

Julia Franck
Worlds Apart

How can a writer make love and death into a story?

Born in East Berlin, Julia is eight when her mother takes her and her sisters to the West, first to the Marienfelde refugee camp and then to rural Schleswig-Holstein. Life in their chaotic farmhouse becomes impossible for her and she moves out to West Berlin, aged thirteen. Living on benefits and cleaning jobs, she finds her father and loses him shortly afterwards, finishes school and meets Stephan, the first love of her life. When she thinks back, the past becomes the present. *Worlds Apart* is Julia Franck's moving story of an unconventional young life riddled with fractures and insecurities; a painfully beautiful work of self-assertion that tells of shame and grief just as precisely as of death and love. Writing and literature prove to be instruments of survival, for the time being.

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Julia Franck, born in Berlin in 1970, studied Pre-Columbian studies, philosophy and German literature. She has published numerous books since 1997, including *Liebediener* (1999) and *Bauchlandung* (2000). She was a resident at the Villa Massimo in Rome in 2005. Her novel *Die Mittagsfrau* won the German Book Prize in 2007 and has been translated into forty languages. Her most recent book *Rücken an Rücken* (2011, *Back to Back*) was nominated for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize. *Lagerfeuer* was adapted for the cinema.

Translation: Katy Derbyshire

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BORN IN EAST BERLIN, I had lived in West Berlin's Marienfelde refugee camp with my mother and three sisters for almost nine months as a child, from October 1978 to the summer of 1979. The West German state of Schleswig-Holstein admitted us as a hardship case and our mother found an old brick farmhouse in a run-down village on the North Sea-Baltic Sea Canal, with a thatched roof, a large almost lightless threshing floor at its centre, and an apparently never-ending unfenced garden bordering on paddocks down to the canal. Anna wanted to drop out there and make a home for herself. Supported by benefits, she wanted to start a new life in freedom with her daughters.

No one knew her in West Germany; actresses were ten a penny. The labour exchange in the camp had told her to her face that no one was waiting for her here in the West. There was no chance of acting work for a thirty-five-year-old woman, single, with four children from different fathers, who hadn't worked for several years. Around the time of her first application to leave the GDR, she had stopped working at the Hans-Otto-Theater in Potsdam, intending to study stage design. Over the years of repeated summonses and rejections of her exit application, she had been allocated jobs as a dubbing artist, a postwoman and a graveyard gardener. The combination of her CV and her social situation rendered her unqualified for the West German labour market. She had been classified as a welfare case. Her training at the renowned Ernst Busch acting school, her many years at various theatres and her roles in East German films were not even enough to get her retrained, at least until the Wall came down.

We kept various animals. A sheep, a goat, a pig, a goose, a rabbit, a dog and a cat. At first, they were all female, apart from my twin sister's dog. None of them was to be alone for long, they were all to multiply. We dug vegetable beds beneath the knotty fruit trees and set up cold frames. We made jam, pressed juice out of elderberries, baked bread from our own hand-milled grain, milked the goats and made our own cheese. The only

thing we children didn't want to eat, other than our mother's nettle soup, was the lambs and piglets soon to be born. In the summer we picked sorrel, yarrow and dandelion leaves from the fields; who needed watery supermarket lettuce? None of us used recipes from books; we taught ourselves to cook any way we liked. Our apple cakes and oat cookies, Christmas biscuits and blueberry tarts were improvised. We got up alone in the morning, made ourselves tea, and in the winter we children shovelled the snow and ice from the pavement before dawn. We walked the five kilometres to the Steiner school on the other side of the canal, sticking our thumbs out in the cold when we reached the ferry, in the hope that someone might take pity and have space for us twins in their car. I remember the pain and the burning in my toes as they gradually thawed out under my desk during the day's first lesson. Damp socks in wet leather shoes. The bus was too expensive. When the snow melted in spring, we cycled to school on our patched-up bikes. Fixing a puncture, changing brake pads and replacing the cable between a dynamo and a lamp, changing a chain, repairing a bottom bracket and replacing the loose ball bearings, greasing parts – there was little we couldn't do ourselves.

