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**Julia Franck**  
**Campfire**  
**Novel**

**Translated by Isabel Cole**

## Nelly Senff Drives across a Bridge

*[referring to the pp. 7-13 in the german text]*

Tired, the children lowered their arms, they had waved doggedly, at first enthusiastic and undeterred by the lack of response, then probably from habit and childish ambition, they must have waved for an hour, their mouths pressed to the windows, where they left damp kiss-stains on the foggy panes, their noses rubbing against the panes, they had waved until Katja said to her brother: "I've had enough, come on, let's stop," and Aleksej nodded, as if it were good to give up at last, good to bring the parting to an end. Again the car carried us forward a bit, the stop lights of the little delivery van ahead of us went out. Under the flat roof a man in uniform stood in the twilight, signaling us to come closer, only to throw his arms up in the air. We jolted to a stop, the motor spluttered and flooded. We had been moving along like this for four hours, perhaps we had covered three meters in these four hours, perhaps ten. The Bornholm Bridge had to be just a few meters ahead of us, that I knew, I just couldn't see it, the narrow road passed through a wide austere building that hid from view all that was to come. The little delivery van was waved to the side and steered onto a neighboring lane. The streetlamps flickered and went on one by one. In the right-hand row a lamp remained dark. I wondered when time came for repairs in this place. Probably between twelve and two at night. The shadow in front of us could be seen approaching until it vanished below the hood, climbed the hood a moment later, crawled across the windshield onto our faces, and finally swallowed the car as ruthlessly as it swallowed all that lay before it, the shadow of that wide roof, of the building that straddled the road and blocked our view. A building all of cardboard and corrugated iron. Until the sun sank between the houses ahead and flared up once more in the window of the watchtower high above us as if to lure us and promise that we would see it again tomorrow, in the West, if only we followed it, and then it was gone and left us here in the dusk with a few streaks of fire in the sky, and the shadows swallowed not only us but the whole city behind us, and Gerd crushed out his cigarette, breathed in deeply, held his breath and said to me that he had already asked himself ten years ago when I would finally come, he whistled through his teeth in an offhand way, but back then I had just met that guy, and today he could tell me, now that I sat in his car and my path led only this one way and I couldn't get out, he said laughing, he had always pictured himself holding me naked in his arms.

Gerd lit a new cigarette, his tongue cupped the filter from below, he started the motor, switched it off, started it again, the ashtray was filled to overflowing, I scooped the butts out with my bare hand and stuffed them into a little plastic bag I had taken along in case the

children got sick. Now I was the one who felt sick. I didn't want to be naked in Gerd's arms. I had successfully resisted the thought until this moment, when he made a mockery of my effort with a soft whistle through his teeth and a few harmless words. Even the fact that I was in his car, that my children sat on the backseat kissing the windows, and that we were in the process of driving across the bridge failed to lend it a thrill.

Katja held her nose and asked if she could open the window. I nodded, ignoring Gerd's groan. For a long time I had thought that Gerd spared me his wishes out of consideration and in the knowledge that I wanted none of his touching. Then again I hoped he had forgotten my body as well as he could. Not very well, perhaps, but still an attempt. An attempt for which I had respected him, an attempt which he didn't even make now, or which was failing at the moment. That guy, whose name he had most certainly not forgotten, though he didn't let it cross his lips, had gone on to become the father of my children. But that was not why Gerd suddenly disgusted me. It disgusted me that he refused to see why we were sitting in his car. We were sitting in his car only to cross this bridge, maybe there was another reason as well, but certainly not the desire to be cooped up together undisturbed for a while. Cool air seeped in from outside, smelling of gas and a little bit of summer, more of night and impending chill. Twilight. A man in a police uniform came up to the car and leaned over on Gerd's side to get a better look inside. His flashlight scattered a little light across our faces, glowing weakly, flickering as though about to go out any moment. He checked names and faces one by one. I looked back into a wan face with a low, broad forehead, deep-set eyes thrust back into their sockets by the cheekbones, a Pomeranian face that no longer looked young, though it still was. He knocked on the back door with his flashlight and said that we couldn't stand here with the windows open. The windows had to stay shut for security reasons. After checking Katja's and Aleksej's documents as well he said: "Get out." My door stuck, I rattled at it until it sprang open and got out.

