

Birthday in Berlin

‘Herzlichen Glückwunsch zum Geburtstag, Angi!’ chimed Tamara with the joyful sincerity that seems to exude from every German whenever there is a birthday, wedding, promotion, or public holiday. The two students sat down at the breakfast table that Tamara had prepared for the occasion with a psychedelic tablecloth, a variety of candles, four wooden breakfast boards and Angi’s favourite selection of bread rolls, cheese and sliced sausage.

Angi could still feel the effects of her birthday party from the previous night. She had been dancing with a larger group of friends from university, had too much to drink but had somehow managed to make her way home on her own towards 5.00 am.

‘Would you like some coffee already?’ asked Tamara.

Anna and Friedericke came rushing into the kitchen. ‘Herzlichen Glückwunsch!’ screamed Friedericke with such excitement that you would have thought it was *her* birthday.

She gave Angi a long hug and then went over to open the window. Tamara frowned briefly: it was early March and only two degrees outside.

Anna poured herself or coffee. Her long, dark brown hair was still wet from the shower and her unblemished skin glistened with the coconut body lotion her aunt had bought her in the KDW.

Angi had often wondered whether Anna had any physical imperfection. Even at 6.30 in the morning Anna looked so tanned and well-rested, as if she had just been on holiday for two weeks. Her pale green vest hung as if by chance over her clearly defined shoulder blades so that you could see the thin white strap leading down to the top of her filigree bra.

‘I wish you all the best, Angi,’ she said in a low voice. As she smiled her large, glossy lips parted to reveal her stunning teeth and two dimples appeared like quotation marks on either side of her mouth.

‘Thank you,’ replied Angi. ‘I am so glad that we can all be together.’

After breakfast she got up from the table and closed the window. Within seconds the warmth returned, along with the smell of coffee, candles and fresh bread that temporarily dominated the apartments’s usual aura of washing powder and cold concrete. She looked out of the window from the 10th floor apartment with its view of Berlin’s main river, the Spree.

The girls had been very fortunate to get such a well-situated apartment, though most of their friends assumed that it was thanks to Angi’s father, who was a senior officer in the Stasi.

The grey sky canopied the crocodile teeth rooftops of the city, creating a familiar sense of pragmatic pessimism. To the right Angi could see the bald trees of Treptower Park and to the left

the red brick Oberbaum Bridge striding the Spree and linking her divided nation from the Communist East to the Capitalist West. She wondered for a moment, yet again, whether she might ever cross that bridge. Whether the Wall, that was there to protect her, might one day come down. Already she had heard that there were hundreds of citizens gathering peacefully outside the church in Leipzig, chanting 'Wir sind das Volk'. The right of human beings to move freely from one place to another is the most fundamental human right of all, she had read somewhere.

For a young woman brought up in a strict, politically correct East Germany family, she was very free-thinking. She had often got into trouble for questioning how her nation could so rapidly accept the change from fascism and communism. From killing Jews to killing its own people.

She turned back towards her friends who had begun to talk animatedly about their forthcoming examinations.

'After my exams, I've been thinking about moving to West Berlin,' announced Angi. 'I long for the freedom they have over there.'

'That's a lie,' retorted Tamara, 'and you know it is. There's no more freedom on that side of the Wall than on this side. True freedom is making the conscious decision to remain here.'

Angi looked at the three faces staring at her, eagerly awaiting an answer. Instead of replying, she smiled at them gratefully. In her heart she felt a warm, contented glow, that feeling she knew as a child when she came home from swimming competitions in the winter and her mother would read her stories by the tiled stove.

She liked her flat-mates. They were very sincere in their care for one another. She liked Tamara for her tireless attention to detail, Friedericke for her naive joyfulness in almost any situation and Anna for her honesty and her beauty, even if Angi was just a little jealous of her at times.

Right now, in spite of what she had just said, she wanted to be nowhere else.

As the candles grew smaller and their wax melted like stalagmites onto the tablecloth, the conversation moved from examinations to the longer term future. The coffee was all gone now and there remained only fruit on the table.

Anna picked up a red-green apple and bit into it with a loud crunch. She took a white napkin wiped away some juice that was dripping from her lower lip.

Angi wasn't in the mood for fruit. She got up and poured herself another Sekt, quite unaware of the fact that this third glass was probably going to save her life.

'Children are more important to me than my work,' concluded Friedericke. 'I hope I can have more than one, and if not, then I will train as a Kindergarten teacher in my thirties.'

