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books

ALSO BY JULIA FRANCK

The Blind Side of the Heart
West

JULIA FRANCK

Back to Back

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN BY
Anthea Bell

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

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Tormented
At man falling
From living by the cards
To death by cards
Silent
Unyielding
And over

12 August 1961

Swaying

The boat lay hidden in the reeds; they had found it a few days earlier by the landing stage, rocking on the water, and the wind drove it into the marshy inlet, along with leaves, twigs and larger branches broken off in the storm and washed ashore. It was not tied up, it obviously didn't belong to anyone. One oar lay in the boat, the other was floating a little way off among the branches.

Thomas and Ella took the things they would need from the house and down the steps to the yard: a quilt, two small saucepans, potatoes, carrots and a chunk of bread. They also took a box of matches, some paper and an empty wine bottle, because Thomas thought they might want to write a message and send it by bottle post. Finally they carried the camping stove and a flashlight over the marshy ground; in October it got dark early, and in the morning there was hoar frost on the leaves and the blades of grass. They would be cold.

They had been on their own in the house for the last two weeks while Käthe was working in the quarry. Just before she left, Eduard had walked out after a row. Thomas and Ella had been looking after themselves; they had boiled potatoes and mixed salt, chives and water with curd cheese, they had been to school, they were ten and eleven and they could do all those things. When Käthe returned at the end of those two weeks, they hadn't meant to do more than tidy the place up a bit: they

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had washed the dishes, and while Ella was still drying them Thomas had begun scrubbing the kitchen floor; they scoured the dark marks off the door, they polished the handle with ashes, washed the door frame with soap, whacked the doormat with the carpet beater and scrubbed it in the rain butt. Gentlemen, today you see me polishing up door handles, and soon I'll sing everyone a song, said Ella.

Laughing, Thomas always put his hands over his ears at that announcement; he didn't want to hurt Ella's feelings, but she rarely hit the right note and changed the tune just as the fancy took her. The chandelier would really shine if you polished it up. The smell of brass clung to your fingers. It was fun; they would get the house into such a state of perfection as it had never known before. Thomas dusted the books and the shelves with a dry duster, then wiped the shelves over with a damp cloth, he sorted the art books by period and size, works of literature by alphabetical order, and political writings by subject. In a rumbling voice and looking through their dead father's field glasses, he called across the expanse of the room: Miss Ella, with all this splendid literature available what will you borrow, a romantic love story or an adventure novel? Are you studying the tale of the Trojan War and all that fighting over Helen? I'll be happy to make out a borrowing slip for you. Ella took no notice; she was lying under the table with a knife and a sponge, cleaning its underside, something that obviously no one had done for decades. Remains of something clung tenaciously to it, traces of food, maybe, or wax. Ella had soaked the Italian damask tablecloth in the zinc tub in the garden. It needed a thorough wash; over a long time, crumbs and dark stains of sauces and wine had made themselves at home on it.

If Ella and Thomas hadn't wanted to get their house-cleaning done in two days, Thomas would have enjoyed playing the part

of librarian; he was going to draw up a card index for the library and its future readers, he would design borrowing slips for all the books. When she hung the saffron-yellow tablecloth on the washing line, Ella's arms hurt from the hard work of wringing it out. Armed with a toothpick and a cotton-wool ball, she climbed on a stool to clean the picture frame of the Sicilian landscape. The cobalt-blue sky shone over the rocky countryside where only olive trees would grow. But the shiny stuff coating the frame stained the cotton-wool ball dark, and Ella was afraid she might get not just the dirt but some of the paint off as well. She even tidied the workbox, winding cotton back on reels and embroidery silks around pieces of cardboard, she sorted the buttons into three black boxes and put needles into their little envelopes in order of size. Probably no one but Ella had used that workbox since the housemaid was fired. She played alternately the part of her distinguished grandmother and the seamstress; with her mouth pursed, and in her grandmother's stilted voice, Ella commented on her own handiwork in French: *Alors, c'est si parfait!*

Perfetto, perfettamente, Thomas replied in passing, and his tone of voice, rustic and theatrical, imitated Käthe's criticism of her mother's upper-class French.

