

The Last Dance Over The Wall

'It's gone but not forgotten. Fragments of *die Mauer* decorate mantelpieces and museums all over the world, but the city in which it was erected has done everything possible to obliterate its physical traces, if not its memory.'

Berlitz Travel Guide, 2004

Danckelmann Strasse

He had never wanted to come back to Berlin. Not after what had happened. Even less so after the fall of the Wall in 1989. He had thought it would be there forever. In 1984 they all had. But that Friday afternoon, at the end of May 2004, he stepped out of U-Bahn Sophie Charlotten Platz onto the wide and surprisingly empty Kaiserdamm, a guidebook and map tucked under his right arm, a jacket slung over his left shoulder and, what sounded like, several thousand deathwatch beetles ticking towards his heart. A time bomb about to explode.

He checked the west side of the map and then put the Berlitz guidebook to the new, shiny, vibrant capital of a unified Germany in his bag. He couldn't make sense of the new U-bahn and S-bahn map: it looked more like the London underground than the old West Berlin network. As for Berlin itself – it was an old city in a metallic and digitalised dress. If he didn't know, he would hardly have recognised it. A transparent world with a glass roofed Government. A world without walls. A high tech city built of computer chips and plasma screens. A new currency even. No more Deutsch Marks, no more Walls, no more barbed wire, no more occupying armies. But he did know and he wasn't convinced. Beneath the dress was the same city. He was almost sure of it. He flicked down his sunglasses to shield himself from the ghosts of the past and drifted in a perfectly straight line along the slumbering street. He had thirty minutes or so to kill before meeting Bodo.

Penny, an old friend and manager of his performance company for 15 years, had nagged, flattered and threatened him in a Pizza Express near Covent Gardens last week. 'If you don't do it now, you never will, Johnny. 'This,' she touched his notes for an aerial performance in Berlin, 'is fantastic. And it's time you faced up to the past. You can do it. When I was there it was even difficult to work out where the Wall used to be. It's a great story – perfect for an aerial performance, you have fantastic performers and a potentially great venue. Besides, the EU grant won't sustain us for ever, you know, and your money has gone. If this show is as good as I think it is, then this may

keep us from Telesales. Think of all the other performers. Surely you owe it to them? In other words, Johnny, this is crunch time,' she told him bluntly.

'Hm,' he said. He hadn't expected her to be quite so enthusiastic about his idea. He'd only really shown it to her out of curiosity. Now she wanted them to perform it this summer. 'I agree it would be good. But I'm not sure I'm ready to go ahead with it just yet, Penny. Give me some time.'

'We don't have time,' she said, slicing up her pizza. 'Go to Berlin and find out. And you can speak to Henri while you're there. He's in Berlin at the moment. And that juggler friend of yours – whatsisname? Bodo? I have his numbers here somewhere. You can give him a call. Oh and I've booked a flight for you next week on Friday.' She rummaged through her bag and handed him a printed off sheet of A4.

She was determined. 'Okay,' he had to agree, 'but no promises.' That was when he began to feel something burrowing towards his heart.

'Fine,' Penny said. 'In the meantime, I'll put an ad in the Evening Standard for anyone wanting a 43 year old aerialist.'

She'd been threatening him with telesales and bankruptcy for ten years now so he wasn't overly concerned. She exaggerated. If it were that bad, they could do a European tour with the material they already had. But fine. If that's what she wanted. He would go and talk to ghosts in Berlin. He couldn't finish his pizza.

His stomach somersaulted when he finally mustered enough courage to tap in one of the number's Penny had given him at 8pm that evening. He hadn't spoken to Bodo for 20 years. He hadn't even wanted to keep in touch with anyone he knew from those days. Otherwise, he would see her face in their eyes.

He had to ask to speak to him. Someone burped. Loudly.

'Johnny? Johnny East? What a big surprise.'

'Bodo, Bodo Jongleur. How are you?'

'Ya, good. Working in cabaret, you know. Ya, good. And you?'

'I'm coming to Berlin. I'm thinking of putting on an aerial show. Can we meet next Friday. If it goes ahead, I'd like you to be in it.'

'Na ya, Johnny, you come to Berlin. It will be good to see you.'

Bodo would be great in the show. *If he decided to go ahead with it.* They could do a double high wire juggling act at the opening. Bodo could juggle almost anything: balls, knives, cigarette boxes, glasses, beer bottles, fire. He could juggle with his feet as well his hands, standing on his head, he could even juggle twenty feet in the air on a tightrope. As for the tightrope: he slid across it as if it were an ice rink. No doubt in his mid-forties he wasn't quite as agile as he was twenty years ago, but Johnny reckoned he could still out-juggle anyone - even him.

'Why didn't you come to London? Did you never get my letter?' Johnny said. In the early nineties, he had written to Bodo telling him about *The Flight Company*, inviting him to join if he wanted, but he never replied.

'Na ya, Johnny. I get the letter from you many years ago, nay? But I can not leave Berlin. And then Alice comes.'

Ah yes. Alice.

'What happened?'

'We live together for one year. Then she goes back to England.'

'Why?'

Bodo paused. 'It becomes difficult. She wants to. She wants me to.'

'And didn't you go with her?'

'You know I wait for so long to get to the West Berlin. I can not leave.' He hiccupped.

Johnny couldn't imagine why. It wasn't as if he were being asked to go back to the East. Bodo had always loved Alice. And Alice had been in love with him, not Bodo. But that was then. He could hear the sound of drinks being poured in the background and a high-pitched laugh.

'Hey, where are you?' Johnny asked.

'I'm at the theatre. You call me at work.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't realise. Do you have to go?'

'No, it is fine.'

'I still have your phone, by the way,' Johnny said. 'The telephone you gave me in East Berlin. It's here in my flat in London. Do you need it now?' He laughed.

'What phone?' Bodo sounded distracted. 'Excuse me, Johnny.' He said something in German to someone.

Bodo had given him an old-fashioned Bakelite telephone with a hefty curvaceous receiver that slumbered over the base. At the time, in 1984, Bodo said he might as well have it as it would take at least ten years to connect. But he didn't seem to either remember or care.

'Na ya, it will be great to see you, Johnny,' he said. 'We have a good time. So many years. You come to my apartment in Danckelmann Strasse after 3pm, ya? Before that I am at rehearsal.'