"No," the man in the police uniform called to me across the roof, "not you, just the children."

I got into the car again and turned around: "You have to get out," I repeated, reaching for Aleksej's hand and holding it tight. He broke away. My hand slipped into empty air. Only now did I realize I was trembling. The doors slammed. The man said something to my children that I didn't understand, he pointed to our car, shook his head and patted Aleksej on the narrow shoulder, then I saw them follow him and disappear into the low building. A neon lamp burned over the dark window. I waited for a light to go on, but the window remained black. Maybe there was a blind inside. Or a special coating made it impossible to look in.

Only from inside could you look out – as through the copper panes in the Palace of the Republic. The king could look out and watch his people, while outside they looked at opaque panes, unable to see through, blinded by their dazzle. If they had been at the same height as the king and his windows, at eye level with the reflection, at least they could have seen themselves, could have met their own frankly curious gaze. But they stood below, the little people, on the square. And up in the windows nothing was reflected but the sky. There was no return of the gaze. But the panes of this window here were particularly black, deep black, coal black, raven black, the longer I looked, the more unnatural it seemed. No dazzle, no orange. All light long ago absorbed. No raven, no coal, no depth. Nothing but black. The window was probably nothing but a mock-up. Gerd crushed out the cigarette and lit a new one.

“Nice and quiet.” He was enjoying the few minutes alone with me. They will ask Katja and Aleksej why we wanted to go over, they will take each one alone into a windowless room, seat the child on a chair and say: There’s something we want to know, and you have to tell us the truth, do you hear? And Katja will nod, and Aleksej will look at his shoes. Look at me, the man in the state service will say to Aleksej, patting him on the back like a buddy, a colleague, a confidante. Not knowing that even if Aleksej raised his head, he would only be able make out his silhouette, because his glasses weren’t much good anymore. He liked looking at his shoes, they were the things that were the farthest from his eyes but still belonged to him, with the shoes he knew exactly how they looked. Maybe the officer will threaten him, maybe jerk at his arm to keep Aleksej from forgetting just how much stronger a man like him really is. Maybe three of them stood in front of Aleksej, five of them, the whole room could be filled with state servants in uniform, people’s police, members of the state security, border guards, officers, trainees, assistants – but then the individual would lose his authority. What does your mother want over there? Has she known that man a long time? Have you seen whether he kisses her? And does she kiss him? How do they kiss? Do you want a father like that, from the West? Has he brought you presents? What kind of presents? So he’s a capitalist. Isn’t he? Silence. What could Aleksej answer? There were only wrong answers. Something flickered at the end of my spine, I could call it fear, but it was only a flicker. Wrong answers. Aleksej didn’t even know that, maybe he suspected it. Will they detain us? What would the piece of paper count for, the authorization, if they simply had me vanish without a trace and put the children in a home? Forced adoption. There were rumors about that. Especially enemies of the country, also enemies of socialist democracy and most especially those who fled, made a getaway, those were the ones whose children were taken into the protection of the state. Irretrievably and untraceably. Later they could always say I