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There was a boy, Schelsky, who would sometimes lie in wait for us at the hill by the ferry. We'd stand on the pedals to climb the hill. Our bikes had no gears; they were heavy. He positioned his bike straight across the road. The minute we braked in front of him and tipped sideways, he grabbed so hard at our handlebars that our bikes crashed to the ground; he showered us with insults and spat in our faces. More than once. He spat as much as he could, while he held first one and then the other of us down beside our bikes on the ground. Never before had someone spat in my face. There was no reason to do so; he just didn't like us. He was three years older and a head taller. We would have liked to forget him. Something of that smell sticks to you; you smell it days and years later.

Disorientated in the West Berlin refugee camp, Anna had set up a kind of tombola for herself. She wrote to all the Steiner schools in Germany and asked if they had free places for her three school-age daughters. The winning ticket took us to Schleswig-Holstein, near Rendsburg. Anna didn't know anyone in the area.

A nursery teacher at the regional Steiner school had volunteered to take us twins for the spring, which meant we left the camp slightly earlier

to move in with her and her husband. We were the strangers. Intruders. We spent those weeks doing everything wrong. We didn't know how to say grace, kept forgetting to wash our hands and comb our hair, ate with our mouths open, didn't hand over our dirty clothes for washing, and spoke a strange dialect. We knew no manners, no curtseys or meek looks. We lied when we dropped a glass and swept up the shards secretly but not thoroughly enough, we stole a biscuit from the plate on the table, we whispered and left our room without asking. Soon we were tiptoeing around the house. It felt bad, and we learned our first Steiner school joke: Felt? the husband asks with a faint smile, and fingers his wife's woollen sleeve. The teacher took us along every morning to the Steiner school, where we were registered as Johanna and Susanne. We only had to stay with her for a few weeks.

When the days got hot, we moved into the old farmhouse in Schacht-Audorf.

We spent all summer long digging pigweed roots out of the black earth, tilling a potato field and sowing carrots. Often, our mother wouldn't get up until we got home from school. Presumably, she went to bed late. Everyone had their own rhythm.

Once we'd cooked, done the washing up, helped in the garden and the wood was chopped and piled, we twins ran off to swim in the Dörpsee lake and play in the paddocks behind the house. Before the fields were sold one day to build the ferry-view estate with its box houses, the paddocks were rarely fenced in with wire; rows of beeches, called a *knick*, served as windbreaks and boundaries. The owner had rented the paddocks to farmers for grazing cows and horses put out to pasture. The horses and ponies, at least twenty if not twenty-five of them, were old and sick; no longer useful. We would visit them, feed them shepherd's purse and dandelion leaves, bring them the first small apples at the end of summer, and watch them. We gave them names and decided which were too small and weak to be ridden. For as long as we could remember, we'd been Indians. We never played Cowboys and Indians – cowboys were dumb, no one needed them. We were Indians. One of our horses was bald, another had a concave back. Its backbone drooped like it had carried cement sacks all its life and would soon be scraping its belly along the floor. Another had dull blueish eyes that watered; it could no longer see, that was for sure. One

usually lay on the grass and buckled its front legs when it stood up. We picked out a rather thin grey horse and a stocky black pony. My sister wanted the small one; I tried to approach the grey. The scent of the skin tickled my nose. For days and hours, we tried our luck: mounting without saddle or bridle, staying put and not getting thrown if they suddenly cantered off. My oldest book, which I still have today, was published by the Lucie Groszer publishing house in East Berlin. I was given it for my third birthday. It's a children's book, originally from America, with the German title *Der kleine Zweifuß* – Margaret Friskey's *Indian Two Feet*. I've read it to plenty of children I was looking after, as a babysitter, nanny or friend. Indian Two Feet, the chief's son, wants nothing more than a horse. We hear all the things he can do and how he spends his days. The book's central line is his father's advice: *If you want to find a horse, you have to think like a horse*. He attempts the impossible, he searches and thinks and searches. One day, he falls asleep in the shade of a big rock, exhausted. Turning the page, you see it: *Oh no, he didn't find a horse, but a horse found him*. At first, he thinks it must be a dream, then he sees that the horse is injured and limping. He takes off his shirt and wraps it around the horse's leg, trying to help him, and he tells the horse to come with him. *Indian Two Feet had a horse, but he walked*. That story of a lucky encounter that speaks many wise truths impressed me. Wanting to think like someone else. Putting yourself in their place. Looking for someone and not finding them. Helping, taking care of someone else. Encountering a companion who comes along and accepts help until they're healthy and we can ride together. When we played Indians, we'd gallop across the fields, set up jumps and run horse races on two legs; we were always both at once, rider and horse. We would click our tongues like hooves and flare our lips when the horses snorted. I liked the scent of their skin, the warm shimmer of their eyes.

