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Julia Franck
The Noonday Witch

Translated by Anthea Bell

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There is nothing bad; once you have crossed the threshold, all is well. Another world, and you do not have to speak.

Franz Kafka, Diaries, volume 12, 1922

Prologue

A seagull stood on the window sill, uttering its cry; it sounded as if it had the Baltic itself in its throat, high as the foaming crests of the waves, keen, sky-coloured, its call died away over Königsplatz where all was quiet, and the theatre now lay in ruins. Peter blinked, he hoped the gull would take fright at the mere flutter of his eyelids and fly away. Ever since the end of the war, Peter had enjoyed these quiet mornings. A few days ago, his mother had made up a bed for him on the kitchen floor. He was a big boy now, she said, he couldn't sleep in her bed any more. A ray of sunlight fell on his face; he pulled the sheet over it and listened to Frau Kozinska's soft voice. It came up through the cracks between the stone flags on the floor, up from the apartment below. Their neighbour was singing. My dearest love, if you can swim, then swim the wide water to me. Peter loved that melody, the melancholy of her voice, the yearning and the sadness. These emotions were so much larger than he was, and he wanted to grow, there was nothing he wanted more. The sun warmed the sheet over Peter's face until he heard his mother's footsteps, approaching as if from a great distance. Suddenly the sheet was pulled back. Come on, come on, get up, she told him. The teacher's waiting, claimed his mother. But it was a long time since Herr Fuchs the teacher had bothered whether individual children were present or absent. Few of them could still attend school regularly. For days now his mother and he had been going to the station every afternoon with their little suitcase, trying to get on a train bound for Berlin. If one did come in, it was crammed so full that they couldn't climb aboard. Now Peter got up and washed. Sighing, his mother took off her shoes. Out of the corner of his eye, Peter saw her untie her apron and put it to soak. Every day, her white apron was stained with soot and blood and sweat; it had to be soaked for hours before she could take the washboard and rub the apron on it until her hands

were red and the veins on her arms swollen. Peter's mother raised both hands to her head, took off her nurse's cap, pulled the hairpins out of her hair and let it tumble softly over her shoulders. She didn't like him to watch her doing that. Glancing at him out of the corner of her eye, she told him: and that too. It seemed to him that she was pointing, with some repugnance, to his little willy, to make sure he washed it. Then she turned her back to him and passed a brush through her thick hair. It shone golden in the sun, and Peter thought he had the most beautiful mother in the world.

Even after the Russians had taken Stettin in the spring – some of the soldiers had been sleeping in Frau Kozinska's apartment ever since – their neighbour could be heard singing early in the morning. Once last week his mother had sat down at the table to mend one of her aprons, and Peter had read aloud, because Herr Fuchs the teacher had told him to practise doing that. Peter hated reading aloud, and he had sometimes noticed how little attention his mother paid. Presumably she didn't like to have the silence broken. She was usually so deep in thought that she didn't seem to notice at all if, in mid-sentence, Peter suddenly read on to himself instead of aloud. He'd been listening to Frau Kozinska at the same time as reading to himself. I wish someone would wring her neck, he heard his mother say abruptly. Startled, Peter looked at her, but she just smiled and put her needle through the linen.

The fires last August had completely destroyed the school, and since then the children had met Herr Fuchs the teacher at his sister's dairy, where there was hardly ever anything for sale. Fräulein Fuchs stood behind her empty counter with her arms crossed, waiting. Although she had gone deaf, she often put her hands over her ears. The big shop window had been broken out of its frame, the children sat on the window sill, and Herr Fuchs the teacher showed them numbers on the board: three times ten, five times three. The children asked him to show them the places where Germany had lost, but he didn't want to. We're not going to belong to Germany any more, he said, adding that he was glad of it. Where then, asked the children, where will we belong? Herr Fuchs the teacher shrugged his shoulders. Today Peter was going to ask him why he was glad of it.

Peter stood at the washbasin and dried himself with the towel: his shoulders, his stomach, his prick, his feet. If he did it in a different order, and he hadn't done

that for a long time, his mother lost patience. She had put out a clean pair of trousers and his best shirt for him. Peter went to the window, tapped the pane, and the seagull flew away. Now that the row of houses opposite was missing, the backs of the buildings and the houses in the next street too, he had a clear view of Königsplatz where the remains of the theatre stood.

