't think anybody would. But if I turned up with green hair one day, he'd probably talk about music and not acknowledge my makeover. Not because he didn't want to; because it was the kind of thing that would simply escape him.

I was in the middle of scribbling a note for Mutti when I heard her unlock the door.

'Anna!' she called, from the hallway.

'In here!' I shouted, ripping up the note. I had hoped to leave without having to explain myself to her. It was all I seemed to do. 'I'm meeting Knut.'

'Have you eaten something?' she said.

'Not hungry.' I pushed past her.

'Anna?' She looked at me, eyebrows raised.

'Ellen?' She hated it when I called her by her first name.

'You don't bother brushing your hair?' She parted my hair with her fingers.

'I forgot, OK?'

'You forgot to brush your hair?'

'Yes?'

'Your hair's wild.'

'Stop parting it,' I protested.

'You're lazy.'

'Thanks, that's really sweet of you, Ellen.'

'Who's too lazy to brush their own hair?' She looked at me and got a hairgrip out of her pocket, pulling a strand of my hair into position before fixing it into place with the grip. The grip caught my skin and it hurt. I batted her hand away.

'Mutti, what are you doing to me?'

She smiled and marched me to the mirror in the hall. 'Look how nice your hair can look.'

I rolled my eyes at my reflection. 'The only thing hairgrips are good for is picking locks.'

'Anna!' Mutti said.

'I'm going,' I said, breaking eye contact with my mirror image.

'Put this on,' Mutti said, handing me a thick woollen hat.

'Not happy with the hair job after all?' The hat was midnight blue and the material felt soft in my hands, as soft as steam. 'Thank you,' I whispered and grabbed my keys.

'Say hello to Knut for me.'

I walked down the concrete stairs and before I'd even reached Frau Schmidt's floor I'd already pulled the stupid hairgrip out and put it in my pocket. Once outside, a crumpled piece of yellowish paper on the ground caught my eye. The telegram. I reached down and put it in my coat pocket, not wanting to look at it there and then. There were eyes everywhere.

I caught the tram two streets away and managed to get a seat. Walking would have been the other option but it was cold and, as Mutti had pointed out, I was lazy. There was something comforting about sitting in a stuffy, dimly lit compartment, clattering over the tracks, past old buildings and the river Panke.

Four stops later, I got off. Even though Knut didn't live far from me, this part of town had been transformed into a barren landscape over the years. The streets were much wider here, and the trees that once lined them had been felled, giving way to concrete tower blocks as far as the eye could see. The only splatters of colour came from the traffic lights, flashing green or red.

It was only a short walk to Knut's, which took me past the Späti, my last chance to get the bottles of Karena. There was no harm in being accommodating just this once, I thought, and turned into the small shop. But the queue was long. The fizzy drinks would have to wait for another day, and I left the Späti emptyhanded.

Knut lived in one of a cluster of tower blocks, each as high as they were grey, the kind of grey that made them disappear in heavy rain. But this evening, against the setting sun, the grey smouldered invitingly. I reached the entrance to Knut's block and scanned the tags next to the call buttons. No new names.

'Lift's broken,' Knut said over the intercom as he buzzed me in.

That would be me walking up eighteen flights of stairs, without a single postman to distract me. I was glad I hadn't bought the drinks.

Knut, was waiting outside his flat by the time I reached the ninth floor. He pointed at his wrist.

'That took you some time,' he said.

'It's eighteen flights.'

'Still, not like you're an old woman.'

I stopped right in front of him. 'Shut up.'

'Got the Karena?'

'No.'

'Anna!'

'Are you not going to ask me inside?'

'No,' he laughed.

'Out of my way.' I pushed him inside, which wasn't that difficult despite the fact he was considerably taller than me.

He held his side, pretending to be injured. 'You're quite strong, you know.'

'Am I?'

'Yeah, for a girl.' He smiled.

I took a few deep breaths, then I looked at him, trying to ignore the busy orange wallpaper.

'Why does it always smell of boiled vegetables in here?'

'Because,' he said, 'Ilse boils a lot of vegetables.'

'That would explain it.'

'Ilse loves vegetables.'

'Why do you call her Ilse?'

'That's her name.'

'She's your mother, though.'

'Do you always refer to your Mutti as Mutti or do you call her by her name?' Knut asked.

'Only to annoy her,' I said.

'You're horrible.'

We'd reached the kitchen where the wallpaper was no less busy. Orange sunflowers framed by lemon diamonds. I'd commented on it countless times. I wasn't going to put him through it today. I looked at Knut then and wondered if he could tell.

'What?' he said. 'Why are you staring at me?'

I looked into his brown eyes. They were so familiar, like the small birthmark on my thumb or the crack in the bathroom mirror. 'Can you tell?'

He studied me then. Carefully, not rushing it. I could hear the radio playing from his bedroom. Classical music. It was mainly classical with Knut. He stepped closer and smelled my hair. 'You have news for me,' he concluded.

'Wow,' I said. 'How do you do it?'

'Skills.'

'I'm impressed.'

'Tell me your news.'

'Pour me a drink first.'

'What do you want?'

'Schnapps.'

'Ilse locks the liquor cabinet.'

'She's so uptight.' We laughed. Knut poured me a glass of water instead, which I downed and then put on the kitchen counter. 'Are you ready?' I asked.

'I'm always ready,' he said.

'Tell me honestly. How old do I look?'

Knut threw up his hands. 'Not that again.'

'No, no. It's not that again at all. I promise.'

'Have you done something with your hair?' He studied me.

'Oh shut up,' I said.

Knut ushered me towards his room, where he threw himself onto the bed, his hands covering his face. The good thing about his room was that the wallpaper was less distracting. The walls were mainly decorated with drawings of composers

because we could never get proper posters. I mean, who'd put a poster of Rachmaninoff on their wall? Knut, that's who.

'All I said to Rosa was that you looked youthful for your age.'

'I don't care about what you said to Rosa. Who is she even?'

'You don't know who Rosa is?' He faked outrage.

'You know what I mean.'

I sat down next to Knut on the bed. 'Today I passed for 18.'

'You're joking.'

'No.' I savoured the moment, before I filled him in on the rest.

'That's sneaky,' he said, shaking his head. 'You State Security?'

'You calling me Stasi?'

'Sorry,' he said. 'But you've got to admit: you're spying on that poor widow.'

'It gets worse.'

'Worse?'

'Yes.'

'How exactly?'

I reached into my pocket and pulled out the crumpled up telegram. I unfolded the flimsy paper.

'You stole the telegram?'

'I found it,' I said.

'I'm sure that's an actual crime.'

'Don't shit your pants,' I said, and looked at the message.

'Stop,' Knut warned. 'You can't unsee it.'

I ignored him and read the telegram out loud. 'Congratulations.'

'What?'

'That's what it says: Congratulations.'

'Anna, I can't unhear it. I can't unknow it.'

'This makes you my accomplice.' I smiled.

He shook his head.

'Congratulations,' I repeated. 'What do you think it means?'

'I don't want any part of this.'

'Too late. You are part of this. Will you come to the cemetery with me tomorrow?'

It wasn't an actual question. More of an assumption.

'No.'

'Why not?'

'FDJ meeting,' he said.

'There's nothing free about the German youth,' I said. 'We'll go after the meeting.'

Knut got up and switched on the TV. 'Ready for tonight's feature film?'

'Don't change the subject.'

'The film is the subject. The film is why you are here.'

I adjusted my position, determined not to enjoy the film. Stuff Young Werther's sorrows. What about mine?

Chapter 2

The next day, after school, I didn't go home. It was too cold to linger outside, so I took a brisk walk around the city until it was time for the FDJ meeting. I stopped opposite a beige high-rise that must have been at least twenty stories tall. The road it towered over was vast – there were three lanes in each direction. Trabis whizzed past me, the noise of their engines drowning out any other sounds. On the side of the high-rise, breaking up the never-ending surface of beige, there was a mural of Margot. In fact, there were murals of her and her husband all over town, but this was believed to be the biggest. Her face was painted in shades of grey, as if it was a picture in a newspaper, on a red background. Her eyes were black but not lifeless. If anything, they seemed to follow you around wherever you were going – 'Margot's watching you,' a teacher at school once said. 'Behave, Margot's watching you.'

The telegram was still in my pocket. It was difficult to think clearly. It wasn't the fact I hadn't ironed my FDJ uniform; I couldn't have cared less about the meeting. I was disappointed by Knut's unwillingness to get involved.

I carried on walking towards the Café der Jugend. It was ordinarily frequented by pensioners, the kind of comrades who remembered the war and liked to tell you about it. And if it wasn't the war, it was the Party and the greater good. But they were usually turfed out when we met.

It was getting dark when I reached the corner of Arnold-Zweig-Strasse. I looked through the window of the café, which was all steamed up. I wasn't sure what time it was, and I didn't want to be the first to arrive. That would involve an awkward exchange with the group leader, who I didn't like. I looked around for Knut, and there he was, wearing his blood red anorak, hands in pockets, sheet music wedged under his arm. Forever with the sheet music. I walked towards him.

‘What do you want?’ he asked. ‘Meeting’s in there—’ he pointed ‘—not out here.’

‘Stop it,’ I said. ‘Why do you always carry that around with you?’ I gestured at the sheets of notes.

‘Because I’m an artist, Anna.’

‘And I’m a...’ I had to think.

‘You’re figuring it out,’ Knut offered.

‘I guess.’

‘Shall we go in?’

I rolled my eyes. ‘Hang on.’ The cemetery. I wanted him to come with me.

‘You know the rules.’

‘I know, I know.’ I didn’t move. ‘Knut.’

‘Anna.’ He started walking towards the café.

‘Wait! Have you changed your mind?’

He stopped and looked at me. ‘I have no idea what you’re talking about.’

I felt inside my pocket for the piece of paper. ‘You know exactly,’ I said. There was a small hole in the pocket’s lining, into which I pushed my index finger. When it was big enough I pushed the paper in. The telegram slid into the space between my coat’s lining and the outer layer.

Knut shook his head.

‘You won’t come?’

‘No.’

The café was already quite full with other members. Flurries of navy blue shirts drifted past faded oil paintings of meadows and sheep and factories. The low ceiling squashed all the air out of the place, even in winter. Rows and rows of chairs faced the wonky stage, where at least 40 small potted trees were lined up.

Our usual spot on the back row, in the far corner, was unoccupied. We shuffled along the row, and sat down, under the watchful gaze of Rosa. I would have been underexaggerating if I said I found her irritating. It seemed wherever Knut and I went, there she was, trying to catch his eye. Since she was in our year at school, it happened all the time. So I did what I always did. I ignored her.

‘Don’t you think it smells of death?’ I said to Knut.

‘Maybe not death. Maybe more like really old people.’

‘Half-deads?’

‘Almost-deads.’

‘Like a cemetery?’ I asked. I was about to say more than that, when the meeting started. I wasn’t sure why we had to meet weekly but that was the way it was. At least all we had to do was sit and listen. Sometimes they would ask us to volunteer for projects; digging holes in the cold, laying bricks, things like that. I didn’t enjoy it much. Others, like Rosa, seemed to get more out of it.

‘Good evening, comrades! You might be wondering,’ the leader started, ‘why we are surrounded by all these little trees?’

‘Cedar trees. That’s their name.’ I said this to Knut.

‘How do you know that?’

‘I paid attention in biology.’

He burst out laughing. ‘Really?’

‘Really.’

‘These young cedar trees,’ the leader continued, ‘are part of an exciting new project.’

I elbowed Knut. ‘Told you. Cedar trees.’

‘Whatever,’ he said.

‘And we need your help,’ the leader announced.

‘Here we go,’ I whispered. ‘Another one of Margot’s projects.’

‘Margot.’ Knut rolled his eyes.

‘The Ernst Thählmann Park needs you,’ the leader said.

‘What?’ someone asked.

‘A brand new estate of tower blocks and shops in Prenzlauer Berg. With trees.’ He gestured towards the trees. ‘I asked for a load of them to be brought in so you can get a sense of what it might feel like to be living amongst all those trees.’

More questions followed and a full-blown discussion about the project started. I had no interest in it. If anything, I wondered what had happened to actually teaching us life skills, like starting fires without matches, picking locks and making soup. This was my chance to talk to Knut.

I elbowed him again. ‘I’ll make it worth your while.’

‘Really?’ he whispered.

‘Yeah, I’ll do you a drawing of that dull composer you like so much.’

‘Which one?’ There was genuine surprise in his voice.

‘Any of them.’

‘Name one.’

‘Rachmaninoff?’

‘I don’t even like him.’

‘You’re missing the point.’

‘Anna, no means no.’

‘Will you come to the cemetery with me at six o’clock? We can go after this.’

‘Seriously, to do what?’ He sounded annoyed.

‘To see what she’s up to.’

'You want to follow her to her to husband's grave?'

'Yes.'

'But why?' Knut asked. 'I mean, someone who doesn't know he's dead obviously sent the telegram.'

'I want to see if he's really dead.'

'You what?'

'I want to dig up the body,' I said flatly.

'You've lost it. That's insane.'

'What if he's not really dead?' I said. 'People fake their own deaths all the time.'

Knut shook his head. 'Anna, Napoleon Schmidt is dead.'

I said, 'And Marić is better than Stravinsky. That byzantine concerto kills.'

'You're only saying that because she's a woman.'

'That has nothing to do with it!' Someone in front shushed me. I looked up. Rosa glared at me. I gave her the finger.

Knut stared straight ahead. 'Then you must be deaf.'

'Because I disagree with you?'

'I don't want any part of this. I need to revise for my exams.'

'But aren't you curious at all?'

Knut looked at me. 'I can't afford to be. I need to focus, Anna. It's our final year.'

'Don't lie to me.'

Knut lowered his voice. 'I need to ace these exams.'

'Because of Christa,' I whispered.

'Yes.'

I sighed. 'Do you ever hear from her?'

'Anna.'

'Sorry.'

I felt for Knut. That whole business had been hard on him and his parents, and it was unfair he should pay for Christa's mistake. But there was nothing they could do about it now.

'I'd rather build all those tower blocks and plant all those trees,' Knut said, 'than even consider exhuming a body.'

Chapter 3

After the meeting, I stormed off. It annoyed me how annoyed I was at Knut, and feeling guilty about it annoyed me even more.

The street ahead was deserted. I looked up at the sky. Black. Starless. Hopeless. It was so cold, even for December. Mutti had insisted on me taking my new hat. I had no idea where she'd got it from. There wasn't enough of anything these days, and soft wool was no exception. I ran my fingers across the smooth pattern, then between the material and my forehead, giving it a thorough scratch.

As I turned the corner onto Wodenstrasse, I saw the Wall. In all its concrete, barbed-wire glory. Giant graffiti spelled out a simple plea: We Demand Freedom. I ran my fingers across the pattern of my hat again, trying to feel for holes and flaws in the knitting. Nothing.

I carried on walking, but slowly and with purpose. My footsteps echoed into the evening. Almost there. I poked the crumpled-up telegram through the torn lining of my pocket. I didn't dare take it out again. Its message – Congratulations – rang in my ears like a siren. Knut said taking it was a crime. It was more complicated than that: if I hadn't taken it, someone else might have found it, and then what? It wasn't like I'd planned it.

I could make out the entrance to Friedhof Pankow. The gate was open and people were coming and going, their voices hushed, their heads held low. I walked through the gate and, after only a few paces, ducked off the main path towards a large tree. It looked as lonely as I felt. The cemetery's dim lamps were barely strong enough to light the paths and the scraggy shrubs that lined them. In the shadow of the tree I was practically invisible and had a clear view of the entrance.

I knew exhuming Napoleon Schmidt's body was a non-starter, completely utopian. I didn't have a shovel or any other tools, and my upper body strength was practically non-existent. The bells from the surrounding churches chimed, giving me goosebumps. Frau Schmidt and a broad shouldered man I didn't know appeared on the sixth toll. Both carried flowers. I had to hand it to her, she was punctual.

Frau Schmidt and the man moved further into the cemetery. I weighed-up my options and decided to follow at a safe distance. But before I'd made it back onto the path, Knut appeared at the cemetery's entrance. He was carrying one of those potted cedar trees under one arm. I walked towards him and gestured at the tree.

'Really?' I said.

'I volunteered,' he replied, 'and they insisted I take this with me.'

'Come on,' I said and pulled him along the path. 'She's already here. With a man. Shoulders like a coat hanger.'

'What's she wearing?'

'Black coat and a dark hat.'

Knut squinted. 'So we're looking for the coat and the hanger.'

We scanned the vicinity: gravestones, trees, sheds, shrubs, hedges, mourners, dog-walkers and paths. More gravestones: upright ones, fallen ones and even broken ones. On the other side of the cemetery wall, towering over it, was the Wall. Freedom.

'Look, over there,' I whispered, without pointing. I was conscious of not drawing any attention to us, or them. Across the cemetery, two figures, walking arm in arm, drifted in and out of the lamplight.

At first Knut's and my steps were out of sync, like two opposing beats, but quickly they found their rhythm, their harmony. I wasn't ready to apologise.

Eventually, Knut said: 'I don't understand why you say Marić is better than Stravinsky.'

'If we have this conversation one more time, I'm going to kill you.'

'Explain it to me.'

'You know who I really like?'

'Who?'

'Bernard Herrmann.'

Knut stopped. 'Herrmann?'

The astonishment on his face was reward enough, 'Yeah. Love him.'

'That hack!'

'Come on. We don't want to lose them.'

Knut resumed his pace. 'Are you taking the piss?'

'Of course not.'

'But how do you even know Herrmann? That's unauthorized stuff.'

'Grow up, will you.'

'Tell me, Anna.'

'Why are we even having this discussion? Don't you think there are more pressing matters at hand?'

He stopped and put down the small tree. 'How do you know about Herrmann?'

An elderly couple and their Dachshund passed by.

'I know what I like,' I said flatly.

Knut seemed defeated and picked up the tree again. We carried on, following Frau Schmidt until the pair disappeared down a narrow path lined with trees.

'Looks like a dead end,' I said. 'Look, the cemetery wall's right here.'

'So what's the plan here? Run out and scream, "Gotch-ya"?''

The truth was, I didn't have a plan. Nothing beyond making it to the cemetery on time. It seemed so pointless now, following my poor neighbour. To prove what? That somehow Napoleon Schmidt was alive and well?

'You don't have a plan, do you?'

I ran both hands over my hat, wanting to throw it to the ground and scream. 'Let's just go and see what they're doing,' I said, hoping I would think of something.

As we turned onto the narrow path Frau Schmidt and the Hanger had taken, I heard her unmelodic whistles followed by muffled voices. Two. Maybe three. I couldn't be sure. We crept forward, seeking cover under the trees: even though winter had claimed their foliage, their long branches offered some shelter.

I pulled Knut's arm. His dark eyes were as still as the graves around us.

'Wait,' I mouthed. He nodded. We didn't dare breathe, trying to listen to what was being said. Just like them, I thought. I'm just like them. It was too dark to see but we could hear. Not what was being said, only that someone was speaking. Then the voices stopped. There was a moment of silence that seemed to go on for as long as a Stravinsky concerto. There was a thud, like something heavy being dropped, and then nothing.

We edged forward, not wanting to be caught. But in the end, we needn't have bothered. Frau Schmidt and the Hanger had vanished. A few petals, scattered in front of an old, weathered gravestone, were the only indication that anyone had been there at all. The name on the gravestone was Maria Liedtke.

'Who is she?' Knut asked.

'No idea.'

Knut didn't want to leave the tree. He carried it back towards the cemetery's entrance. I followed a few paces behind, confused. How could two people vanish like that? We'd seen them. We'd heard them. Then they were gone. I wondered if anybody else had seen them. There were only a few people still in the cemetery. The elderly couple and their Dachshund, a short man in glasses and a bobble hat, and one man in a long coat with a large dog. No, two men in long coats with large dogs. Three. Four. Five.

'Knut, wait,' I said and caught up with him. 'Police.'

The expression on his face changed. 'Anna, this isn't a game.' There was panic in his eyes. He gripped the potted tree tighter. The men were a good distance away but I saw one of them pulling out a see-through plastic bag. It contained a yellow square of cloth. He offered it to each of the dogs to sniff.

'Let's get out of here,' I said. But it was too late. One of the men had spotted us and shouted at us to stop.

Knut whispered, 'My aunt is buried here.'

'Her name?' I asked.

The man in the long coat quickened his pace.

'Irma Heine. We were here to plant a tree for her. We got lost. She loved Christmas.'

'Irma Heine loved Christmas,' I repeated.

'If they take you, get angry.'

'What?'

'Get angry.'

The man in the long coat reached us. He looked us up and down.

'ID cards,' he demanded. 'Now.'

Knut's and my eyes met for an instant. Then we looked at the policeman. But he was no ordinary policeman. He wasn't wearing a uniform. Stasi, I thought. This was serious. We were in trouble. Real trouble.

Chapter 4

I was in the back of a white Trabi, behind the driver. The man in the passenger seat stared straight ahead, nudging the driver every now and again, gesturing left or right with his head. They didn't speak. My hands were clammy. I couldn't breathe. Every time I tried, a mix of cold smoke and fake leather suffocated me. My body felt heavy and I struggled to keep my head up. But my mind was frenzied.

My hand traced along the car door, fingers searching for a handle or something that would let the night in. But there was nothing. As my head bumped against the window, I realised: this was an official car.

'Could you open a window?' I asked.

The driver glanced in the rear-view mirror. Our eyes met for the briefest moment. His face looked vacant. Could he sense the terror in mine?

'Why?' the man in the passenger seat said.

'It's hot,' I said. 'Too hot.'

He shook his head. 'It's the middle of December.'

I turned to look out of the window. All I could see was the Wall, slabs of concrete that paraded as buildings and snatches of murals: Margot in red, Erich in black, peasants in shades of brown. The tall, silver streetlights, standing like soldiers, provided little in the way of illumination. Like me not knowing what was going to happen. Like me not knowing where Knut was or why he told me to get angry. Like my mother not knowing where I was. Maybe I knew too much? The telegram. Congratulations. The cemetery. Frau Schmidt. Nothing made sense. I wanted to rip open the hole in my coat pocket. I wanted to pull the telegram out and scream, 'Congratulations! There you go. You got me.'

Vacant Eyes was staring at me from the rear-view mirror. Was I talking out loud? Could he read my thoughts? What would they do to me if they found the telegram?

They drove around so many side streets and corners it was impossible to keep track of where we were going. Disorientation. Of course. If you didn't know where you were, you were more likely to cooperate.

Eventually, we pulled up outside a large building. It looked like any other building. Both men got out of the car. The passenger walked around the car and opened my door. He didn't look at me. I turned my body to get out, tilting my head away from him. An empty street. Should I run? Before I could give it another thought, Vacant Eyes grabbed me by the arm and pulled me out of the car. Get angry. Get angry. Get angry.

'That hurts!' I said.

He shrugged.

Now, I really was getting angry. 'Didn't your mother teach you any manners?'

He still had hold of my arm and I could feel his grip tightening. 'Manners?' he said flatly.

'Let go,' I said.

He ignored me, carried on walking, hand around my arm, pulling me with him, until we reached the entrance to the building. The passenger, who was walking a few paces ahead of us, opened the door. We entered a corridor, sterile and clinical-looking. The door swung shut behind us, silencing the distant sounds of traffic. Phones were ringing behind closed doors. The whole place seemed to be an endless series of closed doors.

'Where are we?'

'Eyes down,' Vacant Eyes said.

'Tell me where I am.'

'Down,' he repeated, pushing my head into my chest.

He marched me further along the corridor. The linoleum squeaked under my feet. Eventually, we stopped outside a door, also closed. Vacant Eyes knocked. A voice boomed from within.

'Enter,' it said.

Vacant Eyes opened the door and pushed me inside. The walls were naked and the space was dominated by a giant desk and a yellow chair. What an odd choice of colour for a room like this. I'd always considered yellow a happy colour.

'Which one is she?' the man behind the desk asked.

'Friedhof Pankow.'

He nodded, made a note, then dismissed Vacant Eyes.

'Sit down,' he said. 'Remove your hat and coat.' His tone was stern. 'Hands under your thighs, palms facing down.'

'Where's my friend?'

He looked up from behind the desk. 'Excuse me?'

'Where's my friend?' I offered again.

He laughed, which revealed the wrinkles around his eyes.

'What's so funny?' I asked.

He shook his head, still laughing. 'Youth. The arrogance of youth. How about you shut up and let me ask the questions?'

This took me by surprise. My eyes closed for an instant, as if to protect me from his scrutiny, as if to buy me time. What to do next? Then I heard him opening and closing the drawer to his desk.

I looked straight at him. A strand of my hair had fallen out of place. I pushed it to one side, moving it slowly behind my ear. My fingers felt cold against my cheek.

'Hands,' he reminded me, conducting me with his gaze.

I complied, making sure to pick my battles carefully.

'Let's start, shall we?' he said.

He phrased it as a question. As if I had a choice in the matter.

'So, Anna Peters, that is your name, is it not?'

Hearing my name out of his mouth sounded unsettling, as if he wasn't supposed to say it. As if he was trying to claim it. An unbearable urge to repeat my name overcame me.

'Anna Peters,' I said. 'Anna Peters.' I reclaimed it. My name was still mine.

'Parents?'

'Yes.'

He looked up from his notes. 'Yes, what?'

'Yes, I have parents.'

He looked me straight in the eyes. 'Not just arrogant, a joker too? How delightful.'

The sarcasm in his voice was as pronounced as his Saxony accent. He'd been the first to sign-up to the Stasi when he heard it might bag him a place in the capital, I was certain. He forced his lips into a smile. It seemed rehearsed. Not taking his eyes off me, he reached to his left and opened the drawer to his desk. I held his gaze, felt it travel across my face, looking for any signs of... of what exactly? I wasn't sure but I willed myself not to blink or swallow. Now was not the time to show weakness. All I could do was hope he wouldn't hear my heart beat so hard it nearly jumped out of my throat. He closed the drawer but I didn't stop staring at him. Honest people maintain eye contact. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw something in his

hand. A cigarette. He brought it to his mouth and struck a match. The sound cut through the silence, the flame briefly illuminating his face. I noticed the gaps in his eyebrows and his thick lashes. He inhaled deeply and a wave of smoke filled the room, washing over me, a welcome cloak, masking the space between us.

‘I’ll ask you again. Parents?’

I should’ve known better but I took the bait. ‘Don’t you already know?’

He smiled. ‘Mother: Ellen Peters. Father: Wolfgang Peters, deceased.’

That stung. To hear my father’s name, out of his mouth. Deceased. So matter-of-factly.

‘So why ask if you already know everything?’ I said. ‘And why did you bring me here? Where am I? Does my mother know I’m here?’

He took a long drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke out, sighing. I wasn’t sure if his indignation was real or fake but I found it irritating nonetheless.

‘Ever heard of Torgau, Fräulein Peters?’

Torgau. The word made me shudder. Torgau. Who hadn’t heard of Torgau? The place where they sent delinquent youths, where they worked you until there was nothing left of you.

Aunt Irma loved Christmas.

Chapter 5

'Who hasn't heard of Torgau?'

He took another drag from his cigarette and lifted his gappy eyebrows.

'Before we start exchanging holiday stories, why don't you tell me what it is you were doing at the cemetery this evening?'

'I'm sure you already know,' I said.

'Humour me.'

I sighed, leaning forward. 'Fine. Since you asked so politely. My friend Knut and I went to the cemetery to plant a small Christmas tree for his aunt. Irma. Heine, I think her surname is but you'd have to check with Knut. She was his aunt.'

'You wanted to plant a Christmas tree in December?'

'Yes.'

'In December?'

'Yes.'

He shook his head. 'Bookish amateurs. You can work out the square root of any number but didn't think about the frozen soil and the roots of the tree?'

A country boy and a peasant at heart. Interesting.

'No. We didn't.'

'Continue.'

'Aunt Irma loved Christmas. It seemed like a nice idea to plant the tree. Knut and I arranged to meet at the cemetery at six o'clock.'

'Why meet there?' he asked.

'What do you mean?' I wanted to tease this out, to buy time.

'Why not walk there together?'

'It was easier to meet there.'

The expression on his face shifted. He was clearly irritated. 'Then what?'

'We got lost. Knut couldn't quite remember where the grave was, or he thought he did and then it turned out to be the wrong way. That's the thing with cemeteries. It's all these dead people in the ground and everything looks the same.'

'Show some respect!' he said.

'Respect?'

'Don't make me repeat myself.' He meant it.

'Sorry,' I said in a low voice.

'What happened next?'

'We walked back towards the entrance, trying to retrace our steps and then there was the police.'

He looked up at me, clearly unsure whether to treat me as a suspect or a witness. Or both. He didn't know if he disliked me because I might have done something wrong or because he thought I was privileged and ungrateful.

'The asked for our IDs. Before I knew it, they'd bundled me into one car, Knut into another. And here I am. Talking to you.'

He considered this for a second, then made a note. 'Tell me again.'

I'd heard of this. They made you repeat the same thing over and over again to see if you were lying or telling the truth. I took my chance.

'Really? It's a boring story. You want to hear it all again?'

'Humour me.'

I repeated the story. And again. And again. I wasn't sure what time it was but I was sure I'd be in trouble when I got home. If I ever got home. As I gave my account for about the ninth time, he interrupted with a question.

'Did you see anyone at the cemetery?' he said.

This threw me slightly. 'No.'

'You saw no one?'

'Well, there were people there.'

'So you did see someone?' he pressed.

'Why are you asking me? I don't even know why you're making me tell you all this.'

'Did you see anyone?'

I couldn't tell him about Frau Schmidt or the mysterious man. They could be back in her flat for all I knew. I couldn't mention the telegram either.

'I saw an elderly couple with a Dachshund.'

'Why are you only disclosing this now?'

'Why won't you tell me why I'm here?'

He leaned in closer. The stubble on his chin, the pockmarks on his left cheek and the layer of sweat across his face distracted me for a moment. 'You are here because your neighbour, Frau Schmidt, committed *Republikflucht*.'

I tried to keep the surprise out of my face, to not react, but it was impossible.

'Flight from the Republic?' A thousand thoughts rushed through my head.

Republikflucht. I'd heard of citizens defecting. I'd heard of citizens leaving everything behind to start a new life in the West. But I'd never known anyone who actually did it.

'Look, I've been sitting here for I don't know how long, retelling the same story over and over again. My mother's expecting me. I've had enough. You're keeping me here for no good reason. Now let me go!'

To my utter surprise, he nodded. 'Very well. But this is by no means over, Fräulein Peters. *Republikflucht* is a serious crime.'

I got up and shook my hands out. I'd been sitting on them all this time. They were numb and sweaty. There were damp patches on the yellow seat where they had been. Yellow was definitely not a happy colour.

Chapter 6

‘Anna, where on earth have you been?’

‘It’s a long story,’ I said, taking off my hat. Mutti was standing in the hallway, hands on her hips. All I wanted to do was hug her but for some reason I wouldn’t allow myself.

‘Where have you been? And why haven’t you called?’

‘It’s complicated and, I think, serious.’

She looked worried. ‘Are you in trouble?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said, forcing the tears that rose to the surface back down. But it was no use. They ran down my cheeks. I wiped them away quickly, embarrassed about crying in front of Mutti.

‘Oh, Anna,’ Mutti said, and pulled me into a tight embrace. ‘You’re home now.’ I couldn’t remember the last time we’d hugged like this. Her body felt strange yet so familiar against mine, like an old friend I’d almost forgotten about.

‘I’m sorry,’ I whispered.

‘I’ll make you a cup of tea. Then you can tell me what happened,’ she said. ‘I’m so relieved you’re home.’

Sometimes, it was easier to follow simple instructions than to fight against them. I settled on the sofa, running my hands over the kale green material of the cushions. It was so smooth compared to the rough yellow cover of the chair I had been sitting on. The green reminded me of walks in the forest, of cabbage soup and the itchy jumper Mutti made me wear the second the temperature dropped below five degrees.

From the kitchen I heard Mutti opening and closing cupboards, filling the kettle with water and placing it on the stove. I thought of Knut and the chances of him ever talking to me again. They were slim. Incredibly slim. My mind fixated on the thought:

a life without Knut, without fighting him on Goethe, on the smell of boiled vegetables and his obsession with classical music. Tears rose again and I gripped the soft, green material, determined not to let them fall this time.

‘Here’s your tea,’ Mutti said and placed the cup in front of me.

‘Thank you.’ I took a sip and burned my tongue. ‘Ouch.’

‘Let it cool down first.’ Mutti sat next to me and I was glad she hadn’t chosen the battered armchair opposite the sofa. This way, I could avoid looking at her, hiding my tears more easily. ‘Now, tell me. Where have you been?’

The cup between my hands was warm and comforting, the sweet steam of camomile brushed against my cheeks and I would have given anything to disappear into the cup. I stared into the steaming liquid until everything around it was blurred. Mutti waited patiently. Eventually, I turned to face her and started talking. I told her what had happened, and exactly what I’d told the man from the Stasi. I didn’t tell her about the telegram or the postman or any of that. There was a long pause after I’d finished. The regular ticking of the clock on the wall was calming, the certainty and reliability of time.

‘Did they hurt you, Anna?’

‘No,’ I said.

‘You would tell me?’

‘They didn’t hurt me, just made me repeat the same things over and over again.’

‘And Knut?’ she asked this carefully.

‘Knut too. I don’t know. He blames me. Because of the tree and the timing and everything. He might never talk to me again.’

‘I’m sure you’re being over-dramatic. He’s your friend, isn’t he?’

‘Mutti, leave it.’

‘What?’

‘You don’t understand anything.’

She looked at me sharply. ‘You have to listen to me. This is the world we live in. They’ll interrogate you when they want and for whatever reason. Even if it’s because you did a nice thing, like plant a Christmas tree.’

‘You’re on their side?’ I couldn’t believe it. My own mother, siding with the Stasi.

‘It’s not about whose side I’m on. It’s about seeing the world for what it is, Anna.’

‘Seeing the world and not changing the world.’

Another pause. Mutti seemed distracted somehow. Her hands were trembling. ‘And they didn’t even notify me. Nobody called. Nobody told me anything.’ She got up and turned on the radio, drowning out the sound of the ticking clock. Finally, she spoke, ‘You know what happened to that poor boy they suspected of fleeing the Republic.’

‘I know.’

‘They sent him to Torgau.’

‘Torgau,’ I repeated.

‘And you know about Christa.’

I nodded.

‘Exactly. You stay out of trouble. I’m not sure what’s going on, Anna, but—’ she paused, glancing around the room. Then she said, ‘They might be listening to us already.’ Mutti’s voice was shaking. ‘I do not want to lose you too.’

‘But—’

‘You need to be careful,’ she whispered.

‘Mutti.’

‘They have all the power.’ Her voice was barely audible.

'Now you're being over-dramatic,' I said.

'Think about your future. Don't you want to go to university?'

'What does that have to do with it?' Why did she always have to bring up my future? I was glad to make it through the next day. How could I contemplate my future when the present seemed so uncertain? 'And this wasn't my fault!' At least not that she knew of. I wanted to keep it that way.

'Lower your voice.' Mutti turned the music up, some song about swimming in the sea, pushing against the tide.

'You like that song?' I was surprised.

Mutti pulled a face. 'I don't care about the song.'

'You turned it up though.'

She dismissed my words with a hand gesture. 'Anna, they decide everyone's fate. If you step out of line, they'll...' her voice trailed off.

'Surely they can't dictate who gets to be a doctor and who gets to be a postman!' I knew I was wrong as soon as I finished the sentence: of course they could. I looked at my mother and instantly understood why she'd been such a diligent party member. Why she'd made me go to so many rallies and parades. Suddenly, it all fell into place. For me. So I could make something of myself. And here I was, throwing it all away because of a hunch I'd had about my neighbour. I was embarrassed; I couldn't look at her.

As the song about the sea gradually began to fade out, I noticed a letter propped-up against the candleholder on the table. The address was handwritten, neat, printed letters.

Anna Peters. A letter, for me. No stamp.

'When did that arrive?' I asked.

‘That? Earlier this evening. Why?’

‘Because I thought the postman came earlier in the day.’

‘The postman didn’t bring this, Anna. It was a boy – about your age.’

‘Who was it? Someone from school?’

‘He didn’t tell me his name. Just that he knew you from the FDJ?’ She got up to refill my cup. ‘Why didn’t you tell me there was a ball? I could have made sure you had something nice to wear.’

A ball? I grabbed the envelope and tore it open. Neat handwriting. A simple piece of white card. It read:

Congratulations. You have been selected to attend the New Year’s Eve Ball. Please bring a snack for the communal buffet and a beverage to share with your comrades.

Congratulations.

Chapter 7

The next morning the sight of the phone taunted me. I hovered in the hall, willing it to ring, wishing Knut would forgive me for dragging him into all of this. Of course it was up to Knut to decide whether he wanted to talk to me or not but the thought of his silence crushed me. I'd jeopardised our friendship because of a stupid hunch. But there was clearly something going on. Frau Schmidt had disappeared in the cemetery and how was anyone's guess, but I was certain it had something to do with the telegram. So really, my hunch had not been unprovoked. Surely Knut would realise that sooner rather than later. Maybe that was why he hadn't called – because he was working on his apology to me. Maybe I should call him, tell him not to worry about the apology, that apologies were mere formalities. I picked up the receiver and started to dial his number. If I could only speak to him, we'd be able to work it out together. Maybe there was something he'd found out. I finished dialling and had the receiver pressed to my ear when I thought better of it. Phones couldn't be trusted.

The view out of the kitchen window offered some temporary relief. The sky was white, as if an avalanche of snow wanted to fall from it. The thought of being buried under all that snow appealed to me. To vanish like that, in an instant.

My patience ran out. It was clear to me now: speaking to Knut was the single most important thing I had to do. Maybe he'd received the same invitation and it was a genuine FDJ thing. But if he hadn't... Then there might be more to it. I needed to clear my head and there was nothing like a nice walk to do exactly that. My coat and hat were waiting for me by the door and I couldn't help but feel a little nervous as I put them on. Knut could like it or lump it. I was going to speak to him either way.

Outside, the air pierced my lungs. It wasn't cold – it was bitter. I dug my hands deep into my pockets and quickened my pace, tucking my chin and lips into my

scarf, creating a little sauna with my breath. The lower part of my face melted immediately.

There weren't many people in the streets. Most were probably at work or hunting down the perfect Christmas tree. It felt good to be outside. The cold helped me think. Think about what I'd say to Knut. Suddenly I wasn't so sure he'd be the one doing the apologising.

Knut only answered after I'd buzzed the intercom a third time. I could barely make out his voice. It was interspersed with crackling and feedback.

'Knut?' I said.

'Anna?'

'Buzz me in.'

There was a pause. 'No.'

'Knut! You're not serious, are you?' I said.

'Do one, Anna. I've had enough.'

'But I've come all this way to see you.' I persisted.

Another pause. Sighing. Or maybe it was the crackling. Eventually, he said, 'I'll come down.'

'It's cold.'

'Tough,' he said and that was that.

Trying to think of the right thing to say to him wasn't easy. An apology might smooth things over between us, at least for now. The entrance was clear and I pressed my face against the glass panel, trying to detect any movement. I should have stopped off at the Späti and picked up something – chocolates or biscuits, as a peace offering. Finally, Knut came into view and I stepped away from the door. His

face came into focus slowly, his expression stony. This wouldn't be as easy as all that. He avoided eye contact when he pulled the door open.

'Knut,' I said.

'Anna.' He nodded and pulled the door shut behind him. 'To what do I owe this pleasure?'

'I'm sorry, Knut. I really am.'

His eyes didn't meet mine and I felt unseen, as if I didn't matter, as if I wasn't really there. 'You have to drop this. You hear me? You have to.' He spoke slowly and with intent. I'd never seen him like this before.

Of course, he was right. 'I can't.'

'Why not? What's it to you what these people do?'

'I don't know.' It was the truth.

'So stop. Let it go.'

Looking at him became unbearable. I hung my head low, feeling for the gravel below me with my foot. My right foot played with the gravel, moving through it, distracting me enough to focus on my breathing. My eyes focussed on the tiny stones. Using the tip of my foot, I drew a line in the grit, a line that now separated Knut and me. Eventually, I looked up. 'Don't you care what's happening to us?' I asked. It was the only thing I could think of that didn't sound empty.

'Anna, Republikflucht is serious business. What good would we be to anyone in Torgau or prison?' he whispered. 'Do you have any idea how much trouble we're in potentially?'

I nodded.

‘The only thing that saved us was that we didn’t know what Frau Schmidt was doing or how she did it.’ He paused. ‘Or did you know?’ I was about to answer when he stopped me. ‘Actually, don’t tell me. I’d rather not know.’

‘You really think I knew of something as serious as Republikflucht and happily implicated you? That’s what you think of me?’

Knut was motionless. ‘I don’t know what to think of you anymore. I thought we were friends.’

A big knot formed in my throat. ‘And now? What do you think now?’

Knut looked straight through me.

‘I thought maybe I could also volunteer for that Thählmann Park project?’ I said.

Nothing.

‘You know, ask for a shovel and a tree?’ I looked at him.

‘Maybe it’s better if we don’t see each other for a while.’ He sounded small.

The knot in my throat tightened. ‘Because I made a mistake?’

Knut shook his head. ‘Look, my parents, you know? My sister. I don’t think...’

‘It’s not like she’s dead,’ I said.

‘She might as well be,’ Knut said.

‘You know what: there are many things we can say about Christa but at least she stood up for what he believed in.’

‘Oh yes?’

‘Yes.’

‘And look at where that got her!’

‘Why can’t you say it?’

‘Torgau. My sister’s in Torgau,’ Knut spat.

That caught me by surprise. I couldn't believe he'd actually said it. 'She didn't take orders,' I said.

'Why don't you tell her that if she ever gets out of that place?' He turned around and opened the door to his building.

'You're a coward. I don't even know why I came here.'

'Fine,' he said, his hand on the doorknob. 'But you're the coward!'

'No, you're the coward!'

'At least I have a plan.'

'Music? What a brave plan that is!' I shouted.

'And what do you have? Nothing.'

'Go and mess with your little piano or whatever it is you do.' I turned around, ready to walk away. 'So you know: I won't be going to the ball so you can go,' I said.

'Which ball? Have you gone mad?'

He pulled the door opened and walked inside, slamming it before I had a chance to reply.

Chapter 8

On the last day before the Christmas holidays, I arrived at school on time for once.

The corridors were packed, a swarm of orange, green and pink coats. I had to push my way through them, wondering if any of the faces staring at me belonged to the person responsible for the invitation to the ball. It had to be a pupil at my school, someone who knew where I lived. Someone who knew I enjoyed a buffet.

Nobody gave anything away and scrutinising their faces at such close proximity was hard work. I scanned the corridor until I spotted Knut, laughing and joking with Rosa. Rosa, ever keen, was nodding along to the dull tales of piano-playing Knut loved to tell. Somehow, I was surprised he'd continued to exist without me, outside of our friendship. I was better off without him, without his droning on and on about this composer or that concerto. There was a sharp pain in my chest, which I attributed to the sheer relief of not being friends with him anymore. I'd finally have the time and space to concentrate on myself. His earnestness – a quality he shared with Rosa – had been grating on me for the longest time. They deserved each other. At least I wasn't a coward. The bell rang and I let the swarm carry me to my first lesson of the day. Maths, which I never fully understood, but at least it would provide me with a pleasant background noise for daydreaming.

Break time brought some much-needed relief. The school was big enough for Knut and me to lead completely separate lives and as I walked to the far side of the running tracks, I could finally breathe again. The cold air felt wonderful and the thought of only a few more lessons before the big Christmas recital this afternoon made it all bearable.

The schoolyard was full of screaming kids, throwing snowballs, running around and looking happy. Why was feeling happy so much easier when you were younger?

My lunch consisted of a jam sandwich. The sweet taste filled my mouth and for a second I felt it too: happiness. Until I remembered my duties that afternoon. Performing wasn't for me, my teachers had decided, and that was a huge weight off my shoulders – instead, they'd put me in charge of coffee distribution on one of the stalls. With the running of that coffee stall came huge responsibility. Trying to make small talk with all the parents while pouring the brown broth into cups would be challenging. Another bite of my sandwich cheered me up. There was something about jam that made everything better even if only for a few seconds. But I was going to take whatever I could get at this stage.

The assembly hall looked festive: red tinsel hung from the ceiling and pinecone chains dangled from the walls. Golden garlands were draped around the state-issued painting of Margot – always watching, soaking up the Christmassy atmosphere. There was even a big tree this year and the scent of pure Christmas filled the hall. Rows and rows of chairs, arranged in half circles, faced a large wooden stage.

I made my way across the hall, across the polished parquet flooring, towards the well-intentioned refreshment stall. My heart sank when I saw who was on duty with me. Rosa.

'Hallo Anna,' she said as I reached the table.

'Hallo –' I wouldn't say her name. She raised both her eyebrows. All that crossed my mind was that she was Knut's new best friend and all I wanted was to give her the finger again.

'Rosa,' she offered eventually, passing me an apron. 'My name's Rosa.'

Trust her to make such a big deal out of it. I'd only spoken to her a few times before.

'So, you and Knut?' I said, putting on my apron. It had two pockets at the front. My hands slid into them to see if there was anything there. To my disappointment, they were empty.

'What do you mean?' she asked.

'You're welcome to him,' I said.

'Wait, are you jealous? We're just friends, Anna.'

'Friends? You should ask him to spell that.'

'Look,' she pointed to the entrance, 'parents are arriving. You better start pouring. Creamer and sweetener are over there.'

'No milk?'

'No milk,' Rosa repeated. Was she mocking me?

'Sugar?'

'Think you're in the west, do you?'

'Oh shut up, will you?' And with that, I adjusted my apron and stood at the other side of the table, glad for the overly keen parents who'd clocked off work early to see their children perform in sketches, orchestras and choirs. And, in the case of Knut's parents: a limelight-hogging solo performance.

Steamy brown liquid filled the cups. I made sure not to over pour, knowing too well that there was never really enough of anything. Rosa did the same. Not that dim after all.

Christmas music filled the room. Everyone enjoyed themselves, their expressions were so vivid, their cheeks flushed. It was impossible not to get caught up in the festive spirit.

I found myself humming along to one of the tunes that blared out of the speakers, when I heard a familiar voice.

‘Anna?’ This was Knut’s mother.

‘Frau Kraft.’ I hadn’t seen her since the summer recital. ‘It’s so nice to see you.’

‘Let’s just get this out of the way.’

My heart sank. I knew what would come next. ‘Fine.’

‘Knut told me about the other night.’

I felt so embarrassed. ‘Did he?’

‘Yes. Anna, you two must be careful.’

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to get him into trouble.’

‘Anna, please. Promise me to drop it. Focus on school. Your future.’ There was such concern and kindness in her voice.

‘I promise,’ I said. My future. Whatever that might entail.

‘I see you’re doing a fine job with the coffees.’

‘Well, thank you. May I offer you a cup?’

‘Yes, please.’

I passed her a freshly poured drink and looked at her. ‘Creamer and sweetener are over there.’

She pulled a face. ‘No sugar?’

I shook my head.

‘Typical. Where’s your mother, Anna?’ she asked, adding the creamer and sweetener. ‘I have a little something for her. Well, for you, too.’ She pointed at her bag.

‘What is it?’ I asked, quietly, so Rosa wouldn’t overhear.

‘A secret.’ She smiled. There were deep lines around her eyes. I thought she looked beautiful. ‘You’ll like it.’

Mutti was nowhere to be seen. Maybe she couldn’t make it? Maybe she’d got held up at work. Again. ‘I don’t see her.’

‘But she’s coming?’

It wasn’t as if I was performing in any of the sketches. Would Mutti be embarrassed about that? ‘Unless there’s an emergency at work.’ I forced a smile.

‘Let’s keep our fingers crossed there won’t be.’

‘She’s always working,’ I said.

Frau Kraft nodded. ‘I know what it’s like, Anna. The shifts are brutal.’

‘There she is!’

Ilse turned around and smiled. ‘Ellen.’

Mutti pushed her way through the crowd. ‘Ilse, it’s lovely to see you.’ She hugged Knut’s mother. Then she leaned over and gave me a peck on the cheek. Her lips felt freezing against my skin. ‘Coffee please.’

Before I could pour a fresh cup, Rosa beat me to it. I glared at her.

‘There you go, Frau Peters,’ she said, smiling.

‘Thank you, dear,’ Mutti replied.

‘Wait until you taste it,’ Frau Kraft whispered. There was that smile again.

Mutti sniffed the coffee. The steam engulfed her face and with that, she started to relax. ‘Why, is it awful?’

