THE WINTER PALACE

A sumptuous novel of war, survival and enduring love

PAUL MORGAN

About the Book

If he had died, I would know it in my heart.

In 1939, Anton, a captain in the Polish army, says goodbye to his wife, Elisabeth. He is leaving to defend their homeland against the invasion by Nazi Germany and Russia. They make a vow that – whatever happens, however much time passes – they'll meet again at the Winter Palace, their stately home in the Polish countryside.

The winds of war draw them far apart. Anton is captured and sent to Siberia as a POW. He eventually joins a lost army that battles through snowstorms and scorching deserts in Central Asia to find freedom. Anton survives, driven by his determination to join Elisabeth again. She, meanwhile, is forced to be the 'mistress' of a Nazi officer before escaping to join the Polish resistance.

As the war ends, Anton and Elisabeth are at the opposite ends of the world. Anton is in Australia. Elisabeth is in Poland, awaiting his return for months and then years. Will they ever meet again at the Winter Palace?

From 1930s Europe to present-day Australia, this is a sweeping story of love that cannot be broken by time, distance, war or even death.

THE WINTER PALACE

PAUL MORGAN

PENGUIN BOOKS

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Au milieu de l'hiver, j'apprenais enfin qu'il y avait en moi un été invincible.

In the midst of winter, I finally realised that there lay within me an invincible summer.

Albert Camus

It’s my birthday today.

I’m the only one left who remembers now, or so I thought. There was a time when birthday cards stood along my bookshelf like a row of soldiers on parade. Long after I retired, staff at the hospital still remembered the date. For years they organised a lunch for me at a restaurant in Poznań – ‘the oldest hotel in Poland’, a sign by the door proudly and dubiously announced. I made sure to wear the diamond brooch they had given me as a retirement gift. When a waiter came through the door holding up a cake alight with candles, I made an effort to clap my hands in delight. The others were very kind, but none of them truly knew me or the secret of my past. They didn’t even know my real name.

Over time, the row of birthday cards got shorter every year. More often, there was an envelope in the mail with a black border, telling me there would be another funeral, until at last there were no more cards. When we are young, a birthday is celebrated as another year of life. At my age, it’s only a reminder that I’m twelve months closer to the end.

The years went by. A wall came down in Berlin. Here in Poland, a shipyard worker became our president. There was a war in Yugoslavia. A new century arrived and two towers fell. More wars in places I would struggle to locate on a map . . . To be honest, I stopped watching the news long ago. What is the point at my age?

‘You must have seen so much in your life,’ said Marta, my maid, when she arrived. ‘You should write it all down. Maybe I could help you?’ Marta has a tattoo of a Chinese character on her shoulder; it makes me wince to see it, a reminder of the number still visible on my own arm. But she is a kind girl, and brought sweet croissants with her this morning (a Poznań speciality) to warm in the oven and have with some coffee. It’s our daily routine after she has checked that I’m all right – that is to say, still alive – and tidied the apartment.

‘Happy birthday, Emilia,’ she says and squeezes my hand before going to the oven for the croissants, which are sprinkled with icing sugar and fragrant with warm almonds. ‘A few more years and you’ll be getting a special letter from the president on your hundredth birthday!’

Marta prepares my tablets for the day and puts them on a tray by my chair before she leaves, pulling on a pair of big silver headphones as she closes the door behind her. I call Marta my maid, but the badge on her uniform reads, ‘M. Rabinski, Aged Care Assistant, Poznań City Council’. She is a student at the university, in the School of Astrophysics, and works for the council part-time to support herself. It’s our little joke, and she is happy to indulge an old lady.

We both know my life is coming to an end, and this is what I’ve learnt. Time is a house on fire. Each moment burns before our eyes; the ashes curl and scatter in the wind. All we have left are memories, like photographs snatched from the flames, scorched and flaking at the edges. But even my memories are starting to fail me now. They crumble as I reach for them. There are people I can no longer place. Names to which I cannot put a face. I find myself concentrating on a scene in my head, struggling to recall a distant summer’s day, to recall that morning, and those final words.

Perhaps Marta is right. The time has come to tell my story, before it is too late: what happened and what might have been, and to reveal my real name. With fugitive words I shall recreate the incinerated past. ‘Once upon a time’, then. Isn’t that how it all starts? Once upon a time . . .

1

If only the hands on Anton's watch would cease to move.

If only he could make the watch's cogs and wheels suspend their movement. If only he could stop time so that he might lie in bed a little longer.

But if time were stopped, wouldn't this moment last forever: just before 6 am on the last day of August 1939? He would be like one of those creatures captured for eternity in a drop of glowing amber. Anton decided this was too confusing to think about so early in the day. He would forget the watch on his bedside table and stay in bed for a few minutes more to luxuriate in lying warm next to Elisabeth.

Irresistibly, though, Anton's mind and body were waking up. He was becoming aware of the world beyond his skin. Elisabeth's naked back and the curve of her breast beneath his hand. The gentle hills and valleys of the eiderdown gathered around them. Beyond the grounds of the house lay fields where placid cows were already grazing and vegetables grew in pleasing geometric rows. Here and there stood neat black-and-white farmhouses. In the distance spread forests where shy lakes hid. The trees stretched as far as you could see. Everything was as still as a watercolour in the dawn light. And beyond the forests on the western horizon lay the border of Poland with Germany, unmarked by mountains or sea, just a flimsy pole across the road, painted in stripes of red and white. Beyond that point, the Nazis ruled. He could stay in bed no longer.

Anton tiptoed gingerly across the cold wooden floor to fetch his dressing-gown. As he stepped onto the landing, the first beams of sunlight were shining through the stained-glass window above the broad oak staircase. The window showed a knight in Polish armour astride a horse. Holding a lance upright, the knight looked sternly ahead, ready to charge into battle when the order was given. A pennant flew from the lance, bearing Anton's family name. The rising sun caught the crystals of the

chandelier hanging over the staircase so they seemed lit from within, twinkling with colours captured from the window.

A cavalry officer's uniform was hanging ready for Anton on the bathroom door, neatly pressed and placed there the previous evening. It was identical to the green-and-blue uniform his father had worn in 1914, when Poland had been part of the Russian Empire. His sabre drawn and pointing westwards, Anton's father – Andrej Lewicki-Radziwiłł – had repeatedly charged the German lines on horseback and somehow survived through the entire war, only to die in the influenza pandemic of 1918. More than 50 million perished before it was over, more than were killed in the Great War itself. Only three years old at the time, Anton did not remember his father, but always imagined him as the knight in the stained-glass window, bravely defending his lands. Anton's mother, Mela, meanwhile sought solace from her grief by travelling for most of the year in Italy, consoled by the distractions of sightseeing, shopping and the attention of rich Americans touring Europe. She found that there was nothing like a beautiful young widow to make someone fall in love. In time, she learnt to fell a man at a hundred paces simply by staring through a cafe window and giving a long sigh.

At unpredictable intervals Anton's mother returned to Poland, visiting him at home, where he studied with a governess, or later at boarding school. There was often a man with her too. They were different each time, men who spoke no Polish but who tousled his hair and tried to make jokes in Italian or English. Anton didn't like the familiar way their hands would linger on his mother's back. After being sent to bed, he would hear whispers and giggles drifting down the corridor from his mother's bedroom. He would pull the quilt up around his ears to muffle the sound and begin to count silently. 'One, two, three, four . . .' Sometimes he got close to a thousand before eventually drifting off to sleep. When his mother visited, it was like being enveloped in a cloud of perfume, furs and kisses, which vanished as abruptly as it had appeared.

These visits confused Anton at first, but he had inherited his father's practical temperament. Instead of dwelling on the disconcerting arrivals and departures, he tried his best to ignore them. It was easier to focus on his studies instead, especially science and engineering. Nature, these subjects reassured him, was fundamentally orderly and predictable, bound by the laws of physics. The world could be brought under control, whether it was a

stubborn internal combustion engine or an aeroplane lifting into the sky as if by magic. Confident, intelligent and bolstered by his cheerful nature, Anton fancied himself as a modern twentieth-century aristocrat, a fair and progressive landowner who was a skilled engineer, understanding the mechanics of a tractor or irrigation system better than any of his tenant-farmers.