Don't be too late home, said his mother, as he was about to leave the apartment. Last night, she said, a nurse at the hospital had told her there were going to be special trains laid on today and tomorrow. We're leaving. Peter nodded, he had been looking forward for weeks to travelling by train at last. He had only ever been on a train once before, two years ago, when he was starting school and his father had visited them. His father and he had gone by train to see a colleague of his father's in Velten. Now the war had been over for eight weeks, and his father still didn't come home. Peter wished he could have asked his mother why she wasn't waiting for his father any longer, he'd have liked her to confide in him.

Last summer, on the night between the sixteenth and seventeenth of August, Peter had been alone in the apartment. His mother often worked three shifts running during those months, and she had stayed on at the hospital after the late shift to work the night shift as well. When she wasn't there Peter felt afraid of the hand that would come out from under the bed in the dark, reaching up through the gap between the wall and the sheet. He felt the metal of his clasp-knife against his leg, he kept thinking how fast he would have to whip it out when the hand appeared. That night Peter had lain face down on his mother's bed and listened, as he did every night. It was better to lie in the very middle of the bed; that way there was plenty of room on both sides for him to see the hand appear in good time. He'd have to thrust the knife in fast and firmly. Peter sweated when he imagined the hand coming up; he saw himself so paralysed by fear that he wouldn't be able to raise the clasp-knife against it.

He remembered exactly how he had taken the velvet of the heavy bedspread in both hands, one of those hands also clutching the knife, and rubbed his cheek against it. Faintly, almost gently, the first siren sounded, then it howled, rising high to a long, penetrating screech. Peter shut his eyes. The sound burned his ears. Peter

didn't like cellars. He kept thinking up new ways of avoiding going down to the cellar. The siren sounded again. His heart was beating fast, his throat felt tight. Everything about him was stiff, rigid. He had to breathe deeply. Goose down – Peter pressed his nose into his mother's pillow and drew in the smell of her as if it could satisfy his hunger. Then all was still. Terribly still. Peter raised his head and heard his teeth chattering, he tried to keep his jaws together, he clenched his teeth as hard as he could, lowered his head again and pressed his face into the goose down. As he rubbed his face against the pillow, which meant that he had to move his head back and forth, something underneath it crackled. Carefully, he put his hand under the pillow and his fingertips touched paper. At the same moment a strange roaring sound filled his ears, the sound of the first bombs dropping. Peter's breath came faster, there was crashing and splintering, the window panes couldn't withstand the pressure and the glass broke, the bed where he was lying shook, and Peter suddenly felt that everything around him was more alive than he was. Silence followed. In defiance of events outside, he drew out a letter with his free hand. Peter recognized the writing. He laughed wildly, he couldn't help it, oh, his father had entirely slipped his mind although his father would always protect him. That was his writing, look, his M for My, A for Alice. The letters stood firmly side by side, nothing could touch them, no siren, no bomb, no fire. Peter smiled lovingly at them. His eyes stung and the writing threatened to blur. His father was sorry about something. Peter had to read the letter from his protector, he had to read what it said, as long as he was reading it nothing would harm him. Fate was putting all Germany severely to the test. The sheet of paper trembled in Peter's hands; that must be the bed shaking. As for Germany, Peter's father was doing his best. She asks if he couldn't work in one of the wharves. Wharves, of course, sirens were howling but not ships' sirens, the other kind. Peter's eyes streamed. Engineers like him, said the letter, were urgently needed. There was a hissing very close, as if it were right outside the window, a crash, a second and even louder crash. They were finishing work on the Reich autobahn, there wasn't much to do in the east. Not much to do? Once again Peter heard the roaring, the smell of burning tickled his nose at first, then it became acrid and sharp, but Peter was still smiling, he felt as if nothing bad could happen to him with his father's letter in his

hands. Alice. Peter's mother. She reproached him, said the letter, for writing so seldom. There was smoke in the air but it didn't smell of smoke; was that the crackling of a fire? It had nothing to do with her origins. *It*, what was *it*? And what origins, what was his father writing about? A remittance? Did that say remittance? Things were happening, wrote his father, that changed matters between them.

It had been such hard work, deciphering that letter. If only he'd been able to read better, read as well as he could now, almost a year later at the age of nearly eight, perhaps he could have believed in the letter's power to protect him, but the letter had failed, Peter hadn't been able to finish reading it.

