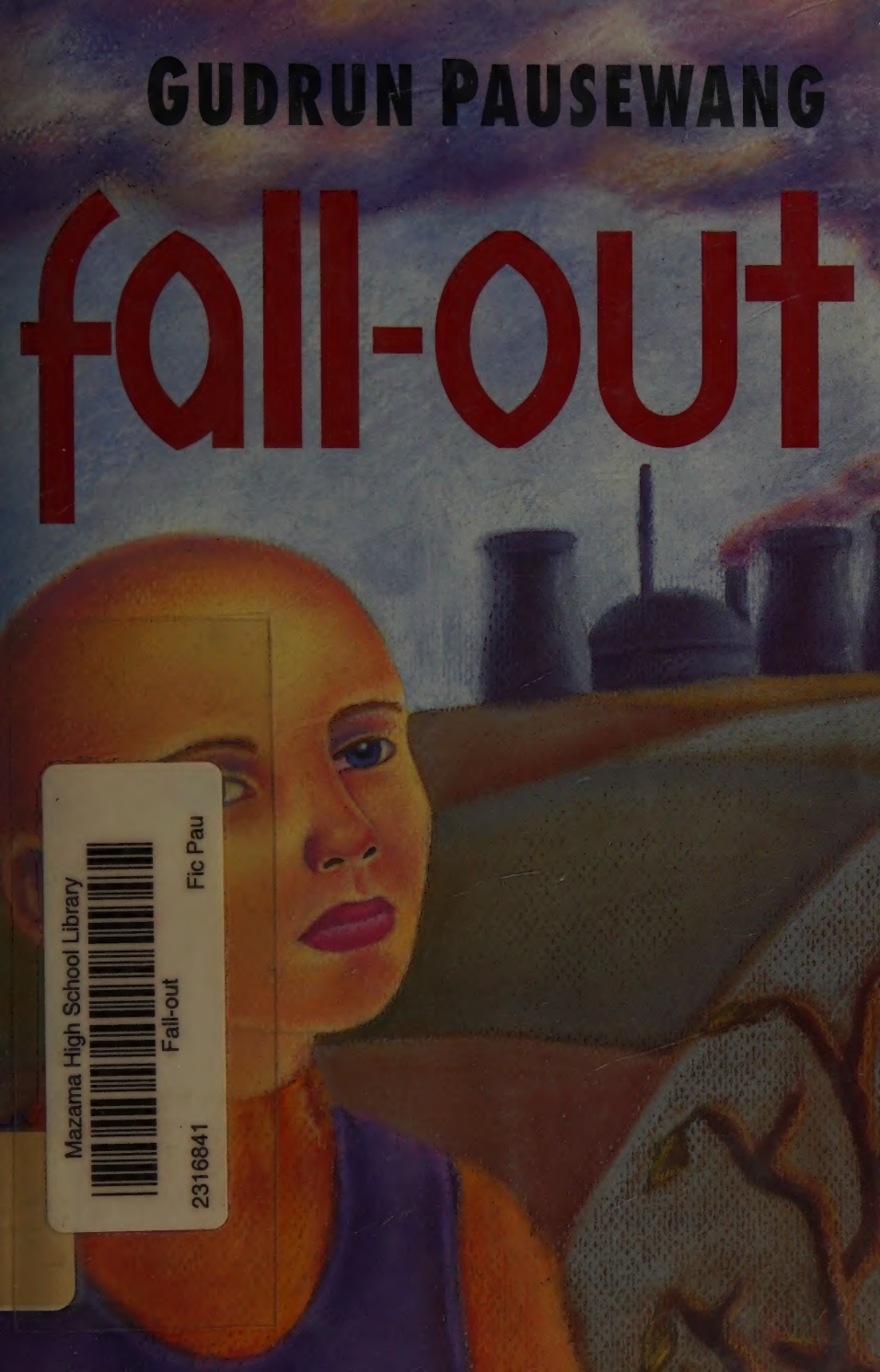
GUDRUN PAUSEWANG

fall-out



CAN $19.99 USA $13.99

'Your attention please; this is the police. A nuclear accident took place about ten o'clock this morning inside the Grafenrheinfeld nuclear power station. The population of the entire district is urgently requested to move at once to a closed room and shut all doors and windows. These are precautionary measures. There is no need for anxiety . . .'

Fourteen-year-old Janna's parents have always protested against nuclear power, but nothing could have prepared them for what happens when a leak actually happens at a power station near their home. As the radioactive fall-out gets closer, the government's glib plans for coping with such a disaster collapse, and Janna, left alone to look after her little brother in a world gone mad with fear, must make the decisions which will mean life or death for both of them.

This extraordinarily powerful and credible novel from Germany's most celebrated writer for teenagers won the German Literature Award for Children's and Young Adult books.

£9.99

fall-out

GUDRUN PAUSEWANG

fall-out

Translated by Patricia Crampton

VIKING

Published by the Penguin Group
Penguin Books Ltd, 27 Wrights Lane, London W8 5TZ, England
Penguin Books USA Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA
Penguin Books Australia Ltd, Ringwood, Victoria, Australia
Penguin Books Canada Ltd, 10 Alcorn Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada M4V 3B2
Penguin Books (NZ) Ltd, 182–190 Wairau Road, Auckland 10, New Zealand

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England

First published in Germany by Ravensburger Buchverlag Otto Maier GmbH 1987
First English language translation published in Great Britain by Viking 1994
1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Filmset by Datix International Limited, Bungay, Suffolk
Printed in England by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc
Set in 12/14 pt Monophoto Bembo

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library
ISBN 0–670–86104–9

1

The breeze was blowing strongly that Friday morning. When Janna looked out of the window she could see the young birch leaves glittering in the sunshine. The shadows of the twigs shivered on the asphalt of the school yard. Above the roofs in the distance it was snowing cherry blossom. The sky was deep blue. Only a few clouds, white and fluffy as cotton wool, sailed across it. It was unusually warm for a May morning. You could see a long way.

Suddenly a siren howled. Mr Benzig broke off his commentary on the new French reader in the middle of a sentence and glanced at his wrist-watch.

'Nine minutes to eleven,' he said. 'Funny time for a fire drill. There was nothing about it in the paper.'

'That's the ABC alert!' cried Elmar, who was top of the class.

'Perhaps they mentioned it somewhere and I simply overlooked it,' said Mr Benzig. 'Let's go on.'

But he had scarcely begun again on the reader when

there was a click from the loudspeaker. Everyone looked at the little box above the door. This time it was not the secretary speaking, as usual, but the head teacher.

'An ABC alert has just sounded. Lessons will end immediately. All pupils must go home by the quickest route.'

The words that followed were drowned in the rising din. Everyone ran to the windows and peered out.

'Do you know what it's about?' asked Janna's friend Meike.

Janna shook her head. She could feel her hands growing cold. Something had happened, but what? She thought of Uli, her little brother.

'Go home!' said Mr Benzig.

There was a lot of noise in the corridor now: excited shouts, running footsteps, banging doors.

'What on earth's the matter?' cried Janna.

Mr Benzig shrugged.

'I don't know any more than you do,' he said. 'Please go now. Run as fast as you can! But keep calm.'

'It's probably a specially authentic disaster drill,' said Elmar, slowly packing his bag. But the teacher shook his head.

'I would have known about that,' he said.

Then someone flung open the classroom door and rushed out. The others stormed after him, into the seething mob in the passage. One or two pupils were trying to fight their way against the stream, among them Ingrid, from the parallel class. Janna often spent breaktime with Ingrid.

'There won't be a bus for home now!' she shouted to Janna. 'Not for an hour and a half. I'll ring and tell Mum to pick me up.'

But there was already a crowd outside the secretary's door. It would be a long time before Ingrid could tele-

phone. Janna wanted to stay with her, but could not resist the pressure of the crowd forcing her towards the stairs. She hung on to Meike's arm as they were pushed down, step by step. The noise increased. Down below in the school hall, someone yelled: 'Grafenrheinfeld! An alert in Grafenrheinfeld!'

Janna tried to remember: Grafenrheinfeld – wasn't that a nuclear power station?

When she left the school building a couple of juniors hurried past her and ran across the street, looking neither right nor left. Tyres screeched. A driver hooted furiously and swore at the children. Apparently he had not yet heard anything.

At the crossing Janna stopped uncertainly.

'No bus yet for me, either,' she said.

'Come back with me first,' Meike suggested.

Janna shook her head.

'Are you going to walk all way back to Schlitz?' asked Meike.

'My parents are in Schweinfurt today,' said Janna. 'Dad's got a meeting, and Mum and Kai are with my grandmother. They're not coming back until tomorrow. Uli will be alone in the house. I've got to look after him.'

At that moment Lars ran past. Lars was from Schlitz too, a senior, who came to school by car.

'Hey, Janna,' he called. 'Want to come with me?'

She nodded quickly, said goodbye to Meike and ran off behind Lars.

Three other boys from her village, all seniors, were already in the car. Janna was allowed to sit in front. Lars drove off while she was still fastening her seat-belt.

'You needn't bother about that,' said Lars. 'You can

hang your legs out of the window today and it won't interest anyone. Least of all the police.'

'Since they've sent us home without warning, it may be a doomsday scenario,' said one of the boys in the back.

'How stupid, my radio's out of order,' growled Lars.

Doomsday scenario. Now Janna remembered: back then, after the accident at the Russian nuclear power station, they had been talking about a doomsday scenario, too. For weeks and weeks. She had still been at primary school and had not understood what the teachers were trying to explain to them about 'rems' and 'becquerels' and 'radiation'. She had simply remembered the name of the Russian power station: Chernobyl. And she had realized that now the sky and the earth, and above all the rain, were in some way poisonous. When it rained they were not allowed into the school yard for break. That made sense. But then, when lessons were over, they were sent home, out into that same poisonous rain. On the first day Janna had tearfully refused to leave the building. The rain was still poisonous, wasn't it? She had finally arrived home in tears, driven by a teacher who lived in their neighbourhood, and Grandma Berta had called her a 'little silly'. The rain wasn't poisonous at all; the teacher was just being silly, too.

But now Janna was fourteen, a pupil in class five, and she knew more. Doomsday scenario: that would mean that radioactivity was escaping from a nuclear power station – in dangerous quantities. And there was a nuclear power station in Grafenrheinfeld. How far away was that?

Lars took the short cut across Marienstrasse, avoiding four sets of traffic lights. It was a quiet suburb, but on that day three other cars were driving ahead of Lars's old car,

and drivers behind him were hooting impatiently, although Lars was already driving at over sixty kilometres an hour.

In the back they were arguing about the type of reactor in Grafenrheinfeld, and what could happen in that type. Again and again Janna heard the words 'Chernobyl' and 'Harrisburg', and 'fuel rods', 'cooling water' and 'pressure vessels'. To her ears the four seniors were nuclear experts. She herself had never been especially interested in physics, but she did know that atomic power stations could become dangerous. After Chernobyl she had accompanied her parents on several demonstrations, which she still remembered vividly. That was when the tremendous row had taken place between her parents and grandparents: Grandma Berta and Grandpa Hans-Georg thought that nuclear power was essential now, that it was simply part of modern life, like a car or a television, and the fact that something had gone wrong in Chernobyl had absolutely nothing to do with German power stations. In any case, demonstrations did no good, they were simply happy hunting grounds for dreamers and anarchists. But it was Mum who made them really mad: they were sure Dad had got all these silly ideas from her.

'We have brought up our son', Grandpa Hans-Georg had shouted in one of their heated arguments, 'to keep both feet firmly on the ground. And now this!'

Where Marienstrasse joined Niesigerstrasse there was a traffic jam, something that hardly ever happened here.

'Pure panic,' said Lars drily. 'They're all trying to get to the motorway.'

Janna's parents had once even been co-founders of a campaign against the use of nuclear power, but by now Chernobyl was almost forgotten. The nuclear power stations in

Germany had gone on working without any great problems, and the campaign had soon died down.

'Even Chernobyl was not enough,' Dad had said once. 'It's got to happen here first, to make us get our backsides off our chairs.'

Now Janna remembered why the name Grafenrheinfeld seemed so familiar: Mum had once printed and distributed anti-nuclear-power leaflets and Janna had helped her. The sites of all the West German nuclear power stations had been shown on the leaflets, and one of them had been Grafenrheinfeld. Janna could no longer remember exactly where it was, but she knew that it was not very far away.

Uli will be running home from school now, she thought anxiously.

She wound down the car window. Blinds were rattling, and people were hurrying out of their front doors. On the other side of the road a woman was running along with two small children, one in her arms, the other dragging behind her. A ground-floor window opened and a cat was shooed out.

When at last the crossroads was behind them and they were leaving the town, they met very few oncoming cars but they were being overtaken all the time, and before they reached the next village a whole line of cars was behind them.

'They're taking the main roads now, because the motorways will soon be jammed,' said someone in the back.

'If it gets really dicey, we'll fly out,' said Lars.

Janna knew that Lars's father kept a sports plane on the airfield in Wernges. He had once invited her father on a flight.

'I bet my folks are packing already,' said one of the

others. 'Safety fanatics. And my gran will pack the craziest clobber: reading lamps, or the weeding trowel!'

Janna thought of her own two grandmothers: Jo, Mum's mother, and Grandma Berta, Dad's mother. Jo was a nurse in Schweinfurt and spent every other weekend on demonstrations. She was a bit of a strain, with her everlasting 'We've all got to change', her vegetarianism and her obsession with the simple life. But Janna felt that Jo took her seriously – she was allowed to join in the talk – and Jo lived in such a lovely mess!

Grandma Berta was quite different. She was like the grandmothers in Janna's children's books. It was wonderful to be a child in her house, the younger the better. She could spoil you and take care of you, and she knew so many old songs and stories. Most of them were kind of sad, although Janna had often only half understood them. But however sad or grisly they might be, fear was never too close, or too great. With Grandma Berta you knew nothing could happen to you; good was clearly visible, and winning, and evil would be defeated. You could rely on that with Grandma Berta. With her, everything had its place, from the swear-words you were not allowed to use in her presence, to the neatly piled bedlinen in the airing-cupboard. And she would not have been Grandma Berta if she hadn't always carried an umbrella when she went for a walk, even when the weather was glorious. The Green Party had 'simply no manners', and when Grandpa Hans-Georg argued with Dad about politics she would take herself off to the kitchen. Her waffles were the best in the world!

Grandma Berta and Grandpa Hans-Georg had gone to Majorca a week ago. Perhaps they were walking under the palm trees at this very moment. Janna missed Grandma

Berta very much, although she had quite often been annoyed with her recently. Grandma Berta simply would not accept that at fourteen Janna could join in. For instance, when politics came up: 'That's enough, Jannie,' she would say softly, as soon as Janna began to speak.

Would Grandma Berta also have been packing up rubbish today? Janna was not certain. On the one hand, Grandma Berta had lived through all the awful years of the war, but on the other hand, whenever Grandpa Hans-Georg mentioned it, she would cry: 'Be quiet, I don't want to hear any more about those dreadful things!'

As they drove through the little village of Hemmen, a school bus stopped on the other side of the road. Children got out and ran about in confusion. One or two mothers, gesticulating nervously, were waiting for the youngest of them. Janna thought miserably of Uli. Was he home yet? He'd be all alone.

'The kids don't look exactly unhappy,' said Lars. 'They're glad to be let off school.'

I hope he really will go home the quickest way, thought Janna. If I have to look for him as well . . .

It had all been so well planned. At first Mum had hesitated over leaving Uli with Janna, but Dad had laughed and said: 'She'll be able to look after her brother for two days. After all, she'll soon be fifteen!'

And Uli had insisted, too. He had vowed to obey Janna as if she were Mum in person. Then Mum had agreed.

'I shall ring up every evening,' she had told them, and Dad had laughed again and said: 'Only two evenings! We'll be back here on Saturday.'

Yesterday, Thursday, everything had run on oiled wheels. Uli had been allowed home after the third lesson.

Mum had hung the house key round his neck on a red leather lace and he had not lost it. At home he had done his homework straight away, and when Janna came back three hours later he had already peeled the potatoes and laid the table. In the evening Mum had telephoned from Jo's flat in Schweinfurt and Janna had been able to tell her that everything was fine.

'Don't forget to give him his sandwich for break,' Mum had told her, and Kai had whispered down the telephone that he had fed the ducks with Jo. Last of all, Jo had come to the telephone: she could not understand why Mum made such a fuss about Janna and Uli. She, Jo, had had to look after her three younger brothers and sisters when she was thirteen, when her mother went to hospital to have her fifth child. Her father had been a soldier and not been given leave from the front.

Janna had not forgotten Uli's sandwich, and today they planned to make potato pancakes. It was Uli's idea, he adored potato pancakes. Would he be frightened?

'How far is it to Grafenrheinfeld?' asked Janna.

One of the boys thought it was seventy, another eighty kilometres. As the crow flies. A ridiculously short distance, Janna knew. Chernobyl had surely been fifteen hundred kilometres away?

'You forget the wind,' said Lars. 'The fall-out depends on the wind. Only the south-east wind would be dangerous for us and we scarcely ever have that. The wind almost always blows from the west here.'

'So how did the fall-out get all the way here from Chernobyl?' asked Janna.

Silence. Then they started talking about the effect of the rotation of the earth and the higher air currents.

'Oh, it's so stupid that my radio doesn't work,' said

Lars. 'They are sure to be reporting the direction of the wind every five minutes.'

'Or perhaps not,' a boy answered. 'The first thing they will do is try to prevent panic. I tell you what will happen: we shall hear at regular intervals that there is no reason for anxiety and they have everything absolutely under control. Motto: calm is the citizen's first duty!'

'Why don't we stop and see where the wind is coming from for ourselves?' asked Janna.

Lars swerved on to the parking lane, jumped out of the car and held up his handkerchief.

'Shit! The wind is in the south-east!'

He jumped back into the car, wound up the window and forced his way back into the column on the main road with loud hooting.

'If it really is a south-east wind,' said someone from the back, 'the thing could be here in two hours.'

'What a load of tripe,' growled Lars.

'Tripe? We took twenty minutes to get here from Fulda – and who knows when the accident happened. It may have been hours ago. In that case it would have caught up with us already . . .'

They drove silently through the next village. A tractor with an empty trailer was chugging its way back from the fields, a woman signalling excitedly to the driver. A curtain moved: no one here seemed to be packing their things.

Janna tried to visualize the map. Grafenrheinfeld must lie to the south-east. No, geography was not her strong point. Only recently Dad had simply shaken his head when she told him where she thought a major town lay. Would she make a fool of herself if she asked?

They were driving through the last village before Schlitz.

Here people were dragging cases out of their houses and stowing them in their cars. Just as Janna was going to ask her question, the answer came.

'Schweinfurt will be completely empty already – assuming that the disaster procedures worked.'

'How do you mean, Schweinfurt?' asked Janna, startled.

'What a question,' said Lars, chewing his underlip nervously. 'Schweinfurt is just beside Grafenrheinfeld – or Grafenrheinfeld is beside Schweinfurt, if you like.'

Janna held her breath.

'If it was a doomsday scenario you can forget disaster procedures,' she heard the boy behind her say. 'All the people in Schweinfurt will need are grave-diggers and marrow transplant specialists.'

'Only in Schweinfurt – are you sure?' said Lars grimly.

'In Schweinfurt ... my parents are in Schweinfurt today,' said Janna.

The four boys fell silent.

Janna thought about her parents: her father, with his dark beard, lean and sunburned, with tiny laugh lines that she loved at the corners of his eyes. Her mother, three centimetres taller than he was, blonde, brown-eyed and full of laughter. And never the way you expected her to be.

'Perhaps they've got away in time,' said a boy from the back.

Her body on fire, Janna realized that Kai too was in Schweinfurt – Kai, the youngest, not yet three years old, Kai whom everyone loved so much! And Jo!

Something terrible seemed to have happened, and yet everything looked as peaceful as ever: a perfectly ordinary, warm, windy, spring day. The cherry tree blossoms had almost faded and all round the villages apple trees were in

flower. The rape fields gleamed bright yellow. In two weeks it would be Whitsun.

'Be alive,' thought Janna. 'Please be alive!'

She dug her fingernails into her arm, pain against pain. Even as a little girl she had done the same thing to help her put up with the dentist's drill.

Then they reached Schlitz. Lars lived in one of the first houses. His mother came rushing towards the car, signalling energetically for him to stop.

'Lars can't drive you home now!'

Janna got out, quite dazed. Behind her the three boys pushed their way out and ran off with a fleeting 'Ciao!' Janna muttered her thanks, but Lars was already running off behind his mother.

Janna looked up to the hill above the town where their house stood. Uli was probably already waiting for her, ten minutes away, or eight, or even seven, if she ran. Janna ran.

2

There it stood, with its pointed gables, in the midst of the grassland behind the birch trees. The sun was reflected from the window of Janna's own room, and the geraniums – particularly flourishing this year – bloomed on her grandparents' balcony. Grandma Berta's pride.

Her grandparents would read all about it in the newspapers.

Uli appeared on the lower balcony and waved. 'They've sent us home!' he called. 'They say there's poison in the air! Lots of poison! And Almut rang up to say we must go to the cellar. I've already grated the potatoes!'

Solemn music came through the balcony door. Uli had switched on the radio. Janna ran up the steep slope and took the steps three or four at a time. Uli was holding open the door. She flung down her satchel and rushed into the living-room.

'They keep on saying something about fall-out,' cried Uli excitedly. 'It's in a cloud and it's poisonous. But I

didn't really get it all.'

The music was so loud that Janna could scarcely hear him. She ran to the kitchen and turned the radio down.

'I know what's happened,' she said.

'We saw something like it once on TV,' said Uli. 'Something exploded and then . . .'

'Was it only Almut who rang?' Janna interrupted him.

'The telephone did ring again, but I was in the cellar getting potatoes. When I came up it had stopped.'

'That must have been Dad,' said Janna, 'or Mum. Why didn't you run upstairs?'

'With all those potatoes?'

'You're an ass!' Janna shouted.

'We were going to make potato pancakes,' said Uli reproachfully.

Janna ran to the telephone and dialled Jo's number with the Schweinfurt code, but all she could hear was the ringing tone and her own hectic breathing. Uli wanted to listen with her and their heads bumped together. Janna put the receiver down and then dialled Almut's number. Almut was her favourite relation, Mum's younger sister, a teacher, married to Reinhard, another teacher. They lived in Bad Kissingen. No one was answering their number, either. Of course, Almut and Reinhard would be at school at this hour.

An awful suspicion came to Janna: did Almut also live somewhere near Grafenrheinfeld?

She snatched the atlas from the bookshelf and leafed hastily through it until she found the right page.

'I'll go on with the potatoes,' said Uli, returning, nose in air, to the kitchen.

Janna leaned over the atlas. Bad Kissingen was close to Grafenrheinfeld. She tried to gather her thoughts. Only

twenty kilometres! Almut had rung up and advised them to go to the cellar. Was she now crouching in the cellar herself? Almut was expecting a baby.

'They're saying something else!' called Uli from the kitchen.

Janna ran in as Uli turned the knob on the radio.

A voice thundered through the room at enormous volume: '*The catastrophe authority for government district Lower Frankonia/Würzburg has the following announcement: radioactivity was temporarily released at Grafenrheinfeld nuclear power station by the accident already announced. Precautionary measures for the population are therefore unavoidable in some areas close to the power station. The population is requested to evacuate the following places at once –*'*

'What did he say?' asked Uli.

'Be quiet!' cried Janna. She heard the word Schweinfurt. Bad Kissingen was also named, followed by a number of other place names. She turned the radio down again. Bits of raw grated potato had stuck to the knob.

'*Car owners are requested to take elderly or handicapped neighbours and mothers with small children with them to the nearest control point . . .*' Janna heard. And then: '*Those without cars should take the shortest route to the nearest school, sports facility, community hall, church or other muster point and wait to be picked up. Only essentials must be taken from the house. These include . . .*'*

That was Radio Bavaria 3. Janna tried to find a transmitter in Hessen. When the announcer's voice fell silent they could hear the loudspeaker from a police car outside, through the open balcony door. Uli was already running

* The passages in italics and starred are taken, with only minor amendments, from official drafts of catastrophe defence plans.

out to the balcony, followed by Janna. They leaned over the railings. The police car was driving along the station road; they could see it clearly.

'*Your attention please; this is the police. A nuclear accident took place at about ten o'clock this morning inside the Grafenrheinfeld nuclear power station near Schweinfurt. The population of Schlitz and the entire Vogelsberg district are urgently requested for their own protection to move at once to a closed room and shut all doors and windows. Switch off ventilators and air-conditioning. As far as possible, eat only food already in the house in tins, jars or other dustproof packaging. Shut your pets up immediately in a room or shed. Give them only food already stored in the house, barn or stable. Switch on your radio or television set. Inform everyone living in the house. These are precautionary measures. There is therefore no need for anxiety. Keep calm and collected. You will be informed of any further precautionary protective measures . . .*'★

The loudspeaker fell silent.

'That's what Almut said,' cried Uli. 'We were to go to the cellar and shut all the doors and windows. But everyone else is driving off!'

He pointed to the little town below them. The noise echoed upwards as cars held up at the entrances to the station road began hooting. Where the road from Fulda met the station road there was already a tailback. Two cars had collided in front of the bank. Janna could hear shouts, but no crowd had gathered. There had been another crash, on the fork leading to Lauterbach. The cars simply drove round the accidents, bumping over the kerbs. The road to the west, towards Lauterbach, was very busy, but most of the traffic was travelling north. Many people were obviously hoping to get on to the Kassel–Würzburg motorway.

Down below, opposite the garage, the Soltaus were

jumping into their car, which was stuffed with luggage. Their old mother was sitting on the back seat, packed between luggage and boxes. Mrs Soltau put her head out of the side window.

'You're not going to stay there, are you?' she called up to them. 'The thing might be here at any minute!'

'Shut the window!' Janna heard Mr Saltau roar.

Mrs Saltau withdrew her head and the window closed. The car rolled downhill and disappeared behind the wall.

'Why are they going?' asked Uli.

'They're frightened,' said Janna.

'Are we?' asked Uli.

Janna swallowed. 'No,' she said, not looking at Uli.

She tried to consider their situation. They had nothing but bicycles. Could they escape the south-east wind that way? She looked at the larch twigs rising and falling in the neighbouring garden. The wind had not dropped, but might it have turned? She held out her handkerchief, but it was still fluttering towards the north-west, rather more north than west.

Nuclear shelters came into her mind: should they instal themselves in the cellar after all?

'Are we going to stay or go?' Uli urged. 'If we're staying I'll finish grating the potatoes. I'm hungry . . .'

Almut had advised them to go to the cellar, and so had the police. Their grandparents' storeroom might be the best place. It was on the back wall of the house, deep in the hillside. Grandma Berta had whole rows of tins lined up there, full preserving jars, jam-jars and unheard-of quantities of sugar, tins of milk powder, bags of flour, packets of noodles, everything that was eatable and keepable. She always took great care that no gaps appeared. Grandpa Hans-Georg complained that she had a squirrel complex,

and Dad had once told Janna that his mother had got used to hoarding in the last war. At that time it had been both right and necessary.

Janna glanced at her watch. Two minutes past twelve, thirty-six minutes since she had left school.

'We'll stay here,' she decided, 'in the cellar.'

Uli nodded and started back to the kitchen, but Janna explained that there was no more time for potato-grating and got him collecting cutlery and plates for the cellar. She herself ran through the whole house, closing doors and windows. Grandma Berta's storeroom had no windows, only a hatch to the neighbouring cellar, whose window she closed carefully.

