

TAKE TO THE STREETS

1974

For a while in Berlin Joe reached some sort of horizon. His breakdown was four years in the past, his buttoned-down upbringing far away. The German Academic Exchange service, or DAAD, set up after the war to attract cultural talent to West Germany, had awarded him a bursary to experiment in film and he had never felt so free. He had friends in the West and friends in the East and when he stood in the control hut at Checkpoint Charlie – East German guards staring at him and his passport, back and forth, up and down – he felt a heightened sense of being somewhere, of being someone, of being here and being now.

And it wasn't just the wall. In Berlin he came across others like him, people trying to understand how they fitted – or had been fitted – in and how they could break out. It was an era of discussion about revolution, relationships, communal living and the nature of sexuality; 'Need for tenderness', 'Compulsion to orgasm', 'Whole body relating', 'An end to genital fixation' – the list was endless. Everyone felt oppressed by the adverts in the underground; everyone accepted that things would have to change, inside and out. Marx had met Freud and women had stated their case; the notion of simple futures where wives would, or even could, nurture hard working husbands had been blown away. The uphill climb by the lone mountaineer had become a caravan across the desert of capitalism. Now people saw where they were going, helped each other on the way and did not doubt they would get there in the end. Some wanted to take a shortcut – Andreas Baader and Ulrike Meinhof sat in cells in Stammheim for blasting

their way through the sand – but Joe, though he demonstrated against their prison conditions, did not support violence.

Holger Meins, another member of the Baader Meinhof gang – or Red Army Fraction – had gone on hunger strike in protest at his solitary confinement. He was not in Stammheim, but in Moabit jail in West Berlin and had not eaten for three months. The authorities refused to force-feed him and his death was expected soon.

It finally came on a grey day in October. Joe was reading a book on semiotics when he heard the news. The door to his room burst open and Gisela bounced in. She was a round woman with red cheeks and a permanent air of enthusiasm. She was the founder of the commune where he lived and had roped him in after they met at a seminar on un-dogmatic Marxism. They liked each other, but it wasn't one of those set-ups where people jumped in and out of each other's beds and although there was much hugging and walking in and out of rooms in the nude – all Germans seemed to find nudity normal – sex between members of the flat rarely occurred.

"Come on, Joe! We're meeting at Turmstrasse and marching down to the prison."

"What? Why?"

"Haven't you heard?" Gisela's eyes gleamed as she warmed her hands on the tiles of a brown coal oven. "Holger Meins is dead."

"When?"

"Last night. They only let the news out this morning. The Senate's banned marches so we're keeping the meeting place secret, spreading it by word of mouth. I'm to tell sympathisers round here. Will you help?"

"Of course."

They ran through courtyards, climbed staircases and left notes informing people where to go. They hammered on doors, cajoled and persuaded and at their last port of call dug out Dieter, the lover of Gisela's best friend Hanna and a man more into movies than Marx.

By the time they reached Turmstrasse, demonstrators were forming into rows. Hanna spotted Joe, ran over and gave him a hug.

"My favourite Englishman!"

Then she saw Dieter attempting to hide behind Gisela.

"You've come? You told me you were ill?"

Dieter shrugged his shoulders.

"You told me you couldn't get off work and you're here."

"That's because I was speaking from the teachers' common room."

Gisela pushed her way between the lovers and linked arms with them both.

"Come on, you two. No arguments today. Alright?"

A police bus – light flashing, siren wailing – screeched past the demonstrators and pulled across the road. Riot police jumped out and positioned themselves in front of the first row. The way to the prison was blocked.

"Someone informed," said Hanna taking Joe's right arm.

A loudhailer declared the demonstration illegal and ordered all participants to disperse. A group at the back began shouting. Somebody threw a bottle.

"RAF," said a voice to Joe's left. "They provoke on principle."

Joe turned and found a tall man with blonde hair standing next to him.

"Your first demonstration?" the man asked as he linked arms.

"Oh no," replied Joe.

"But the first with action, yes?"

"Well," said Joe, ducking as another bottle smashed in front of the police, "I was nearly in Grosvenor Square in '68."

The man laughed.

"Nearly in Grosvenor Square in '68'. I like it. English humour, no?"

"Yes. Yes."

Joe laughed too.

The police gave a second warning and said they would charge if the crowd did not disperse. Joe was in row six. He turned to see how many were behind and was surprised to find people complying with the order. Row by row the demonstration was dissolving.

"We're not moving," hissed Hanna to the tall man. "Right, Manfred?"

But someone had tapped Manfred on the shoulder.

"New tactic," a voice whispered. "Pretend to cave in. Regroup at the Ku'dam."

Manfred passed the message on to Joe and peeled off.

"Manfred, you shit!" yelled Hanna.

But soon everyone was heading for the Ku'dam – ambling off in twos and threes, pretending to be out for a stroll.

At the entrance to Tiergarten Manfred glanced up at the sky.