When he set off for the dairy and Herr Fuchs the teacher that morning, everything was all right, and he didn't need a letter from any father to help him through the night now, never again. The war was over, and today they were leaving, Peter and his mother. Peter saw a tin can in the gutter and kicked it. It made a wonderful clattering sound as it scudded along. The horror would be over, it would be left behind, not a single dream would ever remind them of it. Peter remembered the first air raids in winter, and once again he felt his friend Robert's hand as they scrambled over the low, white-painted fence at the roadside. They were about to cross the street near the Berlin Gate and jump down into the ditch by the newspaper stand. Their shoes had slipped on the ice, they had skidded. Something must have hit his friend, severing his hand from his body. But Peter had run on alone over the distance they had yet to go, as if he had been speeded up when his friend was torn away from him. He had felt the firm, warm hand, and it was a long time before he let go of it. When he realized, later, that he was still holding Robert's hand he couldn't just drop it in the ditch, he had taken it home. His mother had opened the door. She had made him sit on a chair and encouraged him to unclench his fingers. Then she crouched down on the floor in front of him, holding one of the white fabric napkins with her initials on it, and waited; she had stroked and kneaded his hands until he let go.

To this day Peter wondered what she had done with it. He gave the tin can a hefty kick, sending it rolling over to the other side of the street, almost all the way to the dairy. It still felt as if he were holding Robert's hand – then, next moment, as if the hand were holding him, and as if his father referred solely to that incident in the

letter. Yet he hadn't seen his father for two years, he had never had a chance of telling him about the hand.

Last summer, that August night when the bombs dropped, when Peter had read his father's letter, he'd been able to decipher only every third or fourth sentence. The letter had been no help. His hands had been shaking. His father wanted to do what was right by the mother of his son, he wrote, he would be frank, he had met another woman. There were steps to be heard on the staircase, and another little sound so close that, for the fraction of a second, it stopped your ears, and then came a crash, and screaming. Hastily, Peter skimmed the remaining lines. They were to be brave, he was sure the war would soon be won. He, Peter's father, would probably not be able to come and see them any more, a man's life called for decisive action, but he would soon send more money. Peter had heard a noise at the door of the apartment, hard to say if it was a shell howling, or a siren, or a human being. He had folded up the letter and put it back under the pillow. He was trembling. The smoke stung his eyes, making them stream, and waves of heat from the burning city were coming closer.

Someone took hold of him and carried him downstairs to the cellar on his shoulders. When he and the others crawled out into the open air, hours later, it was light outside. The stairs up to their apartment were still there, only the banisters had come away and were lying on the steps. There was smoke in the air. Peter climbed the stairs on all fours, had to clamber over something black, then he pushed the door of the apartment open and sat down at the kitchen table. The sun was shining right on the table, shining so brightly that he had to close his eyes. He was thirsty. For some time he felt too weak to stand up and go over to the sink. When he did turn the tap on he heard only gurgling and no water came out. It could be hours before his mother was home. Peter waited. He fell asleep with his head on the table. His mother woke him. She took his head in both hands and pressed it against her, and only when he put his arms around her did she let go. The door of the apartment was open. Peter saw the black thing in the stairwell. He thought of the screaming last night. His mother opened a cupboard, threw sheets and towels over her shoulder, took candles out of a drawer and said she had to go straight out again. She told Peter to help her carry

things; they needed bandages, and alcohol for use as a disinfectant. They climbed over the charred body outside the door of their apartment. It was the shoes more than anything that told Peter this had been a human being, the body was so shrivelled, and he saw a large gold pocket watch. Something that was almost a happy feeling flooded through him that morning, for the watch couldn't possibly have belonged to Frau Kozinska.

The photograph of the handsome man in the fine suit, leaning on the shiny black bodywork of the car with one arm elegantly crooked, looking up at the sky, clear-eyed, as if he were looking at the future or at least at birds in the air, still stood in its frame on the glass-fronted kitchen cabinet. Peter's mother said that now the war was over his father would come and take them to Frankfurt, where he was building a big bridge over the river Main. Then Peter would be able to go to a proper school, said his mother, and it made him uncomfortable to hear her telling these lies. Why doesn't he write, asked Peter in a moment of rebellion. The post isn't working any more, replied his mother, not since the Russians came. Peter looked down, feeling ashamed of himself for his question. From now on he waited, with his mother, day after day. After all, it was possible that his father might change his mind.