'Yeah, okay. What happened to your old apartment by the way? In the East?'

'Scheisse, Johnny, you lack news,' Bodo said. 'The DDR blow up my apartment, turn it to dust. Just after, in 1985, nineteen years ago. So no one could do what we do.' He laughed. He sounded drunk.

'They blew it up?' Johnny really did lack news. He knew nothing after 9 November 1984. 'Shit. I didn't know that. I'm sorry.'

'Na ya, Johnny. I could never live there again, by the way. Too much memories, you know.'

'Yeah, I know,' Johnny said.

'I guess that's why you never come back to Berlin?' Bodo said.

'Yeah, I guess.'

'You tell me more when you come. But I don't know if I can do your show. You know, I have not been doing so much new work recently. Except for one new act with the knives.' He laughed again: a hollow ha-ha. 'And the past, na ya, difficult.' His voice trailed off.

'Yeah, I know,' Johnny said. So Bodo felt it too. Not surprising: they had been so close.

'Getting old.'

He couldn't imagine Bodo getting old. Then again, he didn't perform much himself anymore. He had decided that, whatever happened, this would be his last aerial performance. *If he decided to go ahead.*

He wasn't fooled. Even under these blue May skies in Charlottenburg, the old British sector – not a place he had even lived - he could still sense something of the murky past lingering in the air, surrounding him, seeping into his skin. Despite what they all said, he could feel the old divided city. As soon as he had landed into Berlin - Tegel earlier he felt it. As if his memories had

leaked out and were trailing him like a bad smell. A zeitgeist in its literal sense, a timeghost waiting for him. Ticking by for twenty years. When the taxi pulled up outside the Hotel am Zoo, he saw his younger self dancing past it on a cold night in January 1984, illuminated behind a net curtain of snow. Alice's shadowy image waltzed by him, her long black coat flapping around her boots. She was laughing and drinking a bottle of vodka. He wasn't able to stay in the hotel for long. As Bodo said, the past, na ya, was difficult.

He turned into a small park, Lietzensee. On both sides of the path naked, or semi-naked, people sprawled on the grass, reading, talking, smoking, drinking beer and laughing. Johnny smiled to himself. That hadn't changed either. Dogs lolloped after one another, occasionally barking. Bikes lay crashed out on their sides, wheels still spinning.

'Hey, pass auf!'

He swung off the path to avoid a bullet train pit-bull terrier pulling a woman on a bike. The young woman turned and smiled at him. Her long, black dreadlocks, moon face and white teeth reminded him of Alice. He smiled back. She would be 40 now. He hadn't seen her either for twenty years but he stumbled on a review of some sculptures she had done once a few years ago. She seemed to be doing well. He was pleased. He always thought that one day their paths would cross. But they never had. He wondered what happened between her and Bodo. No doubt he would find out soon enough.

As for him, there had been no one special since her. Plenty of casual relationships but they would soon leave him feeling cold. Then the cold would seep into the relationship and they would accuse him of being arrogant, uncaring, aloof, unable to commit, insensitive and/or a shitead. They were probably right. Instead, he had lived in the world she had shown him, high above the other world. At times, he wished it could have been different but it wasn't. Na ya, but he had done well for himself, considering.

He sat down on a bench and watched an old woman with long, grey-white hair opposite talking to a plastic cup, a Kaiser plastic bag lodged between her legs. What would it be like to be old and alone in the world? Johnny pulled out a piece of paper from his trouser pocket and checked the address again. He unfolded his mobile: almost five to three. Time to meet the past.

Danckelmann Strasse was lethargic, as if the silence and the heat were weighing it down. Cars aligned both sides of the road. Many of them Mercedes – with their logos poking out of the bonnets. He remembered the times when these symbols had been snapped off and worn like wild flowers. Maybe times had changed. The old Berlin four storey buildings, crumbling at the edges, basked in the street. An open entrance on the left revealed shaded buildings behind. This was it. Bodo told him that it should be open. Johnny looked for his name next to the buzzers but could not find it. He walked through into the large courtyard. A lone tree cast an imposing shadow over the rear house. He reeled as he passed some rubbish bins on the left. Flies hovered noisily above the plastic containers. Some red and white tape trailed on the sticky floor.

Bodo had said he lived in a ground floor flat in the hinterhof. Johnny guessed Bodo's apartment was the one with the dirty windows and half open shutters. Strange though, Bodo's touring caravan used to be immaculate. A lone fly buzzed behind him into the dark stairwell. The building was grimmer than he imagined. Bodo really should have demanded his flat back in the East – even the rubble. He knocked at the door but no one answered. He checked his mobile. Ten past three. He tried to call him and a faint purr responded from inside the apartment. This was the right place then. Odd that no one answered. His only other contact in Berlin was Peter. Bodo had given him Peter's mobile number but he hadn't spoken to Peter for twenty years either. He didn't much want to start now.

Where the hell was he? He strolled back into the courtyard. A small, old lady pushed past him with a shopping trolley. Johnny stopped her. Green eye make-up and thick mascara outlined her watery blue eyes, her lips were painted pink and thick powder decorated her cooked apple complexion. For an instance, her eyes contracted like sea anemones in anger. Or surprise. Johnny was at least two feet taller than her. He held up his hands, lifted his sunglasses and apologised in rusted German. He asked her if she knew of a man called Bodo Jongleur. He imitated throwing balls up in the air and points to his apartment. The woman snorted in disgust.

'Who are you?' she asked suspiciously in a loud, theatrical English accent, incongruous with her shrunken body.

'An old friend from England. We were supposed to meet at three o'clock.'

'Then you are in the wrong place.'

He asked her if this was the address he had written down.

'Ya, of course it is.'

Johnny took a deep breath. It had been a long day, maybe he was more tired than he thought. The woman was clearly crazy.

'Then this is where he lives,' he said. 'He told me.'

'How did he tell you? Are you psychic?' The woman stared up at him, her anemone eyes locking onto his, challenging.

'He told me on the phone.'

'I think you make a mistake. Your friend Bodo is not here anymore. Your friend Bodo throw the knives at himself.'

Johnny took another deep breath. It was not the past he was afraid of now.

'Terrible,' she screeched. 'Such a terrible thing making a terrible mess. All over my house. The hinterhof still smells. Can you not smell it? And all the polices asking the questions of my tenants. So much trouble. And everything terrible. In such a nice neighbourhood. Your friend verrrry crazy.'