Suddenly their conversation was interrupted by strange noises from somewhere beneath them. Loud voices. Slamming doors and smashing glass. Was it a serious dispute between some

neighbours? Had the Stasi broken in to uncover yet another crime against the State? Now it was even louder: more crashing, cracking and banging. Terrified voices began shouting, 'Raus! Raus! Schnell! Schnell!'

People were now screaming for help. The young students ran to the window and began to panic as they realised what was happening. Billows of black smoke were climbing up the outside of the building from about two floors below. There were enormous flames towering out of the broken windows, licking the grey concrete wall like grotesque, scarlet tongues.

'We've got to get out!' instructed Angi, pointing towards the front door of their apartment.

As the young women ran to the door, they could hear the sirens of fire engines and ambulances becoming ever louder in the background. Angi opened the door. The hallway was already filled with dense, grey-black smoke. She slammed the door, grabbed the coats from the coat rail, threw them at her friends and led them into the bathroom. They quickly wet their coats and placed them over their mouths.

As they ran back to the door, it seemed as if everything was now in slow motion. They knew they couldn't possibly use the elevator so they headed through the smoke-filled corridor to the stairwell. Two of their neighbours followed them, coughing and spluttering and shouting. As Angi opened the heavy, metal door, a wall of heat and smoke hit her in the face like a visible force field. She fell backwards against Tamara who grabbed her under her arms and hoisted her back on to her feet. From behind, the neighbours panicked and pushed the young women forwards. Angi fell down the concrete stairs headfirst. Only for a few seconds she could somehow feel how first her head, then her arms, breasts, stomach and legs banged against the rock hard steps and walls of the stairwell. Smoke, heat, shock, painlessness, darkness. Her body shut down.

While most of the firemen were dealing with the source of the fire on the seventh floor, some had been directed to the floors above and to the emergency stairwell. When Klaus, Florian and Heiko discovered the four young women and their two neighbours, their sense of duty and relief at finding them turned rapidly into horror and despair.

A large part of the upper stairwell from the 11th floor had collapsed on to Friedericke and the two neighbours. The immense boulders of concrete had crushed their skulls. They didn't any longer look like human beings. There was nothing they could do.

Anna too lay motionless, her beautiful features distorted and covered in blood from the metal railings that had ripped into her face. From just below her knees, her legs were trapped under the mass of grey rubble. Heiko called immediately for medical assistance, knowing that amputation was the only option.

Close to Anna's matted hair lay the bodies of Tamara and Angi, facedown, the one on top of the other.

'Can you hear me? My name is Klaus,' shouted the fireman. 'We are going to get you out of here. You're going to be OK.'

Tamara groaned with pain. Klaus called for two stretchers.

While Anna's legs were being cut free from the rubble, Tamara and Angi were carried downstairs to a waiting ambulance. The senior fire officer told Klaus to accompany them to hospital since there was a shortage of medical staff at the scene.

Although the fire was now under control, the air was still thick with smoke and the smell of charred wood. Neighbours stood like silent statues as the sirens still filled the air.

The hospital doctors and nurses worked efficiently to prioritise the incoming injured, X-rays, blood transfusions and surgical operations.

Tamara was rushed into an operating theatre, no longer conscious.

'Do you know *this* woman's name?' asked a nurse, gesturing towards Angi, who was fast asleep on a stretcher.

'No', replied Klaus.

'Are you able to wait with her? She is low priority compared with the others we have here. It may take some time until a doctor can see her.'

'My senior officer said that I can wait,' he replied. He was surprised by the sound of his own voice. In a severe crisis like this, you have to become someone else.

'Come into this prep room. We are short of space here and there are more to come. Look, I am putting this tag on her wrist. She is number 27. You can move her to the bed if she wakes up. Then we can also find out her name and contact her next of kin.'

'Fine,' agreed Klaus as he wheeled Angi into the prep room.

'We will call you over the loudspeaker when we are ready for her,' concluded the nurse as she closed the door behind them.

The morning turned to afternoon and then to evening. Finally, Klaus left the prep room to ask if they had forgotten about her.

'No,' said the nurse calmly, 'we haven't forgotten her. It could still take a while. It would be good if you could stay on and look after her.'

When Klaus went back into the prep room, Angi had begun to wake up. Against the blinding backdrop of the white ceiling and fluorescent light, the first thing she could make out was the fire officer. As his features came into focus, she could see his thick black hair, his furrowed brow, sallow skin and three-day beard. He was looking at her with a tense smile.

'You okay? There's been a fire, but you're going to be all right. You're in hospital and the doctor is coming to examine you.'

'I'm very cold,' said Angi as she shivered under the rough, hospital blanket. Klaus looked around the room in vain and then took off his large, black, woollen jacket and placed it over the young woman.