had died of a pulmonary embolism. They could say that about anyone they liked. The stories barely differed – only the heroes had different names. On whom were they exercising their imaginations this time? Truths, too, are nothing but inventions on which there is consensus, so no one will be able to prove that I didn't go on a rampage and wasn't sick – only Gerd could do that. Insofar as he did not belong to them, it was good that he was sitting in the car with us, that it was his car. Keep down the flicker, just don't start burning. He couldn't simply disappear, that would get the king into trouble, big trouble, we weren't that important to them, not Aleksej, not Katja either. Little fish. Little bitsy fish. They had gotten away from the shoal, no longer quite swam in the current, but they were tiny enough to be overlooked. What do you think capitalism has in store for you? Katja's teacher had already asked that several weeks ago, holding Katja in the classroom after the lesson for a private conversation. Don't you believe in peace? Katja, you remember? Didn't you want to help the poor children in Vietnam too? Didn't you bring in rice and collect scrap materials? Who's to blame for the poverty in Vietnam? Well – who's to blame? Who lets the world's children starve? Didn't you learn anything in school? In kindergarten? In the crèche? Don't you know that the capitalist is your enemy? Katja came home with swollen eyes. She didn't want other children to starve because of us, she didn't want to come along with us to the people who let other children starve. She cried half the night. They were probably being interrogated like this now too. Your future father, what was he again? No, a carpenter, that's not quite right. He's a capitalist. Yes, an enemy. How was that again with your real father? What happened to him?

I knocked on the window.

“Why are you knocking on the window? Stop knocking on the window.” Gerd leaned back and avoided my gaze; that was how afraid he must have been of losing his nerve.

I knocked on the window.

“Stop it.”

I knocked twice, rapped out his command.

He groaned, and I wiped my open hand across the pane.

“How long have they been in there?” I asked, staring at the black window of the structure.

“No idea, I didn't look at the time, twenty minutes maybe.”

“Longer.”

## **Krystyna Jablonowska Holds Her Brother's Hand**

*[referring to pp.39-44 in the german text]*

From the upper bunk I heard the familiar grunts, my father breathed evenly, only sometimes seeming to swallow the air the air the wrong way. Now and then his breath stopped for a time and made me think he might let breathing be. At seventy-eight you don't have to breathe regularly, you don't have to do anything anymore. It was still dark outside. But the light of the streetlamps that stood at close intervals between the apartment blocks, keeping the camp in plain view even in the dark of night, was enough for me to get dressed by and put Jerzy's laundered underpants into the bag. There wasn't much I could do for Jerzy, I couldn't bring him anything to eat in the hospital, or anything to drink either. Once I had secretly set aside some of our sausage ration, but he refused to eat the sausage, and the nurses were annoyed when they found it in his closet. He didn't use the underpants, but I washed them anyway, week after week. Quietly, so that my father wouldn't wake up and grumble "Krystyna, you clumsy oaf" down from the bunk, I opened the door. Most of the people in the apartment still seemed to be sleeping, and I didn't meet a single person on the way to the doorkeeper. It was too early still for the schoolchildren, hardly anyone left the camp this early.

When I reached the hospital, day was breaking.

"Can't you at least put on real pajamas? What did I bring you the washed clothes for?" Jerzy's closet was an absolute chaos. I laid the ironed underpants in the drawer. In the midst of the shirts and pajamas he hadn't worn a single time, I found a pack of cigarettes and a German women's magazine.

"Do you read that kind of thing?"

"Ha, how was I supposed to read it? It was lying out in the waiting room, so I took it."

"And why?" I turned to him and held the women's magazine up in the air.

"There are beautiful women in it, that's why."

"Beautiful women," I said, putting the magazine in an empty drawer under the pajamas. To me it looked more like a secret, and Jerzy had no secrets from me. Maybe back in the four years of his marriage, but since he had moved back to father and me he had hardly been able to hide a thing.

I couldn't stand to watch the way he ran one fingernail under the others, cleaning them. "Come here." The manicure set lay in the drawer of the bedside table, I sat back down on the chair next to his bed and reached for his hand.

“No.” Jerzy tried to pull his hand away, but I held onto it, along with the IV, a bandage was stuck over the cannula to hold it, it would hurt him so much to pull that he held still. His skin was white and cracked, suggesting the bark of an old tree. The skin over the veins was studded with punctures.

“And what about the pajamas?”

“No one wears pajamas here, take a look around, Krystyna. Do any of the men have pajamas on?”

I turned around and looked at the men, sitting in their beds and wearing one and the same white nightshirt.

“So?” With the scissors I cut Jerzy’s nails down to the skin. “Just because the others let themselves go like that, you don’t have to also.”