‘You just wait until you taste this, here,’ Ilse said and passed my mother a small bag. ‘My cousin in the West sent this. Too much for just the three of us.’

Mutti took the bag and smelled it. She looked at Frau Kraft with such joy that, for a second, I wished she’d look at me like that. Rosa shot me a quizzical look, clearly

not understanding the fundamentals of basic privacy. Glaring at Rosa pleased me. Motioning for her to mind her own business was priceless. Seriously, the cheek.

‘What is it?’ I asked.

Mutti looked at me, then at Ilse. I hadn’t seen her smile like that in a long time. ‘It’s real coffee, Anna. And Stollen.’

‘Stollen made with real butter, almonds, marzipan and raisins. My cousin made it herself.’

My mouth was watering with the memory of actual marzipan and proper butter.

‘Thank you,’ Mutti said and hugged Knut’s mother.

I caught Rosa’s eye. The glaring had obviously been too subtle. I was about to tell her off when a large group of parents approached our little stall, all in demand of coffee.

‘Better pour that coffee,’ Rosa said.

‘The same goes for you,’ I said.

To my surprise, Rosa smiled. We were in the middle of a glare-off. Didn’t she know the rules?

Mutti and Ilse moved along and eventually sat down near the front. I looked at them, at my mother. Why couldn’t she be more like this when we were alone? It felt as though there were two of her and I only every got to see the mean one, the unhappy one and the thought of that made me sad. The kind of sadness that got into every fibre of you, like constant drizzle.

The coffee queue was nowhere near dying down and I needed the toilet badly.

‘Rosa,’ I started.

‘Need to go?’

‘How did you know?’ I was surprised.

'You've been hopping from leg to leg for the past five minutes.'

'It's urgent.'

'Fine, go. But be quick. And leave your apron.'

'My apron?'

'Hygiene, Anna.'

I pulled the apron over my head. 'Happy?'

'Like all my Christmases have come at once.'

I had to give it to her; she was quick.

I walked the long way round. Not because I wanted to keep Rosa waiting but because it took me past the music room. The door was shut. Still, I could hear him play. I stopped and listened. An unknown song, but the notes Knut hit were low, as low as I felt.

When I returned to the hall, most parents had taken their seats. The headmaster walked onto the stage to address the room and introduce the performances. I stuck to the edge of the hall as I crept back to our stall.

Rosa handed me the apron. Obsessed didn't come close, I thought as I put it back on. Would she be able to tell that I'd been crying?

The lower school choir marched onto the stage, all in red jumpers. The colour of the Party. What was it like to be their age? Somehow, it seemed so distant, like another life. What did I worry about then? I looked at their faces and saw excitement. A general murmuring and adjusting of bottoms in chairs cut through the tension. Someone, probably a poor soul who wasn't good enough to perform in anything, dimmed the lights right down. When the kids assembled in their proper places, all standing proud and tall, their music teacher walked on. He held a triangle. The entire hall went silent. Then, the sound of metal on metal. Cling. A deep nod, followed by a

motion of the hand. This was their cue and boy did they know how to take it. At full pelt, not a slither out of tune, they burst into song. Their faces twisted with each word, using their hands to act out parts of the song. Something about being outdoors and finding one's path, about communities and helping each other. The moment they stopped singing, the hall erupted into the kind of frenzy only proud parents could whip up. Wild applause, whistling and stomping of feet. The choir bowed and, looking at their faces, it was obvious how pleased they were with themselves. Big smiles filled the stage. Even the music teacher looked happy.

Row by row, they marched off stage. Up next, a couple of pupils, dressed in black, walked onto the stage. What were they carrying? Cedar trees? Had everyone volunteered for that stupid project but me? Two more pupils entered the stage, carrying a wooden bench. Now, I was sure I'd seen that in one of the woodwork classrooms earlier. All four left the stage. A short boy walked on, wearing a suit. Maybe his father's.

'Good evening. Now, for the sketches: all written and performed by Year 8. Enjoy.'

Again, this announcement was followed by wild applause. These people had to get out more. I stole a glance sideways. Rosa was as captivated by the performances as everyone else.

Three pupils in FDJ uniforms entered the stage. One carried a map, another a bottle of water. The third had some sort of packed lunch.

'I'm thirsty,' the kid with the map said.

'And I'm hungry,' the kid with the water said.

'And I'm lost,' the kid with the packed lunch said.

I could tell where this was going. A lesson in sharing and working together. There was silence on stage. The three actors looked at each other, not quite sure what

should happen next. The kid with the map unfolded it and held it up, using it as a shield between the audience and the three of them. Whispering. First on stage and then in the audience too. One of them peeked from behind the map.

‘Just a second,’ he said. ‘Artistic differences.’

Everyone laughed.

When the sketch finally finished – after much improvisation, the boy in the suit returned and took his place behind the microphone.

‘Time for a poem,’ he said. He cleared his throat and recited from memory:

‘Still and wild,

Shallow and deep,

Lost yet found

Beneath your feet,

A river that ran,

Then changed its colour

From dark to light,

From dusk to bright.’

He bowed and walked off. The hall was quiet, as if they were giving the boy’s words some thought.

Then, the same two pupils from earlier pushed a piano onto the stage. Knut took his place behind the piano. He didn’t address the audience. He just glanced into the crowd, quickly, before he struck the first note. Sombre and filled with depth. He carried on and with every note, with every sound, my throat tightened. I held my breath because I knew if I came up for air, I’d cry. I wanted him to mess up, to crack under the pressure. That’s what I told myself. The keys he struck were moody, accusing even. He played slowly and deliberately, every note deserved to be heard.

Such emphasis on the lower register. The music was so close somehow, as if it was part of me. Then he picked up the pace steadily. An intrusion of the lighter keys, demanding to be included. It sounded as if they were crying out. His fingers flew across the keys now, faster and faster, hitting the higher register over and over. I closed my eyes. The melody slid through my flesh, until it reached my bones. I opened my eyes and looked at the faces around me. Rosa was glued to the image of Knut. All eyes were fixated on him, feeding him their undivided attention.

I had to get out of the hall, out of this school. From behind the table, I edged along the sides of the room, towards the nearest exit. It took all my strength to push the door open and when it closed behind me, I ran. I ran along the corridor until I crashed through the next set of doors. My feet pounded along the stone floor, the echoes of my footfalls reverberated along the empty corridor, as if I was chasing myself. I flew towards the final set of doors and I pushed them open, not stopping until I reached the darkness outside. There, on the steps of the school, I stopped and looked at the sky, the moon. No stars. But I could breathe. Finally, I could breathe. I bent over and took deep, steady breaths, hugging myself. That shitty apron. I was still wearing it. I slid my hands into the pockets and the fingers of my right hand curled around a folded piece of paper.

Chapter 9

I didn't look at the piece of paper until I got home.

In my room, I drew the curtains, making sure nobody was watching me. I switched on my reading lamp, my accomplice, and pulled the piece of paper from my apron pocket. I felt a shiver travel across my spine. Would Rosa ever forgive me for running off with her beloved apron? The thought of her perplexed expression cheered me up. But that didn't matter now. All that mattered was the note. I unfolded the paper, smoothing out the creases. Under the light, the handwriting looked familiar; the same as that on the invitation I'd received.

Prepare for a game of Hide & Seek. Don't forget the potato salad. Be ready for the ball.

Don't forget the potato salad? Was someone having a laugh? I switched my reading lamp off and sat in complete darkness. Frau Schmidt's Republikflucht, the notes, the interrogation and Knut. Why was I receiving these notes? Who knew that I might know something? And why me and not Knut? Unless of course Knut was involved in all of this, somehow, and was trying to throw me off the scent? But why? These thoughts kept going round and round in my head, making me toss and turn under my duvet until I drifted into a dreamless sleep.

'Anna.' The sound of my mother's voice woke me. I looked at the clock on the wall. Eight o'clock. This was cruel.

'It's early,' I said.

My bedroom door opened. 'I know but it's the first day of your holidays. Don't sleep through it.' I heard Mutti come closer until she sat on the edge of my bed.

'What happened last night? Why did you leave without saying anything?'

I turned to face her. 'Why can't you be more like that?'

Mutti looked at me, confused. 'Like what?'

'Like you were last night,' I whispered.

'What do you mean? How was I last night?'

I looked at her. 'Never mind.'

'So what happened last night?'

'Why, was Rosa upset because I took her precious apron?'

Mutti smiled. 'No, but Knut seemed strange after his recital.'

That made me sit up. 'He did?'

'Yes, I tried to congratulate him after his performance and he seemed distracted.'

'Distracted?'

'As if his mind was elsewhere.'

'Tough,' I said.

'Anna, come on. That's not like you.'

'Mutti, seriously, don't even say anything.'

'Don't be harsh. He's your friend.'

'I don't care.'

'I think you do. You should call him.'

'I already tried to speak to him once. He made it clear he didn't want anything to do with me. So there.'

Mutti shook her head. I hated it when she did that. Like I was a disappointment. Eventually, she spoke. 'Christmas is a difficult time for the Krafts. I thought you knew this.'

I considered this. 'Because of Christa.'

Mutti nodded. 'Yes.'

'Christa is the reason for all that's wrong with the Krafts it seems'

'Anna, that's a bit unfair.'

'Seriously,' I sat up, 'she was some crazy swim protégé and obviously couldn't handle the pressures of the Sportschule. So they kicked her out and then she went loopy, throttled a policeman, bit the head off a bat and they shipped her off to Torgau so she could learn some manners.'

Mutti pulled a face. 'Not quite, Anna. Christa was selected to attend a Sportschule. It seemed like a great opportunity for her. You know, to make something of herself, even though she was only nine when she was picked.'

The thought of being away from my mother at such a young age felt too raw to even contemplate. I looked at Mutti and as if she read my mind, she added, 'An opportunity like that doesn't come along every day. So, of course, the Krafts were thrilled. Imagine: your own daughter taking part in the Olympic Games?'

'So I did get that part right.'

Mutti nodded. 'One day the school called and told Ilse that Christa refused to swim. They'd tried, they claimed, to coax her back into the water, but she didn't want to do it anymore. She and a couple of other girls point-blank refused to go anywhere near the pool. That had gone on for weeks. And, as far as the school was concerned, that was that. They packed up her things and sent her home.'

'And that's when she ate the bat and went off the rails?' I pressed.

‘Don’t be so flippant,’ Mutti said and got up. She walked towards the door, then stopped and turned around, looking at me. ‘Ilse said Christa was never quite the same after the Sportschule. She seemed restless and irritable and incredibly sad. Then, one day, Christa tore down a party sign. A policeman caught her and hit her. The thing about Christa is, she is feisty. So she hit him right back.’

‘And she got sent to Torgau for that?’

‘Yes.’ Mutti walked out of my room.

I rolled onto my back and tried to remember Christa. I remembered playing hide and seek with her at one of Knut’s birthday parties. I was only young, but I remembered liking her.

Chapter 10

We needed potatoes anyway.

‘Since when are you so keen?’ Mutti asked.

‘Since boredom struck,’ I said.

‘That’s not like you.’

‘Being helpful isn’t either.’ I laughed.

‘Here,’ she said and gave me some money. ‘And bring back whatever is left over.’

The truth was, that besides the potatoes, I still needed to get Mutti a Christmas gift. Handmade vouchers that promised things such as ‘making breakfast’, ‘cleaning the bathroom’ and ‘doing laundry’ stopped being cute a long time ago. Plus, I hated doing all of these things anyway.

The bins outside our apartment building looked full and as I turned left, towards the centre, where the shops were, I wondered how that amount of rubbish accumulated so quickly. Considering the business of rubbish, I discarded the idea of taking the tram or the U-Bahn. It felt like a day for walking and thinking, for clearing my head even. It was only three days until Christmas Eve and the list of things we still needed was long:

1. Christmas Tree
2. Potatoes
3. Sausages
4. Spreewälder Gherkins (for the potato salad)
5. Wrapping Paper (ideally not floral)
6. Gift for Mutti

Six things, I needed to remember six things. The tree in itself should have been on its own separate list. It was difficult to get one, even if you knew the right people. Last year's tree was crooked and short but that hadn't mattered. We still enjoyed decorating it and putting our gifts underneath it. It was more about the ritual than the actual aesthetics. Maybe the Schwarzmarkt would prove fruitful?

At the end of the street, I turned right. It started to snow and, looking up at the sky, I let the fat flakes land on my face. They fell softly, like frozen cotton balls, stroking my cheeks.

The traffic lights took forever to change from red to green. Around me, people were waiting, impatient but not irritated. Everyone seemed to be out, running errands, hunting for trees, feeling festive.

What I'd give for a tree. If I was to find one anywhere, it'd be down at the Schwarzmarkt. There was no point in lugging a sack of potatoes around all day, but what if the potatoes sold out? What would we eat on Christmas Eve? I weighed up my options and concluded that a gift for Mutti was more important, and more fun, to look for.

The lights turned green and I crossed the street, treading through the untouched snow that was settling on the ground. The Schwarzmarkt could offer some interesting things but was interesting what Mutti wanted? The last time I went, I'd gotten my hands on all these stickers and a music cassette. It had just one song on it. I'd listened to it over and over again. *The world looks up to my window.* I hummed that line while walking in the general direction of the market, gazing along the shop fronts, many of which were empty. People queued outside the greengrocer's. There were queues outside the shops most days. Anyway, I'd leave the queuing for later.

I carried on, catching some of the snowflakes in my hand, watching them rest and melt. If only they could dissolve into money, I'd get Mutti a hot air balloon ride, so she could see our city from above. This man and his family actually escaped in one of them. That's what Knut had told me.

To actually see the deserted streets around the Wall, the hole where the Versöhnungskirche used to be would be incredible. What a nice name for a church: reconciliation. It's a shame they blew up the church. But from above, we'd be able to see all the trouble they went through to keep us safe: the barbed-wire, the steel barricades and this wooden board with long, thick nails that looked like asparagus. Asparagus-boards. They showed us a picture of it in school once. Whoever invented that must have been quite worried about our safety.

The bookshop caught my eye as I crossed the street again and made my way towards it. Through the window, floor to ceiling bookcases that lined the walls were barely illuminated by a naked lightbulb. The sound of a bell signalled my entry, which seemed to excite the man behind the till who gave me an enthusiastic greeting. A few people were milling around the shop, browsing the many shelves of books. There was a smell of thick dust and deep thought, both of which I inhaled and sneezed immediately.

'Gesundheit,' the old man said.

'Thanks,' I replied.

'Looking for anything in particular, young lady?'

'A gift for my mother. And potatoes.' I smiled.

'Potatoes? Very funny! Now, what does she enjoy reading?' he asked.

'I'm not sure actually.'

'Poetry?'

I had to think about this. 'Poetry?'

He got up from his chair, excited. 'I'll share one of my favourite poems with you,' he said, 'and in turn, you can tell me the sort of thing your mother usually reads.'

I nodded. 'Sounds like a plan.'

'Over here,' he said, pointing at the poetry section of the shop. 'Ever heard of Brecht?'

'Bertholt Brecht?'

His eyes flashed. 'The one and only.'

'I thought he wrote plays, *The Life of Galileo*.'

This met the old man's approval. 'He did. Excellent example.'

'I read it.'

He smiled at that. He faced the bookcase, running his fingers along the middle shelf. 'What do you remember about it?'

'Galileo said that the sun was at the centre of the solar system, supporting that other guy's theory. What was his name again?' I paused. 'Copernicus.'

'Yes.' He pulled a slim book from the shelf. 'What else?'

'And even though Galileo was right, the church made him take it back.'

'Why do you think he took it back?' He flicked through the book.

'I don't know? To protect himself? Or the truth?'

'Denouncing the truth in order to protect it.'

'The church was powerful, wasn't it?'

'That's right. They believed the earth, not the sun, was at the heart of the solar system. And speaking out against them nearly cost Galileo his life.'

It all came back to me. 'And his daughter, who really was in love with this boy, and I mean, really in love, wasn't allowed to marry him because of it.'

‘His reputation as a teacher was ruined: his students thought of him as weak.’

‘Because he folded,’ I said.

‘Because he folded,’ he said. ‘But if we were to entertain your reading of the text, he only folded to protect the truth.’

‘His students didn’t see it that way though,’ I said.

‘It was one against the many.’

‘I guess so.’

He ran his thumb along the trim of the book. ‘Did your mother read Galileo too?’

‘She did.’ We both read it. My father’s copy. But I didn’t say that out loud. That was just for me.

‘Then I think she’d rather like this poem. I’ll only read the first lines to you. Let’s see what you think.’

‘Please.’

He cleared his throat. ‘Wer zu Hause bleibt...’

Who stays at home...

‘...wenn der Kampf beginnt...’

...when the fight begins...

‘Und lässt andere kämpfen für seine Sache...’

And lets others fight for his cause...

‘Der muss sich vorsehen...’

Should tread warily...

He stopped and looked up from the book. His eyes met mine, expectantly.

‘Thoughts?’

‘It sounds like a warning,’ I said.

‘A warning. Clever girl.’

‘Please, read the rest,’ I said.

He was about to continue when the bell rang. We looked towards the door. A woman entered in a long coat covered in delicate, white flakes that started to melt as she walked further into the shop. ‘Can I help you?’ he asked.

‘Yes, I believe you can,’ she replied.

The old man gave me a sidewise glance and pressed the book into my hands. ‘Here,’ he said. ‘See what you think.’ And with that, he left me to it, helping the other woman.

A warning, I thought. Surely Mutti would like that.

It was still snowing when I walked out of the shop. The book of poetry was safely inside my coat pocket, protected from the ever thicker flakes. It felt good to have one less thing to do. Five items remained on the list. Potatoes, sausages and Spreewälder gherkins. I should be able to get all these from the shop or the Schwarzmarkt. A sense of purpose filled me and so I marched on, snaking my path through the people, all looking for the perfect gift.

The signpost for the black market, a red bow tied around a pillar, wasn’t subtle. The state turned a blind eye, everyone got what they wanted and the state was under less pressure to supply things it couldn’t— there was no way they had no idea.

Further down the road, a small side street forked off the path I was on. There were fewer people as I continued on the narrow street towards the next red bow, tied around a lamppost. A left turn and the path led towards the river Panke. Behind me, there were a handful of people, probably all with the same idea. Next to the slender river, the gravel crunched under my shoes and then I saw it. I picked up my pace even more until I reached the railway arch. The Schwarzmarkt.

Stalls. Stalls was perhaps an exaggeration. These merchants had little blankets on the ground, with their goods displayed on top. There was a woman selling cigarettes and silk stockings, and further along a man with a collection of stickers and posters and individual cartoons. Someone else was selling fruit. And there, again, was the guy I bought my cassette from last year.

There were some kids from my school, browsing, just like me. Head down, I thought, determined to become invisible. Instead, I focussed on the number of cassette covers, when I saw Knut and Rosa. What was so special about her? She wasn't anything like me. If anything, she seemed to be a yes-sayer. Maybe that's what he wanted? Someone unchallenging. Someone plain. This stabbing pain in my chest returned and I tried hard to blink them away, hoping my eyes had played tricks on me. But there was no mistaking them. I'd stared at the back of Knut's head for the best part of my school life. If I knew the back of anyone's head, it was Knut's.

The air felt thin and I made my thoughts drift to happy things, like jam and the song I liked. My eyes fixed on the back of their heads, trying to figure out my next move. I couldn't stay here. Rosa turned around and our eyes met. She was mouthing my name and then Knut turned around. I really had to go. Turning on my heels, a van pulled up, next to me and a man jumped out of it.

'Christmas trees! Christmas trees!' he shouted.

Saved by an elf.

'Yes! Here!' I said, walking towards the man. A small crowd gathered around him. A woman tried to push me to the side. 'Excuse me? I was here first.' She was at the receiving end of all my stored-up anger.

'I didn't see you,' she said.

‘Oh, really?’ I didn’t believe a word of it. ‘Hey, how much for the tree?’ I asked. A small boy wove his way through the crowd and shoved me right into the man with the trees. I grabbed him by the hood. ‘You can’t run into people like this.’

‘You’re not my mother,’ he said.

‘You want me to talk to your mother?’

He pointed at the woman who’d tried to push me to one side.

‘Well, that all makes sense,’ I said and returned my attention to the man selling the trees. ‘How much?’ I looked around me, for a second, to see if Knut and Rosa were still about. No sign of them.

The tree I bought was big. Huge, even. It was quite far to my place and carrying it by myself would be tricky. These thoughts were running through my mind when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

‘We’ll help you get that home.’ Rosa’s voice. ‘Won’t we, Knut?’

I spun around, looking Rosa square in the face. Behind her, a little further, stood Knut. ‘That’s nice of you but I think I’ll be fine.’ My gaze shifted from Rosa to Knut. He couldn’t look at me.

‘Anna, are you crazy? The tree’s three times the size of you. How’ll you get that home all by yourself?’ Rosa said.

My grip around the branches tightened and I wondered if she’d bring up the apron. I pulled the tree a few centimetres. ‘Like this, look? Not that heavy at all,’ I lied.

Knut looked the other way, like he had no part in any of this.

‘But you live all the way on the other side of the Panke.’

She was right of course. ‘Honestly, it seems much further than it is.’ I held the tree up with both hands, almost vanishing within its needles.

‘It is far,’ Rosa insisted. ‘And that is a gigantic tree.’

'You might have a distance-weight-disorder,' I said. I couldn't think of anything else.

'A what?' Rosa asked. That got Knut's attention.

'DWD – you know, when you struggle to judge distances and weights accurately.'

'There is such a thing?' Rosa said, worried.

'Oh yeah. A lot of people suffer from it but aren't aware.'

'DWD?'

'Yes, exactly.'

'OK?'

'So this tree might seem huge and it appears I live far away but really this tree is an average size and I live close by.'

'You are sure?' Rosa said.

Still nothing from Knut.

'Yes, honestly, I really enjoy walks in the forest so this is like two-in-one right here,' I said. 'A forest right by my side.'

'It just seems so big.'

'DWD,' I said, shaking my head as pitifully as I could.

'You heard what Anna said,' Knut piped up. He looked at me for half a moment, before he addressed Rosa again. 'She doesn't need any help with the tree.'

'Absolutely not,' I insisted.

Rosa looked from me to Knut and back to me. 'If you're sure?'

'Yes. I'm sure.' I started to drag the tree away, then stopped. 'It's lovely to be outside.'

'I guess,' Rosa said.

Turning my back on them, I shouted, 'Have a wonderful Christmas,' and continued to drag the giant tree and my bruised pride along.

'Wait!' Rosa shouted.

I turned around. Would she call me out on my lie? 'Yes?'

'We'll see you at the FDJ ball?'

My jaw dropped. 'You mean the one on New Year's Eve?'

'Yeah.'

'Maybe,' I said, not feeling so special anymore. 'You've been invited?'

'Of course. All FDJ members are. We'll definitely be there. Won't we, Knut?' Rosa said.

'Yep,' Knut said, looking at Rosa.

'Great,' I lied.

It took me an eternity to get home, having to rest several times. But I got there in the end, all the while thinking: the ball is real, the ball is real, the ball is real.

By the time I'd pulled the tree three floors up, I was sick to death of it and cursed the winding staircase. The tree rested on the floor while I fumbled for my keys. Mutti opened the door.

'Anna, what happened to you?' she said. 'Your hair's all tousled.'

'Mutti, what's the obsession with my hair?'

'And your face! It's scratched.' There was concern in her voice until she noticed the tree. 'A tree!'

'My mother is a genius,' I said, stepping over the tree. I pushed past Mutti, leaving a trail of needles.

She sounded delighted: 'So that's the surprise. But how on earth did you manage?' She struggled to pull the tree inside.

'Let me help you,' I said.

We dragged it through the hall, into the living room and leaned it against the wall. I looked at it and started to laugh. A little at first, but it soon developed into a full-blown belly laugh.

'What's so funny?' Mutti asked.

'You know, Mutti, there was actually nothing wrong with this tree.'

She examined the tree; with its bent twigs and ruffled up needles. 'Nothing wrong you say?' She smiled. 'What on earth did you do to it? Ride it home?' She burst out laughing.

'It looks like it, doesn't it?'

'It sure does.'

'I dragged it all the way here. I pulled it behind me.' I laughed, realising how absurd it sounded but also enjoying how good it felt to laugh with my mother.

Mutti shook her head. 'Why didn't you ask the nice boy to help you?'

'Which boy? Knut? How do you know about that?'

My mother shook her head. 'No, not Knut. I know Knut.'

'Which boy then?'

'The one who brought the potatoes and Spreewälder.'

I stopped laughing. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know any boy who would've brought potatoes and gherkins. How would he even know that we needed these things? I looked at my mother. She was still smiling, waiting for me to say something.

'Oh, of course. The nice boy from the FDJ?' I lied.

‘Yes, he said that’s how you two knew each other. I mean, people complain about today’s youth but he was nothing but polite.’

‘Was he?’ I said.

‘Yes, carried it all into the kitchen and said you had a surprise, that’s why he’d deliver the staples.’

‘In the kitchen you say?’ I made my way into the kitchen. ‘Did he say anything else?’ I looked through the carrier bag and sure enough, there, between the potatoes and the gherkins, was a note. Another note. I cursed the day I’d learned how to read.

‘Yes, he said he’d see you at the New Year’s Eve Ball,’ Mutti said from the living room.

I opened it. ‘For the potato salad, Galileo.’ How did he know about that? I sat down. I read the five words over and over again.

Chapter 11

I was being watched. How else could they know about the potatoes, and what I'd said to the man in the bookshop? Had they seen me at the Schwarzmarkt too? But who? The thing that I hadn't allowed myself to think, that I'd refused to accept, was now at the forefront of everything. What if these notes were a trap? What if the Stasi had been watching me all this time, since the interrogation, and what if they were waiting for me to step out of line? What if they thought I knew something about Frau Schmidt, or worse, what if they thought I'd helped her? But what did I really know?

And that was the thing. What it all boiled down to was nothing: like cooking spinach. That always boiled down to nothing and tasted horrible.

The view out of the kitchen window was dark, my reflection distorted in the glass. I traced my shape with my index finger, circling my eyes. Beyond my outline lay buildings, lit windows, skeletons of trees and parked cars. If I was to quit now, no harm would have been done. Surely. Because all that had happened was that I'd been curious. I wasn't Galileo. I was Anna.

My focus returned to my face, my eyes. 'To hell with it.' I didn't want to play anymore. No more hide and seek.

'Anna?' Mutti's voice.

I turned around. 'Yes?'

'Are you alright?'

'Yes, why?'

'Because you're staring out of the window. I've been shouting you from the living room.'

'Sorry, I was thinking.'

'About what?'

'About your gift.' A small lie but really not a lie at all.

Mutti smiled. 'You don't have to get me anything.' She looked happy in that moment and I so wanted to hug her.

'Too late,' I said. 'I already got you something.'

'Well, you shouldn't have.'

'Tough.'

'I got something for you too,' she said.

'What is it?'

'You really think I'd fall for that?'

We laughed.

'Shall we decorate that tree?'

'Yes. That's a great idea.' I said.

'I'll get the decorations from the attic.'

'No, no. I'll get them,' I said. I was still wearing my coat after all.

We shared the attic with the rest of the tenants. It was divided into compartments and ours was the last one on the right. The attic door creaked as I pushed it open, the hinges screaming out for oil. I hit the light switch to my right and a bare bulb flickered into life, illuminating the row of storage compartments that ran the length of the attic. We shared the space with the other tenants, but it was obvious nobody came up here much. It was mainly a dumping ground for unwanted items, or, in our case, a place to store things we didn't have much need for. Our compartment was right at the far end.

Curiosity got the better of me as I made my way along the row. Our compartment was full of my old toys, most of them broken probably, and I peered through the wire

mesh gates to see what other people had stored away, checking the names as I went. Most of the compartments were full of boxes or black bags stuffed full. There were old toys and odd bits of furniture. I passed Herr Weber's compartment and was surprised it wasn't jam-packed with bottles of Schnapps.

Then I read a name that stopped me in my tracks: Schmidt. The wire mesh gate was locked. Somehow that made me angry – it felt as though my life had got so complicated since I signed for the telegram and it seemed unfair that theirs shouldn't be. I felt in my coat pocket for the hairgrip and remembered what I had been taught about picking locks, which was basically to never do it, but I was taught the same about Republikflucht, as I was sure the Schmidts had been too, and look where that got us all. It was an easy lock to pick and took me all of two minutes. Proper locks, like on doors, were harder.

I stepped inside. But for the dust that marked the outline of what had recently been removed, it was empty. This intense feeling came over me, not dread but something else, as if I'd invaded their privacy. For all I knew they were both living it up somewhere. Somewhere they could be free. What had it been like before all this, before the Wall, when you could cross between the two parts of the city without difficulty? Unimaginable to think of that now. Unbearable, too.

It felt weird, standing there. I let the gate swing shut behind me and marched to our compartment. The key was a little stiff in the lock but it did turn eventually. I didn't want to hang around, so I looked for the Christmas decorations straight away. Now was not the time for reminiscing about old teddies and broken dolls. The boxes, which were usually neatly stacked, had collapsed, their contents spilling out onto the dust-covered floor. I tipped the fallen boxes the right way up and started to scoop the contents back into any random box. It didn't matter; Mutti didn't care much for

labelling things. The disturbed dust was like a cloud around my head and it shot right up my nose whenever I breathed in, making me sneeze. The noise echoed around the attic and my eyes filled with tears.

With most of the mess cleared up, I picked up a book – Walter Benjamin's *Critique of Violence* – and flicked through it. Scrawls lined the margins of each page. The shape of the letters was as familiar to me as the back of my hand. Vati's book. I closed it and slid it into a box. I started checking the contents of each box, making my way through the compartment as quickly as possible. Eventually, I found it. As I lifted the lid, the bright colours and sparkling ornaments shimmered in the dim light of the attic. I couldn't quite believe what I was looking at. Resting snug on a bed of tinsel, like a baby in a basket, was a potato.

'A sodding potato,' I said in a low voice, grabbing it.

I squeezed it so tight, I was sure I'd be making vodka at any moment. I stepped out of the compartment and hurled it down the passage. It hit the floor and split open, the two halves curving off in different directions. Who was doing this? And why?

I grabbed up the box of decorations but overbalanced and fell backwards. Little reindeers and snowflakes and painted wooden baubles skittered across the floor and I scabbled on my hands and knees to pick them up. The paint on the baubles was peeling here and there. It must have been years since Mutti and I had painted them red. It was the only colour we'd had but they'd still looked great.

I crawled along, picking up the last of the baubles. I picked up what I thought was the last one and felt my fingers close around a smashed and broken half-potato. I wished I'd never gotten involved in any of this, whatever it was. They – whoever they were – seemed very keen on making sure I stayed involved, but to what end? If I never saw a potato again it'd be too soon.

The last bauble had rolled under the locked gate of Herr Weber's compartment. I kicked the half-potato in after it and cursed the bauble and cursed Herr Weber, too, the drunken slob.

I walked down the stairs, thinking about what to do next. There were still ten days until New Year's Eve. The ball was real. I knew that now. Unless Rosa was in on it. And Knut too. But that seemed unlikely. Someone wanted to ensure I knew they were watching me. The choice was no longer mine – they wouldn't let me quit.

Chapter 12

Christmas Eve.

‘Anna, how many sausages would you like?’ Mutti asked.

‘How many can I have?’ I was a good eater.

‘As many as you like,’ she said, smiling. ‘But don’t forget there’s Stollen for after.’

We had been getting along so much better since I got that tree. ‘Three sausages to begin with, please.’ I thought any more than that would have looked greedy.

‘I’ll put three in for now and if you want any more we can always throw a couple more in the pot.’

Mutti opened the jar of sausages. How she’d got her hands on real Wiener Würstchen was beyond me but I guessed that she might have also taken a trip down to the Schwarzmarkt. Or she had something sought-after to trade with one of our neighbours. Frau Meyer on the first floor had relatives in the West. But what did we have that might have been of value to anybody else? Better not to ask such questions.

‘Shall I set the table?’

Mutti didn’t hear me, she was a million miles away, staring at the pot of water on the stove. Eventually, she spoke. ‘You know how it works, Anna. Once the water is just the right temperature – ’

‘I know, I know. Before it starts to boil is when you throw the Würstchen in and put the lid on and take them off the heat.’

‘And why is that?’ she teased without taking her eyes off the pot.

‘Because we wouldn’t want them to burst.’

‘I remember that face of yours whenever I tried to serve you burst sausages.’ She stared at the water with such determination until it started to steam vigorously.

‘Seriously, they taste different. It’s not the same.’

Mutti pulled a face. It was nice to be light-hearted. Her gaze shifted from the pan to the window. ‘Look at that snow. It’s the perfect Christmas.’

‘It’s lovely,’ I said. ‘But come on, I’m starving, Mutti.’ And with that I grabbed plates and cutlery as well as some napkins and walked through into the living room, setting the small table. Music blasted from the radio and the Christmas tree looked wonderful. We couldn’t quite afford real candles but the red baubles and mini reindeers were enough.

‘Anna!’

‘Yes Mutti, dearest,’ I shouted back.

‘Don’t forget about that potato salad. We can’t just have sausages, can we?’

‘I’m on it.’ I walked back into the kitchen and got the bowl, which was covered by a plate. A whiff of the earthy smell of the potatoes, the sharpness of the pickled gherkins and the powdery eggs made my mouth water. ‘Delicious.’

She looked pleased. ‘I have been told that I make the best potato salad this side of the Wall.’ Her smile reached her eyes.

Stille Nacht started to play on the radio and we looked at one another. Somehow, all the light-heartedness slipped away, right through my fingers.

‘I miss him,’ Mutti said.

‘Me too.’

‘He would have really liked you, Anna.’ Mutti looked at the bowl. ‘Be a good girl and put it on the table. I’ll be right out with the rest.’

The excuse brought relief. Mutti’s sadness could be suffocating. I did as I was told for once, all the while thinking, I think I’d have liked him too.

None of the sausages had burst. We ate, admiring the tree and feeling pleased with ourselves.

After we'd eaten, we sat on the sofa.

'You first,' Mutti said and presented me with her gift.

I shook the tightly wrapped parcel and squeezed it, trying to guess what it was. It was all part of the festivities. Anticipation was always fun when you knew something good was waiting on the other side of it.

'Open it,' she said. 'Open it.'

I moved my fingers under the sticky tape, unfolding the paper carefully. Eventually, I had unwrapped the gift, an old-fashioned locket. I dangled it in front of me. 'Mutti, it's beautiful.'

'The locket used to belong to your grandmother.'

It shimmered against the light.

'Open it up,' Mutti said.

'I love it.' I held it up in front of my face, studying the black and white picture of my parents when they were young. Mutti helped me to fasten the locket around my neck. It felt special.

'Looks lovely on you, Anna,' Mutti said.

'Your turn!' I said, feeling the cold metal between my fingers. I moved to the tree and picked up the gift I'd got for Mutti. 'I hope you like it.' Passing her the present, I felt suddenly conscious of my shoddy wrapping. Mutti however was far too gracious to comment on it. She took her time, squeezing the parcel, shaking it, guessing at what it could be, 'A lemon? A horse? Slippers? A giraffe?' she guessed. These speculations were for my benefit and they worked: I was in stitches, shouting 'Maybe! Maybe!' in response to her outrageous guesses.

Finally, she started to unwrap the gift. She did this silently until she turned the book around and saw the cover. Her eyes sparked.

‘Anna – ’ she started. ‘Anna, this is so thoughtful. I love Brecht.’

‘I know.’ I smiled.

‘Where did you find this?’

‘The bookshop. The man who works there was so passionate about Brecht’s poetry. I simply had to get it for you. There is one in there about letting others fight your cause. I thought you’d like that. The man read it to me.’

She thumbed the pages and held the book close to her nose. ‘The smell of books always makes me happy. Thank you, Liebling. This is the best gift you could have got for me.’

Liebling. It was lovely.

‘Now how about that Stollen?’ she smiled.

‘Stollen. Oh Mutti, yes! I can’t believe we have Stollen.’

‘Not just Stollen, Anna. Real Stollen. With real butter and real marzipan and real dried fruits. It’ll melt in our mouths.’

‘I want it now,’ I said greedily.

Mutti got up to get the Stollen from the kitchen. I was still too full to move but not too full for Stollen. Instead of moving, I opened up the locket and looked at my parents. They were so young. My father in his uniform, all serious, and on the other side, my mother, with her hair in plaits. The smell in the room was delicious: a mixture of sausages, vinegar and the needles of our tree, which I couldn’t stop admiring. Then, the phone rang.

‘Anna, can you get that?’ Mutti shouted.

Getting up was a real effort but I moved as fast as I could. I picked up the receiver, 'Peters.'

Nothing.

'Peters,' I repeated. 'Hello? Anybody there?'

Silence.

I hung up. 'Mutti, there was nobody there.'

'Probably a wrong number,' she called from the kitchen.

I was about to walk back to the living room, when the phone rang again. I picked it up on the second ring. 'Peters, hello?'

'Anna?'

'This is Anna,' I said.

'Anna Peters.'

'Yes?'

'Underneath the doormat.'

'What?'

'Instructions.'

'What?'

'We need your help.'

'Help?'

The line went dead.

'Who was it?' Mutti called from the kitchen.

'I wish I knew,' I said.

'Maybe it was Father Christmas?' Mutti laughed.

Mutti was still busy preparing coffee in the kitchen. I didn't know what took her so long, unless of course she was harvesting and drying the beans herself. But that was

good. That would buy me time. A deep breath and some silent manoeuvring, and I'd reached the front door. What was Mutti doing with that Stollen? I pushed the door handle down, gently, opening the door, willing it not to make a sound. I bent over and reached for the doormat, feeling underneath it. Yes, and there it was. Not a potato but another note. I grabbed it, and crammed it into my pocket, all the while I could hear Mutti, pottering in the kitchen, humming something rather loudly and out of tune. I pulled the door shut, quickly, quietly when Mutti came out of the kitchen, still humming.

'I need a wee,' I said and shot towards the bathroom.

'That's all the excitement,' she said.

Look for Napoleon and Clover in the Schmidts' flat. Burn after reading.

Chapter 13

The stairwell was dark. I didn't dare switch the lights on. Clutching the key in my hand, I walked down the stairs, slowly, desperate not to make a sound. Nobody had come to collect the spare key since Frau Schmidt's departure. When I reached her door, I slipped the key into the lock. I paused. Dull sounds came from the flat opposite but in the stairwell I was alone.

The atrium lights came on, startling me. One of my neighbours returning? Perhaps a little merry, from the festivities? A deep voice echoed up the stairwell, masking the sound of the key as I turned it. I pulled the door open and slipped inside the Schmidts' flat without a sound. The note had been difficult to make sense of and it was certainly news to me that Frau Schmidt's name was Clover – I always thought it was Viola.

The voice, and the body it came from, were climbing the stairs. It boomed through the closed door. It sounded like Herr Weber. He had a habit of staying out late. That's what Mutti said. It was the middle of the night; Herr Weber should just shut up.

The layout of the flat was identical to ours. Long narrow corridor, with rooms leading off it. I walked along the hall, quietly. The wooden floors creaked as I moved across. There was a grandfather clock at the end, and a small bureau next to it. It was dark but the moonlight illuminated slices of the apartment. It felt weird being here without their permission or knowledge. Unless they were here too, hiding, waiting to meet with me?

'Hello?' I whispered. 'Napoleon? Clover?' I waited. Nothing but the distant sounds of Herr Weber on the floor above.

In the bedroom, the bed had been made. She knew she wasn't coming back and she still made her bed. I opened the wardrobe and was met by rows and rows of

garments, arranged according to colours. Nothing seemed out of place. Did she take anything at all?

In the kitchen, the dishes had been washed and stacked. A half-empty cup of something was on the counter. A fluffy carpet of mould covered it.

In the bathroom, two toothbrushes: one in its holder, the other placed on the edge of the sink. The living room was sparsely furnished: a sofa and a coffee table, a newspaper strewn across it, opened on the coupons page, a pair of reading glasses on top of the paper. She didn't even take her glasses. How would she read the paper in the West? And her knitting needles were on the floor, in the corner of the room, in front of a large bookcase. That seemed careless somehow. I stood and stared, not knowing what I was looking for. Going through her things felt wrong, intrusive, but how else was I going to find Napoleon and Clover?

The knitting needles in front of the bookcase bothered me, so I walked towards them and bent over, picking up the knitting. I had not paid too much attention during history lessons but I did know that Napoleon had been the emperor of France and that he was exiled to Saint Helena. He was also instrumental in the French Revolution. So maybe I was looking for a history book? I scanned the titles on the third shelf from the bottom. There, between Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* and Kafka's *The Trial*, was Orwell's *Animal Farm*, whose spine was very distinctly less faded than that of the other books. A forbidden book – maybe Frau Schmidt had placed on her shelf as an act of defiance because she knew she was leaving? I dropped the needles and pulled the book off the shelf. I thumbed through the pages, pausing at random. There, on page 73, I counted 'Napoleon' five times. My heart beat in my chest. Clover could not be far. I started at page one. There was 'Clover' on page two. I flicked through the pages, looking for clues, and I noticed certain letters had been

circled in pencil. A code of sort, perhaps, but I had no idea what I was supposed to decipher here. My hands were shaking with excitement and adrenaline rushed through my body when, on the final page, there was a message: 'Napoleon, Clover and Snowball went to the farm to buy apples and turned them into cider.' That wasn't quite how I'd remembered the story. And somehow I knew that this too was a code and I tried to work it out, to make sense of it. Nothing came to me at first so I started counting in my head. Numbers! Was each letter relating to a page number, then a line number and so on?

I walked to the sofa and picked up a pencil off the table. I ran my fingers across the pages, counting and counting, circling, as fast as I could. I wrote down each letter and it spelled: rocknhgrakqtheclmbpndfaziroock. Obviously nonsense. There had to be more to it. I went back through the book, more slowly this time, checking and double-checking each letter. Some of the letters, I noticed, were uppercase, others lowercase. I separated them out into two lines:

RGRATHECLNDFAOCK

ocknhkqmbpziro

I made two scatter patterns with each set of letters. It was obvious the lowercase letters meant nothing. But there were more possibilities with the uppercase letters.

LOCKED

HEADLOCK

CATHEDRAL

FATHERLAND

GODFATHER

GRANDFATHER

Grandfather clock!

Using one of the needles, I jimmied the grandfather clock in the hall open and there, behind the clock face, were neatly folded sheets of the thinnest tissue paper I had ever seen.

Our flat was quiet; Mutti was asleep.

In my room, I reached underneath the mattress for a box of matches, which I kept there in case I ever considered smoking. The smell of sulphur swirled around the room.

Did I really want to know what was written on the tissues? I couldn't unsee their contents. My hands answered the question for me and unfolded the papers. They felt fragile in my hand, some yellowing at the edges. I spread them out in front of me and held the lit match over them.

The first tissue depicted a hand-drawn map, with a thick border on one side and a thin line weaving a path through a number of small, medium and large crosses. One of the crosses was circled. I put the map to one side and looked at the second tissue, which contained another drawing. Again, the thick, pencil-drawn border. Furious strokes. A rectangle, inside which someone had written the letters 'M' and 'L'. Something nagged me at the back of my mind. There was a tube drawn underneath the rectangle, which seemed to go through the border. The final piece of tissue paper had no drawings but a series of letters, neatly printed.

K.F.R.T.M.T.A.T.A.P.N.S.W.P.H.S.E.P.L.F.J.F.F.T.

I'd had enough of anagrams.

There was a sudden flash of pain at my fingertips and I dropped the burning match to the floor. I stamped it out and shoved my fingers into my mouth. I told myself that pain was just a series of electrical charges shooting through the brain and, as I picture the tiny surges of blue light zipping underneath my skull, the nagging sensation was dislodged and it became obvious: ML was Maria Liedtke. The name on the gravestone.

I looked again at the drawings. If the crosses were graves, what did that make the thick border? The Wall? Maria Liedtke's grave had been right by the cemetery wall and no more than five or six metres from the Wall. I checked the drawings again, convinced I was getting mixed up, but I wasn't. That must have been what happened: a tunnel underneath the grave, from one side of the Wall to the other, to freedom. That was how Frau Schmidt had managed to flee.

I reached for my bin and threw the map, the sketch of the gravestone and the list of letters in, lighting another match and setting the whole pile alight. The flame jumped high for an instant and almost immediately died down, turning the pieces of paper to ash. There was one last piece of paper, even smaller than the others. On it just one sentence, written in pale pencil: Strength lies in improvisation. I burned that too. One by one, the papers vanished in front of me. Like Frau Schmidt had. So that is what they wanted. They wanted me to find the escape route. But why me?

The phone rang. Once, twice, then it stopped. I made my way into the hall, staring at it. Nothing. It didn't ring again.

Chapter 14

I stared at the card: **New Year's Eve, Café der Jugend, 2000H**. It had arrived the previous day. This card had been printed, not handwritten. It looked real enough. It had the FDJ logo in the far left corner. Arrived in the regular post; not some mysterious messenger. So all this ball business had been legitimate after all. I couldn't help but feel a sting of disappointment. Not so special after all. Still, somebody sent me to the Schmidts'. Somebody needed my help.

'Anna,' Mutti called from the hall.

'Yes?' I was still in my room, not dressed. 'What is it?'

'Phone for you.'

I swallowed. 'For me?'

'Anna, come on. I have something on the stove.'

I made my way into the hall, clutching the invitation. 'Who is it?'

Mutti pressed the receiver against her chest. 'Rosa,' she said.

The moment I heard the name, I rolled my eyes and gestured a firm no.

Mutti looked at me indignantly before she spoke into the receiver. 'Rosa? Yes, she's right here.'

'Thanks,' I mouthed. I grabbed the receiver and slammed it straight down. 'I hate her.'

'Anna!' Mutti couldn't believe it.

I was about to answer her when the phone rang again and I picked up, instinctively. 'Anna Peters,' I said, cursing myself when I heard Rosa's voice. 'Yes, Rosa, something cut us off.'

Mutti shook her head before walking off.

'Did you get the invite?' Rosa said.

'To the ball?'

'Yes.'

'I did.'

'I was in charge of posting them.'

'A job well done, comrade,' I mocked.

'Knut helped.'

'He can be helpful.'

'Yeah, when he wants to be,' Rosa said, laughing.

'You're calling to check on the invite?' Why was she so keen? She seemed desperate for me to attend this stupid ball. And it wouldn't even be a proper ball. Simply another school disco, only not in school but that awful café, under the watchful eye of the FDJ.

'Two things I wanted to ask.'

'So ask.'

She laughed. 'One: I know the invite says eight o'clock but do you think you could come a little earlier and help with the decorations?'

'The decorations?'

'Two: a couple of girls from the FDJ are coming over to, you know, sew outfits for the ball. Are you in?'

'Outfits?'

'Yes, Anna, outfits. You can't go naked, can you?'

'I know that. But I have clothes.'

'I bet you don't have a miniskirt.'

'You're planning on wearing a miniskirt?'

'Like in that music video,' Rosa said.

'You saw that?' I didn't believe her.

A pause. 'No,' she sighed. 'But Lydia did and she told me about it.'

'You'll all wear miniskirts?'

'We'll all wear the same.'

'Won't that look stupid?'

'Oh you mean because we usually don't all wear uniforms that are all exactly the same?'

I laughed at that. 'I don't know how to sew skirts.'

'Neither do I but Lydia does.'

'When?' I asked.

'Tonight. Six o'clock. My place. You know where?'

'You live near that church, right?'

'Yes.'

'Shall I bring anything?'

'Ask your mother for some fabric – you know even an old jumper or something you can reuse for a skirt.'

'Will Knut be there?' I regretted asking the second I'd spoken.

'Not unless he's planning on wearing a skirt, too.'

I had to give it to her. She was funny. Sometimes.

Mutti's enthusiasm was off-putting. Not only was she beside herself that I was going to sew something – no, having been invited to Rosa's house to do it was the icing on the cake. I thought it might be nice to get out of the house for a few hours. And maybe I'd enjoy myself. Maybe. Lydia was an unknown quantity but this could also be said about Rosa. All I really knew was that I was quite happy for her to take Knut

off my hands. I was done hanging out with him. He'd been raining on my parade for too long.

'You've got the old jeans and long skirt?' Mutti asked as I was putting my shoes on.

'I do.'

'Here – some biscuits too. For you and your friends.'

'They're not my friends.'

'Anna, just take them,' she said, shoving them in my backpack. 'I know, you're the lone wolf. Nobody's your friend.'

'That's right!' Finally, she'd got it. 'I have no friends.'

Mutti rolled her eyes. 'Have fun anyway, lone wolf.'

'Thank you.'

'Be home at ten?'

'Eleven?' I loved bartering over curfew.