They tidied up all the rooms, square metre by square metre, cleaned and straightened up the whole house as it had never been tidied before. They had washed the curtains in the zinc tub under the elm tree, and hung them on the washing line in the garden to dry in the wind. They ironed them smooth – Käthe wouldn't believe her eyes. They were maidservant and manservant, singing a duet of admiration for their employer in tones of goodwill. Just once, the tenor of their conversation about their mistress changed – only recently she had raised her hand in anger to the maidservant over a stolen jar of apple compote,

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striking the girl so hard that she was knocked almost unconscious. Manservant and maidservant weighed up their mistress's kindness against her violence, wiping down kitchen surfaces as they talked. They cleaned the oven with a piece of wire wool, making such generous use of scouring powder that they emptied the container; they tidied up the larder, and found a nest of nine tiny, naked mice in a basket full of old shoes. The soft pink of the little creatures' skin trembled in time with their rapidly beating hearts, they didn't squeak or squeal, maybe they were too young for that. Thomas picked up the basket, took a boot out and looked at the nest. Little naked mole-rats, he said, his voice soft and velvety. Ella was disgusted by the blind little creatures. She didn't want to look at them. Ella was in favour of drowning them in the water butt, Thomas was against it. If he took the baby mice down to the cellar their mother would never find them again, and they'd die miserably. So as an animal expert he decided to lure the mother mouse into a trap, and then he could take her down to the cellar alive as well. He put a piece of cheese into a deep stoneware jar and covered it with a board, leaving only a little crack open. That afternoon he found the mouse in the jar, heard her jumping up at the walls inside it and slipping down them again and again. Thomas took the mouse in the jar and the basket containing her litter over the veranda into the garden, and from there to the door of the coal cellar. Ella followed close on his heels; she knew he couldn't go into the cellar. He didn't dare go into the dark, he was afraid of it. He knew how to get Ella to bring coal up instead. If you fetch the coal, I'll do your maths homework. If you fetch the coal, you can have some smoked sprats. If you fetch the coal and take it to the hazel bush beside the cellar door, I'll carry it up the steps and into the house, and what's more I'll heat the stove all week and chop the firewood.

Please, Thomas said, handing her the jar and the basket, you only have to put them down on the floor and take the board off the jar, then they'll do fine on their own.

What do I get in return?

A story this evening.

It'll have to be a long one. And something else.

What?

Because that's not enough.

I'll carry your bag to school all week, I promise, and I'll do your maths for you, and your German homework as well.

Oh, all right. Basket in one hand, holding the jar well away from her with the other, her arms outstretched, Ella staggered down the steps into the cellar. At the bottom she fell full length. He heard the mouse squeaking, the jar was broken, only the basket with the litter of baby mice in it had landed intact next to Ella's head. She struggled to her feet, her trousers torn, her knees sore, her hands black and grazed.

Hesitantly, one foot at a time, Thomas went down the steps and tiptoed into the darkness. His fear of the dark and the fright he'd had didn't cancel each other out, but it must have been the cold making his teeth chatter. He stopped on the bottom step and held out his hand to her. Sorry, he said, putting an arm round her shoulders. Then he examined her knees, helped her up the steps and took her indoors, where he washed her injuries and put iodine on them.

Later, Ella and Thomas had beaten the carpets and swept the floors, then wiped them with a damp cloth. When they were dry, they had rubbed in beeswax, then brushed the floors and finally polished them shiny with a cloth. They had been cleaning the house for hours, and then they fell into bed well after midnight, exhausted. Next morning they got up early, while it was still dark outside, and set to work without stopping for