As for his wayward mother, he came to regard her with the fond but distant indulgence you might grant an eccentric and unreliable aunt. For some years, Mela Lewicki-Radziwiłł had lived in Milan with the owner of a motor manufacturing company, sending occasional letters of extravagant affection to her son. They were written when she'd had nothing else to amuse her, Anton recognised, as he composed dutifully affectionate letters back. And then three years ago, in 1936, the family solicitor forwarded him a letter from the Milanese gentleman. It was written in English in a flowing script and told him that his mother had regrettably died after a chill caught during an unwise midnight swim in the Adriatic Sea. Anton was the sole heir of the entire family estate, including the village of Lewicki and all its lands.

A cloud of steam rose gently from the bath where Anton reclined. It curled around his cavalry uniform where it hung behind the door, so that the jacket seemed to float in a romantic, patriotic frame. His ancestors had worn a gallery of military costumes over the centuries as Poland had been occupied in turn by half the countries of Europe. Charging west then east by turn, the armies of Russia, Austria-Hungary, Prussia, France and even Spain had taken turns to dispute the lands he could see now through the open bathroom window. Such was the history of Poland. Somehow the Lewicki-Radziwiłł family had held on to their estate despite all these convulsions, through a mixture of luck, judicious marriages and alliances with whichever power was currently in charge.

The manor house at Lewicki was a monument to this long history. At one end stood a square tower cloaked in ivy, with arrow slits in the walls and a slim turret at the top. Battlements extended around the eaves of the house. Stone steps led up to a front door of thick oak which looked as though it could resist a battering ram. A house had stood on this site since the Middle Ages, but this was no ancient building. In a fit of modernity, Anton's grandfather had demolished the medieval manor in the 1860s. In its place he built a new house in the fashionable Gothic Revival style. It was a

nineteenth-century fantasy, a romantic dream of an imaginary past. The ivy-covered tower, the battlements, the walls with arrow slits: all were less than eighty years old, a gentleman's folly. Anton's grandfather had modestly named it 'the Winter Palace'.

Bathed, shaved and dressed in his uniform, Anton admired himself briefly in the mirror then went downstairs to eat something before saying goodbye to Elisabeth. She was there in the kitchen when he arrived. Wearing a thin dressing-gown with a cardigan pulled over her shoulders, she'd put coffee on to brew and laid out cheese and cold meats to go with their bread. There was no sign of their cook, Mrs Dudek, who had usually walked up from the village by this time to prepare breakfast. She had worked for Anton's family since the Great War and was as much a part of the Winter Palace as the great oak front door. Perhaps she was ill, he decided.

Mrs Dudek had known Anton since he was a little boy. She doted on him. It was rare for a day to go by without her remarking 'Just like your father!' when he pushed his hair back or scratched an ear. As for Anton, he simply accepted her as an extension of the family. He had decided as a boy that the main thing of interest about the cook was a birthmark on her arm, from which a tuft of dark hair sprouted. It was like some alien plant that had taken root there. He yearned to touch it, while being equally horrified at the thought of doing so.

Elisabeth almost felt that Mrs Dudek was jealous when she married Anton. Soon after they returned from their honeymoon, the cook had given her a long explanation of how Anton liked his eggs, whether boiled, scrambled, fried or in an omelette. Elisabeth got the message that this was a task best left to someone who knew him best. Sometime later, when Anton had idly scratched his ear one day while thinking, Elisabeth pointed and said solemnly, 'Just like your father,' then began to giggle. At that very moment, Mrs Dudek came into the room and Elisabeth's giggles turned to a coughing fit, pretended at first and then genuine. She had to run from the room to fetch a glass of water. Nothing was said, but Elisabeth always suspected that the cook had realised she was being made fun of.

'I was going to bring you breakfast in bed,' Anton said as he entered the kitchen, hugging Elisabeth before they sat down. How delicate she felt against his thick uniform. 'Aren't you cold?'

She shook her head, made an effort to smile, then poured the coffee. Sitting on his knee to drink hers, she placed an arm around his shoulder.

‘Women are tougher than men, has nobody told you?’ Elisabeth said. ‘We don’t feel the cold like you brave tin soldiers, with all your coats and woollens.’

They were silent for a while as they ate, neither quite knowing what to say. Anton felt her hand slowly stroking his back, moving her fingertips back and forth across the fabric of his uniform. He wanted to be gone and yet also never to leave.

They had been married for almost three years. Elisabeth was barely twenty-one, yet had known since she was sixteen that they would be together. The two had met by one of the slender, silvery lakes that hid in the woodlands nearby. Anton was carrying a fishing rod, enjoying his last summer before going away to university. Elisabeth was staying in Lewicki with her aunt at their holiday cottage. She was idly skimming stones across the water from a rickety jetty. As Anton cast his fishing rod, there was a splash of water, a teasing look and a long afternoon’s conversation which became more serious as the hours wore on. Later they agreed: their future had been decided on that day.

‘When will the Germans come?’ she said now, standing in the kitchen to pour them more coffee.

Anton loved the contrasts in Elisabeth. One moment she was curled warm and soft on his lap, and the next she stood before him with the stern expression of a field marshal, inquiring about a war.

They both knew what she meant. It was not a matter of if the Germans would invade Poland. It was a matter of when.

‘Almost certainly next month. Maybe October, but I doubt that. The weather will be too uncertain. We’ve prepared for a September invasion, anyway.’

Anton explained to Elisabeth how Poland’s defence against the German invasion would unfold, demonstrating with knives, forks and the salt and pepper pots on the kitchen table. It was a relief to have something to talk about to fill the time before he left.

‘The Germans will be caught in a trap of their own making,’ said Anton.

He liked explaining things to Elisabeth. Politics. History. How things worked. He enjoyed choosing the wine in a restaurant and educating her on the differences between wine regions. Only as time went by did Anton

realise, with deep embarrassment, how often she found these well-intended little lectures to be simply amusing.

‘Claret comes from the Bordeaux area in the south-west of France. It’s a fuller-bodied wine,’ Anton had explained in a restaurant, with a serious expression on his face. ‘However, this evening we’re drinking a Burgundy, from Saint-Julien,’ he said. ‘It’s also red, but Burgundy is a finer wine, more delicate – more “aristocratic”, if you will.’

Looking up from the wine label, Anton saw that Elisabeth had a hand over her mouth and was trying not to giggle. He blushed and felt like a fool. Was he being pompous? He didn’t dare to ask her, in case the answer was yes. Thankfully the waiter had arrived at that moment with their soup.

‘Hitler will make a big mistake if he invades Poland,’ said Anton to Elisabeth now as they sat in the Winter Palace kitchen. ‘With our allies behind him in the west, the German army will be trapped fighting on two fronts.’

The grand strategy of the war was one thing. Leaving Elisabeth to join his regiment at the Poznań barracks was another. Once again, Anton wished he could stop the clock, so they could live forever in this paused moment, hidden in a fold of time. Anton felt as if he couldn’t move his body from the kitchen chair; that once he stood up, it would start a cascade of events taking him further and further away from her, into a dark, unknowable future.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘Or you’ll miss your train to Poznań. I’ll finish packing my trunk today and be settled in Warsaw by the weekend. We’ll see each other there at Aunt Katerina’s when you go on leave.’

Elisabeth was trying to keep their parting lighthearted, he could tell. But at least she would be safe in Warsaw with the aunt who had raised her. Katerina’s apartment was high up in an old building near the Botanic Garden. The street was quiet, the windows shaded by plane trees. Hardly any traffic went by. Elisabeth could live there in peace until he joined her. Once she left the Winter Palace, the house would be shuttered, ready for their return next year, when the war would surely be over.

At the front door, Anton hugged Elisabeth so tightly that she gasped. The world around them seemed to slow for a moment, during which he took in everything around him as though seeing it for the last time. The silvery sheen of dew on the lawn before the house. The apples in the orchard beyond, heavy and ripe for the picking. The familiar melancholy call of a

woodpigeon: three notes of lamentation, then two for solace. Anton steeled himself to leave. He whispered a few words in Elisabeth's ear, they fumbled a kiss and he climbed on his steed – an old bicycle they used for the short ride to the station in the village of Lewicki. He always hated goodbyes. The idea of waiting on a station platform making small talk until a train pulled away was torture to Anton. He always insisted on parting at the house so he could make a quick getaway. It wasn't that he was unemotional but the exact opposite. He found those moments too upsetting, as when his mother would leave after her brief summer visits when he was a child, so he learnt to simply avoid them if he could.

As Anton sat on the bicycle, Elisabeth's arms were still around him, a hand stroking his back. Anton gently disentangled himself from her embrace. Balancing a kitbag on the handlebars, he set off down the drive, legs pumping slowly like the pistons of a steam engine. Should he turn his head to give her one last smile? No, he was a stern-faced soldier going off to war, as his father and grandfather had been before him. Resisting the impulse to look back, he only held up an arm in a gesture of farewell before disappearing between the stone pillars at the bottom of the drive.