One evening, when Peter's mother was at work in the hospital, he had looked under her pillow. He wanted to make sure. The letter had gone. Peter had opened his mother's desk with a sharp knife, but he found only paper and envelopes and a few Reichsmarks that she kept in a small box. He had searched his mother's wardrobe, he had lifted her ironed, neatly folded aprons and her underwear. There were two letters from her sister Elsa there, sent from Bautzen. Elsa's handwriting was such a scrawl that Peter could read only the opening words: Dear little Alice. He hadn't found any more letters from his father, not a single one.

[...]

Even in the stairwell, he could hear the pots and pans clattering. His mother had been on night shift for the last week, and spent her days cleaning up the apartment, as if it had ever been dirty; she polished the floors, dusted the chairs and cupboards, cleaned the windows. The door of the apartment wasn't locked, and Peter opened it. He saw three men round the kitchen table, and his mother half sitting, half lying on it. The

bare behind of one of the men was moving back and forth level with Peter's eyes, and the fleshy buttocks wobbled so much that Peter wanted to laugh. But the soldiers were holding his mother firmly. Her skirt was torn, her eyes were wide open, Peter didn't know if she could see him or was looking straight through him. Her mouth was wide open too, but no sound came out. One of the soldiers noticed Peter, held the waistband of his trousers closed and tried to push him out of the door. Peter called for his mother. Mother, he cried, Mother. The soldier kicked his legs, hard, so that Peter collapsed outside the door. One foot kicked his backside and then the door was closed.

Peter sat on the stairs and waited. He heard Frau Kozinska singing. A bird on a green bough sat singing its song, through the cold night of winter it sang loud and long. But this was summer, and Peter was thirsty, and the trains would soon be going. He wanted to leave with his mother. Peter pressed his lips firmly together. He looked at the door, and the open place where the lock had once been. There were still splinters of wood on the floor there. Peter's teeth nibbled scraps of thin skin off his lips. Soldiers had visited his mother once before, only a few days ago; they'd had to kick the door down, breaking the lock out. They had stayed all day, drinking and bawling. Peter had kept on hammering at the door. Someone must have pushed something up against it on the inside, perhaps there was a chair wedged under the handle. Peter had peered through the opening left by the missing lock, but there was such thick smoke inside that he couldn't make anything out. So Peter had sat on the stairs, waiting, as he was sitting now.

[...]

When the door finally opened last time the soldiers had stumbled out into the stairwell, one by one. They went downstairs and knocked at Frau Kozinska's door. The last of them had turned and called something up to Peter in German: I have a lad like you at home, keep an eye on your mother. And the soldier, smiling, had wagged one forefinger. When Peter went into the smoke-filled kitchen he had seen his mother bending over in a corner of the kitchen, smoothing out a sheet. You're a big boy now, she had said without looking at Peter, you can't sleep in my bed any more.

She hadn't looked at him, unlike today. He had never seen such an expression in his mother's eyes before. They were icy.

It was hard for Peter to wait outside the door. He stood there, he sat down on the stairs and stood up again. Peter tried to see something through the crack left by the lock when it was broken out. He stood on tiptoe on the last step and leaned forward. That way he could easily lose his balance. Peter felt impatient, his stomach was grumbling.

[..]

Peter's eyes were fixed, as they had been before, on the closed door and the hole left by the lock. He sat down on the top step. He remembered that after last time his mother had asked him to go and find a new lock. There were locks everywhere, in every building, in every godforsaken apartment. But Peter had forgotten.

[...]

Peter's eyes wandered over the charred door frame in the abandoned apartment next door. You could see the marks left by the fire everywhere; the walls, ceilings and floors were black. He and his mother had been lucky, only the apartment above them and their old neighbour's apartment next door had burned out.

Suddenly the door opened and two soldiers came through the doorway. They were clapping each other on the back, in high good humour. Peter wondered if he could go into the apartment. He had counted three men before, so one of them must still be inside. Peter quietly got to his feet, went to the apartment door and opened it a crack. He heard sobbing. The kitchen seemed to be empty. This time none of the soldiers had been smoking; it all looked as clean and comfortable as it had in the morning. His mother's cleaning rag lay on the kitchen dresser. Turning, Peter saw the naked soldier behind the door. Legs drawn up, head in his hands, the man sat on the floor sobbing. Peter thought it a strange sight, because the soldier was wearing a helmet, although otherwise he was entirely naked, and the war had been over for weeks.

Peter left the soldier sitting behind the door and went into the next room, where his mother was just closing the wardrobe. She was wearing her outdoor coat, she took the small case off the bed. Peter wanted to say he was sorry he'd forgotten

the lock, sorry he hadn't been able to help her, but he got out only a single word, and that was: Mother. He reached for her hand. She shook his off and went ahead of him.