At the age of three, my twin sister had once tipped head over heels into the shallow water of the Baltic and almost drowned. She's said to have had turns now and then as a small child, turning blue and briefly fainting. I don't remember that but our mother sometimes talked about it. A consequence of her lack of oxygen during our premature birth. Her sense of balance matured later too, it seems. After the winter when we'd had swimming lessons in the municipal pool at Wildau just south of Berlin, I practiced riding a bike outside our grandmother's house in Rahnsdorf. I

was a big girl of five. The saddle on Inge's folding bike was lowered as far as possible. Suddenly, I could do it. The faster I pedalled, the easier it was to keep my balance. Cars rarely passed the house in those days. I rode up and down Fürstenwalder Allee outside the house, crowing with pleasure. Until Anna came running onto the street and called to me to ride further away. Off you go! Not until I turned around for the umpteenth time and cycled past the house did I hear her anger as she yelled at me. She told me to get going, out of view. She flapped her arms to shoo me away. Get out of here, will you! So my twin wouldn't have to see me and watch me. *Gosh, just imagine it!* were words I heard constantly as a child. Followed by the formula: *Put yourself in her shoes*. For as long as I can remember, I was supposed to put myself in my twin's position, to grasp how terrible all my skills must be for her. To understand I was making her jealous. I didn't want to make anyone jealous, unhappy or angry. Don't show what you can do. I learned to feel ashamed. Of my visibility.

Was I punished for it? Unexpectedly, three brand new bicycles turned up in Rahnsdorf at Easter. My twin sister got a shiny frog-green children's bike with a bell and stabilizers. My older sister was given a blue one with a larger frame like an adult's, with a bell, a light and a pretty net protecting the spokes, and my mother the same in red. Next to the new bikes stood my big sister's old one; it was mine now. It had neither a bell nor a light but it rode well, without stabilizers. At least I could ride it fast and slow and in a slalom. Wherever I wanted. I just wasn't supposed to show it.

When we went to the funfair at Wuhlheide once or twice a year, I had to go on the ghost train and rollercoaster alone. My twin sister didn't dare. Yet we both climbed into the seats of the swing ride, which was to make us terribly sick after the very first round. We vomited in full swing and had to spend minutes recovering afterwards, sitting still on the floor until the dizziness faded. If we wanted to be cosmonauts, we had to have absolutely no fear of heights and giddiness, we were told. Like Laika and Yuri Gagarin, whose pictures we had seen at kindergarten, we wanted to go into space one day, so we had plenty ahead of us.

She was alright in a paddling pool, but my twin was scared of deep water. The early incident on the Baltic coast was blamed. She almost threw up when anyone said we were going swimming. A swimming teacher in the

Wildau pool had simply thrown her in the water one day, clearly thinking that would overcome her fear. The opposite was the case. Over the next few years she gave swimming pools a wide berth. She was excused from swimming at school. In Schacht-Audorf, she learned to swim in the Dörpsee lake, aged eleven or twelve. Her head held high out of the water, she swam a few metres out of the non-swimmers' section in short strokes. Then she could do it.