Jerzy was silent, chewing on a toothpick and contemplating the nails of his other hand. Out of the corner of my eye I watched a nurse change his neighbor’s nightshirt and rub his back with alcoholic liniment. She massaged the slightly younger man, whose veins stood out blue all over his body. He whimpered softly under her hands.

“That’s why, isn’t it?” I whispered to Jerzy, but he seemed completely engrossed in the contemplation of his nails.

“Is that why you don’t want to wear pajamas, is it? Jerzy, answer me.”

Jerzy looked at me with a vacant expression. “What did you say?”

“Now don’t act like you can’t hear right again. You hear fine, Jerzy, just fine. You want her to change your clothes, that’s why you want to wear that ridiculous hospital nightshirt. So that she’ll change your clothes, that’s the only reason.”

“What’s father doing?”

“What should he be doing? He rests all day. From morning to evening.”

“You ought to go on a walk with him.”

“You think? I’d rather visit you, Jerzy. If he doesn’t move on his own, I’m not going to help him.”

“Ow! Watch out!”

“I’m watching out, Jerzy, you have an ingrown nail.”

“Watch out, I said.” Jerzy tried to pull his hand away, but I held tight.

“The nail,” I said, cutting off the smallest one. Then I struggled to keep my voice gentle. “I can change your clothes too, Jerzy, if you need help.” He had heavy blue rings under his eyes, since he’d been here his face seemed to have caved in. As if they were starving him. “I’ll do it, just say the word and I’ll change your clothes. You don’t need these

nurses, Jerzy, you have me.” Behind me I heard the wooden clatter of the clogs, the nurse crossed the room, she called out brightly to an old man: “Well, how are we feeling today?” I heard her shake out a blanket, and I saw Jerzy follow her through the whole room with his eyes, past me and my offer.

“You’re running away,” he said without deigning to look at me.

I cut the nail so close along the fingertip that it had to hurt him. “What from?”

“You know perfectly well.” Attentively he followed the clattering clogs behind my back.

I asked no further, after all I knew he didn’t mean my care of Father. He meant that his sister was wasting herself and her life. He disapproved of every form of waste. It rankled with him that I had sold my cello and wasn’t living up to my capabilities as he saw them. Not only was I capable, as he had said over and over again, my capabilities obligated me. But I wanted none of his concern for me, any more than he wanted mine for him. “We didn’t leave Szczecin to...”

“Why don’t you go, Krystyna? Leave me alone. Look, the nurses are getting ready for [supper??].”

“I’m staying. One moment,” I held Jerzy’s thin cold hand tightly, however he tried to pull it away. For the first time in our lives I was stronger than he. “They aren’t feeding you properly, Jerzy, I can see that. They’re letting you starve. Look at you.”

“Go, please. Go. Go to Father in the camp as far as I’m concerned, he’s afraid of the dark.”

“I know, but in the fall it’s always dark. If I didn’t leave him by himself, I could never visit you in the winter anymore,” I said, trying not to sound threatening or pleading, and felt my own fear of abandoning Jerzy here in the hospital to the nurses and the day and the night and the drip they had put him on at the beginning of the week, my fear of the way home in the dark and in the neon-lit double-decker bus, home to the camp, because the other home was no longer there for us. Even if the house undoubtedly stood where it was, upright and well-kept, completely indifferent to our absence. Now it was countless kilometers away behind two borders in the East on the other side of the Oder. Home was unreachable. I had to say that to him, to make him remember, and cried a little.

Jerzy sighed.

“Why do you always sigh so loudly?” I said, I didn’t want to hear his sighs.

Jerzy sighed again.

“Don’t, please,” I held his hand tightly.



“I’m not sighing, I’m groaning. That’s what I’m here for. It makes it easier to breathe.” Jerzy laughed. “What’s that?” He looked at our hands in horror, with all his strength he pulled his hand away. I opened mine, revealing his nail clippings. Yellow crescents. I nodded and put on my fur coat. After all the years of being worn first by my mother and then by me, its sheen had faded. It left fine black hairs on the linen of Jerzy’s bed. With one hand I gathered the hairs from the blanket, with the other I clasped Jerzy’s fingers again.