They passed the sobbing soldier sitting on the kitchen floor behind the front door of the apartment, they went downstairs, they walked straight along the street to the fish quay. Peter's mother, with her long legs, walked so fast that he had trouble keeping up with her. He hopped and skipped along, and as he scurried after her, almost running, great joy came over him. He was filled by the certainty that they would be catching the train today, they would be setting out on their great journey, the journey west. Peter guessed that they wouldn't be going to Frankfurt, perhaps they'd go to Bautzen and his mother's sister, but first they would travel in the direction of Berlin. Once upon a time his mother used to tell him, as he dropped off to sleep, about the river, the beautiful market place in Bautzen, the wonderful smell in her parents' printing works. Peter clapped his hands and began to whistle, until his mother suddenly stood still and told him to stop it. Once again Peter tried to take her hand, but his mother asked if he couldn't see that she had the case and her handbag to carry.

I can carry the case, Peter offered, but his mother wouldn't let him.

[...]

They walked to the station at a fast pace. But even as they were going down the steps to it, a uniformed nurse with a big belly came towards them, obviously a colleague of his mother's, saying that the special trains weren't coming into Stettin, they'd have to walk to the next station in Scheune. The trains were leaving from there.

They went along between the tracks. The nurse was soon breathless. She kept close to Peter's mother, and he walked behind them, trying to understand what they were talking about. The nurse said she hadn't been able to sleep a wink for thinking about the corpses they'd found by night in the hospital yard. Peter's mother did not reply. She said nothing about the soldiers and their visit. Her colleague was sobbing, she said she really admired Peter's mother's commitment, even though everyone knew that, well, there was something not quite right about her background. The nurse laid a hand on her big belly, puffing and panting, but she wouldn't dwell on that now, she said. Who'd have the courage, after all? She herself could never have taken one

of those stakes to thrust it into a woman's body and pull it out again, impaled like animals they'd been, their female parts torn to shreds. The nurse stopped, leaning heavily on Peter's mother's shoulder for support, she breathed deeply, the survivor kept on calling for her daughter, she said, but the daughter had bled to death long before, lying there beside her. Peter's mother stopped and told the nurse brusquely to keep quiet. For God's sake shut up.

The narrow platform at Scheune was crammed with people waiting. They sat on the ground in groups, suspiciously watching the new arrivals.

[...]

Several more hours were to pass before a train came in. The people crowded round it even before it stopped, trying to grab handles and rails. It almost looked as if the crowd itself were stopping the train, bringing it to a halt. The train didn't seem to have enough doors. Arms flailed, feet kicked, people struck out and brought sharp elbows into action. There was swearing and whistling. Those who were too weak were pushed aside, left behind. Peter felt his mother's hand on his back as she propelled him through the crowd, he had fabric in his face, coats, a case struck him in the ribs, and finally his mother picked him up from behind and raised him above the shoulders of the crowd. The conductor blew his whistle. At the last moment, Peter's mother fought her way the crucial final metre forward, holding Peter tight, pushing him, squeezing him into the train with all her might. Peter turned, holding her hand tightly, clutching it, the train jolted and began to move, the wheels were going round, Peter held on to the door, held on to his mother too, he'd show her how strong he was. Jump! he cried. At that moment their hands lost touch. The people left on the platform were running along beside the train. Someone must have pulled the emergency brake, or perhaps the engine was labouring, because the wheels squealed on the rails. A fat lady in a hat at the back of the crowd called out: sausages, there's sausages over there! Sure enough, many people turned to look at her, stopped, stood on tiptoe, craned their heads to see who had uttered that cry and where the sausages were. The fat lady took her chance to fight her way several metres forward. The crowd pressed Peter's mother and the case into the train. Peter put both arms around his mother. He was never going to let go of her again.

In the train they stood in the corridor, people were pushing and shoving, children had to stand on suitcases. Peter was happy to stand on theirs; it made him almost as tall as his mother. When she turned, as she kept doing, her hair tickled him. It was pinned up but a lock had fallen loose. His mother smelled of lilac.

[...]

Peter felt the pleasant friction of her coat rubbing under his chin. She must be sweating, but she hadn't wanted to leave her coat behind. The train jerked and slowly began to move. Outside the window, those who hadn't managed to board it moved by.

[...]