'Maybe,' he said, 'but where is he now?'

'Where? Are you stupid? Where would you be with three knives in your head? Probably in the hell. He's dead of course.' The woman sounded triumphant, as if throwing down her trump card.

'But when? When did this happen?' It couldn't be true, Johnny calmed himself. Someone would have told him.

'Last week, Saturday. They find the body near the bins in the cardboard box.'

There must be a mistake. She was senile. He had spoken to Bodo on Saturday. She couldn't mean him.

'Ya, ya. Saturday night, maybe early Sunday morning,' she continued. 'He goes into the yard to practise to throw the knives at himself. Better at himself than me. You know once I have the knife in my ceiling.'

Johnny would have smiled if he had not felt the blood drain from his lips.

'His poor mother...' she continued.

'He didn't have a mother,' he muttered.

'Just as well...'

He felt the beetles ticking faster and faster. He needed something to hold onto and he needed to get away from this madwoman. Could it be true? Could Bodo have had an accident? Surely he was too good? And how? How could he have done it on his own? Only weighted knives with razor sharp edges could penetrate a skull. And three of them? The idea was insane. He tried to turn away, but his legs stuck to the courtyard floor and his head spun out of control. His hands clammy. Time slipped backwards along a twenty year slide as a green and white van pulled up outside the house. 'Polizei' was written on the side and the front.

'You must speak to them,' the woman said. 'They want to know more about your friend.'

Johnny didn't want to speak to them. But the two men in green uniforms and black leather boots and holsters were walking across to where he was standing. It's all right, he told himself. They'll sort this out. There must be some kind of misunderstanding.

'Guten tag, Frau Übermann.'

She launched into a long tirade. Johnny couldn't understand much: his German was never very good. He stared foolishly at the police who were now eyeing him with interest.

'You are friend of Herr Kollender?' one of them asked him in a heavy accent.

'Herr who?' For a moment, hope hit Johnny with the speed of a bullet. 'Do you mean Bodo?'

The two police conferred with the old woman. Even Johnny understood that Bodo's real surname was, in fact, Kollender. In twenty years, he had never known that. They'd all called him Bodo Jongleur. His stage name, he guessed.

'Ya ya, Bodo Jongleur, that's right.'

'Yes,' said Johnny. 'I was supposed to meet him today at 3pm but this person tells me he is dead.' The word thumped in his ears. 'Is that true?'

'Ya ya, that is very true. Unfortunately Herr Kollender was dead last Sunday. Estimated time of death is 2.00 am Sunday 23 May. I am afraid ...'

'Was it an accident?' Johnny said, his voice constricted by the heat. And shock.

'We are currently investigating the circumstances. There is a post mortem. We must ask you some questions, Mr...?'

'East,' Johnny said. 'Johnny East.'

The two police exchanged raised eyebrows while one of them made a note of his name.

'Mr East. And perhaps you know how we can contact someone by name Alice Howard?'

He knew Alice's surname and it wasn't Howard. Alice Madison. Mad Alice as Peter used to call her. Although maybe she married? He couldn't imagine her marrying but it would be too much of a coincidence for there to be two Alices connected to Bodo.

'I think I know who you mean but I don't know how you can contact her. Why?'

'She contacted us this morning with some information and now we must talk to her. But we can not seem to trace her.'

'What kind of information?' Johnny asked. But they wouldn't tell him.

Peter would know, Johnny thought, before the past whipped him, before he saw Peter coming back to the apartment in Heidelberger Strasse, out of his head, screaming at him as he stood watching the now empty death strip while the police stomped through the apartment.

'Oh fuck you, you fucking asshole. I fucking told you not to do this. What a fuck up. I think you'd better go, Johnny. I don't want to see you again...'

The time bomb exploded and Johnny plummeted into a past he did want to be in. It made him dizzy. Nausea twisted his stomach. Penny was wrong. He had to get out of Berlin. It was not the right time; it never would be. Now, it was not only a matter of facing the pain of the past but the pain of the present. And the meaninglessness of it all. What, in the end, had it all been for? Fuck Bodo. Why? No, he could not stay. He would get the first flight back to London and cancel the show. Fuck the money, fuck even high wire acts. He had done well, made a career out of dancing in the air. The other performers would find other work. He would declare the company bankrupt and go and work in Telesales.

'Perhaps you could come with us and help with our enquiries?' one of the policemen said. He shifted his weight from his left onto his right leg. His black boots shimmered in the afternoon sun.

Johnny didn't move.

'Ach! I thought you were his friend?' Frau Übermann snorted. 'You English have always the two sides of the face. And, you know, Herr Kollender owes me for last month rent.'

'This way, Mr East.' A gentle arm touched his.

A cold gust blew over him as he found himself propelled towards the green and white van. He heard Alice laughing at him.

'Next time you bring four hundred euros,' Frau Übermann called after him. 'Very cheap rent he had, ya.'

Bahnhof Zoo

Alice pounded the steps to Platform 1 of Bahnhof Zoo, gloved hands thrust deep inside her overcoat pockets, one clutching a box of cigarettes, the other a small bottle of Smirnoff, the blue label. She stopped and gasped for breath while her eyes scanned the badly lit but very empty platform. He wasn't here. Scheisse. Above her, fluorescent lights flickered and buzzed, threatening to plunge the station into darkness. She peered up at the large ghostly face of the station clock and frowned. The broken hand limped around the bottom, bluntly pointing to the fact that she was late. The train had been due in at 10pm, half an hour ago. But surely he would have waited? He didn't know anyone else in Berlin that she knew of.

She decided to wait until 10.45. The train could be late. The plastic casing over the timetable was broken after Hamburg and the times torn out so that didn't help. She extracted a Marlboro with her woollen fingers and lit it with an orange disposable lighter that singed her right thumb, instantly rusting the black wool. The heavily scented smoke whipped her lungs and she almost coughed. Marlboro always did that. She opened the bottle of Smirnoff, took a swig, then another, and slipped it back in her pocket. On the opposite platform a lone, old man, spread eagled on some cardboard, called to her before attempting to sing into a jiggling bottle.

'Prost!' she shouted across.

He stopped singing, waved his bottle and began drinking. All she could hear now was the distant sound of traffic whining along the Ku'damm.