“Is there anything you want?” I stroked his cold, gleaming brow.

“I want you to go.” Jerzy turned his face to the window. The pane reflected the beds of his seven roommates. I dropped his hand.

## **How John Bird Eavesdrops on His Own Wife and Listens to Another**

*[referring to pp. 60-64 in the german text]*

[...] A door slammed, Eunice walked down the hall upstairs. I had ruined her evening. As far as I knew she had never gone out by herself before. Presumably she was going to lock herself into the bedroom. I was sure my side of the bed was covered with big sheets of paper, I would have to move them aside when I went to the bedroom to lie down.

I let my head drop onto the back of the chair, breathed out and slipped off my left slipper with my right foot, my right slipper with my left foot. I enjoyed quiet and solitude. I missed solitude. For all my loneliness, I missed being without people for a moment. I enjoyed the car trips in the morning and the evening – but many days I would have liked to be alone in this house, too. As soon as I saw Eunice and one of her drawings, I was the uninvited guest. Maybe this Nelly Senff actually believed that a single black moment had lured her boyfriend into the beyond, or the few little quarrels they might have had. What could they possibly have fought about?

The smell of grass filled my nose. Acrid. How should I know where Eunice got the stuff? She didn’t tell me. And knowing it wouldn’t have done much good. For more than a year she had spent almost every evening up there. She drew and filled our bedroom with smoke. Maybe she thought that provoked me? The moments in which I thought it would be

good for her and convenient for me if she finally went back to Knoxville without me were accumulating.

We had offered Nelly Senff Marlboros and Camels. This Senff, Nelly Senff, didn't even smoke cigarettes. We had offered her some, hoping that would make it easier, but she declined. She got up and asked permission to go to the bathroom. The smell of her drove me out of my mind. I had to excuse myself for a moment. When I came back she had returned to her seat, sipping from the can of Coca Cola we had given her and looking at me as intently as if she suspected her effect on me. But she could hardly suspect. The negligent way she presented herself, her hair pinned up carelessly. That showed off her neck, a white, long neck, flawless. Her skin had a slight shimmer. When Harold left the room to fetch a new thermos, I sat down at the table across from her and said:

“You aren't afraid anymore, Ms Senff, are you, you know you're safe here?”

“Safe?” She looked at me questioningly, then added softly: “But that's not the point,” she shook her head, and I felt as if a faint breath of air carried the smell straight to my nose. “Do you know what a woman said to me once? There's no safer place in the whole world than a communist country with a wall like ours.” Nelly laughed. Her laughter came so unexpectedly, light and explosive, that it startled me.

A sharp pang made me stand up, more as a reflex than deliberate, I stepped around the table, stopped in front of her and said: “We only want what's best for you,” my voice sounding hoarse.

“Communist,” she laughed, “imagine that, my mother actually thinks it has something to do with her idea of communism. As if the country had developed according to her revolutionary notions,” slowly the laughter ebbed from her voice, “but it was socialist, wasn't it, and socialism has nothing to do with communism.”

I nodded vigorously, then I shook my head. “No, it doesn't.”

Behind me I heard the door open and close. Harold set the thermos on the table and held out a Mars bar to Nelly.

“Such expensive things you give your victims?” Her hand still clutched the Cola can. She barely drank, it seemed more that she were pretending to drink as a favor to us, actually taking mere drops from the tiny opening. She seemed to find it more important to hold onto the can than to drink from it.

“Victims?” Harold looked at her questioningly, lowered his outstretched arm and looked even more questioningly at me. “You aren't our victim. We're talking to you so that

we can determine whether you suffered from persecution. So, the name of this friend? You mentioned that Batalow had this friend.”