Uli had turned the radio in the kitchen right up again and a new announcement re-echoed down to the cellar: *'To everyone living in North Bavaria and East Hessen: please do not leave your homes unless the authorities responsible request you to do so. All seriously endangered districts will be evacuated. Anyone who takes flight without being required to do so will disturb the smooth flow of traffic and also the evacuation measures. The police authorities have been directed to take drastic action against all contraventions in order to keep the roads free for orderly evacuation. Calm is the citizen's first duty. Act responsibly!'*★

'Switch off,' Janna shouted up, 'otherwise we shan't hear the telephone!'

Uli switched off the radio, put a saucepan on his head and carried a big pot full of knives, forks, spoons and a tin-opener down to the cellar. Janna rushed to his room, snatched jeans, underwear, T-shirts and two sweatshirts from the cupboard, stuffed them in a big plastic bag, unmade Uli's bed, ripped off the duvet and pillows and dragged everything down to the door of Grandma Berta's

cellar. Then she ran up again and dragged down Uli's mattress, feverishly trying to think what else they would need down there besides bedclothes, food and clothing. Candles? There might be a power failure. A few books, one or two games and toys for Uli, especially his teddy bear. He would refuse to sleep without that. Water – what about water?

Panting, she brought down her own bedclothes.

'What if we've got to go?' Uli shouted up from the cellar, where he had dragged his mattress towards Grandma Berta's potato box and spread his duvet over it.

Janna had not thought of that. Could they go upstairs to the bathroom, or should she get a bucket with a lid for the cellar? Would they be able to stand the smell? Then the telephone shrilled and Janna rushed to the living-room. It was their neighbour, Mrs Jordan.

'Are you all alone, for heaven's sake?' she asked. 'I saw you on the balcony. We're just going. Come across, we've still got room.'

'No,' said Janna, 'we've been told to stay here. We're going to the cellar.'

'Is that what your parents say?' asked Mrs Jordan. 'They must know what they're doing.'

She rang off.

'Now she's in a huff,' thought Janna.

She had scarcely got back to the stairs when the telephone rang again. It was Mum.

'Janna!' she cried, with an unfamiliar note in her voice. 'It's you! Thank God – I've already rung twice, but nobody answered.'

'I've only just got back,' said Janna. 'Must we really stay in the cellar? All the others are leaving!'

'No,' her mother shouted, 'not in the cellar, you won't be safe there! It's getting in everywhere. You must get away as quickly as possible. Leave with the Soltaus –'

'They've already gone,' said Janna.

'– or with the Jordans, or the Hoffmans or the Manholts! Ring them up and ask them to take you. I'm sure they will. They don't know you're at home alone, otherwise they would have picked you up already.'

'Right, Mum, I'll phone them,' said Janna. 'And where are we to meet you?'

'Take the green address book from my desk,' said her mother. 'All the addresses and telephone numbers are in there. Helga in Hamburg is the first contact address, understand? And take some money so that you don't have to wait to be given everything. In the left-hand desk drawer. Do it now, you must get away! I'm just about running out of change.'

'Aren't you ringing from Jo's place?' asked Janna, astonished.

'We're at the station waiting for transport,' said her mother. 'They've put on special trains. We'll get away on the next, or the one after that.'

Janna could hear Kai crying.

'How about Dad?' asked Janna, aware that her heart was beginning to thud.

'He was at the meeting when it happened,' said her mother quickly. 'He can't find us here. He must have left long ago.'

'And Jo?' cried Janna.

'Don't ask so many questions, child, you're wasting time!' shouted her mother, her voice breaking. 'Jo is on Red Cross duty somewhere. They rang her immediately after the warning. Everything is at sixes and sevens here –'

'But the cloud must have been over you for a long time!' cried Janna.

'Go!' shouted her mother. 'Go, for God's sake –'

Then it was over. There was a rushing sound in the receiver. Janna held it pressed to her ear for some time and then rang off.

'Well?' asked Uli, appearing from the cellar, running with sweat. 'Who was it?'

'Mum,' said Janna. 'They're all right. She says we mustn't stay in the cellar. We must leave with somebody.'

She ran out to the balcony and leaned over the railings. The Jordans had gone, and she returned with relief to the telephone and called the Manholts, but no one answered.

'So why did we drag all that stuff down there then?' Uli complained.

Janna rang the Hoffmans. Tina Hoffmann answered. Tina Hoffmann had been in Janna's class in primary school.

'We're staying here,' said Tina, 'in the cellar. Why don't you come to us? Shall I put my mother on?'

But Janna didn't want to talk to Tina's mother. She said goodbye quickly and dropped the receiver on its stand.

'We'll go on our own,' she said firmly. 'On our bikes.'

Uli's face brightened. He loved cycling. Janna told him to fetch the plastic bag with his clothes in it from the cellar and put on his jacket. She emptied out her own satchel, stuffed in jeans from her clothes cupboard, a T-shirt and a handful of underwear, and added a fresh cut loaf and a packet of cheese slices from the refrigerator. Into the front pocket she slipped Mum's purse and the address book. She gave a resigned nod in the direction of Uli's teddy bear, which he was hugging stubbornly. Without it Uli would never come. She hastily closed the balcony door, picked up her jacket and left the house with Uli, urging him to

hurry. They ran down the steps and pushed their bicycles out of the garage. Janna fixed the plastic bag, bear and jacket on Uli's carrier and the satchel on her own, and then they rode away.

'Stay right behind me!' she called to Uli.

She glanced again at her watch. It was 12.44, not even two hours since the warning had sounded, yet to her it seemed an eternity.

Before the hill path joined the next street Uli shouted nervously, 'Who's going to feed Coco now?'

Coco was Grandpa Hans-Georg's budgerigar. His cage hung in their grandparents' living-room. Uli had promised faithfully to feed and care for Coco while they were in Majorca, and he had kept his word, up to this very morning, before he grated the potatoes.

'Nobody,' cried Janna. 'He's not important now, either.'

'Of course he's important!' Uli shouted indignantly.

He had already jammed on his brakes and was jumping off his bike to run back.

'Stop!' shouted Janna, catching and holding him. 'You're to stay right behind me, do you hear? You haven't the first idea, you stupid idiot!'

Uli burst into tears, but he got back on his bike and followed her.

3

They had difficulty in crossing the station road; it was almost empty in the southbound direction, but on the other side each car was closely pursuing the one in front. Janna held up the first car she could, so that Uli could reach the other side of the road safely. The driver hooted angrily. Janna knew him: it was Mr Miltner, who had trained beginners at the table tennis club – a kind, patient man, but now he glared briefly through the car window as he shot past the children.

It was not easy, cycling alongside the stream of cars less than a metre away. Today the drivers were not making a cautious detour round the cyclists, because they risked being overtaken at speed on the inside by other, hooting cars. Janna made Uli cycle ahead of her so that she could keep her eye on him.

In Hutzdorf, just beyond Schlitz, the side roads seemed to have been swept clean. One or two cars were joining the column on the main road. A dog ran barking beside one of them and as the car vanished in the distance the

dog, howling wretchedly, gave up the pursuit. Uli had to brake sharply in order not to run it down. He wanted to pat the dog, but it snapped at him and Janna urged him to hurry.

'Like Coco. Just like Coco,' said Uli, and Janna saw that he was crying again.

They saw many people they knew. Children shouted out of the open car windows: 'Hallo Janna! Hallo Uli!' The Heinbachs, the Eggelings, the Schmidts, the Trettners drove past the two children.

'Janna!' called Mrs Trettner. 'Where are your parents? You can't be on your own?'

Janna caught a glimpse of her, turning to speak to her husband.

Then there was the dentist, the friendly bank clerk, the girl from the butcher's shop who always gave Uli and Kai a slice of sausage when their mother took them shopping. Uli's teacher waved. The postman drove by as well, not in the yellow post van this time, but in his own car. Many looked away when they recognized the two children, others shrugged their shoulders regretfully. That meant there were no empty seats; the cars were packed to the roof.

At the next garage two lines of cars were queueing. The sun was shining from a cloudless sky; it was almost as warm as summer. Uli complained of thirst and Janna let him drink from a ditch. What difference did it make now whether the water was clean or not? She drank some herself from her hollowed palms, and rinsed her face.

'Come on, hurry,' she urged.

'But I can't see a cloud,' said Uli resentfully, as he got on his bike and pedalled on.

Car after car, private cars, lorries, buses and motorbikes.

Once a police helicopter hovered above the road. Car radios croaked through the closed windows.

An old Volkswagen Golf caught Janna's attention: on the roof-rack was strapped a commode, just like the one Grandma Berta had used when she was in hospital. Janna tried to catch a glimpse of the inside of the car, but the windows reflected the sun, and the car was travelling too fast.

Little villages in a peaceful countryside – the Fulda valley – a level stretch which was easy to ride along. All the same, Uli was quickly getting tired and Janna had constantly to urge him to pedal faster. It was twenty-five past one.

'I've got to rest,' begged Uli. 'Just five minutes. My knees hurt so much – and I'm hungry.'

Janna urged him on until he started crying, half-way between Rimbach and Oberwegfurth. They had not even covered half the distance to Bad Hersfeld. There, Janna had decided, she and Uli would get on a train. She knew that an inter-city train ran directly from there to Hamburg, and in Hamburg was Helga, Dad's sister.

'You're a cry-baby,' said Janna, but she allowed him five minutes' rest, and unpacked some sliced bread and cheese. Uli jumped off his bike, dropped it on the grass and threw himself down beside it. She handed him a slice of bread with cheese and he wolfed it down while she stood beside him, watching him nervously.

'Quicker!' she urged. His hair was tousled, his face smeared with sweat and dust, and he looked ready to fall asleep. His eyelids were drooping.

Janna glanced up at the sky to the south. Then she realized that the cars behind them were suddenly driving much more slowly. Uli lifted his head as well.

'Traffic jam,' he said.

'Come on,' cried Janna, 'we shall be faster than them. Won't they stare, when we pedal past them!'

Uli was delighted with this idea. He swung himself on his bike and tramped on the pedals enthusiastically. Janna was scarcely able to keep up with him. He grinned proudly into the faces behind the car windows. The column was slowing down more and more, until it was barely moving at walking pace. A woman was scolding a boy of Uli's age, who immediately opened the door and peed through it as they rolled slowly along. A driver threatened another who had been overtaking and now wanted to rejoin the stream. A woman rolled down the window, pointed excitedly towards the southern sky and screamed: 'It's coming! It's coming!' Then she declared that there was a peculiar smell in the air. Infants whined, women hugged their children to them. In one car people were praying.

When Janna and Uli reached the edge of the next village the column began to move again. Cars swung off to the right and rushed across the Fulda bridge, only to swing northward again on the other side. Janna knew the valley well. She was a member of the Bad Hersfeld Girl Guides, and for two years she had ridden along this stretch every Friday afternoon, when the summer days were not too hot.

'Are we going to cross the bridge too?' Uli called over his shoulder.

Janna said no, the country road leading northward on the far side of the bridge was very narrow. The cars would push them into the ditch.

Two columns had now formed on the road from Schlitz and were moving along side by side at the speed of

tractors. There was no longer any oncoming traffic. Who would want to go south, towards the cloud?

The children caught up with the commode, but this time it was standing beside the road. An old woman in a flowered dressing-gown was sitting on it, while a younger one leaned over her, trying to protect her from curious glances. There was no bowl in the commode. The old woman was groaning.

Between Upper and Lower Wegfurth, Uli's teddy fell off his carrier and it was some time before Janna could fix it on again, cursing the grinning furry toy under her breath.

Then they reached the motorway bridge which crossed the Fulda valley, but Janna and Uli did not look at it. They were busy recognizing cars which had rushed past them some time before. Just outside Lower Wegfurth they overtook the supermarket owner, the postman, Uli's teacher and the butcher's girl.

'Are you two travelling alone?' the teacher asked through a narrow gap at the top of the window.

When Uli nodded, she called: 'Come with us! If you sit on the bags and tuck your heads in, it might work.'

'No,' Uli called back. 'We get on faster this way!'

At the point where the road from Schlitz met the main road, Janna realized why the traffic was so slow-moving: the double line which was jammed at the entrance to the motorway reached this far, but when she looked across to the motorway bridge she realized that there was only one-way traffic there: vehicles were travelling in the wrong direction on the lane leading to Würzburg via Fulda and Schweinfurt.

'Look at the bridge!' she called to Uli. 'They're driving the wrong way!'

Where the motorway slip-road forked off the main road one or two policemen were trying to restore order, but very few drivers obeyed their directions. The officials looked ridiculous, running between the cars, cursing and gesticulating. Janna thought that she had never seen policemen looking like that before; she had always had a great respect for them.

Almost nothing was moving on the motorway slip-road. Up above, the cars drove bumper to bumper and very seldom gave way to anyone approaching from below. On the fork the chaos was growing all the time. A woman at the wheel of a little Fiat which had been forced off to the side screamed in despair. Three children on the back seat screamed with her. Two other cars had become locked together, but no one was bothering about them. They had obviously been abandoned by their owners. Anyone wanting to reach the motorway had to drive round the wrecks.

Uli stopped and gaped, and when Janna tried to push him forward he lost his temper.

'Can you see a cloud?' he shouted. 'Leave me alone!'

'The fall-out is invisible,' said Janna. 'So you *can't* see it anyway.'

Uli darted a suspicious look at the sky, then mounted his bike and they rode on.

A few cars which had already turned on to the motorway slip-road now turned off on the embankment and drove in the direction of Bad Hersfeld. The road was broad and smooth, a real race-track, but no one was doing more than fifty here, either. The two lines crept northwards, then a third appeared, and a lonely Ford trying to drive south was pushed half on to the grass.

Janna kept her eyes on Uli as he rode more and more slowly and began to wobble dangerously. She felt so sorry for him – how he sweated! Only the gentlest of breezes was blowing now; the air was sultry and Uli's shirt was soaked under the arms and down his back. He had strapped his jacket on the carrier long before.

People were sticking their heads out of their car windows, shouting news of fresh horrors from the latest radio bulletins: a storm was rising in the south and blowing in their direction, and it had just been announced that the entire presumed fall-out area between Grafenrheinfeld and Bad Hersfeld was being evacuated to a radius of fifty kilometres. A purely preventive measure, they said, to exclude any possibility of danger.

'There you are!' shouted Uli, pointing to the south. 'You *can* see it!'

From the shouts and the scraps of bulletins she was able to pick up as she cycled past the cars, Janna was forming a picture of the situation.

'Purely preventive measure?' she heard a young man say. 'Don't make me laugh! The thing has probably caught up with us already!'

'I don't believe anything any more,' shouted a woman perched on the trailer of a tractor. Some children crouched round her, on stacks of luggage.

'On your own?' the woman called down to Janna and Uli. 'Come up here, there's room for two more!'

Janna thanked her, shaking her head. They would get on better on their bikes, and she had no idea where the tractor people were heading. She and Uli had a fixed goal: Bad Hersfeld station.

The next town resembled a shattered ants' nest. In every

side street luggage was being dragged to cars, men were screwing on roof-racks, children were scampering excitedly about. In front of one house Janna saw a Volkswagen bus, its roof piled high with cases and duvets. Two men and several children were strapping the luggage down, and a woman dragged half a pig towards the bus. All of them stopped every few minutes to stare at the sky.

Uli screamed suddenly: in a front garden a man had shot his collie dog.

A long queue of cars had formed in the road leading to the town exit. Janna and Uli had to dismount in order to get through. Two men were punching each other in front of the petrol pumps and Uli was afraid to pass them. Janna grabbed his handlebars and pulled him along behind her.

Eight minutes past two. Still two more villages and a country estate before they reached Bad Hersfeld. Janna pushed Uli forward, but she was beginning to doubt whether he could manage the whole distance. Perhaps she would be forced to leave his bicycle behind and take him on her luggage carrier? Later, in the train, he could sleep as long as he liked.

'You're riding much better than I expected,' she called to him. 'I wouldn't have thought you could manage this long distance.'

She was not lying. He was small for his age, and often sick. It was only since he had been going to school that he had some colour in his cheeks. But he was very strong-willed.

'Pooh!' he said, tramping more vigorously on the pedals.

Janna's hopes rose. Just those two villages and the estate. They could already see the first houses of Bad Hersfeld on the hills in the distance. She turned her head. The southern horizon had darkened.

'If we haven't had it already,' a motorbike rider roared over his shoulder to the passenger on his pillion, 'it's coming with the storm – and how!'

When the children reached the next village, the line of cars beside them was moving at walking pace. The motorcyclists swerved on to footpaths and roared off between ploughed fields and meadows. A couple of men were trying to push a car off the road into the ditch, while its owner resisted them from the other side. 'Just one litre!' he shouted desperately. 'With one litre I could get to the next garage!'

Then the obstacle was out of the way, and the men got back into their own car and drove off. Two old women were still sitting in the car, now tilted across the ditch. Janna looked back again and saw the driver helping the women out of the car and walking on with them.

Cars had been abandoned on the other side of the road, too, and just beyond the village a family left their car standing in the middle of the road and moved to join friends or relatives in another car. The drivers of the following cars swore at the fugitives.

Janna thought of her mother, and of little Kai. Were they already sitting in the train, resting, knowing that they were safe? And her grandmother, Jo? She would have been travelling for hours now, in her white nurse's uniform. Or had she even had time to put that on? Perhaps she just had her Red Cross armlet – and she would certainly not be thinking about her own safety.

Janna was reminded of a demonstration once, when a local woman, sitting by an open window, had spat on the demonstrators. Janna's mother shouted up to her: 'And if the "great death" comes down on you one day – will you go on sitting by the window just the same?'

The great death! Janna tried to imagine it. She had seen pictures of Hiroshima, heard of hair loss, bleeding and growths, of leukaemia and unstoppable nausea. Of all these horrors, hair loss seemed to her the worst: to have your bald head exposed to curious or pitying eyes.

Was Jo right in the middle of the 'great death' at this very moment? Were people dying as she cared for them? Was she herself dying? Janna tried to imagine a gravestone bearing the name JOHANNA HELBERT. Or JO HELBERT? Or JANNA HELBERT – when Jo was very young she had had a sweetheart who called her Janna. He had been her first sweetheart and they had intended to marry after the war, but he had been killed just before the end, in May 1945.

Janna's imagination jibbed at the thought. She must try not to think about Jo.

The storm clouds were mounting in the south, hanging threateningly above the rooftops.

'We must go on,' said Janna, glancing over her shoulder.

A Mercedes was making a path for itself across a carefully weeded, flowering front garden. It drove across a bed of pansies and crushed the garden gnomes into the grass. Then it stuck in the soft ground, its wheels spinning on the spot.

On the road that led out of the next village towards Bad Hersfeld, Janna spotted a gap in the line of cars. That was probably where the Mercedes had been heading. A number of cars had already piled up behind it, and a few people were trying to push the big car out of the front garden to open the way for their own cars.

From Bad Hersfeld a green and white police car was approaching, but no one made way for it. It squeezed its way along the edge of the road, braked at the jammed

crossing and pulled up at right angles to the road. Three policemen jumped out. One put a megaphone to his mouth and shouted: 'The A62 is now barred to all traffic from here to Bad Hersfeld. The town is being evacuated.'

'We want to get to the station!' someone shouted.

'No point!' roared the policeman with the megaphone. 'There is panic in the town. The traffic has come to a standstill, even on the exit roads.'

'They're bluffing!' a man shouted. 'Don't give us that!'

'So where are we supposed to go, if you please?' squawked a woman.

The people behind the Mercedes did not stop to listen. They pushed the car out of the front garden and it bumped down the kerb on to the road, followed by the other cars.

'Stop!' shouted the policeman through the megaphone. 'No one's going through this way!'

'We'll see about that,' shouted the man at the wheel of the Mercedes, and drove straight for the policeman.

Janna saw the officer drawing his pistol.

'Let's get away from here,' she said to Uli. 'We'll try the path across the fields.'

As they pedalled along a narrow path to the edge of the town they heard shots and cries.

'Are they killing people?' Uli called back to her.

'I expect they were just firing in the air,' said Janna, glancing over her shoulder again at the approaching storm front. She told Uli to stop and put his jacket on, pulled his cap on for him and slipped into her own jacket.

'What's that for?' he cried indignantly. 'I'm sweating to death as it is.'

But Janna insisted that he keep his cap on his head. Now Uli was suddenly sure that he could not go on unless he had something to drink.

'The river is just ahead,' said Janna, not knowing if she was speaking the truth. 'You can drink there.'

Uli said nothing. Did he believe her, or was he too tired to answer?

'Come on, sit on my luggage carrier,' she said.

'What about my bike?' he asked.

'We'll leave it here.'

'My bike? No chance!'

He pedalled on.

Behind the last houses they came to a railway embankment, running parallel with the main road to Bad Hersfeld. A narrow path divided the embankment from the fields.

Janna decided to go that way. The path was too narrow for cars, they would have it to themselves.

She was riding beside Uli now. The grass on the path grew tall and they had to ride slowly and carefully. Uli snuffled and wiped his nose and eyes with his sleeve.

In the distance Janna could hear the sound of engines. She turned round and saw a line of cars trying to cross over from the road. They went hooting through the village, and two vehicles tried to drive straight across the fields, but they got stuck in the sticky earth, wet with spring rain. A lorry turned on to the little path, backed off again and disappeared between the houses.

The path was getting narrower all the time, the stinging-nettles on either side almost meeting in the middle. They slashed Uli across the face, and finally the last trace of the path was lost in a cow pasture.

Uli was crying, and Janna too was close to tears. They dismounted and dropped their bikes. Now Janna regretted that they had not gone with the Jordans after all. Uli clung to her and she put her arms round him. What now? Back into the village, to find another way to the north? Then

they heard the sound of car engines on the far side of the embankment.

They picked up their bikes and clambered up the slope, Janna stumbling and slipping back. Uli reached the top ahead of her. It was almost three o'clock.

'Janna!' he shouted excitedly. 'There's a great big path down there – almost as good as a road!'

She pushed her bike over the edge of the embankment, saw Uli swing himself into the saddle on the other side of the rails, and heard a car driving past below. As she lifted her bicycle across the rails she was struck by the sight of the huge, flowering rape field below the embankment, which had been hidden from them before. How it blazed !

Then she saw Uli raise his arms in triumph and begin to free-wheel down the far side of the railway embankment.

'Look out!' she shouted. 'There are loose cinders, you can't ride –'

Uli somersaulted over his handlebars, on to the path, just as a car came racing along it. The bike fell; the teddy bear was flung from the luggage carrier and dropped at the foot of the slope.

'Uli!' screamed Janna.

The driver did not slow down. There was a dull thud, and the car rushed on, leaving a plume of dust behind it.

4

Rigid with horror, Janna stood on the top of the embankment. The dust cloud had settled, and down there lay Uli. Not far from him lay his teddy, and next to it the bicycle. Only the handlebars were bent, the front wheel was still spinning. Uli's head, half shrouded by the cap, lay strangely flattened, in a pool of blood which was visibly widening. Janna flung down her bike, skidded to the bottom of the slope and crouched beside him. She stroked his hand, which was still quite warm. She did not look round at the column of cars approaching from the village. This was Uli, her brother, no one should pass, and Janna stayed at his side, squatting in the middle of the path.

The first car parked, and a bearded man and a woman with red-blonde hair got out. Cars hooted furiously behind them, more and more horns joining in. The blonde woman raised Janna to her feet.

'You must be heading for Bad Hersfeld station too,' she said.

'Get in,' said the bearded man. 'We'll take you along. The children can squeeze up a bit.'

'Uli must come too,' said Janna.

'Uli?' asked the woman. 'You mean . . .'

Janna tilted her head back and stared wildly at the woman. 'He's my brother!' she screamed.

'There's nothing more you can do for him,' said the bearded man quietly.

The concert of car horns grew louder, and a voice shouted: 'Get out of the way – or we'll make you!'

'He's got to come,' said Janna. 'He's got to come.'

'Their nerves are going to snap!' cried the bearded man. He threw Uli's bike on to the bank, picked up Uli, walked a few steps into the rape field and laid him down. When he came back his shirt was covered with blood.

'No!' screamed Janna. 'No!'

She would have run into the rape field had the woman not held her fast. Janna tried to tear herself away and flailed her arms, until the bearded man slapped her face. Then her body went slack and she allowed herself to be carried, unresisting, to the car.

The three little girls in the back huddled nervously together.

'Quick!' cried the blonde woman. 'They'll attack us in a minute!'

Husband and wife threw themselves into the car, slammed the doors and drove off, followed by the column. They had stopped for barely three minutes. The two adults were silent and even the children were quiet. Janna was aware of nothing. It was not until the car stopped in a field by the river and the woman took the children out that she raised her eyes. There were houses near by. This must be Bad Hersfeld. She could hear thunder.

'You must come along with us,' the blonde woman told her. 'You'll be lost here.'

She put out her hand and Janna did what was expected of her, but she heard the others' voices as if through a thick wall.

The bearded man heaved a tightly packed rucksack out of the boot of the car and swung it on to his back. The second of the little girls, perhaps five years old, rode piggy-back on his shoulders. The blonde woman put the youngest child, who was sucking a dummy, into a sling which she hung round her neck. The eldest, about Uli's age, held her hand. The man shut the car doors and they began to run towards the town centre. Janna glanced back. She could see the great walls of the country estate through the trees. Across the countryside, scattered rape fields glowed under the dark sky.

'Hang on to Suzanne,' the woman told her, 'so that we don't lose each other.'

Janna took the eldest child's hand and put one foot in front of the other like a sleep-walker. Before them lay Bad Hersfeld.

'You're going to have to run a little now,' the bearded man told Suzanne. 'If we don't get to the station quickly the cloud will overtake us.'

'But we can get under cover if it rains,' panted the little girl.

The woman looked at her husband. 'You're right, Suzanne. But if we get wet we might catch cold.'

Her husband shook his head and for a moment he seemed to be about to contradict his wife. But he said only: 'Come on, Suzanne, try to run a little!'

Suzanne burst into tears, and the small girl on her father's shoulders howled loudly with her.

They trotted on.

'Do you know Bad Hersfeld?' asked the woman.

Janna nodded.

'She knows the way,' the blonde woman called to her husband, a few steps behind them. 'Thank God!' And turning to Janna, she ordered, 'To the station, do you hear? By the quickest route. They will take the Bad Hersfelders first in the evacuation, but we'll just say that we're from here. In all the confusion no one will be able to check, and with four children they won't ask much. Who has four children these days?'

'*Four*?' asked the bearded man.

'Don't you understand?' cried the woman. 'She's our eldest daughter!'

'Of course,' said the man.

'If you are asked,' the woman told Janna, 'we are the Heublers from Bad Hersfeld. And call us Mummy and Daddy.'

'No,' said Janna.

'It's not supposed to be true,' panted the woman, hurrying on. 'Only so that we get there faster. It's to *your* advantage too, after all. We don't want to take you away from your parents.'

Janna shook her head.

'All right then,' said the blonde woman impatiently, 'call him Bert and me Marianne. And the girls are Suzanne, Nina and Annika.'

Janna heard her voice as if from a great distance. She nodded absently.

'And you?' asked the woman. 'What's your name?'

'Uli,' said Janna.

'Uli? Ulrike? Uli Heubler, then, at least until we're on the train,' said Marianne Heubler.

Janna looked back. The thunder clouds stood black and threatening in the south, their edges almost reaching the sun. They lay right across the May-green landscape. The thunder rolled.

'Don't keep looking back!' ordered Bert Heubler. 'You are scaring the children.'