Elisabeth went back inside, closing the heavy door behind her. The empty hours ahead seemed an appalling prospect. She would do one thing, then another, then another, until at last the long wait would be over and they were together again.

2

After a certain age, you count your memories in decades, not in days. So much has happened, after all. A year gone by is now just a passing ripple in time. But when you are young, even twelve months seems more like the crossing of a mountain range, full of incident and drama. So much of what you experience is for the first time. There are no long perspectives. So it was for Anton and Elisabeth on that morning when he left the Winter Palace to go to war. It felt as though a lifetime had passed since they'd first met, yet it was just six years since that summer's day by the lake. What if she had turned left instead of right and taken her book to read beneath a tree in another part of the woods? What if he had decided to fish in one of the many other lakes in the area? But it was impossible to imagine that day being any other way.

Elisabeth's book had lain unopened beside her at the end of the little jetty. The weather was too warm for reading. Instead, she sat with her feet dangling over the water, her head lifted back and eyes closed to feel the sun on her face. Now and then she stood to send a stone skimming and bouncing across the surface of the lake. However hard she tried, it would never bounce more than three times. Taking another flat stone from her pocket, she threw it with as much force as she could. The stone veered unexpectedly left, towards a figure holding a fishing rod further down the shore, disturbing the water before skittering onto the beach beside him.

'So sorry!' she called out.

'I should think so!' Anton shouted back. 'You've scared all the trout away for the next hour.'

Anton had been vaguely aware of the schoolgirl idly skipping stones across the lake. Now she had interrupted his afternoon's fishing with her careless throw. At the same time, he was not unhappy to have an excuse to talk to her and walked towards the jetty.

'I'm Anton,' he announced with a little bow, 'from over at Lewicki. I haven't seen you around before . . .'

‘Elisabeth Zalewski,’ she replied, ‘from Warsaw. My aunt and I are staying in a cottage here for the summer.’

Anton nodded and found that he had no idea what to say next. In a fashionable city bar or at a dance, he had no trouble coming out with a smart remark, but sitting next to this self-possessed girl by the lake, he found himself lost for words. It puzzled Anton sometimes that he could be confident and yet shy at once. It was something she seemed to understand, though, looking at him occasionally to give a wide, slow smile before turning her face to the sun again.

‘What school do you go to?’ he asked in desperation.

‘The Sikorska school. I’m a boarder. How about you?’

‘I’m at the university in Warsaw,’ he said, unable to keep a little pride out of his voice, before adding, ‘Just starting my first year next month, to be honest. Engineering.’

Anton sat down beside Elisabeth and the two looked out over the water in silence. He relaxed at last, not feeling the need to speak. He was so used to being constantly active that this contentment in doing nothing was curious and unfamiliar to him. It was a kind of pleasant, companionable solitude. Now and then they spoke again, finding out a little more about each other. Anton had assumed Elisabeth to be like any other girl at first, but he discovered there was a thoughtfulness in the way she spoke that was appealing for reasons he didn’t understand. Elisabeth, too, had assumed that he was like so many other boys she had met: a familiar, overconfident private-school type. Something in the way Anton stood and dressed, even in the way he held his head, marked him unmistakeably as a rich kid, one of the landed gentry whose lives would always be easy. On that afternoon, though, as they chatted and lazily sent stones skipping across the water, Elisabeth liked how easily he could laugh at himself if she gently made fun of him. And so, without a word, something somehow was decided in those hours by the lake.

By the time they walked home, as the sun sank lower in the sky, Anton had learnt that Elisabeth’s favourite colour was turquoise. He learnt that she wanted to become a nurse or even a doctor one day. Favourite flower? The marguerite daisy. Best friend? Ingela, a girl at her school. Who would she most like to meet? Marie Curie. Or maybe Josephine Baker. Elisabeth, meanwhile, learnt that Anton’s ambition was to develop his estate with modern methods and to serve the country in the same regiment as his father.

The person he'd most like to meet in the world was Nikola Tesla, the inventor. Favourite flower? He shrugged his shoulders indifferently and gave a wry smile.

The way back to Lewicki ran along a forestry road. The tyres of logging trucks had created deep ruts full of muddy water, which Elisabeth and Anton sidestepped as they walked along, chatting and laughing. Somewhere a blackbird was singing. Far to the west, a sunset of extravagant beauty was visible through the trees. It looked as though a massive airship was crashing to the ground, Anton said, like a Zeppelin exploding into flames in slow motion. Was it then that he hesitantly reached out to touch Elisabeth's hand first? Or was it she who firmly took his hand in hers? In the years to come, they happily disputed who made this first move. So often, remembrance of past feelings is more real to us than what apparently happened.

All that summer they met at the lake and walked hand in hand for hours while they talked. They lay down on prickly hay bales in a barn and hugged each other, she not sure what to do next and he not daring. They went swimming, shyly changing into their costumes with their backs to each other before plunging into the cool water of the lake. At the end of one of these endless days, rain began to softly fall as they walked back to Lewicki. Elisabeth draped her towel over her head, so it framed her face like a mantilla. As Anton grinned and did the same, there was a booming sound ahead of them.

'Sounds like thunder,' said Elisabeth. 'We're going to get soaked. Maybe we should get under cover somewhere.'

They looked around for a woodcutter's hut or somewhere else to shelter, but there was nowhere in sight. What they did see, strangely, was a cabbage rolling towards them down the middle of the road. Rounding a corner, they saw the road was strewn with cabbages. Ahead of them a truck had tipped into a ditch, and sacks of onions, carrots and more cabbages spilled from the back as if it was some mechanical horn of plenty. The engine was still running and the door hung open, showing the driver slumped over the steering wheel.

'Wait here!' Anton called to Elisabeth as he raced forwards. One thought tripped over another as he ran to the truck. (It's a Fiat 621, three-litre engine. Driver must have his foot jammed on the accelerator. Any petrol leaking? Can't tell with the road so wet from the rain. Wonder if he was smoking when it crashed . . .)

Anton got closer, now able to read the sign written in sweeping brushstrokes along the side of the truck. *Jankowski Fruit and Vegetables. Only the best will do!* Then at last he could leap into the cab and switch off the engine. Keeping an eye out for a smouldering cigarette end, he rammed the gearstick into neutral and pulled on the parking brake. As the engine fell silent, Anton turned his attention to helping the driver, but Elisabeth was already there beside him.

'Ease him back gently,' she said.

As they did so, blood ran down the driver's face from a gash on his forehead. He groaned and looked blearily at them, murmuring, 'Skidded on the corner, wet road . . .'

'Hush, now, hold your head back,' said Elisabeth, wiping the blood with her towel then pressing it to the wound.

'That's encouraging,' she said to Anton. 'He's awake, he's breathing and already insisting it wasn't his fault. He needs to see a doctor anyway. Can we get the truck moving?'

They helped the man down to sit in a hedge and recover. Rain mixed with the blood which still trickled down from the towel he held to his head. They were all soaked through, but it no longer seemed to matter. Anton opened the truck's bonnet to check the engine, his hands moving deftly among the maze of pipes and wires and cables. Elisabeth had already noticed his confidence with anything mechanical. Nothing was forced. She was oddly moved to see the way his hands moved so surely, as if he were a surgeon calmly examining a patient's body. Once the truck was reversed back onto the road, Anton took the wheel to drive them to the doctor's surgery in Lewicki. Elisabeth sat beside him while the driver lay behind in a nest of cabbages, carrots and potatoes, grumbling that the crash wasn't his fault, the road was wet, and he didn't need to see a doctor.

Years later, it was not the crash or the injured driver that Elisabeth remembered most, but the drive to Lewicki, with the windscreen wipers working hard against the rain and Anton beside her, steering through the downpour. After working as a team to clear the road and help the driver, now they sat together, sometimes glancing across to grin at each other. It was exciting to travel in a vehicle this way, side by side, for the first time. It was an adventure. Who knew how many more they would share in the future? How wonderful to be in a car and drive as far as they liked, in whatever direction they chose, making their life together.