“No, I wasn’t persecuted.” She shook her head firmly and wrapped a strand of hair around her finger. “No, not at all. I wasn’t allowed to work anymore after I applied for an exit visa, but that was routine, especially when you worked in research. Or in the public sphere. Or in education, or whatever. That was completely normal.”

“The name of the friend?”

“What friend?”

“Just now you mentioned a friend he supposedly met now and then about his translations.”

“Did I? No. I don’t know any friend of Wassilij’s.”

“Listen, don’t try to take us for a ride.” Harold lost his patience again. When he was angry he got loud. “As soon as we ask you for names, you don’t know any.”

Nelly said nothing.

“If you won’t cooperate, we can’t help you.”

Nelly reached for another strand of hair and wrapped it around her finger. She watched Harold attentively.

“The question is who is supposed to be helping whom here,” she said with perfect calm, and let go of the strand of hair.

Harold breathed heavily, then turned around to the stenographer, bored his eyes into her ever-deep décolleté and barked at her: “You don’t have to take down that kind of thing.”

The stenographer looked up: “Should I strike it?”

“Never mind.” Harold returned to his safe place behind the desk. “Let’s go back to the time before you applied for the exit visa. You said you wanted to leave the country because... because there were certain problems between you and your boyfriend.” Harold opened his file again and waited for her reply.

Nelly looked at Harold questioningly. Her skin seemed as white as marble, her eyes were red, and the rims, slightly swollen, gleamed pink.

“Problems? I told you, he killed himself. For me there was no more sense in staying there. The places all have associations with him, it’s impossible for me to see them differently. Another country with the same language, but without those places – that’s the reason why I’m here. Don’t you understand that?”

“Sorry,” Harold said matter-of-factly. “But you aren’t going to get your boyfriend back here either.”

Tears rose to Nelly's eyes, she sobbed audibly and took a deep breath, her nostrils trembled, she wasn't crying, not really anyway, not like Eunice. Nelly didn't seem to have to struggle not to cry, it was more that the tears seeped to her eyes and failed to fall. Harold gave me a meaningful look.

## **Hans Pischke Gets on Line, with Hardly a Wish in the World**

*[referring to pp. 116-120 in the german text]*

Outside it drizzled. The leaves of the birches were rain-heavy and colorless. No wind stirred them, the drizzle weighed too heavy. On the iron monkey-bars with the red paint almost completely worn and peeled away, two children sat eating sweets. The paper bag into which they reached by turn was so sodden that they could hardly get their hands in and out.

Three women stood on line at the food counter. I joined them. The second woman on line, a capacious figure in a yellow rain cape, grumbled toward the head of the line that she was about to lose her patience, she had no time to spend an hour standing on line for her food, she had five hungry mouths waiting upstairs, but the first woman on line, gaunt and scrupulous, refused to be deterred and explained to the lady at the counter, slowly and in impeccably enunciated German, that she didn't like sausage, she didn't want to get into a debate on whether sausage was a basic foodstuff, she simply didn't like sausage, especially not this kind, and didn't understand why she couldn't have this cheese instead of the sausage ration, after all it certainly wasn't worth any more, apart from the processed cheese they had nothing to offer but strong-smelling Tilsiter of the lowest grade.

The lady at the counter said pleasantly that she had her instructions and had to follow them, she couldn't hand out cheese on a sausage coupon. But the first woman on line stuck to her guns until finally the capacious second woman turned around, bright red in the face, and appealed to me and the young woman between us. "Unheard of. Special requests, no less. Never heard of such a thing. She's been standing here for ten minutes already and I've been here for nine, well, almost, anyway."

The young woman between us shifted her weight uneasily, she wore a bright yellow summer dress with big flowers and had clearly not expected it to rain. The dress clung to her

calves. She bit her lips and seemed at a loss, which made me think she might come from Russia or Poland and not understand anything.

The gaunt woman turned around too. She held up her sausage coupon. “Would someone like to swap?”

“Swap?”

“Sausage for cheese.” Her impeccably enunciated German was reduced to the bare minimum.