"Damn!"

Joe followed his gaze and saw helicopters approaching from the south.

"Should we scatter?" asked Dieter.

"No, we should not," said Hanna. "Straight on for the Ku'dam!"

"I only asked," whined her boyfriend.

"If you don't want to come, don't," snapped Hanna. "Go to a stupid film instead."

"Hanna!" hissed Gisela.

At the junction of Kurfurstendam and Joachimstalerstrasse demonstrators had already occupied the pavements. Reinforcements were emerging from the U-Bahn and spilling on to the road. A whispering began, like wind in the willows.

"Make a circle. Block the traffic."

People formed into lines of five and walked round the centre of the junction – one after the other, closely packed, column after column. Motorists hooted. A policeman blew his whistle. But they were powerless to break the human wheel.

Joe and his group linked arms and squeezed in behind five Red Army men in crash helmets.

"The state has murdered Holger Meins – Holger, Holger, Holger Meins!"

A white Mercedes tried to push its way through. An RAF man forced open the driver's door. Manfred pulled him back. The driver reversed away.

"That's what they want us to do," said Manfred, rejoining the line. "Beat people up, behave like animals. It doesn't help our cause. We must win the public's sympathy."

Joe nodded and joined in the chant. He had never felt better, never felt so much. Acting for justice with no self doubts, a rebel with a cause – no dream of what might be, just action now.

"The state has murdered Holger Meins," he shouted at the top of his voice, "Holger, Holger, Holger Meins!"

Hanna laughed and yelled in his ear:

"Your accent is atrocious."

Then the sirens began. A chill ran down Joe's spine. Tank-like vehicles cleared a path through the cars – blue monsters with blank faces.

"Water canons," Manfred shouted.

The line in front stopped. A helmeted man turned and yelled.

"New formation. Rows of twenty across the Ku'dam!"

He indicated that Joe's group should move forward and link arms with his.

"Oh no," wailed Dieter. "We're in the front line."

"That'll make a change for you," said Hanna, but her voice sounded nervous too.

The cannons halted behind a phalanx of shield-wielding riot police with visors down. Joe glanced over his shoulder. Row upon row of demonstrators stretched back towards the ruined shell of the Gedächtniskirche – faces alert, tense, determined.

"Die bullen sind bloed!" yelled a Red Army man.

Police are stupid.

"Don't provoke," said Manfred.

"Shit liberal!" the man replied, but stopped his chant.

Night had fallen and a cold wind from the East cut through the seams of Joe's sheepskin coat. The advertisements flashed and winked mocking the protestors with their message of stability. In Kempinkis ladies in fur hats sipped coffee and toyed with cakes, faces turned towards the street waiting for the show to start. Press photographers positioned themselves near the police, flashguns firing. TV cameras took aim from rooftops or patrolled – tape recorders in tow – up and down no-man's land. One reporter argued with her director about where to stand. She wanted to be in front of the demonstrators,

the director wanted her with the police. In the end she and the camera walked around in circles.

Then the space between the frontlines was cleared. A new chant rolled forward from the back of the demonstration, picking up momentum and volume as it approached.

"No repression by the state! We have the right to demonstrate!"

The Red Army men added 'Holger, Holger, Holger Meins' and as the chants met they doubled in force and surged across no-man's land to the waiting police, drowning out an officer calling on the demonstrators to 'Disperse or face the consequences!'

"This is it," hissed Manfred.

The police moved forward followed by the water cannons. Slowly. Steadily.

Then they fired.

"Stand firm!" shouted Manfred as water slammed into his stomach.

Joe bent to help but was hit too, a block of ice smashing into his skull.

"Turn your back!" Hanna shouted.

Joe couldn't breathe, couldn't move.

Another jet of water smashed into his groin. The police were only yards away – truncheons high, shields out. The crowd surged forward pushing him towards the truncheons that now began battering batons on shields in a deafening dance of terror.

"Fall back and regroup!" came the command.

Joe turned and ran. Manfred ran. They all ran. Retreating head over heels in front of the drums, lines disintegrating as the din approached. Joe glanced back and saw a policeman beat a Red Army man across the back – not once, but on and on and on. A woman was hit between the legs and dumped

into a van that moved forward with the canons picking up human refuse as it was clubbed into submission. Joe's coat felt heavy – soaked through, weighing him down. But he kept running.

Suddenly a pair of arms grabbed him. He ducked, ready for a blow to the head, the back, the balls. The arms held him, but didn't abuse him.

He turned. It was Manfred.

"No good running. Police are everywhere. We must regroup."

Joe locked arms with Manfred and counted a dozen rows ahead of them – they were no longer in the front line.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and turned. It was Hanna. Her long hair soaked with water, her face blue with cold. She locked arms too and huddled close.

"Dieter's been hit. Gisela's taken him home."

"Is he alright?"