Janna obeyed and looked ahead again. In these outer areas of the town she did not know her way, either, but she could see the tower of the ruined church. Two years ago, when she was a new recruit to the Girl Guides, she had always used that tower as a reference point to find her way to their meeting-places. Past rows of small houses and gardens with summer-houses, straight across cultivated public gardens she walked, as if in a trance, towards the tower, aware of nothing that was going on around her. It was only when they reached the town centre that she began to feel the feverish tension everywhere. From all directions came the impatient hooting of car horns; the howling sirens of fire-engines and police cars swelled and were submerged again in the general tumult. There was a distant sound of shouting voices, solitary cries, screams. Military vehicles clattered through the streets.

The Heublers and Janna crossed the inner ring road, where the cars stood nose to tail, among them many buses, filled with children. None of the drivers took any notice of the zebra-crossings and pedestrians had to find their way between the cars. Suddenly the vehicles started moving again, though the lights were red. The Heublers, who were just crossing the road, were driven out of the way by threatening car horns. Janna screamed as a car bore down on her, and reached the pavement in one leap, pulling Suzanne

behind her. Suzanne missed her footing and scraped her knees on the asphalt.

'That too!' moaned her mother. 'Keep going, Suzanne, then it won't hurt so much.'

Everyone was clutching, tugging, hurrying. The closer Janna and the Heublers came to the station, the more people were running in the same direction as themselves, most of them heavily laden, some carrying nothing, many in their best clothes, others just as they had left kitchen or workshop. One woman in a fur coat and hat was staggering along on the other side of the road with two heavy cases; another, not far ahead of them, had forgotten to pull up the zip of her dress. A little girl carried a doll larger than herself, an old lady pressed a little basket containing a Pekinese to her bosom, a Turk carried an electric sewing-machine on his back. Suzanne stumbled over a parcel lying in the middle of the pavement, apparently belonging to no one. She fell on her bleeding knee, wept piteously and refused to be pulled any further. Janna took her on her own back.

Shutters rattled down, but most shops were already closed and police patrols were stalking the pedestrian area, besieged by people demanding information and seeking advice. But the men in uniform merely shrugged their shoulders.

'There are no buses,' said one. 'Nothing is moving on the roads any more. Get to the station. You might have a ghost of a chance there.'

Outside the station a huge crowd pushed and shoved. At the entrance people were screaming, cursing, hitting one another. Red Cross workers tried to force a way through the crowd, children yelled, a handful of policemen and railway officials tried to create some order, but no one obeyed their instructions, no one took any notice of them.

'It's going to rain!' Janna heard someone shouting. 'Then we'll get the lot!'

'The children,' a woman sobbed, 'think of the children! Let *them* on, at least!'

'We're never going to get through here,' said Bert in despair.

People were streaming in from all sides, massing at the main entrance, then spreading to right and left in search of a way through. The Heublers and Janna also struggled northwards along the station building. Something was going on in front of an iron-barred gate in a brick wall, built in a chequered pattern, which stood between two lesser buildings, dividing the platform from the station forecourt: a couple of men had disarmed two policemen, who had been using their rubber truncheons to beat back the crowd that threatened to force open the gate or climb the wall. The wall itself was no higher than a man could reach with upstretched arms, and the square holes of its chequered pattern offered a foothold.

Now the wall was unguarded, and with a savage roar of triumph the crowd stormed it, bearing the Heublers and Janna along with them. They fought their way to a place directly under the wall, where through the holes Janna could see the upper part of a passenger train beyond the waiting throng on the platform. Already people were sitting shoulder to shoulder on the carriage roofs. Two men wearing white shirts and ties caught Janna's eye. Their shirts were torn and filthy, and a woman further along had only one shoe left.

Then the train began to move slowly northwards. The people left on the platform shouted after it, shook their fists, ran behind it. One or two young men clung to open windows or door-handles.

Bert lifted Nina from his shoulders, pushed her into his wife's arms and dropped his rucksack. He climbed the wall and one child after another was pushed up to him. A kindly man on the other side helped them down. Janna, a good gymnast, climbed over too. Then Marianne tried to climb to the top of the wall, but she was stout and frightened and struggled helplessly, until her husband was forced to do something about the three terrified children clinging to each other in the crush on the far side of the wall.

'You keep an eye on the children,' he told Janna, thrusting his youngest daughter into her arms. He pushed all four against the side of the building next to the big wall, and impressed on Janna that they must stand with their backs pressed to it. Then he climbed back outside to help his wife.

Policemen were pushing their way through the crowd on the platform now, and posting themselves along the inside of the big wall. No more people were allowed to climb in from the station forecourt, and Janna could hear the cries of fear and shouts of protest from the crowd, who saw themselves cut off from their salvation. She even thought she heard Bert's voice. Little Annika in her arms screamed at the top of her voice, finding Janna's face strange and threatening. Nina clung to Suzanne, Suzanne to Janna. The crowd on the platform was becoming even more dense – there must be other gaps somewhere. Again and again, jutting rucksacks and broad backs bumped against Annika's head. Janna bowed her shoulders protectively over the child, and Nina and Suzanne squatted down, backs to the wall, their chins on their knees. A woman stumbled over the children and fell on Janna. Now Nina too was screaming with terror and calling for her

parents. Janna stood up, staring desperately towards the wall. When were the Heublers coming? Had the uniformed men stopped them climbing the wall?

A railway official was fighting his way through the mob quite close to Janna, and the waiting people besieged him with questions.

'The Intercity from Munich? Well, what do you think?' he told one woman. 'The track is blocked in Hunfeld, an Intercity drove into a rail car. Apart from that, they are drawing an exclusion ring round the entire Schweinfurt area. No more trains coming through there. It's all already badly infected.'

'What about us?' a few voices cried at once.

'They are sending trains here from Bebra,' he replied, trying to force his way forward. 'The next will be in at any minute.'

'I have a disabled husband,' a woman wailed, hanging on to the official's sleeve. 'I have pushed him as far as the station, but how am I to get him through this crowd?'

The man shrugged his shoulders and pulled away. 'You must keep calm,' he warned loudly, 'otherwise nothing will work!'

The latest news sped across the platform like the wind. Janna thought of her mother, and of Kai, who was not much older than Annika in her arms. Had they got out, or were they caught in the trap? And Jo?

Suddenly all heads turned to the north: a goods train, made up partly of flat trucks and partly of cattle trucks, rolled backwards into the station. The waiting people yelled and surged forward. Janna and the children were snatched from their wall to the spot where the yells from outside were loudest. As they were swept along towards the train she shouted towards the big wall: 'Come on,

please come now!' trying in vain to remember the surname of the three little girls. 'Please!'

She had just time to see that from the outside countless hands grasped the bars of the gate and shook it. From the inside the police resisted. The bars creaked, iron groaned on iron. Then Janna lost sight of the gate, and the children shrieked with fear as they were rushed forward.

'Hang on to me,' cried Janna. 'Don't let go! Mummy and Daddy are just coming.'

The first one she lost was Nina. Her scream of terror was drowned in the noise of the crowd. One last, shrill 'Suzanne!' was all they heard.

Then Suzanne let go, and disappeared at once among cases and legs and skirts. Janna squeezed Annika to her chest, shouted the children's names and tried to stand fast against the stream. She was struck and cursed and had difficulty in keeping her feet. From the gate came rhythmic cries: 'Heave! Heave!'

Janna had turned right round in her desperate efforts to see the blonde heads of the children, and that was how she saw the gate suddenly spring open, pushed from the outside. The crowd came surging through, overrunning everyone in its path. A whirlpool formed where Nina's last shout had come from. People hit out, crashed into each other, hauled themselves up, trod on those who were still on the ground. Janna succeeded in regaining the safety of the wall where she had been standing before, and there were the Heublers, rushing towards her. She was still panting for breath as she allowed Annika to slip into Bert's arms.

'And the others?' screamed Marianne. 'The others?'

Janna pointed dumbly to the chaos between gate and train. The mother of the little girls burst into tears, her face

distorted in a grimace. She gripped Janna by the shoulders and shook her.

'You –! You –!' she cried shrilly.

Janna began to laugh. She heard herself laughing – a shrill, jerky, crazy laugh. She tried to stop, but the laughter kept on coming. Horrified, she put her hands over her face and tore herself away, stumbling over cases, bags and children, fighting her way against the oncoming surge and through the gap in the wall, where a mass of people were still streaming in, out on to the station forecourt. Armoured cars were arriving, a helicopter clattered towards them and circled over the station. Somewhere in the town shots were fired.

Without a thought for where she was going, Janna rushed away, her desperate laughter swamped under the droning of the helicopter and the crash of thunder. She ran straight towards the darkness which now covered the whole sky, straight into the first drops of rain.

5

Instinctively, Janna had run south. No one was moving in that direction, but hundreds of fear-distorted faces were coming towards her. Scraps of paper whirled through the air, the trees bent groaning under the storm, and Janna's long, fair hair fluttered.

All she could see ahead of her was the rape field, towards whose blazing yellow under the dark stormcloud she was running now. Of course Uli would be crouching among the rape, feeling bewildered and abandoned, left out like the dog that had raced behind the car, like Coco in their grandparents' flat. He must be crying and calling for her, fearful of the black, poisonous sky. How could she have left him? When their mother had relied on her!

The storm broke over her, with lightning and huge claps of thunder, over the town, over the accidents and the motionless files of cars, over the refugees seeking, in panic fear, any hiding-place, an open house door, jutting eaves, to shield them from the contaminated rain.

Only Janna was not trying to protect herself. The rape

field, the rape field!

'Don't be frightened, Uli!' she shouted, as the rain soaked her to the skin. 'Don't be frightened, I'm coming!'

It was a severe storm, a cloudburst. At every step the water squelched into her shoes; her hair was sticking to her head, the raindrops were running into her eyes and mouth.

She reached a long bridge on which the cars facing her were at a standstill. The rain drummed on the car roofs, their windows were closed and misted inside, the faces of their passengers invisible. Janna was the only pedestrian on the bridge. One car hooted as she hurried by, someone wiped the glass from inside and made excited gestures to Janna, but she wanted to waste no time. She must reach the rape field, must reach Uli. The splash of yellow colour seemed to be moving further away and she tried to run faster. Without knowing it, she was approaching the motorway.

It was still raining so hard that she couldn't see what was written on the signposts, but that didn't worry her – after all, she could see the rape field ahead of her, but it never came any closer.

When the sky cleared again and the rain died down Janna could run no longer. Gasping for breath, her feet rubbed into open sores by her wet shoes, she began to shiver with cold. Someone shouted from a car: 'Turn round, child – you're running straight into it!'

Suddenly she could no longer see the rape field. She panicked: how could she have lost sight of it? Had she not been running towards it all the time? She tried to start running again, but could only manage a weary stumble. As she followed the curve of the motorway entrance she thought she was walking quite straight, but she was veering to and fro, coming dangerously close to the cars, which

were driving faster here. The shrill blasts of a horn made her leap aside. Then she was on the motorway, trotting along the hard shoulder, beside the guide marks, where no pedestrians usually dared to walk. No one told her to go away.

The carriageway leading eastwards, towards Eisenach, was also very busy, but not jamned. Janna didn't mind which way she went, as long as she could reach the rape field. When she spotted an emergency telephone beside the motorway she felt new hope. She lifted it and listened.

'Mum?' she called. 'Dad?'

But the voice that answered her was a strange one. She replaced the receiver, crouched down and leaned against the telegraph pole. Now and then a passing car sprayed her with water, but she was indifferent to them. She squatted with staring eyes, while puddles and channels left by the rain began to steam. A mist hung over the fields. Between racing clouds, scraps of blue sky began to appear.

Suddenly a brightly painted bus pulled up, its tyres squealing. It was driven on to the hard shoulder near Janna and stopped. A window was rolled down, and a young, freckle-faced woman leaned out.

'Hallo,' she called, 'want to come along?'

Janna did not answer; she didn't even lift her head. The freckled woman got out and walked towards her.

'You can't just go on sitting here, as wet as you are,' she said.

'No,' muttered Janna.

'Where do you want to go?'

'To the rape field.'

Freckle-face turned to the bus and beckoned the driver, a young man with long, blond hair.

'Look at this,' she said softly. 'Poor thing. Off her head.'

'She's just a child,' he said, leaning over Janna. 'Come with us. We'll drive you wherever you like.' He took her arm and raised her.

'Watch out,' warned Freckle-face. 'She was in that rain. She must be covered with the muck.'

'That doesn't really matter any more,' he said.

They hoisted Janna into the bus. Stale air came to meet her. She heard voices, saw two hands stretched towards her, saw feet between stacks of baggage. Then her eyes closed. The bus started up with a jerk; she tried to push away the hands that were pulling her jacket and wet T-shirt over her head. Then all her sensations blurred to only two: warmth and dryness. She fell asleep at once.

At some point the bus braked sharply, throwing bags and passengers forward. A kitbag fell on Janna, waking her abruptly. She thought she was at home in bed, then looked down and discovered she was dressed in jeans several sizes too big for her and an enormous T-shirt which must once have been sky-blue. Even her shoes and socks had disappeared. On her bare feet she was now wearing canvas shoes with rope soles, which she knew from holidays on the Costa Brava. They were light and comfortable, but did not wear well. She could feel sand under her bare toes.

'Well now,' said the freckled girl. 'Feeling a bit brighter?'

Janna looked around. There were six other young people in the bus, three men and three women. The bus was caught in a traffic jam.

'No good looking for your gear,' the freckled girl told her. 'We threw it out of the window. The stuff was contaminated through and through.'

People got out of the bus and conferred with the drivers

and passengers in other cars. Only Janna stayed where she was. Still half asleep, she listened to their discussions and realized what they were about. Up ahead a heavy lorry had driven through military barriers in order to clear the way for the vehicles lined up behind it. But the patrolling soldiers had held the drivers up with machine-guns.

'Murderers!' someone yelled.

'They're just as panic-stricken as we are,' said the blond man calmly. 'In any case, we've had some shooting, too. And I bet all this is just the beginning. No one else will come out alive through the security cordon round Schweinfurt. If they're not killed by the radioactivity, it'll be the military. They will stop badly contaminated people by force from mixing with people from outside.'

'You're making it up,' cried the freckled girl. 'They can't just shoot people down like rabbits –'

'When it comes to sheer survival,' said the blond man, 'the mask of civilization soon falls away.'

Janna was wide awake now. She could see her father facing the barrels of the machine-guns, could see him scream and drop. She pressed her hands to her mouth.

The man with the mane of hair held up his handkerchief. There was no wind. People were urging each other to hurry, having decided to turn around and reach northern Germany via Göttingen.

'You'll come too, of course?' said the freckled girl.

Janna thought of Helga in Hamburg. Her mother had wanted them to get there, by any means and with anyone. But now it was too late. She had run under the cloud of fall-out and been soaked by the contaminated rain. Uli was in the rape field, Dad was probably still in Schweinfurt, and her mother and Kai were somewhere in the disaster area, perhaps still waiting at Schweinfurt station. And

Almut, who was at last expecting the baby she and Reinhard had been wanting so long – all of them were somewhere in this neighbourhood. All the people she cared about.

'No,' she said. 'I'm staying here.'

'Are you tired of life?' asked the freckled girl.

Janna shrugged her shoulders, thanked them and got out. The Volkswagen bus turned and drove back on the opposite carriageway. Janna saw someone waving from the back window. Walking heavily, she left the road. The broad, hilly landscape was chequered with the yellow fields of rape.

Six o'clock: the sun was in the west, the shadows were growing longer. A lovely, peaceful atmosphere. It had not been raining here; to all appearances this district had been spared.

Janna dragged herself downhill to the next village, indifferent to its name. The inhabitants had not yet fled from here, but the streets were completely empty. The only noise came from a supermarket, where crowds of people were packing the boots of their cars to the brim with foodstuffs. This looked less like shopping than plundering. There was a lot of activity at a garage, too, a long queue of cars and plenty of swearing and shouting.

Janna asked for water, but the pump attendant yelled at her to get away. She walked on aimlessly, zigzagging along the street. At the end of the village her thirst had become unbearable. She stopped at a front door, meaning to ring the bell, but could not find it, so she beat on the door with her fists.

A curtain moved, and soon Janna heard shuffling footsteps. The door opened a crack and an elderly woman peered out.

'If it's only water . . .' she replied, visibly relieved, and nodded. Then she asked suspiciously, 'You're not from here, are you?'

'From Schlitz,' said Janna.

The woman did not know where Schlitz was, and Janna had to explain.

'Near Fulda?' cried the woman. 'They've been evacuated. Then you are – have you already got something?'

'Perhaps,' replied Janna dully.

The woman shut the door and shuffled away. After a time she returned without water and spoke through the closed door.

'It won't do,' she said. 'They say everyone from there is radioactive.' She cleared her throat and added: 'They have just announced that emergency hospitals are being set up, even round here. Go to the police and get them to take you there.'

The footsteps moved off, but Janna stayed where she was for a few minutes.

'The refugees are already starting – just like 1945,' she heard the woman saying. And a man's voice answered: 'Have a look and see if she's still at the door.'

Janna walked on, out of the village, keeping to the road, a dead straight avenue of limes. Once she stumbled over tram tracks that crossed the road. To right and left lay fields and gardens. The avenue narrowed, the road was suddenly running uphill. Janna felt a wave of nausea, choked, leaned against the trunk of a lime tree and was sick.

Blind to the beauty of a village whose red roofs had become visible down the valley, she reached the broad fields that lay at the end of the avenue. There the road and the fields ran steeply down to a river that flowed by,

languid and silent. On the far side, framing the remains of a long, ruined bridge, lay the village.

Janna leaned over the railing and was sick again. Then she dropped to the ground, curled up, and began to cry uncontrollably.

6

She could not remember who had found her by the roadside and brought her to this building. She had no memory at all of where she had been found. She could only dimly see the lime avenue stretching before her, and suddenly breaking off. By now she knew she was lying in a school hall. A few days ago lessons had still been going on here. One or two pupils' names were still on the board, in a schoolteacher's handwriting. Right across it was the bold outline of a gigantic face, smiling from ear to ear and sticking out a shapeless tongue.

A bright, cheerful room. One shelf displayed the results of the most recent craft lessons: round, polished stones of the kind you find in mountain streams, stuck together in the form of comic figures, manikins and animals with droll, painted faces. There were Asterixes and Obelixes and turnip witches and potato kings. Janna remembered making those stone figures herself once, in class four at her primary school. They had done it in the term leading up to Christmas: nice Christmas presents, a troll for Grandma Berta, a

policeman for Jo.

Now the pot plants were drying out on the window ledges. The furniture had been cleared away. Only the teacher's cupboard still stood beside the board, and in the corner a map-stand had been forgotten. Instead of tables and chairs, nineteen beds stood side by side. For the first two days there had only been mattresses on the floor.

From the adults' conversation Janna knew that this school building had been turned into one of the many emergency hospitals which had been set up in haste after the disaster, throughout the evacuated area. She was lying in the school-children's hall with another twenty-five sick or injured children, carried here from all over the area. Not every child had a bed to itself. The youngest children and brothers and sisters lay two to a bed. Janna had a place under the window. She had grown thin, and was shocked every time she looked in the glass. Who was this looking out at her? Sunken eyes, pointed chin, pale skin, dull, tangled hair. In the voluminous nightdress she had been given to wear, she looked like a ghost.

She didn't want anything to eat; even the sight of food made her feel sick. But she drank enormous quantities of water and tea and occasionally some soup. They held her head up and put the mug to her cracked lips.

Usually she stared emptily at the ceiling or across at the stone figures. When someone spoke to her she closed her eyes, turned her head away and answered no questions, not even the constantly repeated ones: what was her name, where did she come from? The doctor had to lift her eyelids open when he examined her. 'Shock', he called it. He would not discharge her, she must be kept under observation, but when he or his colleague visited the hall once a day he had scarcely a glance for her. Janna neither

had diarrhoea, nor was she being sick. She had no bleeding and was not one of those who had been wounded or injured. She was relatively well.

In the hectic conditions at the emergency hospital no one had time to comfort her. She was one of the oldest children in the hall and had to take second place. She was not even given a fresh nightdress; they were only for children who needed them more urgently.

'Disgraceful!' complained one of the nurses.

'It's a question of supplies,' the doctor explained, 'of organization. The accident just blew their bungling disaster measures apart. Nothing was ready, nothing worked, only the big-wigs cleared out as fast as possible!'

Janna tried to remember: after Chernobyl, had her mum not made inquiries with the authorities in a number of towns as to the precautions they were taking for the population in the event of a doomsday scenario? Hadn't she discovered that there were apparently very few shelters, or none, and that the town clinics would not accept any patients with radiation sickness, because they were not equipped to do so? Hadn't Mum tried in vain to be allowed to see the disaster precautions? The plans were not meant for the public, she had been told. Dad and Mum had been furious, but most of the people they had spoken to about it had merely shrugged their shoulders.

The hall stank. Many of the children were being sick, others had diarrhoea and everything just ran down their legs, because there were queues for the lavatories and not enough staff to hurry over with bedpans or sick-bowls in response to every call.

There was ceaseless coming and going; new cases were delivered, critical cases separated. Many children had been brought in with their parents, but the adults had their beds

in other halls and came to visit their children. Sometimes, when Janna was lying sleepless at night, she saw fathers and mothers creep in to see their children and make sure they were still alive.

In the bed beside Janna's was a Turkish girl called Aissa, who had lived in Fulda. Janna listened while she was being questioned by a woman from the Red Cross. Aissa had lost sight of her parents in the confusion of evacuation, and had wandered round the almost empty town until she had been picked up by a police patrol. Then she had stayed in a transit camp, where she had vomited all day long. The camp was already overcrowded, which was why she had been brought here.

Janna did not answer when Aissa asked her name. The Turkish girl cried. She cried a lot, especially at night.

There were no silent nights: over and over again, Janna heard children sobbing, calling for their parents, or starting up with shrieks of fear from nightmares. Next door, in the babies' hall, the miserable crying never stopped, even by day.

Two mothers and one father had moved right in to the schoolchildren's hall because there was a staff shortage. They were waiting from day to day for nurses from the unaffected areas of Germany. Janna heard the adults talking about it; they obviously felt betrayed and abandoned. Janna knew all about it. She only needed to think of the woman behind the crack in the door, somewhere at the beginning of some lime tree avenue or other. But Lara, a pale nine-year-old, had her mother with her, and Florian, a boy of Uli's age, whose brown curls were coming out in tufts, was being cared for by his parents. The three adults seemed to have got off lightly, and whenever possible they looked after the other children as well. Florian's father

actually told Janna: 'There's not much wrong with you, you can look after yourself,' but Florian's mother sometimes sat with her and stroked her hair, which made Janna cry.

When she dragged herself along the corridor to the lavatory she listened to the conversations of patients and nurses. Soon she realized that the disaster must have been far greater than at Chernobyl. They talked of thousands dead, and of cattle dying in the stables and meadows, but nobody knew the details, everyone was only guessing. Someone said that the pressure vessel of the reactor had burst. There was a persistent rumour that the situation was still not under control, that the ruins were still emitting radiation.

'You must hurry up and get better,' Janna heard one of the nurses telling Aissa. 'Otherwise you will be the last Turk in Germany. Your compatriots are leaving in shoals.'

'Even the asylum-seekers,' said a cleaning woman. 'All sorts of foreigners. And crowds of Germans, too.'

Again and again the conversation returned to the cloud, which was said to be blown to and fro according to the direction of the wind, spreading panic in the endangered areas at home and abroad.

'A cloud from hell!' said the cleaning woman, as she swabbed down the hall. 'It does all sorts, not just what the weathermen say. When the wind's in the west it goes north . . .'

From the women who distributed the food, Janna heard that food prices were shooting up day by day. The population in the unaffected areas of the country had stormed the supermarkets to stock up with uncontaminated foodstuffs.

'What about school?' asked Lara. 'Shall I have to catch up with what the others are doing now?'

'No,' said Lara's mother. 'The others are not going to school now either. You're not missing anything.'

Once she heard two nurses talking about the restricted zones. After Janna had been listening for a time she understood that there were apparently three restricted zones. Restricted zone one covered the immediate neighbourhood of the Grafenrheinfeld reactor. There, it was said, no one had survived. The terrain had become uninhabitable for an unforeseeable period. Zone two, adjoining it, was still heavily contaminated and would remain restricted for years. Only the refugees from zone three could hope to be allowed to return home in a few months' time.

Schlitz must be in zone three. Janna tried to imagine how long a few months would last, and what a homecoming without her family would be like. The thoughts hurt her and she pushed them away. Since she had been lying in Herleshausen she had tried not to think of Dad and Mum and Kai, and above all, not to think of Uli. They had gone. And she was alone.

Janna had been in Herleshausen emergency hospital for a few days, she did not know exactly how many, when a distinguished visitor was announced: the Minister for the Interior was touring the disaster area and was going to be visiting this emergency hospital.

Lara's mother was very excited.

'We must air the place,' she cried, 'and change the bedding!'

She ran out into the passage, but came back quite soon, looking depressed.

'Nothing is working,' she moaned. 'We have mountains of dirty linen. The sheets are contaminated, they say, no

one dares to use them, and there's no new laundry coming in . . .'

She flung open the windows, though it was a very cool day, sat down beside her daughter, took a comb from under the mattress and hastily began to comb Lara's hair. Janna saw how she tried to hide from the child the hair pulled out by the comb and push it furtively under the mattress, which Lara was too weak to lift.

'He ought to be sent into the ruins!' cried Florian's father. '*That* would be justice!'

'You would have to send a lot of politicians there,' said Florian's mother. 'The entire death zone round Grafenrheinfeld would not be big enough for everyone who is guilty – politicians or not. But we can't complain. We live in a democracy, and we get the politicians we deserve.'

'I'll be getting hold of one of them today!' cried her husband.

His wife made a tired gesture of rejection.

Janna tried to imagine the Minister for the Interior. She saw him as a cheerful man with the corners of his mouth ironically pulled down. This was the picture she had from television and newspaper photographs. Her parents had often talked about him.

'I shall ask him,' Florian's father began again, 'ask him if his conscience is clear.'

'His people won't let it come to that,' said Florian's mother. 'And if they do, he won't be stuck for an answer.'

Her husband was silent.

'I wonder whether people like that have any conscience at all,' said his wife.

'Please,' said Lara's mother, turning to Florian's father, 'don't make a scene.'

Florian's father punched the bedpan he was taking to his

son and it rang like a gong. Then he pushed it gently under Florian and leaned over the boy, who had burst into tears in fright at the angry exchange of words.

Round about lunchtime a helicopter clattered over the school, flying low. A little later, police cars and a jeep drove on to the forecourt. Janna had got up and was looking out of the window. She recognized the Minister among the men who were getting out. He was not smiling today. He stood between policemen and his escort, men in civilian clothes, wearing some kind of overalls. All men. Perhaps they were his colleagues, perhaps representatives of the district. One of the doctors greeted the Minister gravely, almost grimly, and then the little crowd disappeared from Janna's sight.

She tried to move over to the shelf with the stone figures. Five, six steps – what a long way it was! Then she held on to the shelf with one hand and grasped at the nearest stone figure.

'What are you up to, you over there?' cried Lara's mother. 'Get back to bed!'

But Janna stayed by the shelf. She felt weak; sweat was breaking out on her body. She looked expectantly towards Florian's father, who was standing rigidly between the beds. The hall had fallen silent as everyone listened. The sounds from the babies next door were now clearly audible.