She practised exhaling thick white clouds of smoke as she waited. *He* could breathe fire, apparently. And juggle. And dance. He was amazing. And fucking gorgeous. He had dark spiky hair and the deepest blue eyes she had ever seen. And he was at least as tall as her. They'd met in Gossips in Soho over Christmas. After three double vodkas and a line of speed she began babbling about Berlin, telling him how alternative it was, about all the squats

and collectives and the underground, creative stuff happening, how she was doing some work with a theatre company. It was an artist's haven, she'd told him.

'Sounds great,' he said, smiling deep blue sky at her.

'It is,' she said. 'Something to do with being surrounded by the Wall, you know. Whichever direction you go from Berlin, you have to go East. It's bound to have an impact. Bowie spends a lot of time there. And Lou Reed.' She thought that sounded impressive.

He half smiled out of the left side of his mouth and those crushed velvet blue eyes stared into hers. She looked down at the bar and began to shred a beer mat. He lit two cigarettes and gave her one.

'It could be just what I need. I'm looking for new directions in dance.'

'Yeah? You'd love it. There's a great dance scene. I'm going back in a couple of days' time. You should come and visit,' she said. Several times. Well, the music was very loud. She gave him her address and, soon after, he vanished.

Back in Berlin she'd thought about him pretty much all the time for the first week in January. Then she met Tom, an American. She'd just about stopped thinking about those blue sky eyes when she received a card from him telling her he'd be arriving on Saturday, January 21 at 10.00pm. 'If you can't make it, I understand,' he wrote. He signed it 'Johnny East'.

As she crushed her cigarette butt beneath her boot, the platform vibrated. But it was only a faded red and cream wooden S-bahn from the East creaking towards the station. A recorded voice crackled into the night as people inside the train yanked at doors that refused to open. Most of them looked as old as the train except for two girls who stumbled out with plastic bags full of bottles. No doubt they'd visited the Intershop in Friedrichstrasse. Where West met East underground you could jump off the S-bahn, buy very cheap vodka and then get back on the next train. One very good reason for being surrounded by communism, Alice thought.

A lion in the Zoo roared. His lonely cry rumbled along the platform. Poor thing. Caged up in the centre of Berlin. In such cold weather as well. She

rubbed her nose, careful not to smudge her lipstick - just in case - and wriggled her toes in her DMs. She was glad of her astrakhan hat. Some squaddie had said it looked like a baking tin. But what else would you expect from a squaddie. They were a race all of their own. In London you would never meet such people but in Berlin everyone was mixed up together. Like in a Zoo.

10.45. Her heart leap-frogged her stomach as she realised she'd either missed him or he wasn't coming. She didn't have a phone in her apartment so he couldn't have contacted her. Perhaps it was for the best. She knew nothing about the dance scene in Berlin. Nor was she working with a theatre company exactly. To say nothing of Tom.

That was it. 10.46.

'Alice?'

She spun round, her long black coat folding around her. Coming up the stairs towards her was a tall guy with a short, blue mohican, ear rings, wearing a leather jacket, black jeans and boots with spurs. He carried a small grey canvas bag. For a second, Alice didn't recognise him. Then she saw the dark sky in his eyes. The same colour as his hair. She felt her face catch fire.

'Hello,' she squeaked. She was about to say something else, something about him being late, but the words froze in her throat.

'Alice? Hi. You weren't here so I went and found a bar. I thought I'd see you.' He opened his arms to hug her.

There were no bars near the entrance of the station that Alice knew, apart from one very dark and seedy wino hole. She muttered that her train had been late.

'No problem,' he said. 'Thanks for meeting me.'

They hugged and, for a moment, Alice felt she was wrapped in a sheet of heated corrugated iron. Johnny stepped back and held her hands as if about to pull her towards him and waltz. But he didn't.

'You look fantastic. Nice hat. Come on, let's go and get something to drink,' he said. 'It's bloody freezing.'

Alice's hands and toes tingled. 'Here,' she said, thrusting the vodka bottle in his hand. He looked surprised for a moment but he unscrewed the top and swigged a mouthful without flinching.

'Cheers Alice,' he said.

'Is that all your luggage?' she asked.

'I put another bag in the orange lockers down there somewhere. I can pick it up another time.'

She warned him that it was a long way back to the station, but he didn't seem bothered. It was his first night in a new city. She had felt the same a couple of months ago. Everything had been so different and exciting to her that night: the heavy air, clogged up with coal, kebabs, coffee and Camel cigarettes, the wide, dark, empty streets, the array of dark moustaches and leather trousers, the language that sang out orders, the tiny Schultheiss bars – even the small Biers that took an eternity to pour.

As they left the deserted station it began to snow. The white flakes danced in front of the Cinzano sign that lit up the hotel on the corner. She didn't want to go to a café on the Ku'damm: they were expensive. She would take him to Nollendorf Platz. They slip-slided past the waiting cream Mercedes taxis and crossed over the wide, empty streets to the Ku'damm, only slowing down as they passed the decapitated church spire. It was dark and brooding; a dinosaur frozen in time.

'Looks like it's been here since the Jurassic age,' Johnny said. He laughed.

'Yeah, that's the Gedacts kirche,' Alice explained. She wondered what the Jurassic age was. She laughed anyway.

As she drank more vodka she watched Johnny. He was looking up into the night, watching the snow softening the jagged edges of the bombed off spire. She felt good standing next to him. Then she reminded herself that she had only met him once and didn't really know anything about him – except that he was a dancer who ate fire. Or, now that he was here, for how long he was staying.

'So how was London?' she asked, handing him the bottle.

'Cheers. Much the same as when you left. You know London's London - trendy, expensive and full of yuppies and posers.'

Alice nodded. She wasn't very good at posing: she always got too drunk. Maybe that was why she didn't like London.

'I was glad to leave,' he added.

They drifted away from the scarred skyline towards the illuminated revolving Mercedes on top of the Europa Centre. She decided to cut through and be in the warm for a while. 'And how was the journey?'

'It was fine. I met some guys from Amsterdam on the ferry and they showed me some new tricks.'

'Really,' she said. Did he mean card tricks? She was glad he wasn't perfect.