Hold tight, his mother told him, nodding her head towards the door frame of the compartment. Her little nurse's cap was still perched on her blonde, pinned-up hair, although they weren't in the hospital. Are you dreaming? Hold on tight, she snapped. But Peter put his hands on his mother's shoulders, thinking of the soldier who had been sitting sobbing behind the door. He was glad they were getting out of that place at last, and he wanted to fling his arms around his mother. Then someone's elbow struck him in the back, pushing him against his mother so hard that she almost overbalanced, the case under Peter's feet gave way, tipped over, and Peter fell on top of his mother. She staggered back into the compartment. She would never have cried out, she just uttered a growl of annoyance. Peter put his hand on her hip so as not to lose touch with her. He tried to help her up. Her eyes were sparkling angrily, Peter said he was sorry, but his mother didn't seem to be listening, her mouth stayed closed, her lips were narrowed, she pushed his hand away. Peter wanted her attention at any price.

Mother, he said, but she didn't hear him. Mother, he repeated, taking her hand again. It was cold and strong, and he loved it. Next moment the train jerked, people fell against each other, and his mother held tight with one hand to the baggage rack and with the other to the door frame for the rest of the journey, while Peter clung to her coat without her noticing or being able to prevent him.

Just before Pasewalk the train stopped on an open stretch of line. The doors were opened, and the passengers pushed and shoved each other out of the train. Peter

and his mother let the mass of humanity sweep them along until they reached the platform.

[...]

You wait here, his mother said when they came to a bench. An old man had just that moment got up from it. Trains leave for Anklam and Angermünde from here, perhaps there'll be tickets. I'll be right back. She took Peter by the shoulders and pressed him down on the bench.

I'm hungry, said Peter. Laughing, he clung to her arms.

I'll be right back, she repeated, you wait here.

I'm coming with you, he said.

She said: let go of me, Peter. But he was already getting to his feet to follow her. At that she thrust the little case his way and pressed him and it back on the bench. Now that Peter had to hold the case on his lap he couldn't reach for her any more.

You wait. She said that sternly. A smile flitted over her face, she patted his cheek, and Peter was glad. He thought of the sausages back in Scheune, that lady had been shouting about them, maybe there'd be some sausages here, he'd help his mother look for them, he wanted to help her anyway. He opened his mouth, but she was determined to have her own way, she turned and plunged into the crowd. Peter watched her go, and spotted her by the door to the station concourse.

He badly needed to pee, and looked round for toilets, but he wanted to wait until she was back. After all, people could easily lose each other on a station like this. The sun slowly set. Peter's hands were cold, he held the case firmly and jiggled his knees. Small particles of colour from the case stuck to his hands, oxblood red. He kept looking in the direction of the door where he had last seen his mother. People streamed by. At some point the family sitting on the bench beside him stood up and others sat down. Peter kept thinking of his father, building a bridge over the river Main somewhere in Frankfurt. He knew his name, Wilhelm, but not where he lived. His father was a hero. What about his mother? He knew her name too, Alice. There was something suspect in her background. Once again Peter looked at the door to the station concourse. His neck was stiff from sitting like that for hours, staring the same

way. A train came in, people picked up baggage, reached for their nearest and dearest, you had to hold on to everything. Anklam, the train wasn't going to Angermünde, it was for Anklam. The crowd was happy so long as it was going somewhere, anywhere. It was after midnight now and Peter didn't need to pee any more, he was just waiting. The platform had emptied, so presumably those who were still waiting had gone into the station concourse. If there was a ticket office wouldn't it have closed long ago? Perhaps there wasn't a concourse beyond that door at all, perhaps this station had been destroyed like the one in Stettin. A blonde woman appeared at the far end of the concourse; Peter stood up, jamming the case between his legs, he strained to see, but it wasn't his mother. Peter stayed on his feet for a while. When he was sitting down again, gnawing at his lips, he heard his mother complaining of the way he persisted in peeling off bits of his body and eating them, he could see her expression of revulsion in his mind's eye. Someone or other, Peter told himself, someone or other is bound to turn up. His eyes closed, he opened them, he mustn't go to sleep or he wouldn't notice if someone came looking for him, he fought against sleep, thought of his mother's hand and drew his legs up on the bench. He laid his head on his knees and never took his eyes off the station door. When daybreak came, he woke up thirsty, and the wet fabric of the seat of his trousers was sticking to his skin. Now at last he stood up to go in search of a toilet and some water.