That summer came to an end at last. When Anton went to Warsaw to study, Elisabeth had already left for her boarding school in the country. They wrote letters to one another every evening, five pages long or more, then waited impatiently for the postman each morning. Elisabeth told him what she was reading, how her piano technique was improving and that biology was her favourite subject. Anton told her how he'd climbed onto the broad lead roof of his college library one night. This was strictly forbidden. A scandal had erupted the previous year when a student had leapt to her death from the library roof onto the stone-flagged quadrangle below. Suicide was a mystery to Anton. He simply could not imagine the state of mind in which someone would want to end their life. *I mean*, he wrote to Elisabeth, *even if you're sad, the world around us is just so interesting!*

Anton was nineteen years old, and so the ban on climbing onto the roof was practically an invitation. Unscrewing the bolt from a door in the library attic was the work of a few minutes. Anton lay on his back and stared in wonder at the night sky until the morning star appeared. *The universe is a beautiful machine*, he wrote to Elisabeth. *The planets swoop in arcs around the sun as though spinning on invisible gimbals, a movement discovered by Copernicus* – a Polish astronomer, he reminded her.

Anton imagined over and over again the way Elisabeth spoke and moved; the way her hair fell forwards as she read, then was pushed behind her ear with an irritated pout. He was consumed by the extraordinary fact of her existence. Anton was almost frightened, too, by the ferocity of her love for him. What wild creature had been released when they met, like a spirit escaping from a cloven tree? He wanted to be with her always. He wanted to be the air moving around her as she walked. He wanted to be the water that she drank.

During her vacation from boarding school, Elisabeth returned to Warsaw. When her aunt was away for a few days, Elisabeth waited all afternoon for Anton to finish his lectures, walking up and down the gravelled avenues of Łazienki Park. The statues there looked like gigantic chess pieces set down among the lawns and flowerbeds: historical figures gathering marble cloaks around their shoulders, a nymph being pursued by Neptune, a sphinx and the famous monument to Chopin.

Later that evening, in Anton's room, Elisabeth turned out the light, let her dress slip to the floor and climbed into his bed. She knew almost nothing of what men and women did together. On a train once, when Elisabeth was younger, she'd been puzzled by a man opposite her reading a book, squirming sometimes in his seat with a hand in his pocket. After he got off at Torun, she noticed a postcard left on the seat. Perhaps the gentleman had dropped his bookmark, she thought. Turning it over, she saw a strange image that made her stomach flip. It showed a naked couple wrestling: the woman was bent forwards on hands and knees with her breasts dangling down and backside in the air. There was a strange smile on her face. The man, meanwhile, was crouched behind her, his private parts hugely swollen and plain to see. Elisabeth felt her face grow hot and flushed, and quickly pushed the obscene card down behind the seat. Surely respectable people never behaved in this shameless way? Her aunt? The headmistress at school, in her tweed suit, with neat reading glasses perched on the end of her nose?

Being in Anton's arms that night bore no relation to the pornographic postcard. They moved from hugs to kisses, from kisses to drawing their limbs closer, and then lying in a long embrace afterwards. They were oblivious to the watch on Anton's bedside table, as though the hours had kindly paused for them. Despite Elisabeth's innocence, she trusted him entirely. It was the first of many visits they managed to contrive. A few years later, as soon as he had graduated, they were married.

After a honeymoon in Venice, Anton and Elisabeth returned to Poland and made the Winter Palace their home at last. Weeks went by before they became accustomed to saying 'my husband' or 'my wife' without feeling awkward. They were also unaccustomed to the closeness of marriage, to being together almost all the time. This was a surprise to them both. When you marry, you discover the other person all over again, in small ways and large.

'Don't you ever close a drawer after opening it?' called out Elisabeth from the bedroom in the first week after their honeymoon.

'I've never really thought about it!' was the breezy reply from the bathroom, where Anton was shaving.

As she reminded him, this was because he had been raised in a house full of servants silently clearing up after him. So meticulous and orderly in his professional life, he was undeniably slovenly behind closed doors.

Anton winced at the word, ‘slovenly’, and merely grunted, but after that there were fewer drawers left open with his socks and undergarments hanging from them. In his turn, Anton – who liked to read in bed for half an hour before sleep – discovered that Elisabeth preferred to turn the bedside lamp off and close her eyes immediately.

‘It’s quite all right,’ she said, ‘you carry on reading,’ but then tossed and turned one way and the other before pulling the sheet over her head with a sigh. Anton felt there was only one thing to do. He began to gently tickle her until they lay laughing in each other’s arms.

‘Fifteen minutes reading?’ said Anton.

‘Fifteen,’ Elisabeth agreed, then jumped up to sit astride him, pulling her nightdress off over her head. A hank of hair fell across her face, which she pushed behind her ear to reveal a particular smile on her face that he immediately recognised. It meant only one thing.

When they first met, Anton had imagined Elisabeth in simpler terms. It was still her, but in outline only. She had seemed charmed somehow. He felt sure she was someone who had never known what it is to be lonely or unhappy; never lacked friends or felt the unkindness of others at school. These naive ideas fell away as they grew to know each other better. Anton soon made that most surprising discovery of love: that another person actually exists in all the same, mysterious and contradictory complexity as oneself.

Elisabeth, too, came to know Anton better, after having taken him for little more than a schoolboy on the day they first met. She had liked his serious expression when they fell silent, looking out over the lake together without feeling the need to speak. She saw a glimpse of the man inside the boy. By the time they married, a few years later, he was twenty-one, but she was glad to see the boy still there inside the man. Anton could still laugh shyly at himself, after only a little prompting from her.

For the next three years, they celebrated each wedding anniversary with a dinner on the terrace of the Winter Palace, the table set with a candelabra and a vase of fresh dogroses from the garden. Three times they gathered apples from the orchard in autumn, carrying them to the house in a big wicker basket. For three years they woke to footprints in the snow where a fox had crossed the lawn on a winter’s morning. Anton and Elisabeth felt as though the years could go on turning like this forever, circling around in the arms of the seasons. It was as if the future already existed, far off, waiting

to welcome them, like the distant twinkling lights of a city as they approached. When they arrived, there would be fresh sights to explore together, new friends to meet and children playing on the lawn. They would hear music, the notes of which had yet to be written.

3

Imagine how it feels to know someone in the world is determined to murder you, Anton thought. He was having a conversation with Elisabeth in his head, trying to convey how it had felt to be in battle for the past few weeks since he had said goodbye to her.

It's the murderer's sole desire to end your life. ('Why me? We've never even met,' you plead with fate.) Now imagine not one, but tens of thousands of murderers. They swarm towards you armed with pistols and knives and guns. Some even have aeroplanes and bombs and gigantic artillery. It made you feel sick. This was the fear you had to get past if you wanted to survive a war.

How many days had passed since he'd cycled down the drive and left the Winter Palace? Sixteen? Seventeen? More? Drifting in and out of sleep in a dark train carriage as it travelled north towards Warsaw, he found the time impossible to calculate. There were five other soldiers from his brigade in the compartment. He could smell the fug of their warm bodies, but if he opened his eyes he couldn't see a thing. The carriage was in complete blackout. This was comforting, somehow, as though they were deep underground in a metro tunnel, safe from bombs and shells for a while at least. In fact, the locomotive was steaming across open country, taking them towards Warsaw so they could join a last-ditch effort to defend the capital. They were on one of the few railway lines that had not been bombed out of action by the Luftwaffe. In a few hours, dawn would come. If they were unlucky, a German spotter plane would appear, looking for them, a Storch buzzing high above with its spindly undercarriage dangling like the legs of a mosquito. The pilot would radio their location and soon Stuka bombers would appear, as they had so many times in the past weeks, machine guns firing and dropping bombs. For now, though, it was dark and relatively safe, and Anton was enough of a soldier to grab sleep whenever he could get it.

Together with the rest of the Polish army, Anton had been shocked at the ferocity of the German onslaught. It was overwhelming. Poland had

been invaded by almost a million highly trained troops, and thousands of tanks. More than three hundred Stuka dive-bombers screamed out of the sky. What horror can lie in numbers. As Anton dipped in and out of sleep, he tried again to make sense of the past few weeks since the day he had left the Winter Palace. That very night, German aeroplanes had borne down on Poland without mercy, deliberately bombing cities as well as military targets to create terror and confusion. This was not war as anyone knew it, even those with memories of the Great War. This was an invasion by machines.

Like his father, Anton was a captain in the Fifteenth Lancers Regiment. Unlike his father, though, he mounted a horse rarely and with neither skill nor pleasure. Anton rode on a tank. As a boy, his interests had been like those of any other child. He had sword-fights in the garden with an imaginary friend. He wept for the tin soldier in Hans Christian Andersen's story, so treasured as a birthday gift by a little boy, then abandoned and forgotten in the gutter a few weeks later. For Anton's seventh birthday, though, his mother had given him a Meccano construction kit, ordered specially from Hamleys Department Store in London. Soon he was using the metal spars to build a bridge for his model train to cross a chasm between two chairs before it descended down the tracks to steam under a sofa, emerging at last from a tunnel beneath a looming mountainside of upholstery.