'That's a long time to spend with people who're specifically not your friends.'

'Mutti – come on.'

'Ten-thirty. Not a second later.'

Down the stairs, past the Schmidts' flat, I tried not to glance towards the door and even though I avoided looking, I could swear somebody was watching as I walked past.

Outside, the air was bitter and tiny icicles hung from the parked cars. The sun had set a while ago, leaving an unmarked, dark sky. Only the moon and a couple of stars were visible as I walked down the street with my hands in my pockets, when I felt the lining in my coat. And I remembered the telegram, pushing my finger through that hole to feel if it was still there. It was. The edge of the paper pushed against my

index finger and I remembered how Knut and I had read it together. My heart beat faster as I breathed in the cold air. I mapped out my route to Rosa's house and stopped in my tracks. It'd take me past the cemetery anyway. What would be the harm in taking a closer look at Maria Liedtke's grave?

I walked quickly, turning around every so often, but not too often.

The cemetery gate was ajar, begging me to push it open. There were a few dog walkers around but it wasn't busy. If I was stopped and searched I could always tell them the truth. The truth, I decided, could be determined at a later time, when and if needed. The path was narrow and I did my best retracing my steps. The paths were only dimly lit – saving electricity or something like that. The gravel crunched underneath my soles, a reassuring sound, steady and consistent. As long as I could hear it, I was alone.

Around a corner, I carried on along the path and then turned right at the end. The Wall was to my left and I looked at the faded graffiti as I passed it. But the words still meant something: We are the People, it said. The rest of the world was on the other side of it. It was difficult to fathom. What would I do if the tunnel was still there?

I reached Maria Liedtke's grave. There she was, the dead accomplice. Her gravestone was almost as tall as me, and I'm not small. I wanted to carry on, wanted to know if there was a way out, or if someone was having a laugh at my expense. Even if there was a tunnel, my bed wasn't made. It seemed in poor taste to leave it like that, to be remembered as the girl who escaped and didn't make her bed. My hands were shaking with the possibilities of change. Liedtke's grave was right in front of me. And now what? I touched the gravestone, not sure if I needed to push it over or if it was even moveable. I waited, but nothing happened. No trapdoors. No opening up of the ground underneath me. Nothing swallowed me whole. In fact,

there was no hole. What I did notice was a heap of fresh soil. I bent down and picked up a small stone. If ever there was a tunnel here, they'd made sure it wouldn't be found. I threw the stone against the cemetery wall. I was too late.

Before I rang Rosa's doorbell, I calmed myself by counting to twenty. Like me, she lived in a smaller, old-fashioned building with fewer flats and fewer storeys.

'First floor,' Rosa said over the intercom.

I tried to put everything else out of my mind as I climbed the stairs. 'Hi,' I said, walking into her flat, making an effort to act normal. Whatever normal was.

'Lydia, come out of the bathroom, Anna's here,' Rosa called. 'You can leave your shoes there.'

My shoes came off and I glanced around. There were so many paintings on the walls. 'Colourful,' I said.

'My parents are artists,' Rosa said. 'Mostly their work.'

She seemed a little embarrassed. I took a closer look at the paintings, to see what they depicted. A lot of them were of farmers, harvesting their crop. Others of women and men, working in factories. This was Party-approved art. There was one that stood out: a little girl under a tree with her mother, laughing. I looked at Rosa, then at the painting. 'Is that you and your mother?'

'Yes – how can you tell?' she said.

'I don't know. Something about your expression.'

'Never mind that – let's go through to my room,' Rosa said. We passed the bathroom further down the hall. Rosa stopped and hammered against the door.

'Lydia, come out!'

'Why's she in there?' I asked.

'Because she's self-obsessed.'

'I heard that,' Lydia called.

'You were meant to. Now come out!' Rosa said.

'In a minute you capitalist,' Lydia said. 'Not quite done yet.'

'Whatever.'

'Your parents aren't in?' I asked.

'No – they'll be back at nine o'clock but until then we have the place to ourselves.'

Rosa said. 'Want a drink?'

'Sure.'

'Like what?'

'Karena?'

'Karena?' Lydia from the bathroom.

'What's wrong with Karena?' I said.

Rosa rolled her eyes. 'Lydia only drinks beer.'

'Good for her,' I said, turning towards the bathroom. 'Good for you, Lydia.'

Rosa laughed and made her way to the kitchen. She returned with two bottles of Karena, handing me one.

In Rosa's room, I sat down on her bed, which was made. She kept her things, if she had any, neatly stowed away. There were a couple of textbooks I recognised from school on the floor next to her bed. Did she read them at night? Heavy, flowery curtains hid the window and a dried rose was on her desk, next to a stack of sheet music. There were many posters on the walls – Mutti would have never stood for that.

'I'm glad you came,' she said, sipping her lemonade.

'Me, too,' I said. 'I'm not really the sewing type though.'

'We're all the sewing type,' she said.

'Don't you feel watched?' I said.

'Why?'

'Because of the posters.'

Rosa smiled.

'All these eyes on you the whole time?'

'I feel among friends.'

'I guess that makes sense. Especially because your actual friend's in the bathroom.'

She laughed. 'Don't get me started. She's here because she's the best at sewing.'

Rosa gestured towards the sewing machine.

'So who else is coming from the FDJ?' I asked.

'This is it.' She looked at me.

That surprised me. 'Nobody else could make it?'

Rosa got up and turned the radio on. She tuned it until she found a station without static. I recognised the voice of the presenter. This was DT64. The only station that played at least some of the stuff we wanted to listen to. 'You OK with that?'

'Sure.'

'Wow – DT64! So you don't turn to a western station,' Lydia chimed in. 'Hello, Anna,' she said and hugged me. 'Don't listen to that über-comrade over there.' She pointed at Rosa. 'She doesn't only listen to that station. I've known her to switch to pirate radio every now and then too.' Lydia whispered the second half, holding her finger in front of her lips. Lydia was a couple of years older than us. I vaguely remembered her from school – but she must've finished the year before last. Her

brown hair was choppy, her fringe dangling into her eyes. She wore leggings and a long, baggy t-shirt, tied with a belt at the waist.

‘And what about you, Lydia?’ I asked. I was enjoying this. She was clearly tipsy. ‘Ever dabbled with the pirates?’

‘I am the pirates,’ she said.

‘Lydia, enough. Now show us how to sew those skirts,’ Rosa said.

‘Yes, Lydia, I’ve come all this way,’ I said, reaching for the biscuits in my backpack. I threw the pack at her. ‘Have one of these and show us how it’s done.’

‘And tell Anna what that miniskirt looked like. And how she danced.’

Lydia basked in the attention. She stood in the middle of Rosa’s bedroom, telling us in detail about the red miniskirt everyone was talking about when the song came on the radio. Lydia danced with attitude and without any inhibitions. Somehow, I thought that that had little to do with the beer she’d drunk and more with her general personality.

‘I so hope they play this at the ball,’ Rosa said.

‘Stop calling it a ball,’ Lydia said. ‘It’s a happening.’

‘God you’re so pretentious,’ Rosa said.

‘We don’t live in medieval times,’ Lydia said.

‘Dance,’ I suggested. Both seemed fine with that.

Rosa turned the music down. Eventually, Lydia sat behind the sewing machine, looking strangely at home. ‘Did my placement at the garment factory,’ she explained as she started to assess the fabrics we had chosen.

‘They were so impressed with her that they wanted her back,’ Rosa said.

‘Victim of my own success,’ Lydia said, holding up the old pair of jeans I’d brought. ‘This will make an amazing skirt.’

'You'll return to the factory?' I asked. 'That's what you want to do?'

Lydia inspected the jeans more closely, holding them this way and that, only half focussing on our conversation. 'Not really, but I sort of have no choice, do I?' She looked at me then. 'How short are you willing to go?'

'Shut up, Lydia. It's an honour, I think,' Rosa said.

'Really? I wanted to do philosophy at uni. Instead they have me making uniforms for the FDJ.'

'Because you sew so well?' I was intrigued.

'My parents... they aren't exactly model citizens.'

I was embarrassed that I'd been so naïve and quickly shifted my attention to my legs, moving my hand halfway up my thigh to indicate the length. 'Like this?'

Lydia raised both eyebrows. 'That short?'

'Too short?' I was suddenly unsure.

'I'm messing with you. What are you? A nun? Go shorter,' she said.

I moved my hand all the way up to my groin. 'Like this?'

'A girl of extremes,' Lydia laughed.

'Rosa? Length?' Lydia asked.

'Same as Anna.'

'What – all the way to your bellybutton?' Lydia said, keeping a straight face.

'Oh shut up,' Rosa said.

'Great energy,' Lydia said. 'You keep that up for the happening. That reminds me. What are you bringing for the buffet?' Lydia looked up from the machine.

'Meatballs.' Rosa said.

'Potato salad,' I said. 'And – it's a school disco, without the school, in my opinion.'

'Hey, it took me weeks to organise it,' Rosa said.

‘Sorry, I didn’t mean to sound dismissive,’ I said quickly. ‘And school discos can be fun.’

‘Yeah, like when someone throws up,’ Lydia said. ‘Or catching your teachers at it.’

‘No way – who?’ Rosa asked.

‘Later. For now, I’ll need your help.’ Lydia looked at me.

Chapter 15

The night of the ball. The happening. The dance. The school disco without the school. Someone needed my help. My help.

I was actually looking forward to the dance. To all of it: the make-up, the dressing up and the hair. Lydia had showed us how to back-comb it properly that night and, having paid attention, I used all the hairspray left in Mutti's can. My hair was massive and I'd pinned it up real big beauty queen style. A cold draught cut through the sickly sweet smell of the hairspray. The window had to remain open if I was to survive getting ready. My skirt was just short enough to catch the attention of everyone at the party but not so short as to make me worry about being arrested. My Starlet tights gave my legs an amazing gloss and the plain black t-shirt, that was slightly too big, I chose to tie into a knot at my waist. I'd cut the collar out with blunt scissors, as Lydia had suggested. I was ready to go.

It was already dark outside and there was the insistent sound of fireworks. New Year's Eve sounds. The sky lit up and it was an impressive sight. My room, however, looked less impressive. It was a mess, with clothes strewn across the floor and magazines scattered on my desk, my bed unmade. At least I had my locket dangling around my neck. It looked great with my black t-shirt. There was no time to tidy my entire room, so I quickly went through the motions of shaking out my duvet before folding it and smoothing out my pillow. Less of a mess and ready to fall into in the New Year.

'Are you going out like that?' Mutti asked. 'It's cold.'

'Starlet tights, come on!' I said, pointing at my glossy legs.

'Hat?' Mutti held out my blue woollen hat.

'No way. Look at this hair,' I said, putting the hat in my bag.

'You look different.'

'You hate it?'

'Am I not supposed to?' Mutti smiled.

I glanced into the mirror in the hall, fluffing my hair with my hand. 'I like it and look: I'm wearing my locket,' I said.

'Knut's going too?'

'Yes. And Rosa. And a bunch of people from school and the FDJ.' It was nice not to have to lie. It was nice to end the year with the truth.

'Don't be home too late. Say, one o'clock?'

'Curfew on New Year's Eve?'

'Anna, come on.'

'Seriously Mutti. That's the one time of the year where there should be no curfew.'

'Fine,' she said. 'But if you're not back by the time I wake up tomorrow morning, I'll call the police.'

'Fair's fair.'

'And Anna, one beer, fine. Two beers, OK. But do not get drunk.'

I rolled my eyes. 'Relax, Mutti.'

'Have fun,' she said. 'And here's the potato salad.' She handed me the bowl.

'Thanks.' I put on my coat and zipped it all the way up. 'Happy New Year.'

'So grown up.'

The streets were busy. People everywhere, throwing and lighting fireworks. The sky looked spectacular. Reds, blues, greens and golds shot across it, like speckles of thick paint. The smoke that trailed, drowned out all the usual greys and concrete. It felt chaotic and wild. The noise was deafening but that too felt invigorating. The café

wasn't far and I took my time admiring the display in the sky. I knew the city would be swarming with people setting off fireworks.

The shortcut through Bürgerpark was a good idea as it took me past the imposing stone gates. Groups of people were gathered together on the frozen grass, toasting, laughing, singing. The whole city was out – everyone waiting for the New Year. The Witch's Tower loomed in the distance: round, yellow with circular windows at the top. Trying to make out anything through the windows was pointless. They were too far away. I'd often imagined the witch who'd once lived there. No time for such horror tonight. I sped up, past the empty benches, past the Rommel statue of playing boys.

I exited the park and crossed the street, potato salad in hand. Rosa and Lydia had seemed excited about that. What would Knut bring? If he turned up at all. We hadn't spoken since the day at the Schwarzmarkt. Maybe that was another thing I could leave in this year; my recurring feuds with Knut. Maybe too much had happened. Maybe the situation was irreparable and the time had come for both of us to find new friends.

I arrived at the Café der Jugend and knocked. No answer. I pushed the door open with my one free hand. 'Hello?' I said, peeking into the dark space.

Still, no answer.

'Hello?' I said again, holding onto the bowl of potato salad. 'I've brought potato salad, as requested.'

Nothing, only a dark, empty space. What was I supposed to do? I didn't want to walk in, just like that. Was this a big joke after all? I closed the door, waiting outside the café. Suddenly, I felt so stupid, standing here with my bowl and my huge hair and my tiny skirt, waiting. Were Knut and Rosa playing games with me? Who else was in on this? Lydia? I took a deep breath, soaking up the sulphur that laced the air.

'Anna?' I knew that voice.

'Yeah?' I turned around, slowly.

'You look...' Knut didn't finish.

'What do you want Knut?' I said.

'What?' he said.

Here we were, outside the café, like at least one hundred million times before. But this time was different. Because for the first time we weren't happy to see each other. For the first time, it actually felt uncomfortable.

'Don't start a sentence and then not finish it,' I said. 'It's rude.'

'You from the manner police?'

'Yeah, I am, you idiot.'

'Show me your badge then.'

'Here,' I said, digging into the potato salad with my free hand and throwing it at him. 'This official enough for you?'

'Don't waste food.' He shielded his face with his hand. 'There are decent comrades starving out there.'

'Is that so?' I came closer, throwing more potatoes.

'Delicious,' he said, scooping some that had fallen onto his scarf into his mouth.

'Your mother made that?'

'Yeah.'

'Can I have the recipe?'

I laughed. I laughed so hard, almost dropping the rest of the salad. I bent over, gasping for air and when I came up, there was Knut. Like he'd always been, with his wavy hair and his dark eyes. He picked the potatoes off him, putting them in his mouth, chewing away.

'Friends?' I asked.

'Always,' he said. 'Been roped in to help, too?'

'Yeah and then nobody's here.'

'What? After all of that come early business?'

'I know!'

'Let's go inside and decorate the hell out of this place.'

Once inside, we switched the lights on. Moments later, the door opened and Rosa came in. She carried bags and bags of decorations, as well as an optimistic amount of meatballs. Seriously, how many could one consume? She barked instructions at both of us, complaining that none of the other helpers had shown up yet. I wondered what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. She would make an excellent dictator of a small country, I thought. Because, above all else, she was earnest and dedicated to the cause.

'You want all the balloons blown up?' I said.

'Yes.'

'But that's like 200 balloons,' Knut said.

'And only two of us,' I said.

Rosa gave us a stern look. 'I liked you much better when you weren't talking.' With that, she turned around and moved furniture. She pushed all the tables and chairs to the edges of the room, removing several of the chairs altogether. When we asked her why, she said she wanted everyone to dance, not just sit. I understood that logic. If you gave people too much choice, they might not pick what you wanted them to.

After about an hour of moving things and running out of air, the room looked festive. Confetti flew through the air and covered a lot of the floor. The buffet table with all of two items was ready. And about seven chairs were strategically placed

around the room. I was about to ask about the music when the FDJ group leader marched in, with a sound system that looked like a Soviet tank. He hooked one thing onto the other and tuned into the radio station. The sound filled the room. Rosa dimmed the lights and shortly after I tried a meatball, the first members arrived.

The space filled in no time. The designated dancefloor was packed, everyone moving and singing along to the songs. We jumped, turned, twisted and shook. Not always to the rhythm but that didn't matter. This was about having fun. I was dancing away with Knut and Rosa when I made my excuses to go to the toilet. I wasn't sure if they heard me but their delirious calls were reassuring. At least they were having a great time. I pushed through the crowd and made my way to the toilets. To my surprise there was no queue, only a thick cloud of smoke and hairspray. A flammable combination, but who cared?

There were three stalls on the left, all unoccupied, opposite the sink and a small mirror. This was a rarity. I walked into the last stall, sat down and peed. I could feel the bass from upstairs, felt it go through me. A consistent, steady beat, a little like the ticking of a clock. Then, the door flung open, me still in mid-pee.

'Anna,' Lydia said.

'Lydia, let me pee in peace,' I said, grabbing some toilet paper.

'You know who I am?' she said.

'The notes?' I whispered.

She came closer, pulling the door shut behind her. She was now so close, there was no way she couldn't smell my wee.

'Let me flush,' I said.

'Leave it.'

'Are you Stasi?' I said in a low voice.

'No,' she spat. 'Are you?'

'No!'

'You'll help?'

'Help with what?'

'Change.'

'Change?' I whispered.

'We are the people,' Lydia whispered and held up her fist. 'Are you one of us?'

I nodded, conscious of the smell of my wee.

'Meet me outside just before midnight. I'll take you to our leader. She wants to talk to you.' And like that, she turned around and opened the door.

Speechless, and with a pounding heart, I flushed the loo. I was part of something now, part of something important. My heart hammered against my chest and I was glad that I was already on the toilet. I stayed in the cubicle for a little longer, wondering if Knut and Rosa were part of the movement too.

Back on the dancefloor, I pushed through layers of sweat and cigarette smoke. I felt like smoking and got a cigarette off some random guy and took a deep drag. I coughed immediately but it didn't matter. Knut and Rosa were exactly where I'd left them, still jumping up and down. Knut's hair was drenched in sweat, his cheeks flushed as he moved from side to side, playing the air guitar, singing along at the top of his lungs. I joined in, with my cigarette, holding it rather than smoking it, and my secret. For the first time in a long time, I felt as if I belonged.

The evening went by and we alternated between dancing carelessly and talking endlessly around one of the seven chairs, in the corner of the room. It had been so

long since Knut and I had spoken. It was nice that we were us again. He told me about Christmas with his family.

'She sent a card,' he said.

'Who?' I shouted in his ear.

'Christa.'

'What did it say?'

'What do you think?' he said.

'Merry Christmas,' I guessed.

'Got it in one.'

'Was it nice to hear from her?' I asked.

'My dad, he didn't even want to read the card.'

'Why not?'

'Don't know.'

'You must have an idea,' I pressed.

'Disappointment, maybe? He was once a decent swimmer.'

'That sucks.' I glanced around the room. It was ten to midnight. 'I'll be right back,' I said.

'Sure,' Knut said and grabbed my arm. 'Don't be too long.'

'I promise,' I said, looking up. Our eyes met then. And for the first time in a long time I really saw him. It was as if I really knew him, like I knew myself. What happened next surprised me. Knut pulled me closer and without saying a single word, he kissed me. I felt his lips on mine, lingering, waiting patiently. Eventually he moved his head away and looked at me. I simply stood there. Lost for words. Before it could go any further, I turned around and marched off.

Outside, the air was filled with smoke and sulphur. It looked like a bomb had exploded or something. I looked from side to side, waiting for Lydia, trying to make sense of that kiss. Did he think I fancied him? Tiny explosions went off in the night, booming through the city. People sang in the streets, rushing along, carrying bottles to cheer in the New Year. My beer tasted bitter but holding the bottle in my right hand felt good. I preferred lemonade but everyone was drinking tonight. A couple passed me by, and I moved backwards to make more room on the pavement but they stopped right next to me. Their party attire looked glittery.

'FDJ do?' asked the woman.

'Yes,' I said.

'With a buffet?' the man asked.

'Yes,' I said. 'I'm sure there's some left.'

'What did you bring?' the woman asked.

'Potato salad,' I said.

'Potato salad,' the man repeated and looked at the woman, then back at me.

I acted almost without thinking. Without hesitation, I smashed the bottle over his head and legged it towards the park. I ran along the street so fast, it felt like I was flying. You have to be faster. I gasped for air but my lungs resisted. Nothing going in or out.

As I reached the street corner I heard shouting behind me, angry voices, getting closer. And then a man's deep voice, somewhere nearby.

'Stop!'

The entrance to the park was within reach and I opened my mouth to let the last bit of air out and crashed hard against the gate. The impact restarted my breathing and I took a deep breath, inhaling the sulphur-laced air.

‘Stop right now!’

I pushed the gate open, feeling the gap between us closing.

‘Stop!’

For a split second I paused. Reds, blues and golds across the sky. Then I ran. I didn’t feel the gravel wedge itself into my soles. I didn’t feel the frozen asphalt underneath me. I didn’t feel the snow harden as I flew across the pavement. I didn’t even feel my legs anymore. I just ran.

‘Stop her! Get her!’

I didn’t dare turn around. All I could see was a tunnelled vision of the path ahead, of the people with their fireworks. Why weren’t they helping me? Everyone was so far away, so still, so quiet. Snow-covered ground, frosted lawns and fireworks. And me, running for my life. I had to get away, I had to shake them off. I turned a corner, still at full pelt. How long would I be able to run like this?

Footsteps. Tiny explosions. Voices. Cheering. Cheering the New Year. I still heard them as I ran. Then there was barking. I didn’t dare take my eyes off the path. I wanted to scream but I couldn’t. I was mute. An engine revved. A door opened. Two figures jumped out. I wanted to scream. One of them held their hand over my mouth and pushed down hard. I bit into his hand. They bundled me up and pushed me into the parked car. They hadn’t even shut the door before the car set off at full speed down the street. I only saw fragments. Fragments of faces. Fragments of objects. Fragments of scenery. It happened so quickly. My brain was playing catch-up. Happy New Year, happy New Year. Happy.

‘Now, breathe in slowly, Anna.’

Artificial sweetness, like the smell of Karena.

‘Slowly and deeply.’

I kicked.

'Now, now, Anna. Come on.'

And then I lost consciousness.

Part Two

Chapter 16

It took a few seconds for my surroundings to come into focus. I knew exactly where I was. The certainty beat down on me, like a hammer on a nail. This knot formed in my throat and it was impossible to swallow it away. I was here. A narrow, naked room. A door opposite. There was a bucket in one corner but other than that nothing. I lay still, feeling the hard bench against my back.

I couldn't stop the tears from falling. My head was spinning; it felt heavy, moving it even slightly made me nauseous. Deep breaths only made it worse. The smell of urine and sour vomit smothered me. Every time I breathed in, I retched. Everything was hazy at best. Not throwing up, focussing my eyes on that bucket, took all my energy. Rusty old bucket. Wasn't there a hilarious nursery rhyme about a rusty old bucket? Rusty old bucket from Nantucket why don't you shut up, put up and just lump it? Was that how it went? It didn't sound very nursery but it rhymed at least. The walls were pastel green, the colour of despair. My gaze rested on the upper right corner of the room. The paint was flaking and peeling there. It looked like a thousand tiny islands on a map. What I would give to be on an island right now. But instead I was here. The bastards got me after all. What would become of me? I tried to concentrate on the sounds outside the room. A telephone was ringing. Why didn't anybody answer it? Then it stopped. A voice. Muffled. But a voice. I wasn't alone.

Footsteps came closer. They paused outside that door. Then I heard keys. So many keys. Eventually one met the lock, turned. The door opened and I closed my eyes, quickly. A gust of wind brushed past my face.

'Is she still asleep?' a coarse, female voice. I sensed someone bending over me and then, without warning, ice-cold water was thrown over me. My eyes opened and I jerked upright, gasping.

'What is this?' I shouted.

The woman looked official and severe in her grey dress and neatly parted hair, somewhere between a headmistress and a nurse.

'No, what is this?' she said and ripped the grips out of my hair, pocketing each and every one of them.

I held my head. 'Why are you taking them?'

'Because,' she said, 'we wouldn't want you to hurt yourself, would we?'

'But they're mine,' I said.

'Welcome to Torgau,' she said. 'You'll find things are quite different here.'

'Mutti – I want to speak to my mother.'

'Your mother?'

'Why, what happened to my mother? I want to see my mother. She'd never allow any of this.'

'Your mother signed the papers.'

'She what?'

'You heard me.'

'No. She'd never do this to me.'

'She did,' she said. 'And while you're acclimatising, you better read this.' She handed me a thick folder. 'I'll get you in an hour or so for a health check.'

'A what?' I asked.

She looked me dead in the eyes. 'I won't repeat myself.' With that, she left the room, locking the door behind her.

I lay there for a while, staring at the peeling paint, going numb. The rotten smell moved up my nose and sat there. Rusty Old Bucket, I repeated over and over in my mind. Rusty Old Bucket. I understood. Rusty was my toilet. Rusty was my only friend. I got off the bench and walked across the room, peering into Rusty. I wasn't sure if I was looking at someone else's pee or at mixture of bleach and water. I pulled my Starlets and my knickers down and sat on Rusty. 'Sorry, Rusty,' I whispered and started to pee. Rusty's rim dug into my bum. He got his own back after all. 'Sorry,' I repeated. I pulled my tights back up and returned to the bench and lay down, feeling over my Starlets and noticed ladders. Mutti will kill me, I thought. Kill me. Brand new pair of tights and I'd managed to rip them. Typical. My breathing was steady now and made my mind go blank. Tears ran down my cheeks; their heat warmed my face. There was no point in trying to blink them away. Mutti couldn't have told them. Mutti wouldn't have told them. I had to keep telling myself this. She got me my tights. Mutti couldn't have done this. Then, along with the tears came the memories. Like flashes of a camera. Our fights. About everything and anything. I tried to shake them off but it was like they were happening all over again. And I allowed myself to go there.

What if Mutti didn't want me? It didn't matter about the tights. Mutti would never find out about them. Unless of course the bastards told her. I couldn't even tell Mutti that I was sorry about the tights, that it wouldn't happen again. That I'd be more careful with my things in the future. I felt around my neck for the locket. Gone. The pastel green walls seemed to be closing in and I fell against them, trying to will them back. On the wall, next to me, was some writing. Somebody had dared to write on these walls. I wiped the tears away and blinked, focussing my eyes. 'Was that you,

Rusty?' I said. 'What did I tell you about writing on walls?' I said. 'You disobedient little git.'

I was born a human and I want to return a human!

I traced my fingers across the sentence, hypnotised by it. What a brave thing to do, to write something like that. 'I take it back, Rusty. You did good.' I moved onto my side. 'You didn't take their orders.' I paused, feeling my hair. It had somewhat depooofed. Another thing to add to my list. 'Rusty, tell the hairspray people they failed me. Can't even stand the test of medium-soaking.' My feet touched the floor and the sensation of shoes against concrete took me back to the dancefloor of the café, to the kiss. To the beat running through my body. To the excitement and the lightness. To the sense of belonging. 'Rusty, will you dance with me?' I stretched out my hand to the side of the bench. There was the folder the nurse had left for me. 'Torgau House Rules,' it said on the first page. My gaze shifted to the writing on the wall. I touched it again and swallowed hard. 'I can do this, Rusty,' I said, opening the large file. 'You are here because you made mistakes. Here at Torgau, we want to help you to correct your behaviour and to help you become a diligent member of society, to live your life in a stable and meaningful way. You have the opportunity, through productive work and through conscientious learning, to prove faultless discipline and furthermore, prove that you have abandoned all antisocial and rebellious behaviour.'

The door was unlocked. There she was again, the nurse with the coarse voice.

'It's time for your check-up.'

I rose slowly.

'Come on. We don't have all day.'

I glanced back, quickly, to look at the writing again. Human. I am human.

Chapter 17

Heavy iron doors marked the end of each corridor. You couldn't get anywhere without keys. The sound of keys jangling against each other, the sound of turning keys marked my march through the tired hallways. The walls looked cold. Grey and beige painted concrete, stretching from iron door to iron door. I wondered why anyone had bothered to paint them at all. Naked concrete would have had the same effect. And it would have been cheaper.

'Don't crawl,' said the woman with the neatly parted hair.

I picked up my pace, skidding over the taupe tiles. They were marked by footprints and tumbles of dust. I stole glances here and there but saw no one. However, I was sure that the woman with the obsessively parted hair was parading one of my hairpins. I strained to hear, to hear anything, but all that was audible, other than the sound of the keys, was our echoing footsteps and the heavy breathing of the woman. The place was desolate.

'Where is everyone?' I asked.

'No questions,' she said. 'Hurry up.'

As we reached the end of the corridor, we stopped. She consulted her bundle of keys and proceeded to unlock the door. She found the right key straight away. They all looked the same to me, except for one enormous key. I wondered what it might be for. She opened the door and motioned for me to walk through. Everything she did was underpinned by impatience. We entered what looked like a PE changing room. Like the one at my school. She then locked the door behind us, like she had done with all the other doors we'd walked through.

'Take off your clothes.'

'What?'

‘What did I tell you about asking questions?’

‘But what shall I change into?’

She spoke very slowly, ‘Take them off.’

I removed my Starlets first, then my skirt, then my t-shirt. I felt her eyes on me, staring at me, looking me up and down.

‘Underwear too.’

‘What?’ I whispered.

‘No questions.’

I unhooked my bra and put it on the pile with the rest of my clothes, staring at the zigzag shape of the tiles on the ground. Then I pulled down my knickers. I tried to cover my breasts with my right arm, my crotch with my left hand.

‘Arms to the sides,’ she ordered. ‘Follow me.’

For a split second, I looked up to see where she was going.

‘Frau Winkler – got a new one for you,’ she said, as she entered the next room. It was bigger than I’d anticipated. High ceilings with decorated walls.

Certificates with old-fashioned prints hung from the walls in frames. A big oil painting of Margot hung behind the desk. Margot, that degenerate. I had her to thank for this. Behind the desk, in front of the oil painting, sat a grey-haired woman, smoking a cigarette, illuminated by the dull light from two large windows opposite her. Her expression was stern, with deep wrinkles around her mouth. The smell of the smoke took me back to that night. To the ball. To the feeling of utter elation that had made me want to smoke in the first place.

‘Stand over there,’ Frau Winkler pointed.

I walked over to where she’d pointed.

‘Frau Uhlig,’ Winkler said. ‘You haven’t addressed her manners?’

'She's slow to learn,' Uhlig said.

'This is where we search you and perform physical checks,' Winkler said to me.

'Search?' I said.

'To make sure you're not hiding anything.'

'Hide it where?'

'Girls like you hide drugs, cigarettes and even razorblades,' Uhlig said. 'Isn't that so, Frau Winkler?' Uhlig took a seat by the window, lighting a cigarette.

'I don't have anything like that,' I whispered.

Frau Winkler put on a latex glove and got up from behind the desk. She looked right at me. 'When was she brought in?'

'Yesterday.'

'Why are we only strip searching her now?'

'She was unconscious.'

'I see. Like to drink, do you?' This was directed at me. 'Crouch down, on this bench,' she said. 'Frau Uhlig, have you got the form? Record any distinguishing features for me.'

I felt cold air against my skin. I smelled Frau Uhlig's fresh cigarette and the smoke that lingered here always. I got on the bench and I crouched. Human. I was still human.

The sound of the electric clippers. My hair fell around me in thick, brown strands. It had taken me so long to grow. Now it was gone. Just like that. I bit my bottom lip, trying not to cry. But as more and more strands fell around me, so did my tears. The sun outside was high. It whitewashed the room, almost blinding me.

'Through there to get disinfected,' Winkler said. 'Frau Uhlig, go with her. Make sure she doesn't do anything silly.'

I nodded and got off the bench, letting Uhlig lead the way, another cigarette in hand, bunch of keys on her belt.

‘Shower first. Then use the disinfectant.’

I nodded.

‘Use it everywhere,’ she said. ‘Don’t want your germs.’

I nodded again.

‘What are you waiting for?’

The room was tiled, off-white with showers on either side of it. I picked a shower and switched the water on. It was ice cold. Instinctively, I jumped to the side only to feel something hard against my ribs. I turned to see what it was.

‘I said, shower.’ Uhlig. With a wooden baton.

I complied, immersing myself in the icy water, bending my head, working the disinfectant into my skin. I felt across my barren skull, wishing for the hat Mutti gave me the day I took the telegram. I tried to focus on the water, escaping through the plughole. That’s all I could see. Water going down the plughole. How it swirled and swirled until it was gone. I envied that water. Another smack across my back brought me to attention.

‘That’s enough now,’ Uhlig said. ‘Dry yourself and put this on.’

I turned around in time to catch a pile of clothes she threw at me. Jogging bottoms and a sweatshirt. Pale grey. Not really my colour but at least I’d blend into my surroundings.

When I was returned to my room, the wooden bench I’d been sleeping on had vanished. I turned to Uhlig, who was about to lock the door behind me.

‘Where’s the bench?’

‘It’s daytime. Benches are for night time.’

'I sit on the floor?'

'You stand and you learn our house rules.'

'What?'

The wooden baton met the door. 'You heard me.'

'Wait!'

But she was already moving away from the door. I turned to look at Rusty. 'How do you like my hair?' I said. Then I looked at the writing. At least that was still there. I moved over to that part of my room, running my fingers over it. What would it have felt like to write it? The letters were round and joined up, the exclamation mark at the end fading slightly.

I didn't want to think about what had happened so, instead I took the house rules and read them. The old-fashioned typeface on the pages was a good indication of the kind of material I was studying here: this was a conduct book of sorts. Words such as antisocial, discipline, diligent, meaningful and rebellious featured heavily and I read them until my eyes felt heavy.

Chapter 18

The second night. I was lying on the bench in my tiny room. Not my room. My room was at home, with Mutti. I was lying on the bench in the tiny room they'd given me. The woollen blanket was itchy but worse than that, it reeked of someone else's BO and something that was so sharp it made my eyes water. Several stains had seeped into the fibres of the blanket. Some were crimson, others rusty. Maybe someone else's blood or worse. It was obvious the blanket had never been washed. The modest slit of a window high up in the wall, too high for me to reach, let in a wedge of light from outside. I wasn't sure if it was moonlight or floodlight. I wasn't sure of anything anymore. I thought of the notes and the potato trail. I thought of someone needing my help and being someone who needed help. I thought of Knut and Rosa. How we'd fallen out. How we'd made up. Of Mutti and my hat. My tights. Potato salad in Knut's face. Laughter. How everything was getting better. Everything was on the verge of something. And then I – I couldn't go there.

I rolled from my back onto my side and looked at Rusty, whispering his name. He benefitted from the light that crept in through the window. A spotlight on him.

'What are you performing for us today?' I whispered. 'A new song, you say?' I stared at him, willing him to start his performance. 'Come on, Rusty. For me.'

He moved from side to side, and sang his new song about dreaming and not missing anything else because dreaming was the best. His choreography was simple but sophisticated. He knew how to move. Like Lydia had that night at Rosa's when we made skirts. The night I went to the cemetery. The night I looked for the tunnel. Who had sent me the notes? Lydia or the Stasi? Did Lydia even react when I mentioned the notes in the loo? I couldn't be sure. My mind began to wander and

that wasn't fair on Rusty. He put such effort into his performance. I focussed my attention on him, feeling a smile spread across my face.

'That Uhlig bitch stole my pins,' I said in a low voice and continued to watch him sway and sing. My eyes became heavy and the words of his song and the house rules started to merge in my head. I used all my concentration to separate them in my mind, trying to recall them, like others count sheep. So many sheep. So many rules.

- a. Fulfil your allocated duties without protest.
- b. Stand to attention when encountering an adult, only giving your name and task when specifically asked.
- c. Behave considerately towards your peers: violence, swearing, thieving and trading are strictly prohibited.
- d. Keep your body hygienically clean and fully comply with the no tattoos policy.
- e. Obey your group leader.
- f. Do not have any contact with the opposite sex.

I fell asleep at the 'opposite sex'. My sleep was chaotic, with strange dreams, specifically not about the opposite sex. I dreamed Rusty and I were in a queue. We weren't sure what we were queuing for, but there we were, outside the cemetery, in the thick snow. The queue snaked around the entire block. Ahead of me was a Christmas tree, behind Rusty was a piano. At the head of the queue was a giant skeleton key. All the way at the back I saw Knut and Rosa, deep in conversation with Mutti. I couldn't hear a word of it but their expressions were animated.

'Why are we here?' I asked.

'Where else would we be?' the tree said.

'Can I wait with Mutti?' I said.

'This is your spot,' Rusty said. 'You must stay in your spot.'

'I don't belong here,' I said.

'This is your spot,' Rusty repeated.

Then everyone started singing a song about how wonderful rules were. And then I saw what everyone was queuing for. Liedtke's grave. One by one, they kissed her gravestone and reappeared with bowls of potato salad and yellow cloths.

'I want to go home with Mutti,' I said to Rusty but he ignored me and continued to chant along about the wonderful rules. 'I want to go now,' I said, this time louder. Nothing. Nothing from Rusty. Nothing from the piano or the Christmas tree. More snow fell. It fell in my open mouth, feeling cold, stopping me from screaming. But somehow I was still screaming. Then I woke up. Uhlig was leaning over me, slapping me across the face.

'Next time you make such a racket, I'll stuff a sock down your throat.'

I couldn't speak. I simply nodded, afraid she might slap me again.

'Good.' She turned around and walked off, locking the door behind her.

My breathing was erratic, my cheeks burned and I felt sweat clinging to my clothes. I was absolutely drenched so I got up and stood underneath the window. My entire body was sore and heavy. Trying to touch my toes, the blood shot into my head too quickly and I felt myself go faint. I hadn't eaten anything of substance in almost three days. I sat back onto my bench and looked at the writing on the wall, touching the word *human*. It was as if all thoughts I'd ever had tried to surface all at once, shouting for my attention. It was too crowded inside my head.

There were tears in my eyes. It was dreaming of Mutti. I felt so homesick, all I could do was cry. At some point I had lost sight of how much I loved Mutti and how much she loved me. It was as if we lost each other for a moment or two. We were so lost she signed me off, handed me over to somebody else.

‘I can’t be your friend anymore, Rusty’ I whispered. ‘I have to keep my sanity. That’s the only thing I can do to keep safe.’

Chapter 19

The sound of keys and rushed footsteps marked Uhlig's arrival. This was the soundtrack to my existence. It chimed in the beginning of my day. Today, Uhlig didn't come in. She stood by the opened door, impatient. Always aggravated.

'Let's go.'

Each time I'd left the room, to be showered and searched, I'd been directed left. Today, Uhlig showed me to the right. I followed her down the corridor, it looked the same as all the others.

'Hurry up,' Uhlig said, encouraging me along with her wooden baton. Walking at a regular pace wasn't an option. In Torgau, you marched everywhere.

My behaviour had been exemplary since I had arrived. I learnt the house rules by heart and had been no bother at all, staying in my room without causing any trouble and being polite when my bench was removed and returned. Rising early wasn't a problem and I used Rusty and ate all the food I was given. I hadn't even tried to sit down on the floor when they took my bench. Maybe Mutti wanted me home.

As I waited for Uhlig to unlock the next door, I thought I could hear voices. When she pushed it open, I knew I could. Female voices. Young voices. But the second I walked through the door, the sounds seemed to disappear behind another.

Further along, we turned off the corridor and up a flight of stairs. Through another door, onto another silent corridor. We could have been walking in circles for all I knew. Eventually the corridor opened out into a kind of anteroom with three doors leading off it, all closed. Uhlig knocked on one of the doors and I wondered if even she knew what was behind it.

'Enter,' a voice sounded.

Uhlig opened the door and pulled me along, roughly.

It looked like a waiting room, somewhere official. Directly opposite the door was a large desk with a secretary behind it, hammering away at a typewriter. A row of chairs had been pushed up against the far wall facing a pair of heavy wooden doors. Maybe Uhlig would finally get to use her giant key.

‘Anna Peters for Herr Franken,’ Uhlig said.

‘I’ll let him know you’re here,’ the secretary said. She picked up a receiver and mumbled something into it. She looked at us. ‘He’s ready to see you now.’ Her expression didn’t change. Her indifference surprised me.

‘Move,’ Uhlig said, pulling my arm.

‘Sorry,’ I said, walking towards the heavy wooden doors. I was disappointed not to hear the usual jangling of keys. The doors were not locked; Uhlig simply pushed them open.

There was light, so much light. It took a few seconds for my eyes to adjust but when they did I saw a room of wood-panelled walls, leather chairs, and potted plants. What a contrast to the rest of the building. There were two large windows, one on either side of the room. Out of the window to my left, I could see the perimeter wall stretching the length of the building, and at ground level the painted markings of a school playground. Through the opposite window, under which I spotted a small writing desk, I had a view of the landscape beyond, the rising winter sun and a river. But the view was framed by the top of the perimeter wall. It was the same shade of grey as the interior walls. The colour must have been on offer or something. Or maybe someone here really loved concrete grey. *Excuse me, which colour would you recommend for a fine institution such as Torgau? Oh, Torgau, that would be concrete grey, Madam. You’ll find it in our Total Control range.*

‘Anna Peters. Finally, we meet.’

This man, I guessed, watering his potted plants, was Herr Franken. He was tall, with broad shoulders and eyebrows as thick as his hair. His suit was tailored, something you didn't see very often. He stretched out his hand as he approached me. His handshake was strong, intimidating. I worried he'd break my fingers.

'Happy New Year,' he said.

'Happy New Year,' I said, feeling stupid. It certainly hadn't been for me.

'Sit,' Franken said, pointing at an armchair.

I hesitated, looking at Uhlig for reassurance.

'Sit,' she said.

'That will be all, Frau Uhlig.'

Uhlig nodded and walked from the room without giving me another glance, shutting the door firmly behind her.

The softness of the leather under my bum felt strange, as if I'd sink through the chair at any moment. This must be how sailors felt when they returned to land after a long journey.

'Comfortable?' Franken asked.

'Thank you,' I said and stopped adjusting my weight in the chair immediately.

He sat in the armchair opposite me. He leaned back and sighed. 'You are here.'

'I am.'

'Have you learnt the house rules?'

'I have. I know them by heart.'

'Good. Do they make sense?'

'Shall I recite them?'

'Do you understand them?' Franken stared at me, not moving a muscle on his face.

'I... I think I do?'

'What makes you uncertain?'

'Everything's open to interpretation.'

'Interpretation?'

'I guess?'

'Would you say the law is open to interpretation?'

'The law?'

'Yes, the law.'

'I don't know,' I said, quietly.

'I think you know very well. And this is why you're here. Because you think the rules don't apply to you. Because you think you're above the law.'

'I don't think that,' I said, quickly.

'Liar.'

'What?'

'You are a liar.' He narrowed his eyes. 'But you're lucky.'

I remained silent.

'It's rude not to answer,' he said.

'Sorry.'

'You're lucky because this is your second chance.'

I felt the severity of his words. Not being able to bear it any longer, I looked outside, not towards the concrete grey but towards the orange glow of the sun. Its warmth brushed my cheeks. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. Maybe he was right. Maybe I did think I was above the law. Maybe I was a liar. But if I was to have a second chance, I would be an idiot not to take it. 'A second chance?'

'Torgau is not a prison,' he said. 'We like to think of it more as a rehabilitation centre. We lock doors but there are no guards, only qualified pedagogical staff. We simply lock doors to help you make good choices.'

'I want to make good choices,' I said.

'So do you understand the rules?'

'Yes.'

'How do I know you mean what you say?'

'It's the truth.' I held his gaze.

'No, no. Not words. Actions, Anna.'

'Oh.'

'Indeed.'

'What must I do?'

'We have a range of activities here, all in line with Margot's framework, of course. There are academic lessons and productive labour. Intense exercise. Early rises and collective contemplation. We will correct your behaviour.'

'It needs to be corrected,' I agreed.

'Otherwise it's prison.'

'Prison?' I hadn't killed anyone.

'You're a traitor.' Franken got up and walked towards the writing desk.

'A traitor,' I repeated.

'So you admit it?'

'I don't know.'

He looked at me from across the room. 'There's time yet.' He appeared almost saintly against the orange glow. 'You'll stay here for three months. Initially.'

Three months. An eternity. 'And then?' I asked, quietly.

'We'll see.'

'I get to go home?'

'It depends.'

I fixed my gaze on the empty armchair opposite me, the polished brown leather, the brass buttons. 'On what?' I asked eventually.

'How well you reform and if your mother's ready to take you back.'

I looked at him then. Directly at him. 'Mutti might not want me back?'

'Can you blame her?'

'No,' I whispered. I guessed I hadn't realised how bad it had become between us.

'Come,' he said, coaxing me towards him with the movement of his hand.

I rose from the armchair and walked towards the sun, towards his desk. He motioned for me to take a seat opposite him. 'Thank you,' I said. I felt the sun on my face.

'Since you have agreed to rehabilitation,' he said, placing notepad and a pen in front of me, 'you should tell your mother.'

I nodded.

'You understand that this is a privilege.'

'I do.'

'You'll also understand that for you, Anna, there's no such thing as privacy anymore. That is something you have lost.'

I nodded again.

'Do you understand?' Franken said, smiling.

'I do,' I said, hastily.

'Everything you share in this letter will be checked by one of our minders.'

'I understand.'

‘Should your behaviour improve over the coming weeks and months, we might consider giving you mail privileges.’

‘Thank you,’ I said.

‘Consider the content carefully,’ he said. He reached across then and touched my hand. ‘This is your first step.’

I didn’t dare look at him. His fingers felt strange on the back of my hand. I wanted to pull mine away. But I didn’t. I simply zoomed in on the dark hairs across his knuckles.

‘Make the most of this second chance. Prove to Margot that your antisocial, antidemocratic behaviour is behind you.’

‘I will,’ I said.

‘Reinvigorate the values of the GDR.’

‘I will.’

‘Good girl,’ he said. He stroked the back of my hand with his thumb. It felt unbearable but I didn’t dare pull my hand away. Like you do with the flame of a candle. You wait and you wait until you almost get burned. ‘I shall give you a few minutes.’ He removed his hand and got up. He resumed watering his plants, speaking words of encouragement to them.

I stared at the piece of paper, pen in hand. It cast a long, thin shadow across the page. I wanted to trace the shadow, draw its outline. Instead, I started my letter. The pen felt heavy between my fingers.

Liebe Mutti,

I’m sorry about the tights. I don’t know how it happened but I didn’t mean to rip them. I know I should be taking better care of my things and I know that

tights are not easy to come by. I don't know what you've been told but I need you to know that I was careful and it was an accident. I promise I'll take better care of my things in the future.

I wish I was home. I guess I don't deserve that right now. I've been told that if I work hard, I might be able to be home with you in three months. It feels like a long time but maybe this will also give you the time and space you need.

Things must have gotten bad between us and, Mutti, I'm sorry I didn't realise this sooner. I now understand that my rebellious behaviour must have been hard on you. You've done nothing wrong though. Somewhere I lost my way; I wanted more. I was greedy and selfish. I hope there comes a time when you can forgive me.

Until then, please know that I love you. Please know that I'm working hard on becoming a better member of society. Please know that I didn't rip my tights on purpose.

I'm sorry. For everything.

Anna.

Franken's hand on my shoulder jolted me back into the room.

'Nice, Anna. A really nice letter,' he said.

'Thank you,' I said, quietly.

'Let's make sure Mutti gets it,' he said.

'Can she write to me?'

'Not yet.' Franken squeezed my shoulder. 'All in good time.'

'We can't have any contact?'

'You're on your own.'

I felt his fingers dig into my collarbone.

'I understand.'

'Good girl. From tomorrow you'll join the rest of the girls. You'll rise at 5.30 every day, except for Sundays, where you'll rise at seven. Lights out at nine. Your spare time will be filled with important duties, such as cleaning and cosmetic repairs to the building. As you will have seen on your journeys around the centre, there's some room for improvement.'

'I understand.'

'As Margot would say: this is all for you, Anna. To give you the opportunity to reform and to turn yourself into a valued and diligent member of society.' He paused and looked out of the window. 'This is a second chance. You don't often get them.'

'Thank you.' I stared at my letter.

'So compliant,' he said. 'Now, let's get you back to your room.' He walked me to the door.

Uhlig was waiting in the secretary's office. I felt oddly relieved to see her.

'Finished?' she asked.

'Yes, quite finished,' he said. 'You may return her to her room.'

'Not the group room?' Uhlig asked.

'Not until tomorrow.'