Outside in the passage there were loud footsteps and voices. Janna stared at the door, but when it opened she could see neither the Minister nor his escort. The open door obstructed her vision.

'This is the schoolchildren's hall for the milder cases,' she heard the doctor saying. 'About half of these children have a real chance of surviving.'

The Minister greeted the patients, but only Lara's mother and one or two of the children answered shyly. Janna looked across again at Florian's father, but he was still silent.

'You are right, doctor,' she heard the Minister say. 'Bad, conditions here, bad. I shall see to it at once that the supplies for your hospital receive the highest priority. Highest priority. Everything will soon be back to normal.'

Janna raised the hand holding the stone figure. Florian's father – why didn't he speak? But the hall door was already closing; the Minister must be in a hurry. The stone figure crashed against the doorpost and shattered on the floor.

'What about Uli?' shouted Janna. 'How will he get back to normal? And my parents and Kai and Jo?'

The children stared at her in amazement. Up to now she had always been so quiet.

'Have you gone mad?' cried Lara's mother.

'And Almut and her baby?' shouted Janna.

A noise broke out in the passage, where patients from other rooms seemed to be gathering. A little girl, lying on the far side of Aissa, called for her mother.

'And me? And me?' cried Janna. 'And those, over there? How can they ever be normal again?'

'Be quiet!' cried Lara's mother. 'And get back to bed this instant!'

But Janna was unable to let go of the shelf. The room swam before her eyes. The noise in the corridor increased: threats, a chorus of voices, noisy crying, and now and then the Minister's voice. There was the sound of broken glass and a door slammed. Then the noise died away. One or two children climbed out of their beds and peered through a crack in the door.

'He's gone,' they reported, 'and the swing doors are broken, and everyone is going back to their rooms.'

'My dear child,' Florian's mother said to Janna as she led her back to her bed. 'You're quite right. But that won't help, either.'

Florian's father was sitting on the side of his son's bed, his head in his hands.

'She's got plenty of courage,' Florian's mother told him.

'Courage?' cried Aissa. 'That was *rage*!'

7

Since the Minister's visit Janna was eating again, in fact she was positively famished. And she had recovered hope. Every time the door opened she looked expectantly across at it. Why should her parents be dead, why should Kai and Jo be dead? Perhaps they had got out in time, had caught the last train or a bus which had been able to leave the town on a road that was not jammed. And one day Mum would be standing in the doorway, with Kai in her arms, laughing! And Dad behind her, with outstretched arms!

She was talking, too, especially to Aissa. She told her her name and talked to her about Uli and about Almut's pregnancy. And Aissa told her that she had a German boyfriend who was fifteen and that her parents had forbidden her to see him.

'But I'm going to see him all the same!' she insisted.

But she spoke often and tenderly about her parents and brothers and sisters, with tears in her eyes.

Two days after the Minister's visit, lorries drove in and

were unloaded. There was clean linen and the mountains of dirty laundry were taken away. Janna and Aissa were given fresh nightdresses; the nurses brought bottles and packages into the hall and stacked the contents in the teacher's cupboard and on the shelf. The children got the stone figures out of the waste-paper basket and played with them.

New nursing staff were arriving, too: two trained nurses and two civilian auxiliaries. One male nurse from Cologne was allocated to the two children's rooms. They called him Uncle and he didn't mind. He was a talkative chap who brought them plenty of news from outside.

'Eighteen thousand dead,' he said, as he fed one of the children, 'and more every day. The day before yesterday they announced a national emergency.'

It was not only the children who heard him: adult patients crowded to the door of the hall to listen as well.

'They have evacuated as far as Coburg, Bayreuth and Erlangen,' Uncle reported. 'Now they are evacuating the Würzburg area as well, because there's a north wind coming. And the filthy radiation still won't stop! They put in one specialist group after another, and for bugger-all. Excuse me, but it's true!'

He was on his way out with a bedpan but the children called him back.

'Tell us more, Uncle!'

'In the first few days half Europe locked themselves in their cellars,' he said, waving the bedpan. 'Even the French. In Cologne, practically nothing moved on the streets, in fact only people who were close to starvation came creeping out of their holes. Offices, factories, shops, schools – all shut. There was no hope anywhere. Even the old people, who generally know exactly what's going on, had nothing

to say. My sister almost went mad: two children, three and five, and spending their days in the cellar! In the end she simply walloped them. But even when we were able to get out again it wasn't much better. Everything was contaminated and irradiated, from letting the children out! They're saying that all over central Europe the topsoil will have to be moved and taken away. Really! And what's to go on the table? People have almost killed each other for old tins, and when fresh meat came in from the Argentine there were queues right round the block. Fresh food on the table from Germany? Forget it. My family always take their shoes off outside the front door now, but what's to become of our garden? They simply can't begin to imagine. When it rains Mother starts crying, and Father killed our two dogs on the second day although he was so fond of them. They would have needed to go out. And who's got several hundredweight of dog food in the house? At first my father wanted to have them put to sleep but no, none of the vets wanted to come out and my father naturally didn't dare to go out either. So he killed them with an axe. My mother cried when she heard the whining. The whole of the washroom was covered with blood.'

Florian began to cry.

'And what's it like now?' asked Lara's mother. 'Have things begun to get back to normal?'

'Normal!' said Uncle. 'What does normal mean? We'll never be normal here again, if you see what I mean. My father, for instance: he's already lost his job. International export-import, it used to be. No country lets our lorries cross the border. There's not much moving, even at the airports, because no one wants to come in. There's a lot wanting to get out, but nobody wants them, either. That's how it is, ladies and gentlemen. That's it. The end. Amen.'

There were now two television sets in the hospital as well: one of them brought by the new nurse. That was kept in the staff office, but the other had simply been delivered. It was generally agreed that it should be moved to each room in turn. All the people who could stand on their own feet crowded into whichever room the television was in each day. That meant trouble with the doctors and nurses, and in the end the new nursing sister put her set on a little table in the passage during the day, and after his first weekend leave Uncle brought his old black and white set back with him.

'For you,' he said, clearing the shelf and lifting his set on to it.

From now on all the children's beds were positioned so that they could see the screen, but it was not showing the lively children's programmes they had known. It was showing almost exclusively news, reports from the disaster areas, missing persons bulletins, expert analyses – and every hour on the hour there was information on the weather situation, the wind direction and the latest radiation levels, accompanied by solemn music.

Janna followed breathlessly a report on the accommodation of the millions of evacuees and refugees outside the disaster zones. The homeless were distributed throughout the still habitable areas of Germany, but not without stern measures: all living space had been registered and was now compulsorily requisitioned. Aissa laughed when they showed the furious owner of a mansion who did not want anyone from the disaster area in her house, especially with three children! But she had to take them.

When the main news began, most of the children turned away. Uncle wanted to switch off, but Janna and Aissa asked to be allowed to see the programme.

They saw huge demonstrations, at which the final closure of all European nuclear power stations and the resignation of the German government were demanded. After one of the demonstrations there had been six dead. Anger had been directed principally against the Minister for the Interior.

'He's sticking to his armchair,' said Uncle, who happened to be passing.

Then there were reports on international relief funds, said to be the largest since the Second World War. Aissa yawned. Janna thought of the collection box she had gone round shaking at one of the school events for the starving in Africa. She too felt exhausted – she had learned so much that was new, so much that was incredible that day.

But with the final missing persons bulletins both girls were suddenly wide awake: parents were seeking their children, children their parents, old people were missing. Photographs of unidentified corpses appeared on the screen, there was talk of a missing persons register and a list of the dead. An announcer read out names and addresses.

'Those registers', Uncle explained, 'are compiled by the Red Cross. If you would like to write down the names of your family for me I will make inquiries. OK?'

They thought he was great.

'Almost like my boyfriend,' said Aissa.

Janna thought about the boys in her class. Quite nice types, but there was not one of them she would have fallen for. Not even Elmar, who could do everything and knew everything. She had always imagined her boyfriend being like Reinhard, Almut's husband, only younger.

She and Aissa went on whispering to each other for a long time, even after the centre light had been switched off. Neither of them could sleep. Janna thought about the

pictures of the dead. If Dad and Mum and Kai and Jo were really dead – did they look like that?

Eighteen thousand dead, hundreds of thousands of radiation victims, contaminated areas, whole regions which would be uninhabitable for years, forbidden land, sealed off and encircled with barbed wire – Janna tried in vain to imagine it all.

In the next few days she did not miss a single news bulletin. She wanted to know every detail.

'Do you know what the women were saying in the toilets?' whispered Aissa. 'They say that for a few kilometres round the nuclear power station they shot everyone who was trying to get away. Because they were already completely contaminated. Do you believe that?'

'No,' said Janna, 'I don't believe that kind of thing could happen here.'

Suddenly Aissa was staring at the door, her eyes wide. She shouted something in Turkish and Janna saw her hurl herself at a thin man with dark hair and a moustache. He caught her, lifted her up and hugged her to him.

Aissa's father had come from Wangerooge, where the family had taken refuge. Arms clasped round each other, they sat side by side on Aissa's bed and told their stories with many gestures. Janna did not understand a word. And all the time, both father and daughter were crying. They were so noisy! Janna felt lonely. She turned her face to the wall. There would be a strange child in the next bed soon.

But that evening Aissa's father had to leave without her. The doctor would not discharge her yet.

'In a fortnight, he said,' she sobbed, after going as far as the door with her father. 'Now we have to put off the journey home! Just because of me!'

'Home?' asked Janna. 'To Turkey? What about your boyfriend?'

Aissa did not answer.

Janna now knew that she had been in this hospital for two weeks and two days.

'If you are free from serious illness for another week, you will probably have got over it,' said the doctor. 'You've come out of it well. One week, and then I can discharge you.'

'Discharge me where?' she asked, thinking of Schlitz. But she would not be allowed to go there, nor to Bad Kissingen, where Almut and Reinhard lived.

The woman from the Red Cross who filled out the forms for the missing persons service and therefore questioned with endless patience every child staying in the hospital without parents, came back to Janna's bed.

'Of course, we know your name now,' she said, 'but your parents have not yet been registered. I have made inquiries.'

Janna looked at her.

'They can only be alive or dead,' she said.

'Certainly,' said the woman, 'but only a fraction of the evacuees are registered as missing persons. It doesn't go that fast. And by no means all those who have died are on the death list yet. You must be patient. New names come on to the missing persons register every day. You must have relations in other places as well, not only in the contaminated area?'

Helga in Hamburg, but to have to go to her without knowing what had happened here to her parents and Kai and Jo – no, Janna did not even want to think about it.

'I haven't got the address book any more,' she answered.

'It's with my bike on the embankment at the village of Asbach.'

What she did not say was that she knew Helga's address by heart. She did not want to be sent to Helga, she did not even want to ring her up, because, knowing Helga as she did, she would come and fetch her straight away and decide everything for her until her parents were able to take her back again. And if they were no longer alive she would have to stay with Helga, who lived alone – who always wanted to set other people an example.

No, Janna had other plans. She was going to slip out of the hospital and go in search of her parents and Kai and Jo. She had once read a story from the Second World War in which a girl had gone in search of her scattered family and after a long, wandering journey she had actually found them and everything had ended well. Janna had cried when she read it.

She would wait only a few more days. Perhaps their names would come up on the missing persons register soon? Or Dad and Mum themselves might arrive?

'Did you ask the Red Cross about my family, Uncle?' she called to the nurse.

'At the weekend,' he promised. 'I'll have time then.'

She often looked out of the window now. After all, Mum or Dad might . . . She saw relations arriving with expectant faces, and leaving again, some of them relieved, some downcast. She saw patients brought in and coffins carried out, and then she saw the woman from the Red Cross again. Janna signalled to her when she came into the hall.

'Have you found out anything about my parents?' she cried.

But the Red Cross woman behaved as if she had neither

seen nor heard her. She went over to the doctor, who was examining a child in another corner of the hall, and spoke to him. Janna saw her glance across at her for one second. Then the woman came over to her bed.

'No news,' she said sadly. 'We shall have to go on waiting.'

'Poor Janna,' said Aissa.

Janna felt a dull rage.

On Monday morning Uncle arrived punctually in the hall, but there was something different about him.

'Did you hear anything?' cried Janna.

No. He had not even telephoned the Red Cross. He had been at a demo on the French frontier. Janna knew all about it: on Sunday evening there had been a report of this demonstration against the French energy policy on television. There had been a great deal of violence and the French army had even been called out. Six Germans and two Frenchmen had lost their lives.

'My parents were at the demo too,' reported Uncle, shaking his head. 'Right in the midst of it! Just imagine – my old Ma and Pa!'

He promised Janna that he would telephone the Red Cross at the very next opportunity.

She no longer stayed in bed all day. She helped the nurses with Aissa. She played with the children and fed them if they were too weak to lift the spoons to their mouths themselves. She told stories and sang songs that she had learned from Grandma Berta. And she comforted them.

'Janna, Janna!' the children called, and she came, although she realized how weak she still was. Now and then she dropped exhausted on to her bed, but as soon as a child

called for her she got up again. Everyone should see that she didn't belong in hospital any more.

Aissa wanted to steal away too. The entire escape plan had been worked out and discussed in every detail. It was only Uncle who could not be relied on. He would drive off to the laundry or to the big bakery, and every time he came back without having achieved anything. The first time he said he had forgotten to ring up, and on the second journey he said he had had no time. Then it seemed to Janna and Aissa that he avoided them as often as he could.

During those days some of the children in the hall died – one of a sudden lung inflammation against which her body had no defences, another from a simple angina, while a third, Florian, simply faded away within a few days. He died so unexpectedly that his mother kept on stammering: 'But it must be a mistake –' until his father yelled at her: 'Oh, for God's sake, will you finally be quiet!'

When they carried the child out his father cried. Janna watched him through the window and a verse came into her head which Mum had made up after Chernobyl and carried around on a banner at the demonstrations:

Eenie meenie minie mo,
To Chernobyl you must go.
Millirem and becquerel,
Little children don't feel well.
Radiation's all about –
And now
You're
Out!

Two or three little boys were standing on the other side of the playground, staring across at them. The children of

Herleshausen never came to the windows or door of their school. They would peer shyly out from a place of safety, prepared to run at any moment. They must have been told that the school was contaminated.

That same evening Aissa developed a high temperature, and the next morning Janna too completely lost her appetite. She felt listless and feverish and she had diarrhoea. Her glands were swollen and painful. The doctor bent over her and stroked her head. Strands of her blonde hair caught between his fingers. He nodded, troubled. So it wasn't over.

There was no more talk of escaping. Janna watched with longing as Lara was discharged. Relations came to fetch mother and daughter. They were lucky.

Most of the other children in the hall were in the same state as Aissa and Janna: after days of apparent good health they were more sick than before. Tormented with a high temperature and diarrhoea, they whimpered to themselves or dozed apathetically. One morning Aissa began to cry hysterically. She had combed her luxuriant black hair, and thick strands had come out in the comb. Bald patches appeared on her head. When Janna put a comforting arm round her she struck out. The other children stared across at them in amazement and felt their own heads furtively.

'It doesn't hurt, dear,' the nurse tried to console her. 'And it will grow again later.'

Janna herself felt the fear of baldness creeping over her – a bald-headed girl did not arouse sympathy, it just sounded comic. She imagined what it must be like to be laughed at, and decided not to comb her hair any more.

Indifferently she put up with the doctors' examinations and saw them shrug their shoulders helplessly.

'All these cases should be in a special clinic,' she heard one of the doctors tell a nurse.

'But there are tens of thousands of them,' said the nurse.

'Tens of thousands?' retorted the doctor. 'Hundreds of thousands! Not counting the ones who will be getting it in a year or two.'

He lowered his voice and pointed to Aissa and Janna. Janna watched him through half-closed eyes. 'Lovely future. When I think that –'

He broke off, fell silent and walked on, his face weary.

Aissa tossed and turned in her bed, groaning. Finally she crouched on her knees with her back to the pillow, bending forward until her head touched the mattress.

'What are you doing?' cried Janna.

'I'm praying,' sobbed Aissa, wiping the sweat off her face.

'Do you think it helps?' asked Janna.

But Aissa did not answer. Her eyes closed, she straightened and bent, up – down, up – down, until Janna's eyelids closed.

Gravely ill children were carried out, and new arrivals were put in their beds before they had cooled. Janna had barely the strength to wave to those who had to go. Of her old familiar neighbours only Aissa remained, and she would talk about nothing but her hair. Janna had to look at the back of Aissa's head and describe it, but she was concerned about her own hair too. She asked Aissa to comb it very cautiously, and then there were outbursts of anger and tears when Aissa suddenly caught a great bunch of hair in the comb.

Janna's longing for Mum and Dad grew and grew. If only they were sitting on her bed, or at least one of them, and

stroking her hair – no, not her hair! – or just looking lovingly at her, then – yes, she knew for sure, then she would get well at once, she would be able to get up and leave.

'Dear God,' she prayed, 'let them be alive and come!' And she added: 'Otherwise you don't exist.'

She was putting him to the test, setting conditions. She would count to fifty, giving God that much time to produce her parents. At forty-three the door opened and Janna lifted her head. But it was only Uncle with the thermometers.

'Uncle,' she asked dully, 'have you asked yet?'

'Yes,' he said, trying to avoid her eyes. 'They are not on the registers. Not yet.'

'Not even my grandmother?' she asked helplessly.

He shook his head. 'Heaven knows where they are,' he said. 'At least everything is still possible for the time being. You just get well and then we'll see.'

'I think you're only trying to spare me,' she said.

Uncle dropped one of his thermometers and had to gather up the splinters. Later, when he had taken all the temperatures, he came to Janna's bed and stroked her head.

'Not my hair,' she said in horror. 'You only have to come close and it falls out.'

She took his hand, put it over her eyes and held on to it until he was called away.

That evening Janna took an interest in the news again, but she no longer understood what it really meant. There was talk of a change of government, there were farewells, greetings and promises. In the government quarter in Bonn many windows had been broken: unauthorized demonstrations, protesters, people from the disaster area. The reporter mentioned a figure of fifty thousand. There were

columns of street-sweepers, sweeping up the fragments. Then, in close-up, two dead deer in the grass: in North and East Bavaria wild animals were dying in their thousands, said the announcer.

Dead deer in the grass. Janna could not help thinking of Uli. She closed her eyes and turned her head away.

Aissa asked Uncle to get her a headscarf. Then Janna wanted a cap. Next morning he arrived with a whole bundle of caps which he had collected from house to house, children's caps, some of them darned, shabby and faded. But the children snatched at them. With a little bow he handed Aissa a headscarf which she happily tied over her head, pulling one last curl down on her forehead.

'Would you still notice?' she asked.

Janna shook her head. She tried on the cap. A cap in bed? She pushed it under the pillow.

When she went to the lavatory, walking slowly, keeping close to the wall, she met Uncle in the passage. He grinned at her and said: 'Has anyone told you that you have a real pixie face?'

She leaned against the wall, suppressing the desire to be sick.

'I haven't got a pixie face,' she said, 'whatever that may be. I haven't got a face like anyone's. Especially not like my parents and grandparents.'

'I don't know any other way to put it,' said Uncle awkwardly.

'Take a good look at me,' she said, 'and see how I look with hair: in a few days I shall be bald.'

'Appearances,' he said.

'Do you think a boy would be able to fall in love with a bald-headed girl?' she asked.

He looked at her, raised his eyes, stared at a diagram on

the wall showing the circulation of water, and said thoughtfully: 'Hair is unimportant. If anyone thinks otherwise, you're too good for him.'

He nodded to her and moved on. She watched him go and tried to swallow back her tears. When she was back in the room later on she told Aissa what Uncle had said.

'It's different for us,' said Aissa darkly.

'They say it grows again,' said Janna. 'But I don't believe it. I don't believe anything any more.'

'Not anything?' asked Aissa. 'Not even that your parents are still alive?'

Janna thought about it.

'Yes,' she said. 'I believe I do believe that.'

Next morning Janna smiled across at Uncle, who grinned back distractedly.

'What can one say!' he called. 'Now the French are rioting round their own atomic piles! And their government is swearing blind that their nuclear reactors are the safest in the world. What happened in Grafenrheinfeld could *never* happen to them!'

'Haven't I heard that before?' said the doctor.

Uncle leaned over Janna. 'And what have you to say to this racket the French are making?' he asked.

'Nothing,' she said, and turned her face to the wall.

She had a high temperature and the diarrhoea would not go away. Her bedlinen was covered with hair. Whole bunches of hair. For a few days she did not comb it at all, but one day Aissa grabbed her by the hair and got a handful of loose strands. A big bald patch was left on Janna's head.

'There you are,' said Aissa, and laughed.

Janna struck her in the face. She asked the nurse for a

comb and combed long and furiously: after that she was bald, but for a few straggly hairs above her ears. She dragged the cap out from under the pillow and put it on.

Uncle had news for her. '*You* are on the missing persons register now – with your address here!'

This news confused Janna altogether. She had never thought of the possibility of being on the register herself.

'Your relations will turn up soon now,' said Uncle.

Janna started to think hard. If her parents and Jo were still alive they would certainly be asking for her at the Red Cross missing persons service. It might still be true that one day, perhaps even today or tomorrow, the door would open and Mum or Dad . . .

Aissa was trying to re-tie the scarf that had slipped off her head, but she was too weak. Sweat broke out on her face.

'Help me,' she begged.

Janna pretended not to hear her. Since Aissa had grabbed her hair she no longer talked to her. She pulled the cap further over her ears and arranged herself so that she could keep an eye on the door.

8

Four days later Janna, half asleep, was aware of someone bending over her.

'Janna,' said a woman's voice softly, and a cool hand touched her arm.

Janna started and opened her eyes wide, but it was none of the people she had been expecting. It was Helga, Helga from Hamburg, Dad's sister.

'So here you are,' said Helga. 'Why did you get on the missing persons register so late? I thought you were with your parents –'

'What do you mean?' said Janna sharply. 'What's happened to them?'

Helga looked at her with concern: 'Then you don't know –?'

Janna shook her head. Her face was distorted, her eyes filled with tears. Then she said defiantly: 'How do you know? They're not on the list –'

Helga took her hands and nodded. 'They are,' she said. 'They are on the death list, if that is what you mean.'

'Kai, too?' asked Janna, tonelessly.

'Yes.'

'And Jo?'

'And Jo.'

Then Janna began to scream. She screamed loudly and shrilly. The children in the hall stared at her aghast, and one or two of the little ones started to scream as well. Uncle came rushing into the hall, followed by a nurse. They pushed Helga aside and bent over Janna, who struck out at them.

'Liars!' she screamed, tore off her cap and flung it into Uncle's face. He held Janna fast until the nurse had given her an injection. Her screams died away, her eyelids closed. She went on groaning for a little while and then fell silent.

'I meant well,' said Uncle. 'As ill as you are –'

He put the cap on her bed. She brushed it away.

Uncle shrugged his shoulders helplessly and let it fall. When someone called him from the corridor he disappeared with relief. Helga sat down on the edge of the bed, but Janna kept her eyes closed, and after a time she fell asleep.

When, hours later, she woke up again, Helga was no longer there. It was night-time, and a dim emergency light shone in the corner. One window was slightly open. The moon was shining outside, casting its light on the wall. There was a smell of young leaves and fresh earth. Janna thought of her parents, for whom she had longed so greatly. She remembered a day when they had been walking in the mountains and she had been swinging to and fro in a sling-chair between Dad and Mum in time with her parents' steps. They had played 'Angel, fly!' with her and swung her high in the air, but she had not been afraid.

Between her parents nothing could happen to her. 'Again! Do it again!' she shouted.

Later on, her parents had carried Uli and Kai and swung them in just the same way, and the sling-seat had begun to look quite shabby. On her last visit Almut had taken it away to make a new one in the same pattern. You couldn't buy one like that. Jo had designed it.

Almut, if she was still living, would not need to return the old seat. There was an end of swinging for them, the Meineckes, and no angel would ever fly again.

Janna thought of Kai, a chubby little child, with dimples in his cheeks and hands. He had even had a dimple in his chin. She could not imagine him dead. He had always been such a lively child, a 'get up and go boy', as Grandma Berta said. And Jo had told Mum once, 'You could leave that one in the garden all night – next morning he would be sitting at the front door, covered with snow, and would not even sneeze.'

Jo – the faint scent of fennel, the dark grey curly hair, the centre parting, the brown eyes, the down on her upper lip, the dimple in her chin which Kai had inherited from her. Jo, who would move every three or four years from one flat to another, and each time throw out a stack of 'garbage'.

'I like travelling light,' Janna had often heard her say, and: 'Oh no, have I been living in Jakoby Street for three years? It's high time for me to move, otherwise I'll get stuck here.'

The moonlight moved slowly along the wall of the room. Aissa groaned. Janna stretched her arm across and felt around until she found Aissa's hand, which was very hot. She called the nurse. The door to the passage was open and a strange woman looked in.

'A fever?' she said. 'You don't need to make so much noise just for that. Who hasn't got a fever here? Nurse Lotta is asleep. No wonder, after sixteen hours' work without a break. Let her sleep. Tomorrow is another day.'

Janna held on to Aissa's hand, feeling her racing pulse. She tried to stay awake, but her eyes closed of themselves. She dreamed about Uli's teacher, who was driving past Uli, shouting through the gap at the top of the window: 'Come on, get in, Uli. If you sit on the suitcase and tuck your head down, it might work!'

Uli, his face and trouser bottoms muddy, turned and looked questioningly at Janna. 'Get in, Uli, get in!' Janna shouted. 'The cloud is coming!'

Uli raced along beside the car, but it did not stop.

'I can't stop!' cried the teacher. 'There are so many more behind me!'

'Open the door!' cried Janna. 'Uli can climb in as it goes along.'

But the door stuck. Uli hung on to it from outside and was dragged along.

'The cloud, the cloud!' she heard herself screaming.

The next car behind the teacher swerved out to overtake. A cloud of dust whirled up, there was a dull thud, and the car raced away.

'Don't cry like that,' said the nurse, shaking Janna. 'You'll be waking everyone up.'

Janna started and let go of Aissa's hand.

'Uli is so hot,' she stammered.

'Who?' said the nurse.

'Aissa,' said Janna. 'Aissa.'

The nurse leaned over Aissa's bed, then rolled it out of the room. An empty space was left between the beds.

'Is she dead?' asked Janna.

'Sshh!' whispered the nurse. 'What do you mean, dead? She's going to another room, that's all.'

After breakfast Helga came back. She had spent the night in a village inn.

'You can't have slept much,' she said. 'I've had a bad night, too.'

She hesitated and looked around.

'Conditions here are incredible,' she said. 'We're a rich country, too!'

'You're not up to date!' said a father who was attending to his child two beds away. 'We are a developing country now.'

Helga did not answer.

'Why don't you ask about Uli?' said Janna. 'I'm sure he's not on the missing persons list. Not on any register or any list.'

'Perhaps I'm afraid of the answer,' said Helga.

Janna looked at Helga, sitting there, so upright, a model of self-control.

'Never lose your self-possession,' Janna could hear Grandpa Hans-Georg saying. He did not like anyone bursting into tears. But Dad was not in the same mould as Grandpa Hans-Georg. She had seen him crying, for instance when Uli had been seriously ill in hospital and the doctor had not given his parents much hope. Or once after Chernobyl, when Dad and Mum had worked so hard for weeks, preparing a demonstration. They had planned a forum with representatives of all parties, on the theme 'How safe are our nuclear reactors?' with questions and answers for the audience. At the last moment all the politicians but one had declined, and Dad had lost his self-control. It was Mum who managed to save the event.