One day, Anton's governess found water cascading down the wide marble staircase of the Winter Palace. She ran upstairs to find Anton in his bath, which was overflowing onto the floor. Both taps were turned on full, and a contraption of Meccano pieces, pipes and rubber tubing was balanced on the side. Water gushed from this into a bucket, which was also overflowing, adding to the sudsy lake which spread across the floor onto the landing to make a waterfall down the staircase.

'Anton!' the governess shouted. 'Turn off those taps.' She plunged her arm into the bath to pull out the plug.

'Look!' he cried out excitedly, oblivious to the flood. 'I've made a gravity-fed siphon!'

All through school and university, studying mechanical engineering, he developed a near-magical intuition for what was wrong with an engine or pump or dynamo. He would have protested at the word 'magical', pointing to the hundreds of hours he spent with his technical books and repeatedly

dismantling and reassembling every sort of machine you can imagine. It seemed that whatever he laid his hands on wanted to share its workings and please him as he coaxed it to life again. To command a squadron of tanks was a schoolboy's dream for Anton. Not only could he follow his father in the same cavalry regiment, to ride out with the wind blowing in his face, but he could do so from the turret of a tank.

Charging across a plain while on exercises, Anton felt invincible. The Polish TKS tank was fast and nimble, with a top speed of 45 kilometres an hour. The charge was like the ferocious advance of an army of centaurs across a field of war. They were like gods – man-machines – breasting the air as they swept forward to kill their enemies and take the fruits of victory. The five other tanks in his squadron roared alongside his, red and white pennants fluttering from their aerials. Anton could distinguish each one by the faintly different pitch of its engine.

After arriving at the Poznań barracks from the Winter Palace, Anton's tank squadron was sent ahead of the main army group to scout out where the German invasion forces lay. He was glad not to be with the lumbering heavy forces, making their way by road towards the invaders. Thousands of troops were travelling westwards by foot, truck and horse-drawn wagon, or wobbling along on requisitioned bicycles. At every crossroad there were long hold-ups. Officers wearing Movement Control armbands checked paperwork and maps, before sending entire battalions down country lanes, hoping they wouldn't turn a corner to find a column of German Panzer tanks facing them.

'This is more like it!' Anton had yelled above the roar of the engine to his driver. Corporal Stanislaus Pawlowski grinned back like a boy in a billycart as the squadron charged downhill towards a river crossing. Stan was a tight squeeze in the driver's seat. He had a heavy build and a tough, pockmarked face but for his lips, which were incongruously delicate. It was like the mouth of a Hollywood starlet on the face of a boxer. Anton and Stan had become good companions, if not friends, spending long days together inside the snug cabin of the tank, with its constant smell of oil and cordite. The corporal had been a mechanic in a Gdansk shipyard before joining the army. He was a Communist.

'When the revolution comes, we'll take all your lands and return them to the downtrodden peasants who slave on them,' Stan had told him

cheerfully one day. ‘Then you’ll have to get a job and earn a living like the rest of us.’

Anton could never tell how serious Stan was when he said these things. Perhaps Stan wasn’t sure either. Anton’s own tenants didn’t seem particularly downtrodden to him – quite the opposite – but he didn’t want to get drawn into a tiresome argument. Besides, he had no interest in politics.

‘It might have escaped your notice that I do have a job, Corporal Pawlowski,’ he said. ‘And it involves sharing a tank with the aroma from your armpits. That’s punishment enough for any man, surely?’

Anton’s tank reached the river crossing first. This marked the border with Germany. It was called a river on the map, but to Anton it looked little more than a stream. They had been driving for hours through paddocks and open country. All the while, Anton had been sitting in the tank turret as they bounced along, staring through his binoculars for any sign of the Wehrmacht – the German army. He had spotted birds and squirrels, and even a fox creeping along the side of a field, no more than a red streak before it disappeared at the sound of the tanks. Of the mighty German Wehrmacht, though, there had been no sign.

‘Well, well,’ Anton said, gazing across the river. ‘It seems we are about to invade Germany. What time do you make it now?’

Anton lifted his wrist and remembered yet again with irritation that he had left his watch at home. ‘It’s 11.47,’ called out Stan. Anton noted the time in his pocketbook, then pulled down his goggles and with his arm gave the signal for the six tanks to advance. He moved his legs into a wide stance to steady himself as they crashed easily across the river and up a lightly wooded slope on the other side. At the brow of the hill they paused while still hidden among the trees and shrubbery. Anton looked carefully through his binoculars to see what lay ahead. It seemed impossible that no one had heard the roar of their tank engines or smelt the black diesel fumes of the exhaust as the engines revved up the slope. The hill ran down on the other side to a shallow valley. German cows grazed peacefully in a German field while a skylark sung high above them, celebrating the calm of a late summer’s day. Beyond the field were a few half-timbered houses, neat in black and white, gathered by a bend in the road. There was a garage with ivy creeping across a brick wall and an old-fashioned petrol pump. A rusting tin sign bearing a yellow seashell hung unmoving in the midday air. Three German army trucks waited in line to fill up, each one flying a black

cross pennant from a radio aerial. The soldiers had been allowed to get out of the trucks and were lounging nearby, smoking and chatting. One of the village women had made coffee. She carried a tray of mugs from group to group, handing them out to the men. Anton could almost hear the conversation when one of the Germans lifted his voice or gave out a laugh. These villages were a familiar sight to Anton. This one was on the outskirts of Fraustadt. He recalled stopping at this very place to buy petrol a few years before.

The range of the cannons on Anton's tanks was half a kilometre. The German trucks were around 300 metres away. At this distance, the Polish shells could penetrate steel 25 millimetres thick. Anton jumped down to walk along the line of tanks and confer with the other crews. When everyone was briefed, he climbed back into his tank to work with Stan, preparing their cannon and ranging on the German column as accurately as he could. They worked quickly, for the Wehrmacht trucks could drive off at any moment once their fuel tanks were full. Anton had never killed a man in his life, yet he moved with a calm rhythm now, at one with his tank, like a well-oiled camshaft in a machine. In a few minutes they were ready. He held up five fingers to the other tank crews, then four, then three . . .

The tanks recoiled in unison as they fired. Birds clattered in fright out of the undergrowth, terrified by the tremendous noise. Yet what happened next seemed out of all proportion, making Anton and his men crouch back in awe. As the cannon shells hit the German trucks, there was an enormous explosion, followed by an eruption of fire which engulfed the entire village. Where the garage had stood moments before, a column of black, oily smoke rose up while a rain of debris fell down all around. Splinters of metal. Gobbets of flesh and burning fragments of cloth.

'Everyone aim for the petrol pump,' Anton had said before they fired. Their aim had been true, for the shells must have instantly ignited the petrol line and the fuel storage tank below the pump. The earth lifted up as a terrible explosion consumed the garage, the army trucks and the surrounding houses. Anton wondered if he had really made this terrible thing happen. He imagined being one of those lounging soldiers in the moment before the shells landed, sipping on a coffee and joking with his friends. Anton felt guilty, frightened and exhilarated in equal parts. Do your duty, he told himself, that's the only way to cope.

‘Get brigade headquarters on the line,’ he called out to the radio operator. ‘Find out what’s happening elsewhere and ask for the latest orders. I don’t know whether to move forwards, backwards or sideways.’

Anton waited, watching the giant column of black smoke rise into the silent air. After a while, he heard the skylark begin to sing again. Cows returned to their grazing, chewing sedately on the grass. It felt eerie for the destruction and slaughter he’d caused to be absorbed so soon into the landscape, taken for granted by trees and the grass, the wind and the grazing animals.

The radio operator beckoned to Anton with an urgent gesture then passed him the earphones.

‘Fall back, fall back!’ cried the voice over the radio. Anton did not know who this person was, but he spoke with a deadly authority. The transmission was broken up by cracks and pops, as though the radio waves were being shot apart by flying bullets. ‘It’s no wonder you hardly saw any Germans in the border country where you are, near Fraustadt. They’ve concentrated into two armies pouring into the country to the north and the south. It’s a giant pincer movement aimed at Warsaw.

‘Your brigade is going to be trapped right in the middle,’ the officer on the radio continued. His tone suggested this was all Anton’s fault. The successful attack on the German column was forgotten. ‘Fall back to Poznań now. We’re going to regroup to defend Warsaw until the French and British armies attack the Germans from the rear.’