'It's probably shock. I'll get you a drink. Warm milk okay?'

'That would be nice of you.'

Klaus, suddenly feeling more at ease, rolled up his shirt sleeves and slipped his braces off his shoulders so that they hung down from his waist. He lifted her up and laid her on the bed.

'I'm Angi, by the way,' she told him, as if she were reminding him of something he already knew.

'And I'm Klaus,' he told her. 'I am the fire officer who saved you from the fire.'

As he stared at her through his striking green eyes, he noticed for the first time how pretty she was. His sense of duty conflicted with his embarrassment. He looked away and focused on the warm milk. By the time it was ready, Angi had fallen asleep again.

Half an hour later the doctor came in, woke Angi up, examined her and took her details.

'You have been very fortunate,' the doctor summed up. 'You are obviously shocked and bruised, but you have no broken bones. Thanks to the amount of alcohol in your blood, your body was very relaxed as you fell down the stairs. You should be able to go home tomorrow.'

Home to her parents, that was.

'Your parents are here, added the doctor, 'I will send them along to see you as soon as we have moved you to the ward.'

'And what about my flatmates?'

'Best to wait until tomorrow,' replied the doctor sternly.

Angi was moved to Ward C. Klaus was exhausted now. His eyes were sore, his muscles taut and his joints ached. He asked Angi if she minded if he went home.

'Of course not,' she replied. Klaus pulled up his braces, slipped on his thick coat and started to walk away.

'Klaus.'

He turned around, somewhat anxiously.

'Thank you,' she added.

'My pleasure. Don't mention it.'

The next morning Angi took a shower and went to see what had happened to her friends before being driven home by her parents. Nothing could have prepared her for the stark reality that was about to confront her. It was a much worse than the fire itself.

Tamara had completely lost her memory, Friederike had died and Anna had lost both her legs. It was bad enough trying to cope with seeing Tamara who no longer recognised her. It was

almost impossible to make conversation. And merely seeing Anna was unbearable. She lay asleep in bed, surrounded by tubes and medical equipment. Angi wondered if it would have been better if Anna had died.

Is it okay to think like that? she wondered as she sobbed at the side of her friend's bed. Then she forced herself to try to think of something more positive. But she couldn't.

She spent the next two months at the home of her parents in Eberswalde. The University said she needed time to convalesce. Anyway, she had nowhere to live in Berlin.

For the first few days the media covered the story of the devastating fire in Treptower Park. The death toll rose from three, to six, then to thirteen. Angi's parents, like many citizens of the GDR, had two television arials. According to the East Berlin news, the fire had been started by an unattended cigarette. In the West, it had apparently been caused by a faulty electrical cable and the unnecessary deaths had been purely a result of inadequate insulation, the absence of an external emergency exit and the slow response of the fire service.

What does the truth matter now? Angi asked herself.

Just twice during those two months she made the journey into the city in order to visit Tamara and Anna. As the S-Bahn arrived at Treptower Park, she felt as if she were an intruder visiting someone else's past.

On one occasion she met up with Klaus too. She owed him her life, after all. She was surprised at how well they got along and so they agreed to see one another again.

One morning at the beginning of May when Angi was in the shower, she realised that she had not had her period. At first this didn't worry her too much since it was logical to assume that the delay was due to the shock of the fire. Besides which, she was a virgin. She had enjoyed petting with a few students, but she had never had intercourse with any of them.

But by the end of May, she was getting more and more concerned.

She went to the doctor. There was no question about it. Pregnant. The baby was due in early November.

For the next week, except for a few involuntary moments where her body took over, she was unable to sleep.

How could this have happened? Had she got so drunk at her birthday party that she had sex without knowing it? What on earth would her parents say? What about her University education? Who could she tell? What was she going to do?

Angi needed to buy herself some time. She was slim and often wore baggy jumpers, so she knew she could keep the baby secret at least until the early summer.

One sunny morning after she had been looking for new student accommodation near Boxhagener Platz, she arranged to see Klaus in a café in Grünberger Straße.

He had had his hair cut and was cleanly shaven. His yellow t-shirt accentuated the the specks of gold in his striking, green eyes. He seemed happy and relaxed, like a school boy on holiday.

'Cigarette?' he asked.

'No, thanks.'

As he put his packet of cigarettes back in his trouser pocket, his leg touched Angi's under the table. She was wearing shorts and her legs were bare.

'I'd like to tell you something personal, confidential,' she said, inhaling deeply.

'Go on,' replied Klaus.