“Well, you could have said that in the first place, couldn’t you, we like sausage, my five hungry mouths and I, sausage spread, ham sausage, oh, we like just about everything. There you go.” And before anyone else could beat her to it, the capacious woman in the yellow rain cape snatched the coupon out of the offender’s hand.

They ordered their food and went their way, a safe five-meter distance apart.

“As if we didn’t have enough to deal with,” the lady at the counter nodded after them and spoke aloud to herself so that we could hear her. “Five hungry mouths, don’t make me laugh. Nearly four thousand of them last year, counting the Polacks, yes, nearly four thousand, just in this camp alone.”

The woman in the summer dress in front of me stepped up to the counter.

“Hello,” she said, holding a little sheaf of coupons through the window, “can you help me? What do I get for one of these coupons?” She plucked the uppermost coupon from the bundle. She spoke accent-free, East Berlin melody. As she leaned forward on tip-toes, the wet hem of the flowered summer dress rode up and clung to the backs of her knees.

“T, that’s a ration of tea. Here, M, that’s a ration of milk. B is bread. You can pick whether you want rye-wheat bread or crispbread.”

“Well, then, then I’ll take – can I have some of both?” She pushed a strand of hair behind her ear. The drizzle had sprinkled her hair with fine drops, shimmering adornment, from the side I saw her delicate profile, she looked like a princess in a Czech fairytale.

“If you have two coupons you can. One coupon, one ration.”

The lady at the counter helped her look through the coupons.

“Here’s jam, no choice, there’s only strawberry, that’s butter or margarine, and this here you only get once a week, it’s for coffee. You have children, right?”

“How do you know that?” She ran her hand over her hair and brushed away the fine drops, now her hair was just wet and no longer the hair of a princess. A princess has no children.

“Because of the milk coupons, adults don’t get that much milk by themselves.” The lady at the counter snorted contentedly, turned around and packed up the groceries. “Sausage spread or ham sausage?”

“Sausage spread, please.”

“Do you need sugar and salt?”

“Yes, please, we don’t have a thing up there.”

“Oil?”

“Yes.”

“Can you carry all that?”

“Oh, sure.”

“If not, the young man will help you.” The lady winked at me through the window, and the young woman turned around. A smile crossed her face. “Oh no, you don’t need to, I’m sure it won’t be necessary.”

“Here, I put everything in a box for you to make it easier for you to carry.” The lady at the counter slid a box across and the woman took it with many thanks, as I may also have done my first time there. As she walked away I saw how the summer dress clung rain-heavy to her calves and bound her legs together in an odd way, she could only take very small steps. By now I dispensed with the thanks. After all, the presents weren’t from the lady at the food counter, she was paid to work here, I assumed. She had work and the triumphant smile of an employee who combined goodness with utility and continually pocketed the newcomers’ thanks along with her monthly wages. I handed over my coupons.

“Special requests?”

“No thank you.”

“Would you like rye-wheat or crispbread?”

“Whatever you have more of.”

“Do you really want two portions of butter? You have two coupons here,” the lady held up the corresponding coupons.

“Must have been a mistake, no idea, no.”

“Cheese instead?”

“No thank you.”

“Sausage?”

“No, no, just keep it.” Her questions overwhelmed me. What I liked about the food coupons was that what you got was written on them, and there were no big decisions to make. I took the food and turned down the canned lentils they had today.

“I have string beans too,” the lady called after me, but I didn’t turn around, and I bit back my thanks. I didn’t want to give her any more of that sense of great significance. There was already much too much of it in her voice.

The woman in the summer dress stood by the monkey bars in front of the two children. Evidently they had finished or hidden their sweets. The woman set the carton on the monkey bars between the children and showed them her plunder: crispbread, sausage spread, sugar. She lit a cigarette and watched them pick up one package after the other and turn them every which way, saying something.

I tried to catch the eyes of the woman in the summer dress, I would have liked to smile at her and see her smile, but she didn’t look my way, and so I walked past, hesitating at each step, dragging it out, turning my head to her again and again in case she might look around after all, and opened the door of my stairway.