4

When Anton left the Winter Palace, cycling slowly down the drive with his bag balanced on the handlebars, I so wished that he would turn to smile at me one last time. He only raised an arm in farewell, though, before disappearing from sight between the stone gateposts. I went back inside and closed the heavy door behind me. Somehow I would have to fill the rest of the day. Usually I hardly noticed time passing – we were always so busy – but now every minute gaped emptily in front of me. At least I needed to pack my trunk and decide what to take to Warsaw. That would fill a few hours. If there was a war, it might be twelve months before I was home again. I would need clothes for four seasons. Perhaps it made sense to travel in my lambswool coat rather than pack it, even though the weather wasn't cold enough for it yet. But no – it would all be over before Christmas, I told myself. Anton had said so. When spring came and the first daffodils appeared on the lawn of the Winter Palace, he would be home again. When the weather was warm enough, we would have breakfast on the terrace, looking out across the grounds. I would hear the familiar rustle of newspaper as Anton opened wide the *Gazeta* then folded the pages back sharply with a crack. If I missed him this much after a few hours, it was impossible to imagine how I would feel in a few months. At the same time, I was strangely sure that he would come to no harm if there was a war.

What had drawn me to Anton, what was it that now made life hard to imagine without his presence? It was an attraction greater than its parts. I liked how his solemn look of concentration would break into a sudden wide smile as he looked up, making me melt inside. I liked his confident intimacy with machinery: the way he gently handled a recalcitrant car engine or repaired a bicycle. He could be overconfident, even snobbish, at times, but then would humbly ask my opinion on some great matter of strategy. It was this combination of strength and vulnerability that was special. I wanted to look after him and be looked after by him at the same

time. Was that the meaning of love? It seemed as good a definition as any other.

I had long finished packing when dusk came. The electricity had failed, so I made a little fire in the kitchen to warm some soup and went to bed early. I surprised myself by falling asleep straightaway, only to be woken just before dawn by the sound of aircraft. It was unusual to see even one aeroplane in our quiet part of the country. Going to the window, I saw dozens, then hundreds of them passing overhead, like a flock of great metal birds migrating east. The air was filled with a constant mechanical buzzing.

It's started, then, I thought, wondering where Anton was at that very moment. A sickening lump of anxiety began to gather in my stomach. At least the luggage was all ready in the bedroom. A taxi was booked to take me to the station in a few hours, at ten o'clock in the morning. I would get to Warsaw just in time. It would be good to have company, to hug Aunt Katerina and have someone to talk to.

When ten o'clock came, though, no taxi appeared. I began to think I might have to walk to the little station in the village and leave the carefully packed trunk of my belongings behind, when I heard the sound of a vehicle coming up the driveway, grinding over the gravel.

'At last,' I said out loud. 'I'll make it for the train after all.'

When I opened the wide front door, though, it was not the taxi from the village pulling up but a big military truck with a black cross marked on its side. Another arrived behind it, then another. Half a dozen motorbikes followed, weaving between the vehicles, driven by dashing dispatch riders in leather gauntlets and goggles. The noise of the convoy was deafening and the drive was thick with dust. Soldiers jumped down from the trucks and stretched their arms before lighting up cigarettes. They did not even seem to see me. I felt invisible. The shock of their arrival was so great that I couldn't think for a moment. I could only stand and watch as though a scene from a play were being acted out in front of me.

They were Germans.

A soldier carrying a clipboard walked up to the front door, followed by an officer wearing a long leather coat. Both seemed surprised to see me there. The officer nodded, looking me up and down, then gave a smart salute. He took the clipboard from the soldier and stepped forwards. The officer's long, bony fingers held the official-looking paper as he read it, then gave a broad smile.

‘You must be Mrs Lewicki-Radziwiłł,’ he said. ‘It’s my pleasure to meet you. Your house has been requisitioned by the Reich. I’m Colonel Wendt of the Third Construction Battalion. We’re here to improve transport infrastructure, as this land is now part of Greater Germany. The area’s ideal for an airfield, and your delightful house will be our headquarters while we carry out the construction.’

I leant back against the doorpost, my hands trembling. It was impossible to speak. I felt as though I might vomit.

Soldiers wearing braces rolled up their sleeves and began to unload boxes and filing cabinets from the trucks, wheeling them on trolleys past me and into the house. There was a tinkling crash from the dining room. Something made of glass had smashed on the parquet floor.

‘My men are so clumsy sometimes,’ said the colonel. ‘Do you forgive them? Yes, of course. We’ll reimburse you for any damages, naturally,’ he added with another smile. It was impossible to tell if he truly meant to be apologetic or if the smile was really a smirk.

All this must have been planned years ago. While Anton and I were sitting out on the terrace last summer, perhaps discussing planting new rosebushes, someone at Luftwaffe headquarters in Berlin was peering at a map and deciding that this was a good place to build an airfield, that our house would be taken over by the army, and so a ring was drawn around the Winter Palace in red crayon. I wouldn’t be travelling to Warsaw today.

‘Now, we have so much work to do,’ Colonel Wendt said, ‘and it would be easier for everyone if you kept yourself out of the way . . .

‘Private!’ he called to a passing soldier. ‘Take this lady up to her room. Bring her some tea. How do you like it? With sugar? Some milk, perhaps, English style?’

‘Yes, thank you – just a little milk,’ I found myself murmuring my usual response without thinking, then blushed at the stupidity of the words.

The soldier led me upstairs, stepping around a technician who was laying telephone cables down the stairway. As the bedroom door closed behind me, I heard the key turn in the lock. What a fool I was for thanking the colonel when he offered me tea! All day there were sounds of banging, shouting and boots clattering up and down the stairs as the house was transformed from our home into headquarters for building the new airfield. No tea arrived, of course. I was glad to be out of the Germans’ way, yet frustrated at being locked up like an inconvenient dog. I wandered

aimlessly around the bedroom, sometimes raging at the invaders, sometimes feeling the cold draught of fear on the back of my neck. I dreaded what would happen in the next few hours, let alone days or months in the future. Tomorrow they would let me go, surely? I would walk to Warsaw if necessary.

'Dear God, let Anton be safe today,' I prayed, over and over again.

While gazing through the window, I heard shots ring out from the direction of Lewicki. At the Winter Palace we were used to hearing rifle fire now and then, but hunters fired in single rounds as they came upon a deer in the woods. These shots came in repeated, rapid bursts. Machine guns. Smoke began to rise from the village, not the familiar drifting haze from a heap of burning leaves but a dense, black column. I left the window and went to lie down, feeling sick in my stomach at what might be happening.

This was when I saw Anton's watch still lying on the bedside table. He would be furious with himself for leaving it behind! My next thought was that a German soldier would surely steal the watch as a souvenir. I had to keep it safe, this last physical connection to Anton. I held the watch tightly in my fist while staring around the room, looking for somewhere to hide it. I went to the empty fireplace and reached my hand up into the chimney. My fingers found a narrow, sooty ledge, and there I carefully placed the watch.

I'd just wiped my hands clean when the door opened abruptly. A German guard stood by while the woman who came up from the village every day to cook for us entered with a tray of food. Bread. Cold meats. Gherkins. A glass of milk.

'Oh, Mrs Dudek,' was all I could say, squeezing her hand. She didn't look in my face and pulled her hand away, shaking her head, then left with the soldier behind her. I was hungry but somehow had no appetite at the same time. Picking at the food on the plate, I tried to piece together what was happening in the village. The gunfire. The smoke. Mrs Dudek's expression. And why was I being kept here? Why not throw me out, let me travel to Warsaw? I should have tried to leave as soon as the Germans arrived, but I'd been in a state of shock. I would ask Colonel Wendt later. Despite everything, he was surely still an officer and a gentleman, like Anton.

As night fell, I decided that the colonel had forgotten all about me. I might as well go to bed and ask to see him when morning came. I was sure he would allow me to leave, perhaps even tomorrow if the trains were

running again. How comforting it was to undress and slip between the cool sheets. Lying in the dark, I heard the Germans in the dining room below. There were raised voices, then laughter and bursts of song. I recognised one of them, the ‘Jägerlied’. (‘*Im Wald und auf der Heide, da such ich meine Freude . . .*’)

How jolly they sounded, I thought bitterly. Wasn’t this one that Anton sang with his friends when he invited a group to visit for a weekend of hunting? I suppose I must have fallen asleep, for the next thing I remember was waking with a start as the door of my room was opened and slammed shut again. Footsteps sounded in the darkness and then I heard a voice mumble something indistinct. I began to tremble as I realised there was a man in the room, standing just beyond the foot of my bed.