I had learned to swim just before I turned five, and I loved all kinds of water and swimming, breaststroke and backstroke, floating on my back and somersaulting, I'd dive underwater and open my eyes, in the Baltic, rivers and lakes and in the swimming pool, where I spent whole afternoons practicing underwater swimming and deep diving.

The silence under water. The way you could move your ribcage like you were breathing. Feel your diaphragm, your muscles, the current. At around the time my sister learned to swim, I got my intermediate badge and started practicing for the rescue swimming test in Rendsburg. My head between my outstretched arms and my fingertips out front, I jumped from the starting blocks. Feet-first from the diving tower at a height of seven and a half metres and, despite my fear, one day from the ten-metre board. Not many of the boys in the swimming club dared that. You just had to make sure you didn't do a belly flop. The pain on the soles of my feet. You can only feel brave if you feel fear. The tingle in my tummy on jumping, like the tingle as a small child when the swing swung downwards.

I had to go with her to the lake; she refused to go alone. The Dörpsee was too shallow for high diving towers. The lake had only a small one with a one-metre board and a three-metre board. I dived head-first from the top one into the opaque water. We never had to tell anyone where we were going. No one was ever waiting for us. There was no time we had to get home by. There were neither fixed mealtimes nor bedtimes. We went to sleep whenever we wanted. No one woke us in the morning; my alarm clock rang, we got up alone, swept the road in the grey light of dawn, cycled to school and went to bed in the evening when we were tired.

In our seventh year at school, aged thirteen, we were late almost every morning; classes started at twenty past seven. One day, our teacher lost his temper when we opened the door. He'd had enough, he said, he'd be calling our mother. We didn't tell him she was often still asleep in the

morning. Clocks were for other people. She didn't value punctuality. When she didn't get the day wrong, she'd arrive late to every appointment.

Without tea, which we made for her, Anna couldn't get out of bed on the weekend either. When she sat down with us at the breakfast table we'd laid, Sundays at noon, she couldn't yet hold a knife. A peculiarity I've never seen in myself or heard of from others: She couldn't grip just after getting up, the muscles in her hands and arms wouldn't work. Her teacup and cigarette were the first things she could hold. She had no strength in the hands she used in the afternoon to lift pails full of pig feed into the wheelbarrow and carry water for the animals. After rising late, she still didn't have the strength to cut a slice of bread for lunch. So we sliced it for her.

She was not shy of hard work, it was just that she couldn't do two things at once, or even perceive them. She couldn't follow a conversation if there was music playing. A pronounced sensitivity. When she lost control of herself, which happened easily, she had a short temper. We'd complain about this and that. When the kitchen stank of smoke in winter, and when she put out her cigarette stubs everywhere, on lids of jars, in egg cups and on plates. There were times when she'd remain untouched by the outside world, and on other days her own chaos upset her. We found it stressful that she'd only start tidying a few days before Christmas, and would lock herself into her room until midnight on Christmas Eve with crates of decorations from previous years, to arrange everything just as she wanted it – while we had cooked and our meal had long since gone cold on the stove, pulled our sister on a sledge around the village for hours until she stopped crying and fell asleep. There was barely a Christmas when we were allowed entry into her magical room before eleven at night.

Her short temper didn't kick in as a reaction to us complaining, for example, that we didn't get proper sneakers like other kids. Whereby we didn't want a certain brand; it was about the firm sole we needed for ball games, light athletics and running in the school gym. Her fuse blew when a branch of the Christmas tree caught fire during her explanation of our lack of money, and two things came together. It wasn't predictable; it could be a tiny thing that made her flip out. Someone expressed surprise at the wrong moment over the pots and pans sometimes soaking in the sink for days at a time? The minute the phone rang, a child yelled or she remembered the