After she had read out the politicians' letters of refusal without comment from the empty platform, she simply let the audience talk. Janna had been sitting on the steps to the platform, watching. She had not understood much of what was said, but it had been extraordinary to observe how upset, how fearful, how angry people had been. And the entire hall had been filled with acrid cigarette smoke.

'He was with me until the other day,' said Janna. 'We didn't go to Schweinfurt with Mum and Dad and Kai. We escaped on our bikes from Schlitz. He is dead, run over by a car.'

Helga stood up, turned and walked out. Janna watched her through the window as she crossed the playground and disappeared between the houses.

It was at least an hour before she returned to Janna.

'Excuse me,' she said.

'Here everyone cries when they feel like it,' said Janna.

'I can't do that,' said Helga.

She had talked to the doctor, who still would not let her take Janna away.

'I shall make arrangements to get you into a Hamburg hospital,' she said. 'Staff have been withdrawn from there as well for the disaster areas, but all the same it would be better for you there. You would be in a two-bedded room . . .'

'I'm staying here,' said Janna, without thinking.

Helga shrugged her shoulders. 'As you like,' she said. 'I'm not going to force you. You're old enough to know what you're doing. But think it over.'

When she said goodbye Helga suddenly came to life. She urged Janna to wear a hat.

'When you're outside, at least,' she said. 'Or do you want to shock people on purpose?'

'I've got nothing to hide,' said Janna. 'I'm bald. That's that. I have to live with it.'

Then Helga made Janna promise not to tell the grandparents from Schlitz, who were still in Majorca, anything about the death of Janna's parents and brothers.

'They wouldn't survive the shock,' she said. 'Perhaps, later, we could – bit by bit –'

In answer to Janna's question as to where the grandparents would live when they came home, it turned out that Helga had already worked everything out: Grandpa Hans-Georg and Grandma Berta would live with her until restricted zone three was clear.

'I shall try to make them put off their return as long as possible,' she said. 'The later they get back, the more life will have returned to normal here.'

She intended to tell the two old people that their son and daughter-in-law were receiving treatment with their two grandsons in a special sanatorium which was out of bounds to visitors.

'No,' said Janna. 'In any case, I'm not going along with that.'

'Do you want to break your grandparents' hearts?' asked Helga.

Janna looked at her without answering.

'Then at least keep quiet and don't say anything to them,' Helga begged. She stroked Janna's bald head. Another three weeks, the doctor had said. Only another three weeks.

'Then I will come and pick you up,' she said. 'Hamburg will be your new home. Think about that when you're feeling miserable.'

'And Almut and Reinhard?' asked Janna. 'I really wanted to go –'

'I don't know where they are,' said Helga.

'Have you looked for them on the register?' asked Janna.

Helga hesitated. Then she shook her head.

'You don't have to spare me,' said Janna.

'Let's assume they're alive,' said Helga, rather impatiently. 'In any case they won't be in their flat, they'll be staying somewhere as evacuees. So you can't add to their burdens. With me you will have your own room. The Friemels have also been living with me since the disaster. Do you remember them? Relations of Grandma Berta's. But they will only be staying until restricted zone three is cleared. And they are very quiet people –'

When she left, Janna crossed her arms behind her head and stared at the ceiling. At lunchtime she learned that Aissa was dead.

During her last three weeks in Herleshausen many more children died. The days dragged past; the only variety came from the news of daily events – and her dreams.

Sometimes it seemed to Janna that she was living more intensely at night than by day. In the daytime she would simply gaze blankly ahead, tormented by nausea, fever and headaches. Even to lift her head was a labour, and when Uncle came towards her bed she closed her eyes.

But she was afraid of the nights, when Mr Benzig shot a magnificent collie dog in the school yard, and Elmar, the top of the class, stood on the balcony of the house on the hillside and let his handkerchief flutter in the wind.

'South-east wind!' he shouted. 'South-east wind!'

The Trettners and the Miltners tried to climb over the wall at Bad Hersfeld station, while she, Janna, on the station platform, lost the Heublers for the second time in

the maelstrom of the struggling crowd. Once again she heard the little girls screaming, tried to help them, failed to reach them, could not find them.

Bathed in sweat, she woke up.

But it was not long before she was standing again at the door of the house in Herleshausen and ringing the bell. It was opened not by a stranger but by Mrs Soltau, who peered through the tiny gap and said: 'Bring your brother here first, then you'll get something to drink.'

And then she was wading with her friends Meike and Ingrid through a gigantic field of rape, searching for Uli, and she could not, could not find him, although he kept calling 'Cuckoo!' again and again.

Ingrid said nervously: 'I think we ought to stop looking, or we might trample on him.'

Once she actually saw him, his blond head of hair among the yellow blooms, but when she came closer he had disappeared, and Meike said: 'I'm bored. I'm not going to play any more.'

'Uli, Uli!' called Janna, 'come out, we're not going to play any more!'

Once again she heard his faint 'Cuckoo!' behind her, but when she turned, the ruins of the Grafenrheinfeld nuclear reactor reared up before her, ragged, cracked and splintered.

Reinhard and Almut were suddenly there too, neither with hair on their heads. They were carrying sticks, with which they poked about in the ashes.

'Don't!' cried Janna, shocked. 'The thing is still radioactive. Run away!'

But they went on poking about as if they were deaf and Janna saw that they were both crying. She ran to Almut and tried to pull her away, but Reinhard held her fast,

sobbing: 'We haven't found it yet, Janna. You must be patient. We're not going until –'

She tugged and tugged, and once again she started up, soaking wet, from her sleep. It went on night after night, sometimes with Grandpa Hans-Georg and Grandma Berta appearing in her dreams as well, and the friendly bank clerk and the girl at the butcher's shop. Or she would see the boys from the senior class with whom she had driven home from school that day, pushing Lars's old car across the plants in someone's front garden.

The only people of whom she never dreamed were her parents, Kai and Jo.

Gradually the nausea and diarrhoea stopped. Thin, pale, weak and uncertain, she attempted her first steps. She did not get far. When Uncle tried to help her she sent him away. But she practised day after day. Her strength increased gradually. The days dragged on, but she was not longing for her discharge.

When the time came, and Helga returned, there was no longer anything or anyone in the Herleshausen emergency hospital whom Janna would have found it difficult to leave behind. Only one or two children for whom she had cared now and then watched her sadly, and she waved to them.

Dressed from head to foot in new clothes, Janna felt like a stranger to herself. Helga had brought her expensive underwear, which smelled of the days before Grafenrheinfeld. She had never worn the kind of shoes she was wearing now, and the black trousers and fashionable black jumper made her move stiffly and awkwardly.

They were scarcely in the car when Helga handed her a hat, half Basque cap, half beret. You could see that it must

have cost a lot of money. Janna dropped it on the back seat.

'I should put it on,' said Helga, a vertical line between her eyebrows. 'Lots of people react in a funny way when they can see that someone has come from the contaminated area. There are actually hotels which refuse to take in evacuees when – when the illness is really visible. They say it drives their customers away.'

'I understand,' said Janna in a hard voice. 'They don't want to be reminded.'

'As I said, I would put on the hat,' said Helga.

Janna did not pick it up.

'But I *want* to remind them,' she said. She leaned back, feeling the warmth of the summer wind stroking her head as they drove along, and breathing in the spicy scent of the fir trees in the air. The wood was so beautiful! She had seen nothing but white walls for so long.

'Don't make it more difficult for us than it is already,' said Helga.

'I've got nothing to hide,' said Janna gruffly.

'As you like,' said Helga. 'But you'll be hurting yourself.'

She drove along little side roads as far as Eschwege, and made a big detour round the contaminated area. On that drive Janna learned that even supposedly unaffected areas were suspect, for Helga was appalled when during a brief rest Janna wanted to squat in the bushes.

'It's all contaminated!' she cried.

'So am I,' said Janna, 'had you forgotten?'

They drove with the windows closed, though it was very warm. 'Better safe . . .' said Helga. Nor would she let Janna drink from a well. 'You never know,' she said.

She did not venture on to the Kassel–Hamburg motorway

until they reached Göttingen. They ate together in a service area, and Janna could not believe her eyes when she saw the prices.

'The meat is from abroad, and so are the vegetables,' Helga explained. 'Only the potatoes are German, left over from the previous harvest. Next year the potatoes will also come from somewhere else – for those who can pay.'

'And what will the people who *can't* pay eat?' asked Janna.

'The cheaper stuff,' said Helga.

Janna nodded: so this would be the new difference between rich and poor.

She met the stolen glances of the other customers defiantly, tossing her head and laughing shrilly. She tried to ignore the fact that one group left the next table and moved to a table further away. It was only when they were back in the car that she became dumb with fear.

9

During the first few days in Hamburg Janna was surprised how normally life continued, far from Grafenrheinfeld. With Helga it was as if, apart from the mourning clothes, the hushed voices, the two Friemels who were lodging, and the daily power-cuts, there was no change from her earlier visits. Janna had a room to herself and was generously equipped by Helga with new clothes. Helga had even put a CD player, and not a cheap one, in her room, with a selection of classical discs from Bach to Orff.

Lessons had begun again in the Hamburg schools, which had closed for three weeks after the disaster. Helga, a senior teacher in mathematics and chemistry, went off every day and came home for lunch. In the afternoon she spent hours at her desk preparing for the next day, writing letters or correcting work. She also spent a lot of time in search of uncontaminated food, but when Janna wanted to go with her she refused: it would still be too strenuous for her to walk about, looking and listening, running hither

and thither and carrying shopping-bags. She was to be thoroughly rested first.

But the rest was not what it might have been, for Helga took her responsibility very seriously. So Janna was examined by several doctors – well-known specialists, as Helga emphasized. After that Janna was always undergoing treatment, taking medicine and spending hours in waiting-rooms. When she questioned the doctors they shrugged their shoulders.

'We have had no experience with radiation sicknesses yet,' they said. 'It is quite possible that your hair will grow again, but we can't be absolutely certain.'

She was often alone. She avoided the Friemels because she did not know what to talk to them about. She sensed a growing irritation between them and Helga, but she too felt irritated, especially by Helga's cultivated self-discipline, which she did not want to imitate, and her demands with regard to education, behaviour and tradition. And she was so overwhelmingly responsible.

'It'll soon be time for you to go back to school,' she said, after barely a week. 'Otherwise you'll be missing too much and losing touch.'

Janna was horrified. School? That had receded into the past, and she was still listless and exhausted. Not even the nights refreshed her – on the contrary: they tormented her with wild, ugly dreams.

But Helga insisted on her going to school, and the Friemels supported her. Janna felt too weak to resist Helga's will, so Helga registered her at the school where she herself taught.

Fearfully, Janna went to school the very next morning. She was not the only new pupil in the class: three more fugitives from the disaster area had arrived after the school

term began – in fact there was scarcely a class in the whole school which did not have at least two new pupils, and most of the new ones had lost members of their family. So Janna was in no way a special case, and naturally she tried to join the group of evacuees.

On the very first day she was stopped by a girl from Bad Brückenau. 'Why are you going around like that?' she asked her angrily.

She pointed to Janna's bald skull.

'Do you think I should be ashamed of it?' asked Janna.

'Not ashamed,' said the girl, 'but you don't need to display your misfortune so publicly, either.'

A boy from Bamberg nodded gloomily.

'You're not only hurting yourself, you're hurting all of us,' said a very pale, blonde girl. 'Do at least put on a cap! We are Hibakusha, but that doesn't mean everyone has to know from the start.'

'Hibakusha?' asked Janna.

They explained that this was the name that had been given to the survivors of Hiroshima, and that it was now used for the survivors of Grafenrheinfeld.

'I am a Hibakushi,' she told herself, looking into the mirror in Helga's bathroom and examining herself closely.

Yes, even without the bald head people would have been able to see it – she looked so thin and sickly. In the street people moved away from her, just as they did from the others in whom they could see the radiation sickness. All those gaps that opened up before her and the rest of those who now, in midsummer, went around wearing caps and headscarves! Those curious or compassionate sidelong glances.

She learned fast: no one teased, no one sniggered, no one

called rudely after her, but no one wanted to sit beside her, either in school or on the bus, and the Friemels told her of acquaintances who had had to be compulsorily allocated to a flat where the owners protested against taking evacuees.

'We seem terrifying to them,' said the girl from Bad Brückenau. 'We might be giving off radiation ourselves – perhaps we are.'

Janna glanced sideways at the girl's head. She was wearing a wig.

'I think it's more than that,' said the boy from Bamberg. 'The refugees were just as unpopular after the war, although they didn't give off radiation. My Silesian grandmother was always talking about it: anyone who'd survived and come through the war didn't like to be constantly reminded that other people were not so lucky, that they had to have help. And had a *right* to receive help!'

Janna soon noticed that life in Hamburg was not as normal as it had seemed to her in the first few days. On her way to school she saw long queues in front of the food shops. She was surprised, and in the end she asked.

'Milk powder from the USA,' she was told.

'When something uncontaminated arrives, you have to grab it,' Mrs Friemel told her.

'If you can pay,' added Mr Friemel. 'All the Third World countries that have something edible to offer are as pleased as Punch. They will sweep up the last scrap of edible rubbish for us – for money, of course!'

'What about the farmers here?' asked Janna.

Mr Friemel gave a tired gesture. 'Forget it. Most of them have already had to slaughter their cattle, and no one took the meat. Milk is still produced up here and in the

southern Allgäu, but it's not suitable for children and young people.'

'*We* don't drink it either,' Mrs Friemel put in.

'After Chernobyl this milk wasn't allowed to be sold to *anyone*,' said Mr Friemel. 'All the same, the farmers are going bust.'

'Oh, my lovely vegetable garden,' moaned Mrs Friemel. 'I can't bear to think of it! Soon there will be nothing but weeds growing all over Germany.'

Janna saw other things on her way to school, when she passed a huge former pub and a cinema. Both buildings were filled with refugees and evacuees. Even the gymnasium at the school was used to accommodate refugees. Between the school yard and the gymnasium a fence had been erected and Janna sometimes spied between the planks. She saw children playing, adults leaning against the gymnasium wall or sitting on improvised benches in the sun. Their clothing looked uncared for. Many of them dozed with closed eyes, others stared into space, many of them looking sick or exhausted. There were only a few bald heads to be seen, almost all men. But many women wore headscarves and many children wore caps – in midsummer. Refugee children who climbed to the top of the fence, curious to see what was going on in the school yard, were chased down again by the caretaker.

'What do they actually live on?' Janna asked the boy from Bamberg.

'They get their meals from the field kitchens,' he said. 'And the Red Cross looks after the clothes. Immediately after the disaster there was a collection. The textile firms made donations too: stuff that was out of fashion or not selling well. I don't know what happens about medical care, but the State presumably does the necessary. And for

everything else there is pocket money for the time being, until it's all been worked out. I know that from someone in 4B who lives over there. He couldn't even buy himself gym shorts and shoes. The class made a collection for him.' After a moment he added: 'They are having a debate in parliament on compensation for the people who are completely destitute now.'

A day or two later, in the school hall, Janna met Elmar from her old school in Fulda. He too was almost bald, and his face was grey.

'Elmar!' she cried gladly.

He turned and his face also brightened. They spent the whole of the break together. He knew nothing about any of the other pupils from their class.

'Some of them will have kicked the bucket,' he said. 'Most people left too late – the evacuation should have begun much earlier. Typical of our politicians! Nobody had the bottle to take responsibility for an unpopular measure.'

Elmar – he always knew how things should have been done, and he talked like an adult.

'We only left when the roads were completely jammed, too,' he told her, 'because my father couldn't find some documents or other and my mother wanted to take too much junk along. Now she's in hospital, neither alive nor dead. My father and I have crawled in with some relations. Horrible. We bow and scrape from sheer gratitude. But even that's better than living in a gym. We have to accept the bowing and scraping. Anyone who's contaminated is only worth alms and sympathy. We are the nation's handicapped.'

When the bell rang for lessons Elmar went as far as

Janna's classroom with her. On the way there, amid all the noise and the crowd, he told her that his father, once a firm believer, had left the church. 'In the old days he used to chase me off to Communion every Sunday morning,' he said. 'Now he's offended that the good God didn't give him credit for that. He feels he's been treated unjustly, instead of bawling out the politicians he elected – or himself!'

As they reached the classroom door he said quickly: 'I've been doing a lot of thinking since Grafenrheinfeld, about that, too. And I've come to the conclusion that the equation only works if you cut Him out.'

'Who?' asked Janna.

'Who indeed?' said Elmar, pointing upwards towards the sky with his index finger.

Janna was upset. Was this Elmar, the laid-back, cheerfully superior philosopher? And had she changed that much too, since the last time they had seen each other?

These days she spent hours lying on her bed. She was almost always tired, having to will herself to every action. Generally she went to school without her homework, and after two or at most three lessons her head was buzzing. When she came home she unwillingly swallowed a few morsels of food, then collapsed on her bed for hours, locking her door from the inside so that she would not be disturbed.

'You really could help a bit with the housework,' said Helga, with that line between her brows which always appeared when her voice became reproachful. 'After all, we're a kind of family, you and I.'

Janna was shocked. No, they were not a family, nor would they ever be. She continued to have the same

feelings for her aunt as she had in bygone days, when she had been on a visit. Listlessly she stacked the dirty plates in the dishwasher while Helga did her school preparation or wrote letters. The Friemels had now taken over the shopping.

Helga had always been a sort of family telephone exchange, from whom they could find out how things were with Uncle X or Great-Aunt Y. Now she was trying to get some real news about the fate of all the members of the family who had been living in the disaster area. Again and again letters were returned, marked 'Addressee moved to unknown address'. But Helga would not give up. She discovered that Janna's father had died in Schweinfurt, probably on the morning of the disaster. Her mother and Kai had died in a Red Cross tent – first Kai, and four days later their mother. All she knew about Jo was that she was dead. Jo was not one of the family. Nor was she interested in making contact with Almut. Janna herself had tried to find the address in the missing persons register, but all she found there was the note 'Currently at primary school, Wiesbaden-Bierstadt', and her letter to that address was also returned: 'Addressee moved to unknown address'.

'You are under my address in the missing persons register now,' Helga told Janna. 'As soon as Almut has the chance, she will turn up here.'

Janna could hear Helga typing far into the night, writing to all their relations, asking them not to write anything to Grandma Berta and Grandpa Hans-Georg about the death of their son, daughter-in-law and two grandsons. She herself had written soothing letters to her parents.

'I told them your father was in hospital with the family,' she said to Janna, 'and their health was only temporarily –'

'Oh yes, that bunch of lies you told me at the hospital,'

Janna interrupted. 'They can't write at present because the hospital is strictly screened off from the outside world – right?'

'Yes, I lie to them,' said Helga angrily. 'But I only do it for the best.'

'Do you think they believe your story?' asked Janna. '*I* certainly wouldn't swallow it.'

'They believe it,' said Helga, 'because they want to. They can't possibly know that your parents and Kai were in Schweinfurt. I have recommended them to stay in Majorca until everything is normal again here. Then I'll bring them over. The Friemels won't be here for ever. I've sent them money, of course. Really, Majorca is the best place for them just now.'

Janna felt the sweat breaking out all over her body and had to lie down again to think.

She could see Grandma Berta in her mind's eye, knitting, most probably a traditional Alpine jacket for Kai, or a brightly-striped woolly hat for Uli. She would be sitting under a brilliant sunshade, the inevitable cup of coffee in front of her, listening to Grandpa Hans-Georg as he read aloud, for her eyes were not very good these days. She did not insist on any particular writers, but she laid great store by stories that ended happily.

'We're too old for tragedies,' she would say, and Janna saw Grandpa Hans-Georg nodding. She had often tried to picture her grandfather as a captain – a captain of heavy artillery in the last war. Sometimes he had begun on a story: '. . . and then, in the summer of 1940, on the Dniester . . .'

Almut had once told Janna that Grandma Berta had been in the Nazi women's organization, not just as a hanger-on, but as something quite senior. When Janna

asked her grandmother about it she received a surly answer: 'Oh, do be quiet about those days! It's all so long ago. I had to organize jolly evenings for wounded soldiers, is there anything wrong with that?'

Where the Nazi period was concerned, Grandma Berta was very reticent. Grandpa Hans-Georg, on the other hand, was all the more talkative. Uli had always listened to him with shining eyes.

'*Must* you keep stirring that up, Hans-Georg?' Grandma Berta would interrupt crossly. 'I don't want to hear any more about the war and those awful things. For goodness' sake, you've done more in your life than fire off guns!'

Grandma Berta and Grandpa Hans-Georg would certainly have given up reading reports of the German nuclear disaster some time ago. Probably they were not even talking about it any more. Janna could hear Grandma's soft voice in her ear: 'Be quiet, Hans-Georg, I don't want to hear any more about that dreadful business!'

But when they were having morning drinks with other Majorcan dwellers, Grandpa Hans-Georg would set out in lengthy monologues his theory of the cause of the disaster: sabotage, of course! Janna flung open the window. The curtains blew against her face, and suddenly she had an immense longing to see the sea, or at least a broad stretch of water. She ran out, paying no attention to Mrs Friemel's astonished 'What's your hurry, child?' She ran the gauntlet of the sympathetic or dismayed eyes of passers-by, until she reached the concrete post on which someone had sprayed in giant letters: THANK THE POLITICIANS FOR THIS! And saw the headlines in a newspaper kiosk: ALL CLEAR AT LAST! and REACTOR NO LONGER RADIOACTIVE!

Janna felt dizzy. Helga must have known, but she had not said a word when they were eating. Did it not seem

important enough to her? Janna realized that Helga never mentioned current political events.

On her way to the river Alster Janna passed her school, and there, to her astonishment, she bumped into Elmar. His bald head showed up strikingly against the dark wall he was leaning on. He was shouting rude remarks after the passers-by. Janna made for him as if for a lifebelt.

'What are you doing here in the afternoon?' she asked.

'I am, so to speak, hanging about,' he said. 'And *where* doesn't really matter.'

She asked him about his homework.

'I don't do any now,' he said, shrugging his shoulders.

'If you're not doing anything else,' she said, 'come to the Alster with me.'

'I'm not doing anything else,' he said, and pushed himself away from the wall. 'Nothing but trying to get through this shitty life as fast as possible.'

They had to wait at a crossing and someone behind them said softly: 'Man, she really got it.' But not quietly enough.

Elmar spun round and shouted: 'And you didn't? It got here too! It got everywhere! Not so bad? Not so life-threatening? Who says so? The Minister for the Interior? Politicians? For sure: the earth, the sky, the food – all contaminated. Even if you don't look as if you'd been scalped, you're programmed for cancer. What are four or five hundred kilometres in a doomsday scenario? It's only a question of what *kind* of cancer you're going to get. And there will be fantastic monsters among your grandchildren – they're programmed, too. What you want to do is get on and ask how it could have happened!'

Nobody answered. The two who had been whispering together stared into the distance, and when the traffic lights turned green, the waiting people hurried away. Only Elmar forgot to go.

'They're going to kill you!' he shouted after the others.

Janna had stayed beside Elmar, breaking into a sweat, her knees giving way. She had to lean against the traffic-light post.

'Come on,' she said. 'Let's go back. It wouldn't give me any pleasure now.'

'Pleasure?' he said. 'Did you say *pleasure*?'

When Janna came home the Friemels were sitting in front of the television. Mr Friemel was wearing a jogging suit, though he never jogged. He had opened the zip of the jacket, showing his under-shirt. It outlined his stomach, which swelled over the elastic top of the pants. Mr Friemel was smoking, although Helga could not stand the smell of smoke.

'Sit down with us, child,' said Mrs Friemel. 'They are giving us something amusing again.'

She was wearing a Tyrolean peasant dress – a dirndl – a pink one this time. She almost always wore dirndls. The two of them had run a costume boutique in their home-town: dirndls, loden coats and alpine jackets. They moved apart on the sofa and Mrs Friemel pointed invitingly to the vacant seat.

'Were you for or against nuclear power?' asked Janna, without sitting down.

'Ah, well,' said Mr Friemel, 'we didn't know anything about the risks. Isn't that so, Barbie?'

His wife nodded reluctantly.

'And after Chernobyl?' asked Janna.

'Chernobyl,' said Mr Friemel, shrugging. 'Chernobyl was a *Russian* reactor.'

'Now stop that!' cried Mrs Friemel. 'Sit down, and leave it alone.'

Janna went to her room and shut the door. She felt so weak that she could scarcely reach the nearest chair. Seated, she pulled down a towel from the laundry cupboard – a very old, beautiful, linen towel from Grandma Berta's dowry, bearing the initials BL: Berta Lothammer, Grandma Berta's maiden name. The linen was a little thin and threadbare now, but so wonderfully cool that Janna put the cloth over her face and head. She leaned back, and stayed there for a while, quite still, her eyes closed, until Elmar's despairing shout at the traffic lights came back to her. Then she buried her face in her hands, felt the linen cloth, and furiously pulled it off her head.

That evening Helga came to her room.

'It will be your birthday soon,' she said, 'and I think we ought to have a little celebration in spite of everything. We'll invite any relations who live fairly near and –'

'– are still alive,' said Janna.

Helga ignored the interruption.

'Uncle Fred and Aunt Cathy from Harburg will come, with Margaret and Mia,' said Helga. 'They have already accepted. And then there are Werner, Max and Thea. From Bielefeld there are the –'

'I don't want any visitors,' said Janna.

'They are coming, because you need to know that you are not alone,' said Helga, with determined calm. 'Just one thing I want to ask you: that day, at least, wear a wig.'

'Do you think they haven't seen any bald heads in these past weeks?' asked Janna.

'Of course,' said Helga. 'But they were not related to those people. There is a big difference.'

'You mean non-relatives are none of our business?' said Janna.

'You are upset today,' said Helga. 'We'll talk about it another time.'

With that she left the room.

That night Janna once again dreamed of a huge rape field in flower, over which a cloud was forming. And in the midst of the rape stood Elmar, small and forlorn, crying.

10

Then, one rainy Saturday, Almut was standing at the door: thin, haggard, with rings under her eyes. Janna flung her arms round her.

'Why didn't you ring ages ago?' she sobbed.

'After all that's happened you can't just get in touch by phone,' said Almut. 'In any case, *I* can't. I went to Herleshausen when you were still under that address in the missing persons register, but you had already left. That was where I discovered that Helga had taken you away.'

Almut wanted to see Helga, but she was not at home, and the Friemels were watching television. Janna helped Almut out of her raincoat and took her to her own room.

'I found Uli's name on the death list, too,' said Almut. 'Is it true?'

Janna nodded.

'Tell me about it.'

Janna told her, haltingly, describing the events tersely, in two or three sentences.

Almut was silent.

'He hasn't been buried yet,' said Janna. 'I often think about that. As if he had no covers on in a cold room at night.'

Almut sat down on Janna's bed. Janna sat beside her and put her arm round her.

'You've still got your hair,' she said, letting one of Almut's black locks slide through her fingers.

'Oh, my hair,' said Almut, and then they were both silent.

'What about – what about the baby?' asked Janna after a time.

Almut raised one hand and let it fall.

'Did you –?' whispered Janna.

Almut nodded. She drew Janna to her and began to cry. 'That's another reason why I couldn't come earlier,' she said. 'There's terrific pressure on all the hospitals. You have to make arrangements weeks ahead. It's revolting!'

'Wasn't it possible to do anything else?'

'No,' said Almut, 'we were urgently advised to do it – all pregnant women from the Schweinfurt area who were less than four months pregnant. We thought it over for a long time, but I was sick for days after we escaped and the diarrhoea almost killed me. And there was a lot of blood in my stools. Reinhard was the same. We left too late, we had to look after the schoolchildren first.'