5

When Anton and his troop reached Poznań that evening, they saw the fuel depot had been bombed by the Germans, along with the barracks and railway yards. Without diesel, their tanks were useless.

The machines were abandoned on the street where they ran out of fuel. Anton and his men billeted nearby, then left the following morning, joining the scramble to defend Poland. Some soldiers left on horses from the regimental stables, cantering away with pennants raised, as their ancestors had done for so many centuries. Some left on an enormous armoured train that bristled with anti-aircraft guns. From a distance it looked like a battleship sailing smoothly through the countryside. Some left on trucks, or the less fortunate on foot. There wasn't a bicycle left in the city, as thousands were requisitioned by the army.

Anton and Stan set off with the rest of their brigade in a long column, pedalling their bicycles awkwardly with packs, gasmasks and rifles on their backs. Within a few hours, Anton's legs began to ache. He felt as though iron shafts were moving up and down inside his calf muscles, pushing against the flesh. It was unthinkable to stop while hundreds of others in front of and behind him were carrying the same load on their backs. After a while he discovered that he'd become used to the pain. If it got no worse, he could carry on. With every push on the pedal, too, he was drawing closer to Warsaw, where Elisabeth was safe in her aunt's apartment. Whatever else happened, at least he would see her in a few days' time.

The column of troops on bicycles was led on a route which avoided main roads. These were choked with refugees and attracted the attention of German dive-bombers, so they cycled along under the dappled shade of tree-lined country lanes, travelling ever eastwards to defend the capital. By late afternoon, Anton had begun to wonder where they would rest for the night and if there would be anything to eat, when he heard a buzzing sound in the sky. It grew louder and then became a roar as a German fighter plane swooped down, pulling up just above the trees beside the road. Anton and

Stan froze, looked up, then dived with others into a ditch at the side of the road. After three runs at the column with machine guns firing, the Messerschmitt flew away, this engagement a mere diversion on its way to somewhere else.

Climbing from the ditch, soaked in mud, Anton saw a bizarre, horrific sight. Dozens of soldiers who had not moved fast enough lay dead on the road. Their bodies were slashed open, mutilated by the rain of bullets, and so entangled with the wreckage of their bicycles that it looked impossible to separate them.

'The local villagers will bury them,' said another officer, sounding unconvinced. 'Let's get out of here before any more aircraft turn up.'

No one disagreed. Leaving their bicycles behind, the troops ran across a field and disappeared like rabbits into a nearby wood, part of the massive Kampinos Forest.

Those days in the forest were a blur. Anton's little group came across other soldiers who had fled into the safety of the woods after their units were attacked. Approaching a clearing, they saw more than a hundred mounted cavalrymen had made camp around the edge, with their horses neatly corralled behind a row of tents. It was like a romantic nineteenth-century painting. This was all that remained of the Pomeranian Cavalry Brigade. The clearing became their new headquarters. There was an armoury with a ramshackle collection of weapons and mismatched ammunition. There was a hospital tent overseen by one exhausted medical officer. There was a canteen but hardly any food.

Anton and the other officers formed new companies from the broken battalions that struggled in, then made sorties, emerging from the forest to harry enemy units, doing anything they could to stop German troops from crossing the Bzura River. All the while they were conscious of the armies closing in on Warsaw from the north and south like a pair of gigantic jaws. Day after day they fought on, hoping at least to slow the German advance.

Anton was usually particular about shaving every morning before patting his face with Acqua di Parma, the same cologne his father had used. Now he had a bushy beard and stank, with a sickly combination of sweat and dirt, as did everyone around him. He hadn't washed or changed his clothes in weeks. Dinner was often just a soup of boiled roots and a piece of hard black bread. Anton's sleep was disturbed by groans of agony from injured soldiers in the hospital tent. As days went by, the number of

wounded increased. One sergeant spent all day walking back and forth around the camp with a stick to support a useless, wounded leg. The pain was worse if he stopped, the sergeant explained, so he kept on walking until he collapsed from exhaustion. Another had a head injury covered by a grubby bandage. His jaw made a clacking sound as it moved up and down, like the painted wooden mouth of a puppet.

One of Anton's men, a private, had been hit by a vicious line of machine-gun fire, which shattered his leg and turned it into a shredded bag of skin, leaking blood and full of splintered bones. Soon after the man was brought back to the camp, the doctor sawed off the leg below the knee. Without medical equipment or drugs, amputation was the only option to save the limb from gangrene. Once this creeping necrosis took hold, the flesh would start to die while the patient was still alive. It was a terrible fate. The doctor was busy that day; a bin of severed limbs stood by the tent-flap of the hospital, waiting to be taken away and burnt in a pit that night.

Visiting the private the next day, Anton tried to make conversation about when the war was over and how things would get back to normal. He tried to sound as though this might be possible.

'Thank you, Captain, but I think my farming days are done,' the soldier replied. 'Better to lose a leg than my head, though . . .'

A throb of pain made the soldier gasp and close his eyes for a moment. A tear ran down his cheek. After a while he was able to speak again, but Anton told him to rest, promising to return the next day. He had never encountered the sickening smell of rotting human flesh before. The stench from the stump of the man's leg, covered in bloody bandages, had almost made him gag. If only men were like machines, he found himself thinking. If only he could unscrew the leg and replace it with another, then change the man's spark plugs and see him smile again and cease to weep.

When Anton returned the following day, as promised, the private had died. A blanket had been pulled over his head but no one in the hospital tent had organised for his burial yet. When Anton asked a passing orderly about it, the man just waved a hand and rushed by, too busy with the living and the nearly living. Anton would have to do it himself.

'You, Corporal!' he called to a man loafing around outside the tent, doing nothing in particular. 'What's your name?'

'Marek, sir!' he replied, shuffling to attention. The soldier stooped slightly, as tall men sometimes do to avoid attention, until it becomes a

habit.

‘Well, fetch a spade, Marek. You can do something useful and help me bury a brave man.’

The ground was easy to dig, soft and carpeted by the first leaves of autumn. It had made a soft bed for the soldiers when they established the forest camp; now it would make a quiet grave too.

•

The camp commander made contact with the Poznań army headquarters at last. He was ordered to evacuate the forest and make for a small town a long day’s march away, where a train would be waiting. It would take them to Warsaw under cover of night. They would help defend the city until the French army attacked the Germans from the rear. If only the French would attack. If only the British would come to the aid of Poland as they had promised.

The train felt strange and luxurious after weeks of living and fighting in the forest. Anton squeezed into his compartment with Stanislaus, four other soldiers and all their gear, laying their rifles along the stringed luggage rack above their heads. There was a lamp with a velvet shade and tassels above each seat. Between each lamp was a little advertising placard in a brass frame: a man standing on a beach with hands on his hips; the sand a bright yellow, the sky an ultramarine blue. The soldiers were all too tired to speak. Most fell asleep instantly, as though a spell had been cast on them, rocked by the swaying motion of the train.

Anton drifted in and out of a doze. Memories of all that had happened since he’d said goodbye to Elisabeth swirled around his head. He wished he could remember exactly how long it was since that morning he’d left the Winter Palace. It still worried him that he didn’t know. Time after time he tried to calculate how many days had passed, but he always failed in the blur of the forest. To know exactly would make Elisabeth feel closer, somehow, through these days of terror. Nobody had told him how noisy battle would be, making his ears ring almost constantly. Nobody had told him what a bullet wound could do to a man’s head, cruelly giving a young soldier the face of a deep-sea monster. Nobody had told him how it would feel to have tens of thousands of armed murderers swarming into his country, determined to kill him and his companions.

Anton tried to force himself to stop thinking and go to sleep, but it was no use. He opened his eyes and stared out of the window into the blackness beyond. A shooting star flashed briefly in the sky ahead of the train. ‘That’s for luck,’ he told himself, as his governess had whispered to him when he was young. After a while there was another flash, and then a whole shower of lights dashed in an arc into the moonless sky, hanging like ghastly lamps and exposing the train to view. Soon the show repeated itself, closer now. That’s fireworks, not stars, he thought, realising at the same time how unlikely that was.

Anton nudged Stan’s knee to wake him, then pointed through the carriage window at the lights.

‘Flares,’ said the corporal, awake in an instant and sitting upright. ‘Someone out there wants to see us. I don’t like it.’

