

## **East Berlin, August 1961**

Annalisa looked down at the embroidery in her hands. It wasn't perfect, she knew that, but with a love of sewing she wanted to decorate her sister Zoe's dress. Her dark plaits hung over her shoulders and tickled the fabric. It was a deep blue satin with gold butterflies patterned on the sleeves and hem. There were neat pleats along the waistline, gathered together underneath a matching thick ribbon. Her own dress was the same except in purple and silver, but she had finished that weeks ago. It was her cousin Corinna's wedding. Corinna had purchased the fabric from the grand KasDeWe (Kaufhaus des Westen) Department Store in West Berlin and sent the fabric to Annalisa to make the bride maids dresses. Her cousin was an intelligent woman and she had a well-paid job as a secretary in an established law firm so she could afford the lovely silky fabric.

Even at the tender age of fourteen, Annalisa dreamed of being a fashion designer, and of her creations one day gracing the covers and pages of the VOGUE magazines and being worn by the likes of America's First Lady, the elegant Jackie Kennedy or Her Royal Highness the beautiful Grace Kelly as well as her favourite, the famous and gorgeous movie star Audrey Hepburn. It was a real treat each month to receive a copy of the VOGUE magazine. Annalisa loved the inky smell of the glossy pages. It was fresh and new. She imagined herself in the pictures, of the places where people were carefree and happy and that it didn't matter that people were frivolous. This was how it was to live in Post War Europe. People felt they were entitled to it. But not everyone saw it that way. Papa was often talking in hushed tones to Mama about the Soviet and how he didn't trust Walter Ulbricht.

“I worry for the girls,” Annalisa would often hear her Papa whisper. Every month Papa would tease Annalisa about how he had to smuggle the VOGUE magazine tucked inside his socks as he returned home from his work in West Berlin.

“You mustn’t let Mr Walter Ulbricht know that you are reading this or about your dreams to become a famous fashion designer in the West, do you hear me?” He gently pinched her cheek and gave her an affectionate kiss on her forehead. Annalisa would nod, happy to share in the secret and yet she never quite knew whether Papa was teasing her or being serious.

They were going to the wedding in nearly a week’s time, and she was very excited. Zoe bounced into the cramped attic.

“Is it ready yet, is it ready yet?” she yelled, squashing the blue folds as she jumped on them.

“Not yet, and certainly not if you keep that up!” Annalisa joked.

She pulled through another stitch. It was nearly done, all she needed now was to finish the hem and neck. Zoe trotted off. Annalisa put down the dress and ran downstairs to get ready for school.

School was the first priority. Annalisa trudged along Gleimstrabe, her satchel banging against her and her hair ribbons swishing along the dyed calico fabric that her neatly ironed tunic was made out of. Her plaits brushed her shoulders rhythmically. She stared at the ground and wondered about the conversation she had overheard last night. Mama had been talking to Papa about rumours of a wall. Papa tried to sound reassuring.

“You heard what Ulbricht said in his address “Nobody intends to build a wall” and it isn’t possible to build a wall overnight, we will have time to leave if we have to, I promise you.”

Annalisa wasn't so sure. She was nearly thirteen now, and hearing from her parents all the trauma of the Second World War had terrified her. She knew just what people were capable of doing. She also overheard conversations quietly spoken between her parents about some First Secretary in the Soviet by the name of Khrushchev who her mother said couldn't be trusted.

After school, Annalisa walked briskly home and ran upstairs taking her glass of milk and a handful of *Spekulatius* with her. She only had one seam to do and the dress was finished! She worked on the dress all that evening. With only one week to the wedding, she hadn't left much time, but now she knew she would get it finished. She couldn't wait for Zoe to try it on. Mama was always saying that Annalisa made so much for Zoe, that it was A to Z. It had become a family joke. Annalisa worked on it again all through Saturday while her mother busied herself with the housework and Papa and Zoe did errands to the shops and bought groceries. Finally she finished the dress late that night. 'I'll show Zoe in the morning,' she thought out loud, 'because if I show her now she'll never get back to sleep.' Saying this, she tiptoed downstairs to her bedroom.

In the middle of the night, Annalisa woke. The night was eerily quiet, she couldn't hear the noise of the Sbahn or diesel trains at Berlin Gesundbrunnen railway station. Their house was on Schwedter Street, so she would often wake to the sound of traffic along the busy Gleimstrabe and then hear the cars slow down as they entered through Gleimtunnel nearby. On a warm summer night you could hear the sticky sound of rubber tyres over cobbles in the old underpass. But tonight, nothing. Restless, she nonetheless dozed off.

"Wake up, wake up, WAKE UP!" Zoe shouted at Annalisa. "You need to see this!"