breakfast. They lit all the stoves in the house, including the bathroom stove; it was possible that Käthe might want a hot bath when she got home. They scoured the bathtub and wiped down the doors, they hung the freshly washed curtains at the windows they had cleaned. At midday they put more coal on the stoves; acting the part of stokers they took the ash bucket out with the rubbish and cleaned the outside of the dustbin, they raked up the leaves under the elm tree, pulled dead plants out of the flower beds and swept the steps from the veranda down to the garden. Ella went all round the house with a feather duster, getting cobwebs out of corners and dusting the paintings. Something in her chuckled when she came to the oil painting of the cherry blossom in the garden on the Wannsee. That picture, Käthe told admiring visitors when they looked at it, was a masterpiece. Their reverent nods always delighted Ella. A few years ago, when she was sick and had to stay in bed, and no one came to keep her company for weeks, she had tried to paint a picture of her family in oils on a wooden board. It had not been a success: she herself was huge, larger than her mother and hovering in the room, her brother looked like a gnome, the tiny twins were attached to their mother's breasts like rodents, and her breasts themselves, emerging from her blouse, were far from rosy – against the green fabric of the blouse they were a strident scarlet. It was true that Ella had only just started school at the time, but the picture had made great demands on her, and she knew she could never show it to her mother. Then, however, her glance fell on the cherry blossom beside the Wannsee, and she couldn't resist it; she had got out of bed and added tiny white dots to the grass on the banks of the lake with her brush. She had also added a hint of yellow, only a slight one, because white was never sheer white. And didn't they seem to be daisies if you looked at them closely? No one was to notice those little

white dots, so that over the following years Ella kept altering tiny details of the great master's picture. There was no time for that today. She just smiled as she flicked the feather duster over the cherry blossom beside the lake. Thomas and Ella dusted every piece of furniture in the house, they rubbed down the chairs with warm, soapy water and then oiled them, leaving a glow as golden as honey on the wood. Only Eduard's room remained as it was; they were strictly forbidden to go into it. In secret, Ella opened the door; the room smelled nasty, of stagnant flower water. But Ella couldn't see a vase of flowers anywhere. Eduard's absence was a provocation to Ella; she felt she simply had to go into his room, as if she were looking for something and wasn't sure what. She slipped in quietly, although there was no one within earshot, and she knew that Thomas was far off in the kitchen. The desk drawer was locked. How often had Ella tried to open that drawer already? With a hairslide, a safety pin, a stray key that she had found while sweeping under the carpet. Was she the person who had scratched the varnish round the lock?

They left everything exactly as it was in the studio, they didn't touch any of the wax models, although the older ones had layers of hairy dust sticking to them, and one of them had lost its arms through drying out and age. They didn't touch the plaster models either, all Ella did was stroke the rounded hips of the reclining figures. No one had told them not to touch, but it was an unwritten law that nothing must happen to these fragile models, and more particularly, children must not play close to them. The broken bits of sandstone in the bin under the gallery, the clay keeping moist, and the smaller scraps of marble on the window-sill, it was all left as it was. They didn't even pick up a broom to brush up crumbs, they didn't remove cobwebs here. Dusk was falling when Ella, her legs weary, went out into the garden to

pick a bunch of mauve Michaelmas daisies. She also broke some bare twigs of bright red rose hips off a rose bush.

Thomas made lentil soup, although he'd never made it before and there were no cookery books in the house. He was breathing through his mouth as he did it, because it cost him an effort to fry the bacon. The smell of smoked meat frying made him want to retch; it wasn't that he liked pigs any better than, say, hares, but he disliked the idea of any animal being killed solely to be eaten. He suspected, however, that Käthe would think lentil soup inedible without any bacon in it. Ella made fun of the way he breathed through his mouth, saying he looked like a fish gasping for air. The bacon was sizzling over the flame; later, in the soup, it would turn transparent and flabby. Thomas cut up the potatoes and carrots small, and he had bought celeriac because he remembered Käthe's grunt of pleasure at the mere mention of the word. He added two cloves of garlic to the pan. Nor did he forget the bay leaf; he spiked an onion with a bay leaf and a clove and put it in the pot for flavour. Käthe would never in her life have had such good lentil soup. Ella sat on the flour chest, swinging her legs and folding the napkins she had ironed, she watched Thomas cooking, and now she too was breathing in through her mouth.