Uhlig marched me back to my room. I recognised nothing. Even the flight of stairs seemed different. She could have been taking me a whole new way for all I knew; I still couldn't figure out the layout of the centre. I was trying to picture the network of corridors and where they led to when I heard the voices again. Young and female. As we passed an open door, I caught a glimpse of grey tracksuits, identical to the one I was wearing. Shaved heads turned to look and my eyes darted from face to

face. Hard faces, expressionless. Girls, like me. One face caught my attention. I looked at it for less than a second, but that was all it took. I recognised that face.

Chapter 20

I learnt to swim a lifetime ago, one unbearably hot summer. One weekend Knut's family took me to the outdoor swimming pool, near the State Park on Wolfshagener Strasse, to help me build my confidence. It was the summer before Knut's sister was sent back to the Sportschule. I remembered the smell of chlorine and sweat, of sunscreen and freshly cut grass.

Knut and his sister were having an argument. I wasn't listening; I was struggling to get into my swimming costume with a towel wrapped around me so as not to expose myself. I'd have died of shame if anyone had seen me naked. I'd just slipped my knickers off when I realised that Knut and his sister were both looking at me.

'What?' I asked.

Knut's sister looked annoyed. 'Weren't you listening?'

'To what?'

'The rules,' said Knut.

'What rules?'

'No jumping in,' he said.

'We're not allowed to jump in?'

'I know!' Knut said.

I turned to his sister. 'Is this true?' I was holding on to my towel, swimming costume up to my thighs but no further than that.

'Are you two for real?' she said.

'Tell us,' I said. 'We want to do it right.'

'Yeah, tell us, Christa,' Knut said.

'It could kill you,' Christa said. She turned on her heels and set off towards the pool, through the hordes of people enjoying the sun.

'You coming?' Knut said, following her.

I waited for him to turn around before dropping my towel. I needed both hands to pull up my costume. I didn't jump into the pool on that day, or any other day. I didn't want to die.

I was woken in the customary way the next morning: footsteps, keys, lock, door, Uhlig.

'Get up,' she said. 'You're joining your group today.'

My group. Christa. Maybe Christa would be in my group. 'Yes, Frau Uhlig,' I said, following her out of my room and immediately breaking into a march. It was the usual procession of iron doors, concrete grey and taupe tiles.

Eventually, Uhlig showed me into a squat, depressing-looking room. It was like a concrete box. Light streamed in through narrow, barred windows near the ceiling but it made little difference. The room was still dingy, industrial and cold. Whatever appetite I had retreated to somewhere around my intestines. The air was heavy with the smell of bleach, boiled potatoes and celery. It was too early for celery.

'Your group is waiting,' Uhlig said, jabbing me along with her baton.

There were others in this room, all with shaved heads, dressed in grey, standing straight as candles around a long table on the other side of the room. They looked identical, even in their faces. The only way to tell them apart was by their size and height. I picked up my pace, fighting the urge to run to them. I counted ten girls. Nobody spoke or moved a muscle, but at least I wasn't alone anymore.

Nobody so much as glanced at me when I reached the table. They kept their eyes fixed on the table – no, on the empty bowls in front of them. It was as if they were wearing blinkers or were actually blind. Uhlig pushed me towards an empty seat

between a tall, thin girl and a shorter one. I was suddenly self-conscious, overwhelmed. I didn't dare look for Christa. I looked down and focussed on the scuff marks scoring the grey-blue linoleum. It looked as if a thousand little pigeons had dipped their feet into pots of grey paint and marched circles around the room.

'Sit,' Uhlig said.

In one clean motion, the girls pulled the chairs out and sat down. They did nothing more than that. There was silence. I stared at the empty bowl in front of me, zooming in on all the little fragile lines in the ceramics, on the chipped rim, the dried bit of food where somebody hadn't done a good job of cleaning it. I heard footsteps and the smell of over-boiled potatoes and celery intensified. There was movement behind me, people spreading out around the table. Before I knew it, my bowl was filled with a large lump of grey. I didn't feel hungry.

'Start,' Uhlig said.

I stole a glance at the girl sitting opposite me and noticed how robotic her movements were. How she picked up her spoon and ate, as if she'd been rehearsing this for months. I too dug my spoon into the gruel and brought it to my mouth. It was dry and dense, not made with milk but water. It didn't really have any taste but the texture felt like coarse wallpaper paste as it went down my throat, stripping a layer of flesh in the process. Struggling to swallow, I looked at my bowl and panicked. There was so much left. How would I ever eat it all? I tried a few more spoonfuls but couldn't produce enough saliva to swallow it. I decided I'd eaten enough.

'Stop,' Uhlig said.

Robot Girl was the first to put down her spoon. I was fascinated by her seamless, graceful movements. Spoon met bowl and stayed there. I did the same, relieved that at least this part of the day was almost over.

'New Girl hasn't finished,' the girl sitting to Robot Girl's left said, pointing.

It was Christa. I stared at her, willing her to see me, repeating my name over and over in the hope it might somehow transmit across the table to her. But there was no recognition, nothing. Just this intense stare.

'New Girl hasn't finished,' Christa repeated.

My cheeks burned. I felt the rough oats sticking to the inside of my throat. The smell of celery became overwhelming. I didn't know what to do so I stared at my bowl and the spoon in it. How it looked like the hand of a clock. How I'd put it at three o'clock.

'New Girl hasn't finished.' Not just Christa this time. The whole group. 'New girl hasn't finished,' they chanted. It got louder and louder. 'New Girl hasn't finished. New Girl hasn't finished.' Then it stopped.

'Finish,' Uhlig said, digging her baton in between my shoulder blades.

I picked up my spoon and ladled the remaining paste into my mouth. I felt betrayed by Christa, by the group. I was as alone as I had been in that room. Only this was worse. This was a thousand times worse because everyone was staring at me, taunting me. The only thing I could do was lower my gaze and look at the floor. Those little birds and their tiny feet. The sound of me chewing became distant. When I looked at my bowl, it was empty.

'Have some more.' Uhlig added another ladleful of gruel into my bowl.

'Give her more!' the group chanted.

I took a good look at all of them. Gleeful bitches. How could they be so cruel? I wanted to pick up my bowl and hurl it at all of them.

'Give her more!' they chanted. 'Give her more!'

I blinked back tears as I spooned the dried porridge into my mouth. I didn't want them to see me cry.

'Rise,' Uhlig said, when I'd finished. 'Straight into the courtyard. Thirty laps to thank the new girl.'

'Thanks, New Girl,' Christa said.

'Thanks, New Girl,' Robot Girl repeated. She had striking blue eyes.

Everyone got up quickly but orderly. There was no chaos. They lined up and made for the stairs, following the other minder, who led the way. I was the last in the queue, except for Uhlig. We marched down the stairs and into the courtyard. The cold air slapped my face and I remembered what it felt like to be outside. I saw the concrete wall that I'd seen out of Franken's window to my left, the building to my right. I could hear dogs.

'Faster,' Uhlig shouted. 'Faster! One...'

I ran. It was difficult at first because of the slippers I wore. I looked to see what shoes everyone else was wearing. Little ballerina slippers. All of them. The soles were so thin; I felt every bit of gravel through them. Still, I ran. I was about to complete my first laps, when I felt it. A hard smack around my head. Then another. And another. By the time I gathered myself, it was too late. The culprits had overtaken me, 'Thank you!' they shouted, one after another. Still, I ran, determined not to cry. Then another smack. I turned to see who it was and there was Robot Girl. Her expression was lifeless, her body composed. I felt my tears rise and fall. There was nothing I could do to stop them. The cold air clung to them and for a second it felt as if they might freeze right there on my cheeks. Permanently imprinted on my face.

I looked at Uhlig, pleading. She turned her back to me. Still, I ran. Until a girl, who was smaller than the other girls, matched my pace and ran next to me. She looked at me and smiled. I was about to say something to her, something like, thanks for being human, thanks for running next to me. But she beat me to it.

‘Sack of shit,’ she said and slammed herself against me.

I lost my balance and tumbled to the ground. My face hit the frozen gravel. My cheek burned and I put out my hands to steady my weight, trying to get back up before anyone noticed. Everyone had stopped running. They were frozen onto their spots, arms outstretched, pointing at me.

‘Sack of shit. Sack of shit. Sack of shit,’ they shouted.

Snow started to fall, thick flakes landed on my face, fast and heavy. A protective cloak? It was of no use to me at all. I cried because it didn’t matter anymore whether they saw me or not.

‘Don’t stop!’ Uhlig commanded. ‘Fifteen more to go.’

I ran through the cold, through the snow that landed on me. I ran until I couldn’t think of anything at all anymore. Rules meant nothing here. I longed for the isolation of the room they’d kept me in. To be alone, to be gone.

Chapter 21

After the courtyard, we were taken to a classroom. At least it looked like a classroom, with individual desks arranged in four rows of four. Cold sweat clung to my body. I picked a seat in the middle row, behind Christa, feeling scrunched up pieces of paper hitting my back. Compared to Uhlig's baton or her bunch of keys, I quite enjoyed the sensation. At least they couldn't pull my hair.

I'd memorised the daily schedule. It was 0700H and this was double civics. Double maths came next, followed by double German and double practical studies. Double maths. I still couldn't escape maths. Why did life have to be so unfair? Why couldn't I at least be exempt from maths for as long as I had to stay here?

'Good morning.'

'Good morning, Herr Bayer,' the class chimed.

He looked around the room until his eyes reached me. 'A new face?'

I nodded. 'Yes, Herr Bayer.'

He gave me half a smile. 'Chose the right day to join.'

'Chose?' I whispered

'It is time for your test,' he said to the whole class, and started to hand out paper.

I panicked. My hand shot up. Herr Bayer seemed irritated, clearly, but what could I do?

'Yes?' he said.

I got up and stood next to my chair. 'I can't take the test.'

The whole room erupted into laughter. 'New Girl can't take the test,' a short girl said. 'Poor New Girl.'

'Girls, stop it at once,' Herr Bayer commanded. 'Why can't you take the test?' he asked me.

'Because I don't know what you've studied.'

'You just volunteered yourself for blackboard duty.'

'What?'

'For the whole week.'

'What?'

'New Girl is on blackboard duty, New Girl is on blackboard duty.' Chanting.

'Girls!' Herr Bayer shouted. 'Now, New Girl, sit down and take out your pencil.'

'Anna,' I said as I took my seat.

'Excuse me?'

'Anna Peters is my name. Not New Girl.'

He handed me the test and said, 'Blackboard duty, Anna Peters.'

I shouldn't have worried about the test. It was easy. I felt confident in most of my answers and I wrote them down quickly but neatly. I checked my answers over and let my gaze travel, towards the window. As in the dining room, the window was barred. I hadn't noticed them when I'd first walked in. Who were these bars protecting? I imagine Uhlig would claim that the bars were meant to protect us from ourselves. But they were also there to keep us trapped inside. To protect the outside world from us. And if there was no way out, the only way to survive would be compliance.

Beyond the bars I saw the edge of the river Elbe. I remembered from geography lessons that it stretched from its source in the Czech Republic all the way to the North Sea. And then I remembered Knut and I let my mind drift back to that other life.

The corner of Wodenstrasse, after an FDJ meeting. Both in our blue shirts with the yellow emblem. It was hot. I remembered that. Even though it was late, it was hot

and the air was stagnant. My shirt clung to my body, wet patches under my arms. I looked at Knut, holding up his bike between us, and saw the beads of sweat on his forehead. He wiped it with the back of his hand.

‘I’m melting,’ he said.

‘Tell me about it.’

‘I don’t sleep when it’s this hot. My room gets too stuffy.’

‘What do you do all night?’

‘Lie there and think about stuff.’

‘What stuff?’

‘You know, the kind of stuff you think about when you’re alone. The kind of stuff you think about when nobody’s listening.’

‘Like what?’ Sometimes, he was so secretive. I looked at him but he was busy looking at his shoes. There was hardly anybody out on the streets, a few stragglers in their FDJ uniforms who obviously didn’t want to go home. Even though we were in the middle of the city there were hardly any sounds. A few revving engines, the underground rattling somewhere far away, but not much else. I rolled up my sleeves, not neatly, like when you fold one bit of sleeve and the next, but roughly. The warm air stroked my arm. Knut was still looking at his shoes. I reached over to his bike and rang the bell.

‘What are you doing?’ he said.

‘What stuff?’ I asked.

‘Like what I should have for breakfast.’

I laughed.

He shook his head. ‘It’s true. I know you expect some profound answer. You always do. But all I do is think about my next meal.’

‘And what do you really think about?’

‘How far I could go on my bike.’

I laughed again. ‘You don’t even like your bike.’

‘I know, it makes this squeaking sound when I ride it. Why, Anna. Why?’

‘Oil!’

‘You think?’

‘Idiot.’

‘Charming.’

‘What else?’

‘Promise you won’t laugh?’

‘I always laugh at you. That’s kind of my thing.’

‘Fine.’

‘You won’t tell me?’

‘I will but I need to prepare myself for your reaction.’

‘I won’t laugh for at least five seconds after you said it.’

‘So generous.’

‘The Party spirit is rubbing off on me.’

‘I lie there and I wonder...’ he paused. ‘You know how Stravinsky and Bach and all those guys were such gifted musicians. How they created this oeuvre—’

‘Oeuvre?’ I mocked his choice of words. ‘You’re so pretentious.’

‘It’s a great word. Oeuvre. Say it with me.’ He motioned for me to say it with him.

‘Never. This will never happen.’

‘You don’t know what you’re missing.’

‘Carry on.’

‘Anyway, I guess what I think about is... Will I ever be good enough? Will I leave such a legacy of great work? Am I worthy?’

I looked at him. I counted to five in my head and started to laugh. ‘Knut. Seriously. I thought you might think about the world, the state of politics or about that blonde girl in the year above us. But no. You think about yourself.’ I pushed his bike over. ‘There. Something real to think about.’ And we laughed. We laughed so hard that the stragglers turned around to look at us, wondering what was wrong with us. It felt good to laugh like that. It felt like nothing else mattered, except our friendship. Had Knut kissed me that night because he thought that was what I wanted? What was expected? Why did he have to complicate things?

Something hit the back of my head and clattered to the floor. A blackboard duster, a puff of chalk dust rising silently from it. And just like that, I was back in the classroom with the bars on the windows. With my shaved head and my aching bones.

I was glad when the lesson finally ended. As the girls lined up to leave the room and take their supervised break, I saw one of them pocket a small cartridge of ink. I went about my duty, cleaning the blackboard, ignoring what I’d seen. One by one, the girls passed me until someone grabbed my arm. I spun round, absolutely ready to stand up for myself, and came face-to-face with Christa. She was wearing a weird expression. Somewhere between happiness and hatred. But what I saw in her eyes was more important.

‘Anna Peters,’ she said, so quickly I couldn’t be sure she actually said it.

Recognition. She’d finally recognised me.

Chapter 22

All I wanted to do was speak to Christa. But there was no opportunity. I had gone from three days in solitary confinement to continuous company. But it wasn't good company. It was oppressive. Controlling. Everything was done as a collective, supervised by Uhlig or another of the minders. They didn't like it when the girls chatted. I saw Uhlig giving two girls, the one who'd slammed into me in the yard and another, more fragile looking girl, a warning with her baton. All they'd done was talk quietly. Not that I cared what happened to them after what they did to me this morning. They could rot in hell for all I cared.

'Toilet,' Uhlig said and rounded us up.

The girls marched down the hall. I followed, even though I didn't need to go. When we arrived at the facilities, the stench made my eyes water. There was black mould in the corner of the room, damp climbing the walls.

'Line up,' Uhlig commanded.

The girls formed an orderly queue. Robot Girl was second in line, standing straighter and more still than anyone else. Uhlig passed her, swung her wooden baton at her and carried on. No reaction from Robot Girl. She remained perfectly still.

Uhlig gave each girl ten seconds, and if she was not out of the cubicle in that time, she would come in and drag her out. If I hadn't needed to go before, I really didn't need to go now.

'Next,' Uhlig said, looking at me.

'Oh, it's OK. I don't need to go,' I said and stepped to the side.

'You don't decide,' Uhlig said, pointing at the empty cubicle.

I did as I was told. She started to count. That made me hurry and I managed to push a few drops out. But what if I needed to go when there wasn't a scheduled break?

'Nine!' shouted Uhlig.

I pulled up my pants. Uhlig went for me as soon as I was out of the cubicle, swinging her keys until they hit my cheek.

'Don't stare,' she said, smoothing her parting. I wanted to rip that pin out of her hair so badly I had to put my hands in my pockets. 'Line up,' she said, smiling.

'Sorry,' I said, walking backwards. I couldn't bring myself to look at anyone. Instead, I focussed on the taupe tiles, the grouting, the cracks, the dirty footprints. Nothing else. Not the smell of stale sweat that wafted off my body, nor the stench of dried vomit. I simply stared at the floor.

'Hurry up!' Uhlig commanded.

I still couldn't look up, too afraid to make another mistake. And then I felt the light brush of fingers against the back of my hand. It was the lightest of sensations, the smallest gesture, and I felt the tension drop from my shoulders. I glanced up, quickly. It was Christa.

'Time for work!' Uhlig shouted.

The entire line set into motion. We marched from the toilets, along the corridor until we reached an iron door. Keys. Lock. Corridor. Iron door. Repeat. Down two flights of stairs and outside again. The cold air consoled me, kissed my bruised face. Snow was still falling. The flakes landed on my forehead. I wanted to catch them with my hands but I stopped myself. That would get me into trouble. We crossed the courtyard. In the sky above I saw a grey heron, flying high, then diving down, out of sight.

We were shown into another low building. The noise inside was deafening. The sound of drills and hammers. We had arrived at metal-assembly. The fumes reached my nose and smoked out my lungs. This was a different type of work all together. This was what they called productive labour. Uhlig rattled off a load of names to what I assumed to be the overseer. He looked at the list and then counted us from a distance. A nod confirmed everything seemed to be in order. All present and correct. The machines made a real racket. It sounded as if a lawnmower and a chainsaw were having a fight. Constant revving. Insistent hammering. I felt a headache coming on. Not that anybody cared. I was a cog in the state machine.

The overseer proceeded to divide up the jobs. I waited, patiently. I was sure there would be some sort of induction since I had never worked in this way before. I had never even held a tool other than a paintbrush and I was certain that didn't count.

'Name?' he said, as he approached me.

'Anna Peters,' I said.

'You're on welding,' he said and pointed at a large work station in the middle of the hall. 'Tools and goggles are over there.'

I nodded and went to where he'd pointed. The rest of the girls had dispersed in different directions, all working on various jobs. I had no idea how to weld or what it even was exactly, but I also wasn't keen on finding out what asking a question would bag me here, surrounded by sharp tools and steaming machines.

When I reached my station, I pulled a boiler suit off one of the hooks and put it on. I grabbed a pair of goggles and put them around my neck. Sparks flew. The mechanical sounds were repetitive, dulling even. On the table in front of me were containers with copper pipes. To my left, the girl next to me was welding the pipes together by using a propane torch. It looked a little like the Bunsen burner I'd used in

my science classes. I copied the girl next to me as best as I could. It was a good job I wasn't scared of fire. The noise persisted but I could feel myself getting used to it.

'Not like that,' said a girl to my right. 'They'll take that out of your wages.' Christa. She looked tired.

'Christa—' I started.

Christa continued to move the pieces of pipe into place and put the torch back into my hand.

'Try again,' she said. 'You need to make sure it's all fused together. No gaps.'

'I don't care about the pipes.'

'Not here. It's not safe.'

'When?'

'Tonight. You're being transferred to the dorm. It'll be safer then.'

Chapter 23

The dormitory was unlocked at 2030H. I'd been allocated the bottom bunk, which I didn't mind. The room was pitch black but for a wedge of light that got in through the window, high above. I lay still, feeling every one of my muscles sink into the lumpy mattress. I didn't care that it was lumpy – it was better than the wooden bench I'd been sleeping on for the last few nights. Everything hurt, from my cheeks to the soles of my feet.

Light went out at 2100H, just as Franken had said. Under the cover of darkness, some careful whispering started to spread through the room. I let it wash over me. White noise. I heard the squeaking of rusty springs on the other side of the room. Someone was climbing down the ladder of their bunkbed. They slipped, soft-footed, across the linoleum. Bare soles on the ground. They stopped in front of my bed.

'Move,' Christa whispered.

I slid across to the far side of the bed and Christa got in next to me. I turned onto my side so I could see her. Our faces were so close together, my nose almost touched hers.

'Christa,' I whispered, hot tears running down my face.

'It's OK,' she said. 'Everything'll be OK.'

I wanted to believe her. 'How?'

'You'll be out of here in three months.' Her voice was so quiet.

'I will?'

'Yes.'

'How?'

'You'll reform.' She sighed. 'What happened?'

'I followed a trail of potatoes.'

She smiled. I stared into her eyes. They were just like Knut's, deep and still.

'Did they trick you?'

'I don't know anymore.'

She brushed her fingers against my cheek.

'I thought someone needed my help.'

'Who?'

'Lydia.'

'Lydia who?'

'Rosa's friend.'

She paused. 'How's my brother?'

'Doesn't he write?'

'No.' Her eyes half shut then.

I wanted to tell her how mad he made me sometimes. How he never listened to me. How he replaced me with Rosa but had then seen the error of his ways. How I loved dancing with him on New Year's Eve. How he kissed me and how I wasn't sure if I'd liked it or not. How he always made me laugh. How really, in the scheme of things, he was my best friend. How I missed him. But I didn't say any of these things.

'Music,' I said. 'He hates it when I don't like the same composers he likes.' It felt good to share though. Remembering Knut made him real. 'He played at the Christmas recital. You can feel what he feels when he plays.'

Christa's eyes filled with tears but that was where they stayed. I wondered if she'd allowed herself to ever think about what her life would have been like if she hadn't been selected to go to the Sportschule. If she'd been allowed to be a normal child who enjoyed swimming. 'I never hear from them anymore.'

Christa's tired face told a story and I realised suddenly that, where I'd been subjected to this kind of terror for only the last few days, Christa had been in and out of institutions for most of her life. I felt alone; she probably felt abandoned.

'Do you remember when you took us to the outdoor pool?' I asked.

A long pause. 'My memory's not as good as it used to be.'

'You told us if we jumped into the pool, we'd die?'

'I don't remember.'

'Knut talks about you.'

'He does?'

'Yes. Not often but he does.'

'What's it like, out there?'

'It's—' I didn't know what to say. 'Christmas was nice. Your mother gave us some Stollen. And real coffee. Mutti was especially excited about the coffee.'

'What else?'

'Your mother told Mutti that Christmas was hard because you weren't there.'

'She did?'

'Yes, she did.'

'I wrote them a card this year. Did she say anything about that?'

I thought for a second, then remembered about her father not wanting to read it.

'Your mother said it made her Christmas.'

Christa smiled at that. 'What else?'

'Mutti got me a locket for Christmas. With a picture of her and my father inside it. But they took it.'

'We'll get it back.'

'We?'

'Yes.'

'How long have you been here?'

'I stopped counting the days.'

'More than three months?'

'Probably.'

'Franken said they'd keep me for three months.'

'Franken's not to be trusted. Watch out around him.'

'What do you mean?'

'Sometimes he sends for one of the girls at night. And if you step out of line, they'll send you to the fox den.'

'What's that?'

'A hole in the wall that's so small, you can just about stand up in it and nothing else.'

'Like a coffin?'

'Like a stand-up coffin in the walls, yes.'

Before I could reply, there was the sound of keys from the corridor outside the dormitory. Christa jumped out of my bed and ran across to hers. I saw her throw her blanket over her body as the door opened.

Heavy footsteps thudded across the room. A torch searched the beds. It settled on my bunk. Then it moved to the bunk next to mine where Robot Girl was sleeping. Someone approached and pulled her out of bed. She didn't say a word, drifting on the arm of the minder through the dorm.

I lay there, concentrating on the thudding pain spreading across my forehead. A snapshot of something flashed before me. I was young, maybe four? I remembered

going to the park with my father, what it felt like to hold his hand – my little hand, holding onto his finger. Tight. I pulled his finger, wanting his attention.

‘Liebling?’ he’d said. ‘What is it?’

I couldn’t see his face properly because the sun was in my eyes. I squinted, smelling wet earth, after a heavy downpour. It must have been summer or maybe spring. I pointed at the kite in his other hand. ‘Is it windy enough?’ I’d asked.

‘Let’s see, shall we?’ He let go of my hand and put his finger into his mouth. Then he held it up in the air, inviting me to do the same. I licked my finger and up it went.

‘Can you feel anything?’

‘Windy,’ I’d said.

Chapter 24

Ramona started talking to me while we dug holes on the edge of the estate. The ground was solid but that didn't seem to matter much. If anything, the harder the task at hand, the more character building it was. We were surrounded by a high concrete wall and it was impossible to see much but the sky, with the odd cloud or passing plane. We were fenced in. Wall on one side, building on the other.

Uhlig and one of the other minders patrolled the area, walking circles around us, flasks of hot drinks in hand, scarves and hats wrapped around them. We could only dream of such luxuries.

'Don't let them catch us,' Ramona said.

'But we're talking about the holes.'

'We are?'

'I mean, is this deep enough?' I said, pointing towards the shallow dent I'd made.

'No,' she laughed.

'How long have you been here?'

'You mean right here?' She pointed to where she stood.

'No, in Torgau.'

'Too many three-month sentences.'

'What do you mean?'

She let out a sigh then. 'I mean, they've been telling me three months for a while now.'

'Can they do that?'

'Who's going to stop them?' she said.

I looked at her then and noticed the bruises on her lower arms, the way the purple had faded to a brownish green. Like overcooked sprouts. I studied her face, what I

could see of it. Her skin was pale and there was a scar just above her temple. She noticed me staring at her and met my gaze.

‘Nobody,’ I said eventually. That seemed to satisfy her.

‘I used to be quite handy with a shovel,’ Ramona started. ‘There’s this bit of land near our flat in Dresden. A little square, with grass growing on it, and weeds.’

‘I know the kind,’ I said. Cities were full of them.

‘One day I thought, what would happen if I just planted a potato in the ground?’

‘A potato?’ I was embarrassed to admit to myself that the mention of this particular root vegetable sent shudders down my spine.

‘Because you don’t need a seed. All you need is one potato.’

‘And then?’

Ramona continued to scrape the hard ground with her shovel. I could see her jaw tense as she dug the tool into the ground. She hardly pierced the surface. Yet, she didn’t stop.

‘And then,’ she continued, ‘they grew. I couldn’t believe I’d actually grown something.’

‘They were edible?’

‘They fed my family and the family next door. They were so floury, they tasted amazing roasted.’ She stopped digging then and looked at me. ‘You know, really crispy on the outside and fluffy on the inside?’ A smile.

My mouth was watering. ‘With a fried egg on the side?’

‘And the best thing was my little sister’s face when we dug them up.’

I wanted to tell her about my recent experience with potatoes. How some psychopath had planted one in my attic and made me bring potato salad to the New Year’s Eve party. I also wanted to tell her that her story had done something else. It

had reminded me that there had been a life before all this, before Torgau. And it might mean there could also be a life after Torgau. It might mean that all this would one day pass.

We only had lessons once a week, on Wednesdays. On the rest of the days, they found other things for us to do. One day, they had us paint the corridors. Ten of us, all painting the same wall, stretched out across the length of the corridor. A fresh coat of concrete grey. I never thought I'd long for a sight of that awful pastel green. But I did.

This was not unsupervised, of course. Uhlig prowled up and down the corridor, her baton gripped in her hand, her keys jangling on her belt. Up and down. Back and forth. I dipped the brush into the thick paint. Liquid depression. The wall was uneven and the lights overhead kept flickering on and off, which made painting even harder. The electrics in this place had to be dodgy.

I was quite focussed on what I was doing, when the girl next to me wrote something on the wall in paint.

Hallo. She quickly painted over it.

I recognised that handwriting instantly.

Human, I wrote quickly, before painting over it.

Yes!

Thank you, I wrote.

She smiled at me. Simone, she mouthed.

Anna.

Now that we'd established we wanted to communicate, we whispered whenever Uhlig was at the other end of the corridor. Her footsteps echoed whenever she was walking, which made it easier to judge her whereabouts.

'Why're you here?' she asked.

'Fancied a holiday,' I said.

She smiled. 'Me too.'

'Isn't it lovely?'

'Seasonal bliss.'

'Margot's recommendation,' I said.

'She's full of great ideas.'

'How long did they give you?'

'Three months. You?' Simone asked.

'Same. How much longer?'

'Two weeks until my review,' Simone said.

I wanted to ask her about what Ramona had told me. About the never-ending three months. But I couldn't bring myself to hear it confirmed.

Uhlig's footsteps came closer. We paused our hushed conversation and concentrated on the walls. Everywhere I was, there were walls. I was sick of staring at them. I heard Uhlig turn on her heel, walking straight back towards the other iron door, patrolling her stretch. I wondered what she'd been in another life. Had she always been like this?

'What's it like out there?' Simone asked.

'Everyone's asking that,' I said.

'Tell me.'

'Change is in the air,' I said. 'You can feel it.'

'Really?'

'Margot wouldn't like it.'

It was strange having a conversation without looking at the other person. Not just strange; it felt rude. But here it was the only way to talk. Simone and I looked straight ahead, at the wall, and continued our duties. If it looked like we were working, we were less likely to be found out.

'I do want to get out of here though,' I said.

'Me too.'

'You reformed?' I asked.

'I used to get really angry. Now I don't care anymore.'

'You're calm now?'

'Indifferent,' she said. 'Good enough, I hope.'

'Why did you write on the wall?'

'I wanted to talk to you.'

'No, I mean in the isolation room,' I said.

'Because it's easy to forget.'

I nodded.

She dared to look at me. 'Don't ever let them do that to you.'

'I won't,' I said. 'I promise.'

Uhlig approached. She stopped right behind us. I felt her baton digging into my back. 'Hurry up,' she said. 'There are plenty more corridors.' She carried on walking until she reached Robot Girl. Without any warning, Uhlig lifted her baton and brought it down hard on the girl's back.

'Who's that?' I whispered.

'The girl Uhlig hit?'

'Yeah. Who's she?'

'Nina,' Simone said quickly, dipping her paintbrush into the bucket.

Nina. That name fit her, somehow. There were more things I needed to ask while I could. One thing in particular was playing on my mind and it had been since it'd happened.

'Why did you push me?' I asked.

'Group correction,' Simone said.

'What?'

'If we don't discipline you, they will. It's better now than it was.'

'It was still pretty bad.'

'They used to get you in your sleep.'

'Your own group?'

'Yes. It was horrible.'

'And do what?'

'You don't want to know.'

'And now?'

'The ringleaders left. Christa took over. It's been better since.'

'They were released?'

'Sent to prison.'

This blew my mind. So Franken hadn't lied to me. I could still end up in prison if I fought reformation. It was hard to imagine how prison could be worse though.

Uhlig's footsteps echoed closer and we paused again. I stared at the pot of thick liquid depression, the brushstrokes on the wall, the rough surface. Simone had almost made it. She was as good as out. Two weeks left. If she could do it, surely I could too? If I kept my head down and did as I was told, if I became invisible, I

should be out in three months. I wrote *Margot's a degenerate* and quickly painted over it. It'd still be there, under the paint.

'No you did not!' Uhlig shouted.

I straightened my back, ready for the blow. But it never came. I turned to my left. Uhlig was standing behind the girl who'd been sleeping in the bunk opposite me. She grabbed the girl by her shoulders and shook her hard.

'You little bitch!' she shouted

'What's happening?' I whispered to Simone. We stood in line, none of us moving an inch. 'What did she do?' There was a surge of elated whispers, some girls were brave enough to call out her name: Julia. But nobody moved. We stood there, holding onto our paintbrushes, waiting.

'I think she drank paint thinner,' Simone said.

'She what?'

Simone turned to the girl on her other side. 'Gerda, what shall we do?'

'What can we do?' Gerda said. 'We can't help her.'

'Shit.' Christa's voice.

I didn't know what to do but couldn't believe my eyes when I saw that Nina carried on painting the wall.

Uhlig called for reinforcements and they arrived a few seconds later. Two men with a stretcher scooped Julia up. 'Hurry,' Uhlig said. She'd messed up big time. Too busy marching up and down, not paying proper attention to what we were doing at all.

The two men passed us. I locked eyes with Julia. I didn't know if I'd see her again.

'What are you staring at?' Uhlig. There was rage in her voice. 'Get back to work.'

And so we did.

In our dorm, after lights out, Christa introduced me to the other girls. It felt strangely formal, sitting around my bunk, shaking hands. I already knew Simone and Ramona, and there was Gerda, Nina and Katja, but I couldn't remember every name. We sat there, huddled together. I strained my ears, listening for footsteps, or the rattling of keys. Conversation was conducted only in whispers.

'Julia's in a bad way,' Christa said.

'I was next to her,' Nina said. Her fair skin almost illuminated the room. It looked so delicate, as if it was made out of tissue paper.

'What happened?' Simone asked. Her voice was coarse.

'She took a sip of paint thinner every time Uhlig turned on her heel,' Nina said.

'And you let her?' Gerda said.

'Don't raise your voice,' Christa warned.

'Sorry,' Gerda said. 'I'm sorry, Nina. Why didn't you stop her?'

'It was her choice,' Nina said, looking at me.

'I wouldn't call it a choice,' I said.

'You're just worried for yourselves,' Christa said.

'How do you mean?' I asked.

'Julia took most of the grief,' Ramona said.

'Why's she here?' I asked.

'Stopped attending school. Kept running away from home. Hiding in sheds. Stuff like that,' Ramona said.

'And they gave her three more months for that?' I couldn't believe it.

'If she's lucky, she'll get to leave sooner,' Nina said. We all knew what she meant.

'Let's do something to celebrate her,' Christa said and looked at me.

'Celebrate?' Katja said. 'We can't exactly throw a party.'

'No, but we can mark her act of rebellion in other ways,' Christa whispered.

'How?' Katja asked. Her thin lips almost disappeared.

'Who's got a safety pin?' Christa asked.

Simone and Ramona raised their hands.

'Ink?' Christa said.

Gerda nodded. 'I took some ink from Bayer's room.'

'Let's get tattoos.'

'That's against the rules,' Katja said.

I loved the idea. It was just the right kind of transgression. The kind that actually meant something. 'Who's in?' I asked, raising my hand.

Chapter 25

Days turned into weeks. Some girls received letters from home but I didn't, and it was as if someone stabbed me all over with tiny needles. The letters always arrived opened. Privacy, it seemed, was a privilege none of us deserved. More often than not, letters were heavily redacted. Gerda had a letter from her mother and all she could read was something about the weather and a great Party meeting. The rest had been blacked-out. At least, and this was what Gerda said, at least it was reassuring to know that it had been sunny in Leipzig. That was something that would help her get through the night. Nina on the other hand didn't offer much. I'd become preoccupied with observing her – her smooth, well-rehearsed movements, her vacant eyes and absentmindedness. The way she took the unprovoked beatings, the way she seemed so numb. I had never met anyone like that before. She felt like a haunting to me.

It was the day of Simone's review. It had been postponed so many times that her anger returned. She didn't feel indifferent anymore. She felt frustrated. Christa and I were on welding duties, next to each other. It was easier to talk to her because of all of the noise. We still had to be careful though. There were eyes and ears everywhere. I had noticed that, like me, Christa never received any mail. How, like me, she had to feel forgotten.

'I'll miss Simone,' I said.

'If she gets out,' Christa said.

'Why wouldn't she?'

'I don't know.'

'Why's she here anyway?'

Christa picked up a copper pipe and fixed it into place. She then pick up another piece and held it in place with plyers. With her other hand, she turned on the torch and began to weld. The flame was orange and yellow, glowing against the industrial greys. She didn't look at me when she spoke. 'She didn't tell you?'

'No,' I said.

'They caught her with another girl.'

'Her parents?'

'No, her FDJ leader.'

'And he told on her?'

'Yeah.'

'What an idiot.'

'I know.'

'What about the other girl?'

'Came up with some bullshit, said Simone made her.'

I stared at the flame and the copper pipes. Time had passed slowly but yet it had passed. Rusty was nothing but a faint memory, as was my life before I arrived here. Here, there was no time to think. You moved from chore to chore, from meal to meal, from one set of corridors to the next. You were never alone, always under the watchful eye of Uhlig or some other minder. By lights out, you were so exhausted that you'd fall into a deep, dreamless sleep. Every now and then this routine was interspersed with some news, like the sun had shone in Leipzig, like Julia was hanging on for dear life, like one of the dogs guarding the grounds had puppies. And there were rumours. There were always rumours about the boys who occupied the next building. We never saw them, but they were there, living alongside us, parallel lives. They travelled through the same spaces as us, at different times. I had heard

of overlaps from the girls who had been here longer than me but I was yet to see them for myself. Apparently, they looked exactly like us. Grey clothes, shaved heads. Maybe broader. Maybe taller. Other than that, the same.

I recalled the rules, and how it was an offence to engage with the opposite sex in any way. How would you even go about it? You were always watched and if they didn't watch you, they locked you in. I had become so accustomed to stopping in front of doors, waiting for Uhlig to unlock them, I wouldn't even try to pull a door open anymore.

'Tell me about outside,' Christa said.

'What do you want to know?'

'The most exciting thing that happened to you.'

I didn't have to think for a long. 'The night Lydia asked me to join the movement.'

'The movement?'

'To bring about change.'

'But how?'

'There are ways and means.'

'What kind of ways?'

I turned around quickly to make sure nobody was listening. 'Cemetery in Pankow. The week before they took me, I found some drawings, a map, and a list of initials.'

Christa looked at me expectantly. It felt good to know something she didn't.

'There was something to do with a grave. A woman's grave. Maria Liedtke.'

'A grave?'

'They asked me about what I knew.'

'Stasi?'

'Yes. And Knut too.'

A heavy sigh. 'I understand. What did you do with the drawings?'

'I burned them.'

'Clever,' she said. 'You're a clever girl.'

It'd been a while since I'd been praised.

'That's probably when they started watching you,' Christa said.

'You think?'

'Or maybe they were watching all along.'

'But why? We didn't do anything wrong.'

'They watch everyone.'

'Everyone?'

'And they listen through your radio and pot plants.'

'The entire nation?'

'Yes, Anna. Maybe it was something you said in jest. It could've been anything.

They don't need much reason to put someone under surveillance.'

'But I don't matter.'

'But you do.'

'What about you?' I asked. 'What's the most exciting thing that ever happened to you?'

Christa didn't say anything for a while. Finally she spoke, 'I've been here so long. It's hard to say.' And with that, her attention moved from me onto the welding, onto her duties.

I did the same. Talking about what had been was always draining. Remembering the past implied imagining a future. And that was hard when you had no control or choices in the present.

It wasn't until the evening meal that I saw Simone. As we stood to attention behind our chairs, not looking left or right but down, towards the tiny footprints the birds had left, there was something different in the atmosphere. We were instructed to sit down. I dared to look and saw Uhlig and another minder whispering. Directly opposite me was Christa. Next to her sat Simone. I noticed some bruising on her face. Before I could look any closer, I had to tilt my gaze downwards. I couldn't risk being caught. It left me wondering what had happened but of course I couldn't ask. There was a strict no talking rule at mealtimes. All I could do was hope Simone had slipped. Not that she had been hit by Uhlig or Franken even.

The meal consisted of potatoes and some unidentifiable meat. It was dished out, followed by firm instructions to start eating immediately. The meat was so stringy, it kept getting stuck between my teeth. The potatoes had been boiled to within an inch of their lives and lost all flavour. It was hot at least. I chewed and chewed, all the while hoping Simone would stay. I knew this was selfish of me but her being here made it more bearable. I felt the same about the other girls.

'Stop.' This was Uhlig.

We put our cutlery down. We sat up straight and awaited further instructions.

'Before you go: it's my duty to inform you that Julia has passed.'

Silence. Absolute silence. Everything seemed far away. I felt for the bits of stringy meat between my teeth, for the bits of potatoes that had stuck to my gums. Julia was dead. I couldn't believe it. I couldn't believe someone I knew had actually died. I slid my fingers onto my hipbone and felt for the sore *J* we had decided on. *J for Julia. J for Justice.*

'It's your fault,' Gerda said. 'You killed her.' She pointed at Uhlig. 'Murderer.'

Not missing a beat, Uhlig and the other minder were on top of her and dragged her away from the table. They stood her up between them, restraining her.

‘Outside. All of you. Push-ups, squats, star jumps. In that order. And repeat. Until I tell you to stop,’ Uhlig said.

It was pitch black outside. They turned the floodlights on so they could see us but as soon as they’d flickered on, they went off again. ‘Bulb’s gone,’ someone said. Uhlig got her torch out and shone it in our faces. The air was cold, even though the days had gotten slightly warmer. We formed a wide circle. Uhlig pushed Gerda into the middle. Her face was swollen with rage; she reminded me of a bull in a ring, left to fight, without knowing why.

‘Demonstrate,’ Uhlig shouted from the side lines.

Gerda didn’t move at first but then thought better of it. She performed each of the exercises, one after the other. We joined her when she started again. We performed the sequence over and over. My muscles burned and my legs started to cramp. Every time I pushed myself up from the ground, small pieces of gravel dug into my palms. They felt raw. The food I’d eaten travelled upwards, waiting to come out. I jumped and, as I did, I tasted the chewed meat and squashed potatoes. I couldn’t hold it for long and spat it out. The bitter taste made me shudder. I wasn’t sure how long we’d been outside, how many times I squatted.

Later, in the dorm room, once the lights were out, we huddled together.

‘You’re lucky they didn’t throw you in the fox den for that,’ Christa whispered.

‘It was the truth,’ Gerda said. ‘Not saying it would’ve been a betrayal.’

‘You’re lucky Christa’s the leader,’ Ramona said.

‘The old group would’ve—’ Simone started.

'Leave it,' Christa said. 'Take it review didn't go well?'

'Franken gave me three more months.'

'Why?' I asked.

'Because he can,' Simone said.

Maybe it'd be different for me. I could only hope. 'I'm sorry,' I said.

'How did that happen?' Gerda asked, pointing at Simone's bruised cheek.

Nina's head turned slightly towards Simone but she remained silent.

'Franken got angry.'

'Why?' Christa.

'I read the paper.'

'So? It's all eastern propoganda. What does he care?' Ramona said.

'It wasn't. It was a western paper.'

'What did it say?' I said.

'People are marching for freedom.'

You could have heard a pin drop. Freedom marches.

My mind was alert. I lay on my back, my eyes closed, trying to steady my breathing, to finally fall asleep. Soft soles on lino, and before I knew what was happening, Christa had crawled into bed next to me.

'Can you believe it?'

'It's too good to be true,' I said.

'People want change,' she whispered. She was so close, I could feel her breath on my face. 'I want to get out of here.'

It was the first time I'd heard her say that. It was the first time I'd heard her say what she wanted. 'Me too. I miss Mutti,' I said.

'And your father?'

'I guess.'

'Why did he leave without you?'

Everything was far away. Christa's breathing. My breathing. My heartbeat. My pulse. Like all of that happened in another room. Like the sounds didn't belong to me or her. I stared at Christa.

'He left?'

She moved her mouth but nothing came out. Her eyes locked onto mine. I felt her panic. She was about to say something else when there were footsteps and the jangling of keys. She jumped up and sped across the room, up to her own bunk. I closed my eyes, heart hammering. My father. Christa knew something about my father.

Chapter 26

Morning. Nina lay in the bunk opposite, staring straight ahead. Her skin looked see-through, like tracing paper.

‘Hey,’ I said. ‘You OK?’

Nina didn’t move, she kept looking straight ahead. I wasn’t even sure she’d heard me.

‘Leave her,’ Gerda said from the top bunk.

‘Nina,’ I said, trying to reach out to her.

‘Anna,’ Gerda said, ‘leave her.’

‘What’s the matter with her?’ I said to Gerda.

Gerda climbed down the iron ladders; her face turned the other way. When she finally reached the ground, she spoke. ‘It’s this place.’

Before I had the chance to ask more questions, a familiar sound of keys interrupted the conversation.

‘Rise,’ Uhlig commanded. ‘Come on. Quickly. Line-up. Physical exercise, breakfast then straight to metal assembly.’

We formed a line quickly and we marched. We marched into the courtyard and we started on the laps. Thirty. Always thirty it seemed. Where was Christa? I searched the courtyard until I spotted her, near the front. If I wanted to speak to her, I needed to pick up my pace. The sense of urgency increased with my speed, I zigzagged across the dew-covered gravel. The threat of being disciplined didn’t bother me – what I needed were answers.

‘Christa,’ I said, as I approached from behind.

‘Not now,’ she said. ‘Uhlig’s watching.’

‘I don’t care.’

Christa sped up, leaving me behind. Desperate to close the gap between us, I ran even faster.

Christa glanced behind. 'Anna, leave it. Not now.'

'I need to know.'

'What?' she said.

'Is he alive?'

Something hit me from behind. Before I could turn around to see what it was, I felt it again. 'No talking.' Uhlig. Uhlig and her baton. She pulled me into the middle of the courtyard, while the other girls ran circles around us. 'Do not stop running,' she shouted. 'Disobedient little wretch.' She pushed me to the ground and hit me repeatedly. I held my hands in front of my face, feeling the impact of the wood on my knuckles.

'Stop,' I shouted. 'Stop, you monster!'

'Monster?'

'You monster!' I screamed.

Two minders appeared out of nowhere, as though my scream had summoned them somehow. They picked me up and dragged me away. 'Thought you could fight Uhlig? Fox den it is,' they said.

My feet scraped across the ground, as they dragged me away.

'Yes!' Christa's voice. 'Yes.'

I knew that was meant for me. My father was alive.

Eternal darkness. Was I still asleep? I willed myself to wake up, like in one of those dreams where you think you've woken up but are still asleep. My hand felt across cold concrete, my finger tracing along the mortar between the bricks. It was freezing.

Underneath me, damp concrete floor, the foundations of a basement. My leg wouldn't fully extend, a wall blocking it. This wasn't a dream. I wasn't dead. They'd taken me into the fox den. Opening my eyes, I waited for them to adjust but it was pointless. There was nothing to see here but the walls that trapped me. 'Help. Somebody help me,' I whispered. No reply, no sign, nothing. The smell of the damp earth helped. If I focussed, if I thought hard enough, I could take myself back to that day in the park.

'Don't let go,' he'd said.

I stared at the blue, diamond shaped kite in the air. Little red ribbons gracing its tail. It was beautiful. I held on to that piece of string so tight, it dug into my hand.

'Look how high,' I'd said.

'Almost dancing with the clouds,' he said.

'Dancing with clouds.' I laughed. In my excitement, I let go of the string and the kite flew away. 'My kite,' I cried.

He picked me up and stood me on my feet. 'Look.' He pointed to the sky. 'Look how happy the kite is.'

'Happy?' I remembered how whiny my voiced sounded.

'It's free.'

'Free?' I said.

'Now it can dance with the clouds.' He started dancing. 'And I can dance with you, Liebling.'

He bent down and held my hands, gently. I remembered the feel of his coarse skin on mine. 'Boogie-woogie,' he said, twisting his legs.

'Boogie-woogie,' I repeated, copying him.

But that was then. Now was different. I felt the material of my sweater. The rough inside leaving an imprint on my skin. How I wished for the soft wool of my midnight blue hat. The glossiness of my tights. I felt for my tattoo again; traced the *J* with my index finger, then with my middle finger. *J for Julia*. I repeated this under my breath. *J for Justice*.

My father was a coward. I was sure of it. Mutti was a liar and I'd rather die in this den than ever speak to her.

I couldn't bear to return to Mutti. For all I knew, she put me here. *Your mother signed the papers*. And my father was a stranger. Where was he? He could be anywhere. Flying a kite wasn't enough. Flying a blue kite was the last thing on my mind. I remembered the pieces of paper I found at the Schmidts' apartment. The paper with the initials on. I tried to picture that piece of paper. I could have sworn his initials were on it. And then I remembered another thing: that one line, written in pale pencil: *Strength lies in improvisation*. I saw it so clearly now, right in front of me. My father's handwriting. My father had written that. How could I've missed something so obvious?

These thoughts flew through my mind – not fully formed but fragmented. Sleep claimed me, washed over me and I recalled my life before all of this. How Knut and I used to make fun of the FDJ leader. How the FDJ leader had a crush on Margot. How we'd always sit in the back row at meetings. How heated our discussions got, especially about music. How I liked that song I couldn't remember the title of. How I made up this thing about distance-weight disorder. How Rosa seemed worried about it. Mutti. The sausages she made. The hat she got me. The thick wool and how that felt against my forehead. Knut. The man in the bookshop. The smell of old books.

The smell of Christmas trees. The softness of my bed. The door to my room. The lining of my coat. The hole. The telegram. How I loved jam sandwiches. How they made everything better.