Now Janna was crying too.

'The worst thing is that no one could tell us if we can ever have children at all now. Normal children –' Almut laughed briefly. 'Not with one eye on their forehead, or two heads.'

She dropped sideways on to the bed, buried her face in her hands and wept. Janna stroked her head – how soft her hair was, how lovely it felt!

'That's enough crying,' said Almut, sitting up and blowing her nose. 'Reinhard sends his love. From next week he will be teaching again, back in Wiesbaden. He got the news yesterday, but he had not dared to hope it would be as quick as this. It will probably take quite a long time for me.'

She told Janna that she had come with an acquaintance, sharing the cost of the petrol. She was free only until Sunday morning, then they would have to go back.

'Haven't you got your own car any more?' asked Janna.

No, they had lost it in the escape, in the traffic jams. Three men whose car had simply stopped had torn open the driver's door and hauled Reinhard out, so what could Almut do but get out with him? Before the men drove away they had thrown Reinhard the keys to their own car.

'They were sniggering,' said Almut, 'and they said, "Perhaps you'll be able to make it start. Good luck!" Of course it didn't start. We had to go on on foot until someone picked us up.'

Janna thought about it. Then she asked: 'Why did you tell Uli we should go to the cellar?'

'You were much further away from the reactor than we were,' said Almut. 'I could not imagine that they would be evacuating people there as well. And the two of you alone on those jammed roads – I thought it was too dangerous. I went on hoping that your parents would get away in time, too. Then they would have picked you up. If I had known –'

She choked.

'Just after you, Mum rang up,' Janna told her. 'She wanted us to escape. Uli might still be alive if we had gone to the cellar.'

'And he might not,' Almut murmured. 'There's no point in thinking about it.'

'The last thing she said was "For God's sake!"' said Janna.

Then she went to the kitchen, cooked two poached eggs for Almut and made coffee, splashing the oven plate in her eagerness. She pushed her school books off the writing table and laid a place. Almut ate hungrily. She had had nothing to eat on the entire journey from Wiesbaden to Hamburg. Janna sat beside her on the bed, her knees pulled up.

'If Grandma Berta saw you like that,' said Almut, with her mouth full, 'she would knit you a hat at once. First so that no one would see, and second to keep you warm.'

'If she saw me like this,' said Janna, 'it would be as bad for her as if I were running around naked.'

Almut had to laugh and Janna laughed with her.

'But there are advantages,' said Almut. 'You are recognizably Hibakushi even from a distance. I always have to explain that I am, too.'

Janna had never thought of it like that. It felt good to have Almut here. In recent days Janna had become almost more silent than Helga herself, but now she began to talk, words spurting out like a waterfall. She described their flight in every detail and what had happened on Bad Hersfeld station. She talked about her weeks in Herleshausen emergency hospital and spoke of Helga and Elmar. Almut listened in silence, only nodding now and again. They were so absorbed in talking and listening that they forgot where they were and how late it was.

Then there was a knock at the door. It was Helga. She greeted Almut in her cool way and asked if she knew any

more details about the death of Janna's parents and Kai. But Almut knew no more than she did.

'You can spend the night here,' Helga told her before she left the room.

At supper Mr Friemel and Almut fell out. Mr Friemel was bemoaning the loss of his property: 'When I think, before I fall asleep at night, that our shop may already have been plundered –'

'But Paul,' said Mrs Friemel, patting his hand, 'we are not living in some banana republic.'

'By the time *we* get home again,' said Almut, 'there will be ivy growing through the walls. We have written everything off. We're making a new start. And we rejoice in every day that's left to us.'

Then she talked about the first efforts at solidarity among the Hibakusha in the Rhine–Main area.

'Solidarity?' said Mr Friemel. 'Who is supposed to have solidarity with whom, against whom?'

'We survivors from the disaster area,' said Almut, 'sooner or later we'll become a separate class in society: the class of the diseased have-nots. Ineffective in the economy, and above all not to be on view. Uncomfortable, too: we arouse guilt feelings and prevent people from forgetting and suppressing.'

'You're exaggerating,' said Helga.

'I'm exaggerating?' Almut smiled. 'You should get yourself a book about Hiroshima. The survivors there, and we – and maybe all the others still to come – we are the outsiders of the twentieth century.'

'Don't say such awful things,' cried Mrs Friemel, raising her hands in self-defence.

Almut ignored her protest.

'At the same time, we can say we're lucky,' she continued. 'Hitler would have gassed us, with our messed-up genes.'

'Well, well,' said Mr Friemel, leaning back. 'That's really not the issue now. The only question is, what do we do if it turns out that the people with severe radiation damage – sorry, Almut, I know this must affect you – that the people with severe radiation damage can only have sick children. I mean –'

'You mean they will have to prevent us having children at all,' Almut interrupted. 'Didn't we have that once before ?'

'But Almut,' cried Mrs Friemel, 'he didn't say that!'

'He may not have *said* it,' retorted Almut.

Helga stood up and began to clear the table. Almut followed her to the kitchen, cleaned the oven plate and scrubbed the egg-pan, while Helga read out a letter from Grandma Berta that had arrived that morning. They were well, they were quite sunburned and were pleased that nothing really tragic had happened to anyone in the family in the reactor accident. They wished their son, daughter-in-law and grandchildren a quick and complete recovery, and would stay where they were until they were allowed to return to Schlitz.

'Thank God,' said Helga.

'What does "really tragic" mean?' said Almut. 'They can't even manage to use the word "dead".'

Later, by the flickering light of a candle in Janna's room, Almut told her about their life in Wiesbaden. She, Reinhard and his father all lived in a tiny basement flat – kitchen-living room, bedroom and lavatory.

Janna remembered Reinhard's father with pleasure. He had run a small nursery garden in Bad Kissingen. When

she thought of him, she saw a kindly face, always bobbing up in a frame of flowers, and hands with dirty finger-nails and calluses.

Almut described the difficulties of keeping the peace with the owner of the house.

'As soon as we were able to stand,' said Almut, 'we were allocated to the flat by the assembly camp. The owner fought to the last, although she had all the rest of the house to herself. Of course we are too noisy for her, and too demanding, and too everything. I can actually sympathize to some extent. She is old and she can't adapt so quickly to no longer being the only person who makes a noise – and is allowed to make one! – in her own house.'

Janna nodded.

Then Almut spoke of the millions of evacuees and people who had fled of their own free will, for whom accommodation had to be found all over Germany from one day to the next. Sometimes things almost reached the point of murder and mayhem, but there were also uninjured people who helped wherever they could. Almut talked about a parson in Wiesbaden who worked indefatigably for the refugees, and of a social worker in Mainz who had recruited an entire network of voluntary helpers to care for the survivors.

'And now we are organizing ourselves politically as well,' said Almut. 'Many of the uninjured are joining us, for the sake of solidarity. We are gaining ground, we can do something –'

'Do you remember the demonstrations after Chernobyl?' asked Janna. 'You were full of hope that time, too, Mum and Dad and you. I knew, although I was still very young. But Grandma and Grandpa were right: everything died down again and it was as if Chernobyl had never happened.

Not even all those Ukrainians slowly dying could change anything. Mum and Dad often talked about it.'

'Even Chernobyl was too small,' Almut responded. 'And who knows? Perhaps Grafenrheinfeld itself will turn out to be too small, as well. There's the possibility of even bigger accidents.'

'People are already beginning to forget,' said Janna. 'That's why I don't wear a wig.'

Almut stroked her head.

Helga wanted to make up the couch in the living-room, but Almut preferred to sleep in Janna's room. Together they carried a mattress in and laid it on the floor. Janna offered Almut the bed, but Almut refused, and stretched out on the mattress. Janna extinguished the candle.

'Are you asleep yet?' said Almut, after a time.

'No.'

'There is something – but I'm not sure if I ought to tell you –' Almut hesitated.

'Tell me,' said Janna.

'You really must tell me if you want me to stop,' said Almut. Then she began: 'On the very first morning, only an hour or two after the accident, they threw a cordon round restricted zone one. Police and soldiers wore protective clothing. They ordered the people in that zone to go to the cellars. And – they say that anyone who tried to escape was shot. With machine-guns.'

Janna thought of what Aissa had once told her.

'Do you think it's true?' Janna asked.

'Yes,' said Almut. 'They tried to keep it secret, but that kind of thing can't be kept secret.'

'And why –'

'They say that the people in restricted zone one were so contaminated that they were a danger to others. And they

say they had no chance of survival anyway. They would have died slowly and in agony.'

After a long pause, Janna asked: 'But the police and soldiers, how could they –?'

'Human beings are capable of anything,' said Almut.

There was another long pause. Then Janna asked: 'Do you think Dad was one of those who were not allowed to leave?'

'I don't know,' said Almut.

Janna was crying.

'I don't want to stay here,' she said. 'Take me to Wiesbaden with you – please!'

'I would, gladly, you know that,' said Almut. 'But there is simply no room in our basement. Try to hold out here until we have found somewhere else to stay. And listen – if you can't bear it any longer, come anyway.'

Next morning Almut's acquaintance with the car picked her up. Janna fought against tears when Almut got into the car. Everything she looked at was blurred.

'Chin up!' Almut called, before the car disappeared round the corner.

She stood there for a long time. When she returned to the flat Helga was chopping onions in the kitchen. She lifted her head in surprise, her eyes streaming.

'I really thought', she said, 'that you had upped sticks and gone with her.'

11

Janna was now seeing Elmar almost every day. Although she admired him, she did not really like him very much, and had generally avoided him at home. Now he was even harder to bear, making endless speeches and seeing the downside of everything. When someone irritated him he became aggressive, but if she did not want to be with Helga, who else was there besides Elmar?

They generally met outside the school building, because he lived in the opposite direction from her. He was almost always there ahead of her. When the weather was fine they strolled in the nearest park – where Hamburg was green, Janna thought, it looked a little bit like Schlitz.

'Green?' said Elmar scornfully. 'How can this concrete desert be green?'

'Who do you talk to when you're at home?' she asked him once.

'You mean my relations?' he said. 'Nobody. My father just broods, and my relations are not interested in anything. At least, not in anything that interests me.'

Janna nodded.

Once Elmar greeted her with a shout: 'We're going to be poor, Janna!'

'Who?' she asked in bewilderment. 'You and your parents?'

'I'm talking about all of us,' he said fiercely. 'Grafenrheinfeld is making us poor. All the homeless and unemployed, and the sick! They're not earning anything, only costing. And agriculture is finished anyway. Transport is half-crippled. Industry is shattered –'

'Can you see any poverty?' asked Janna in astonishment. 'I can't.'

Elmar stared at her. 'Open your eyes, you see it everywhere! The sales, the closures! Haven't you noticed all those FOR SALE notices? And the ads in the papers: "Genuine reason for sale"? Are you walking about with your eyes shut? Don't you read the papers?'

Janna protested: in Hamburg everything was new to her. In Schlitz she would have noticed – and as far as the newspapers were concerned, she had never read the advertisement pages.

'Well, you should!' cried Elmar. 'They advertise for dear life. But they can't get rid of the stuff, whether it's a factory or a fur coat. Supermarkets, shops, blocks of flats – you can buy them all at rock-bottom prices. One compulsory auction after another!'

Janna had known nothing of all this. Elmar was indignant that she did not even watch the news bulletins on television. Janna sighed. The Friemels were generally sitting in front of the television, and she preferred to avoid them.

'Anyone who doesn't inform themselves is pretending,' said Elmar.

'Then would I go around like this?' she asked angrily.

★

Once Elmar spoke about his relations.

'Being poor is not the worst thing for them,' he said, 'although it's hard for them to get down off their high horse. What is worse are the fears they suffer from now: fear of riots, fear of bankruptcy, fear of delayed effects. Aunt Hedi doesn't sleep well any more, and Uncle Kurt simply shouts at everyone. We are tough, we Germans, and if it comes to it, we can produce miracles, economic miracles. But we have to be able to see a silver lining on the horizon.' Even back then, in Fulda, classmates would wink at each other when Elmar got going. Now he was talking even more hectically, more obsessionally. Janna stared at him: was he quite right in the head? Perhaps not. There was still a little of the old model-pupil glitter about him, he was still capable of sizing up a situation quickly, getting the gist of problems, but what she had once so much admired in him he could no longer do: find solutions. That was what seemed to upset him most.

'Solutions?' he said, when she asked. 'I don't see any. Neither for me, nor for anyone else.'

He stood still and looked at her. 'I wanted to be a doctor,' he said.

'And I wanted to have children,' said Janna.

But Elmar's urge to make speeches began to fade. The closer they came to the end of the school year, the more silent he became. He continued to meet her, but he would trot along wordlessly beside her. Nowadays she missed his speeches, she watched the news and read the advertisements.

A week before the holidays began, the girl from Bad Brückenau fell ill and did not come to classes for the rest of that week.

'I've been to visit her,' the boy from Bamberg reported. 'She's very ill.'

When the rest of the class asked what her illness was, he talked about inflammation of the lungs. Janna watched for him in the school yard and asked: 'Is it true?'

'Of course not,' he said. 'It's leukaemia. She had been feeling terrible for quite a time, but she didn't want to admit it. You know. Yesterday they sent her off to a special clinic.'

When Janna came home from school Helga opened the door to her.

'We absolutely have to go to the hairdresser in the next few days,' she said. 'Wigs are in short supply, and it's your birthday in two weeks' time.'

'I'm not wearing a wig!' cried Janna.

'Calm down,' said Helga. 'You can tell them you're wearing a wig.'

'And what good does that do them?' asked Janna.

'Oh, child, you simply won't understand! How am I to put it – it just looks depressing when a young person has no hair. Please, it's so easily arranged. Only until they have all gone home again.'

At last Janna nodded, resigned, and went along to the hairdresser, but she refused to choose a wig for herself. Helga had to do it for her. She decided on a medium-blonde one with short curls.

'I was much fairer,' said Janna.

But there was no fairer wig that suited her. Helga had the medium-blonde one packed up.

'You're certain to get lots of presents,' she said on the way home, the packet containing the wig under her arm.

Janna shrugged. At home she put on the kitchen radio and listened to rock music until Mr Friemel got annoyed.

Janna was not looking forward to the last day of school, and when it arrived she thought helplessly about the holidays. The report which was handed to her contained only a probationary comment: 'Because you came to this school very late in the school year,' it said, 'and without a report, we do not yet know very much about your performance.'

In the break a girl from Janna's class distributed invitation cards for her birthday party. Janna did not receive one.

'Forget it,' said the boy from Bamberg, suddenly appearing at her side. 'You're not invited, and nor am I. It's not her fault – her mother is against it.'

Janna nodded. She would be no ornament to a birthday party.

The others were in a hurry when the class teacher released them, but she was not. She waited outside Elmar's class, but when the rest of the pupils left the room he was not with them.

'Haven't you heard?' said one of them. 'He hasn't been moved up, so he doesn't need to come in today.'

'Elmar?' asked Janna incredulously.

'Did nothing, said nothing,' was the answer. 'Just hung out.'

Janna was close to tears.

'Back home,' she said, 'he was the best.'

'Back home you were all the best,' she heard someone else mutter, before she left them.

Helga had come home earlier. Janna laid the report on her desk without a word.

'I have already asked about your marks,' said Helga. 'You will have to do a lot of school work in the holidays. I will take care of it.'

'There is someone I want to invite to my birthday,' said Janna.

She gave Helga Elmar's name, and to her astonishment Helga had nothing against him.

'He hasn't got any hair, either,' said Janna.

Helga gave Janna a sharp look.

'I like him!' shouted Janna, and ran to her room.

Supper passed in silence. Janna was astonished when even Mrs Friemel took only a few bites.

'You mustn't get into a panic just because you're losing a few bits of hair,' said Mr Friemel in a low voice, patting his wife's hand.

'Oh, what do you know!' she cried, and she got up and went to her room before the others had finished their meal. That was something she never did – on the contrary, she thought Janna rude when she did it. Mr Friemel stayed where he was, clearing his throat. After the meal he switched on the television.

'Expert opinions,' he growled. 'Every day, expert opinions.'

He switched off, wished everyone goodnight and went off to join his wife, After stacking the dirty plates in the dishwasher, Helga sat down at the desk in her study. Janna was left alone in the living-room.

This was new. The Friemels' voices sounded very low and very far away, and soon they stopped altogether. One or two mosquitoes whined round the light bulb. Janna turned on the television – still the expert opinions – about the disaster, of course. The new Minister for Home Affairs

was speaking, and she caught him in the middle of a sentence.

'. . . *pile all the guilt on us!*' he was shouting at someone else at the round table, whom Janna did not recognize. '*I admit that in the last analysis we are responsible for the fact that not all reactors were closed down after Chernobyl. But please, who was it who reached the decision not to close down? It was reached in a long and democratic decision-making process and* everyone *took part in it, scientists, politicians, and not least of all the citizens who elected the politicians. And what politician would have banned nuclear energy off his own bat? No, if you believe you can make the politicians accountable for everything, you are making it too easy for yourselves. We are all guilty of what has happened, and all of us must –*'

The stone figures on the shelf in Herleshausen emergency hospital came into Janna's mind. They had been cool and easy to hold.

'*But we were always calling attention to the residual risk!*' shouted the representative of the power plant workers. '*You can't deny that.*'

There was nothing to choose between them: no one wanted to be guilty.

She switched off the television and went to bed.

That night she slept little. She could see the holidays lying ahead of her, the loveliest weeks of the year – before Grafenrheinfeld. Now they would be a sea of loneliness, boredom and sadness. She feared this dreadful birthday, which promised an endless string of demonstrations of sympathy, senseless presents and a whole mass of prejudices. She saw herself standing in dark clothes beside Elmar and felt that she was infected by his hopelessness. She saw Helga and the Friemels, reproduced a thousandfold, as far as the horizon.

★

Next morning she returned to the empty school, which smelled of unaired coats and damp cleaning cloths. Cleaners were scrubbing the passages and music from a portable radio echoed up the staircase. There was the sound of a typewriter from the secretary's office. Janna opened the door and asked the astonished secretary for Elmar's address, which was given her on a sheet of paper.

'You really need the holidays, don't you?' said the secretary, after a searching look at Janna's face. 'You're almost transparent.'

So he lived out in the suburbs. Janna started to walk, she had plenty of time. She spent a long time standing on a bridge, her elbows propped on the railing, her head in her hands, as she gazed down into the oily water. Rainbow-coloured streaks glittered on the surface.

Elmar lived in a high-rise building. Janna went in and asked a woman who was emptying her postbox for Elmar's family.

'There's no consoling them,' said the woman. 'There's no point in your trying. They won't open the door.'

'Consoling?' said Janna. 'Has Elmar's mother died?'

'Not his mother,' said the woman, 'the boy. Oh, didn't you know –?'

'But the day before yesterday he was –' stammered Janna, and swallowed.

'Put an end to himself,' said the woman, 'without a word to anyone. Yesterday morning his father found him lying quite peacefully in bed. Pills. Who knows where he got them? They took him away straight off, but there was nothing to be done. Police were here too – could have saved themselves the time. The boy did it all on his own, didn't even leave a line or two. Poor chap. Took no interest any more – couldn't stand it –'

With a glance at Janna's head she fell silent.

'You could ring, I suppose,' she said at last. 'But a few people have already been, and they didn't let any of them in.'

Janna thanked her and left. Once again she spent a long time on the bridge, then sat for hours in the gardens along the bank of the Alster and did not get home until evening – late enough not to have to see anyone, either Helga or the Friemels.

That night she reached a decision.

Towards morning she packed some underwear, a spare pair of shoes, and the purse containing her pocket money in a plastic bag. She did not even touch the parcel containing the wig, which was still lying on the armchair where Helga had left it. She took a packet of biscuits from the kitchen cupboard, and stole out of the flat.

She walked southwards through the town and bought a bright red T-shirt and white jeans in a second-hand shop. She put on her new clothes at once and trudged away with seven marks fifty in her purse.

Throughout that blue summer morning she walked, until she found someone at a petrol station who would give her a lift.

She reached Wiesbaden in five stages. Except for one old woman, all the people she travelled with were Hibakusha.

It was already dusk when she arrived in Wiesbaden without a penny in her pockets. On the way she had bought a bag of chips, a sausage and something to drink. She had a feeling that only the Coca-Cola had been 'clean', but she had no money left and she had been so hungry. In any case, she was already contaminated and lost.

Now she was tired. Slowly she dragged herself up the steep hill and asked the way to the watchtower. Unable to make out the house numbers in the darkness, she could only ring at the first doorbell.

Footsteps shuffled towards the door and Janna tried to remember from where she had lived through a similar scene. An old woman in a dressing-gown opened the door and stared suspiciously at Janna, who apologized for disturbing her so late and asked the number of the house. Having confirmed that it was the number she was looking for, Janna inquired about the entrance to Almut and Reinhard Sommerfeld's flat. 'It's a quarter past ten,' said the old lady, sounding aggrieved. 'A bit late for visitors.'

'I've come from Hamburg,' said Janna.

'Without luggage?' said the old woman. 'Nothing but a plastic bag? Who would believe that?'

'Almut Sommerfeld is my aunt,' said Janna. 'She's expecting me.'

'Don't get any ideas about living here,' said the old woman. 'The flat is too small for three. No one else is going to get in here. No one!'

At that she slammed the door. Janna groped her way down the steps and crept round the house. Light was shining from a half-open basement window. She stooped and knocked. Reinhard appeared, listened, and approached the window.

'It's me, Janna,' she whispered.

'My dear girl!' cried Reinhard, opening the window. 'Come in!'

There was suddenly no time to look for the basement door. She sat down on the gravel and swung her legs over the window-sill. Reinhard caught her.

'Welcome, Janna,' said Reinhard.

12

The basement flat, which the owner had previously used as a guest suite, really was a tight fit. Almut and Reinhard slept in the small bedroom, Reinhard's father on the living-room couch. Where was Janna to go?

The only solution they could think of was to put a mattress in the hall, but there were no spare mattresses. So for the first night Reinhard joined his father on the couch, and Janna slept beside Almut.

Neither of them went to sleep very quickly, though Janna was worn out after the long journey. She told Almut about school, and Helga, and the wig. After some hesitation she also told her about Elmar's death.

'It's a good thing you came,' said Almut. 'I ought to have taken you along at once. Our life here is one long temporary measure – but perhaps that's exactly what you need now.'

'I don't need any organized surroundings,' whispered Janna. 'I don't need anything I had in Hamburg.'

'Let's see how you get along with us,' said Almut. 'We try not to get on each other's nerves. What we can offer you is the feeble comfort that we too are sometimes desperate and don't know how to go on – and that you can say "shit" here whenever you feel like it.'

With a sense of security, Janna fell asleep, had no dreams, and did not wake up until Almut, striking out wildly in a nightmare, kicked her on the shin.

She was anxious to make herself useful, but she had no chance to ask for work. The very next morning, Reinhard's father took her along with him. 'Paps', as everyone called him, had taken over the kitchen and did the shopping, while Reinhard taught and Almut was busy with a newly-founded 'Emergency Association of the Nuclear Injured'. Paps explained to Janna what food could be eaten without fear, what stamps and labels should be looked out for, and which stores could be trusted.

'We stick to rice,' he said, 'morning, noon and night. Rice, anything else is simply an accompaniment. Once you've got used to it, it's not bad at all. Of course, rice is twice as expensive as it was, but it can just be managed. We've completely finished with meat – too risky. They are constantly trying to push the contaminated stuff at us, and meat from Argentina and Brazil is too dear.'

'What's the point of all this?' asked Janna in astonishment. 'We were contaminated long ago!'

'Right,' said Paps, 'but we haggle for every day we can get, and every clean head of lettuce counts.'

She could understand that, and took trouble to stick to his advice and commit the shops he used to memory. 'Above all,' he said, 'don't trust the authorities.'

Janna nodded. She liked him, liked his face, sunburned

from working outdoors, and looking even darker under the white thatch of hair. She forgave Paps for his loud snores at night.

At the post office she handed over a card for Helga, which Almut and Reinhard had insisted on. Then Paps bought her an air-bed.

When they got home they would cook together a dish not found in any recipe book: Indian rice with Colombian beans. Reinhard and Almut found it enjoyable, although a few of the beans were still hard. Paps said that if they were still hard they could not be beans: perhaps they were bullets. Janna was surprised to hear everyone laughing. People laughed often and readily here, but it was a few days before she could laugh with them.

Janna wrote addresses for Almut on stacks of envelopes, accompanied her on visits to the authorities, typed letters for her with two fingers, took on the laundry duty for her and cleaned the flat with her. She helped to collect funds for a Hibakusha centre, and got more donations than Almut.

'It's because of your head,' said Paps. 'Anyone who meets you is grateful to have come out of it better!'

When Paps had a stubborn attack of diarrhoea for days, Janna took over the cooking until Reinhard's school year came to an end. Reinhard liked cooking and did it well, but Almut needed him too, to help set up the centre.

'There will have to be legal advice and medical advice and support for all the form-filling, and we're going to help over accommodation, and there will be a copy of the search register –' she proclaimed enthusiastically. 'Anyone who likes can simply sit and read the papers, or meet people – or just have a good cry.'

Until the day when she could work as a teacher again, Almut wanted to devote herself entirely to the centre. It was to open with a big announcement and a meeting of all Hibakusha who had found somewhere to live in the Rhine–Main area. Almut was bursting with ideas for the programme for that day. 'Anyone who comes must go home with new hope,' she said, 'and above all, never feel alone again.'

Paps thought she had enough optimism for everyone, but Janna knew the other side of it as well: she was often impatient with those who took everything more calmly.

'You drive me mad, keeping so cool!' she scolded Reinhard and his father one day. 'I'm at my wits' end, and you sit back and watch all the carry-on before you can make up your minds to do anything!'

'I don't intend to over-wind *my* clock,' was Reinhard's reply, and it made her even angrier. She set off for the centre in a rage, but came home that evening good-humoured and at peace.

'Down one minute, up the next,' said Paps.

Janna admired Almut: how she could throw back her head and laugh in spite of the loss she had suffered, how tirelessly she worked for others, how she struggled with the authorities and wrested rights from them for the survivors in her neighbourhood, and with what wild despair she sometimes flung herself on the couch and cried, 'None of it does any good! I give up!' – only to set off to work again as a matter of course the next day.

'Weren't you going to chuck it all up?' Janna asked her the first time.

'Who cares about the rubbish I talked yesterday!' said Almut lightly, and ran for the bus.

To begin with, the owner of the house had complained

several times about Janna's presence, her voice echoing right down the staircase. Janna wanted to reply, but Paps held her back.

'Pick her a bunch of flowers,' he said. 'If anything can soften her, it would be that. You have to try and understand her a bit, too. For her, *we* are the disaster.'

Janna picked a bunch of wild flowers behind the chestnut tree. Paps thought it was perfectly beautiful, and Janna took it up to the owner of the house. The old lady's face darkened when she opened the door, but she accepted the bouquet, glanced uncertainly at Janna's head, thanked her curtly and closed the door. From then on at least she stopped protesting down the stairs.

A few days later Almut was noticeably quiet when she came home. She had tried to visit a former colleague in a Frankfurt hospital, but had arrived too late.

'Leukaemia,' she said, 'discovered much too late.'

Janna heard that this woman had left two little girls, aged three and five. Like Almut she had lived in Bad Kissingen, and had returned there after the disaster alert to rescue her children. She had left her car at the road-block and run through the town – in vain: the children had already been evacuated with the kindergarten, and far too late, with the very last people, the woman had left the town.