Annalisa groaned. "Buzz off, Zoe. It's *Sunday!*"

Annalisa sensed a panic in Zoe's voice: "But Anna, this is important! Please!" Zoe was desperate. "Get *UP!*"

"Okay, okay. Just let me get my dressing-gown on and get myself organised."

Annalisa tugged open the blinds, and saw her neighbours leaning over the balcony to look past their house. The neighbours were up early to go to church, but Annalisa wondered what they were doing outside at this time of morning. Their bedroom window faced east though, so both sisters rushed to the other side of the house to get a better view of what was happening. Mama and Papa were already up, out on the balcony. Annalisa ran out, and what she saw nearly made her stumble back inside. She had to blink to make sure she wasn't dreaming. Barbed wire lay in coiled snakes across the intersection, and guards were lined up neatly like dominoes in front of the entrance of Gleimtunnel. Annalisa almost felt that if they were toy soldiers, she could have poked the first in the line and make them all fall over. Their house was close to the border with West Berlin, but now there seemed to be no way of getting across. People wandered around in a daze and looked confused as if waiting for some explanation. The guards were threatening anyone who came too close to the barbed wire. They were announcing that they would shoot to kill and that no-one could cross the border. Zoe hugged Annalisa. She would have hugged her little sister back, but she was too shocked and scared to move. It was like a terrible film, but it was real. She was motionless with disbelief.

"Annalisa, Zoe, come inside. We need to talk." Mama sounded really worried.

Annalisa woke from her daze and shuffled inside. Zoe began to cry. She was only a couple of years younger than Annalisa, having just turned twelve, but she was a lot more sensitive and cautious. Annalisa often took risks, and didn't think before she acted. Although they often found each other's traits annoying, it was what made them best friends as well as

sisters. Now it was all falling apart. It was amazing how everything could change in just one night.

After a long talk about what was happening, Annalisa and Zoe went up to their room. There was no point in showing Zoe the dress now, because the wedding was in West Berlin and they were completely separated from it. Mama and Papa had explained that, but Annalisa really wanted to go and she had decided no one would stop her: not her parents, the Police, the soldiers, the Stasi or even the Soviet would stop her being a bridesmaid at her cousin Corinna's wedding over in West Berlin.

Annalisa had overheard her Papa and Mama talking that people were trying to escape and there were reports that citizens had been shot. Papa couldn't believe what was happening.

"It must be temporary," he kept saying as a way to try and reassure Mama.

But Mama said she feared the worst was yet to come, that was the talk she heard. Now was the time to try and escape while there were still gaps in the border, you just had to know where. Papa wouldn't hear of it and it was the first time Annalisa had ever heard Papa raise his voice at Mama.

"Be quiet...the children...the children...they mustn't know about this, we need to keep them safe."

That afternoon, Annalisa explained her secret plan to Zoe. In three days' time, they were going to pack, and creep out in the middle of the night to the park. Annalisa knew of a thicket of brambles where she was certain there would still be time to escape before the soldiers cleared it and coiled more barbed wire. From there they would crawl along their hands and knees through the grass to where the wire was on the other side. They would pull it apart with thick rubber gloves and make a dash for freedom. Zoe was nervous but she knew this was a secret that had to be kept.

“What if we get caught?” she mumbled. “They said they were going to kill people who tried to escape!”

Annalisa reassured her. She thought that the sooner they went, the easier it would be to go without being caught. It was risky, but it was a risk she was willing to take.

On the day of the night that they were planning to escape, things went wrong. Huge slabs of concrete were being placed a little way back from where the wire was. It was the wall that some people had been fearing was coming. Annalisa had packed their bridesmaid dresses and patent leather shoes in her school satchel. It was all they needed. They were going to a wedding in West Berlin.

Undeterred, they decided to continue with their plan despite the huge wall unfolding before them. If they got out before it was completely assembled, they would have a better chance of escaping. In the evening, they ate and went up to their rooms for an ‘early night’. The last creak of footsteps on boards echoed through the house, and then there was an eerie silence that had in the last three days swept over East Berlin. Annalisa and Zoe sneaked quietly downstairs. They were wearing dark slacks and a long sleeved shirt and thick dishwashing gloves that they had taken from the kitchen. Annalisa had plaited Zoe’s hair for her, and Zoe kept tugging on her plaits for ‘good luck’. The coast was clear. Silently, they crept out of the house and walked to Mauerpark.

In the distance, a dog howled. They were on the edge of the park adjacent to the wired wall. Annalisa had decided it would be better to make a run for it under the shadow of the trees, rather than in the open air. Zoe had objected, suggesting that in trees there was more room for other people to hide, but Annalisa had put her foot down and kept to the plan. The weather had turned out perfectly. It was a dark night, with a half-moon shrouded by fog and a thick bank of cloud.