I was lying in a puddle of my own urine. Where was Rusty? I heard noises outside the door. At this point I wasn't sure what was real and what was imagined. I didn't know how many days – if any – had passed. All I knew for sure was that I still wasn't dead, although it wasn't like I hadn't considered dying. I thought back to when I'd arrived at Torgau. That sentence on the wall – *I was born a human and I want to return a human!* – I really understood that now. There was this voice in my head and it repeated the same phrase over and over again: *Your mother's a liar, your father's a coward. Your mother's a liar, your father's a coward.* What did I have to live for? What kind of a human was I, with parents like that?

More noises outside my door. I turned my head slightly to face it, opening my eyes, just halfway, to see if there was actually something there. Slowly the door creaked open. A man peered in.

'Here, some water.' He passed me a plastic beaker. 'Drink.'

I shook my head. I didn't want it.

'Girl, drink it. You'll feel better.'

I shook my head.

'Don't be silly,' he said, 'have a sip.'

I reached out my hand, took the cup and poured the water next to me. 'There.'

He took the beaker and sighed. 'Don't give up.' He closed the door again.

Don't give up? What did he know about what it was like to be here? I felt my breathing slow down. Everything seemed far away, even the walls that trapped me. I

could barely feel my heart. It felt as if I was falling, through the concrete, down, down and further down. Would I ever hit the ground? These fragments kept drifting in and out as I fell. The letters. The notes. The initials. Why did I burn that paper? The interrogation. The cemetery. Maria Liedtke. Those dogs. Yellow cloth. Smoke. Stollen.

*

Regular beeping. Like the sound of a metal detector. Beep. Beep. Beep. A sharp smell of disinfectant. Voices. Far away but there were voices.

‘Anna.’

I’d heard that voice before.

‘Anna, are you awake?’

I tried to open my eyes but they were so heavy. Any attempt at speech was pointless; my throat was tight, as if it had been sewn up. I lifted my index finger instead and felt someone touching it.

‘Anna, can you open your eyes for me?’

The voice was kind. I wanted to open my eyes to see who it belonged to.

‘Come on, try for me.’

And I did half open them. Everything looked blurred but light. There was so much light here. It stung my eyes and I had to close them again. ‘The light.’

‘Anna, you are severely dehydrated. We’ve brought you in for medical assistance and put you on a drip. Try to sleep. You’ll be returned to your group once you’re back on your feet.’

‘How long?’

‘How long what, Anna?’

‘How long was I in there for?’ It hurt when I spoke.

'Two days.' A heavy sigh.

I opened my eyes and squinted. 'You brought me the water?'

He nodded but put his index finger on his lips, indicating that I shouldn't mention it.

'You didn't come here to die,' he said.

'I didn't?'

'None of you did.'

'Julia did.' My throat was so dry, like sandpaper.

'We couldn't save her,' he whispered and took a deep breath.

I sensed that there was something else. Something he wasn't telling me.

Something that would explain why I was still alive. 'Who else?'

Another sigh. 'He was brought to the boys' camp a couple of days ago. Put in solitary confinement. Hanged himself. Used the bars of his window.'

'Thank you,' I whispered. 'For saving me.'

I nodded off slowly and dreamt about Mutti and my father. We sat around the dining table, in the kitchen. I was only small. Maybe four. No older.

My father had turned on the radio.

'Want to dance?' he asked, holding out his arms.

I looked at Mutti, who smiled.

'Mutti too,' I said, laughing.

'Mutti too,' my father said, holding out his other hand to her.

'Boogie-woogie,' Mutti said.

'Boogie-woogie,' I screamed and jumped up.

And we danced, right there in the kitchen.

I woke up with a jolt. That was no dream. It was a memory. A memory of the last time I saw my father. The room was draped in darkness but for some light coming from the corridor. I let my eyes adjust and looked around the room until my gaze settled on a chair. I tried to focus my eyes on the chair when something moved. Was there someone there? A tiny red dot flashed, like the tip of a cigarette. No, not like the tip of a cigarette. The actual tip of a cigarette.

‘Who’s there?’ I asked, carefully.

‘Fräulein Peters, how’s that aunt of yours?’ a male voice.

I tried to sit up but I couldn’t. I was bolted down. ‘Who?’

‘Irma Heine?’ It was the Stasi man.

‘She’s not my aunt.’ I continued to struggle, inhaling the smoke he was blowing out.

‘Oh, yes. My mistake. Your friend’s aunt?’

‘Yes.’

‘Funny how you ended up in Torgau after all.’

‘You think?’ I didn’t think it was funny at all. In fact, I couldn’t remember laughing once since I got here.

‘Delightful. They haven’t broken your spirits yet?’ He took another drag from his cigarette, the tip lighting up. ‘Enjoyed making that potato salad?’

The bastard. ‘Why are you here?’

‘Now, now. I thought you’d be pleased to see an old friend?’

‘Haven’t you done enough?’

‘You lied to me. You knew exactly what that traitor Schmidt was up to.’ There was genuine disappointment in his voice. ‘Feeding me some cock and bull story about an aunt.’

'I didn't know.'

'And you continue to lie.'

'It's the truth.'

'The truth is that your friend betrayed you.'

'Knut?' A tonne of bricks crashed down on me.

He brought the cigarette to his mouth and took a long drag.

The uncertainty was unbearable. 'Knut betrayed me?'

He blew out a cloud of smoke. 'The girl.'

Rosa or Lydia. I knew it. I knew they weren't to be trusted.

'You knew about the Schmidts.'

'I didn't.'

'You were part of the movement.'

'I didn't do anything wrong,' I pleaded. 'You have to believe me.'

'Now there are demonstrations. Monday Marches. Chaos!'

He got out of his chair and approached my bed. He towered over me. Even in the dark I could see his pockmarked skin clearly. 'I'll make sure you never get out of here.' Then, he turned around and left. It was like he'd never been here apart from the trail of smoke he left behind.

Chapter 27

Weeks passed. I was exhausted. But that didn't matter to them. The second I was deemed to have 'recovered', they escorted me onto the worksite. The pipes wouldn't weld themselves. This was my life and I knew I'd never get out of here.

The girls looked up as I entered the hall and put on the boiler suit as I'd done all those weeks ago. I did everything I was told. I needed to preserve my energy to come up with a plan. I hadn't been here long enough to understand how it all worked, to understand who had access to what. But I knew, I knew as I moved to my workstation, that I had to escape this place in order to have a future.

Copper pipes in front of me. I picked them up and started welding, staring at the flame, at the sparks. Anything was better than darkness. I never wanted to go back there. I felt the questions in the room. I felt my group asking, 'Anna – how are you?' but they couldn't verbalise any of it. Not here, not now. Even if they had, what could I say? A pockmarked lunatic from the Stasi is blaming me personally for the Monday Marches? And Rosa. Rosa and Lydia betrayed me. They spied on me. And for what? To get rid of me so Knut would be their friend?

A bell rang and everyone put their tools down. Collective toilet break. We disappeared into the bathroom and as soon as we turned the corner, and the minder was out of earshot, the girls huddled around me, making me feel human. I mattered to them. We were this mass of hauntings, with no beginning and no end. We all ended up here because we'd done something wrong. But not really wrong. Wrong according to them. We were like that curl that you couldn't get straight – no matter how hard you pulled, it'd always spring back. Then, I saw Christa. The look on her face was one of relief. Her eyes still, looking at me intently.

'Anna, you're OK?' Christa hugged me. 'What did they do to you?'

'Fox den,' I said. 'Then, medical ward.' And then, worse. But I couldn't say that. Not here, not in front of everyone.

'Nobody would tell us anything.'

'And then we heard about a death,' Gerda said.

'And we thought it was you,' Christa said.

'You heard about the boy?' I asked.

'What would Margot say about that?' Simone said.

'That bitch is all about sacrificing youth for the greater good,' Ramona said.

'Two sacrifices made, twenty or so to go,' Simone said.

'They are on high alert now.' Christa.

'They are?' I said.

'Don't want any more of us to die.'

'It'd look bad on them,' Christa said.

'People would start to ask questions,' Ramona said.

'We've come up with a plan.'

My eyes went wide. 'Tell me.'

Christa looked around. 'Not here. Later. Tonight.' She held my face in her hands.

'I'm sorry.'

'It's not your fault. It's this place.'

'Still.'

I held her tight, only for a second, before Uhlig returned.

'Toilet break's over.' Then she looked at me. 'Peters – enjoyed the den?' Rage rose inside of me. I wanted to punch her. I wanted to scratch her eyes out and throw them to the dogs. I wanted to pick up the potato I'd found in my attic and shove it in her gob.

Chapter 28

The door locked. Everyone was in their beds. I was glad to be back in the dorm room, glad to have returned to the others. Within a few minutes, the soft sound of bare feet on linoleum filled the room. Whispering. Then, a puddle of girls around my bunk. Simone guarded the door, Christa sat on my bunk, next to me. Gerda had come down from her bunk and sat on the lower one, next to Nina. The others sat on the floor, between our two beds.

‘So you heard about the boy?’ Christa started.

‘Yes,’ I whispered.

‘We heard that he hanged himself from the bars in front of his window, using his trousers. Ripped them up or something. A minder only saw him because he looked through the spyhole. He opened the door and ran in to see if he could still be helped.’

‘So what we need to do is create a distraction for Uhlig, something that will make her come into the room at night.’

‘And then we tie her up, steal her keys and off we go,’ Christa said.

‘But we all have to be in on this,’ Gerda added, looking around. ‘It’s either all together or none at all.’

‘Wouldn’t they look for us?’ I said.

‘Not until the morning.’

‘What if they caught us?’

‘Fox den.’

I couldn’t do that again. But what was the alternative? To wait? ‘Where will we go?’

‘Prague.’

'Prague? I thought the Czechs were part of this? Why would they help us?'

'We heard rumours.'

'What kind of rumours?' I whispered.

'There's an embassy there. If you go and you say you are seeking refuge, they have to take you in.'

'Don't you have to be of age?' I asked.

'We will be next month,' Gerda said, pointing at herself and Simone.

'And I already am,' Christa said. 'And Ramona is too.'

I wasn't, but I'd passed for eighteen before. Maybe I'd get away with it?

'And then what? They take you in and then what?' I asked.

'There are rumours that they are thinking of organising trains. Trains, whole trains for people like us. Because we're not alone. There are others.'

'The Monday Marches,' I whispered.

'Others who've also had enough. People want to leave the Republic.'

'They're just allowed to leave? I mean why bother digging tunnels and forming resistance groups if you can just walk into the embassy and say put me on a train?' I said.

'Anna,' Christa whispered. She put her hand on my hand and looked at me. 'It's worth a try.'

'How long will it take to get there?' I asked, squeezing her arm with my other hand.

'It depends. If we walk all the way, three days. But only one day until we reach the border. Then it'll get easier.'

'And if we hitch a ride it'll be much quicker,' Gerda said.

'Won't it look strange? Nine of us, in grey tracksuits and shaved heads, walking through town?' I said.

'We thought about that too,' Christa said.

'When we get the keys off Uhlig, we can get our own clothes back,' Gerda said.

'They're locked away, next to the laundry room. We need the right key.'

I thought of my skirt and ripped tights.

'Why can't we just go home?' Katja said.

'We can never go home,' Christa said.

'If we go home, they'll find us,' Ramona said. 'And bring us back here.'

'Home,' Nina said. It was the first time she'd spoken. 'Some of us don't have a home.'

I looked at her. For a second, it was as if I could really see her: her freckles and blue eyes. There was a long pause and I understood. She couldn't go home because it was probably no better than being here.

'Why would you leave here? For what?' Katja said. 'I might get out in a couple of weeks.'

'Might,' Ramona said. 'Remember what happened to me?'

'And then?' Gerda said. 'Who'll employ you with Torgau on your CV?'

'No one,' I said, quietly.

Christa looked at them, considering her answer carefully. 'There's a whole world out there. It's not that black and white; it's not either Torgau or home. There are places in-between, places further away. We have choices. You can get a job in a welding factory and earn a little money, then move on,' she paused and looked around. 'And the best thing is, this, this here, never happened. You start again, as someone else. A new life.'

'A second chance,' Nina said slowly.

'Wouldn't they look for us?' Katja said.

'That's why we have to escape at night, to get a proper head start.'

'How will we lure Uhlig into the dorm? She only ever checks through the spyhole.

She's not stupid,' I said.

'She's also not afraid of us. So – if there was a reason – she would come running in.'

'But what reason could there be? It's not like we can get hold of that boy's body and string him up here, is it?' I whispered.

There was a long pause in the room.

'You can string me up.'

The voice came from straight across. It was deep and it was sincere. No frailty there.

Chapter 29

'I'll say it again: you can string me up,' Nina repeated.

'Nina, you're crazy,' Gerda said. 'I don't want you to die.'

'I don't want to die either,' Nina said. 'But I want to help.'

'We can think of something else,' Christa said. 'This is taking it too far.'

Nina shook her head. 'Don't you ever listen?' Nina said, looking at Gerda.

Gerda squeezed her hand, clinging on to it, like I used to do with Mutti, scared of getting lost.

'What do you mean?' I said.

Nina turned to me. 'I used to do gymnastics. I was pretty good.'

'And I used to swim,' said Christa. 'What's your point?'

'My upper body strength is incredible,' Nina said. 'I could easily dangle from a rope, making it look like I'm hanging by it.'

'Really?' Simone said.

'Piece of cake,' Nina said.

'So that's the plan then,' Christa said, smiling. 'All this time we've been in the company of a brilliant gymnast and we had no idea.'

'What about the guards?' I asked.

'There are no guards – only locks. Don't forget,' Christa said, deepening her voice, imitating Herr Franken, 'this is not a prison. We like to think of this as a rehabilitation facility.'

'Locks are cheaper than guards,' I said.

'And dogs are cheaper than guards, too,' Gerda said. We looked at her. The dogs, of course. How could we have forgotten about the dogs?

'How many?' Christa asked.

‘Didn’t one of them have puppies?’ Ramona said.

‘We should be able to find out how many dogs are guarding the courtyard,’ I said. ‘All it takes is for all of us to pay more attention to our surroundings.’ Everyone nodded. It was agreed: everyone was on dog-watch duty.

We didn’t know when, but we knew we wanted it to be sooner rather than later. The only advantage of waiting was that the weather might be on our side, that the nights wouldn’t be so cold.

We knew that it had to happen on a night Uhlig was on duty. She wasn’t scared of us and would come running in without calling for backup. She was small and would be easy to overpower. And it would be sweet to get revenge for all those times she hit me with that wooden baton of hers. I wanted to see the fear in her eyes as we tied her up and left her there. The shame.

We arrived at our maths lesson, having been marched through the concrete corridors. Single file, no talking, heads down. Never any talking in corridors. That was all I used to do in school, talk in corridors. About how bored I was in lessons. About that new song. About so-and-so’s new haircut. About the last FDJ meeting. About who fancied who. About kissing behind the gymnasium. About anything, as long as it involved talking.

‘Good morning,’ Herr Bayer said. ‘Please sit.’

We did as we were told, all in our allocated seats, on our allocated rows. I looked out of the window. In a place where everything was forbidden, the only thing you could do was daydream. So I did. I imagined myself out there, somewhere in the west. I let my mind visit Vati, let it fantasise about our first encounter after all this time. I felt a smile on my face.

'Anna?'

I looked up. Herr Bayer. 'Yes?'

'You know the answer?' He pointed at the board. There was an equation there. I glanced at it. It meant nothing to me.

'Zero?' I offered.

'Congratulations.'

How I hated that word. Congratulations got me here in the first place.

Herr Bayer added my answer to the board and explained, if only briefly, how I must have arrived there. It all seemed so simple. Then, he turned around and added a few more equations to the board. 'I'll give you 20 minutes to work these out. No cheating. And no talking. Ready?' He sounded enthusiastic as he walked back to his desk and sat behind it.

I started to copy the first equation into my book. I tried to write neatly, into the boxes, not outside of them. It was difficult because my handwriting was big. Mutti always commented on it. Mutti. I focussed my eyes on my book, pencil on white paper, the sound it made as it moved across the page. I took a deep breath when I smelled citrus. I looked up and there was Herr Bayer, peeling a satsuma. The smell filled the whole room. My mouth began to water. I stared at him as he absentmindedly put the first segment into his mouth. He looked up and caught me staring. A surge of embarrassment went through me and I looked away immediately. I didn't want him to think I was begging. I returned to the task in front of me when I heard footsteps. I shouldn't have stared. I should have just minded my own business. I didn't dare look up, instead I just wrote numbers and letters into my book, not caring if they were even right. The footsteps stopped. Right in front of my desk. I kept all my attention on the paper. I didn't so much as glance to my left. Herr Bayer

placed a segment of satsuma onto the centre of my work book. I looked up, quickly. But it was too late. Herr Bayer had already moved on and put another slice onto Gerda's desk and Nina's desk and Christa's desk. Until there was a piece of satsuma on everyone's desk.

When he returned to the front of the classroom he simply sat down and scribbled in his book. He didn't look at us. But he knew. He knew.

Chapter 30

Weeks went by and the days got longer, the temperatures increased. Even the welding was more bearable knowing that my life here would come to an end. Even though we hadn't had a chance to put the plan into action, Nina was in training for her moment on the rope. She seemed so confident about it all; I was impressed.

I put on my boiler suit, no questions asked, and made my way to the workstation. The metal clanging and industrial sounds had become familiar. I picked up a pipe and then another, fixing one into position and welded the other one on. The tricky bit was getting the angle right. I didn't actually care about doing a good job but, as I discovered the hard way, if you didn't do it right, you'd have to do it again. All my attention was on the pipe when something sharp hit me in the face. It really hurt. I dropped the welder and moved my hand across my face, to my eyebrow. Wet and warm. There was blood. I felt it run down my face.

'Shit,' Simone said, next to me. 'You're bleeding.'

Before I had chance to answer, one of the overseers grabbed me by the arm.

'Here, press that onto the cut,' she said. 'Go see the nurse, over there.' She pointed into the direction of the office. 'Stray piece of metal must have hit you. No big deal.'

'Yes,' I said and started walking along the aisles, past the other workers and towards the offices. I turned onto a corridor, the sounds were much fainter here. I kept pressing the tissue onto the wound but it was no use. It was soaked. Would I need stitches? Maybe I should go and get some toilet paper to stop the flow? I turned back on myself, quickly, and retraced my steps. There was a toilet here somewhere. I knew it was against the rules but there was nobody in sight. When I got there, I pushed the door open a crack. I looked through the gap. The coast was

clear. The first cubicle had plenty of paper and I grabbed some, pressing it against the cut. I shut the cubicle door and pulled down my boiler suit with my right hand. I sat on the toilet and peed. For the first time without everyone else around. For the first time, because I wanted to and not because I had to. The injury was almost worth it for this.

At the nurse's office, I lay on my back.

'Won't need stitches,' she reassured me. 'Just a plaster.'

'Yes,' I said, numbly.

'Let me clean the wound and you'll be good to go back.'

'To my duties.' I sounded robotic.

'Pipes won't weld themselves.'

She hovered over me, dabbing my brow with some soaked cotton wool. It stung. She must have noticed me pulling a face. 'Now, now. Surely that's not so bad.'

'No.'

She turned around and looked through a box. 'I'll be just a minute. These plasters are all too small.' She got up and was about to leave when she turned around to look at me. 'Don't you move.'

The second she left the room I sat up and looked around. What could I take? Was there anything worth taking? Would she notice? I searched the shelves for something useful, anything that might come in handy at any point. I saw a faded green and greyish cardboard package. Bandages. One metre long. Surely they would come in handy? There was a stack. I grabbed three packs and put them into the pocket of my boiler suit, ensuring there was minimal to no bulging. I returned to my seat, heart beating fast.

'Now then,' the nurse said as she returned. 'This will hurt much more when we have to rip it off.' She pressed the plaster down tight, so it covered the whole cut.

I smiled. 'Thank you.'

She looked at me, looked at my mouth. 'How did you chip that tooth?' she asked.

It had been a hot day. The middle of summer. It was so hot you could see the heat rising from the tarmac. I was out riding my bike with Knut. We'd chosen a long, quiet cul-de-sac by the cemetery. There was no traffic. Me and him, riding our bikes. I was eight. Maybe nine. We practised riding our bikes with only one hand, then no hands.

'Race me!' Knut shouted. He started to pedal as fast as he could, riding away from me.

'That's unfair,' I shouted after him, trying to catch up. 'Cheater! You're a big fat cheater!'

I wasn't going to take it though. I sped up, attempting to overtake him but he continued to block my way by going in wiggly lines. 'Out of my way.'

I tried to go to the left. But he swerved to cut me off. My front wheel smashed into his back wheel. I fell off my bike and skidded, face down, across the hot summer tarmac, skin on asphalt.

'Are you ok?' Knut asked as he rolled me onto my back. 'You're covered in blood.'

'I think I chipped a tooth,' I said, letting my tongue glide over my teeth.

I looked at the nurse. 'I don't remember.'

'You girls are all the same.' She shook her head. 'Now go and join the others. I don't want to see you back here. Understand?'

I nodded. I rose slowly and returned to the hall, to the mechanical sounds and the people in rows, welding and hammering. I had bandages. That had to count for something.

'How's the cut?' Simone asked.

'Worth it,' I said. 'Wait for me when we're done. I have to give you something.' I said to Simone and resumed my work. I wanted to tell Christa.

'Fine,' Simone said.

I finally spoke to Christa in the dorm. As the door was locked and the lights went out, I heard soft soles on the linoleum floor. This too had become familiar.

'Move over,' Christa whispered.

I did as I was told and moved all the way to the edge of the bed. 'Here,' I said.

Christa climbed in next to me, like she had done that first night. 'Look at that,' she said, tracing her index finger over my plaster. 'Looks nasty.'

'It's not so bad.'

'Brave.'

'I stole bandages from the nurse's office.'

'You did? How did you smuggle them out?'

'First in my boiler suit, then in my shoes and knickers. Simone took some too.'

'Can I see?'

'Under my mattress. We'll have to think of a better hiding place.'

Christa thought about that and nodded. 'Good thinking.'

'Do you think it'll work?'

'The escape?'

'Yes.'

'It has to,' Christa said.

'What do you want to do?' I asked.

'When we're out?'

'Yes.'

'To be like everyone else. I want to be happy,' Christa said.

'Doing what?'

'I don't know.' Christa went quiet. 'Teaching children how to swim. I'd be good at that.'

'Do you miss it?'

She let her eyes travel across my face. 'I miss how it used to feel. When I first started swimming, I felt so invincible and... safe.'

I nodded. I wanted to hear more.

Christa turned onto her back. 'I don't know, Anna. It's such a blur.'

'You can't remember?'

'I try to, sometimes. I see snippets. Like I'm watching a film. Not like I'm watching myself.'

'What do you see?'

She closed her eyes. 'Me in my swimming costume. Drinking juice, around a table with other girls. We were all wearing our costumes. Maybe just before we were going in? A doctor in his white gown.'

'Were you ill?' I interrupted.

'I don't think so. He went around the table and gave each of us an injection. Big needle. I don't remember anybody crying. Maybe we were used to it?'

'What kind of injection? A vaccine?'

'Vitamins, he'd said. To make us swim faster. He said, look what you are drinking right there, full of vitamin C? This is just like that juice but as an injection.' She sounded sleepy.

'Did it work?'

'Yeah – it felt like flying through the water.' Christa's eyes flicked open. She turned her head to face me. 'Enough about me. How about you. What do you want to do?' She closed her eyes at the end of the sentence.

'I want to find my father.'

'Hamburg's nice.'

'Hamburg?' I repeated.

'Send me a postcard.'

'What about Hamburg?'

Christa's eyes shot open. She stared at me.

'Christa – what on earth?'

'Shut up,' she said.

'Who told you?' I pressed.

'It doesn't matter.' Christa started to get up.

'Christa. Tell me.'

'No.'

'Tell me.' I raised my voice.

'Stasi,' she said quickly, quietly.

'Why were you talking to the Stasi?'

'Everyone's Stasi,' Christa said, trying to wave it off. 'Don't worry too much about it.' She started to turn and walk back to her own bed. The light from outside outlined her shape.

'Christa,' I said. I got up and followed her, putting my hand on her shoulder. 'Wait.'

'Quiet or Uhlig will come in,' Katja whispered.

'Mind your own business,' I said. Then to Christa, 'Who told you?'

'Anna, it doesn't matter.'

I held her by both shoulders now, staring at her. 'Who told you?'

Christa looked at me, blankly.

In an instant, I understood. *The girl betrayed you.* Not Rosa. Not Lydia. Christa had betrayed me. Christa had told them everything I'd told her in confidence. About Lydia. About Rosa. About the Schimdts. The tunnel. The movement.

'It was you.'

'What was me?'

'You shit,' I said.

'Don't be so dramatic.'

'I'm still here because of you!'

'You're still here because you deserve to be.'

'You let me believe Mutti didn't want me.'

'Maybe she's had enough of you.'

The floor opened up in front of me and I tumbled down, down, down.

'You shit.' My voice didn't sound like my own. Suddenly I could see myself, like a photograph.

Christa said, 'You don't understand.'

'I trusted you!' I pushed her. 'How could you?'

'Calm down, let me explain.'

But I didn't want to hear it. I slapped her, hard. To my surprise, she hit me right back. I grabbed hold of her shirt and ran towards the wall, slamming her into it. With

my other hand, I punched her repeatedly. She gave as good as she got and I could feel the cut under my plaster throbbing.

'Stop it,' she said. 'Stop it.'

'You're dead to me.'

The girls were out of bed. Before I knew it, they were trying to get me off Christa, pulling me by my shoulders, by my shirt. 'Anna, please, stop.'

'I hate you,' I said.

'They made me choose!'

'And you chose yourself.'

'No!'

'Traitor!'

'It was you or Knut.'

'Don't bring him into this.'

'My parents. I'm already in here. Imagine both of us in here.'

'What about my mother?'

The sound of the door unlocking. The lights being switched on. Footsteps. 'What on earth is going on?' Uhlig.

'Nothing,' Gerda said quickly. 'A disagreement.'

'To bed, at once,' Uhlig said, using her baton to reinstate order. 'You two, you stop at once.' Uhlig lined Christa and me up next to the window. 'I don't care who started it. All I care about is who's going to finish it.'

'What?' I said.

'What have I told you about questions?' Her baton hit me across the face. I looked at her, surprised. 'Now, who's going to finish this? Fight until one's unconscious.'

Christa didn't look at me. Instead, she jumped on Uhlig and punched her in the face. Uhlig, looked as surprised as me, but didn't waste any time. She grabbed Christa by the throat with one hand, squeezed and squeezed and hit her repeatedly over the head with her baton.

Nobody moved. I didn't dare breathe.

Christa inhaled deeply, blood running down her face. 'Bandages,' she managed.

'What?' Uhlig said.

I darted to my bed, lifting the mattress and pulled out the bandages, ripping open the packaging. 'Quick,' I whispered to Gerda and Nina. 'Quick.' I looked around the room to see if there was anything we could use to whack Uhlig over the head with. There was nothing. 'Now,' I said. The girls looked at me, rising from their beds. Together, we pulled Uhlig off Christa. Together, we pried the baton out of her hand. Her grip on it was so tight, we had to pull finger by finger away from the handle.

'Stop it,' Uhlig cried out. 'I'll throw you all into the fox den. See how you cope.'

Christa waved the baton around. 'Your turn,' she said to me. 'Hit her hard. In the temple. That'll knock her out.'

I took the baton and felt it in my hand. I did exactly as Christa said. I looked Uhlig in the eyes, as I struck the blow.

Ramona felt her pulse. 'Not dead.' She felt around her uniform until she found a big bunch of keys. She rattled them about. The sound of freedom.

We moved her to the far corner of the room and tied her up, using the dressings. We tied her to the radiator and the bars by the windows, away from the spyhole.

'What if she screams?' Gerda said.

'Put a sock in her mouth,' Christa said.

'A dirty sock,' I added.

I looked at Uhlig's immaculate parting. I stepped forward, looking down on her, and pulled my grip out of her hair.

'That's mine,' I said, and put it in my pocket.

We worked quickly, methodically, as though we had planned everything meticulously. We got dressed quickly and made our beds. We locked the door, from the outside.

Chapter 31

If there was one thing we were good at, it was running through corridors. Without switching the lights on, we ran, quietly, through the hallways until we reached a door. I tried to push it open but of course it was locked. I turned around to look at Christa, who carried Uhlig's keys. Making her the prime instigator of our escape felt like a good insurance policy. If we got caught, we could blame it on her.

Christa looked through the keys. It didn't take her long to find the right one. 'This should do it,' she said, turning the key in the lock. She pushed the door and it opened.

Once we were all through, Christa locked the door. Uhlig had become such an über-monster in our imaginations, we didn't want to take any risks. What if she woke up, chewed through the bandages, managed to pick the lock with her fingernail and then caught up with us because we didn't lock the corridor door behind us? Unlikely but not impossible.

We ran down the stairs. One flight, then another until we reached the ground floor.

'Laundry room,' Christa whispered. 'Then we get changed.'

There was another door, locked of course, and Christa worked fast to find the correct key. We stood, single file, pressed against the wall. None of us spoke. All that was heard was the sound of the keys. Keys clanging against each other, keys in locks, keys turning or not turning. My heart hammered against my chest and I could feel my pulse in my ears. This corridor too was dark but our eyes had adjusted by now and I could see Christa in front of me. I craned my neck, quickly, to see who was behind me. Gerda. I took her hand and squeezed it. It was clammy.

'What's taking so long?' I asked Christa.

'It's always the last key,' she said.

'It better be.'

'If this doesn't fit—'

'Don't even think about it,' I cut her off.

Christa put the key into the lock. It fit. 'Oh thank god,' she said.

A wave of relief went through us all and by the time it arrived at the end of the line, we'd safely made it through the door. Again, Christa was careful to lock it behind us.

We ran along the corridor, silently, until we reached the room with our clothes.

Christa was getting better at finding the right keys. In no time, she'd unlocked the door and we'd slid in, like quicksand. We didn't turn any lights on. But there was enough light from outside. From the moon. From the streetlights. Plastic, see-through boxes were stacked up against the wall. Our names written across, in bold capital letters. At least that made it easier to find our stuff. I pulled out my box, and looked at my things from that night. The night they'd taken me. My skirt that I'd made. My ripped Starlets. And my locket.

'Get changed later,' Christa instructed. 'This stuff is better for running.'

She had a point. There was a general agreement and we returned our personal items into the bags they were stored in and carried them with us.

'What about these?' Ramona pointed towards more see-through boxes, not filled with clothes but with yellow cloths.

'Those bastards,' I said, opening each of the boxes quickly, tearing the yellow fabric out. 'They have these for the dogs. In case we escape.' I stuffed the fabric into the bag I was holding, giving some to the others. 'Throw these in the river first chance you get.'

The final corridor. Concrete grey. Dull lino. Taupe tiles. Iron doors. The outside another door away. Then a courtyard and another gate. We'd come this far. There

was no turning back now. I was holding on to Gerda's hand, who was holding on to Nina's hand. We ran, as fast and as quietly as we could. We reached the door at the end and stopped. While Christa looked for the key, I remembered the dogs.

'Wait,' I said and put my hand on Christa's shoulder.

'What?' an indignant look.

'The dogs.'

Christa continued to look for the key and found it. She turned the key to the door leading outside. Outside. One door away. The rest of the girls had come closer. We huddled together.

'How many?' Christa said.

'No idea,' I said.

'It's three,' Ramona said. 'I counted them. When we're in lessons.'

'So,' Christa said. 'Three dogs. Nine of us.'

'What's the plan?'

'I'll run to the kitchen. It's only there,' Simone pointed, 'I'll see what food there is and then we just try and bribe them.'

'That could work,' I said.

'And then?' Christa asked.

'We run across to the gate in groups of three,' I said.

'All at the same time?' Gerda.

'Yes – so they won't know who to go for if the food doesn't manage to distract them.'

'Christa, do you know which key opens the gate?' Simone.

All eyes were on Christa. 'If there is a key for the gate, I have it narrowed down to three possible keys.'

'Three?'

'It's better than ten,' she said, defensively.

'Yeah but not better than knowing for certain.'

'There was no time!' Christa said.

'Shut up everyone,' I said. 'The plan: Simone and you,' I pointed at Katja who I knew was really fast, 'go to the kitchen, now. Then, we run in groups of three, at the same time. We run as fast as we can. To the tall, iron gate. Throw your bags over it. It'll make it easier to climb if we have to. If you can climb it, great, if not, Christa will be there – and must be guarded against the dogs – until she finds the right key.

Understood?'

Katja and Simone sped off towards the kitchen. The remaining girls nodded and I looked at Christa. Christa who'd betrayed me. Hurt flared up inside of me as I tried to pull myself together. I had to focus on getting out of here.

Chapter 32

We stood by the door that was separating us from the outside. We'd become experts at lining up and waiting. But with every second that went by, I became more and more nervous. The kitchen was only at the end of the corridor. There weren't even any doors that needed unlocking.

'What's taking them so long?' Christa said to me.

'Don't speak to me,' I said.

'Anna.'

'Oh was that an apology?'

'I'm sorry,' Christa said.

'You betrayed me.'

'Now I'm freeing you. That makes us even.'

'We'll never be even,' I said.

'Entitled brat,' Christa said. 'Think it was easy for me?'

'I don't give a monkey's.'

'Well I do,' Christa said.

'I trusted you. I told you things. And you sold me out.'

'Yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'Maybe I was more of a double agent,' Christa said.

'Oh shut up,' I said.

'Don't forget that I was the one who found out that your father's alive and living in Hamburg.'

'So what? Am I supposed to thank you?'

'You thought he was dead and I'm telling you he lives just at the other end of the Elbe. I think a thank you might be in order.'

Gerda appeared in front of us. 'Shut up. Both of you. This isn't about you. This is about us.' She turned around to look in the direction of the kitchen. 'What's taking them so long?'

And that was when we saw them. Only not how we'd hoped. Simone walked towards us, slowly, Katja behind her, holding a knife to her throat.

'What do we do?' I whispered to Christa.

'There's always one,' Christa said.

'Nobody move and nothing will happen to her,' Katja said. 'Thought you could march out of here?'

'What do you want?' Christa asked.

'I'll save the day,' she said. 'They'll release me. Margot will give me a medal.'

'They won't release you,' Simone said.

'Shut up,' Katja said, pulling Simone closer, edging the knife onto her throat.

'She's right,' Nina said. 'They'll keep you here.'

'Not if I turn you in. That'll change how everyone thinks of me.'

Christa came closer. She whispered in my ear. 'We don't have time for this.'

'We can't leave Simone,' I said.

'That's not what I meant.'

'What do we do?'

Christa motioned for me to keep Katja talking. I did as I was told, not being able to think of a better idea. Christa moved closer, towards Simone and Katja. It wasn't that Katja didn't see her. But she must have felt quite superior holding the knife so close to Simone's throat. What threat did any of us pose? We didn't have weapons.

'I guess you win, Katja. What shall we tell Uhlig when we march back into the dorm?' I said.

A smile spread across her face. Was this easier than she thought? 'We tell her you made me. All of you made me. I never wanted to leave. I never wanted to break the rules.' Katja continued to talk. She talked herself into such a frenzy that she let go of Simone and waved one arm about in the air when Christa pounced on her and wrestled her to the ground. Without missing a beat, I ran across and pried the knife out of her hands. Simone ran back to the kitchen and returned, only moments later, with food. For the dogs but also for us.

'What shall we do with her?' I asked Christa.

'Throw her to the dogs for all I care,' Christa said.

Chapter 33

We didn't throw Katja to the dogs. Not because she didn't deserve it. Instead, I used my ripped Starlets to tie her up. Gerda donated a sock, which we stuffed into her mouth. We locked her in the laundry room, alone and angry. We hid her under towels and sheets. The longer it'd take to find her, the greater our lead.

Christa turned to unlock the final door. She gripped the key tightly; her knuckles turned white. She slid the key into the lock. The rest of us were so quiet you could have heard a pin drop. With Christa's back to me, I could see her shoulders move up and down with each intake of breath. Then there was the scraping of metal against metal as Christa turning the key in each direction. What followed was the sound of something getting stuck, like a coin only travelling halfway down a vending machine. I was confused: I couldn't get past the difference between hearing what I expected to hear, and what I actually heard. Eventually, Christa glanced over her shoulder and whispered, 'It won't open.'

I pictured a vending machine, imagined that stuck coin standing between me and a bar of chocolate. 'Try again,' I said, calmly.

'What's going on?' Simone asked.

I turned around to the rest of the girls. 'Lock's stiff.' Then to Christa: 'Maybe you need to pull the door towards you so the lock aligns properly.' I stood next to her now.

She pulled the door towards her and tried again to turn the key in each direction. 'It's not moving all the way. It keeps getting stuck.' Finally, she looked at me, holding the bunch of keys in her right hand. 'What do we do?'

'Try the other keys,' I said. 'All of them.'

'Why is this taking so long?' Gerda whispered.

My heart beat so violently that it drowned out the evolving whispers from the girls.

'The key is not working,' I said. These five words felt like a death sentence.

'So try the others,' Gerda said.

'What do you think I'm doing?' Christa was getting frustrated.

Everyone huddled around her, paying close attention to which key had already been tried and which was still to have its chance to be our liberator. But it was no use. None of the keys did the job; none of them freed us. A sense of defeat, of disappointment but also despair spread through us: things would not work out. And that seemed unfair.

'The keys are useless,' Christa said, looking at me. 'What now? It's only a matter of time until someone stumbles across Uhlig and then...'

'Uhlig...' I said, feeling around in my pocket. 'Uhlig!' I pulled out the hairgrip.

'What're you going to do with that?' Christa asked.

'Nobody taught you to pick locks?' I said, waving the pin around. I took a closer look at the lock. A mortice lock. These were harder to pick than the lock I'd picked in the attic, a lifetime ago, but easier to pick than Yale locks. The biggest difference between this lock and a Yale lock was that this could be picked with a wire, or in my case, with a pin. 'This might take a while – if I manage it at all.'

'What shall we do?' Christa asked.

'Keep a lookout and see if any of the windows down here don't have bars. If this doesn't work, we need options.'

Christa nodded and organised the girls. 'Meet back here in ten minutes.'

'We don't have watches, you joker,' Simone said.

'Whisper through the house rules ten times. That should equal ten minutes.'

The girls vanished down the corridor and with them the gentle murmurings of the rules. I turned all my attention to the lock. I felt Christa's eyes on me.

'You shouldn't be watching me, but what's going on behind me.'

'Who taught you to pick locks?'

'This guy from the FDJ. I think he wanted to show off.'

'At least he taught you something useful.'

'I can also make soup and start fires without matches,' I said, staring at the lock.

'Really?'

'Christa, you have to shut up now,' I said. 'I have to concentrate.'

'Sorry.' And then there was complete silence but for the buzzing of the lights above us.

I began by breaking my pin into two pieces and twisting one of them into an 'L' shape. First, I had to apply tension to the bolt. I slipped the straight half of the hairpin into the narrow gap between the doorframe and the lock, lifting the bolt from underneath, convinced I could feel the air from outside brush against my fingers. I fed the other half – the 'L' – into the keyhole. I had to lift each lever until I could feel it set into place. When all the levers were at their specific height, the gates inside the lock would be aligned and the bolt would slide into them, opening the door. The fewer levers, the quicker I would be. I began moving the L-shaped pin in half-circles, feeling for resistance, until I heard the first...

Click.

I felt the barrel of a gun in the back of my neck before I could turn around.

'Fräulein Peters,' Herr Franken said. 'You haven't filled in your evaluation sheet yet.'

'Let go,' Christa complained. 'Let go of me, you asshole.'

'Shit,' I whispered under my breath.

'Now, now,' he said, digging the gun further into my neck, 'what did we say about swearing?'

'That it's bad?' I asked.

'Bravo,' he said. He spun me around so I was no longer facing the door but the corridor. 'I always knew you had potential.' He smiled, pointing the gun at my forehead, 'Bang.'

He had a hold of Christa by the neck and shoved her forward so she was standing next to me. She looked at me apologetically.

'Not much of a lookout, this one,' he said, pointing his gun at Christa. 'But lovely to see the two of you have rekindled your friendship.' He winked. 'Planning to run off like Bonnie and Clyde into the sunset? Just the two of you? How romantic.'

Just the two of us. He didn't know. He didn't know it was all of us. We had to keep him talking until the others returned. But what could they do, really? He had a gun and I was certain it was loaded.

'Is that too much to ask?' I said. 'To be happy?'

'Oh, but Anna, this girl comes with baggage. Lots of baggage. If you care about her, you will stay. Let her get better.'

'Baggage?' Christa said. 'You're the one threatening two girls with a gun.'

He considered that for a moment. 'I guess I am.' He laughed, then pointed the gun at Christa. 'Bang, bang.'

The lights in the corridor continued to flicker, the buzzing strangely soothing. The truth was that I had absolutely no idea what to do.

'Are you going to kill us?' I asked eventually.

Christa's arms, like mine, were hanging by her sides and she moved her little finger to graze mine. She then gently tapped my finger one, two, three, four times. Somehow, I knew what that meant. The girls would be back in four minutes. We had to survive for four more minutes. I nodded, a signal to Christa that I understood, then turned my attention to Franken.

'Are you going to shoot us with that gun?' I said, loudly.

'Are you going to kill us with that gun?' Christa asked.

Franken looked surprised, perhaps at the directness of our question, and seemed to take great pleasure in pointing the gun at Christa, then at me, then at Christa, then back to me.

'Yes,' he said. 'I'm going to shoot you.' He meant it.

'What will you tell my mother?' I asked. 'Will you tell her you shot me?'

Franken laughed. 'Your mother. That woman, let me tell you, was a tough nut to crack. Didn't want to sign the papers, had to be convinced the old-fashioned way. A little slap here, a little physical examination there. Eventually she agreed that Torgau would be the best place for you.'

A massive lump in my throat prevented me from swallowing. Christa tapped my little finger three times.

'You bastard,' I said.

'She kept writing to you. More and more letters, day after day. Don't worry, Anna. I read them all. Some are quite heart-warming. Blaming herself, your father, the system and so on.'

'You kept them from me,' I said.

'What do you think?' he said.

'Pencil-pusher,' Christa said. 'You small-town bureaucrat.'

Franken slowly turned the gun on Christa. 'Her parents on the other hand needed no convincing at all. Told you this one is damaged goods. Nobody wants her.'

'That is not true,' I said, looking at Christa.

Franken alternated between pointing the gun at me and Christa, as if he was making up his mind who to shoot first. 'Any volunteers?'

Before the words had left his mouth, the lights went out, their buzzing silenced. The corridor was plunged into pitch blackness. Instinctively, I kicked out in what I hoped would be the general direction of Franken's groin area and made contact. Franken groaned and fired the gun, the bullet hammering into the door behind us.

'Christa!'

'I'm ok! I'm ok,' she said.

Franken had dropped to his knees and was moaning, leaning over in pain. I was about to throw myself at him when the girls emerged out of the darkness and started to batter him with large metal objects. From the sound of the gongs as they collided with his skull, I'd say the girls had rid the kitchens of their pots and pans.

Someone shone a torch around the corridor and fixed the beam on Franken, who was unconscious, face battered and bloodied.

'Swine,' Gerda said. She turned the torch onto Christa, then me. 'Bad news – all the windows are barred. It's this door or nothing. Anna, can you get it open?'

'Of course she can,' Christa said. 'She can also make soup and start fires without matches.'

These girls had saved my life so many times. I wanted to repay them. The L-shaped piece was still lodged in the keyhole. Gerda shone the torch at my feet and I snatched up the other half. I shook my hands out and knelt before the door. Lifting the bolt from underneath with the straight piece of hairpin, I got to work, setting one

lever at a time into place while the girls dragged Franken into a cupboard and tied him up.

Chapter 34

We pushed the door open with such force it almost flew off its hinges. It was dark outside but for the faint light of the moon. Christa went out first – she had the keys and it was her job to get to the gate and unlock it. She ran as fast as I'd ever seen anyone run. And then I heard the dogs. It sounded like someone revving an engine: interrupted and slow at first, until it gathered speed and became strong and consistent.

'Run,' I shouted. 'Run!'

The three dogs went for us. They were so fast I was sure they would catch us and eat us alive. I'd always considered myself a dog person. Now all I wished for were cats.

'Dogs who bark don't bite,' Gerda said.

'Tell the dogs, don't tell me,' I said.

'Who's got the food?' Gerda said. 'Throw them the food, quick!'

There was food everywhere. In the air, on the ground. More barking. But the tone of the barking had changed: no longer aggressive and intimidating, but excited and greedy.

'Run,' I whispered, not taking my eyes off the dogs, who were hoovering up their midnight feast more quickly than I would have liked. 'Run.'

When I reached Christa at the gate, I didn't turn around. I didn't want to know if the dogs were after us again. I couldn't hear them. I only heard my breathing. Everything was blurred except for the gate and Christa, who was right in front of me. She hurled her bag over it and I heard it thud on the other side. How on earth we ever hoped to climb this monstrosity was beyond me. The gate's beige paint was peeling off. Rust covered its hinges. I was convinced that if we'd really wanted to, we

could have pulled it down. But we didn't have time for that. The dogs had started barking again.

Christa's hands shook.

'Christa, hurry up,' I said. 'Pull yourself together and open the gate.'

The barking was getting louder, closer, but I didn't dare turn around. The girls reached the gate one by one, rattling against it.

'Hurry,' Simone said. 'We're out of food.'

'Shit, they're coming. The dogs are coming,' Gerda said.

'Hurry, Christa,' Nina said. 'Please.'

Christa's hands got worse. The insistent shaking wouldn't allow her to slot the key into the lock. I grabbed the bunch off her. The barking getting ever closer, like a lorry trying to overtake on the motorway. I slid the key in, turned it, and, together, we pushed against the gate until there was enough room for us to squeeze through. The second we were on the other side, we slammed it shut and locked it. We felt the collision of dog and iron gate. Yelping. It couldn't be helped.

'To the Elbe, quick,' Christa said.

There was no traffic. It was easy to follow the sounds of the river. Draped in our concrete uniforms, bags in hands, we ran quietly. We didn't dare breathe or talk. We were outside. Not just outside. *Outside* outside. No more locked doors, no more Uhlig. No more Franken. The world looked how I'd remembered it. But it felt different.

We reached the Elbe and stopped underneath a bridge. We opened the bags we'd carried and changed into our own clothes. For the first time we'd be able to see each other how we really were. Not as a collective but as individuals. I pulled my jogging bottoms down and changed into my skirt. It was loose around the waist. I pulled the grey jumper over my head and changed into my black t-shirt and coat.

Last but not least, Mutti's hat. I hadn't lost it. It was right here. As I turned around I saw the others. In jeans, colourful sweatshirts and jumpsuits. It was as if we were meeting for the first time.

'We did it,' Simone said.

We stood there for a moment or two, inhaling our first taste of freedom, looking at each other. Nina took my hand and squeezed it tightly. We actually did it. It was unbelievable. But we knew we didn't have time for sentimentalities. We were still a long way off from actually making it. I looked at them. If I had a camera, I'd have taken a picture of us. I had found what I'd been looking for. Finally, I belonged. It felt good not to be alone anymore. I looked across the river; I saw the heron. She was standing there, on the edge, staring at the water, completely focussed. I was transfixed by her patience, her level of concentration.

'My father's in Hamburg. It's that way.' I pointed upstream. 'Prague's that way,' I pointed downstream.

'I'll come with you,' Christa said. 'I'll help you.' I wanted to say no. I wanted to tell her how much she'd hurt me, how she couldn't expect me to trust her so quickly after everything she'd done. But then she'd risked her life to get us all out of that place, out of Torgau. Our eyes met, and there, in the moonlight, I understood. I understood why she did what she had done. She chose her brother over me and that was OK.

I threw my arms around her because I was overcome by an urge to forgive her because if I couldn't forgive her, I'd be alone again and the thought of that was unbearable. She was my friend. A real friend. The others quickly piled around us. This was it. This was what we'd all wanted.

There wasn't enough time. There never was for goodbyes. We hugged, quickly but with sincerity. Christa and I stood there for a few moments as we watched these

wonderful girls walk away, along the riverbanks, towards the Czech border, towards freedom.

‘Come on,’ Christa said and slid her hand into mine.

I held her hand tight. The thought of ever having to let go terrified me. I lifted my head and looked into her eyes, let them travel across her face. ‘I once read an article that said honest people always made eye contact because they had nothing to hide.’

‘Is that so?’ she smiled.

‘Yes,’ I said and stepped closer. I noticed the freckles on her nose, the stray hairs around her eyebrows. I kissed her. And she kissed me right back.