The children were now with their grandmother, but she could not keep them permanently. She was already over seventy and poorly, and they were very lively children.

'And the father?' asked Janna.

The woman had never married. She had brought up her children alone.

'Do you remember those two?' asked Almut, turning to

Reinhard. 'She took them with her on the firm's outing. Sweet little rascals.'

Reinhard nodded. 'Those two who kept on chattering in turn,' he said. 'You couldn't miss them.'

'Head teacher,' said Almut drily.

Reinhard raised his eyes and looked at her. 'In other words, you would like to –?'

She nodded and laughed. He looked across at Paps, who also nodded.

'And what does Janna think?' he asked.

'Of course!' she cried.

Almut and Reinhard dropped everything and went out. Janna watched them as they walked round and round under the chestnut tree for a long time, talking. Reinhard's arm was across Almut's shoulders, her arm round his waist.

'That will bring a bit of life to the place,' said Paps. 'And work, eh?'

Janna nodded. He smiled, and she smiled back.

'In case you don't know it,' he explained, 'children can really get on your nerves.'

'My mother always said I was good with children,' said Janna.

'Oh well –' said Paps cheerily. 'All we need now is a bigger place.'

On the morning of her birthday Janna was alone in the house. She had put on one of Almut's aprons and was cooking rice soup when there was a knock at the basement door. It was Helga, wearing a neat suit and carrying a little case.

'Why didn't you tell me you wanted to go to Almut?' she asked, seating herself very stiffly on Paps's couch.

'Because I was afraid you might persuade me to stay,'

said Janna. 'You're always ready with such sensible arguments.'

She made coffee and balanced a full cup on the table by the couch. Of course, a little had to slop out – Helga would never have offered that to a visitor. But Janna did not take it back.

'Why didn't you at least leave a note to say where you were going?' asked Helga.

'I thought it would be obvious to you where I was going.'

Helga stirred the cup and leaned back.

'Your postcard didn't explain much,' she said. 'Nothing at all, in fact. It simply confirmed my suspicion that you were here. I have been worried about you.'

'Weren't you glad to be rid of me?' asked Janna.

'What are you saying?' cried Helga. 'Would I have come and fetched you, if that were true? God knows I haven't had an easy time over you.'

'*I* want to be the one who's responsible for what happens to me,' said Janna brusquely.

'At fifteen?' said Helga, with a mocking note in her voice. 'And in the – the state you're in?'

'No one asks how old I am here,' said Janna, 'and I live with people who have suffered just as much as I have.'

'I would like you to come back to Hamburg after the holidays,' said Helga. 'I have applied for the rent for you, and you have a residence permit for Hamburg.'

'I've got one here, too,' said Janna. 'Almut got it for me. I got it very quickly.'

Helga was silent for a time, then she said: 'You've left all your school things in Hamburg. How are you going to catch up?'

'I'm not coming back to Hamburg, and I'm not going to school any more,' said Janna vehemently.

Helga made an effort to keep calm. 'What sort of future can you have without education?' she asked.

'Future?' said Janna darkly. 'Do you know if I've got one? I don't. But the little bit of life that I may have left, I'm going to live the way I want. As if there was nothing more important than school for people like us!'

'And what is more important than school?' asked Helga.

'The fact that I'm *living* here,' said Janna. When Helga did not understand, she added: 'That I'm *alive* here.'

Still Helga did not understand.

'Very well,' she said, 'school attendance is behind you. But if you seriously decide never to go back to school, there will be consequences. Without your school leaving certificate, you won't have any great prospects.'

This time Janna gave no answer. She rinsed the dishes.

'It was not nice of you', said Helga, after a pause, 'to leave me in the lurch two weeks before your birthday.'

'I'm sorry,' said Janna, turning round. 'Excuse me. I was running away.'

'I had to write to all the people we had invited,' said Helga. 'I explained to them that after all you had been through, you didn't feel like having a party.'

She took a handful of letters from her bag.

'Some of them have answered already,' she said. 'They understand.'

'Are the letters for me?' asked Janna.

'Yes,' said Helga. She hesitated, then added: 'I have read them, yes. After all, they were replies to *my* letter.'

Janna bent over a pot and scrubbed it.

'Are you having a birthday party today?' asked Helga.

Janna turned again and their eyes met.

'The others have no idea that it's my birthday today,' she said. 'And perhaps I would have forgotten too, if you hadn't reminded me.'

Helga shook her head. She snapped the case open and took out a stack of clean underwear.

'You left these in Hamburg, too,' she said. 'And your clothes. I see you are wearing colours again. And here is the wig. Perhaps you will want to use it one day, after all.'

She passed an envelope across the table to Janna. 'Your birthday present,' she said. 'Buy yourself what you need, or what you want.'

Janna thanked her and offered Helga her air-bed for the night, but Helga refused. She had already booked an hotel room in the town. Before she left she added: 'I am not going to write to Grandma Berta and Grandpa Hans-Georg, except to say that you are spending the summer holidays with Almut in Wiesbaden.'

Janna answered with a shrug.

'Many happy returns,' said Helga as they walked to the basement door, 'and I wish you the kind of life you want. If you should want to return to Hamburg one day, do so. I shall be waiting. I hope you will. Apart from my parents, you are the closest relative I have left. Do you know what that means? I wanted to think of you as my daughter. We have the same surname and – believe me – I could have opened a good many doors for you!'

She turned away and walked out of the door. 'Say hallo to Almut and Reinhard for me!' she called, already half-way to the chestnut avenue. 'Tell them I send them my best wishes.'

Janna went back into the house and watched Helga through the window, while she herself stuffed clothes,

underwear and wig into a bag. Under the big chestnut tree Helga stopped for a moment and blew her nose.

In the evening Almut spread out her work again: letters to write, posters to design, signs to paint. Three Hibakusha from Mainz, two young men and a girl, were helping her. They sat at the table; Janna and Almut painted on the floor. Janna mentioned Helga's visit almost in passing and pulling the crumpled envelope from her trouser pocket, she opened it. There were three hundred-mark notes in it, which she stuffed into the communal tin.

'My birthday present,' she said.

'Is it your birthday today?' asked the others, surprised.

They pushed letters, pens, paints and posters aside and toasted Janna's health. Paps, still a bit wobbly on his legs, made a salad of pre-disaster potatoes in the kitchen corner.

'Something really elegant,' he said. 'As dear as kiwi fruit, and almost unobtainable. Even six months ago we would have thrown the wrinkled things away. I bought them for a special occasion, and now we have one.'

Almut fetched a bottle of wine from the clothes cupboard in the bedroom; Reinhard found a bottle of juice in the refrigerator, and wrote a birthday poem:

Today it's potato salad and wine,
For Janna's birthday everything's fine.
She's like blossom on the cherry tree –
May one of God's angels her guardian be!

Tears filled Janna's eyes, even as she laughed.

'You're not allowed to remember what it used to be like,' Almut whispered. 'Try to think of the future.'

'Future?' Janna gave a sob.

Almut put her arms round her. 'Happy, happy birthday!'

Letting her go again, she stared suddenly at Janna as if transfixed, took her head in both hands, pulled it towards her, stroked it gently and cried: 'Your hair is growing again, my girl! There's some down, here!'

Janna ran to the tiny glass in the bathroom.

'It's true!' she shouted. 'It's coming! I'm going to have hair again!'

She danced round the room, beside herself with delight, and the others danced too, including one of the guests from Mainz, who was also bald. They made so much noise that the owner of the house complained loudly down the stairs again, after all.

13

It was a hectic summer. Reinhard had found a bigger place, a rather rundown weekend house among the vineyards of Wiesbaden-Frauenstein. The refugees who had previously been lodged there had looked for other accommodation in fear of the coming winter, for the house had no stove and no heating system, only an open fireplace.

'We'll simply leave all the room doors open,' said Reinhard.

Paps looked sceptical.

'How times change,' he mused. 'In the past the authorities would never for a moment have allowed a place like this to go on being occupied.'

'Oh, Paps,' cried Almut, 'you are right. In January we are going to have icicles on our noses. But the summer! What a summer for the children!'

'You'll be surprised!' said Paps grimly.

They moved easily, having little to take with them. Friends

helped, both evacuees and residents. They managed to find bedlinen, children's clothes, two children's bedsteads, one proper large mattress and a duvet for Janna, who organized herself in the attic. She tipped shovelfuls of dust and mouse droppings out of the skylight, and for the first time she was singing to herself.

Two bedrooms, living-room, kitchen, bath. Still too small for six people, if you applied the standards that had existed before the disaster, but Almut brushed such ideas away: times had changed, one must adapt, make the best of it, and for the time being they were happy. She could scarcely wait to fetch the two children; their grandmother, who was still looking after them for the time being, was becoming pressing.

'The work is too much for her,' reported Almut, returning from a visit to the children two days before she was due to bring them back. 'At the same time, I have a bad feeling. The old woman depends on the children and bursts into tears at the very sight of me. When I think that the day after tomorrow she will be sitting all alone in her little room –'

'Listen,' said Reinhard, 'I know what you're getting at, but are you clear that once again we would be living in the same sardine tin that we have just left?'

'I was only thinking,' sighed Almut, 'but when I see myself in her shoes –'

'We can visit her with the children,' said Reinhard, 'and she can come and see us – as often as she likes.'

'She could sleep in the children's room with them,' said Janna.

Neither Almut nor Reinhard replied, and the subject was not mentioned again until they left the next day to pick up the children. Paps and Janna waited for them at

home. Janna gave the windows of the children's room another quick rub, Paps cooked sweet rice with currants. He spilled the milk powder, and even at the last moment they had to sweep and polish again.

'How easy it is to get hold of orphan children now,' said Paps, shaking his head. 'In the past you had to apply to the youth welfare office years ahead, and even then there was no certainty that you would be regarded as suitable to bring up a child.'

But Janna was not really listening to him. She was thinking about the children's grandmother.

Then there was a sound from outside – they were coming! Janna rushed out and saw at once that there were five of them.

'Welcome!' cried Paps.

'Just for the first few days,' said the old lady awkwardly. 'Just to let the children get used to it.'

'After that, we'll see,' said Reinhard. 'Perhaps you may like being with us.'

Janna had imagined her as being small and dainty, but she was as tall as Paps and a little plump. Her hair was almost white and she wore thick-lensed glasses. Her face looked old and tired and she walked with a stoop. You could see at once that she could no longer cope with the children. She moved into the children's room with them, and Janna lent her her own mattress until Almut could find another.

'She's got just the same beautiful brown eyes as her daughter,' Almut told Janna when they were alone.

For the next few days the question of the old lady's stay remained in the air. No one mentioned it, and she herself did not speak of it either. But the whole family called her 'Grandmother', just as the children did.

'My daughter didn't want to make me into a "granny",' she explained.

At first Almut stayed at home and took care of the children, which was not too easy. Irmela, the elder girl, cried a lot and clung to her grandmother all day long. She was allergic to several things and needed a strict diet, and when she was restless at night and Almut went in to see her, she would start screaming. The little one, Ruth, on the other hand, a round, podgy figure, needed constant attention because she swept anything she could reach off the shelves and screeched like a stuck pig when she did not get her own way.

After a few days Reinhard and Janna came back from town to find Almut lying face down on the couch, drenched in tears, while Paps kept hold of the little one and Grandmother rocked Irmela in her lap.

'I can't do it,' sobbed Almut. 'I quite simply can't do it.'

Tears were running down Grandmother's cheeks as well.

'What can't you do?' asked Reinhard, putting his arm round her.

'These children!' cried Almut. 'I have never known such difficult children in all my life. I can't manage them. Do you understand? I can't manage them! They won't eat, they won't sleep, they won't even play.'

'If our child had inherited your temperament,' Reinhard interrupted, 'it would probably have been difficult, too.'

'But it would have been –'

'What?'

'Nothing. You're right.'

She got up from the couch and searched for a handker-

chief. Reinhard gave her his; she blew her nose, and said: 'So *you* will get their supper, right?'

When the children were asleep, Almut, Reinhard and Janna sat on the steps outside the house, looking down on the rooftops of Frauenstein. There was a smell of hay and herbs, and the scent of roses floated across from the distance. Almut leaned against Reinhard, lost in thought. How small she looked beside him! He was like a giant boulder, and Janna was surprised that Almut's shadow almost completely obscured him. Only his moustache and bushy eyebrows glowed red in the evening sunlight.

'Sorry about just now,' said Almut. 'Something snapped there for a bit.'

'Will you give up the children?' asked Janna.

Almut sat up straight and threw back her head.

'Oh, no!' she said. 'Forget about my whining. I have simply been saying a final goodbye to a few dreams.'

'Are you sure it was final?' asked Reinhard.

Almut stared at him and shrugged her shoulders. Then she ran into the house.

'Come and sit out here with us!' Janna heard her call.

Paps came out and sat down beside Janna. It was a little while before Almut and Grandmother appeared, Almut carrying a chair which she settled under the old lady.

'There was something we had to decide,' she said. 'We have decided that Grandmother will go on living with us –'

'If no one has any objection,' said Grandmother.

'No one!' cried Janna.

The opening of the centre was drawing near. Deadlines threatened, demonstrations were in the air. German demon-

strators poured across the French border to play their part in the French population's resistance to the atomic piles. While Paps and Grandmother looked after the children, Almut, Reinhard and Janna drove off with a group of friends, finally walking along footpaths because the French had closed the border. Other groups also appeared among the fields and joined them. Among them Janna suddenly recognized the Hoffmanns and the Jordans from Schlitz. Mr Jordan was thin now; Mrs Jordan was wearing trousers and a parka, and Janna thought she looked extraordinarily comic in them.

'Janna!' cried Tina Hoffmann, running up and embracing her. Tina still had her head of curls, although she must have left Schlitz hours after Janna. The Hoffmanns had presumably not gone through the rainstorm.

'You poor thing,' said Tina.

Janna swallowed.

'It's growing again,' she said, sounding almost hostile. 'Can't you see the down?'

'Tina means the death of your parents and your little brothers,' said Mrs Hoffmann.

Janna had to tell them where she was living now, and what had happened to her.

'You have changed,' said Mrs Jordan. 'The last time we saw you, you were still a child.'

'We've changed too, for that matter,' said Mr Jordan.

'And your grandparents?' asked Mrs Hoffmann.

Janna told her that they were still in Majorca. No, they did not yet know of Dad's and Mum's death and the death of the little boys.

'Oh, my God,' said Mrs Jordan. 'Think what they've got to face! When restricted zone three is released, quite soon, they'll be coming home.'

Mr Hoffmann hurried them on to reduce the space between the groups. Tina stayed with Janna, as they walked first through mist and then through drizzle. Janna learned that they were expecting zone three to be released on the first of October.

'The Jordans want to go home right away,' said Tina, 'on the first day. Because of their garden. Mrs Jordan would like to wait a bit longer, but there's no holding him. And the farmers from the Schlitz area want to go home immediately too. They still have to plough in the harvest before winter comes.'

But Janna also learned that there were others who did not want to go home at all – the Eggelings, for instance, who thought the health risk was too great. The poison would stay in the earth for who knew how long, and everything they ate or even touched would be contaminated. The Eggelings were now living on the Dutch border with relations and intended to stay there. They were pensioners and could live where they liked.

'What about you?' asked Janna.

'We are emigrating', said Tina, 'to Colombia. We are just waiting until we have enough money. Europeans have to pay a deposit now if they want to go to the country for good. And the crossing costs a bomb, but they accept you, even if you're contaminated.'

Colombia? In the past she had always passionately longed to travel in South America, but now she thought of her home on the hillside, saw it lying there, bright in the sunshine, with the little town below. The contours of the two forts and the massive rear tower were outlined against the sky, with the slender steeple of the evangelical church between them.

Schlitz was the most beautiful place in the world.

When they reached the other groups the place was already in tumult. The French police had waited for the demonstrators on the edge of the town and were forcing them back. Janna broke away from Tina to go in search of Almut and Reinhard.

'If you ever want to come to Colombia,' Tina called, 'write to us!'

'I'm going to Schlitz,' Janna replied.

'Look in on our house!' cried Mrs Jordan, waving her goodbye.

Janna pushed her way through the crowd until she bumped into Almut. Reinhard had been arrested. He was not freed until the evening, returning with a surface graze on his forehead, temporarily covered with a rough plaster, and with dried blood still adhering to his eyebrows and moustache. His left sleeve had been almost ripped out at the shoulder. Almut embraced him passionately.

'I was lucky, all the same,' he said, as they drove home.

Four demonstrators had died, three Frenchmen and a German. More than thirty had been severely injured, including some policemen. It was said that there had been violent disagreements among the police: many had refused to oppose the demonstrators, in fact many had been openly on their side.

The bus had a flat tyre and they did not get home until midnight, dead tired and famished. While Grandmother told them what the children had been up to, Reinhard slipped into the bathroom behind her back, so that the sight of his face would not alarm her.

Three days later the date on which restricted zone three was to be officially released was announced: the first of October. The decision was taken in the Bundestag by a

small majority. The new Minister for the Environment had declared that contamination in the area had subsided and its resettlement gave no cause for concern. Nevertheless, the authorities insisted that people would be returning at their own risk.

Janna was sitting in front of the television when this news came through. The whole clan was sitting there, including the children. A family from Frauenstein had brought up the old set as a contribution to the centre, but Almut did not want to install it there until the day before the opening.

'Otherwise they will all stop painting and laying floors,' she said. 'I know those people – and myself.'

Before Grafenrheinfeld that set would have been an affront. The picture was completely distorted: everything round was egg-shaped in the upper half and the politicians' contorted faces made them laugh.

'If only they really had foreheads that high!' cried Paps. 'Their brains might be that much bigger!'

'In that case they would not have released the restricted zone yet,' said Almut angrily. 'Everything is still contaminated there! It's madness to send people back. They're not even ashamed to push them into running the risk – and they'll shrug off the guilt when it goes wrong!'

'There must be a strong lobby in favour,' said Reinhard.

'Business interests,' came Paps's voice from the back. 'And anxiety over property.'

'And homesickness,' said Grandmother.

Janna looked at her in astonishment.

'I come from East Prussia,' she said. 'I know what I'm talking about.'

That September was a long series of bright, sunny days.

Reinhard brought home bales of coarse cloth and unrolled them in the garden: banners had to be painted for the opening rally. Helpers gathered, painted all day long, became friends. Many stayed overnight. A huge banner, which was to hang over the speakers' platform, slowly reached completion: LONG LIVE LIFE! it said. Other banners lay beside it on the grass, and the children of Frauenstein stood by the hedge and gaped. They did not understand the meaning of phrases such as CHEAT DEATH! or DON'T BE FOBBED OFF! They puzzled over the question: CAN YOU CLAIM YOU KNEW NOTHING ABOUT IT THIS TIME? They giggled over HIBAKUSHA OF THE WORLD, UNITE! There was only one motto which made them nod their heads: TO HELL WITH THE POLITICIANS! That would be something they had already heard at home.

Ruth and Irmela skipped about among the painters, rolled on the grass and climbed in and out of the bath-tub full of water which was standing in the sunshine. When Janna appeared they ran to her, asking to be cuddled and carried. Reinhard had made them a swing and they could not have enough of it. Grandmother sat outside for hours pushing it, until the children, completely content, began to nod. Then she went on knitting.

'To see that,' said Reinhard, 'you would think the world was well again.'

'In that case there would be a third child playing out there,' said Almut sadly.

'And a fourth, and a fifth,' said Janna.

'The whole place, the whole valley full of children,' said Paps. 'And adults as far as the horizon.'

'Not forgetting the future,' said Grandmother, straightening her glasses. 'The future would have to stretch over it all, deep blue and endless, with white feathery clouds in it.'

Her needles clicked.

'What's that going to be?' asked Janna, stroking the soft white wool.

'A surprise,' said Grandmother, winking at Janna through her thick glasses. 'For you.'

That night Janna dreamed of her parents, returned after a long absence, sitting with her on the steps of the weekend house, looking at the sunset sky, while Janna tried in vain to remember where they had been for so long.

14

On the first of October, a Thursday, the helpers, who had been busy with preparations for the opening rally, crowded inside the future Hibakusha centre, in front of the television which stood in the entrance hall. The programme was full of reports of the people coming home. There were moving pictures from Fulda, from little villages, from Coburg and Bamberg. Householders unlocked their doors, women cast appraising glances at their kitchens, little girls ran to their toy cupboards with shouts of joy. Now and then an overgrown garden would be shown, and even a rabbit hutch, with the remains of the dead animals, but these were immediately followed by the peaceful and unchanged silhouette of a village on the river Main.

Janna stood on her toes and tried to catch a glimpse of the pictures over people's shoulders. Would they show Schlitz? An old woman appeared on the screen and was filmed as she ran towards her half-timbered house and opened the garden door with shaking hands. They showed

her face in close-up: tears running down her cheeks. A reporter asked her how she felt. 'Everything is going to be all right now,' she sobbed.

Then Janna laughed, so loudly and shrilly that the people turned and stared at her.

While they were going home in the bus Janna was still thinking of Schlitz. Two men sitting in front of her, evidently colleagues, were talking about their children. One spoke of his daughter's confirmation, another of his son's school-leaving exam. Janna was not interested in their chat, but they were so close and spoke so loudly that she had to listen.

Another son was mentioned too, a student of Germanistics, who was obviously a worry to his parents.

'He's friendly with a girl from Fulda,' said the man. 'Of all places! She'll have caught something, for sure!'

'Anything to be seen?' asked the other.

'No,' Janna heard the first man reply, 'she's not ill, either, but who knows if they've got some congenital diseases? No one will know until it's too late. I'm trying to explain to the boy, but he's stubborn, you have no idea.'

'Where there's love . . .' said the other. 'But you're right. Mine isn't thinking about girls yet.'

When Janna got home Ruth ran towards her and clung to her. 'Stop that,' said Janna, pushing Ruth's hands off her leg. Ruth giggled and clutched the other leg. Janna pushed the child away so violently that she fell and began to whimper.

'What was *that* for?' asked Paps, turning startled eyes on Janna.

Then she ran up the stairs to the attic and flung herself on her mattress.

The next day, the day before the opening ceremony, they were all at the centre, even the children and Grandmother. There was still so much to do! Janna helped bring in the chairs. Several rows in front of the speakers' platform were to be reserved for the sick and their companions. At the back there were supposed to be long tables with benches, where people from the various towns or districts could meet. So many helpers had responded to an appeal in the newspaper that they were almost in the way.

Janna suddenly found herself face to face with Meike, her friend from Fulda. Meike flung her arms round Janna, but her father stayed in the car park, beckoning.

'I've got to go,' she said quickly. 'He's always so unbearable these days if everything isn't exactly as he thinks it should be.'

'Elmar is dead,' said Janna.

'Elmar?' cried Meike. 'Did you know that Ingrid, too –? No? I'll come back tomorrow and tell you everything!'

Janna let go of the chair that she had been carrying across to the platform and walked over to the building that the town had made available as a Hibakusha centre. She needed an empty space where she could think in peace and quiet.

'Janna! Janna!' She heard Irmela's piping voice calling from a distance, but she did not turn.

'The mayor is going to speak as patron of the institution!' she heard Almut cry through one of the open windows.

As she approached the entrance, which was being decorated with garlands, she heard her name called again, but she behaved as if she were deaf. She wanted to be left in peace: Ingrid was dead! She could see her friend's laughing face before her eyes, and she remembered how almost every day at break they had shared their snacks. There was

always a thick slice of smoked sausage or liver sausage in Ingrid's sandwich, which was never available in Janna's house. She had cheese to offer – a delicious variety of cheeses. Once she had been out to visit Ingrid at their small farmhouse in the country.

'Janna!' a man's voice called again.

It was no good, she had to turn round – and there was Lars, Lars from Schlitz, in whose car she had driven home on the day of the accident.

Ignoring her bald head, he shook her hand for a long time. 'Come with me,' he said. 'My parents are sitting at the table over there. The Miltners are there too – you know him, the table tennis coach.'

'I have no time,' she said hesitantly. 'I'm helping my aunt here.'

'Aren't you interested in hearing about Schlitz?' he asked. 'I was there yesterday.'

She stared at him, then followed him to his family's table. Lars's mother smiled awkwardly when she saw Janna's bald head, and could not take her eyes off it.

'I have got a wig,' said Janna, 'but I don't wear it.'

Lars's mother stared at her uncomprehendingly, then shook her head.

'I would never have the courage to go around like that,' she said to Mrs Miltner, who took Janna's hand and murmured, 'My sincerest condolences.'

'Mother!' cried Lars.

He urged Janna to sit down and began to talk quickly: they lived in Mainz now, the dentist and his family were with relations in Venezuela, the Soltaus in their holiday home in Marbella – and the Trettners in Canada.

'The Trettners had the most luck,' said Lars's mother reproachfully. 'Heaven knows what connections they must

have! We applied to the Canadian Embassy three times. We filled in masses of forms, but it did no good. They don't let contaminated people in, but we're not contaminated at all. But how can you prove it?'

'And how is Schlitz looking?' asked Janna.

'We're going to South Africa now,' said Lars's mother. 'They are still humane – they admit all Germans, contaminated or not. The Miltners are going too. We'll be there in three weeks.'

'And how do things look in Schlitz?' asked Janna again.

'The Jordans went there the day before yesterday,' said Lars's mother. 'And the Heinbachs left this morning. Some people wanted to wait for the meeting here before they went back, but it will never be as it once was. Lots of people won't want to live there any more.'

She talked and talked and would not be interrupted: thousands had emigrated and it was not only those who had been evacuated who were leaving. The foreign consulates were constantly under siege – oh, the stories she could tell! First they had wanted to go to the United States – not a chance. Then Canada – no good, either. At the Turkish consulate the people had laughed at them.

She was getting more and more excited: 'Most people want to go to South America, but you don't get there unless you've got money. The more money you have, the more doors are open to you. Our doctor went to Kenya, but of course as a doctor he has more opportunities than we do. Even the Nepalese are apparently generous, but who wants to go to the end of the world? Thank God someone gave us the tip about South Africa. I'm surprised there aren't more Germans going there. Ideal climate, and you're welcome, even without a fortune!'

'Schlitz,' said Janna. 'How are things in Schlitz?'

'Empty,' said Lars's father. 'What's the point of keeping our business there when there are no customers? And we'll be waiting a long time for compensation.'

Janna sat still and did not answer, but Lars jumped to his feet.

'What's the matter with you?' he shouted. 'Who's interested in your stupid shop now? Who, apart from you? And who is going to compensate *her*?' He pointed to Janna. 'Have you ever thought about *that*? What do you think parents are worth? Or brothers and sisters? What are you moaning about? Who was always in favour of nuclear energy? "So that the lights don't go out here." Do you remember? No?'

His parents stared at him speechlessly and he took Janna's arm and drew her away.

'Go to South Africa, that's the right place for you!' he shouted over his shoulder. 'From one madness to another!'

They stopped under a line of trees.

'Well, that's that, then,' he said. 'I've been longing to do that – thank you for giving me the cue!'

'Tell me about Schlitz,' said Janna.

Shadows played across Lars's face. He shrugged his shoulders slowly.

'Ghostly,' he said. 'From a distance everything looks quite normal: the hillside, the half-timbered gables, the towers. But when you walk through it, your footsteps echo and there are dry leaves in front of the doors. Most of the roller-blinds are down, and in the gardens the weeds are flourishing, even between the paving stones in the market-place, and here and there you see mice scurrying about.'

Janna wanted to ask about their house, but it lay on the hillside above the town, at some distance from the main

street. He could not have passed it, and if he had, what could you see of a house from the outside?