'I'm expecting a baby. It's due in November. My parents don't know yet. I've been thinking about going away from here.'

'Where, exactly?' he asked.

'I was thinking of West Berlin. I've been thinking about it on and off for a long time, actually.'

'Oh,' he retorted. For Klaus, the idea of moving to West Berlin was somehow a much greater surprise than her pregnancy.

'And what about the father?'

'I don't know who the father is.'

Klaus pensively stroked his glass with the side of his finger.

'Do you think you could help me to get there? Maybe you have some contacts who could help me?' she asked with a mixture of uncertainty and mild desperation.

'I need time to think about that. I'm really not sure,' he replied.

But over the next few weeks Klaus started to talk to some of his contacts about how to get to the West.

He came across two gay friends, Michael and Justus, who were already planning their escape. They were to show Angi the way and to take her with them.

For the time being, Angi moved in to Klaus's apartment. Their relationship was entirely platonic, except in their subconscious.

Whenever Klaus was not working, they spent hours and hours planning her escape, weighing up all the different options.

Largely due to her pregnancy, Michael and Justus recommended that crossing the border by sneaking on to the underground S-Bahn train was their best and safest chance.

In August Angi told her parents about the baby, but made no mention of the move to the West. They reacted as if they were being asked to celebrate the funeral of a close friend. Her mother, with a look of sad resignation on her ageing face, tried not to show her disappointment,

while her father avoided speaking to her at all and simply increased his daily intake of beer and vodka. They assumed that Klaus was the father.

For Angi, her parents' evident indifference towards their future grandchild was another sign that it was right to move to West Berlin.

As the long summer days rapidly shortened to autumn, Angi was ready, on 1st October, to leave the GDR. Excited about a new start, sad to leave behind her remaining friends, terrified of being caught or losing the baby.

Angi went to visit her parents for the last time. It hurt that it didn't hurt. Then she travelled to Berlin to meet Klaus, as arranged, outside his apartment. Klaus locked the apartment door and they got ready to walk briskly through the pouring rain along Karl Marx Allee to meet with Michael and Justus.

Just outside his apartment, Klaus threw his keys in the large communal dustbin.

'I'm not going to need those any more,' he said resolutely.

'Why the hell not?'

'I've decided to come with you.'

'What? Are you *serious*?'

She stared at him, astonished, through the driving rain.

His smudged face betrayed his earnestness.

'Sometimes I think I know you so well. And sometimes I think I just don't know you at all.'

Angi smiled and shivered. She gave him a hug and kissed him.

Then she suddenly jumped with fright as a fox ran towards her from behind one of the large, grey dustbins.

'Scheiße!' she exclaimed. 'That scared me.'

Klaus laughed. The fox disappeared.

'Come on. We need to keep moving,' he added, putting his arm protectively over her shoulder.

When they arrived at Michael and Justus's building, they took the elevator up to their twelfth-floor apartment. The elevator stank of urine and was covered in graffiti.

'If the West has all the answers, then you are asking the wrong questions,' read Angi.

'If you are doing something in secret, then you are denying your own values,' read Klaus.

As the lift doors opened, a young man rushed in and gestured to them not to get out. He put his first finger over his mouth.

'Shush,' he gestured and with his other hand pressed the STOP switch.

'There is a big problem. Justus and Michael decided to decorate their front room to put the Stasi off the scent, to make it look like they were staying. As they ripped the wallpaper off the wall,

they found hidden wires and microphones. The Stasi arrived two hours ago, beat them up and arrested them. You need to get out of here. Right away.'

He released the STOP switch and disappeared.

Angi and Klaus went down to the ground floor and turned east towards Alexander Platz.

'Do the Stasi know about us too, then?' whispered Angi.

'Almost certainly,' replied Klaus, feeling the enormous disappointment tight across his chest.

They didn't dare attempt to cross to the West that night. They had to sleep rough, in spite of the baby. After all, Klaus had thrown away his keys.

During the rest of October, after two further aborted attempts at crossing to the West on their own, they decided to have one last try before the baby arrived.

As they got nearer to the Friedrich Straße S-Bahn station, they climbed down the metal ladder into the warm, dry tunnel that smelt of electricity and disinfectant. They waited in silence, both trembling with fear and their hearts pounding in their chests.

At last, they heard the familiar sound of the electric engine and the screeching of the steel wheels grinding upon the metal track. The deep black of the tunnel wall turned to dark grey, then light grey and finally to almost white. The cables running along the wall were suddenly obscured by the train itself.

Yes! It stopped.

Klaus banged frantically on the double doors. No one answered. He ran to the next carriage, urging Angi in front of him.