THE END

<p style="text-align: right;"><i>8th November 1989</i></p> <p><i>Congratulations.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>Strength lies in</i></p> <p><i>improvisation.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>Change is coming.</i></p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;"><i>I love you.</i></p> <p>A.</p>	<div style="text-align: right; border: 1px solid black; width: 60px; height: 50px; margin: 0 auto 20px auto;"></div> <p><i>Ellen Peters</i></p> <hr/> <div style="background-color: black; width: 180px; height: 15px; margin: 5px auto;"></div> <hr/> <div style="background-color: black; width: 160px; height: 15px; margin: 5px auto;"></div> <hr/> <div style="background-color: black; width: 100px; height: 15px; margin: 5px auto;"></div> <hr/>
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Critical Commentary

Introduction

Writing this commentary has been like unstacking a set of Russian dolls. To begin with, it looked as though I had only one doll: Margaret Atwood and her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), hereafter referred to by *THT*.¹ I was already aware of Atwood's non-fiction, specifically her collection of essays, *On Writers and Writing* (2002), in which she reflects on both her own work and that of other writers.² Reading these essays was liberating. Atwood strikes a fine balance between academic literary criticism and reflections on her practice – she discusses a wide range of subjects, including the origins of her own writing, her experiences as a young reader, and the difficulties of genre categorisation. I was particularly interested in Atwood's writing on 'ustopia', a term she coined to more accurately describe the genre of *THT*.³ This encouraged me to investigate the intersection between history and dystopia regarding my own novel, *Napoleon Schmidt is Dead*, hereafter referred to by *NSID*. As a result of the research undertaken for this doctoral project, which will be detailed in this critical commentary, I propose the creation of a new hybrid genre: hystopia.

A hystopian narrative must fulfil the following conditions:

1. It must depict a particular period of history.
2. Cultural and historical references must be coded and distorted.

¹ Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale* (London: Vintage, 1996)

² Margaret Atwood, *On Writers and Writing* (London: Virago Press, 2015)

³ Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds* (London: Virago Press, 2014), p.75

3. The emphasis must be on communicating the atmosphere and mood of the era depicted.

These conditions, which might be referred to as the Feindt-Principle, make clear that the focus of a hystopian narrative is the production of a veiled depiction of the past, of history.

A note on the spelling. It is not my intention to use a spelling that suggests a gendered reading, either by reading to history as ‘his-story’ or by encouraging an association with the oppression of women by invoking ‘hysteria’. In addition, there already exists a research group called Histopia attached to the Autonomous University of Madrid. The group focusses on utopia and its alternatives, and its impact on modern societies as a tool ‘for the construction of possibilities’ with regards to experimentation, implying that speculation plays a significant role in their research.⁴ This is explicitly avoided in hystopian narratives. The spelling of ‘hystopia’ refers back to the late Middle English spelling of ‘history’ and incorporates the transformation it underwent from the 1500s (‘hystorye’) to the 1600s (‘hystorie’). It is appropriate – it is *correct* – according to the conditions of the Feindt-Principle that the genre should turn to the past for the spelling of its name.

Atwood’s influence on this critical commentary is not limited to her writings on ‘ustopia’. It was through her non-fiction works – essays, reviews, and lectures – that I discovered the babushkas hidden inside my original Russian doll.⁵

⁴ ‘Histopia’, in *UTOPIA: Transatlantic Network of Utopian Studies*, para. 6 of 6, <<https://utopia.hypotheses.org/histopia>>, [last accessed 21st February 2022]

⁵ Margaret Atwood’s non-fiction has been collected in numerous works, including: Margaret Atwood, *Writing with Intent* (New York: Carroll & Graf Publishers, 2005); Margaret Atwood, *Curious Pursuits* (London: Virago Press, 2006).

There is a longstanding history of dystopian writers responding to each other's work. Orwell inverted Huxley's technicolour dystopia into a concrete-grey vision of hell. Soviet author Yevgeny Zamyatin's dystopia *We* (English translation, 1924)⁶ was significant not only for Orwell and Huxley, but also for Atwood, whose protagonist in *THT* was inspired by Zamyatin's 'subversive femme fatale'.⁷ Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932)⁸, hereafter referred to by *BNW*, started life as a satire of H.G. Wells' *Men Like Gods* (1923)⁹ before becoming its own beast.¹⁰ Orwell has written extensively on Wells and singles out the theme of 'trying to restore a disorderly past'¹¹ – a theme that is also explored in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949), hereafter referred to by *NEF*.¹² Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726)¹³, influential for Huxley and Orwell, was praised by Orwell as one of the 'English masterpieces of the eighteenth century'¹⁴, while Huxley, in a letter to G. Wilson Knight in 1931, refers to *BNW* as: 'a Swiftian novel about the Future'.¹⁵

Atwood outlines the influence Orwell and Huxley had on *THT* in her essays 'George Orwell: Some Personal Connections' as well as 'Brave New World by Aldous Huxley'.¹⁶ This discovery encouraged me to explore the work of George

⁶ Yevgeny Zamyatin, *We* (London: Penguin Classics Science Fiction, 2020)

⁷ Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 2014, p.146

⁸ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2007)

⁹ H.G. Wells, *Men Like God* (London: Penguin Books, 1987)

¹⁰ Adam Roberts, *H G Wells: A Literary Life* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019)

¹¹ George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume II My Country Right or Left 1940–1943*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p.169

¹² George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000)

¹³ Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels* (London: Penguin English Library, 2012)

¹⁴ George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume III As I Please 1943–1945*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Penguin Books, 1970), p.210

¹⁵ Aldous Huxley, *Letters of Aldous Huxley*, ed. Grover Smith (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), p.353

¹⁶ Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 2014, pp.141-149; pp.184-193

Orwell and Aldous Huxley more closely. Atwood first read *Animal Farm* (1945)¹⁷, hereafter referred to by *AF*, in primary school and, even though she did not pick up on the historical or political context, she got a very distinct sense that the pigs in the fable were acting unjustly, which outraged her.¹⁸ I was slightly older when I first encountered *AF*, perhaps fourteen or fifteen, though this, too, was in school, and what stuck with me more than anything else was Boxer's death. However, much like Atwood, rereading *AF* as an adult unveiled a range of political and historical issues that I had not fully understood aged fourteen. What piqued my interest as an adult reader was the fable's retelling of the Russian Revolution (1917 – 1923) and the notion of rewriting history, a theme that runs through Orwell's non-fiction like a red thread. This can be seen in his essay 'Politics vs. Literature: An Examination of "Gulliver's Travels"' (1946)¹⁹ and also in a broadcast for the BBC in 1941, 'Literature and Totalitarianism'.²⁰ The subjectivity of recorded history is one of Orwell's major concerns. Though *NEF* is set 35 years in the future, Orwell was addressing contemporary issues and examining the novel's treatment of history, the question of who gets to narrate it, edit it and erase it.

Huxley shares this sensibility and it is through an examination of *BNW* that the similarities between his work and that of Orwell and Atwood become obvious. In his later work *Brave New World Revisited* (1958), Huxley reflects on the main themes of his novel, omitting any discussion of feminism, focussing on themes of overpopulation and consumerism instead.²¹ It is Atwood who assumes the mantle of

¹⁷ George Orwell, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (London: Penguin, 2013)

¹⁸ Atwood, *In Other Worlds*, 2014, p.141

¹⁹ George Orwell, *All Art is Propaganda: Critical Essays*, compiled by George Packer, (New York: Mariner Books, 2009), pp.292-315

²⁰ Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Volume II*, 1970, pp. 161-164

²¹ Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (London: Chatto & Windus Ltd., 1959)

discussing feminism and female bodies in *THT* and also in her 2007 introduction to Huxley's novel, a conversation continued by Anna Burns in her novel *Milkman* (2018).²² And it is Anna Burns whom I seek to introduce into the canon of dystopian literature.

Anna Burns' *Milkman* is a veiled exploration of The Troubles set in Belfast during the 1970s. The omission of exact dates, geographical locations, and references to political or religious orientation from a depiction of an oppressive society allows the reader to experience the novel through a distinctly dystopian lens. It also renders the story universal. The question that interests me is whether a novel can be universal while also being firmly anchored in history and whether this constitutes a new genre. This is something I explore through my own creative practice. My novel, *NSID*, is set in the German Democratic Republic during the 1980s. Intended for a young adult audience, I deliberately omit dates and names. For example, the only political party, the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands), is referred to as 'the Party', because to do otherwise would limit the scope of the novel historically but also in terms of its universality. Like Burns, I look to the past in order to create a fresh narrative, one grounded in history, which utilises dystopian tropes and does not give way to speculation. Where Huxley, Orwell and Atwood projected their narratives onto a future, Burns and I distort the past in the creation of our dystopias.

On reading Huxley, Orwell, Atwood and Burns, works published between 1932 and 2018, it is apparent that these writers share certain common themes. The loss of individual freedom and individuality, the prohibition of love, and the fragility of recorded history form the basis of any dystopian society, alongside emerging

²² Anna Burns, *Milkman* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 2018)

subthemes such as feminism, and critiques of the Soviet Union, consumerism and overpopulation.

This commentary will discuss what I have taken from these authors and applied to my own creative work.

Aldous Huxley

‘The Will to Order is admirable in matters involving the handling of symbols; in dealing with human beings, it can, when pushed too far, become tyranny.’¹

Aldous Huxley understood the interplay between satire, utopia and dystopia, and it is no surprise that his most famous dystopia, *BNW*, blurs the lines between these genres so effortlessly.² This section of the commentary investigates this fluidity by examining Aldous Huxley’s *BNW* alongside his non-fiction book *Brave New World Revisited* and giving due consideration to his influences.

Margaret Atwood asserts that *BNW* poses a conundrum: is Huxley painting a vision of a utopia or a dystopia, and does it depend on your point of view?³ Since Thomas More’s publication of *Utopia* (1551, English translation)⁴ the word has become associated with the idea of paradise, an ideal society.⁵ However, the quest for perfection is a slippery slope and, if pursued too rigidly, this quest often defines dystopias.⁶ The title of More’s novel is a play on words: eutopia meaning ‘good place’, and utopia meaning ‘no place’.⁷ The suggestion of the no place implies, ultimately, that utopia cannot exist: it is ‘unrealistic and unattainable’.⁸ The word is used in the latter context in the German language. If someone was to express an unrealistic wish, for example, wanting to holiday on Mars with Marilyn Monroe, you

¹ Huxley, 1969, pp.847-848

² Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History: A Study of Modern Despotism, Its Antecedents, and Its Literary Diffractions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p.361

³ Atwood, ‘Introduction’ in *Brave New World*, 2007, p.ix

⁴ Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. by Paul Turner (London: The Folio Society, 1965)

⁵ Claeys, 2020, p.53

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.18

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.53

⁸ *Ibid.*

might well proclaim their desire to be 'utopisch'.⁹ On the surface, *BNW* appears utopian: its population is secure, healthy and beautiful.¹⁰ But are they happy?

Gregory Claeys notes that a dystopia could be described as a 'satire of utopian aspirations'.¹¹ One of the questions central to this section is whether *BNW* depicts a utopia or a dystopia, or perhaps, as Claeys suggests, a satire of utopian values, which would turn the novel into a dystopia. Huxley was considered a satirist throughout his career and *BNW* very clearly follows in that tradition. According to Atwood, the novel satirises, among other things, the Victorians' attitude to sex and their obsession with the word 'mother'.¹² Here is an example to illustrate Atwood's observation:

"And 'parent'?" questioned the DHC.

There was an uneasy silence. Several of the boys blushed. They had not yet learned to draw the significant but often very fine distinction between smut and pure science. One, at last, had the courage to raise a hand.

"Human beings used to be..." he hesitated; the blood rushed to his cheeks. "Well, they used to be viviparous."¹³

⁹ 'Utopisch' in *Duden Online* <<https://www.duden.de/rechtschreibung/utopisch>> [last accessed 30 Jan 2020]

Utopisch: nur in der Vorstellung, Fantasie möglich; mit der Wirklichkeit nicht vereinbar, [noch] nicht durchführbar; fantastisch (my translation: only possible in the imagination or fantasy; not compatible with reality, not {yet} feasible)

¹⁰ Atwood, 'Introduction' in *Brave New World*, 2007, p.ix

¹¹ Gregory Claeys, 'The origins of dystopia: Wells, Huxley and Orwell' in *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*, ed. by Gregory Claeys (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p.107

¹² Margaret Atwood, 'Introduction by Margaret Atwood' in *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2007), p.xii

¹³ Huxley, 2007, p.19

Huxley highlights the attitudes towards family by subverting such ideas: 'parent' has turned into a scientific word, but one that makes the boys blush – they are clearly uncomfortable with the concept, and unsure whether or not it is rude, something that does not mirror the reader's experience. What the reader would consider to be indecent, for example, is a society that encourages 'erotic play between children', something that is deemed completely normal, progressive even, in *BNW*. Such moments illuminate the satirical tones of the novel.¹⁴

According to David Bradshaw, Huxley satirises the attitudes towards Britain's economic problems in the aftermath of the Great Depression of 1929, which were apparently caused by 'under-consumption'.¹⁵ The DHC of *BNW* states:

“The problem was to find an economically sounder reason for consuming transport than a mere affection for primroses and landscapes. It was duly found.

“We condition the masses to hate the country,” concluded the Director. “But simultaneously we condition them to love all country sports. At the same time, we see to it that all country sports shall entail the use of elaborate apparatus. So that they consume manufactured articles as well as transport.”¹⁶

This double-consumption is humorous. Being conditioned to hate the countryside while simultaneously being conditioned to love all country sports in order that transport and equipment are still consumed seems extreme, but it is, perhaps, this exaggeration that makes the satire so successful.

In a letter to G. Wilson Knight in 1931, Huxley describes *BNW* as:

¹⁴ Ibid., p.27

¹⁵ David Bradshaw, 'Introduction by David Bradshaw' in *Brave New World* (London: Vintage, 2007), p.xxiii

¹⁶ Huxley, 2007, pp.18-19

'a Swiftian novel about the Future, showing the horrors of Utopia and the strange and appalling effects on feeling, "instinct" and general *weltanschauung* of the application of psychological, physiological and mechanical knowledge to the fundamentals of human life. It is a comic book – but seriously comic.'¹⁷

It is interesting to note that Huxley understood utopias to be just as awful as dystopias, with reference to 'the horrors' in his letter. Indeed, as Atwood herself notes, the Third Reich as well as Communist Russia 'both began as utopian visions.'¹⁸

The *OED* defines satire as: 'A poem or (in later use) a novel, film, or other work of art which uses humour, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing immorality or foolishness, esp. as a form of social or political commentary.'¹⁹ Considering this definition, it is apparent that Huxley knew he was writing a political novel, one aimed at exposing and ridiculing political and social injustices, much like Jonathan Swift, whose *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), as Orwell suggested, can be read as 'an attack on England'.²⁰

Huxley understood that satire and utopia and dystopia are bound together: each explores the politics of an imagined society, or, as Anthony Burgess suggests: 'Perhaps every dystopian vision is a figure of the present, with certain features sharpened and exaggerated to point a moral and a warning.'²¹ What Burgess states

¹⁷ Huxley, 1969, p.353

¹⁸ Atwood, 'Introduction' in *Brave New World*, 2007, p. x

¹⁹ 'Satire, n.' in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2021) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/171207> [last accessed 14 July 2021]

²⁰ Orwell, 2009, p.294

²¹ Anthony Burgess, *The Novel Now: A Student's Guide to Contemporary Fiction* (London: Faber & Faber Limited, 1967), p.45

here about dystopias is probably equally true of satires and it leads on to what Orwell said about Swift's ability to 'magnify' a truth to the point of distortion: 'Swift did not possess ordinary wisdom, but he did possess a terrible intensity of vision, capable of picking out a single hidden truth and then magnifying it and distorting it.'²² If we consider *BNW* in this context, what is obvious is that Huxley, like Swift, draws on contemporary political and social issues in his dystopia, magnifying underlying issues and distorting them by setting them in another world, the future. That is to say that the reader struggles to identify their place in a futuristic, dystopian world, one which is far removed from the economic and political instability experienced throughout Europe.

The political instability across Europe in the aftermath of the First World War may have unnerved Huxley. The state motto in *BNW* ('COMMUNITY, IDENTITY, STABILITY') can be read as a direct reflection of this instability.²³ American consumerism of the 1920s would have been rocked by the Great Depression, which lasted from 1929–39, causing a great deal of instability. This would have shone a light on material inequality, something David Bradshaw discusses in his 1993 introduction to *BNW*.²⁴ Medical advances, such as the discovery of penicillin in 1928, meant that people were living longer, but the birth rate showed no sign of slowing. Consumerism and overpopulation, along with the end of individualism and individual freedom associated with such concerns, become the focus of *BNW*.

Huxley believed that overpopulation would lead to totalitarianism.²⁵ According to Huxley, as poverty increases, the world becomes unstable. It is this disequilibrium

²² Orwell, 2009, p.315

²³ Huxley, 2007, p.1

²⁴ Bradshaw, 'Introduction' in *Brave New World*, 2007, p.xxiii

²⁵ Huxley, 1959, p.19

that is regarded as a road to totalitarianism and, perhaps, planted the seed for *BNW*. It is a central theme of the text and one that is key to understanding the novel. But the trigger for the novel, it seems, is to be found elsewhere.

Bearing in mind Huxley's deep-rooted sensibilities as a satirist and comic writer, it comes as no great surprise that *BNW* was originally intended as a parody of H.G. Wells' *Men Like Gods* (1923).²⁶ In Wells' novel, the population decreases from over two billion to only a quarter of a million people. The future setting resembles a utopia in which science is harnessed for the benefit of all – not only the elite. H.G. Wells took issue with Huxley's depiction of science in *BNW*, referring to it as a 'bitter satire on progressive ideas': a betrayal.²⁷

These two ideas, the use of science and the threat of overpopulation, form the basis of *BNW* and an investigation into Huxley's treatment of these themes will help us understand why Wells was so offended.

BNW is set in World State, a London of the far future – 'in this year of stability, A.F. 632'.²⁸ The World State's motto, 'Community, Identity, Stability'²⁹, sets the ambiguous tone: the motto seems rather tame and wholesome but, according to David Bradshaw, it is a direct comment on Britain's economic instability after the Great Depression of 1929.³⁰

In the opening pages of the novel we learn about the hatcheries, which are part of a state-controlled breeding programme, and the importance of 'social stability', a concept dependent on the 'Bokanovsky Process', which involves the

²⁶ Roberts, 2019, p.316

²⁷ H.G. Wells, *The Correspondence of H. G. Wells*, Vol. 4, ed. David C. Smith (London: Pickering & Chatto, 1998), p.35

²⁸ Huxley, 2007, p.2

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5

³⁰ Bradshaw, 'Introduction' in *Brave New World*, 2007, p.xxi

sorting of fertilized embryos into different castes: Alphas, Betas, Gammas, Deltas and Epsilons.³¹ Huxley presents the reader with a factory-like setting, where babies are genetically engineered, each 'caste' fulfilling a particular duty or role in society, and therefore maintaining existing social structures and managing population size.

The Epsilons, for example, are 'conditioned' to thrive in heat.³² As the Director explains, 'that is the secret of happiness and virtue – liking what you've *got* to do. All conditioning aims at that: making people like their inescapable social destiny.'³³ According to the Director, the population loves 'servitude', and it is through this acceptance that social stability is maintained.³⁴

This raises the issue of social engineering. The World State breeds different types of humans – those who are more intelligent, for example, or those who thrive in the heat, who are created, bred, to perform more physically demanding tasks.³⁵ The idea of course is that in order to guarantee the stability of World State, all categories of people are needed. Nicholas Murray in his biography of Huxley, noted that Huxley was alert to the dangers of eugenics: 'If the eugenists are in too much of an enthusiastic hurry to improve the race, they will only succeed in destroying it.'³⁶ However, Huxley discusses the potential links between the 'tradition' of 'individual liberty' and the 'effective practice of dysgenics' in *Brave New World Revisited*.³⁷ Huxley also refers to it as an 'ethical dilemma'.³⁸ With that in mind, it is interesting to note the political discussion surrounding eugenics in the 1920s and 1930s. The

³¹ Huxley, 2007, pp.1-3

³² Ibid., p.12

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid., p.xlviii

³⁵ Huxley, 1959, p.27

³⁶ Aldous Huxley quoted in Murray, *Aldous Huxley*, 2002, p.207

³⁷ Huxley, 1959, p.29

³⁸ Ibid.

eugenics movement rose to prominence in Britain during the first half of the twentieth century.³⁹ In the United States, a growing interest in eugenics coincided with the rise of white supremacy, with the Ku Klux Klan drawing 50,000 demonstrators onto the streets of Washington in 1925.⁴⁰

The concept of moral conditioning in the novel, using science to control the population, ensures the social stability of the community, or as the Director puts it: 'social destiny.'⁴¹ Each individual is only considered in relation to the greater good, the collective, which forms the basis of a utilitarian utopia, or at least the principle on which utopian societies are built. Their lives are predestined, their freedom of choice removed. Huxley acknowledges that 'individual freedom' will be the price we pay if the problem of overpopulation remains unsolved.⁴² He adds, writing in 1958, that it is not an acute threat but something that could very well endanger the 'personal freedom' of the American population.⁴³

What Huxley omits from his reflections is the notion that the state has taken over control of women's bodies, depriving them of the freedom to make individual choices about family life and fertility, something he perhaps borrowed from the time before the first wave of feminism fought such patriarchal control. This is further illustrated through a conversation between Fanny and Lenina in *BNW*:

³⁹ Donald MacKenzie, 'Eugenics in Britain' in *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 6, No. 3/4 (September 1976), p.499 <www.jstor.org/stable/284693> [accessed 23 August 2021]

⁴⁰ Martin Austeruhle, 'A Brief History Of White Supremacist Rallies In D.C.' in *Local News*, 9 August 2018, para. 3 of 18 <<https://wamu.org/story/18/08/09/brief-history-white-supremacist-rallies-d-c/>> [accessed 3rd August 2020]

⁴¹ Huxley, 2007, p.12

⁴² Huxley, 1959, p.19

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.23

“I’ve been feeling rather out of sorts lately,” Fanny explained. “Dr Wells advised me to have a Pregnancy Substitute.”

“But, my dear, you’re only nineteen. The first Pregnancy Substitute isn’t compulsory till twenty-one.”⁴⁴

The purpose of the Pregnancy Substitute is to allow, or force, women to go through the hormonal changes of pregnancy without actually being pregnant, a procedure that becomes mandatory when women reach the age of twenty-one. Atwood asserts, if women no longer carry babies, ‘sex has become a recreation’.⁴⁵ Atwood inverts this idea in *THT*, where sex for recreation and procreation have been separated: the handmaids replace the hatcheries but sex is only to be had in order to procreate, not for recreational purposes. Huxley’s ‘freemartins’⁴⁶ in *BNW* become ‘unwomen’⁴⁷ in Atwood’s *THT*: these women are sterile. As Mr Foster outlines in *BNW*: “...in the vast majority of cases, fertility is merely a nuisance. [...] So we allow as many as thirty percent of the female embryos to develop normally”, implying that the vast majority are manipulated to be sterile.⁴⁸ As he assures his students: ‘Guaranteed sterile.’⁴⁹ What Atwood is perhaps responding to is the patriarchy portrayed in *BNW*, a world in which women’s bodies have become pure pleasure machines. However, it must also be noted that Huxley’s depiction of hatcheries is the precursor to what is now known as IVF treatment. If the idea was to be entertained that Huxley was in fact not a feminist, it could be said that his satire critiques such

⁴⁴ Huxley, 2007, p.32

⁴⁵ Atwood, ‘Introduction’ in *Brave New World*, 2007, p.xiii

⁴⁶ Huxley, 2007, p.10

⁴⁷ Atwood, 1996, p.71

⁴⁸ Huxley, 2007, p.10

⁴⁹ Ibid.

scientific advances. But the real issue in both novels is the lack of choice for women over their own bodies, in worlds ruled by men.

In his 1946 foreword to *BNW*, Huxley explains that the theme of the novel is not the 'advancement of science' but the progression of science 'as it affects human individuals.'⁵⁰ The use of the word 'affects' implies that his concern for humanity is reflected in the above statement – he does not say science *advances* the human individual but *affects*. Huxley expands on this thought when he revisits the theme of systematically practised eugenics in his essays.⁵¹ Here, Huxley clearly states that the end result does not justify the means.⁵² However, he outlines how science affects the individual human being by extrapolating that it might be all well and good that the 'quick death by malaria' is a thing of the past, but what has replaced it, as a direct result of scientific advancements, is 'a slow death by outright starvation'.⁵³ What he is actually criticising here, I believe, is the disjointed relationship between science and ethics, and the lack of social responsibility taken by scientists. If you enable people to live longer, you have a moral obligation to ensure that they are able to do so humanely. The consequence of not fulfilling your moral obligation might be a state-controlled breeding programme, a totalitarian future as portrayed in *BNW*.

The next theme, which is closely intertwined with Huxley's concern about overpopulation, and highlighted by the state-controlled breeding in *BNW*, is that of the family. The portrayal of individual human attachment, or lack of, guarantees social stability within Huxley's fictional world. It is a theme that recurs in Orwell's

⁵⁰ Huxley, 2007, p.xliv

⁵¹ Huxley, 1959, p.27

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.29

⁵³ *Ibid.*

NEF, Margaret Atwood's *THT*, and Anna Burns' *Milkman*, as well as in my own novel, *NSID*.

The World State of *BNW* encourages its inhabitants to be non-monogamous. In fact, when Fanny suspects Lenina of becoming too attached to Henry, she urges her 'to be a little more promiscuous'.⁵⁴ She quickly underpins this sentiment by quoting one of the state's proverbs, 'everyone belongs to everyone else', highlighting to the reader that this is not simply two friends talking, but systemic practice.⁵⁵ This systemic abolition of traditional values might at first seem to reflect human fantasy – a world where monogamy has been eradicated and where free love is the norm, where the state imposes orgies on its citizens – and the reader might wonder, 'Are we in fact in utopia?' One set of norms has been replaced with another. With wit and humour, Huxley praises Sigmund Freud in the novel, crediting him as the first person to expose the evils of 'family life'.⁵⁶ However, he stretches this idea to the extreme, voiding the concept of any meaningful relationships: 'Mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters. But there were also husbands, wives, lovers. There were also monogamy and romance.'⁵⁷ This quotation lists the range of individual relationships humans previously had, indicated by Huxley's use of the past tense. The lack of individual love enslaves the individual; the only meaningful relationship an individual can have is to the state. John Atkins discusses individual love when he writes about Orwell but I believe the quotation is as applicable to Huxley's work: 'The condition of love is isolation from the rest of the world.'⁵⁸ Individual love has no place in a world

⁵⁴ Huxley, 2007, p.36

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p.37

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.33

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.34

⁵⁸ John Atkins, *George Orwell: A Literary Study*, (London: John Calder (Publishers) Limited, 1954), p.248

where one exists to serve the collective and those who choose individual love pay the ultimate price.

Controlling love is a means to secure power within totalitarian regimes. It is a powerful vehicle, astutely analysed by Huxley, who compares *BNW* to Orwell's *NEF*. Huxley's fable encourages sexual activity; Orwell's prevents it.⁵⁹ Even though the regimes operate in opposing ways, they share the same aim – total control over the population and maintaining existing power structures. One offers the release of sexual tension without meaningful emotional attachment; the other controls both.⁶⁰ By controlling sexuality and love, the rulers of *NEF* guarantee a permanent state of tension among their subjects, which serves their perpetual state of war.⁶¹ By eliminating the family unit in *BNW* and enforcing sexual freedom, Huxley rids his fable of any kind of 'destructive (or creative) emotional tension'.⁶² It is the regime that decides how it will control its people: through science, technology, through rules and laws regulating relationships. It is irrelevant how love is controlled by the state, only that it is controlled. As Huxley concludes, the systemic infliction of pain in *NEF* is as brutal as the infliction of pleasure in *BNW*.⁶³ And, ultimately, both methods, both means, come to the same end: the end of individual freedom, which is the foundation of any dystopia. These methods are at the core of all 'collectivist regimes.'⁶⁴

One text that predates both Huxley's *BNW* and Orwell's *NEF*, and which was a notable influence on both writers, is Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*. It was Orwell's belief

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.42

⁶⁰ Huxley, 1959, p.42

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Claey's, 2018, p.370

that Huxley was deeply influenced by Zamyatin's novel.⁶⁵ I agree with Orwell, to a point. Zamyatin's 'mathematically infallible happiness' has an echo of Huxley's state-prescribed Soma conditioning people to be happy in *BNW*.⁶⁶ The novels also share very similar attitudes towards sex. 'Any Number has the right of access to any other Number as sexual product'⁶⁷ in *We*, while in *BNW* 'everyone belongs to everyone else'.⁶⁸ In his 1946 review of *We*, Orwell compares the similarities in 'atmosphere' and notes the 'rebellion' against reason in a 'painless world' in both novels, but suggests that Huxley's novel is not as politically alert as *We* and seems to be 'influenced by recent biological and psychological theories', such as psychoanalysis.⁶⁹ I contend that this is a harsh criticism to make. The texts share a deep concern about the loss of 'individuality'.⁷⁰ Take for example, the naming of characters. In *We*, the characters are referred to by numbers, or even titles, like the 'Benefactor'.⁷¹ The Benefactor rules 'OneState'⁷², much like Huxley's 'Director', who presides over the 'World State'.⁷³

The most interesting crossover, however, is in the concept of 'the savage'. Zamyatin uses 'savage' to refer to the reader's ancestors and illustrates this through use of a jacket: 'I'm sure a savage would look at a "jacket" and think, "What's that for? Just something else to carry."' ⁷⁴ Zamyatin, here, implies that the savage is

⁶⁵ George Orwell, *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell Volume IV In Front of Your Nose 1945–1950*, ed. Sonia Orwell and Ian Angus (London: Martin Secker & Warburg Limited, 1968), p.72

⁶⁶ Zamyatin, 2020, p.3

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.26

⁶⁸ Huxley, 2007, p.34

⁶⁹ Orwell, *Volume IV*, 1968, p.73

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.73

⁷¹ Zamyatin, 2020, p.3

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Huxley, 2007, p.1

⁷⁴ Zamyatin, 2020, p.13

primitive. Huxley, on the other hand, uses the word to relate to his readers, rather than their ancestors. The difference being is an ironical one as Huxley's readers would have had access to high art, unlike the 'progressive' citizens of *BNW*. The 'Savage' of Huxley's novel is John, a man who has access to high art, much like the reader, and who renounces the Brave New World in favour of individual freedom.

As readers, we are aware of the cultural vacuum in every character except John, who grew up reading Shakespeare and poetry. In a world in which everyone is happy, John, who belongs to a different, archaic, simpler world and has been brought into the Brave New World as an experiment, claims his right to be unhappy.⁷⁵ What gives the Savage access to such privilege is his status as an outsider and his knowledge of the old world. It is through this deeper understanding of the world that he is able to access unhappiness and thus remain an individual. Choosing unhappiness is a subversive act. In a utopia, or failed utopia, like the GDR, the role of the outsider is of great importance. In my own novel, *NSID*, in which Anna, the protagonist, unravels the web of lies surrounding her by assuming the role of the outsider and, like the outsiders in *BNW*, is punished by being interned to a notorious youth delinquency facility.

The Savage, 'the ultra-individualist John', is the true non-conformist of the story: he is a tourist in *BNW*, not a citizen.⁷⁶ Because he has not been artificially bred, because he grew up with a mother on a Reservation, where he was exposed to religion, high art and a different system of values, perhaps much closer to those of the reader, he feels alien in the superficial world to which he has been transported. The Controller acknowledges that if one has not been bred to accept happiness

⁷⁵ Ibid., pp.211-212

⁷⁶ Claeys, 2018, p.373

without questioning it, it is much harder to accept than truth.⁷⁷ Because of this, he offers the Savage the choice of two futures. ‘The most serious defect in the story’, according to Huxley.⁷⁸ The Savage is offered the choice between ‘an insane life in Utopia’ or ‘the life of a primitive’ on a Reservation.⁷⁹ Huxley reflects that giving the character ‘free will’ to decide between a life of ‘insanity’ or ‘lunacy’ was a great source of amusement and one he thought accurately reflected the human condition at the time.⁸⁰ John’s attachment to the old world, here characterised through his love of Shakespeare and poetry and religion, emotionally prevents John from becoming a citizen in the Brave New World. He refuses the state-prescribed drug Soma or any of the other numbing substances and chooses to be alone. He commits suicide after failing to find solace in his hermitage. Huxley notes that the Savage’s act of suicide means that he reasserts his own authority over himself – accessing his individual freedom – but has ultimately been driven to depart from ‘sanity’.⁸¹ Writing in 1946, Huxley admits that if he was to rewrite the book, he would give the Savage a third choice.⁸² Huxley would have given the Savage the chance of ‘sanity’, an option that would have technically existed with the Brave New World in a ‘community of exiles and refugees’.⁸³ John, like Winston Smith in Orwell’s *NEF*, pays the ultimate price for his freedom. As Huxley concludes in his essay, ‘without freedom, human beings cannot become fully human and that freedom is therefore supremely valuable.’⁸⁴

⁷⁷ Huxley, 2007, p.200

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.xlii

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² *Ibid.*, p.xliii

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ Huxley, 1959, p.164

Huxley's novel situates itself at the generic intersection of utopia, dystopia and satire, and uses historical events and trends to draw an image of the future in which the freedom of the individual is threatened. This is the overarching theme of all the texts discussed in subsequent chapters.

George Orwell

‘I know it is the fashion to say that most of recorded history is lies anyway. I am willing to believe that history is for the most part inaccurate and biased, but what is peculiar to our own age is the abandonment of the idea that history *could* be truthfully written.’¹

George Orwell is one of the most influential writers of the twentieth century, and it is doubtful that Margaret Atwood’s *THT* and Anna Burns’ *Milkman* would exist without *NEF*. Orwell was influenced by writers such as Jonathan Swift, Yevgeny Zamyatin, Aldous Huxley, and H.G. Wells, and this chapter will trace these connections through an examination of two of Orwell’s most famous novels: *AF* and *NEF*. Orwell’s concern with the deterioration of the English language and the subjectivity of recorded history will also be discussed. These concerns underpin a significant portion of Orwell’s work and have also seeped into the pages of *THT* and *Milkman*. The accuracy of recorded history and use of language colour these novels and Orwell’s bearing on them is evident.

We can trace the origins of both *AF* and *NEF* back to Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*, a world that predates totalitarianism as we now know it.² Orwell connects certain themes in the text, such as ‘war hysteria’ and reading ‘people’s secret thoughts’ through their faeces, with Swift’s interest in the ‘truthfulness of recorded history’.³ Both *AF* and *NEF* draw on these ideas. Orwell’s ‘Thought Police’ is perhaps

¹ Orwell, *Volume II*, 1970, p.296

² Orwell, 2009, p.302

³ *Ibid.*, p.302; p.300

a more efficient, less scatological version of what Swift had in mind when writing about secret thoughts.

The blurb of the 1988 Penguin Books paperback edition of *AF* makes the following claim:

'If this Swiftian satire has a moral, it is a bleakly ironic one [...] the animals' Utopia disintegrates into an oppressive, despotic regime, manipulated by the pigs' accomplished propaganda, until the slogans that heralded the new freedom are perverted into blatant contradiction.'⁴

The blurb emphasises the 'Swiftian' elements of *AF*. Like *Gulliver's Travels*, which is a satire of England in 1726, *AF* is a satire of the Russian Revolution (1917 – 1923).⁵ It is a disguised retelling, an allegory, of the Russian Revolution, depicted through a cast of animals, which investigates how history is produced, distorted and revised.⁶

It is important to note that Orwell was not afraid of revealing the historical events that inspired *AF*. In his preface to the 1947 Ukrainian translation, Orwell stresses two points: firstly, that several occurrences in the fable were taken from 'actual history of the Russian Revolution', but that these episodes were dealt with anachronistically, and, secondly, that the fable does not end with any form of 'reconciliation' but in 'discord'.⁷ In fact, Orwell goes as far as to say that the ending of the novel was inspired by the Tehran Conference of 1943, in which the allied forces

⁴ George Orwell, *Animal Farm: A Fairy Story* (London: Penguin Books, 1988), back cover

⁵ Orwell, 2009, p.294

⁶ *The Cambridge Introduction to George Orwell*, ed. by John Rodden and John Rossi (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p.82

⁷ Orwell, *Volume III*, 1970, p.459

of the U.S and Great Britain established an alliance with their former enemy, the Soviet Union.⁸ This maps onto Orwell's ending, which shows former adversaries, the farmers and the pigs, drinking to 'the prosperity of Manor Farm'.⁹

The issues Orwell portrays in *AF* might, at first glance, seem to be historical concerns, but they can be viewed outside of any historical context. Or, as Burgess puts it, *AF* 'is the story of the Russian Revolution; it is the story of any revolution.'¹⁰ Atwood read the fable when she was nine years old and, though she did not make 'any connection with historical events', she still experienced a strong sense that the 'pigs were so unjust', which shows the fable's accessibility.¹¹ *AF*, like *Gulliver's Travels*, offers various levels of entry for both young readers and more informed adult readers, and this is something I have sought to achieve in my own novel through use of a teenage protagonist.

AF was written at a time when Britain and the Soviet Union were allies, fighting alongside the United States against the Axis powers of Germany, Italy and Japan. Even under the cloak of allegory, the political implications of the novel were not popular. The Ministry of Information advised against the publication of the fable so as not to upset their Soviet allies, as Orwell writes in *The Tribune*.¹² Writing about recent political events under the distortion of allegory or through some other filter – be it dystopian or historical – is something Orwell greatly admired in Swift, who, he writes, was 'capable of picking out a single hidden truth and then magnifying it and

⁸ Orwell, *Volume III*, 1970, p.459

⁹ Orwell, 2013, p.102

¹⁰ Burgess, 1967, p.43

¹¹ Atwood, 2014, p.141

¹² Bernard Crick, *George Orwell: A Life* (London: Penguin Books, 1982), p.457

distorting it.¹³ It is also a technique deployed by Atwood and Burns, whose use of distortion I will discuss in subsequent chapters.

In his biography *George Orwell: A Life* (1980), Bernard Crick outlines the difficulty Orwell had in finding a publisher.¹⁴ Given that the fable was considered 'not OK politically', many publishers refused to touch it.¹⁵ Orwell's struggle to get *AF* published, must have, in some way, reminded him of the British press reporting on the Spanish Civil War: 'Yet, after all, *some* kind of history will be written, and after those who actually remember the war are dead, it will be universally accepted. So for all political purpose the lie will have become truth.'¹⁶ Here, Orwell draws attention to the artificiality and subjectivity of recorded history, a theme he revisits in *NEF*, and the drowning out of any opposing or questioning voices. In brief, Orwell must have felt silenced by the Ministry of Information's interference.

The novel was eventually published in 1945. Having agreed to publish, it took Secker & Warburg a further year to actually print it due to paper shortage during the war.¹⁷ By the time *AF* reached bookshops, the war was over and political allegiances were changing. As Orwell outlines in his preface to the Ukrainian edition: 'I personally did not believe that such good relations would last long; and, as events have shown, I wasn't far wrong...'¹⁸ He certainly was not.

Atkins notes in his literary study, *George Orwell* (1954), that *AF* is a 'Socialist's mockery at the expense of Soviet Russia' and, because of that, melts comfortably into the form of 'political satire'.¹⁹ The fable deals with life under an

¹³ Orwell, 2009, p.315

¹⁴ Crick, 1982, pp.452-460

¹⁵ Orwell, *Volume III*, 1970, p.119

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.296

¹⁷ Crick, 1982, pp.454-461

¹⁸ Orwell, *Volume III*, 1970, p.459

¹⁹ Atkins, 1954, pp.221-222

oppressive, totalitarian regime. As such, it can be read as a failed utopia. Crick notes the 'intellectual continuity' between *AF* and *NEF* and suggests that *NEF* picks up where *AF* left off, depicting what happens after the revolution.²⁰ Thematically, there can be no doubt that *NEF* is a continuation of *AF* and it is necessary to chart the evolution of these themes.

Let us consider *AF* as a failed utopia. Greenblatt argues that the animals are trying to create their very own 'utopian community'.²¹ The blurb of the 1951 edition supports this view. The animals began the revolution with the best intentions. They wanted a better life. They wanted equality. This is evidenced by the seven commandments:

- '1. Whatever goes upon two legs is an enemy.
2. Whatever goes upon four legs, or has wings, is a friend.
3. No animal shall wear clothes.
4. No animal shall sleep in a bed.
5. No animal shall drink alcohol.
6. No animal shall kill any other animal.
7. All animals are equal.'²²

It is important to note that the commandments ensure equal treatment for all animals, while also creating a clear distinction between animals (proletariat) and humans (bourgeoisie), and, as we have discovered, 'equality' is the cornerstone of

²⁰ Crick, 1982, p.450

²¹ S. J. Greenblatt, *Three Modern Satirists* (Yale: New Haven, 1965), p.63

²² Orwell, 2013, p.17

any utopian society.²³ It should also be noted that this allegory points to a Marxist view of history.

As the novel progresses, allegiances change. The concept of the common, invisible enemy is a constant theme here, much like the 'war hysteria' in Swift.²⁴ Old Major proclaims at the beginning of the fable: 'Is it not crystal clear, then, comrades, that all the evils of this life of ours spring from the tyranny of human beings?'²⁵ Initially, Mr Jones is the enemy.²⁶ This is then generalised to encompass anyone on 'two legs'.²⁷ Whenever the other animals question the pigs about why they do not share the milk and the apples, the pigs chant, 'Jones would come back!' and so the animals are locked in a cycle of war hysteria, with constant rumours of Jones planning to 'recapture the farm'.²⁸ This hysteria is later fuelled by the plight of Snowball, who, after building a windmill, is labelled a villain and blamed for everything that goes wrong on the farm.²⁹

Thought control in *AF* is not exercised through the investigation of any of the animals' excrement, but through the systematic control of who learns to read and write. Of course, it is only the pigs who can do it 'perfectly'.³⁰ A consequence of this is that none of the other animals are sure what the seven commandments originally said, making it possible for the pigs to whittle them down to just one:

'All animals are equal but some animals are more equal than others.'³¹

²³ Claeys, 2020, p.59

²⁴ Orwell, 2009, p.302

²⁵ Orwell, 2013, p.5

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p.24

²⁸ Ibid., p.25; p.29

²⁹ Ibid., p.57

³⁰ Ibid., p.23

³¹ Ibid., p.97

In this single sentence we can see the foundations of Newspeak or doublethink, and its elegance shows off Orwell's excellent, self-reflective use of language, illustrating how language becomes the basis of all power. By definition, something that is equal (to something else) is no better or worse than its companion. It is not possible for something to be 'more equal'. 'More equal', then, is not a comparative or superlative version of 'equal' but its opposite, and ultimately highlights the oppression of individual freedom. 'More equal' is to *AF* what '2 + 2 = 5' is to *NEF*.³²

The slogans in *AF* provide the overarching source of satire, in my opinion, whereas the slogans in *NEF* operate on a different level. The contradictions these slogans express – 'War is Peace, Freedom is Slavery, Ignorance is Strength' – are not amusing because of their bleak execution within the novel.³³ They are true, and their brutal reinforcement does not carry the same level of absurdity as those in *AF*. But, of course, they both reflect Orwell's concern about the simplification of the English language, a simplification that remains prominent in politics today. In his essay 'Politics and the English Language', Orwell discusses the idea that 'political language [...] is designed to make lies sound truthful and murder respectable'³⁴ – something he dramatises to great effect in both novels.

Orwell's use of language underscores his concern with the rewriting and editing – the distortion – of history, and the contradiction that lies within this process. We, the readers, can turn back the pages and see for ourselves that once upon a time there were seven commandments. The animals in the story lack such solid

³² Orwell, 2000, p.303

³³ Ibid., p.6

³⁴ Orwell, 2009, p.285

proof. The rewriting of history, then, only functions within the novel and it is the reader's job to bear witness to it. Orwell attempted to do just this outside of his fictional writings. In 1946, he, along with H.G. Wells and other prominent writers, put his name to an open letter to the British press, in which they called for 'an investigation aimed at the establishment of historical truth'.³⁵ The letter, though widely circulated, was only published in *Forward*, and no such investigation was undertaken. Of course, this also resonates with Swift's concern about the accuracy and honesty of 'recorded history'³⁶, which is also relevant to Atwood's *THT* and Anna Burns' *Milkman*, as well as my own novel, *NSID*.

Orwell understood the relationship between history and language, and it is through Winston Smith in *NEF* that he explores this relationship in more detail. Winston Smith works in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth, where it is his job to rewrite the news in order to demonstrate to the people that Big Brother is always right.³⁷ A modern reader might say that Winston Smith is employed in the production of fake news. The real concern, here, is the 'mutability of the past', which applies to the entire history of Airstrip One but also to Winston's own life.³⁸ Even Winston's childhood is lost to him: 'he could not remember: nothing remained of his childhood except a series of bright-lit tableaux, occurring against no background and mostly unintelligible.'³⁹ This has an impact on one's sense of self: 'If both the past and the external world exist only in the mind and if the mind itself is controllable – what then?'⁴⁰ This implies that one's own past is as controllable as that of an entire

³⁵ Orwell, *Volume IV*, 1968, p.115

³⁶ Orwell, 2009, p.300

³⁷ Orwell, 2000, p.5

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.163

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p.5

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.84

nation and it seems that solid objects are the only true bearers of history. Take, for example, the paperweight Winston admires:

'It was as though the surface of the glass had been the arch of the sky, enclosing a tiny world with its atmosphere complete. He had the feeling that he could get inside it, along with the mahogany bed and the gate-leg table, and the clock and the steel engraving and the paperweight itself. The paperweight was the room he was in, and the coral was Julia's life and his own, fixed in a sort of eternity at the heart of the crystal.'⁴¹

Winston has the capacity to fantasise, to dream-up a better life, to imagine a world in which only he and Julia exist, a world outside of and separate from the regime. Orwell does not portray this through the telescreens or any other technology in the novel, but through a paperweight, an old-fashioned, nostalgic object. The object is solid; it cannot be altered. As Winston points out, 'Do you realise that the past, starting from yesterday, has been actually abolished? If it survives anywhere, it's in a few solid objects with no words attached to them, like that lump of glass there.'⁴² It is interesting that the paperweight is described as 'transparent' – it is a vehicle for hope, for reflecting. If we think back to Swift's definition of satire, employing the image of a glass (probably a mirror) for his analogy, it is even more interesting to consider Orwell's choice of object. Yes, Winston regards the paperweight and, in so doing, sees himself, but not as he is in that moment. What Winston sees is a fantasy, a form of escapism that provides him, and the reader, with a modicum of comfort. It can also be read as a metaphor for the past: past

⁴¹ Ibid., p.154

⁴² Ibid., p.162

events are unalterable; they are solid. Only the meaning and narrative we attach to them can be controlled.

In a later scene, O'Brien tells Winston, ““Who controls the present controls the past””⁴³ and it is under this umbrella that the two men discuss the notion of reality and its existence. This raises questions about the control of memory but the answers, to the alert reader, seem obvious: the oligarchy controls the news and controls history, and so controls the people. By determining what is true, they can enforce the belief that ‘2 + 2 = 5’, which is the epitome of living under an oppressive regime – it externalises the psychology of systematic oppression.⁴⁴ In my chapter on Margaret Atwood, I will consider how memories of the past in *THT* offer the reader brief periods of respite, while the erasing, suppressing and repressing of memories, will be discussed more fully when I come to Anna Burns, who uses the concept of ‘jamais vu’ in her novel *Milkman*.