I can hear her! Ella jumped up. There was a high-pitched clattering in the distance. It came closer, and now it was echoing across the yard as the sound was cast back and forth between the house, the studio and the shed. Nothing else made a noise like Käthe's two-stroke motorbike; its sound was unmistakable. Ella and Thomas went into the dining room and looked down to the yard from the window to make sure. There she was: Käthe with her leather pilot's cap on her head. She was bending over the wooden crate on the carrier and unstrapping a large, rather shapeless bag. Then her dog arrived, jumping happily around her now that he had caught up. He spent most of the time on

the way home in the crate on the carrier. Käthe would let him out near Rahnsdorf, in the woods on the Püttbergen, so that he could run the last few kilometres. Dogs and children loved the tall dunes into which the sand had formed on the south-eastern side of the glacial valley where Berlin stood. 1954, there were woods as far as the stream of the Fliess and the banks of the lake, the Müggelsee. Isolated houses, a part of the city like a village on the edge of Berlin, the tall pines of the Brandenburg Mark with their red trunks rising above the tops of oak, maple and beech trees. Käthe seldom went out of the city without her motorbike, but she would have liked a car for transporting her materials and tools. Small sculptures fitted into the trailer of the motorbike. And when she took models to be fired or cast, she had to telephone and claim friendship with neighbours who were really just acquaintances, so that she could borrow their car.

Thomas went back to the kitchen, tasted the soup and burned his tongue. How was he to tell whether or not there was too much salt in it? He liked salt. Thomas turned down the flame. You taste it, he asked Ella, but she was already running past him. From the front hall they heard a clatter, and then the barking of Käthe's dog. Thomas followed Ella into the smoking room.

With her pilot's cap on her head, Käthe was standing at the long table with a stack of post in front of her: letters, newspapers, flat packages. Hello there, Käthe sang out in her high voice; she had heard Thomas coming into the room, but her eyes were on a newspaper as she hastily leafed through it. When she came home from a visit of any length to the stone quarry, even when she came up to the house after hours in the studio, she could suddenly break into song in mid-sentence. Cheeks slightly flushed, she licked her lips as, with the dog's leash over her arm, she opened a small envelope. She skimmed the lines inside it, uttering a sound like a little whinny. An invitation from the

Artists' Association! Proudly, she propped it against the vase of flowers. She couldn't help sighing. She had been waiting a long time for that invitation. Impatiently she opened the next letter.

Ella sat down in one of the two deep armchairs at the table, watching Käthe in her pilot's cap looking through her post.

Thomas would have liked to hug Käthe; he was realising how much he had missed her. He liked her cheerful whinny, there was desire in it, a sense of rejoicing. When Käthe was out of earshot, Thomas and Ella would sometimes imitate her little whinny all of a sudden, on their way to school or going shopping. Thomas wondered whether to take her pilot's cap and the dog's leash from her, the way you take visitors' hats and umbrellas when they come into your house. At the wrong moment, she might find such a gesture intrusive, for the cap and leash were a part of Käthe herself, and you don't just take such things away and hang them up on a hook. He liked Käthe's smell of leather and dog. But Käthe avoided hugging, it was as if she froze in physical proximity to anyone, she would press her arms close to her sides, stiffen her back, shake herself. There must be something she disliked about a hug; Thomas thought that was possible. She often used to tell the children: Don't cling like that – when they were only close to her. There were never any hugs. Nor had Thomas ever seen her hug Eduard or any other man. Maybe, as Käthe saw it, hugging was simply civility, doing a favour, showing affection that she simply did not feel. So Thomas stayed where he was, hoping she might put out her hand or at least look at him.

Käthe slit open a large envelope with her silver letter opener, produced a magazine and a letter and began to read. Without looking up, she reached her hand out to one side, searching for something in the air. Maybe Thomas was meant to take her hand?

Come on, then, she said, come here. Her hand flapped as her eyes gazed at the letter. Thomas took a step towards her, wondering whether she meant him, whether he should take her hand, or shake it; he took another step her way – but the dog got there first. Agotto licked Käthe's fingers, nipping her outstretched hand, rubbing his ears against her to make her pat his head.

Are you hungry, Käthe? I cooked something. Thomas put his head on one side. She must be able to smell the lentils.

Käthe nodded, briefly looked up and then turned back to her post. She nodded again, as if she had forgotten why first time. Thoughtfully, she put the letter away and picked up the next envelope. Ella-ella-ella, you'd better ask the good Lord to make you a pair of legs. The table isn't laid yet.