Behind them they heard footsteps clinking fast down the metal ladder.

Soldiers?

This time the doors opened. The train began to move. Accelerating quickly.

'Schnell! Schnell!' shouted a voice from within the carriage.

Angi tried to run.

'Keine Bewegung!' screamed two soldiers from just a few metres behind them.

Two pairs of hands grabbed Angi's raised arms and dragged her into the S-Bahn. As they grabbed Klaus, shots were fired.

Two, then four, then six. In rapid succession.

Klaus was hit in the back of the neck. His head jerked and his torso froze.

Angi screamed with horror and began crying uncontrollably as the two passengers let go of Klaus and his lifeless body fell to the floor of the tunnel.

When Angi made it across the border, she was rushed to hospital by taxi.

'We are very concerned about the baby. Dr Brettschneider thinks it best that we carry out a C-Section tonight. We need your agreement,' explained the young, red-headed nurse, who reminded Angi of Friederike.

Angi signed the paperwork, glad to be in the hands of well-trained doctors. She fell asleep, crying.

She dreamt that when she gave birth, a fox came and snatched the baby, running away and devouring its warm prey in the blood-stained snow.

When Angi woke up, she knew that she was going to lose the baby. A mother couldn't get that wrong. Pure, non-verbal instinct.

She wondered if it was better for baby to die than to grow up without a father.

Is it OK to think like that? she wondered as she saw again Klaus's rigid body falling from the underground train. She tried to think of something more positive. But she couldn't.

Two hours later the baby was safely delivered. The mother had been wrong, after all.

'He's beautiful,' said the midwife who had assisted the doctor, placing the helpless newborn into Angi's arms.

'You can try feeding him now, if you like.'

As the tiny boy began to drink the warm milk from his mother's breasts, Angi experienced something new. Something intimate, life-giving, primeval. Something completely *other*.

'Is the father not able to be here?' asked the young, red-headed nurse.

Angi thought for a moment. The baby boy pulled away from her nipple with a loud, sucking noise.

'No, he's over in the East,' she replied.

'Well, at least that won't be a problem in the future,' smiled the nurse as she turned on the television in the top corner of the room. 'It's all pretty unbelievable.'

Angi cuddled the baby boy tightly to her chest as she watched, her mouth wide open, the surreal unfolding of the day's news. It was 9th November 1989.

In the years that followed Angi settled with her son in a 70 m² apartment in Augsburgger Straße. She trained as a journalist and went on to be a television presenter for RBB.

She named her son Janus, after the Greek god with two faces. She thought this was highly appropriate in view of her son's birth marking both the historic end of the Cold War and the turning point between her old life in the East and her new life in the West.

Angi never got married and she only had sex when she had had too much to drink. She kept in regular contact with Anna but she lost touch with Tamara, who never did recover her memory. She even managed to re-establish contact with Michael and Justus who had moved to Schöneberg in 1991 but then split up when Justus was suddenly diagnosed with AIDS.

Angi decided to celebrate her son's 10th birthday with a party in their apartment. As well as Janus's closest school-friends, she also invited Anna and Michael.

'Herzlichen Glückwunsch zum Geburtstag, Janus!' exclaimed Michael with the joyful sincerity that seems to exude from every German whenever there is a birthday, wedding, promotion or public holiday.

Janus opened Michael's present.

'I hope you like it. I painted it myself,' enthused Michael.

It was a painting of the Berlin Wall with cracks all over it. And in the middle was a large, graffiti-like symbol of the Greek god Janus with one face painted black and the other white.

Janus said that he liked it.

Michael turned to Anna and explained, as if he were still talking to the ten-year-old, 'Janus is a Greek god with two faces who symbolises that every human being has both a good side and a dark side. That's true, don't you think?'

'You've just answered your own question,' replied Anna.

Meanwhile, Angi poured herself another glass of Sekt. She couldn't help but notice the psychedelic tablecloth, the range of different sized candles and the selection of bread rolls, cheese and sliced sausage on the table in front of her ten-year-old offspring.

She remembered with intense fondness the wonderful sense of community back in the days of the GDR.

Is it okay to think like that? she wondered as she picked up the matches ready to light the candles on the birthday cake.

She bent down and gave her son a kiss.

'Herzlichen Glückwunsch zum Geburtstag, Schatz,' she said fondly.

As she lit the candle, her heart was briefly overwhelmed with bitter-sweet emotions as she observed, not for the first time, how the bright yellow flame accentuated the specs of gold in his striking, green eyes.

Maybe the truth did matter, after all.