A heatwave greeted them as they opened the doors and music blasted out of the nearby Irish Pub. People hung about the entrance, puddles of mucky brown ice melting around them. Others in sleeping bags huddled outside the shuttered up shops. Alice showed him the giant water clock. Compared to the blackened headless dinosaur outside, it glistened like an alien spaceslide under the dazzling lights of the late twentieth century. The past and the future side by side.

'Very garish. Let's get a drink shall we?' Johnny said, walking back towards the Irish pub.

'Not there.' She wondered what 'garish' meant.

'Ah go on. Let me buy you an Irish coffee. My mother was half Irish.'

'It's full of military and straight people.'

'They won't kill us.'

'They might but come on then.'

They went into the tennis court size bar. A live band was fiddling. Pints of Guinness dotted the bars and waitresses in black trousers, white shirts and black leather money pouches flitted around the tables. A group of crew cut American GIs sat at the bar. Some of them turned and stared at them. Bad idea, Alice thought.

'Hey man, there's blue snow out there!' one of them said.

'Am surprised it's not red!' another one replied.

Alice smiled at him, pretending he was funny while nudging Johnny in the ribs. His body was solid.

A girl with, Alice thought, a strong Northern Irish accent served them. She didn't look very happy but they got their Irish coffees and sat down as far away from the GIs as possible. Alice had never had an Irish coffee but it looked nice. Johnny produced some Benson & Hedges. Alice took one gratefully. Sitting near them was a British man and a German woman. The woman smoked out of a cigarette holder. They too stared at them.

'See what I mean?' Alice said. She sipped her coffee. It didn't taste quite as nice as it looked.

Johnny shrugged, his blue mohican demolished by the melting snow.

'Fuck 'em,' he said and smiled. He stretched out his legs from the stool.

'So how was your dance audition in London?' Alice asked, trying not to stare at his bulging thigh muscles.

'I've had three since I met you but, you know, I'm just not ready to do the West End shows. I'll see what's going on here. You said there's a great dance scene?'

She nodded. Did she say great? 'Yes, there's a lot going on,' she said. She was going to add that it was a garish scene but she didn't think that sounded quite right.

'What about cabaret?'

'What about cabaret?' She knew nothing about cabaret.

'Well, you know, Berlin is famous for cabaret.'

'Oh, I don't think it's quite as popular as it used to be. You'll need to get a copy of *Tip* or *Zitty*. That's like the Berlin *Time Out*.'

Johnny nodded and sipped his coffee. 'This is good.'

Alice agreed: anything to get away from cabaret.

'So what's the theatre company you're involved with?' Johnny asked.

Fuck, he remembered that as well.

'Oh, it's a small group of people from Kreuzberg - we're hoping to do a performance of ... 1984.'

Johnny looked impressed. 'Wild.'

Yes, she supposed it was.

The band finished singing about a dirty old town and everyone clapped loudly, to Alice's relief. One of the Americans was trying to chat up a girl at the bar with long dark curls and he must have asked her where she was from as she shouted, 'Derry. It's Derry, not fuckin' Londonderry. I'm not fuckin' British, I'm Irish.'

'I'm just going to the toilet,' Johnny said, getting up.

'Hey, sir, what tribe you from?' one of the GIs called out.

Johnny stopped. Keep walking Johnny, Alice thought. But Johnny started talking to three of them. They seemed quite friendly. Alice also sidled over; she didn't want to miss anything.

'And are you the princess mam?' another one said to Alice.

No, I'm the fucking chief, came to mind but, for once, she kept her mouth shut and smiled.

One American was asking Johnny how he made a living with blue hair.

'I'm a performer. You want me to show you a trick?' Johnny asked him.

'What kinda trick, sir?'

Johnny moved the beer mats and a wallet out of the way on the bar and took three empty plastic cups.

'Have you a mark?' he asked.

'One mark? Hey, it had better be worth it!' The American laughed, opened his wallet and gave him a Deutsch mark.

Johnny put it in one of the plastic cups in full view. Then Johnny politely told him that if he could guess which cup it was under, he would double his money. If not he would lose it. The American nodded.

Then Johnny shuffled the cups around and, without speaking, invited the American to guess where the coin was. He selected the same one Alice had

her eye on. Johnny slowly lifted the cup but there was nothing there. He showed him the inside of the cup. Empty.

'How about that one?' the American asked, lifting up another cup himself. The other one was empty as well. 'That's a cool trick, sir.'

Johnny picked up the third cup and pocketed the mark. They shook hands. Then he slipped to the toilets without saying another word.

Alice sat back down to finish her coffee, impressed. The GIs also appeared amazed as they kept examining the plastic cups. It wasn't until the band started up again and they began to sing along to 'The Wild Rover' that they forgot about the disappearing money. As Johnny came back from the toilets, he bent down and picked up a wallet from the floor.

'I think this is yours,' he said, putting it on the bar.

'Gee, thanks ... *And it's no, nay, never...*'

Johnny drank up and said they should go. Alice burst out laughing when they left the pub. Where had he learned that, *sir*?

'On the boat over here,' he said. 'Although actually I used to do as a kid at school in the East End but I'd forgotten about it.'

'You're from the East End? But you don't have an accent.'

'Drama school,' he said.

Alice didn't say anything. She wanted to go to drama school.

'So you eat fire, dance, act, do tricks... Anything else?' She was beginning to feel fairly useless. She didn't even know what 'garish' was.

'Juggle. And I used to be able to walk a tightrope but I haven't done that for a long time. Come on, let's run.'

He took hold of her hand and they ran across a now very white Tauentzienstrasse.

'How old are you, Alice?' Johnny asked,

'Twenty,' she said, panting slightly. She couldn't even run. 'And you?'

'Twenty three.'

He was six years older than her then. Perhaps she would have time to be something. Perhaps she could be a dancer too. She'd give up smoking

Marlboro. She slowed down and pulled out the bottle of vodka which they drank as they walked by a line of Mercedes parked along the road. Not one of them had the Mercedes sign on the front.

‘Everyone breaks them off,’ Alice explained, ‘and wears them as necklaces.’

They passed Wittenberg Platz. A cream bus with snowy barnacles stuck to it slushed along the streets. It was a number 19. On the outside lane a green and white Polizei van overtook it. The pavements, even the roads and dark buildings that aligned them, had whitened and softened like grumpy old men made to carry sticks of candy floss. Johnny put his arm around her. They fitted snugly into each other. She slugged some more vodka, acutely aware that she was slipping into another world in the supple arms of a magician. But she wanted to remember this forever: walking through a white Berlin night with a man who could dance, act, eat fire and make Marks disappear. She loved Berlin. It was a crazy, magic city: a city sawn in half like a magician’s assistant. She pointed vaguely eastwards and upwards at the snow falling under the street lights.