Ella stayed where she was in the huge armchair, sinking into it like a doll draped in fabric. She had put on her best dress, the check one, and her lace collar. She hadn't often worn the dress since her grandmother brought it back from London two years ago, and now the sleeves were a little short, showing her wrists. Ella's hair was brushed smooth, she had even cleaned her shoes until they shone – and not just hers, but all the shoes she had found on the shoe rack in the bedroom. Ella rubbed her finger silently over the green velour covering the arm of the chair. She was reluctant to stand up. The carefully arranged flowers stood between herself and Käthe, who hadn't opened the last envelope yet and shook her head now and then as she read, or made a sound of approval or disapproval. Ella was hoping for a glance, for a remark, however tiny.

What is it? Now Käthe did raise her head and looked challengingly at Ella. Do hurry up.

Taking no notice of her dress, no notice of her hair. Ella elaborately got to her feet; her left leg had gone to sleep, so she

limped as she followed Thomas to the kitchen. Once in the kitchen, Thomas and she had only to exchange glances; their eyes expressed their growing suspense, their impatient waiting, it could be any moment now. Käthe's eyes didn't necessarily have to fall on the flowers, or the best dress and the shining clean windowpanes, but surely the smell of the polished floor would tickle her nose, Käthe would notice the rearranged bookshelves. And then she would have the taste of the celeriac and bacon and lentils in her mouth. How surprised she would be! Ella carried a carafe of tap water and three glasses into the smoking room.

Oh, for goodness' sake open a window, Ella, it's unbearable in here. Are you two aiming to make this house into a sauna? What a waste of money. We don't go heating the garden in October, understand?

Käthe cast one brief, reproachful glance at Ella. She poured herself a glass of water and emptied it in a single draught. Käthe's cheeks were flushed, she passed the back of her hand over her forehead, now she was studying the sender's address on a letter with close attention. Indecisively, Ella shook her head. Maybe she'd overdone the heating.

Back in the kitchen, Ella rolled up the napkins, which were already folded in half, and put them in silver rings. She drew a heart on a piece of paper in red crayon, and then two smaller, intertwined hearts inside it. She wrapped the message in the green-and-white napkin that Käthe liked to use.

There was still some parsley in the garden. Thomas showed Ella the blue bowl. Ella cut several slices from the loaf of bread, as straight and as neatly as she could, put them in a basket and covered them with a cloth. They poured the soup into a festive tureen. Thomas carried the steaming tureen in, Ella brought the tray with the plates and spoons, the bread and the napkins.

Oh, this is too much! We're not mixing with every Tom, Dick and Harry!

Käthe was talking on the telephone as Ella pushed the door to the smoking room open with her elbow, holding the tray steady in her hands. They laid the table. Thomas ladled the soup into the plates. They waited. The phone conversation went on for quite a long time. Through the big double doors, they could see Käthe standing by the chest of drawers, gesticulating wildly; it was probably about some decision that her group had taken. While whoever was at the other end of the line tried explaining something to her, Käthe did a charcoal sketch on the back of a large envelope. No, Käthe did not agree – she waved her stick of charcoal in the air – I've said so already, not in any circumstances. An idea like that needs to make sense. After a while Käthe hung up and came to the table. Has Eduard shown up?

Thomas and Ella shook their heads. Eduard didn't tell the children when he was coming or going. He seldom said hello to them, and if he did it was like a greeting to strangers; then, just to be awkward, he expected those strangers to reply politely. If they were all in the house at the same time, he regarded the children as part of the fixtures and fittings, like furniture or household pets: sometimes he noticed them, sometimes he didn't. There were times when he admired Ella's shoes, there were times when he admired her dress. It was perfectly possible that he had in fact been here during the last two weeks, maybe in the morning, but they hadn't seen him.

Not once? Käthe sat down and unrolled her napkin. The heart message, unnoticed, sailed to the floor. She tucked the napkin into the neck of her sweater, like a bib, and dug her spoon into the plate. Can't you even heat the soup properly?

We did. Thomas was watching Käthe slurp, chew and swallow. It got cold once it was on the plate.