The world of *NEF* is one, as Burgess remarks, ‘in which the individual has lost all his rights of moral choice’, which implies a loss of freedom.⁴⁵ Orwell discusses this idea in his broadcast ‘Literature and Totalitarianism’, using as an example the quickly changing political allegiances in the lead up to the Second World War.⁴⁶ The ‘emotional life’ of the Germans under Hitler’s rule was subject to ‘violent change’: in one moment they were expected to hate the Bolsheviks, in the next they were ordered to love them.⁴⁷ The obedience demanded of the German

⁴³ Ibid., p.260

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.303

⁴⁵ Anthony Burgess, *1985* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 2013), p.8

⁴⁶ Orwell, *Volume II*, 1970, pp.161-164

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.163

army is also demanded of the citizens of Oceania, who, though they are always at war, are faced with a rapidly changing enemy.⁴⁸

The example of the Germans is interesting. Orwell spent much of the war writing about his disillusionment with ‘the intellectuals who for ten dreadful years have kept it up that [Hitler] is merely a figure out of a comic opera,’ and it is in this same broadcast from 1941 that Orwell criticises his favourite boyhood author, H.G. Wells, for exactly that kind of thinking.⁴⁹ When the broadcast was later reprinted in the *Listener*, Orwell received an ‘[a]busive letter from H.G. Wells’, in which he addresses him as “‘you shit”, among other things.⁵⁰ This particular argument aside, Roberts claims that Orwell was indebted to H.G. Wells’ *The Holy Terror* (1939)⁵¹, in which a ‘global war continues’ throughout the narrative.⁵² This, of course, echoes the plot to *NEF*. The other comparison Roberts draws between the novels is the use of language, more specifically the ‘simplified English’ used in Wells’ novel, which Orwell later develops into Newspeak.⁵³

Like Huxley, Orwell was concerned with the loss of individual freedom above all else.⁵⁴ In a 1941 BBC broadcast, Orwell discusses the ways in which totalitarianism ‘isolates you from the outside world’ and how it controls the ‘thoughts and emotions’ of its citizens.⁵⁵ There seems to be only one other agent as powerful as totalitarianism when it comes to cutting individuals off from society, which Atkins, writing about Orwell, identifies thus: ‘The condition of love is isolation from the rest of

⁴⁸ Orwell, 2000, p.189

⁴⁹ Orwell, *Volume II*, 1970, p.168; Orwell, *Volume IV*, 1968, p.344

⁵⁰ Orwell, *Volume II*, 1970, p.469

A prelude to the exchange is detailed in Crick, *George Orwell*, 1980, pp.427-431

⁵¹ H. G. Wells, *The Holy Terror* (London: Simon and Schuster, 1939)

⁵² Roberts, 2019, p.405

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Atwood, 2014, p.146

⁵⁵ Orwell, *Volume II*, 1970, p.162

the world.⁵⁶ The connection between the loss of individuality and the right to individual love is something Orwell notes when discussing Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), in which the Houyhnhnms have 'no word for "love,"' and 'their marriages are arranged'.⁵⁷ These themes are not only familiar to us from Huxley's *BNW*, they are also deeply engrained in Orwell's work. Orwell read Swift when he was eight years old, in much the same way Atwood read *AF* when she was in primary school.⁵⁸ Zamyatin, too, writes about the links between love and power in *We*: 'Love and hunger rule the world.'⁵⁹ Orwell must have been deeply influenced by Zamyatin's novel, which he reviewed in 1946, comparing it to Huxley's *BNW*.⁶⁰ In 1944, Orwell wrote to Gleb Struve, thanking him for a volume of '25 Years of Soviet Russian Literature' and mentioning his particular interest in Zamyatin's novel.⁶¹ Orwell writes, 'I am interested in that kind of book, and even keep making notes for one myself'.⁶² The similarities between *We* and *NEF* are striking and Orwell's novel could be read as a response to the other, specifically with respect to the ending, which Orwell subverts. This, I will discuss in more detail later in this chapter.

In a letter from 1948, Orwell criticised a draft blurb of the English edition of the novel, which, he believed, made *NEF* sound too much like a 'thriller mixed up with a love story'.⁶³ This is interesting given that, in the novel, love is controlled, sex is prohibited, and any marriage must be authorised and arranged by the Party.⁶⁴ Where Huxley depicted a society in which promiscuity is heavily encouraged but the family

⁵⁶ Atkins, 1954, p.248

⁵⁷ Orwell, 2009, p.309

⁵⁸ Orwell, 2009, p.311; Atwood, 2014, p.141

⁵⁹ Zamyatin, 2020, p.25

⁶⁰ Orwell, *Volume IV*, 1968, p.72

⁶¹ Orwell, *Volume III*, 1970, p.118

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Orwell, *Volume IV*, 1968, p.460

⁶⁴ Orwell, 2000, pp.68-69

unit abandoned, Orwell creates a world in which feelings can change in an instant.⁶⁵ It is important to bear in mind that, as Huxley points out, the aim for these regimes is total control over the population in order to maintain existing power structures. In order to achieve this, Orwell outlaws the release of sexual tension.⁶⁶ By controlling sexuality and love, the rulers of *NEF* guarantee a permanent state of tension among their subjects, which serves their perpetual state of war.⁶⁷

The love interest in *NEF*, Julia, passes Winston Smith a note, which says 'I love you'.⁶⁸ Atkins says of Julia that she represents the 'weakness of love; its isolation' and that love is 'individual in its action'.⁶⁹ What this means, then, from the point of view of the oligarchy in *NEF*, is that love must be avoided – prohibited, even – at all costs, because the success of the regime depends on total obedience and loyalty from its citizens.⁷⁰ The character of Julia seems to be inspired by Zamyatin's femme fatale, I-330, who, like Julia, initiates the love affair, even though this is prohibited by the state, and is punished for it.⁷¹ D-503 later betrays I-330, in much the same way Winston betrays Julia.⁷² Winston and Julia's love seems to be based on political ideas rather than real feelings: for Winston, his love for Julia is a weapon 'to challenge the Party'; for Julia, it is an excuse to break the rules, through the act of making love.⁷³ Burgess wonders if having sex is Julia's idea of freedom as well as the only way she knows to express love.⁷⁴ Whether their love is real or imagined, it

⁶⁵ Burgess, 2013, p.84

⁶⁶ Huxley, 1959, p.42

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Orwell, 2000, p.113

⁶⁹ Atkins, 1954, p.248

⁷⁰ Burgess, 2013, p.84

⁷¹ Orwell, *Volume IV*, 1968, p.74

⁷² Zamyatin, 2020, p.257

⁷³ Atkins, 1954, p.248

⁷⁴ Burgess, 2013, p.85

also serves another purpose. When Julia and Winston are caught, they betray one another:

“I betrayed you,” she said baldly.

“I betrayed you,” he said.

She gave him another quick look of dislike.⁷⁵

In the same way he betrayed Julia over his fear of rats, Winston also betrayed his mother over a bar of chocolate when he was a child:

‘Tragedy, he perceived, belonged to the ancient time, to a time when there was still privacy, love and friendship, and when the members of a family stood by one another without needing to know the reason. His mother’s memory tore at his heart because she had died loving him, when he was too young and selfish to love her in return, and because somehow, he did not remember how, she had sacrificed herself to a conception of loyalty that was private and unalterable.’⁷⁶

What this suggests is that, even at a time when love existed, Winston was incapable of loving. By his own admission, he was too ‘selfish’ to love his mother. Perhaps in the same way, he is incapable of loving Julia and, instead, uses her as a vehicle to express his apparent disillusionment with the Party.

Burgess believes Winston’s incapacity for love is Orwell’s own ‘testimony of despair.’⁷⁷ Burgess asserts that, towards the end of his life, Orwell had lost hope in

⁷⁵ Orwell, 2000, p.305

⁷⁶ Ibid., p.32

⁷⁷ Burgess, 2013, p.88

the working classes and with this loss of hope came an inability to love.⁷⁸ Winston's affirmation that he loves Big Brother and his subsequent death, Burgess concludes, confirm 'the death of freedom'.⁷⁹ This also implies that love is a symbol for the death of individuality because the love Winston proclaims for Big Brother absorbs him into the regime, into the collective. Once Winston succumbs to loving Big Brother, he ceases to be an individual. However, Burgess' conclusion might be overly pessimistic.

Orwell's appendix, 'Principles of Newspeak', though perhaps much misunderstood, offers a genuine source of hope. Margaret Atwood and Andrew Milner have both noted that the appendix historicises the novel. Yes, Winston Smith has been consumed by the regime. As Orwell writes: 'He had won the victory over himself. He loved Big Brother.'⁸⁰ This last line is followed by the words 'The End'. It might be true that this is the end for Winston, but, as is the case with dystopias, this is a novel about ideas. So the questions posed by the novel relate to a wider world, not simply one individual. The fact that Winston does not witness the fall of the regime is irrelevant. The appendix is written in 'standard English', the 'third person', and in the 'past tense', all of which suggest a collapsed regime.⁸¹ Orwell subverts the ending of Zamyatin's *We* in *NEF*. In *We*, D-503 challenges the regime, much like Winston Smith in *NEF*, and the regime seemingly collapses in what appears to be the final chapter, 'Record 39, The End'.⁸² However, Zamyatin includes another chapter, 'Record 40, Facts, The Bell, I Am Certain'⁸³, in which the reader learns that

⁷⁸ Ibid.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.89

⁸⁰ Orwell, 2000, p.311

⁸¹ Andrew Milner, 'Introduction' in *Tenses of Imagination: Raymond Williams on Science Fiction, Utopia and Dystopia*, ed. by Andrew Milner (New York: Peter Lang, 2010), p.6

⁸² Zamyatin, 2020, p.249

⁸³ Ibid., p.256

not only has the regime survived but D-503 has been operated on and now fully supports the regime.⁸⁴ D-503, like Winston, has been consumed by the state. However, in *NEF*, though Winston dies, the reader witnesses the fall of Big Brother, whereas Zamyatin ends his final chapter with D-503's affirmation to the regime, to the Benefactor, because 'reason has to win.'⁸⁵ The impact of the report or appendix cannot be overstated: it provides relief to the reader, an assurance that everything will be fine in the end. It also shows that Orwell was not, as Burgess supposed, without hope and, as Atwood points out, believed in the 'resilience of the human spirit'.⁸⁶ Atwood's decision to include 'Historical Notes' in *THT* was inspired by *NEF* and their inclusion has the same effect as Orwell's appendix.⁸⁷ Burns' use of retrospectivity in *Milkman* and my own use of the postcard in *NSID* fulfil an equally optimistic function: they signal to the reader that there is hope beyond the narrative.

Each of these post-narrative codas serves to historicise the events of their respective novels. Presenting a constructed, dystopian novel as an historical artefact has a further, dual function: it operates as an act of creating a history, while simultaneously commenting on the fact that history is created.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Ibid., p.258

⁸⁶ Atwood, 2014, p.145

⁸⁷ Atwood, 2005, p.292

Margaret Atwood

‘I suppose that's what happens to utopian societies when they die: they don't go to Heaven, they become thesis topics.’¹

Margaret Atwood has written extensively on the concepts of utopia and dystopia and her work is very much in conversation with that of George Orwell and Aldous Huxley. Atwood describes *NEF* and *BNW* as two presentations of ‘man-made Hell’: one a brutal totalitarian state, the other a state-regulated idyll.² In the same way Huxley and Orwell responded to Swift, H.G. Wells, and Zamyatin, Atwood acknowledges the influence Orwell and Huxley, have had on her writing, both of whom she read when she was young.³ By being in dialogue with these writers, Atwood has progressed the genre of dystopian fiction and arrived at her own terminology: ustopia. In the same way that Wells’ “scientific romances” were ‘pioneer[s] of science fiction’, Atwood is a pioneer of speculative fiction.⁴ Burgess states that, ‘Wells is perhaps the only “progressive” writer of the early modern age to have been both absorbed and reacted against.’⁵ Orwell and Huxley are indebted to H.G. Wells, though both had tumultuous relationships with him, the latter being described by Burgess as ‘the greatest anti-Wellsian of them all’.⁶ Their reactions against ‘Wellsian Utopia’ in *NEF* and *BNW* are woven into *THT*.⁷ Atwood acknowledges that “Science Fiction” as a

¹ Atwood, 2014, p.91

² Ibid., p.148

³ Ibid., p.143

⁴ H. G. Wells, *The Time Machine* (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), p.xvi; Burgess, 1967, p.38

⁵ Burgess, 1967, p.38

⁶ Ibid., p.39

⁷ Orwell, *Volume II*, 1970, p.170

term was unknown to Wells', the term only being coined in the United States in the 1930s.⁸ This is also true of Atwood and ustopia, the difference being that Atwood coined the term herself. This chapter will trace the origins of Atwood's ustopia and consider why she felt the need to coin her own term through an exploration of her relationship with the genre of science fiction, and the importance of setting when it comes to ustopian narratives through a close reading of *THT*.

Given Atwood's status as a genre pioneer, it is important to start with a consideration of her relationship with the genre of science fiction. Reviewing Atwood's 2009 novel, *The Year of the Flood*⁹ in the *Guardian*, Ursula K. Le Guin takes aim at Atwood for claiming not to be a writer of science fiction.¹⁰ Le Guin asserts that Atwood's non-realist novels, *THT*, *Oryx and Crake* (2003)¹¹ and *The Year of the Flood*, bear the hallmarks of science fiction, drawing 'imaginatively from current trends and events to a near-future that's half prediction, half satire.'¹² Warner describes H.G. Wells' technique when writing scientific romances as inverting 'the usual far-fetched material of fantasy into seemingly "near-fetched" observations.'¹³ The two definitions overlap: both incorporate the idea of 'current trends', or a 'near-fetchedness', essentially something that can be explained, or as Warner asserts, a 'scientific truth' when it comes to H.G. Wells.¹⁴ Atwood, however, has developed her own definition of what science fiction is: it is fiction in which things happen that are

⁸ Atwood, 2005, p.390

⁹ Margaret Atwood, *The Year of the Flood* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2009)

¹⁰ Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Year of the Flood by Margaret Atwood' in *Guardian*, 29 Aug 2009, para. 1 of 14 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/aug/29/margaret-atwood-year-of-flood>> [last accessed 14 April 2020]

¹¹ Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2003)

¹² Le Guin, 2009, para. 1 of 14

¹³ Wells, 2005, p.xix

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.xvi

impossible.¹⁵ Atwood's implication is that even though things like time travel can be explained through science, they are, ultimately, impossible. Take, for example, H.G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), in which technology is used to travel through time. Atwood asserts that if the term science implies 'the known and possible', then Wells was paying 'little attention to those boundaries.'¹⁶ Wells wrote during a period of what Warner describes as 'unsurpassed scientific discovery'¹⁷ and uses science to, in his own words, '*domesticate* the impossible'.¹⁸ But the fact remains, the advances he depicts are the stuff of fiction; they are impossible.

Atwood, on the other hand, is adamant that nothing impossible happens in her non-realist novels. There is a basis, a foundation, for everything: what happens has already happened somewhere in the world or is within the parameters of happening.¹⁹ This implies a degree of realism, which forms the basis for what Gregory Claeys terms the 'Atwood principle'.²⁰

Le Guin and Atwood settled their dispute in a public discussion as part of the Portland Arts and Lectures series in 2010, agreeing to disagree. Though they are describing the same qualities, they deploy different labels: what is speculative fiction to Atwood is science fiction to Le Guin, and what is science fiction to Atwood is fantasy to Le Guin.²¹ Atwood concludes: 'When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance.'²²

¹⁵ Atwood, 2005, p.92

¹⁶ Ibid., p.390

¹⁷ Wells, 2005, p.xx

¹⁸ H. G. Wells, *Seven Famous Novels* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1934), p.viii

¹⁹ Atwood, 2005, p.92

²⁰ Claeys, 2018, p. 287

²¹ Atwood, 2014, p.7

²² Ibid.

Much of Atwood's exploratory writing around genre focuses on the intersection between utopias and dystopias.²³ As discussed in my chapter on Huxley, there is a clear overlap between satire and dystopia, in particular that they are political in nature. Darko Suvin suggests that the 'dramatic strategies' deployed in utopias often conflict with 'the reader's presumption of normality.'²⁴ This is also true of dystopias. Dystopia, however, depends heavily on point-of-view.

From 1961 until 1989, East Berlin was separated from West Berlin, and the rest of West Germany, by a wall. One side socialist, the other capitalist. Depending on which side of the wall you found yourself, you might have thought of the wall as keeping you safe or penning you in. Gregory Claeys uses the analogy of the wall in relation to utopian and dystopian societies in *Dystopia: A Natural History* (2017), measuring a society's level of utopianism and dystopianism by the stated purpose of the wall.²⁵ If a wall was erected to keep others out, its purpose is most definitely utopian. However, if it was built to keep its citizens in, it is a dystopian society.

Atwood recognises the similarities between utopias and dystopias, in that both are based on exclusion as much as they are on inclusion. This is, of course, especially interesting if we consider the roles of the John 'the Savage' in *BNW* and Winston Smith in *NEF*: in both cases the outsider is punished and dies. In both cases the hero is considered, to use Burgess' term, 'eccentric'.²⁶ Most utopias regarded from the perspective of the people who don't fit in could easily be referred

²³ Atwood, 2014, pp.2-7

²⁴ Darko Suvin paraphrased in David Seed, *Science Fiction: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p.73

²⁵ Claeys, 2018, p.8

²⁶ Burgess, 1967, p.45

to as dystopias.²⁷ So it is not simply a case of utopia equals good, dystopia equals bad; it depends on one's perspective.²⁸

Atwood uses as an example the seventeenth-century Puritan New Englanders. From utopian beginnings, the Puritans set out to build a better society, and the first things they built were a prison and a scaffold.²⁹ The creation of a prison and a platform for public executions embodies the concept of punishment and so acknowledges the existence of resistance and transgression within a utopian society. Atwood points towards Thomas More, stating: 'As for the utopias, from Thomas More onwards, there is always provision made for the renegades, those who don't or won't follow the rules: prison, enslavement, exile, exclusion or execution.'³⁰ Considering Atwood's assertion, it is apparent that all societies – be they utopian or dystopian – anticipate some form of resistance. The notion that every utopia contains the seeds of a dystopia is one of the defining features of Atwood's ustopia.

In her spat with Le Guin, Atwood uses the term 'speculative fiction' rather than ustopia. This is because her argument with Le Guin predates her coining of the term. In her lecture 'Writing Utopia' (1989), later collected in *Writing With Intent* (2005), Atwood outlines the process of writing *THT*, and for much of the essay she refers to the novel as a 'Utopia-Dystopia'.³¹ In order to create ustopia, Atwood merged the concepts of utopia and dystopia: '*Ustopia* is a word I made up by combining utopia and dystopia—the imagined perfect society and its opposite—because, in my view, each contains a latent version of the other.'³² There is almost always an element of

²⁷ Atwood, 2014, pp. 66-67

²⁸ Atwood, 2005, p. 93

²⁹ Atwood, 2014, p.83

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.86

³¹ Atwood, 2005, p.93

³² Atwood, 2014, p.66, Atwood's italics

utopia within dystopias, with many dystopias, like the GDR, starting as imagined utopias. In her essay 'Dire Cartographies: The Road to Ustopia', Atwood discusses utopias and their origins.³³ This essay traces utopia's journey from unexplored islands, to increasingly remote islands, and, eventually, to the edges of the map.³⁴

As maps became more detailed, the scope for hitherto undiscovered places narrowed, and writers and myth-makers were forced to take their stories underground, where they remained until advances in Geology.³⁵ New settings were sought in time, rather than space, and the future replaced the unknown island.³⁶ This creates other worlds.³⁷ Though they depict another place or time, these kinds of narratives, as Burgess suggests, are about the here and now.³⁸

A knock-on effect of the future-setting is that it opened up the possibility of setting utopian and dystopian stories in the past. Parallel universes gave way to a past so long ago that all textual traces of it had disappeared.³⁹ The past, like the future, has the power to engender a sense of estrangement, of alienation. This is pertinent to my discussion of *THT*, but also to Anna Burns' *Milkman* and my own novel, *NSID*, both of which are set in the past.

It is important to begin a discussion of *THT* – in light of our understanding of ustopias – with an exploration of the novel's conception and its setting. Atwood started writing the novel while in West Berlin during the early 1980s.⁴⁰ A visit to East

³³ Atwood, 2014, pp. 66-96

This lecture was part of the Richard Ellmann Lectures in Modern Literature, delivered by Atwood in October 2010. It is likely that this is the first time she used the term 'ustopia'.

³⁴ Ibid., p.67

³⁵ Ibid., pp.68-69

³⁶ Ibid., pp.70-73

³⁷ Ibid., p.24

³⁸ Burgess, 1967, p.45

³⁹ Atwood, 2014, p.70

⁴⁰ Atwood, 2014, p.86

Berlin gave her access to ‘a totalitarian – but supposedly utopian – regime’ and an insight into life under such conditions.⁴¹ It is no coincidence, then, that there are fragments of the GDR in the Republic of Gilead. There are references to ‘real coffee’, the ‘black market’ and ‘the Wall’.⁴² Fruits, like oranges, are not always available in Gilead, which, I believe, is a reference to the GDR’s deal with Cuba to supply them with oranges in exchange for cement factories.⁴³ There are also the ‘Eyes’, whose job it is to spy on the citizens of Gilead, much like the Stasi operatives in the GDR.⁴⁴

Gilead and the GDR are both situated within countries they once belonged to before becoming ideologically and geographically isolated. Progress – both economic and technological – slowed in these countries, if it did not halt altogether, and as a consequence, they feel oddly old-fashioned, a window onto the past.

The old-fashioned, period feel of *THT* can be attributed in part to Atwood’s costume choices, but also to the makeup, infrastructure and texture of the world she depicts. As Atwood explains, the handmaid’s distinctive costume ‘was inspired by the figure on the Old Dutch Cleanser boxes of my childhood, but they are also simply old.’⁴⁵ This brand of cleanser depicts a woman in traditional Dutch costume, wearing a bonnet, reminiscent of the description Atwood chose for the handmaids: the ankle-length skirt, the gloves and the wings that frame the face.⁴⁶

The handmaid’s costume, given its real-world influence, will carry the weight of recognition for readers of a certain age, grounding the narrative in a known reality. This recognition can be extended to the novel’s setting. Rather than opening with the

⁴¹ Ibid., p.87

⁴² Atwood, 1996, p.20; p.24; p.41

⁴³ Ibid., p.35; ‘Die Kuba-Orange: "Fidels Rache" in *MDR Zeitreise*, para. 4 of 7 <<https://www.mdr.de/zeitreise/kuba-orangen-in-der-ddr100.html>> [last accessed 15 May 2021]

⁴⁴ Atwood, 1996, p.28

⁴⁵ Atwood, 2014, pp.88-89

⁴⁶ Atwood, 1996, p.18

clocks striking thirteen (Orwell) or a description of a London high-rise hatchery (Huxley), Atwood invites us into a repurposed gymnasium, where an as-yet-unnamed protagonist muses about the teenagers who would have passed through it.⁴⁷ The protagonist leads the reader through different time periods, mentioning 'mini-skirts' and 'spiky green-streaked hair'.⁴⁸ Atwood, via her protagonist, guides the reader from the 1960s through to the 1980s. This is the element of realism Gregory Claeys meant when discussing Atwood's style. But slowly, she reveals more about the world of the novel. The 'army-issue blankets, old ones that still said U.S.' signify to the reader that, yes, this is a world that is familiar but also different.⁴⁹ Something strange is going on. It appears, from this first page, that the United States, as the reader knows it, no longer exists. In this version of the United States there are 'the Aunts' and there are 'the Angels', and there are five names: 'Alma. Janine. Dolores. Moira. June.'⁵⁰ Atwood grounds the narrative in the familiar. Only once she has established that her world looks very much like our own, once she has anchored it, does she begin to distort it. It is our world, but in the near-future. The version of the United States the reader might be familiar with is referred to as 'the time before'.⁵¹

This reference to a past within the world of the novel offers a further means of distinguishing the novel's setting from the world we know. Atwood utilises three narrative timeframes: the narrator's past (the reader's present), the narrator's present (the reader's future that feels like a past long ago) and the future (in the form of the 'Historical Notes', an appendix to the novel). The use of different timeframes will be explored in greater depth when I discuss Anna Burns, who manipulates the

⁴⁷ Ibid., p.13

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p.14

⁵¹ Ibid., p.20

narrative in a similar way. In utopian narratives, these timeframes allow for transition between utopias and dystopias in a way reminiscent of the 'yin and yang pattern' Atwood describes.⁵² Offred's past, the reader's present, gives the character, but also the reader, access to relief, to utopia. This timeframe functions in much the same way as Winston Smith's moment with the paperweight: it provides hope but it also links in with Atwood's idea of literary landscapes as states of mind – both Winston and Offred visit these utopias in their minds, through memories and imaginings. These places do not physically exist. This is a particularly telling distinction, given that the word utopia, far from meaning 'perfect' place, in fact, means 'no place'.⁵³ Though these nowhere places do not exist in any tangible sense, Offred has full control over when and how she accesses them: 'But the night is my time out. Where should I go? Somewhere good.'⁵⁴

Soma, the state prescribed drug in *BNW*, also fits the criteria. Though what Huxley's characters experience and feel while under the influence of Soma is artificially produced, it is difficult to assess for the reader if Offred's memories are real or imagined. However, the important aspect to note is that these moments, these retreats, bring the characters and, by extension, the reader, relief. They function as utopian landscapes and, as Atwood demonstrates, access to these landscapes is a matter of personal choice for Offred, in a similar way to the inhabitants of WorldState, who willingly consume Soma.

Though physical setting is an important part of an utopian narrative, for Atwood, utopia is just as much a state of mind.⁵⁵ In fact, according to Atwood, a

⁵² Atwood, 2014, p.85

⁵³ Atwood, 2005, p.93

⁵⁴ Atwood, 1996, p.47

⁵⁵ Atwood, 2014, p.75

literary landscape and a character's state of mind are linked.⁵⁶ Characters can access a utopian or dystopian space through memories (the past) or imaginings (the future): the 'state of mind' is linked to temporal spaces.⁵⁷ The state of mind is the gateway to utopia.

In *THT*, Atwood buries the utopian landscapes in two places: 'one is in the past—the past that is our own present. The second is placed in a future beyond the main story by the Afterword at the end of the book'.⁵⁸ The future is represented by Atwood's 'Historical Notes on *The Handmaid's Tale*', which functions similarly to Orwell's 'Appendix'. It signifies a hopeful ending: though we are not certain of Offred's fate, the historical notes indicate that Gilead, like IngSoc in *NEF*, has fallen.⁵⁹ It implies that, in the end, even though the novels' individuals have died, 'individuality' has triumphed over collectivism.⁶⁰ This furnishes the narrative – be it in *THT* or *NEF* – with an element of utopia, harking back to the account of the time traveller/reporter, which was made popular by Thomas More's *Utopia*.⁶¹ It also, of course, historicises the novel. By comparison, WorldState does not collapse at the end of *BNW*. John the Savage, the true individual, the traveller, commits suicide and the regime continues. This is also true of Zamyatin's *We*: D-503 who is operated on and consumed by the regime.

What the protagonists of all these novels desire is the freedom of individualism. Early on in *THT*, Offred remembers the freedom she used to enjoy in the time before. The freedom to walk the streets with her husband and dream about

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p.91

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p.147

⁶⁰ Ibid., p.146

⁶¹ Seed, 2011, p.73

the future. She is aware that this freedom is a thing of the past. It now belongs to the no-place.⁶² There is, however, another kind of freedom: 'There is more than one kind of freedom, said Aunt Lydia. Freedom to and freedom from. In the days of anarchy, it was freedom to. Now you are being given freedom from. Don't underrate it.'⁶³ Of the two types of freedom, one is a utopian kind, the other a dystopian freedom that carries with it all manner of restrictions, depending whose point of view one implores: 'Freedom from', in the context of *THT*, from Offred's perspective, is a euphemism for enslavement. It is a phrase out of Newspeak's B vocabulary:

'No word in the B vocabulary was ideologically neutral. A great many were euphemisms. Such words, for instance, as *joycamp* (forced-labour camp) or *Minipax* (Ministry of Peace, i.e. Ministry of War) meant the exact opposite of what they appeared to mean.'⁶⁴

Atwood discusses this very idea when she writes about the rise of state surveillance in the aftermath of 9/11: 'For the sake of freedom, freedom must be renounced. [...] It's a concept worthy of doublethink.'⁶⁵

The manipulation of language as a tool for oppression is closely associated with the manipulation of history, which, inevitably, leads to disenfranchisement. *THT* deals with the disenfranchisement of women. While out walking with another handmaid, Offred passes a small church and looks at the old gravestones in the churchyard: 'They haven't fiddled with the gravestones, or the church either. It's only

⁶² Atwood, 1996, p.33

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.34

⁶⁴ Orwell, 2000, pp.321-322

⁶⁵ Atwood, 2014, p.149

more recent history that offends them.⁶⁶ The recent history in question is likely to relate to the emancipation of women and developments in birth control and abortion legislation, which Huxley took to another extreme in *BNW*, that is the societal reinforcement of such drugs and procedures. The dead bodies, which Offred sees hanging from the Wall, were once doctors who performed abortions, now treated like ‘war criminals.’⁶⁷ Attitudes towards the terminations of pregnancies have changed, however, and, given that this is a world where most women struggle to conceive, few women would opt for such a procedure.⁶⁸ Because of this, Offred says, these dead bodies are ‘time travellers, anachronisms. They’ve come here from the past.’⁶⁹

The fertile women are assigned to powerful men, whose households they serve as handmaids. Atwood asserts: ‘The pigs in *Animal Farm* get the milk and the apples, the élite of *The Handmaid’s Tale* get the fertile women.’⁷⁰ *THT* has close literary links with *BNW*, in which sex has been turned into ‘recreation’ rather than ‘procreation’.⁷¹ In many ways, *THT* is a subversion of Huxley’s tale, yet the underlying idea is the same: women’s lack of power over their own bodies. The sterile women, or, ‘freemartins’, of *BNW* are deemed desirable.⁷² Atwood, however, sends her ‘Unwomen’ to the Colonies, further stressing their undesirability in Gilead law: ‘There are only women who are fruitful and women who are barren’.⁷³ Whereas women’s bodies have become solely a source of pleasure in *BNW*, they have become breeding machines in *THT*. Abortions are encouraged in *BNW*; in *THT* they

⁶⁶ Atwood, 1996, p.41

⁶⁷ Atwood, 1996, p.43

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Atwood, 2006, p.338

⁷¹ Huxley, 2007, p.xiii

⁷² Ibid., p.10

⁷³ Atwood, 1996, p.71

are forbidden.⁷⁴ Atwood's account of writing the novel shows a clear awareness of the oppression of her female characters. In contrast, Huxley's silence on the same issue in *Brave New World Revisited* is deafening. It may be, then, that *THT* is a direct response to that silence. The women in *THT* do not, as Huxley put it, 'love their servitude', despite being conditioned to do so, and it is because of this that the oppression of women is openly voiced.⁷⁵

Atwood focuses on the oppression of women through the lens of an extremist religious regime derived from the Puritans.⁷⁶ Atwood wrote the novel during the 1980s in the aftermath of second wave feminism and at the tail end of the Cold War. She wondered what would need to happen in order to force women back into the home, and her model for these conditions was the nineteenth-century, when women were not allowed to vote.⁷⁷ Having stripped women of their independence, of their voice, Atwood took environmental aspects into account and asked what would happen if child-bearing became more and more difficult, if radiation, for example, caused higher rates of infertility, something Atwood says was already happening at the time of writing the novel.⁷⁸ The world Atwood creates in *THT* is the result of these conditions: all women have been deprived of their rights, with only a few able to bear children.

The oppressive regimes depicted in each of the texts discussed so far have explored the prospect of state-regulated relationships. Atwood's novel is no exception. The concept of love, of any romantic or meaningful relationship, is abolished in *THT*, as is indicated by Offred's musings on friendship: 'It's hard to

⁷⁴ Ibid., p.43

⁷⁵ Huxley, 2007, p.xlvii

⁷⁶ Atwood, 2005, p.99

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., p.98

imagine now, having a friend.⁷⁹ Relationships fulfil a function and, as in *NEF*, the only relationship of significance is that between the individual and the regime. Offred considers these constraints as she walks past the Guardians of Gilead:

‘If they think of a kiss, they must then think immediately of the floodlights going on, the rifle shots. They think instead of doing their duty and of promotion to the Angels, and of being allowed to possibly marry, and then, if they are able to gain enough power and live to be old enough, of being allotted a Handmaid of their own.’⁸⁰

The kiss symbolises sexual desire and, as Offred knows, sexual desire and acting on such desire is outlawed. This aspect of Atwood’s world mirrors that of *NEF*, where ‘[l]ove is banned’ and sexual desire must be repressed.⁸¹ This links back to John Atkins’ idea that the ‘condition of love is isolation from the rest of the world’, a theme that recurs in Anna Burns’ *Milkman*.⁸²

A lack of any meaningful or intimate relationships in the present of the narrative, means that Offred drifts between timeframes, sliding out of dystopia and into utopia: ‘I want to be held and told my name. I want to be valued in ways that I am not; I want to be more than valuable. I repeat my former name, remind myself of what I once could do, how others saw me.’⁸³ This quotation underpins the need for personal relationships in which Offred is ‘valued’ as an individual, in which she retains her name. She is reminded, of a time when she had access to individual freedom. She rejects the society in which she is only a commodity, valuable, not

⁷⁹ Atwood, 1996, p.35

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.32

⁸¹ Atkins, 1954, p.245

⁸² Ibid., p.248

⁸³ Atwood, 1996, p.108

valued. These private thoughts show the reader that Offred does not accept her servitude. She is conscious of the oppression she suffers, and it is this, a story told from a female point-of-view, that distinguishes *THT* from other dystopian narratives. This is 'the world according to Julia', with Offred operating as a response to Zamyatin's 'subversive femme fatale', I-330.⁸⁴ The treatment of women in Atwood's novel speaks not only to feminists of the 1980s but, in the light of the #MeToo movement, to a modern audience as well.⁸⁵

In writing *THT*, Atwood helped to evolve the genre of dystopian fiction by drawing on the past, on events that have already happened somewhere, grounding the narrative in a world that is at once recognisable and yet unfamiliar, and, in so doing, created a new subgenre: ustopia.

⁸⁴ Atwood, 2014, p.146

⁸⁵ In 2017, after allegations of sexual harassment were made against Harvey Weinstein, the actor Alyssa Milano called for women who had had similar experiences to respond to her tweet with the phrase 'Me too'. Huge numbers of women from around the world, working in different industries, responded.

Nadia Khomami, '#MeToo: how a hashtag became a rallying cry against sexual harassment' in *Guardian*, 20 October 2017 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/20/women-worldwide-use-hashtag-metoo-against-sexual-harassment>> [accessed 25 August 2021]

Anna Burns

‘...thing was, these were paranoid times.’¹

Each of the texts so far explored in this commentary have a relationship with history: they use the past and the concerns of the time to comment on society’s relationship with history and politics. Though these narratives have been set in the future, they are, as Burgess suggests, ‘a figure of the present’.² However, the past as setting can also create other worlds in much the same way as the future. It is with this in mind that I seek to induct Anna Burns’ *Milkman* (2018) into my new proposed genre, hystopia. Burns utilises themes and conventions, particular to dystopian fiction, including elements of satire, in her novel *Milkman*, and, at the same time, subverts the tropes of historical fiction in order to create a universal tale of oppression.

Milkman has been described in reviews as an ‘unconventional historical novel’, among other things.³ The narrative, which takes place in 1970s Northern Ireland, is told retrospectively from the point of view of an unnamed first person narrator. This narrative point-of-view alone subverts the conventions of historical fiction.⁴ Other reviews have, rightly, picked up on this unconventionality, with the adjective ‘dystopian’ often used as a qualifier.⁵ It is true that there are some distinctly

¹ Burns, 2018, p.27

² Burgess, 1967, p.45

³ Maddie Crum, ‘Anna Burns’s Booker Prize–Winning *Milkman* Offers Some Hope But No Change’ in *Vulture*, 4 December 2018, para. 2 of 14 <<https://www.vulture.com/2018/12/review-of-anna-burnss-booker-prizewinning-novel-milkman.html>> [accessed 12 September 2020]

⁴ Crum, 2018, para. 1 of 14

⁵ Marisol Morales-Ladrón, ‘Milkman by Anna Burns: silence as an architectural form of containment’ in *The Irish Times*, 19 August 2019, para.11 of 22, <<https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/milkman-by-anna-burns-silence-as-an-architectural-form-of-containment-1.3988554>> [accessed 12 September 2020]

dystopian elements in the novel. Burns depicts an unnamed, oppressive regime, a claustrophobic society and a patriarchy that shares more in common with *THT* than it does with, for example, Hilary Mantel's *Wolf Hall* (2009).⁶ Above all else, Burns' characters remain nameless, referred to only by titles, and the setting and time period remain vague, hinted at but never explicitly stated. This distortion of setting, the omission of bird's-eye-view specifics, adds a dystopian filter to our reading of *Milkman*. This is a complex novel, one hailed as 'difficult' on publication, and its tendencies towards dystopia go beyond the tropes mentioned above.

Before examining *Milkman* in any detail, it is worth considering how historical fiction functions. In his book *The Historical Novel* (2010), Jerome de Groot argues that history casts a long shadow over the present and that this shadow influences the way we, as readers, experience our lives and, most importantly, how we view ourselves.⁷ Historical fiction, like early utopias and dystopias, occurs in the margins, in the factual gaps that open themselves up to filling in and invention.⁸ The past furnishes us with documents and statistics about wars and plagues and laws, facts that writers of historical fiction can use to develop stories. Nothing is known about the future. All we have are predictions and projections. In order to create a plausible vision of the future, writers of science fiction and dystopias must look to the past and the present to produce their narratives, as can be seen in *BNW*, *NEF* and *THT*. Historical fiction relies to some extent on the reader's knowledge of relevant history.⁹ The historical novel is concerned with truth and authenticity, a claim it shares with

⁶ Hilary Mantel, *Wolf Hall* (London: Fourth Estate, 2009)

⁷ Jerome de Groot, *The Historical Novel* (Oxon: Routledge, 2010), p.27

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.10

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.8

realism.¹⁰ However, there is also a push against this idea of absolute truth and authenticity, questioning the ways in which history has been constructed by the elite, something Orwell was concerned with throughout his writing life. The author's note, which often prefaces historical novels, often details the research undertaken and primary material used in the process of writing the story.¹¹ Given the amount of research required, the depiction of real events, and the telling of perhaps lesser known stories implies that historical fiction attains a certain educational merit.¹² What is remarkable about *Milkman* is that Anna Burns makes no claims in that direction. In fact, Burns' novel falls into a whole other category as she bends the rules of historical fiction, pulling the genre out of shape, in the pursuit of a feeling of estrangement.

Burns makes a deliberate choice not to limit the point-of-view of *Milkman* to that of the protagonist in the present of the narrative. It is not simply a case of the novel having been written in the past tense, but that the narrator is able to comment on the events of the novel from some undefined future. This retrospectivity operates as a kind of Pause button, allowing Middle-Sister's future self to intrude on the narrative, commenting from a position of hindsight. To illustrate this point, I will discuss a short passage from the text. After having listed a long list of antagonists, Middle-Sister concludes:

¹⁰ See 'realism, n.' in *OED Online* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, September 2021) <www.oed.com/view/Entry/158931> [accessed 8 May 2020]

'Esp. in reference to art, film, and literature: close resemblance to what is real; fidelity of representation, rendering the precise details of the real thing or scene. Also: an instance or example of this. Cf. (by contrast) idealism n. 2, surrealism n.'

¹¹ de Groot, 2010, p.7

¹² *Ibid.*

'Of course you did not say this. Which was why, eighteen years old, I didn't talk about the renouncers, was unwilling to reflect upon them, pulled down shutters against the topic of them. It was that I wanted to stay as sane in my mind as I thought then I was. This too, was why maybe-boyfriend, at least when with me, also didn't talk about the renouncers, also perhaps why he was into cars in the way some people were mad on their music. This didn't mean we weren't aware, just that we didn't know how to not be partisan. [...] That was me then, age eighteen.'¹³

Here, we can see how Middle-Sister's future self intrudes on her own past. Similar to *THT*, Burns' novel employs three planes of narration. Firstly, there is the present of the narrative, Belfast in the 1970s. This plane doubles up as the reader's past. Then we have the past within the narrative, for example, Middle-Sister's childhood. This in turn has the same functionality for the reader – it takes us further into the past. The third mode intersects Middle-Sister's future with the reader's present. This is the mode I would like to discuss further.

Intermittently, as in the passage above, future Middle-Sister announces herself to the reader, commenting on what is happening in the story, breaking the fourth wall. It is as if Middle-Sister is returning to this moment in her past, revisiting and re-narrating. Middle-Sister is traversing the past. The moments of return are signalled by Burns' narration, when she uses constructions such as: 'It was that I wanted to stay as sane in my mind as I thought then I was.' The key to this formation is the word 'then'. The past becomes a destination, a literary 'state of mind', as Atwood would refer to it. Burns ends the passage with 'That was me then, age

¹³ Burns, 2018, pp. 114-115

eighteen', implying that this is told from the point of view of another 'me', older than eighteen, a 'me' in the future.

The question is whether this narrative intrusion fulfils the same function as the 'Appendix' in *NEF*, the 'Historical Notes' in *THT*, and the postcard in *NSID*. The narrative retrospectivity tells the reader that Middle-Sister will survive and gain perspective on what has happened, making it a hopeful novel. Thomas More's future utopian narrative is presented as a report from a traveller.¹⁴ The same device is used by Swift in *Gulliver's Travels* and, arguably, in *BNW* through the character of John the Savage. In his 1895 novel *The Time Machine*, H.G. Wells destabilises and unhinges preconceived notions that humans could only move through time in a linear way, that is from the past to the future.¹⁵ "Scientific people," proceeded the Time Traveller, after the pause required for the proper assimilation of this, "know very well that Time is only a kind of Space."¹⁶ Burns' decision to allow her narrator to draw the reader's attention to particular parts of the narrative and point to the narrative's retrospectivity allows the narrator to highlight the artificial nature of the text, which is particularly interesting when the characters discuss history, for example when Middle-Sister thinks about her 'wee sisters', and their Joan of Arc phase. Middle-Sister makes some astute points about her view of history: 'because of the usual legacy of history and of the power of history that had been built up and passed down and reshaped and elaborated upon'.¹⁷

Here, Burns comments on the accuracy and artificiality of history itself, acknowledging that history is essentially unknowable. That history is shown to be

¹⁴ Seed, 2011, p.73

¹⁵ de Groot, 2010, p.44

¹⁶ Wells, 2005, p.5

¹⁷ Burns, 2018, p.149

malleable, something retold, and ultimately changed to serve the ruling classes, is a clear nod to *NEF*, *BNW*, and *THT*, and a major theme of dystopian fiction. The quotation reads like Winston Smith's job description in the Ministry of Truth, a reference to Orwell's idea of 'the mutability of the past'.¹⁸ In *Milkman*, Burns uses the concept of 'jamais vu':

'Constantly we were having memory lapses, episodes of a kind of *jamais vu*. We couldn't remember that we'd remembered, and would have to remind each other of our forgetfulness and of how closeness didn't work for us given the state our maybe-relationship was in.'¹⁹

Jamais vu is the opposite of *deja-vu*, meaning 'never seen', and encapsulates the idea of repressing and forgetting. It becomes a coping strategy, a mode of unseeing, of escaping. It suppresses any kind of familiarity and renders the forming of meaningful relationships with other people impossible. This, as we have seen, is the first sign that individualism is being stifled in the name of collectivism.²⁰

There is no room for real, individual love in *Milkman*, which places the novel alongside the works of Huxley, Orwell, and Atwood that I have so far discussed:

'Of course there was the big one, the biggest reason for not marrying the right spouse. If you married *that* one, the one you loved and desired and who loved and

¹⁸ Orwell, 2000, p.28

¹⁹ Burns, 2018, p.43

²⁰ Collectivism does not always carry negative connotations. One might argue that the collectivist rhetoric underpinning the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination in the UK – 'nobody is safe until everyone is safe' – is driven by altruistic ideals. The high uptake suggests that a collectivist seam runs through us all. However, when the UK Government wanted to implement mandatory vaccinations for health care staff – that is to say, flex their authoritarian muscles – people protested and the scheme was dropped.

desired you back, with the union proving true and good and replete with the most fulfilling happiness, well, what if this wonderful spouse didn't fall out of love with you, or you with them, and neither of you either, got killed in the political problems? [...] That was why marrying in doubt, marrying in guilt, marrying in regret, in fear, in despair, in blame, also in terrible self-sacrifice was pretty much the unspoken matrimonial requisite here.²¹

Middle-Sister describes the way in which relationships are regulated and controlled by 'the community', which really is an extension of the state.²² Meaningful and intimate relationships are not the norm in this world. If anything, they are feared and should be avoided because the threat of loss is too great. This idea strengthens the argument that *Milkman* depicts a dystopian world, but one that is firmly anchored in our own history, in Northern Ireland of the 1970s. In *BNW*, monogamy is abolished. In *NEF*, sexual relationships are controlled and marriages arranged by the Party. In *THT*, relationships are controlled by the state and women are assigned to men without their consent. Being afraid of individual love, as portrayed in *Milkman*, and therefore never truly attaching oneself to another human being, perpetuates existing power structures. Individuals do not belong to each other, but to the state. This fear, fuelled by the community, is the reason Middle-Sister sticks to 'maybe-relationships'.²³ This is a portrayal of the ultimate death of love.

The characters in *Milkman* are nameless, referred to only by their titles. This has caused some critics to brand the novel experimental.²⁴ However, the nameless

²¹ Burns, 2018, p.256

²² Ibid., p.12

²³ Ibid., p.256

²⁴ Alex Marshall, 'The New Booker Prize Winner Who May Never Write Again' in *New York Times*, 29 November 2018, para. 8 of 30 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/29/books/anna->

character is a longstanding trope of dystopian and utopian fiction. For example, in Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We*, the characters are referred to by their numbers, which indicates that they do not matter as individuals, that their significance lies in their being part of a larger system.²⁵ Even before Zamyatin, this device was deployed by H.G. Wells in *The Time Machine*, who refers to his characters as 'Time Traveller', 'Psychologist', and 'Provincial Mayor'.²⁶ More recently, we have *THT*, whose protagonist is referred to as Offred, not her name, but an indication of her status, of Fred. *Milkman* follows in the Wellsian tradition – Burns' novel is populated by 'Milkman', 'Somebody McSomebody', 'First Brother-in-Law', and 'Elder Sister'.²⁷ Characters are reduced to their function, the roles they fulfil in relation to the world Middle-Sister occupies, and this anonymity, this distortion, adds to the novel's feeling of estrangement. It also adds a layer of artificiality, stripping the characters of their individuality.

Burns illustrates the experience of living under an oppressive regime in the scene involving the sunset. Teacher makes the Middle-Sister and the rest of her French class look at the sunset and describe the colours:

Of course we knew really that the sky could be more than blue, two more, but why should any of us admit to that? I myself have never admitted it. Not even the week before when I experienced my first sunset with maybe-boyfriend did I admit it. Even then, even though there were more colours than the acceptable three in the sky – blue (the day sky), black (the night sky) and white (clouds) – that evening still I kept

[burns-interview-booker-prize-milkman-no-bones.html?auth=login-email&login=email](https://www.burns-interview-booker-prize-milkman-no-bones.html?auth=login-email&login=email) [accessed 29 September 2020]

²⁵ Seed, 2011, p.80

²⁶ Wells, 2005, pp.3-4

²⁷ Burns, 2018, p.1

my mouth shut. And now the others in the class – all older than me, some as old as thirty – also weren't admitting it. It was the convention not to admit it, not to accept detail for this type of detail would mean choice and choice would mean responsibility and what if we failed in our responsibility? [...]

So no. After generation upon generation, fathers upon forefathers, mothers upon foremothers, centuries and millennia of being one colour officially and three colours unofficially, a colourful sky, just like that, could not be allowed to be.²⁸

George Orwell said of Jonathan Swift that he was skilled in describing a 'single truth' by first 'magnifying' and then 'distorting it'.²⁹ The same can be said of Burns, who here uses hyperbole to achieve the desired satirical effect. The reader knows that the sky can be many colours – the characters not being able to see the different colours, flatly refusing to name the colours they can see, functions in a similar way to Swift's *A Modest Proposal* (1729), in which he suggests feeding the children of the poor to the rich.³⁰ The exaggeration employed by Swift and Burns, the outlandishness and absurdity, creates humour, which draws attention to the failures of the systems on which they are commenting. Limiting how one can describe the sky or a sunset is symptomatic of living under an oppressive regime: it reveals the finer workings of the psychology of oppression. Not being able to see colour is a dramatic way of showing oppression as individual experience is ignored in favour of a collective response.

Burns' use of satire underlines the loss of individuality and of individual freedom, since not only does Middle-Sister claim that the sky can only be blue but

²⁸ Burns, 2018, pp.70-73

²⁹ Orwell, 2009, p.315

³⁰ Jonathan Swift, 'A Modest Proposal' in *A Tale of a Tub and other satires*, ed. Kathleen Williams (London: J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1975), pp.255-264

the entire class. Here, the nameless characters show us why they are nameless: they are functionaries of the state. This scene also serves to alienate the reader, who likely lives in a world where the sky has many colours. It also stresses the split between the public, 'the sky is blue', and the private, in which, Middle-Sister admits, at least to herself, to not admitting that there are other colours, which, in effect, confirms the opposite. Again, the spectre of Orwell's doublethink rears its head. Middle-Sister comments on the legacy and cycle of oppression, and the reshaping of history, with reference to the generations of people who have described the sky as being only one colour. Not being able to see the different colours in the sky is like Winston Smith believing that $2 + 2 = 5$. It signifies the ultimate loss of individual liberty.