‘See over there?’

‘Yeah?’

‘That’s Big Brother,’ she told him. ‘He watches us all the time. You can’t see him tonight but you will tomorrow. He has big, red, flashing eyes.’

‘More like he’s watching those in the East. Here, there’s a drop left.’ Johnny passed her the bottle. ‘Is he in the play?’

‘What play?’ Alice asked, drinking the rest of the vodka.

‘The 1984 play.’

‘Oh yes, of course,’ she said quickly. ‘The idea that we’re being watched all the time, just like Orwell imagined.’

‘It’s good that it’s snowing then. I wouldn’t like to think we were being watched now.’

Alice looked behind them. She could see where they’d walked, just the two of them, like giant penguins. In front was the smooth white shagpile pavement. There was no one else in sight.

'Isn't this fantastic?' she said.

Johnny stopped and pulled her into a dark shop doorway so suddenly she had to catch her breath. Her heart slammed against her coat as she looked into his eyes. He tugged gently at her snow tails that had been left to freeze outside her astrakhan hat. Snow dripped from her eyelashes. Everywhere he touched melted. She clung to his leather jacket, not knowing what to say. As he came closer, she found that they could make their breath clouds disappear. He tasted of ice and hot whiskey. And there was something else on his firey breath which she couldn't name; something that made her hands tremble and her feet tingle. The snow fell behind them under an arc light. Minutes raced by, hours, days, nights, yet still they didn't let go. Alice imagined them frozen in time, forever.

He sighed as they breathed again.

'We'd better go,' he said, softly, touching her face with burning fingers.

They crunched the rest of the way to Nollendorf Platz. The big white and blue U-bahn sign, now also splattered with fat white barnacles, grew closer. Alice no longer wanted to go into a bar but the Café Swing looked quiet enough and they would be able to warm up. Alice quickly scanned the place for Tom as they entered the café. He wasn't there – not that she had expected him to be. Salsa music played in the background. Johnny went to order whiskey and coffee.

Alice floated up the steps to some aluminium tables on a raised platform. A couple of familiar faces smiled at her as she passed. She sat near the window in the corner and took off her long black coat and hung it around a chair. Her deep red jumper was damp. Johnny joined her, sitting next to the steamed up window.

'I like it,' he said. 'It's got a good vibe.'

'I once heard that there are more bars and clubs in Berlin than there are people,' Alice said. 'Two million bars – can you imagine?'

A waitress with a shaved head and a nose ring brought them their drinks and smiled.

Johnny pulled out a wad of dollars and marks and paid for the drinks with a ten mark note. Alice was surprised he had dollars.

'To the Allied Forces,' Johnny said and clinked her whiskey glass.

She paused. 'You didn't, did you?'

He raised a dark, innocent eyebrow.

'I'm afraid so,' he said.

'Johnny!' she said. Even she would never dare steal money from the military. 'How? I mean how did you do it?'

He winked at her and half smiled with the left side of his mouth. 'I already had the guy's wallet when I went to the toilet. I only took some, the rest I returned. He probably won't even notice.' Johnny paused and wiped the condensation from the window. 'I don't normally nick things. It's just times have been difficult.'

'Oh I'm all for redistribution of wealth and all that,' she said, not wanting him to think she was, in any way, straight.

He shrugged. 'What's that over there?' he asked, pointing to the grey building with an 'M' on it.

'That's the Metropol,' Alice said. 'They have bands playing upstairs. Downstairs, there's a bar. Do you want to go? I have something to keep us awake if you want?'

'I'd rather cuddle up with you,' he said, putting his arm around her.

Alice smiled, uncertainly. British guys tended to hide their feelings behind a wall of sarcasm. She didn't think Johnny was like that but she wasn't sure. Germans were much more open and honest: they said what they thought. So were Americans - at least Tom was. When she told him that Johnny was coming to stay and that she wouldn't be able to see him for a few days he said, 'No problem'. Easy. Actually, he'd said, 'No problem, hon.' Alice wasn't sure if she liked the 'hon' bit.

'Do you mean it?' she asked Johnny.

'Of course. Has no one ever told you how beautiful you are, Alice?'

Alice glowed as they left the Café Swing and went down the steps of the underground. She was happy that they were going back. Tom wouldn't come round to the apartment. As easy as their relationship was, she didn't particularly want him to find her snogging Johnny.

'How much is it?' Johnny asked, going over to the ticket machines.

'Two marks but, don't worry, they don't control at this time of night.'

Next to the machine was a map of Berlin and the underground network. A thick pink line framed West Berlin. A couple of underground lines crossed into the blanked out East.

'So where do you live?'

'Down here near Hermannplatz in Neuköln. Near the Wall. We have to change at Möckernbrücke. We're here - the yellow line, Line 4. We need the blue line, Line 7.'

The two carriage, orange train was waiting at the platform. Alice jumped on and stood in the doorway. Johnny was still mesmerised by the map. Alice wondered what would happen when they got home. The possibilities made her toes scrunch up in her boots.

He talked for most of the way back about the East End, his family, or lack of it. Apparently, his father had pissed off before he could talk and his mother had died of cancer four years ago when he was nineteen. Alice listened but didn't say much. She didn't get on with her parents at all. They were ancient and lived in Hellesden, near Norwich.

'Then I went to East 15,' Johnny said. 'What about you?'

'Oh, I don't have much to do with my parents anymore. I was adopted.'

He stroked her hand and kissed her. Her whole body scrunched up.

They got off at Hermannplatz and walked down Sonnenallee. A Doner Kebab shop and a couple of Kneipes were still open. Johnny suggested a kebab and a beer; he hadn't eaten since a stale British Rail sandwich and chips. Alice agreed. She was thirsty. A couple of Turkish men sat and drank coffee, gesticulating widely. The man serving chatted to her in German. 'Da, da, das stimmt,' she agreed, not having a clue what he meant.

They put the cans of beer in their pockets and left the shop munching on the shredded lamb, the remains of which rotated in front of a big grill by the window.