"I think so." She wiped away a tear. "He was trying to stop a pig hitting me."

"And Gisela?"

"Cut in the face – best for her to go with him."

With the column reformed, the chanting swelled again. The demonstrators surged forward – at a run this time – charging headlong at the state's protective wall, the words of the chant coming fast and loud.

"No repression by the state! We have the right to demonstrate!"

Joe kept his eyes on the front line. When it hit the police it would stop dead.

"No repression by the state! We have the right to demonstrate!"

He concentrated on the words – spitting out each syllable, fighting off the cold.

"No repression by the state! We have the right to demonstrate!"

Shots broke across the chanting. Four rows in front of Joe lines scattered as a plume of smoke rose from the ground. More shots and a canister landed next to Joe.

"Tear gas! Cover your mouth and nose!"

Manfred thrust a scarf at Joe. Joe pressed it to his face but gas had already reached his lungs. He wretched, no longer caring what happened as long as he could stop. He tried to cover his mouth but the gas numbed his brain. He collapsed on the ground coughing.

"Joe. Get up!" – Manfred's voice – "Get up! Head for Zoo Station!"

Joe struggled to his feet, fighting off nausea, willing himself to move.

All around people coughed and screamed. Beyond the fog, sirens wailed.

"Can you walk?" Hanna yelled.

"I think so."

"Good. Keep your face covered and follow us."

Figures loomed from the shadows clutching scarves to mouths. Red Army men ran past with iron bars, guided by the sound of breaking glass. Onlookers cowered too terrified to move.

One old lady crouching by a kiosk on the corner of Kantstrasse held a cardboard carton over her head with the word '*Hilfe!*' scrawled on the side. Men in suits emerging from the peep shows behind her – eyes stained with prurience, expressions blank and empty – ignored her plea, fastened their trousers and ran for safety.

Joe struggled across the street and took hold of the woman's hand.

"Where you headed?"

"Anywhere," she stuttered.

"Want to come with us?"

The woman nodded.

Manfred took her other arm and they pressed on.

Baton-wielding policemen appeared from an alley and charged. Manfred pointed at the woman. The police took no notice. Joe and Manfred hoisted her onto their shoulders and ran as best they could.

The police pursued. A flashgun fired. Aimed at them, Joe hoped: 'Demonstrators save granny from police!'

"Ought to be ashamed," the old lady muttered into Joe's ear.

"Who ought?" he gasped. "The demonstrators?"

"No! The police."

Near Zoo station the pursuers were diverted by a fire and gave up. Joe and Manfred, out of breath from their exertions, lowered the woman to the ground and entered the station. It was packed. Wounded demonstrators lay in rows tended by medical students. Unharmd protestors huddled in corners discussing tactics. Members of the public wiped eyes and dusted down clothes, unsure what to do next. The station regulars – junkies and unemployed Turkish workers – stood in front of the exchange office too bemused to ask for money. Beyond them a crowd pushed up against the ticket counter, desperate to get home.

Hanna bent down to the woman.

"Where do you live?"

"In the East. Prenzlauer Berg"

"In the East?" Hanna queried and then burst out laughing. "You can tell them it's true then. We are oppressed and brutalised."

"I know," said the woman. "I was here in '68. I always come for the riots."

Joe wondered how she could have crossed the wall then remembered that pensioners were free to travel back and forth.

"The East – that's a good idea," said Manfred as a group of policeman arrived to block off the entrance to the street. "Let's go to Friedrichstrasse."

"Coming too?" Joe asked the woman.

"No thank you, but I'm grateful for your help."

Joe squeezed her hand and ran after Hanna and Manfred. At the S-Bahn entrance Manfred ducked under the barrier. Hanna and Joe followed suit. On the platform most people were heading west and when a train for Friedrichstrasse clattered in they were the only ones to board. They collapsed on to the slatted seats and sighed with relief when the doors shut and the train pulled out. As it rolled through the Tiergarten they saw blue lights flashing in the trees and a gas cloud hanging low over the Ku'dam Ecke.

The cross on the Gedächtniskirche shone forth, the Mercedes sign winked.

We win, it said. You lose.

Hanna took Joe's hand and squeezed.

"You alright? You were in a bad way back there?"

"A bit cold."

"A bit cold? Is that all? You English understate everything. Aren't you exhilarated, terrified, exhausted, happy, sad?"

"Yes, that to."

Hanna leant across and hugged the sheepskin coat. Joe put an arm round her and an arm round Manfred and together they rattled past the ruins of the Reichstag, over the Spree and across the wall – today a welcome barrier against the hypocrisy and conflicts of capitalism. When the train reached Friedrichstrasse – with its East German guards on gantries above and kiosks

selling duty free goods below – they found a bench and declared it free of East and West. Manfred bought whisky and Swiss chocolate and they sat getting drunk against the cold – happy to be in no man's land, happy to be alive, happy to wait a little longer for the revolution.