Annalisa found the blackberry patch and remarkably there was a tunnel and she was hopeful that others had successfully escaped through it. She was disheartened when she saw that the soldiers had instead moved the wire around the patch of blackberries. As another misty blanket moved over, Annalisa boldly stepped out to the wire. She grabbed it, and her hand shot back as pain streaked up her arm. She looked down at a bloody cut in the back of her elbow. The gloves only came up so far. Pulling her sleeve down and wiping away the blood, she plunged for the lethal wire snake again, but this time with more caution.

Annalisa and Zoe struggled through the barrier. Crawling through the long grass they kept their heads low with their hearts pounding fearful of what they might hear. They were now faced with the wall that had been partially assembled that day. They leaned against the wall for a breather. They crept along the slab, searching for an opening or a weakness. It was no good, they were going to have to climb it. On the other side they heard footsteps. Annalisa's eyes widened so that the whites of her eyes were like beacons. Zoe gasped and Annalisa put her finger up to her mouth alerting Zoe to not say a word, not even a whisper. There were muffled murmurs, too soft to hear, and Annalisa thought they were safe when a voice said "Did you hear something?"

More murmurs, then someone else spoke.

"No Hanz, I think it was one of the watch dogs, they are noisy sometimes."

There was a crunch, and then, "You are so complacent!" said the other officer.

There was a shuffling noise, more grunts and grumbles, and then silence. Then the sound of footsteps, slowly fading away into the distance. Annalisa again pressed a finger to her lips, and nudged Zoe to make sure she understood. Zoe nodded. Annalisa ran her hand along the surface of the concrete slabs that had been erected. The concrete was as hard and smooth as if it had been polished marble; there was no way she would be able to get a grip to climb it. She glanced back at the park, at safety. A few trees leaned over the coiled wire. If

she could just get a hold on a branch; that was when she had an idea. If they could hold onto a branch to get over the wire, why couldn't they climb a tree to get over the wall? The concrete slabs were still fairly new, and Annalisa doubted that the soldiers would have had time to clear the growth that might help an escape. She looked up. Above her head was open air, but 50 metres along there was a large tree that had a huge branch right up to the wall! From there Annalisa would be able to grab the top and pull herself up, she was sure of it. She and Zoe crept along the concrete to the tree.

The moon had shifted along its path by the time Annalisa and Zoe both teetered on the edge of the branch. The top of the slab was easily within reach now, and Annalisa fingered her way up the wall, hauled herself over and jumped down the other side. Zoe followed landing with a loud thump.

Annalisa elbowed her and muttered "Shush!" before turning her head this way and that to check that no-one had seen or heard them.

The cloud had lifted by now, and the moon shone down on them like a searchlight, seemingly trying to detect movement to sound an alarm. Zoe poked Annalisa and nodded. The coast was clear. It was time to make their escape. Annalisa and Zoe sprinted across the open area, and ran, panting, into a building on the edge of the street. They had made it. They were in West Berlin. It seemed almost too easy. Annalisa gave out a small chuckle. They were going to Corinna's wedding.

The girls speedily crossed the street, even though they were safe they were not wanting to be seen. Their adrenalin still made them feel nervous and jumpy. They found a street map on the corner of the road, and looked for Bridge Avenue. It wasn't the real name of the street, but they called it that because it had a little bridge at the end of the lane. It was just north of a corner grocery shop, so Annalisa and Zoe jogged down the road and past the



shops. Finally they turned down into Bridge Avenue. Dawn was fast on its way and Annalisa decided that they would wait outside the house until morning so as to not cause a commotion and draw attention. In no time they dozed off on the pavement.

The sun shone down in promising rays by the time that Zoe woke. The fog that had covered their escape had lifted, and it was a clear morning. Annalisa was still asleep. Zoe was starving so she shook Annalisa.

“Wake up! Annalisa, we’re here! Get up! Come on...”

Annalisa turned over. She groaned, blinked, and then stood up and looked around. Then she remembered where she was. They were actually here. “Oh Zoe, we made it!” She turned around and gave Zoe a hug. “Let’s go and see our cousin!”

Corinna ran out of the house to get the mail. The warm sunshine had woken her up. It was hard to be excited about her wedding in two days’ time. The world had turned on its head and her two cousins, her bridesmaids were stuck in East Germany. How could she celebrate her wedding without them and without her beloved Aunt and Uncle? Corinna was desperate for news but in the last few days East Germany almost ceased to exist. As she stepped out of the front door she noticed two lumps sitting on the pavement outside the house. Presently they stood up and looked around. Corinna could not believe her eyes “Annalisa! Zoe!” She yelled excitedly and hugged them both.