'That's better,' Johnny said. 'So how far are we from the Wall? It didn't look that far on the map.'

'It's quite a way,' Alice said.

'Shall we go and see it?'

'Okay,' Alice said. She had never been to the Wall near here and she desperately wanted to de-scrunch with Johnny. 'Are you sure?'

'Yeah, let's.'

They kept walking down Sonnenallee, past the entrance to her apartment. She thought it was to the left so they took the next turning, glove in glove. On both sides of the street the dark, old Berlin houses, four or five storeys high, gazed down at them, their little balconies dressed in white. The roads were quiet, apart from the occasional taxi slushing through the snow. Alice had no idea where they were but she had a feeling that Peter, an American who ran the best bar in Berlin, lived nearby. They crossed several roads and a canal.

'Do you know where we are?'

'Sure,' she said.

They kissed, drifting along the street.

'Fuck,' Johnny said, stopping.

She opened her eyes and there it was: the 13 ft high concrete wall with its tubular trimmings lying straight in front of them. The end of the road.

Alice drank her beer as they watched the Wall. Not that it did much. She could just about make out the shadows of painted boats sailing across the concrete on a dark sea. Writing covered the sky and beach. An eerie glow hung above it as the arc lights cast shadows onto the death strip behind. Beyond the Wall loomed the houses in the East, the same as those in the West, but blacker. They were eerily close. This must be a very narrow stretch of the Wall.

'What's the other side?' Johnny asked.

'There's a death strip called No Man's Land where there are watchtowers, barbed wire, alarms and all that shit. It's supposed to be mined with explosives but I don't know if that's true. I saw loads of rabbits from the viewing point at Potsdamer Platz. But maybe they don't set the explosives off.'

'Wild. Let's go nearer,' Johnny said. 'I want to see the rabbits.'

Johnny walked towards the Wall. Alice followed him. As she got nearer she read: *Make love, not war, fuck the wall*. Next to it was a drawing of a penis/gun firing sperm or bullets depending on your perspective.

'Hey, Alice. Put your hands together like this.' He indicated that she should make a cradle with her hands so that he could jump up. He began to unlace his boots. 'I'll stand on your shoulders. You must be almost six foot. I might be able to see over.'

'I am six foot but it's still too high. And if you do, they might shoot you,' she said, putting down her beer. She rather liked the idea of lifting Johnny. If nothing else, she was strong.

'Alice, this is 1984. Not 1948.' He laughed as he stepped into her palms.

The Watchtower

'Scheisse,' said Dietrich, as his automatic rifle clattered to the floor.

Klaus didn't look around. He knew what had happened. It was bad enough that one of them was away from the window, even if it was only for a second.

'Okay?' Klaus asked, eyes still peeled.

'Fine,' Dietrich said. 'Except my fingers have frozen.'

Klaus poured some coffee from his thermos flask into a plastic cup and wriggled his toes, still without taking his eyes away from the control strip of deserted land below him. He took several sips and passed the cup to Dietrich. It was the first time he had been on duty with Dietrich.

'Thanks.'

They were both huddled up against the heaters under wooden seats that ran beneath the watchtower windows but it was still freezing. Snow was falling outside and the sandy strip below them had already turned white. Only a madman or a ghost would try to cross now, Klaus thought, although he knew that only madmen and ghosts would try to cross at any time. Between the two 3.4 metres high walls protecting the Deutschland Democratic Republic, there were watchtowers, rolls of barbed wire and antitank barricades. And the whole area was wired with alarms. But still they must be vigilant. Madmen and ghosts did exist. Not here, but other sections of the Border had been violated – even recently.

Klaus suppressed a yawn. At least the snowflakes dancing under the arc lights gave them something to watch. As much as he dreaded the time he would have to shoot someone, the thought of another year watching nothing, except rabbits, made him yawn. Still, it had to be done and, at least, they rotated the watchtowers and the shifts so that every day he was somewhere different.

This was about the closest he'd been to the West. Some watchtowers were closer than others. Here, the houses were so close to one another it almost

looked as if you could jump. But, of course, you couldn't. He was so close though he could peer into the windows if he wanted. Dietrich had an even better view. Dietrich was the postenführer, which meant that he was in charge. It also meant that he watched the side which was considered to be more vulnerable - in this case, the south east. Not that Klaus wanted to look into windows. Only out of curiosity. He felt pity for the people living in the West, the homeless, the unemployed; people existing without the support of the State. Of course, he knew a certain percentage were rich; that they could afford things he could only dream of. He had been warned of that. In the daytimes, he had seen the large, polished cars parked in the streets, the people arriving home laden with shopping bags, the insides of their brightly lit apartments with their big televisions and sofas, their luxurious dining tables with bowls of real fruit in winter (although his postenführer that day had suggested they were plastic), coffee tables with glossy magazines and bookcases full of books, wardrobes bursting with clothes and shoes, refrigerators, washing machines, telephones that would ring, coffeemakers, microwaves, cupboards full of unfamiliar jars and tins of foods, an endless supply of vegetables, fresh meat and fish.

But he had also seen into apartments without curtains, without carpets, without even beds. In one apartment from another watchtower he had peeped into such a small apartment where five people lived in one room: three men and two women forced to live together. They had no money to buy even the basics and looked thin and pale. One girl's hair was all knotted and another one had the sides of her head shaved. Maybe she had come out of hospital. He had watched them sharing a cigarette.

Occasionally, from some watchtowers he had glimpsed the bright lights of the West and imagined people sleeping in doorways wrapped in newspaper as they had seen in documentary films. It wasn't fair how some people could have so much while others could have so little.

'Dietrich?' he said.

'Yes Klaus.' Dietrich let his binoculars hang around his neck.

'Have you ever had to shoot anyone crossing from the West?'

'From the West? No.'

Klaus hesitated. He knew he had to be careful about what he said. But most of them happily talked about shooting and Dietrich seemed quite laid back.

'Don't you think it would be difficult? I mean, you can't blame people for wanting to come to our Democratic Socialist state can you?'

Dietrich shrugged. 'We have our orders. It is not about where people want to go, it is about the violation of our Border.'

'I know that,' Klaus said quickly, 'but it must be terrible for them, not having a choice.'

'Yes, I suppose so, but more people attempt to cross from our side to the West. Why do you think that is?'