'All my parents wanted to know', said Lars, 'was whether anything had been stolen from the house or the shop. But there was nothing missing. When they discovered that the electricity was working again they could not praise German organization too highly.'

He thought for a moment.

'The weirdest thing there', he said, 'is the leaves on the trees. They are already completely yellow, as they used to be by the end of October, and many of the trees are already bare.'

Janna looked up into the tree-tops.

'Go there,' he said. 'You won't know any peace till you do.' And he added: 'I would never have believed I cared so much about the dump!'

'Thanks,' said Janna, and with a nod they parted. Janna watched as Lars walked over to his family.

She returned to the meadow, where she found Grandmother on one of the chairs in front of the platform, and took charge of the children. Relieved, Grandmother returned to her fleecy knitting, which was bunched in her lap. Her needles clicked as she cast off.

Janna discovered Paps behind the platform, messing about with electric cables. She watched him for a time, until the children began to whine. She liked being near him. From time to time he raised his head and smiled at her, and she smiled back, but they did not speak.

That evening, when they were home again, Janna explained to the others that she would be leaving for Schlitz in the morning.

Almut reacted with astonishment.

'Over there?' she cried. 'Into the contaminated zone? Why, so suddenly? Leave it another few weeks or months, you won't be missing anything – no one is waiting there for you.'

'The house will be dusty anyway,' said Reinhard, 'and the winter will deal with all the weeds.'

They were right, and yet she simply could not wait any longer.

'It's the inauguration tomorrow,' said Almut. 'Are you going to miss that, after doing so much work for it?'

'Let her go,' said Paps. 'If she's drawn to it, you can't hold her back.'

'But you will come back?' asked Grandmother, her eyes anxious.

'I don't know yet,' said Janna. 'I don't want to make any promises. Everything is undecided.'

'It looks to me', said Paps, 'as if you are doing exactly the right thing. We wish you a good journey – and no more sorrow than you can bear.'

Almut gave her a purse containing a hundred-mark note and some change.

'After all, you're not going to the ends of the earth,' she said.

Janna asked her if she could borrow the big holdall.

Late that evening she went out, unnoticed by the others, and put a small folding spade, which she had found in the tool shed a few days ago, into the bag.

The next morning she left very early, but not so early that Grandmother did not hear her. She came softly out of the children's room and pressed the fluffy, white object into her hand.

'A beret,' she whispered. 'These October mornings can

be cold, and you told me that in the autumn there is often a mist in the Fulda valley. You may need it.'

Janna dropped it into the holdall, hugged Grandmother, kissed her downy cheek and thanked her for the beautiful beret. Then she ran down to the bus stop, wearing the same jeans and T-shirt in which she had arrived in Wiesbaden. Only her anorak was new. It had belonged to Ruth and Irmela's mother, and had been presented to her by Grandmother just after she came to live with them.

15

It was drizzling and a mist lay over the Rhine valley, but Janna did not have to wait long at the motorway exit. The second car that stopped was driving towards Kassel. The driver was a woman, and after one glance at Janna's head she began to talk about the troubles of her sister, who had lost everything in the disaster.

'Everything!' cried the woman.

'But she is still alive,' said Janna.

The woman talked on, paying no attention, but there was no need for Janna to answer and she dozed off.

That lift carried her no more than fifty kilometres. On the grass at the exit Janna picked a big bunch of sunflowers until a bearded student in an ancient Fiat gave her a lift. She was lucky: the student was heading for Berlin, but when he heard that she wanted to go to the former restricted zone three, he looked thoughtful.

'I have something to do there,' she said, and asked him to put her down at Bad Hersfeld.

'Do think it over,' he said. 'What you have to do can't

be as important as all that.'

But she was determined. When he stopped she thanked him and got out. As she moved the spade fell out of her bag and the student stared first at it, then at her.

'Are you going to dig something up?' he asked.

'I am going to bury someone,' she said.

'All the dead are buried,' he said. 'Even the dead animals. They sent special troops in at once to do it.'

'But', said Janna, 'I don't think they searched the rape fields.'

'Who is it?'

'My little brother.'

'Get back in,' said the student. 'I'll drive you there.'

He drove with the windows closed and both were silent during the journey. Shortly before the village of Asbach she asked him to stop, thanked him, gave him a sunflower from her bouquet and got out. He turned the car and set off again. There was scarcely any traffic on the broad main road, but without making the detour through the village she strode straight across the fields. She reached the embankment and stopped, staring down at the village for a long time. The whole gentle valley had taken on a brownish colour. A few trees down in the village were already bare. She took a deep breath and clambered up the slope.

There was her bike beside the rails, all rusted, with her school satchel still on the luggage rack. But behind it, filling half the horizon, lay the unharvested rape, giving away no secrets.

She climbed slowly down the far side of the embankment towards Uli's twisted bicycle, which lay on the verge. The plastic bag was in tatters – animals had probably torn it to get at the food inside. On the now overgrown cinder path she discovered the teddy bear, flattened by car tyres and

covered with dust, which turned its satin-brown colour to sand.

She lifted the bunch of sunflowers high above her head and waded into the field. Feeling carefully ahead of her with her feet and bending the stalks apart, she had to hunt for some time before she found Uli. Goosefoot and wild camomile had almost completely covered what was left of him. There was no smell. The key of the door was still hanging on its red leather thong. When she pulled at it, it gave way without her having to tear it off. The key fell into her hand. She put it away and took the spade out of the holdall.

She did not have to dig a very big grave. When the hole seemed deep enough she put in the sunflowers, now rather withered, and laid on them the pathetic remnants that were all that remained of Uli. She fetched the teddy bear and put it in the grave. Then she shovelled in earth and trod it down. Several times she had a violent attack of nausea, but she did not give in.

As soon as she had finished her work she folded the spade and hurried through the rape, without looking back, then up the embankment, like someone taking refuge on a dyke from floods. At the top she looked back breathlessly at the rape field, but there was scarcely a trace of her passage and she could no longer make out where the grave lay.

She realized that her knees were shaking, but now she no longer had to hold herself together. She dropped to the ground and lay on her back for a long time, watching the clouds pass by above her – peaceful, gentle clouds, puffed up like cotton wool.

It must be lovely to lie on sunflowers, enveloped in silence and cool darkness, without fear.

Her bicycle tyres were flat, but the pump was still working, and after pumping up the tyres she took the satchel off the luggage-rack and threw it away without opening it. Then she fixed the spade on the rack and thrust the bicycle along the path. It squeaked and resisted as she pressed down on the pedals, but she made progress.

Nothing was moving in the village. Dead leaves were still lying in the streets, and so was the sand left behind from the last downpour. A rat stole across the road. A dog, so thin that its bones stuck out, was lying before the door of a house, but she could not tell if it was dead or sleeping. When Janna reached the crossroads she found the wrecks of several cars crushed together in the front garden through which the Mercedes had once rocked and swayed. A bulldozer must have cleared the road.

She turned on to the A62. A few houses on, a family was unloading a car and carrying cases and bundles into the house. A woman raised a window on the upper floor and Janna heard her shout: 'Thank God, it's all still there – but the mice –!'

Then the village came to an end and in all directions there was nothing to be seen but unharvested, overgrown fields and the wrecks of cars along the roadsides. As Janna squeaked by on her bicycle, a scraggy cat stole out of the half-lowered window of a Volkswagen Golf. The Golf had a roof-rack, and beside the car lay a commode.

A few people were to be seen moving about in the next two villages, and Janna saw one woman cleaning windows and a man standing beside a field, looking at the grey-brown wheat that had been beaten down by the rain. An old man and a boy of about twelve were dragging a dead pig out of its sty. It must have been overlooked by the refuse disposal men.

More and more often Janna had to stop and pump up the tyres, made cracked and brittle by the hot summer months.

The drizzle had stopped and the ghostly silhouette of the motorway bridge rose from the mist. There was very little traffic, almost all of it travelling south: trucks and cars packed high with belongings. The slope beside the motorway entrance was entirely covered by a car scrapyard. A flock of crows perching on the wrecks fluttered up as Janna rode past.

She turned off the main road on to the country road, where the real Schlitz region began. A woman was sweeping the pavement, two children were playing football out in the street, and on the cobbles of a farmyard a man was lying under a tractor, hammering. There was a smell of cabbage soup. Janna stopped under a tree by the roadside – the tree she had leant against while Uli gobbled down his bread and cheese. At that moment her mother and Kai had still been alive, and probably Jo as well. Her father might already have been dead, and all the time Grandma Berta and Grandpa Hans-Georg had been sitting, unaware, drinking coffee on their terrace in Majorca.

She reached into her pocket and felt the key there. Then she pumped up the tyres again and pedalled on, along the road she had so often travelled with her parents and her brothers. Walking had been Dad and Grandpa's hobby, something in which they were at one. They often fell into an argument over politics on the way, but they could always forget the reason for the squabble over a good beer.

A fallen tree lay across a garden, crushing the fence. An old man was hacking the branches off the trunk, while in another corner of the garden a woman gathered up wind-

falls. She stopped Janna and asked her where she was going.

'To Schlitz?' she repeated, astonished. 'On your own?'

'My parents are dead,' said Janna, 'but our house is still there.'

'Who were your parents?' asked the woman, tying her headscarf on more firmly.

'The Meineckes,' said Janna.

'Oh my God,' said the woman, staring at Janna. 'The Meineckes. What kind of a world is this? How have we deserved this?'

'Silly question, Marta,' growled the old man. 'Mankind has grown arrogant; we thought we could understand and do everything better than the Almighty. We needed to be taken down a peg, and now we have been.'

'You said exactly the same thing after the war,' cried the woman.

'Quite,' said the old man, 'but even that was not enough, it was all forgotten. I told you that once, way back, when Ralf and Leni flew to Morocco on holiday – farmers, in June! No good can come of that, I told you, it's a crime. And I told them the same thing when they didn't put the cattle out to pasture any more. The Almighty doesn't allow that kind of thing.'

'Oh yes, yes,' said the woman crossly, 'you always knew best. You must be related to the Almighty!'

Then she turned back to Janna. 'There won't be many people in Schlitz yet,' she said. 'We have only been here ourselves since the day before yesterday. Quite a few just come to see how it looks and drive away again. If you don't meet anyone today who can look after you, do come back here. After that you can think again.'

Janna thanked her, climbed back on her bike and set off,

passing the ditch from which she and Uli had drunk that day. She dismounted and washed her hands, which were still dirty from the earth she had dug. Over there, where the river Schlitz ran into the Fulda, the mist had dissolved and a patch of blue sky had appeared above the woods.

Young animals used to be put out to pasture here, but there were no cattle in the Schlitz valley now. Was there any point in working the land? Would they be able to eat the new harvests? And not everybody who had once lived here would be returning to the Schlitz valley now; there was no future here, the whole district would be poor and sick.

Janna trod more vigorously on the pedals, although by now she was practically riding on the rims of the tyres. She passed the first houses of Hutzdorf, saw the town rising ahead of her with the silhouettes of the old castle and its towers, and thought of the house on the hillside. Someone called to her from behind – wasn't that the voice of the friendly girl from the butcher's shop?

But she didn't want to be stopped now. First the homecoming had to be gone through, the sight of the house in which no one waited for her.

She jolted on, past the last houses of Hutzdorf and the first houses of Schlitz, blind to everything that was going on there, and to the sunshine reflected in the puddles. She turned towards the old station and puffed her way up the slope, but the rusty bike was not going to make it. Janna jumped off, leaned it against the wall and carried on on foot. The Soltaus' bungalow was silent, the roller-blinds down. Blown twigs had piled up on the steps to the front door, dry leaves rustled, and the geraniums at the windows had shrivelled up.

Janna stared the other way, towards the hillside, where

she could already see the top of the house with its pointed gable, framed by fruit trees and lilac, by broom and golden rod. Janna's heart beat faster: apart from Grandma Berta's wonderful geraniums, which had vanished, everything seemed to be as it had always been. She had only to run up the fifty-one steps and ring the bell as impetuously as ever. Then the door would open and Mum would be standing in the doorway, saying: 'So there you are!' Kai would come running out, let Janna pick him up and cover him with kisses, and Uli would appear with messy fingers and a grater, crying: 'Three more potatoes, then I've finished!' From the open living-room would come the scent of Dad's pipe smoke.

Janna had difficulty with the steps, stopping half-way up and supporting herself against the stone balustrade. She had often seen Grandma Berta stand like that when she came home from the shops. Her heart was throbbing right up in her throat and her knees were weak. She remembered how she had sometimes hopped up the steps ahead of Grandma Berta and laughed down at her from above: 'I got here first!'

Then Grandma Berta, leaning against the balustrade half-way up, would lift her head and call softly: 'You wait till you're old, it'll come to you one day.'

Slowly she climbed on. Under the balcony lay a pile of withered geraniums. She began to wonder – of course, no one had watered the geraniums after she and Uli left the house, but who had taken the dry stalks out of the window boxes when the house was empty?

A flicker of hope dawned in Janna, grew and took her breath away. Could it all have been a misunderstanding? An unfortunate chain of false information and mistakes? What if Dad and Mum and Kai –?

She took the key out of her pocket and quietly unlocked the door.

16

She listened, her head bent forward, but nothing was moving. No creak from the door which separated the staircase from the flat, no tap-tap from Mum's heels, no rush of toddler's feet could be heard, and there was no scent of pipe smoke, only of stale air. The smell of rotting leaves filtered in from outside. Janna sat down on the stairs and put her head in her hands.

But there *were* sounds! Footsteps were tapping slowly across the upper floor, where Grandma and Grandpa had their flat. They were coming downstairs: Grandpa Hans-Georg's footsteps – unmistakable! Then she actually heard him clear his throat.

'Is there anyone there?' he called down.

She whisked round, snatched the white, woolly beret from the holdall and pulled it on. Then she stepped forward.

'It's me,' she said.

He leaned over the banister, and she saw again his long, narrow, smoothly-shaved face, the bags under his eyes and

the grey hair that always fell over his brow. His eyes were not too good now and it was a moment before he recognized her, but as soon as he understood, he was beside himself.

'Good God – Janna, is it you?' he cried, and took two steps down towards her, only to turn and shout up: 'Berta, come quickly, Janna's here!'

Even before he reached Janna, the flat door opened on the upper floor and she could hear tripping steps. Grandma appeared: first her hand on the banister, then her head, leaning forward, and then she was hurrying down the stairs.

'Oh Jannie, Jannie,' she cried, 'you've come already! What a surprise!'

Grandpa reached Janna first, hugged her to him and kissed her on both cheeks. She hung on to the beret, which threatened to slip. Then Grandma pushed him to one side. Janna had not remembered her so small – she had to stoop to kiss her – or was it she, Janna, who had grown?

'How thin you've grown!' said Grandma, stroking her cheek. 'No wonder, after all that excitement. But now we're going to feed you up again!'

Janna felt as if she were dreaming. Slowly she walked up the stairs, Grandma and Grandpa behind her. Grandma was hanging on to Grandpa Hans-Georg's arm, as she had always done, as long as Janna could remember. And from the open flat door came the scent of coffee, just as it had always done at this time of day.

'You must forgive us,' panted Grandma, 'for not having cleaned up properly yet. The guestroom and Grandpa's study, for instance. This is only our third day here and you wouldn't believe how dirty everything was. Everything covered in dust – and what a smell in the flat!'

'We were some of the first to move back here to Schlitz,' said Grandpa. 'We had heard even in Majorca that restricted zone three would be re-opened on the first of October and that was the end of our patience. We booked the flight at a time when we could drive straight out here from the airport – we took a taxi, as the buses and trains don't seem to be moving regularly yet. And we stopped in front of a supermarket right there in Frankfurt and filled the taxi with food. Everything is going to take some time to get going again here – I mean the shopping facilities and all that.'

'You know, we were so fed up with Majorca,' Grandma interrupted, 'and then we were worried about our flat here.'

'Everything has got a bit out of control with that unfortunate business in Grafenrheinfeld,' Grandpa went on, smiling. 'Perhaps even morale, would you say? At least, we both had the impression it would be better to look after our own things here instead of leaving everything to the police.'

'I think', said Grandma, 'that we could drink coffee on the balcony. The sun has come out and it gets warm quickly at this time of year.'

'Grandma has already baked biscuits,' Grandpa Hans-Georg announced with a contented grin.

'And as for him, he's already got going in the garden,' said Grandma. 'He simply couldn't wait. The steps were almost completely overgrown – you should have seen them! The bushes had spread everywhere – and the vegetables behind the house – indescribable!'

While Grandpa arranged the chairs and spread a familiar old tablecloth, Janna stood on the balcony, looking down on the town, which lay silent in the sunshine.

One or two pedestrians, now and then a car – that was all. The streets were sprinkled with brown leaves that no one had swept away. The autumn trees shimmered in the sunshine, many of them already bare.

'Back then, that day –' she began slowly.

'Ssh,' Grandma interrupted her, with an anxious, defensive gesture. 'I don't want to hear about it. Please! I don't want to be reminded of all that. Let's be glad that everything turned out well after all.'

'We rang Helga from Frankfurt Airport,' said Grandpa, 'and found out that everyone was all right. They can be discharged quite soon.'

Janna took a deep breath and looked at Grandma, who smiled back, so tenderly, so happily.

'Yes,' said Janna quietly, and for a moment she was certain that she was not lying, 'they are well, very well.'

'Everything's all right then,' said Grandpa, sitting down at the head of the table and leaning back in his chair. 'We will be seeing them again soon. The boys must have grown a lot – but they really could at least have sent a card to Majorca. No one can be so ill that they can't at least write a card.'

'You forget the shock,' said Grandma Berta mildly. 'Everything must have been topsy-turvy here.'

She paused, then added rather hurriedly: 'Could anyone have guessed that those power stations were so dangerous?'

Grandpa Hans-Georg tried to say something, but Janna could not wait.

'Didn't Mum and Dad tell you often enough?' she asked, and leaned forward tensely, waiting for Grandma's reply.

'In my opinion –' Grandpa began, raising his hand for a grand gesture.

'No, Hans-Georg,' Grandma interrupted. 'Let's drink our coffee first. You can talk politics after that.'

Talk politics. Janna remembered the phrase well, Grandma had used it often, in a rather belittling tone, as if it were some particularly pointless hobby, like football, stamp-collecting, or solving crossword puzzles. The phrase had always maddened her parents.

Grandma was sitting down now as well. The table was carefully laid and the crumble cake smelled delicious. Nothing was missing – not even the whipped cream: delicacies from the good old days. Neither at Helga's nor at Almut's was there either whipped cream or crumble cake, and they used powdered milk in their coffee.

'Do sit down, child,' said Grandma, smiling all over her sweet face. 'Who would have thought the three of us would be drinking coffee together today?' She giggled. 'That is, to be exact, there are not three of us drinking coffee today. Jannie is having cocoa, as usual. At your age coffee is poison.'

She leaned forward and filled Janna's cup with cocoa. Janna sat on the edge of her chair, ready to spring up at any moment.

'But now, child, tell me why you didn't take little Coco with you?' said Grandpa, and Janna noticed that he was taking pains to keep the reproach out of his voice. 'When we arrived we found the poor creature had starved to death in his cage. Why didn't you at least let him go! How could that have happened?'

'We forgot him, Grandpa,' said Janna.

'Forgot?' cried Grandpa and Grandma together, staring at Janna in dismay.

'I cried when I found him,' sighed Grandma.

Janna was silent.

'Ah well,' said Grandpa Hans-Georg soothingly, 'we are not going to spoil this beautiful day with complaints. Let's forget about it.'

There was a pause, while Janna stared at the flowers on the tablecloth and thought of Uli. The coffee spoons tinkled gently in the fine porcelain cups. A wasp circled over the cake.

'Now do take that hat off, child,' said Grandpa Hans-Georg.

Janna shook her head. She was longing for a slice of cake. She had eaten nothing yet that day, not even breakfast. She gorged herself. A bit of the good old days, guaranteed contaminated. She tried not to think about it.

'The hat, Jannie, the hat,' Grandpa reminded her. 'You're still wearing it.'

'Oh, leave her alone,' said Grandma, turning to her husband – and then to Janna: 'I expect you knitted it yourself and you're proud of it. I think it's terribly pretty, too. So do you, don't you, Hans-Georg?'

'I don't care for the colour,' said Grandpa. 'From a distance you could take the child for an old lady with white hair. Especially as she's completely hidden every bit of her own hair underneath it.'

Grandma Berta laid a hand on Janna's arm and said, with her little wilful toss of the head: '*I* like it, and I like the colour most of all. In any case,' she leaned across towards Grandpa again, 'don't forget that the child has a great deal of excitement behind her.'

'Of course,' said Grandpa, putting his cup down noisily, 'much too much excitement. Unnecessary excitement. German hysteria. Here we are, ninety or a hundred kilometres from Grafenrheinfeld, and at the merest suspicion of trouble they chase out the entire population. Just for a

picion, they close down factories, leave the cattle to die and the harvest to be ruined. I find it totally incomprehensible. It would have been enough to evacuate pregnant women and children for a week or two, like the Russians did that time. One must give them that: after Chernobyl they showed us how to deal with these things.'

Janna opened her mouth, but Grandma Berta was ahead of her.

'But, Hans-Georg,' she said, 'they say that nine times as much radioactivity was produced by the accident at Grafenrheinfeld as at Chernobyl.'

As always, she raised her cup with her little finger held out daintily, and drank with pleasure.

'They can tell all kinds of stories,' said Grandpa Hans-Georg darkly. 'Just think of the hysteria here, after Chernobyl! And if you ask me, it's always the same people for whom no disaster can be big enough. Opponents of nuclear power, do-gooders, the whole green lot of them, who want to send us back to the Stone Age.'

Janna remembered again the little figures on the shelf in the emergency hospital. She wished she had some stones, plenty of handy stones. She looked around her. There were no stones here on the balcony, not even a block of wood or a paperweight. Her eyes stopped at the cocoa jug. She took it in both hands and lifted it high.

'Nice and hot, isn't it?' said Grandma, with an affectionate smile. 'Drink it up.'

Janna lowered the jug. No.

'But in the papers they said there were so many dead,' Grandma Berta told Grandpa Hans-Georg.

'Have you seen them?' he replied grumpily. 'Naturally at the power station and round there. And then the traffic chaos . . .'

'They wrote that there were eighteen thousand,' said Grandma Berta.

Grandpa waved his hand irritably. 'I'll tell you what it's all about,' he lectured, as if to a large audience. 'It's all about keeping these accidents from the press. Then there wouldn't be any of that hysteria, and we would be spared all the publicity and all the exaggeration. These days much too much gets published. Why should every Tom, Dick and Harry know about the details of a reactor, about rems and becquerels? After all, they don't really understand it. Why should all the world know how many dead we have? It's these grand disaster fairy-tales that do unnecessary damage to our image abroad. I'll say just this: in this country there used to be politicians who would have handled the whole thing so discreetly that even here in Schlitz the accident would never have been noticed. And no member of the press would have dared to go sniffing around.'

Grandma Berta nodded her agreement.

Then Janna pulled the beret off her head and began to speak.

25435

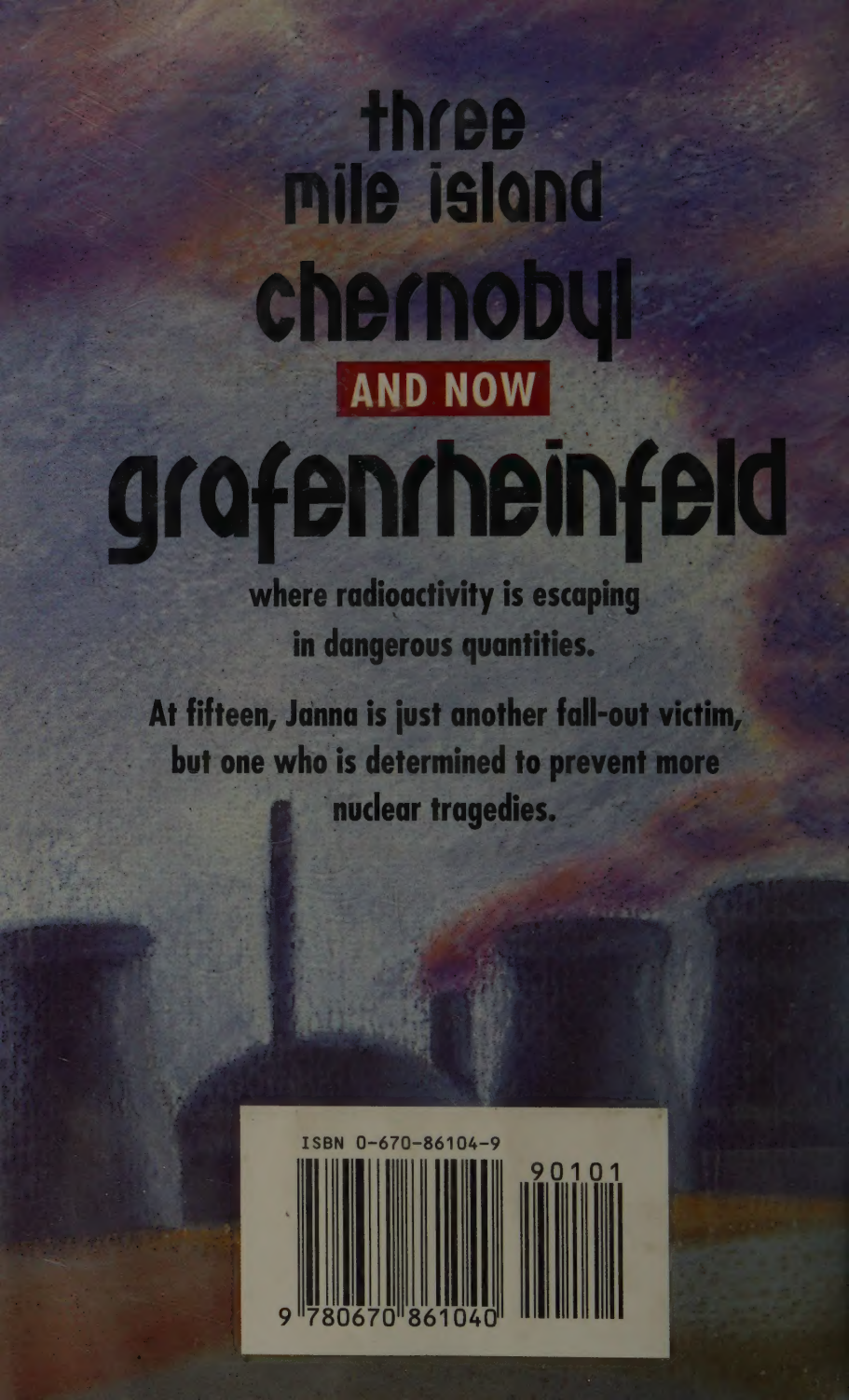
Pau Pausewang
Fall-out

Gudrun Pausewang was born in 1928 in what was to become East Germany, the eldest of six children. Her father was killed in Russia in 1943 and at the end of the war, the family fled to West Germany.

Since graduating, Gudrun Pausewang has worked as a teacher both in Germany and in South America, where she spent some twelve years in Chile, Venezuela and Colombia. She now lives and teaches in Hessen, in Germany. She has one son.

She began writing in 1959 and is the author of numerous books for children and teenagers, in which her own experiences of poverty in South America, the fate of refugees and the nuclear threat are reflected.

Cover illustration by Lynne Russell



ISBN 0-670-86104-9
90101
9 780670 861040