It is worth taking a moment to consider the classroom in which the students are asked to look at the sunset:

'Then, as the sunset was not most visible from this window, she marched us out of our classroom and along the corridor into the *littérateurs'* classroom. [...] Here teacher bade us look at the sky from this brand new perspective, where the sun – enormous and of the most gigantic orange-red colour – in a sky too, with no blue in it – was going down behind buildings in a section of windowpane.'³¹

Teacher does not march her students to the history or science classroom; she takes them to the literature classroom. Burns is commenting on literature's role in enlightening readers, in offering fresh perspectives and expressing universal truths. It is only once the class have entered the literature classroom that Middle-Sister

³¹ Burns, 2018, pp.70-73

allows herself to admit, if only to herself, that of the many colours in the sky, none are blue. Though she has now recognised that the sky is not simply blue or black or white, Middle-Sister remains, for the time being, a part of the collective. That the sunset is visible through 'a section of windowpane' suggests that she remains slightly removed from this symbol of individuality. However, by acknowledging the other colours, Middle-Sister is able to stake a claim on individuality: this is the epitome of what Atwood refers to when discussing literary landscapes as states of mind.³² It is a brief flicker of utopia within an oppressive narrative, an indication to the reader that Middle-Sister is the outsider, the individual.

In his review of *Milkman* in the *London Review of Books*, Christopher Tayler notes that the clues to the period in which the novel is set are submerged within the narrative, with reference made to songs, for example, *Only Women Bleed* (1977), and the actress Sigourney Weaver in the film *Alien* (1979).³³ The references are oblique, coded, and, importantly, rely on the reader's (prior) knowledge, not unlike historical fiction. Burns deploys this technique to obscure when and where the novel is set. Tayler asserts that this is all part of Burns' conception, to reimagine the Troubles without recourse to terms such as 'the Troubles', 'Britain', 'Ireland', 'the IRA', and so on.³⁴ This vagueness enables Burns to create another world in the same vein as *THT* or *NEF*.

There are two elements, here, that are at odds with our understanding of historical fiction. Firstly, the lack of specificity where the wider setting is concerned

³² Atwood, 2014, p.75

³³ Christopher Tayler 'The Psychologicals' in *London Review of Books*, Vol. 40, No. 20 (25 October 2018), para. 2 of 14 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v40/n20/christopher-tayler/the-psychologicals>>

[accessed 14 August 2020]

³⁴ Tayler, 2018, para. 6 of 14

and, secondly, the exchange of one set of euphemisms, for example, 'The Troubles', for another:

'I knew it had happened this time because of the milkman and his involvement, and by "involvement" I mean connected, and by "connected" I mean active rebellion, and by "active rebellion" I mean state-enemy renouncer owing to the political problems that existed in this place.'³⁵

This chain of euphemisms, each one as coded as the last, leads the reader to what the protagonist actually wants to express. However, Middle-Sister never achieves clarity: 'political problems' could refer to a whole range of issues, and it is this use of language, this layering of euphemisms, along with the obscured setting, that makes *Milkman* universal. The layering of euphemisms also seems to be a play on Orwell's Newspeak, in which 'the suppression of definitely heretical words' was designed to 'diminish' the types of thoughts people had.³⁶ *Milkman* is responding to Orwell's concept of Newspeak, to his idea of doublethink. Of course, the use of euphemisms also functions as an indicator of choice between different registers, implying that freedom of thought has not been completely eradicated.

The depiction of setting in *Milkman* has contributed to its being labelled a dystopia. Burns does something incredibly disorientating, which is to show the reader very specific detail in extreme close-up without situating these details in relation to anything else. It is like pinpointing a location on a map, without revealing in which country or city the location is. Burns is a master at blurring the edges of what she chooses to show us – like blurring the background during a Zoom meeting.

³⁵ Burns, 2018, p.7

³⁶ Orwell, 2000, p.313

For example, Burns describes Middle-Sister's sister's toenails being painted in different colours, tells the reader exactly what her sister is drinking ('Bushmills in one hand and a glass of Bacardi in the other'), and yet refuses to zoom out, refuses to show the reader where the house is or how Middle-Sister got there.³⁷ Middle-Sister moves through the setting via a series of specifically non-specific landmarks: the 'parks & reservoirs', the 'dot dot dot places', and 'the ten minute area'.³⁸ Places are 'over the road' or even 'over the water'.³⁹ This creates a feeling of claustrophobia, adding to the atmosphere of the world of the novel. Burns focuses on the object in front of the lens and does not expose what lies beyond. It is as if the reader, like Middle-Sister, is walking around, their head in a book.

In order to escape the 'twentieth century', Middle-Sister reads nineteenth-century books, while she walks.⁴⁰ This is a wilful act of disengagement, of non-participation, and, ultimately, of hope, since only fiction can provide Middle-Sister with the kind of escape she seeks. Because Middle-Sister reads while walking, she effectively removes herself from the setting of the novel to a place where the political problems of home do not exist. By accessing actual literary landscapes, Middle-Sister can inhabit a utopian state of mind. In the same way that John the Savage's love of art and literature contributes to his downfall in *BNW*, Middle-Sister's escape into literature – a symbol of her individuality – is similarly punished. She is pursued and sexually harassed by the milkman.

Milkman, like *THT*, focuses on the oppression of women. In the opening sentence, Middle-Sister is threatened, a gun pressed against her breast, by

³⁷ Burns, 2018, p.15

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p.13; p.47; p.81

³⁹ *Ibid.* p.24

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.5

Somebody McSomebody. Middle-Sister goes on to explain about a rumour, likely started by first brother-in-law, 'that I had been having an affair with this milkman and that I was eighteen and he was forty-one.'⁴¹ She then clarifies: 'It had been my fault too, it seemed, this affair with the milkman. But I had not been having an affair with the milkman. I did not like the milkman and had been frightened and confused by his pursuing and attempting an affair with me.'⁴² First-brother-in-law, it transpires, has always invented things about Middle-Sister's 'sexlife' and he, a much older man, has made inappropriate remarks to her: 'his predatory nature pushed me into frozenness every time'.⁴³ In the space of a single page, we learn about three men who have threatened, sexually harassed, or been sexually inappropriate towards Middle-Sister. These men represent the judicative, legislative and executive arms of the system she inhabits. But what is most interesting is that Middle-Sister is being blamed for the affair, which implies that misogyny is deeply rooted and internalised by both men and women in the community Burns portrays in *Milkman*. The fact that there is no affair, that Middle-Sister is the victim, is irrelevant. Her being 'pushed into frozenness' by these unwanted advances speaks to generations of women who have been silenced by the patriarchy, by a system that stacks the odds against them. This idea is underpinned by the 'renouncers' who, in order to appease the 'beyond-the-pale women' in light of 'the sexes now being equal', came up 'with the invention of rape in subsections – meaning that in our district there could now be full rape, three-quarters rape, half-rape or one-quarter rape – which our renouncers said was better than rape divided by two – as in 'rape' and 'not rape'.⁴⁴ Needless to say, the renouncers are

⁴¹ Ibid., p.1

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Ibid., pp.1-2

⁴⁴ Ibid., p.311

men and 'rape in subsections' is their idea of gender equality. Here, language is used to make light of the seriousness of sexual assault, and the quotation draws attention to the role language plays in regards to consent, which is the key measure through which sexual assault is assessed. Even though the oppression is set in Northern Ireland in the late 1970s, it is a tale about the oppression of women now: 'I hope this novel will help people think about #MeToo,' the chairman of the judges for the Booker Prize said when *Milkman* won.⁴⁵ The intersection between the historical and the contemporary illuminates the bearing the present has on historical truth and how we often retreat into the past to examine the present. Burns' depiction of a particular period of history, her coded cultural and historical references, and the emphasis she places on the communication of atmosphere and mood, as opposed to relying on facts, positions *Milkman* firmly within the generic boundaries of dystopia.

⁴⁵ Parul Sehgal, '#MeToo Is All Too Real. But to Better Understand It, Turn to Fiction' in *New York Times*, 1 May 2019, para 5 of 8 <<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/05/01/books/novels-me-too-movement.html>> [accessed 5 September 2021]

Iris Feindt

‘Writing is always an act of hope.’¹

NSID straddles the generic boundaries of historical fiction and dystopia. Everything in my novel is based on things that have happened, as I will outline in this chapter. However, possibly because I did not want to overwhelm the reader with copious historical detail, but also because the novels I discuss in this commentary deal with universal themes, it would have felt limiting to write straightforward historical fiction. On the other hand, it would have felt just as limiting or restrictive to write a pure dystopian novel. It was important to me to communicate a sense of the oppression and powerlessness Anna, my protagonist, experiences. I am more interested in capturing the atmosphere of a time and place than in describing political structures. As a result, I have been thinking about my own genre.

My work, a blend of historical fiction and dystopia, is best described under the umbrella of this new genre: hystopia. A novel of the same name, written by David Means, was published in 2016 and speculates how history might have changed had JFK not been assassinated. When I think about the genre hystopia, I do not think about alternate versions of history, but of coded and distorted forms of history, featuring characters attempting to navigate this landscape. I would consider Anna Burns’ *Milkman*, which is a masterclass in euphemisms, codes, and the use of the

¹ Margaret Atwood quoted in Erica Wagner, “‘Writing is always an act of hope’: Margaret Atwood on The Testaments” in *New Statesman*, 18 September 2019, para. 18 of 20 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2019/09/writing-is-always-an-act-of-hope-margaret-atwood-on-the-testaments>> [accessed 19 August 2021]

distorting lens, to be an dystopian novel. In order for a text to be dystopian, then, it has to fulfil the following conditions, which we might refer to as the 'Feindt Principle'.

1. It must depict a particular period of history.
2. Cultural and historical references must be coded and distorted.
3. The emphasis must be on communicating the atmosphere and mood of the era depicted.
4. All dystopias are equal but some dystopias are more equal than others.

My interest in history sparked by the fall of the Berlin Wall, which happened a couple of months before my eighth birthday. I recall my parents explaining in very simple terms that there had been a wall, which had been separating families across the country. As I was prone to homesickness, I remember feeling quite distressed by that, but I took great comfort from the knowledge that I had not suffered the same fate.

My next encounter with the GDR was in 1990, when my mother's friend's niece, Janine, visited. Even though she was five years older than me, I was tasked with entertaining her. We went to the cinema, which at the time cost 9 DM (Deutschmark) per ticket. I still remember Janine telling me the following things: cinema tickets cost the equivalent of half a DM (50 Pfennig) where she was from, she had never seen a Barbie doll and when I walked her back to her aunt's house, pushing my bike so I could ride it home after dropping her off, she insisted I rode my bike because she was fine running alongside me. I had never met anyone, especially someone older than me, who did not know what a Barbie was. I did not know anyone who enjoyed running and would have been hard-pressed to imagine any of my

friends suggesting they jog alongside while I was cycling. But the idea that the price of one cinema ticket in Hamburg would buy me eighteen in whatever utopia she came from seemed too good to be true.

Aged nine, I had no real understanding of what the GDR was or had been but I understood that wherever Janine was from, it was a place of great contradictions: cheap cinema, no Barbies. I would not have understood that Barbies were western and therefore capitalist and banned, or that the cinema was cheap because the majority of the films shown perpetuated socialist propaganda.

I can trace my curiosity about the GDR back to my encounter with Janine, David Hasselhoff singing on the Berlin Wall and my mother addressing mail to the BRD (Bundesrepublik Deutschland), as opposed to the DDR (Deutsche Demokratische Republik), and underlining the three letters several times on each envelope. These were the very early seeds of my novel, *Napoleon Schmidt is Dead*. (unpublished).

NSID is set in late 1980s East Berlin. It tells the story of 15-year-old Anna Peters, who plays a dangerous game of cat-and-mouse with the Stasi. I originally conceived of the novel as straightforward historical fiction set in the German Democratic Republic. That is until I read an interview with former Children's Laureate Malorie Blackman. Blackman had planned to write a novel about slavery and its legacy. However, mixed reactions from friends, led her to turn the story into a dystopian series for teenagers, *Noughts and Crosses* (2001), in which Blackman subverts racial history.² Though I do not subvert history, I do use it as a solid framework for my creative practice.

² Malorie Blackman, 'Noughts and Crosses Q&A' on author's website, para. 1 of 12 <<https://www.malorieblackman.co.uk/noughts-and-crosses-qa/>> [accessed 17 February 2021]

Planning, researching and writing the novel felt like working on a patchwork quilt. A variety of sources, all adding new textures and layers to my novel, informed my writing. I will retrace my research journey below, focussing on the key texts and moments that inspired and shaped my novel.

The character of Anna Peters first appeared in my short story *The White Line*, which was published in an anthology of YA fiction by staff and students of Manchester Metropolitan University.³ The basic outline of *The White Line* is that Anna's sister, having escaped into West Germany through a tunnel, sends Anna a coded postcard and a copy of *AF* to lead her to freedom.

Some of these elements remain in *NSID*. However, when I first thought about the novel, I was unsure about the plot. My initial outline from September 2015 reflects this uncertainty:

NSID tells the story of two teenagers, Anna and Ben, who investigate the death of their teacher, Napoleon Schmidt. The investigation leads them to uncover the secrecy, surveillance and deceit that have resulted from the construction of the Berlin Wall. Set in East Berlin, during the GDR, this story focuses on the differing perspectives of Anna and Ben with regard to the Wall.

Even though I did not know what would happen in the novel, I knew I wanted to take Anna on a journey, with a clear progression, a meaningful revelation, and a coming-of-age at the end. Anne Lamott quotes E.L. Doctorow in her book on writing, *Bird by Bird* (1995): 'Writing a novel is like driving a car at night. You can only see as

³ Iris Feindt, 'The White Line' in *Timelines: Tales from the Past by Writers of the Present and the Future*, ed. by Sherry Ashworth, Iris Feindt and Livi Michael (Manchester: Manchester Metropolitan University, 2013), pp.168-178

far as your headlights, but you can make the whole trip that way.⁴ Even though I did not know every story beat, every twist and turn of the narrative, I knew enough to take it 'bird by bird', one scene at a time.⁵

My research into the GDR helped me to plan my novel. However, the history of the GDR spans 41 years. Enough history to fill several novels, enough information to overwhelm any researcher, historian or writer. As part of my research, I have read books, both fiction and non-fiction, watched films and documentaries, and carried out fieldtrips. Often one text would lead to another; the process developed quite organically.

Firstly, I familiarised myself with the genesis and chronology of the GDR by reading non-fiction, such as *Geo Epoche's* specialist magazine for history, *Die DDR* (The GDR).⁶ This special edition brings together documents, photographs, a general timeline, and articles about specific individuals, such as 18-year-old Hermann Joseph Flade, who was arrested and sentenced to death for distributing anti-GDR leaflets.⁷ Even though I refer to it as a magazine, it functioned more like an archive and brought the history of the GDR to life. I cannot stress enough how invaluable this document was – the photographs and articles really captured life in the GDR. There was a focus on 'everyday life' within the state, rather than simply a whistle-stop tour of historical highlights and facts. The magazine depicts the struggle of the individual and provided me with many ideas for my novel, such as the yellow cloth, which was used to capture the scent of suspect GDR citizens.⁸ I have already mentioned

⁴ Anne Lamott, *Bird by Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life* (New York: Anchor Books, 1995), p.18

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.19

⁶ *Geo Epoche: Die DDR*, ed. by Gesa Gottschalk and Fabian Klabunde (Hamburg: Gruner und Jahr, Nr.64)

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.43

⁸ Gottschalk and Klabunde, p.17

Hermann Joseph Flade. It was his run-in with the Volkspolizei that inspired Christa's run-in with the police over tearing down a Party sign in my novel.⁹ One of the images in the magazine shows graffiti daubed on the Wall, 'Wir Fordern Freiheit', and this, too, worked its way into my novel.¹⁰ The idea of an escape through a tunnel from Friedhof Pankow was sparked by an article about a similar escape.¹¹ The illustrated timeline and details about anti-GDR demonstrations within the GDR, as well as the freedom trains from Prague to West Germany, helped me decide how to end my novel.¹² To return to Doctorow's night-driving analogy, the magazine was the bulbs in my headlights. It helped form a solid historical foundation for my novel, but offered enough gaps so as to not feel as though I was transcribing a textbook. As discussed in my chapter on Burns, historical fiction happens in the margins, in the factual gaps that open themselves up to invention.¹³

When researching a specific period as a writer, you do not do this through non-fiction alone. The second part of my novel is set in Torgau, at the Geschlossener Jugendwerkhof Torgau to be exact. I first learned about this youth delinquency facility when I watched the German film *Barbara* (2012).¹⁴ In brief, Barbara is a physician sent to work in the countryside as a punishment for not always being true to the state. In the hospital where she works, she encounters Stella, a teenage girl, who keeps running away from Torgau, a notorious facility for delinquent youths. Stella is a minor character but her storyline formed the foundation for the second part of my novel: I decided that Anna would be sent to Torgau and

⁹ Ibid., p.43

¹⁰ Ibid., p.42

¹¹ Ibid., p.90

¹² Ibid., pp.138–154

¹³ de Groot, 2010, p.10

¹⁴ *Barbara*, dir. by Christian Petzold (The Match Factory, 2012)

would try to escape. I guess it is not that unusual, when working on a novel or film, to be inspired by other works of fiction. One of my favourite films is Billy Wilder's *The Apartment* (1960).¹⁵ While watching David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945)¹⁶, Wilder wondered about one of the minor characters, the friend who allows Trevor Howard's character to borrow his apartment to meet with Celia Johnson's character.¹⁷ Fifteen years later, Wilder wrote and directed *The Apartment*, a film whose premise deals with that very subplot. Atwood, too, has written about how Julia in Orwell's *NEF* became the inspiration for Offred in *THT*.¹⁸ Writers inspire other writers: they are in dialogue, in conversation. The creation of stories is a perpetual exchanging of ideas.

Having decided to write about Torgau, I was lucky enough to visit the small town of Torgau by the river Elbe and its namesake, the correctional facility, now a museum, in the summer of 2017. It was interesting to walk the corridors and look at the exhibition, entitled "Ich bin als Mensch geboren und will als Mensch hier raus – Der Geschlossene Jugendwerkhof Torgau im Erziehungssystem der DDR".¹⁹ This roughly translates as, 'I was born a human and I want to return a human - Der Geschlossene Jugendwerkhof Torgau as part of the Education System of the GDR'. The accompanying publication, *Auf Biegen und Brechen: Geschlossene Heimunterbringung im Kontext sozialistischer Erziehung in der DDR* (2006), which is a collection of essays and articles on the subject was helpful in writing the Torgau

¹⁵ *The Apartment*, dir. by Billy Wilder (United Artists, 1960)

¹⁶ *Brief Encounter*, dir. by David Lean (Eagle-Lion Films, 1945)

¹⁷ Cameron Crowe, 'Billy and me: why I love *The Apartment*' in *Guardian*, 3 December 1999, para. 10 of 25 <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/1999/dec/03/culture.features>> [accessed 15 March 2021]

¹⁸ Atwood, 2014, p.146

¹⁹ <http://www.jugendwerkhof-torgau.de/Ausstellungen/Dauerausstellung/446/>, para. 1 of 5, [last accessed 15 March 2021]

section. It includes several photographs of the facility and the essays were very informative.

The title of the exhibition is based on a photograph of one of the rooms in Torgau. Written across the wall in black lettering are the words, 'I was born a human, I want to return a human'.²⁰ My character Anna discovers these words when she wakes up in her room in Torgau. On the one hand it is based on the real writing of someone who stayed there, but the emotions Anna feels when reading the words over and over, are supposed to echo those of Atwood's character Offred in *THT* when she discovers the Latin writing in her room, '*Nolite te bastardes carborundorum*'.²¹ The writing supports the idea that the characters are not alone in their suffering but also highlights the legacy of suffering. Shortly before discovering the writing, Offred is determined not to think of the room as her room, until she does: 'Was he in my room? I called it *mine*'.²² I respond to Atwood's scene in chapter 18 of my novel: 'The second night. I was lying on the bench in my tiny room. Not my room. My room was at home, with Mutti. I was lying on the bench in the tiny room they'd given me.' This is an excellent example of how a blend of research helped me write these specific scenes (chapters 16 and 18).

The essay, 'Der Geschlossene Jugendwerkhof Torgau. Geschichte und Struktur', on the history and structure of the facility provided me with plenty of information about life in Torgau.²³ A good amount of what I have learned from the

²⁰ *Auf Biegen und Brechen: Geschlossene Heimunterbringung im Kontext sozialistischer Erziehung in der DDR*, ed. by Gabriele Beyler and Bettina Klein (Torgau: Initiativgruppe Geschlossener Jugendwerkhof Torgau e.V., 2006), p.24

²¹ Atwood, 1996, p.62

²² *Ibid.*, p.59, Atwood's italics

²³ Beyler and Klein, p.53

essay is reflected in what the director, Herr Franken, tells Anna about the facility in chapter 19, from what time she has to get up to doing everything as a collective.²⁴

Torgau's website served as another source of information, and their section on 'Special Incidents' (Besondere Vorkommnisse) details escape attempts and fires at the facility, among other events. The incident that intrigued me the most, however, sounded so macabre that it almost did not seem possible. In 1989 a group of boys planned to flee Torgau. In order to create a distraction, one boy volunteered for the others to kill him and dangle him in front of the window.²⁵ I use this set-up in my novel (chapter 28), with the difference being that my character, Nina, does not volunteer for the others to kill her, but uses her skills as a gymnast to make it seem as though she has hanged herself. The other suicide mentioned in my novel (chapter 26) is also based on a real suicide in Torgau in 1988. A boy called Steve B. hanged himself with his shirt while in isolation.²⁶

I knew that I needed to include the Stasi in my novel, as the State Security represents perhaps the most oppressive part of the GDR. Again, I was able to visit the Stasi Museum in Berlin in 2017. The Stasi Museum is located in the old Stasi Headquarters. The exhibition 'Staatssicherheit in der SED-Diktatur' (State Security in the SED Dictatorship) was invaluable in helping me understand more about the Stasi's methods, as was walking the corridors and seeing the old offices.²⁷ Since the GDR was a heavily surveilled state, I knew that the Stasi would play an important role in my novel.

²⁴ Ibid., pp.53-60

²⁵ See 'Besondere Vorkommnisse', para 6 of 7 <<https://www.jugendwerkhof-torgau.de/Historie/Besondere-Vorkommnisse/455/>> [accessed 20 March 2021]

²⁶ Ibid., para 1 of 7

²⁷ See 'Exhibition' in <<https://www.stasimuseum.de/en/enausstellung.htm>>, [last accessed 19 March 2021]

Having grown up in West Germany, the Stasi was a part of my consciousness for a long time, and there were quite a few things I already knew. I knew they tapped people's phones, took pictures of them, and listened through radios and plants. While at the Stasi Museum I obtained several museum publications, such as *Der Stacheldraht* (2016), which taught me much more. For instance, the GDR's 'spinning' of the existence of the Wall as an 'antifaschistischer Schutzwall' (protective anti-fascist barrier), which made its way into my novel in the form of Anna's thoughts about the Wall in one of two instances of satire (chapter10).²⁸

The next edition of *Der Stacheldraht* featured an article on the type of surveillance citizens faced if they requested a permit to leave the GDR and the kind of torture and psychological terror deployed when interrogating suspects.²⁹ Some of this informed my scene in which Anna is interrogated (chapter 4), though she is not tortured. This scene, which also includes the yellow cloth, pays homage to the film *Das Leben der Anderen* (2006), in my opinion the best film made about the GDR.³⁰ It is such a powerful portrayal because it focusses on the fate of only three characters to illustrate the wider machinations of the state. Blurring the lines of good and bad, it is a masterclass in making history immersive and engaging, as well as moving.

Another publication obtained at the Stasi Museum was *Die DDR-Staatssicherheit: Schild und Schwert der Partei*.³¹ With a focus on the Department for State Security, the publication contains documents and images, as well as a

²⁸ Martha Wedra 'Republikflucht' in *Der Stacheldraht* (Nr.4, 2016), p.4

²⁹ Theo R. Payk 'Zersplitterung, Lähmung und Isolation' in *Der Stacheldraht* (Nr.5, 2016), pp.8-10

³⁰ *Das Leben der Anderen*, dir. by Florian Henckel von Donnersmark (Cineuropa, 2006)

³¹ *Die DDR-Staatssicherheit: Schild und Schwert der Partei* (Berlin: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung, 2011), edited by Jens Gieske.

timeline of the Stasi, which I found very helpful, and underpinned my research into the Stasi's methods.

Part of the exhibition included photographs of former Stasi informants, one of them GDR athlete Udo Beyer. At the time, I did not know who he was. The friend who had accompanied me to the exhibition told me about a documentary she had seen, in which he denied any involvement with the Stasi. The documentary, *Einzelkämpfer* (2013), is about athletes in the GDR.³² What fascinated me was the systemic doping of both adult and child athletes. A large portion of the documentary focusses on swimming and swimmers and it is this aspect that I used for Christa's backstory (chapter 9). Christa's refusal to swim and, essentially, going on strike results in her expulsion from the Sportschule. This is based on a very similar incident, which I learned about from *Einzelkämpfer*.

By now, enough of the road illuminated. But getting started I found very difficult. Anne Lamott says, 'All good writing begins with terrible first efforts.'³³ My work was no exception.

I started writing my novel in March 2016. The difficulty with researching a topic, maybe even specifically a historical period, is to know what should be included. Having recently re-read a chapter breakdown I wrote in 2016, I had forgotten about some of the twists and turns I had originally intended for the narrative. The breakdown details that before Anna gets thrown into Torgau, she is sought out by a mysterious man who indoctrinates her into the freedom movement. She is given a mission: to get her best friend Knut out of East Berlin into the West, as part of 'Operation Travel Agent', a real operation in which lookalikes were used to

³² *Einzelkämpfer*, dir. by Sandra Kaudelka (Farbfilm-Verleih, 2013)

³³ Lamott, 1995, p.25

extract people from the GDR. This plotline seemed an exciting idea on paper but the issue, when it came to writing it, was that it did not feel like Anna's story – it felt like everyone else's. I decided to abandon the idea of 'Operation Travel Agent', even though the possibilities appealed to me.

Anna is a teenager and, in early drafts of the novel, she has an idyllic, conflict-free relationship with her mother. They never fight and Anna willingly shares details about her life with her mother. That relationship did not reflect the relationship I had with my mother as a teenager at all, but it was not until I watched Greta Gerwig's coming-of-age film *Lady Bird* (2017), which brilliantly captures a tumultuous mother-daughter relationship, that I realised I had to rethink the relationship between Anna and her mother.³⁴ I think the reason Anna and her mother originally got along so well was because I had not fully developed the friendship between Anna and Knut. So, instead of showing Anna with her best friend, I transplanted that relationship onto her mother. The reality of a mother-daughter relationship is now evident from the first chapter, in which Anna and Mutti argue about her hair.

I was concerned with historical accuracy and, initially, I kept moving the timeline from the 1960s to the 1980s until I realised that anachronisms should not be feared but embraced. I was writing the novel as though it was set in 1989. However, the Maria Liedtcke grave stopped being used as an escape route in the early 1960s, shortly after the Wall was built. The freedom trains from Prague contributed to the fall of the GDR in 1989. The music video that inspires the sewing of the miniskirts, Nena's *Nur Geträumt*, was released in 1983 and the yellow scent cloths were not used by the Stasi until the 1980s. This is one of the ways in which my novel moves away from historical fiction and towards dystopia.

³⁴ *Lady Bird*, dir. by Greta Gerwig (Universal Pictures, 2017)

History functions as a narrative anchor in the novels discussed in my commentary. The ways in which these writers draw attention to the artificiality and subjectivity of history, and how history is a filter through which the contemporary is discussed, has acted as a formal example to me when writing *NSID*. My novel uses history as a vehicle and follows in the footsteps of the works discussed in previous chapters. What my novel does differently, however, is to shed the cloak of speculation that dystopian fiction usually wears.

Huxley, Orwell and Atwood set their novels in either the far future (Huxley) or the near future (Atwood and Orwell). As Atwood notes, ‘the future’ established itself as a setting, and, with that, another space was created in which to write about contemporary concerns.³⁵ Anna Burns sets her novel in the recent past, as I do, because the past, like the future, is ultimately unknowable.

Other than in the postcard after the end of the narrative, I never explicitly state when my novel is set. I make references to a ‘telegram’, a ‘cassette’, a ‘music video’ (chapters, 1, 10, and 14). These references imply that the setting is not contemporary. I add to this by avoiding direct references to pop culture, turning instead to classical composers, such as ‘Rachmaninoff’ and even ‘Bernard Herrmann’ (chapters 1 and 3). When I mention literature, I discuss classic texts, such as Goethe’s *Young Werther’s Sorrows* (1774) (chapter 1) or Brecht’s *Galileo* (1940) (chapter 10). Where setting is concerned, I am very specific, using a similar technique to Anna Burns in *Milkman*. I mention ‘Friedhof Pankow’, the river ‘Panke’, and ‘Prenzlauer Berg’, but deliberately omit to mention that these are situated in East Berlin (chapter 2). In this way, my novel differs from *Milkman*, which avoids the use of actual street names and places. Where Burns is writing for adults, I am writing for

³⁵ Atwood, 2014, p.72

a younger audience who might not be familiar with the history of the GDR. I ground the narrative in a degree of realism, in so far as the places I refer to are real: there is a cemetery in Pankow, there is a part of Berlin called Prenzlauer Berg, and Torgau was a real facility. However, unless the imagined teenage reader has a good knowledge of Berlin or East Germany, it is unlikely that they will know that the novel is set first in East Berlin, then in the small town of Torgau, in the final year of life behind the iron curtain.

I applied the same method to the politics and political system in my novel, with the exception of the FDJ (Freie Deutsche Jugend) and the Stasi. I decided against inventing policing bodies, such as Atwood's 'Guardians' or 'Angels', or even Orwell with his 'Thought Police', because I wanted to ground the narrative in an historical framework, but also because I thought that my intended readership might not be familiar with either. I do not explicitly mention the SED (Sozialistische Einheitspartei Deutschlands) but refer to them as 'the Party', as Orwell does in *NEF*, and changed any mention of socialism to 'politics' or 'ideology' (chapter 21). I do not name any politicians of the period – other than Margot Honecker, the National Minister for Education of the GDR. However, I only refer to her by her first name and I do not state her position. She could be anyone from a celebrity to a cult leader, with murals and paintings of her adorning the world Anna inhabits. She is a Big Brother figure: "Margot's watching you," a teacher at school once said. "Behave, Margot's watching you" (chapter 2), and because there is a sense of always being watched, Anna, like Offred, retreats into memories when she is in Torgau. For example, when Anna recalls a funny conversation with Knut (chapter 21), this memory is a utopia embedded within the dystopia of the narrative, a scene very much in dialogue with Atwood's concept of ustopia.

The reason for using history as a narrative framework, rather than treating it as doctrine, is that it helps to universalise the portrayed oppression. It opens the narrative up to different interpretations and invites the reader to draw parallels between what they are reading and their own experiences. Atwood articulates the effect of allegory when recalling her first encounter with *AF* and admits that the political content of the book completely escaped her.³⁶ She did not link the narrative in the book to the Russian Revolution or any other historical events, but that did not mean that she did not understand the sentiment of the fable.³⁷ She understood that 'the pigs were *unjust*' and that 'horrified' her.³⁸ In fact, Atwood's encounter with *AF* does not differ greatly from my encounter with the niece from the GDR. I did not understand the politics but I understood the sentiment.

It is true, then, to say that *AF*, *Milkman* and *NSID* operate on two levels: on the one hand these texts can be read through their historical context, but on the other, they function on a more emotionally engaging level, because they do not simply deal with ideas and systems, like many dystopias do, but with characters operating within these systems.

Anna rejects the literature of Goethe and other classics, saying 'what could these old men possibly teach me about myself or the world I live in?' (chapter 1). This rejection of a past presided over by dead white men is a comment on contemporary society. Anna does not reject history but the patriarchal structures through which her place in the world is being drawn.

In a later chapter, Anna has a conversation with an old man in a bookshop, which is in many ways inspired by Winston Smith's interaction with the old man in

³⁶ Atwood, 2014, p.141

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid., Atwood's italics

the shop in *NEF*. The function of the old men is to provide access to the past: in Winston's case, this is achieved through the paperweight. In Anna's case, it is through Bertholt Brecht's poetry and play, *Galileo* (1940) (chapter 10). The conversation Anna has with the old man appears to be a discussion about the play, which is set during the Italian Renaissance. They discuss the power of the church and the way it operated, which is to say in a way not unlike a totalitarian regime. This, again, is implied. Some readers might be aware that Brecht was writing his play about the Third Reich, but the play's concerns can be mapped onto Anna's life behind the iron curtain. So even if Anna rejects many of the classics, she realises that there are events in history that can give her a deeper understanding of her life now and that she can still learn from the past. This is underlined by the fact that Anna buys another of Brecht's books, significantly, as a gift for her mother.

The role of literature and poetry is important. It grants Anna and the reader a greater understanding of the world they live in, considering the recent rise of populism. Of course, literature and art were censored in the GDR and it is lucky for Anna that the regime compromised with Brecht and granted him some creative freedom in return for taking credit for his fame.³⁹ In a later chapter, Anna raids her neighbours' empty flat and discovers Orwell's *AF* (chapter 13). This is a forbidden book, yet it is through a code in this book that Anna finds an escape route out of East Berlin. Anna Burns uses nineteenth century literature as escapism in *Milkman*. Her protagonist buries herself, reading while walking, in literature of the past because it is free of contemporary politics and therefore safe. It is this non-political retreat into the

³⁹ Mark Clark, 'Brecht and the German Democratic Republic' *Bertolt Brecht in Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp.97–104
<<https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/bertolt-brecht-in-context/brecht-and-the-german-democratic-republic/B1D3F13EA771ECBB29510AFF2892AC28>> [accessed 14 August 2021]

past that marks Middle-Sister out as an individual and one of the reasons her community starts to gossip about her. In this regard, Burns' use of literature is comparable to the Savage's love of Shakespeare in *BNW*. Here, too, literature creates a link to the past, to history, and it is this link that ultimately identifies the Savage as a non-conformist who is destined to die. The act of reading is also an act of transgression in *THT*.⁴⁰ Orwell's Winston Smith fears for his life when he puts pen to paper.⁴¹ My heroine, Anna, engages with ideas that reveal her to be a non-conformist and it is because of this that she is captured by the regime and placed in an institution for delinquent youths (chapter 15). Not unlike Winston Smith, Anna's downfall is precipitated by her engagement with a forbidden book – the code she deciphers in *AF* leads her to an escape route into the West and, though she does not immediately attempt to flee, it is the knowledge of such a route that signals her downfall.

Individual love is regulated by the state in one way or another and this is also the case in my novel. Anna lives with her mother (chapter 1). We are led to believe that her father is deceased, but it later turns out that he fled the republic and now lives in Hamburg (chapter 30). As discussed in my chapter on Huxley, individual love isolates you from the rest of the world, and so to ensure the survival of a totalitarian regime, total loyalty is demanded.⁴² In my novel, fear has torn Anna's parents apart: through clues, such as the list of initials Anna finds in the Schmidts' flat, the reader can piece together that Anna, her mother and her father were all supposed to flee to the West together (chapter 13). However, this did not happen, and Anna and her mother remained in the GDR. As Anna's relationship with her mother gradually

⁴⁰ Atwood, 1996, p.35

⁴¹ Orwell, 2000, p.10

⁴² Atkins, 1954, p.248

improves, Anna is taken away to Torgau. Anna is also in the process of repairing her friendship with her best friend, Knut, when she is chased and captured by the Stasi (chapter 15). As Anna seeks to mend her personal relationships, which are representative of individualism and individual love, she is punished. There is hope for Anna, though. At the end of the novel, Anna and her friends have escaped the facility. Anna has forgiven Christa and now realises that she is in love with her, as depicted through the kiss. What is important to note here is that Anna kisses Christa (chapter 34). She actively chooses individual love at the moment she is free of state control. However, we do not see Anna reunited with her father, or reconciling with her mother. There remain unresolved elements, which mirrors the ending of *THT*, in which Offred is picked up by two men, not certain if they belong to the resistance group 'Mayday' or if they are 'Eyes', employed by the state:

'Whether this is my end or a new beginning I have no way of knowing: I have given myself over into the hands of strangers, because it can't be helped.

And so I step up, into the darkness within; or else the light.¹⁴³

We do not see Offred reunited with her daughter or her husband. We are as unsure of her fate as she is. However, we can take solace from the fact that Gilead has fallen, as shown through the 'Historical Notes' at the end of the novel. Solace can be found at the end of *NSID* in the form of the postcard, sent by Anna to her mother, the day before the fall of the Wall, and at least the hope of an end to the oppression.

⁴³ Atwood, 1996, p.307

On the subjects of endings, my critical reading was quite useful. When studying *NEF*, I read Raymond Williams, who has written extensively on Orwell. It was not until I read Andrew Milner's introduction to a collection of Williams' essays that my interest was really piqued. Milner asserts that Williams misunderstood *NEF*'s ending.⁴⁴ It is Milner's belief that the Appendix is an important part of the novel and indicates that the regime eventually collapses. Atwood supports this reading and even modelled the ending of *THT* on it.⁴⁵ What I found so encouraging was that Williams got it wrong – and I fully agree with Milner and Atwood on this point – and that Orwell's intention might never have been to integrate the Appendix into the body of the novel, as Williams suggested.⁴⁶ It underpins how open to interpretation texts are and I thoroughly enjoyed reading these differing viewpoints.

Gregory Claeys has been my main source of critical reading for dystopias and utopias. I found his book *Dystopia: A Natural History* especially useful as it gave a detailed and thorough history of the genres with an entire section on totalitarian dystopias, which included readings of Huxley and Orwell. His assertions on Atwood were eye-opening. He discusses the 'Atwood principle', which relies on a certain level of 'realism' and draws a very concrete line between science fiction and dystopias.⁴⁷ Margaret Atwood's critical writing was also hugely important to me, in particular her coining of an entire new genre: ustopia. This inspired me to do the same. What Atwood touches on here is fascinating: writers will often feel that their work has been mislabelled, miscategorised, in order to fit certain moulds or sections of a bookshop. Even though there are no sections in any bookshop I have recently

⁴⁴ Andrew Milner, 2010, p.6

⁴⁵ Atwood, 2005, p.292

⁴⁶ Raymond Williams, *Orwell*, (London: Fontana Press, 1991), p.97

⁴⁷ Claeys, 2018, p.287

visited that advertise 'ustopia', Atwood raised the issue that categorising one's work is actually difficult and that reclaiming your work as a writer in the ways she has done is empowering.

This project has made me realise that there remain new frontiers to be discovered. It has allowed me to explore how porous the boundaries between genre are and to what extent writers respond to each other through their work. I can very easily see myself writing more dystopian fiction. It might be a sequel to *NS/D* or a novel set in the former Yugoslavia, where my mother was born, and which has a rich, dark history. I am excited to finish this project but I doubt I will ever stop thinking about the legacy of these writers.

Conclusion

'Love and hunger rule the world.'¹

Yevgeny Zamyatin understood the inner workings of totalitarian societies like no other and his novel *We* showcases this understanding. The novel is not directed at any one country but, as Orwell suggests, at 'the implied aims of industrial civilisation.'² The themes raised in Zamyatin's novel are universal, they predate Stalinism and Nazi Germany, and they encapsulate the very essence of what it is that makes us human. We need personal relationships and we need food, and these needs distinguish us from machines. Zamyatin's novel, as with all novels discussed in this commentary, asks the question: what does it mean to be human? Orwell's quotation about Zamyatin's novel implies what happens when humans strive for utopia (industrial civilisation) and how likely it is that they will find themselves in dystopia. As Atwood asserts: 'should we try too hard to enforce Utopia, Dystopia rapidly follows'.³ Perfection is a slippery slope.

This central question is discussed in Huxley, Orwell, Atwood, Burns and my own novel. A common sub-theme that feeds into this overarching question is the individual's access to love, to personal relationships and family, and therefore to a future. The depiction of power structures regulating an individual's relationships, controlling their thoughts and feelings through oppressive systems and laws, underpins how the oligarchy in the texts discussed have understood that by controlling love, they control individuals, and by controlling the individual, they control

¹ Zamyatin, 2020, p.25

² Orwell, *Volume IV*, 1968, p.75

³ Atwood, 2005, p.95

their commitment to the collective. It seems, then, that emotionally isolating the individual is one of the principal ways to create a dystopian society, in which individual liberty is a thing of the past, as encapsulated by Offred's distinction in *THT* between 'freedom to' and 'freedom from'. Dystopias are always built on 'freedom from'. In this way, literary dystopias are related to real life totalitarian states, which were often built on utopian principles. This is to say, there are close links to history.

Oppression and the threat to freedom are themes that were as relevant in *Gulliver's Travels* in 1726 as in *Milkman* in 2018 and, of course, in my own work, *NSID*. Having the 'outsider' fight against such structures becomes the bread and butter of the genre: John the Savage pushes against the vapid society in *BNW*, Winston Smith betrays IngSoc in *NEF*, Offred joins Mayday in *THT*, Burns' reading-while-walking heroine uses nineteenth-century literature as means of disengaging with the political debate around her in *Milkman*, and my protagonist, Anna, interrogates things she once thought of as true. Through their use of the outsider, these texts have an interrogative relationship to history. As Orwell's extensive writing on the subject suggests, recorded history is ultimately another form of fiction, which raises questions about the nature of historical fiction, a form of fiction that makes claims to authenticity and truth. If history is simply another form of fiction, does this not render the entire genre meaningless, or at least satirical?

What is at the core of the texts discussed is an examination of the accuracy and truth of recorded history. Orwell demonstrates through Winston Smith that history in *NEF* is erased, edited and rewritten in a way that mirrors his own experience of the reporting of the Spanish Civil War. In his essay 'Looking Back on the Spanish War', Orwell writes: 'I know it is the fashion to say that most recorded

history is lies anyway.’⁴ Huxley grapples with similar ideas, even misquoting Henry Ford in *BNW*, telling his readers that ‘history is bunk’, and monogamy, families, religion, high art, and Shakespeare – all things of the past – are extinct.⁵ Atwood, too, takes aim at the subjectivity of history, describing a church in *THT*, telling the reader that though the church has been restored, it is more recent history that the oligarchy opposes, hinting at feminism. Burns discusses ideas of ‘reshaping’ and ‘elaborating’ on history throughout the generations, which implies a struggle to accept the existence of an objective account of history.⁶ This collective history extends to the personal histories that are artificially created. In *NSID*, Anna grows up believing that her father is dead, only to discover that he has fled the GDR and started a new life in the West. In a state where the most important relationship is to the regime, private histories are as controlled as those of the entire nation. Everything is considered a political act. This also implies, as Burgess observed, that these dystopias, even though drawing on the past, are commenting on the contemporary.⁷ This is done under the guise of a futuristic setting or thorough the creation of another world, and it is this ‘other world’ that functions as the ‘glass’ Swift described in his definition of satire, ‘wherein beholders do generally discover everybody’s face but their own.’⁸

⁴ Orwell, *Volume II*, 1970, p.296

⁵ Huxley, 2007, p.29

Industrialist Henry Ford, in a three-part interview with the *Chicago Tribune* in 1916, said: ‘History is more or less bunk. It is tradition. We don’t want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker’s dam is the history we make today.’ Roger Butterfield, ‘Henry Ford, the Wayside Inn, and the Problem of “History Is Bunk”’ in *Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society*, Third Series, Vol. 77 (Massachusetts Historical Society, 1965), pp. 53–66 <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25080601>> [accessed 4 September 2021]

⁶ Burns, 2018, p.149

⁷ Burgess, 2013, p.ix

⁸ Jonathan Swift quoted in *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 1999, p.780

We are locked in an endless cycle of repeating history, but do not seem to be aware of the fact: Orwell writes about the oppressive regime of the Soviet Union in *NEF* in 1949 through a depiction of post-war London. Anna Burns writes about the oppression of women and the #MeToo movement via Northern Ireland in the 1970s. Even though these novels are very firmly anchored in history, the oppressive societies they portray feel universal and current. The uses of the 'Appendix' in Orwell, the 'Historical Notes' in Atwood, Burns' use of retrospective narration, and the postcard in *NSID* historicise their respective narratives, creating out of a constructed, dystopian novel a history. This act of creation is itself a comment on the fact that history is created and recreated.

These narratives communicate with each other via their use of politicised language. From the use of the state motto in Zamyatin's *We*, Huxley's *BNW* and Orwell's *AF* and *NEF*, they understand the power of language. *THT* and *Milkman* both adopt versions of Orwell's 'Newspeak': Atwood draws a comparison between 'freedom to' and 'freedom from', concluding that 'freedom from' has little to do with freedom at all, while Burns layers euphemism upon euphemism, uncovering the violence such language can mask. Both writers are responding to Orwell through their use of language, translating Orwell's 'Newspeak' into their own creative practice.

Generic conventions will always be a point of discussion. What is the distinction between dystopia and science fiction? Can a work of dystopian fiction also be satirical? What role does history play in dystopian writing? Atwood asserts: 'When it comes to genres, the borders are increasingly undefended, and things slip back and forth across them with insouciance.'⁹ Atwood captures this 'insouciance' by

⁹ Atwood, 2014, p.7

blending utopia and dystopia, thus creating her own genre: ustopia. Satires and dystopias share political concerns, often at the expense of the ruling elite. Huxley blends these genres masterfully in *BNW*, achieving what Claeys refers to as a ‘satire of utopian aspirations’.¹⁰ Above all else though, these texts share concerns about the state of the world. Burgess asserts that, ‘Huxley more than anyone helped to equip the contemporary novel with a brain.’¹¹ This sentiment is also true of Orwell, Atwood and Burns – their novels are about more than the fate of one individual: they are concerned with power structures and the threat of unchecked power. What these novels also share is a concern for the world and time in which they were created. To turn again to Burgess: ‘only the present is worth satirizing [*sic*].’¹²

Dystopian fictions are becoming increasingly popular and the reason for this might be the times we are living through. With the era of Trump recently ended in the United States, a global pandemic that brought with it a new way of life through state-imposed restrictions, the rise of populism across Europe and the Taliban occupation of Afghanistan, and, overshadowing all of this, the realities of global warming, it is no surprise that writers and readers alike have turned to dystopian fictions. Online publications have also picked up on the trend. In 2020, ‘The Conversation’ published an article, titled, ‘Are we living in a dystopia?’¹³ The *Guardian* offered its readers ‘[a] dystopian reading list: books to enjoy while in quarantine’ in March 2020.¹⁴

¹⁰ Claeys, 2010, p.107

¹¹ Burgess, *Ninety-nine Novels: The Best in English since 1939* (London: Allison & Busby Limited, 1984), p.85

¹² Burgess, 1967, p.46

¹³ Amy Atchinson and Shauna Shames, ‘Are we living in a dystopia?’ in *The Conversation*, 29 April 2020 <<https://theconversation.com/are-we-living-in-a-dystopia-136908>> [accessed 21 August 2021]

¹⁴ Lois Beckett, ‘A dystopian reading list: books to enjoy while in quarantine’ in *Guardian*, 16 March 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/mar/15/books-to-read-while-quarantined-coronavirus>> [accessed 20 August 2021]

Movements such as Black Lives Matter, Extinction Rebellion and #MeToo have encouraged people to think more critically about the world they live in and to interrogate supposedly historical issues such as racism and sexism. These are ideal subject matter for dystopian narratives. Perhaps dystopias are more popular now because of their capacity to reflect the state of the world. There is a growing strand of dystopian fiction that confronts the climate crisis, as Claire Armitstead points out in her article 'Stories to save the world: the new wave of climate fiction' in the *Guardian*.¹⁵ It seems that dystopias are the only genre equipped with the necessary tools to examine and work through the issues that scare us. I hope that my work advances this trend and that we will see more dystopian fiction emerging in years to come.

¹⁵ Claire Armitstead, 'Stories to save the world: the new wave of climate fiction' in *Guardian*, 26 June 2021, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2021/jun/26/stories-to-save-the-world-the-new-wave-of-climate-fiction>> [accessed 15 September 2021]

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