Klaus laughed. 'Propaganda, of course. They see the Western television which shows the consumer goods and the high life of the few and they think that everyone lives like that!'

'I suppose so,' Dietrich said, picking up his binoculars once again. 'But don't you ever want to see for yourself?'

Klaus knew that this was dangerous territory. He was surprised at Dietrich. Maybe he was testing him.

'Well, from what I have seen, no, not really. I mean, perhaps for the day, but I would hate to have to live there. I do not see why anyone would want to.'

They fell silent again and watched the snowflakes.

'How long have you been here?' Dietrich asked him.

'Three months. And you?'

'Just over a year,' Dietrich said.

'Where are you from?'

'Leipzig. And you?'

'Dresden.'

'Dresden is a good city. I visited once.'

'I'm afraid I don't know Leipzig,' Klaus said. He hadn't done much travelling. All his family lived in Dresden.

'I don't want to go back,' Dietrich said.

'Why not?' Klaus was surprised. It was unusual to say that you didn't want to return to your hometown.

'There's nothing for me there.' Dietrich paused. 'My mother died last year.'

'I'm sorry,' Klaus said. 'What about your father?'

'He works and drinks and sleeps.'

Klaus didn't say anything as he didn't know what to say. He tried to imagine what it would be like to not have a mother and a drunken father, but he struggled. His father was a successful engineer and his mother worked in a nursery. His sister, Olga, was still at school but he even got on with her.

Dietrich whistled.

'Hey, Klaus, a woman is undressing... Come and have a look! It's a wall stripper!'

Klaus hesitated. Dietrich, as the postenführer, was responsible for their watch. Even so. Their Commander would be furious. But a wall stripper? He had heard other guards talk about them. He double checked that there was no movement his side and went to join Dietrich. He focused his binoculars on a bedroom window on the fifth floor to the right of the watchtower. There she was; a young woman, early twenties, with dark curly hair down to her shoulders, a pale face, red lips, with long curvy silky legs and small feet standing beneath a naked bulb facing the window. The curtains were open. Either she had forgotten to draw them or... Klaus imagined the alternative as she unbuttoned a long, white shirt.

'Ach, yes... ' Dietrich said.

The shirt slipped to the floor where she left it. Standing in only a pair of white lace knickers and bra she stretched revealing the dark hair beneath her white arms. Then she folded her arms behind her back and unhooked her bra strap.

'My God,' Klaus whispered.

'Shut up.'

Her breasts were huge. Klaus had never seen anything like them. They were like oranges, no bigger, like giant snowballs, smooth, perfectly round snowballs. She was beautiful, a goddess, a beautiful snow goddess whom Klaus wanted to marry. He was sure of it. He ran his binoculars up and down her body, fiddling with the focus, trying to get closer. He fiddled so much the figure that bent over and stepped out of her knickers and emerged completely naked was blurred, but there were two of her. By the time Klaus had got her back into focus he was erect and she was walking towards the window. Klaus didn't know where to look most.

'My God.'

When she got to the window, she stopped and reached across for the curtains. Then, as if she had a second thought, she let go of one side with her right hand and turned towards them and stuck up her middle finger before slamming the curtains shut.

Dietrich laughed while the world slowly collapsed around Klaus. She wouldn't marry him, she would never know him, never meet him. She hated him. It wasn't fair. His erection shrivelled like a popped balloon.

'Isn't she something! Did you see those breasts? Imagine. Scheisse.'

They both fell silent, both imagining. Klaus didn't trust himself to speak. This sort of thing didn't happen every night and he knew he was lucky, but that didn't help. In fact, it somehow made it worse. His binoculars kept wandering to the West, to Dietrich's side, towards the lit bedroom, but the curtains remained firmly closed. Only a chink of light reminded him of the woman inside. He might as well be on Mars.

The snow stopped but Berlin remained white, unusually bright. Klaus looked up and saw that the moon had appeared from behind the clouds. Down below, on the Western side, he saw a very tall man with, what appeared to be, blue hair walk towards the Wall. Behind him a giant woman, in a square fur hat and an old fashioned long, black coat tapered at the waist, followed. She was speaking to him and laughing loudly as they came closer to the Border. Klaus thought she spoke English. Dietrich picked up his Very

light pistol and went towards the door. The Westerners disappeared from view as they stood against the Wall. They looked fairly desperate but they wouldn't, would they?

A pair of black gloves appeared on the tubular top of the wall, groping at the lumps of frozen snow. Klaus felt his stomach yo-yo down to his boots and back. How could they have got up there? He or she must be standing on the other giant's shoulders.

'Hold your fire,' Dietrich said.

Klaus held: they weren't allowed to fire into the West or until the Border was violated.

'Shouldn't we alert the patrollers?' Klaus said. Surely this counted as a breach of security? The hands were still there, stuck to the snow. Then slowly, a head appeared. It was a he. The hair was definitely blue.

Dietrich pressed the button and fired his pistol towards the moon. The piercing shot reverberated through the white night. The woman screamed and the hands fell away. For a moment Klaus thought that Dietrich had hit them but then he saw the two giant violators running away from the Wall. They stopped at the end of the street and looked back, holding onto each other. Perhaps they couldn't see the watchtower, but they were staring straight at him. Klaus looked through his binoculars and saw their pale faces under the streetlight. They were young, his age maybe. They turned to each other and smiled or laughed - he couldn't tell. The fools. They could have been killed. They stepped into the shadows and began kissing just as the patrollers arrived.

Dietrich explained what had happened and pointed to the area of the Wall that had been violated. He exaggerated slightly saying that the man had tried to throw his leg over, but Klaus didn't say anything. They didn't want to appear trigger happy and it had been his idea to alert the patrollers. The area was declared safe and the Commander praised their action. Dietrich took the opportunity to go and piss against the inner wall while the patrollers were there.

By the time the patrollers had left the violators had gone.

'Poor things,' Klaus said. 'I wonder what kind of lives they have?'

'Who knows,' Dietrich said. 'Look.'

Klaus looked again towards the woman's bedroom. She had put a lamp in the window. For a second, Klaus burned at the thought of her naked behind the window, lying on the bed picking at a bowl of cherries. He imagined himself lying next to her, watching her take the pips out of her mouth. But there in the window above the lamp hung a white banner. On it was written, 'ass holes'.

As Klaus tipped out the last of his coffee, he suddenly felt homesick.