goat needed milking, she would leave the kitchen and forget the pans on the stove, the rice would burn, the potato water would steam away and the potatoes would char, a dish in the oven would blacken. Discovering the smoke herself an hour or two later or called back by one of her daughters, she would hit the ceiling with rage at herself. There was no dishwasher. She hated washing dishes as much as we did. She only did it if one of us or a friend read to her for hours as she worked. The plates and glasses weren't clean enough for us? She might have a tantrum and throw crockery at us. Smashed crockery was glued together as best we could manage, plates and cups, bowls and even egg cups. We were ten years old, our big sister sixteen, when one such argument ended with each of us daughters, apart from the two-year-old, now having two washing-up days a week, and Anna only one. There was not one electrical gadget in our house and garden, neither a mixer nor an electric grain mill, no saw, no lawnmower. An hour or two on the grain mill affixed to the kitchen table gave us blisters on our hands and sore wrists. On our washing-up days, we had to wash all the dishes from morning to night for our five-person household and our guests. If we didn't manage it in one day, we were to finish the rest the next day. If we wanted to stay over with a friend we had to swap days. A few months later, she got sick of our constant criticism of her cooking. We didn't like her dandelion salad or the nettle soup with grains. The rice was too soggy and the pasta too soft. She foamed over with rage. Fine, then we were each to take turns cooking for a week from now on. It stayed that way from the time we twins were eleven and our big sister seventeen, until we moved out one after another a few years later. Cooking for one week a month, plus two washing-up days a week. Despite having one more household chore, we were glad. At last we could decide and cook what and how we liked. Spaghetti didn't have to stick together like a tree trunk, we could stir it in salted water and drain it in time. Rice could be cooked in less water and stay firm to the teeth, not a mushy mess. Onions didn't have to burn black and taste either sour or bitter, we could braise them over a low heat. The roux for a mustard sauce was quickly lump-free. The worst dish, in my view, was Anna's lentil soup with blubbery boiled gristly bacon. The smell, the consistency, the look of it. It made me nauseous. Faced with a bowl of it, I'd simply sit unmoving. The bowl would be plonked down again that evening and the next day. When everyone left the table, I had to stay seated

and just go hungry. Once the last person had left the kitchen, I got up secretly and took the lentils to the toilet, where I gagged even as I flushed. No one was allowed to throw food away. I had a guilty conscience and a light heart at the same time.

Anna loved all forms of bacon, most of all pure white speck, smoked, fried, boiled. She would cut thick chunks and pop them in her mouth. She even thought she had to hide the bacon so the mice wouldn't steal it away from her. That meant a slab of bacon might well fall on your head when you took an upturned bowl out of the high cupboard.

In summer, hay had to be made. The scythe was big and heavy compared to us, but one day we too learned to cut the grass. Turning the hay, collecting fallen fruit. In autumn we bottled apple sauce and preserved plums for the winter.

No one noticed me skipping handicraft classes. When I got sick with tonsillitis and couldn't get out of bed for a few days, it once happened that Anna only found out days later, when my sister mentioned it in passing. Then she came into my little room in the northernmost corner of the house. She asked what was the matter and did I need a cup of tea. I nodded. Tea would be good. I waited hours for that tea, until I made myself a cup that evening. She'd long since forgotten it and me again for an unforeseeable length of time. It wasn't meant badly. She was simply occupied with her life, with herself, her animals and friends. Aside from that, she was scatty – that was what she called her forgetfulness.

It might sound idyllic, Pippi Longstocking-esque, but I had neither a monkey nor a horse. Nor was I as strong as Pippi Longstocking. Ashamed of the faded clothes from the Red Cross donations box and the knitted suits arriving in parcels from our grandmother in East Berlin, especially commissioned in green, orange and brown stripes, with straps and bloomer-like trousers that made them look like baby rompers, which even the other children at the Steiner school laughed at, I sewed my first dress at the age of eleven. It was made of scraps of fabric and old clothes, which I cut up and put together again in my own design. To start with, I worked on the old Singer I'd learned to sew on in Adlershof, back when I was six. One day, though, our grandmother from East Berlin brought not only our walnut trees, roots and all, from our older sister's father's garden in Rahnsdorf. Inge had also hidden an electric sewing machine in the large

trunk of her Lada estate car, in among the young trees, watercolour paints and badger-hair brushes, and from then on I used it to sew dresses, take up and patch trousers. She would presumably not have been allowed to remove such an important product from the German Democratic Republic's national economy.

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