Corinna was nearly 26, and now owned the little house that Annalisa remembered playing in as a toddler. It was so weird coming back to it now, with the neatly trimmed garden and lawns; the little lemon tree by the steps: it was all very familiar but alien at the same time. Corinna looked around confused. Where is Tante and Onkel? The next hour went in a blur. Corinna asked so many questions, and invited them in for breakfast. But finally Corinna

knew all about their escape, of everything that was happening in East Germany, the confusion and fear and the butterfly dresses.

Corinna looked away and went quiet. She seemed to know of something that she couldn't share in front of Zoe. Annalisa knew she would in time come to understand. And then Zoe asked, "Annalisa, why are there butterflies on the dresses? Not flowers, or lace, or trim?"

Annalisa looked outside to the lemon tree. "Because, Zoe," she said quietly, "Butterflies are freedom. They represent freedom." She sighed. "A butterfly can fly over anything, butterflies are beautiful, they breathe life." She paused, and then, "Zoe, if there was no change there would be no butterflies."

Later that evening and after Zoe was asleep in bed, Corinna came over to Annalisa and said you must write urgently to your Mama and Papa, tell them you are alright and tell them you are sorry that you did not tell them you were leaving. Tell them I will take good care of you. Annalisa was confused.

"Are you angry at us Corinna? If we had told Mama and Papa of our plans they would never have let us go. After the wedding we shall return home and I don't care if Papa never buys me a VOGUE magazine again or if Mama makes me tidy the house for a year. We didn't want to miss your wedding...please don't be angry with us".

Corinna came over and put her arms tightly around Annalisa and gently said.

"Annalisa, you don't understand, you can't go home after the wedding, it's too dangerous but it is also dangerous if the Stasi think your parents helped you escape. Some people think this wall will become..." her voice trailed off and then she said "Please write that letter."

Dear Mama and Papa,

We are okay. We are in West Berlin, at Corinna's house. We came to go to the wedding. We are safe, nothing bad happened. We miss you but we will be alright as Corinna will take good care of us until we can return home which we hope will be soon. We are sorry if we caused you to worry. We have included something small for you.

Annalisa and Zoe.

### **28 years later... November 9<sup>th</sup> 1989**

Annalisa turned off the radio. There had been so much talk about the inevitable, the coming down of the Iron Curtain. It was just a matter of time they said. It infuriated her. Annalisa knew all about time. She scribbled today's date in her diary. It was her birthday. She was turning 42 in exactly one hour, four minutes, and twenty-three seconds. No, twenty two. Twenty-one... All the years her life had become about counting away the minutes, hours, weeks, months and years.

Surviving nearly 30 years without her parents who were now grandparents to four grandchildren had not been easy. When they made their escape back in 1961, she didn't think that they would be separated from their parents for almost three decades. They had just been kids then. Whereas many people in West Berlin could attain passes in recent years and visit relatives in the GDR (especially at Christmas time) all their efforts had been denied. She knew this was the way the Stasi would punish her family for the betrayal. It had been torture and she carried so much guilt. She had a good life and couldn't complain about that. She had realised her dreams and designed dresses that now graced the pages of VOGUE magazines

and were worn by the famous and wealthy. But she would trade all that in to have had shared her life with her parents.

On special occasions there was place near Checkpoint Charlie where their extended families could wave to Mama and Papa. It was both a joyful and an unbearable occasion. In an hour's time they would make their way to the place near Checkpoint Charlie.

Annalisa thought she should close the shop early. The latest wedding dress she made with Zoe hung in the window. The gold butterfly motif that had become her signature caught her eye. Corinna walked in from the back room. Even at 54 years of age she was a beautiful woman. She smiled as she saw Annalisa.

“Happy birthday!” she sang out as she swept Annalisa up in a hug. “You have a very special present today!”

Annalisa grinned. “What might this very special present be?”

Corinna glanced towards the door.

“Where’s Zoe?” Annalisa asked.

Just then the shop door opened and there stood Zoe with Mama and Papa on either side. Zoe spoke, the words tumbling out in excitement as if she was once again a little girl.

“The Wall Annalisa, it’s coming down, it’s coming down right now and the soldiers they just let Mama and Papa walk on through without their papers and I was there waiting.”

Her parents stood crying.

Annalisa gasped in disbelief and tears began to streak her face. They all held each other and sobbed, each of them afraid to let go.

Annalisa was now content for time to be forever.

## **References**

Berlin Wall – a Multimedia History

Google Quick Answers

Wikipedia