No sooner had he spoken than the lights were followed by the sound of guns being fired, then the thud of shells smashing into the ground around the railway tracks they moved along.

As he concentrated on the sound, Stan narrowed his eyes, a connoisseur of artillery. His face was calm but deathly pale in the artificial light of the flare.

‘Sounds like 76-millimetre shells. Betushka tanks have those. If I didn’t know better, I’d say we’re being fired on by the Russians.’

‘That would only make sense if Stalin’s invaded Poland from the east, in some devilish deal with Herr Hitler, coming from the west.’ Surely that was impossible? But by the time Anton had finished his sentence, he realised it must be the truth.

At that moment a curious thing happened. A flash of light filled their train compartment, as it rose up, expanded, then crashed in on itself. In a curious silence, the walls of the carriage split open and imploded, sending shards of wood and steel flying through the air. The other soldiers in the compartment lifted from their seats and flew through the air, crashing into the splintering walls and ceiling. Corporal Pawlowski seemed to explode from within. His head split in two like a torn mask, splashing blood and gobbets of brain tissue across the shattered window.

Anton saw all this in silence, because his ears had been deafened by the explosion. There was a tremendous pain in his leg. He also seemed to be falling through the blackness that filled the carriage after the flash of light: falling through the whirling debris of the wrecked train, which had taken a

direct hit from a Russian shell; falling down the railway embankment and through the dark rich earth, past the ruins of ancient castles and archaeological relics and dinosaur bones, past prehistoric seashores and deep into the hot dark core of the earth. Only here did he hear a sound, like somebody far away asking him a question. Anton strained to listen as the voice was so faint, like the desperate, fluttering sound of a moth trapped inside a bottle.

6

‘What a day, what a day, and so much to do yet.’

I recognised the voice in the darkness of my bedroom. It was the colonel who had greeted me when the Germans arrived at the Winter Palace. Had he forgotten I was still in the house? Or did he mistakenly think this bedroom was empty? But no, he was talking drunkenly to me, I realised. I lay still, terrified and pretending to be asleep. A boot hit the floor, then the other. There was the shuffling sound of clothes being taken off.

Dear God, no. Not that, I thought.

‘You should see that heathland. How are we going to turn it into an runway that will take the weight of a Heinkel bomber? We’ll need good drainage, that’s for sure. I’m glad Ernst is working with me. There’s no better engineer for that sort of thing . . .’

As the voice went on talking in the darkness, I heard the sash window being pulled up, then a distant splash of piss as it rained down on the shrubbery below. With a grunt of satisfaction the colonel closed the window, and suddenly he was in the bed beside me, cold and naked.

Before there was time to react, his hands tugged my nightdress up then gripped my body, turning me towards him.

I felt paralysed. This couldn’t be happening.

‘Now, warm me up, won’t you,’ he murmured.

‘Oh God, no, please . . . no, please . . . please, sir,’ I whispered, trembling with fear and trying to pull away from him.

‘No need to be shy,’ the German said more firmly. He was on top of me now, big hands around my wrists. As I tried to struggle free, I felt one of my arms being released, then the flat of a hand slapping hard against my cheek. There was a burst of little stars before my eyes. He hit my face again and I tasted blood in my mouth. The man’s penis was pushing insistently at me down there, hard and moist at the end like a dog’s snout. There was a piercing pain that made me cry out, and then I could only weep in despair. All the while, he was groaning and whispering obscene affections. It was

like the embrace of some awful, tentacled sea monster from the depths of a nightmare. As in a nightmare, too, I felt unable to move or struggle any more. It seemed the agony would never end, until he gave a shudder and a cry before throwing himself back on the bed beside me with a loud sigh.

I felt as though I'd been split wide open and my insides scooped out. Immediately, I curled into a ball, weeping as I cradled the ache in my groin. It felt wet, whether with blood or the man's stuff I didn't know.

'What are you?' the colonel said sleepily. 'You're a fierce little pussycat, that's what you are.'

I felt a wet kiss on my nape and shuddered. The taste of vomit rose into my mouth and I was almost sick on the bed where I lay. When the man went to asleep, I felt able to move at last, creeping from the bed to clean myself at the washbowl. I winced as my fingers touched the bruised skin of my privates and inside my thighs. It was impossible to get back into bed with the man again. He'd raped me in my marriage bed, the bed I had shared with Anton. Fear, anger and shame took turns to be uppermost in my mind. Settling as well as I could into an armchair, I pulled up my legs and hugged a dressing-gown around my body. I couldn't stop trembling. The man had forced me so casually, as though my body was his property. It felt like something he was accustomed to doing. He treated me like a reluctant wife. I imagined the silent brutality of his marriage. I prayed for sleep, but the emotions stirring in my mind kept me awake for hours.

My despair was so profound and extravagant it threatened to carry me away. The temptation of oblivion filled my mind for a while, but the mechanics of taking my own life defeated me. To lie in the bath and cut my wrists? To hang myself? Only love had ever felt as extreme as this despair, and it was this love which proved stronger than the urge to kill myself. I had to believe this: that one day the war would end. That Anton and I would be together again. I would never tell him what had happened. I had to believe that one day in the future, we would have afternoon tea at the Winter Palace again, looking out over our beloved garden. With familiar teacups in our hands, we would reminisce about that terrible war we had lived through and survived long, long ago.

7

‘The principle exports of Poland are machinery and agricultural goods,’ Anton read from a poster gaily decorated with crayoned pictures. There were yellow sheaves of corn, a red tractor and a bright blue pig. Hanging next to this was a chart of the Holy Land, showing Jerusalem and other cities, along with the lands of the tribes of Israel. Gilead, Judah, Ephraim and the others. There were children’s drawings on the wall too, some with gold stars in the corner.

Anton had woken to find himself lying on a thin, striped mattress on the floor of a schoolroom. That was clear enough. The familiar smell of chalk and dust rose from the floorboards. Other men lay around him, but everything was strangely quiet. His leg ached terribly. When he slid his hand down, he found it was bound tightly in bandages. Think, think! Anton told himself. What happened? Where am I?

There was an explosion on the train. Now he remembered. He’d felt himself falling, falling so far he thought he would never rise again. Propping himself up on an elbow, Anton looked around the room. Rows of other injured soldiers were lying on the floor around him. A woman in a white coat was kneeling close by, speaking to another patient, but Anton could hear nothing of what she said. There was a smell too, which had become familiar to him in the forest: the stench of gangrene and rotting human flesh. It still made him gag. It was the worst smell in the world. All right, concentrate, assemble the facts, make a plan, Anton told himself. One, I survived the attack on the train. Two, my leg is injured. Three, I’m in some kind of field hospital set up in a school building. Four . . . but he couldn’t think of a fourth thing and drifted back to sleep again.

When Anton woke later, the doctor, in her dirty white coat, was beside him. She looked exhausted, as though she hadn’t slept for several nights, which was probably true. Her voice was almost inaudible.

‘Speak up, could you? You’re whispering,’ Anton said.

The doctor leant down close to Anton’s ear and spoke again.

‘Captain Lewicki-Radziwiłł, I’m Dr Kantor. You’re a lucky man. After the attack on the train, you were dragged alive from the wrecked carriage and taken prisoner by the Soviets along with the rest of us. We’ve been here in Lvov for three days. This school is a temporary prisoner-of-war hospital.’

Anton remembered the explosion; how Stan’s head had burst open in front of him. He nodded.

‘I’m not whispering, by the way. It looks as though your ears have been affected by the explosion, but don’t worry. You’ll be hearing normally in few days, in your left ear anyway. I’m not sure about the right ear, but you’ll get used to it.

‘The damage to your leg was more serious. We’ve got most of the shrapnel out, though we had to leave one piece in there. You’ll carry a fragment of a Polish Railways First Class carriage in your body for the rest of your life. I suggest you try to walk around gently, to help the muscle to heal and not lose strength.’

‘At least it was a First Class carriage,’ said Anton, attempting a joke.

The doctor gave a tired smile. She said nothing, but looked around warily like an actor who had forgotten her lines and was searching for the prompt. She spoke again.

‘Listen, Captain. This place is being closed down. We’re being moved out. There are all sorts of rumours. We’re being sent west, to be handed over to the Germans. Or we’re being transported east to work in Russia. I doubt the Soviets know themselves yet what to do with us. But you can guess what they’ll do with prisoners who aren’t well enough to travel. They’ll be shot and left behind in a ditch. Look as fit as you can, if you want to live.

‘And one more thing. Now you’re awake, the Russians will want to interrogate you. Once they see you’re an officer, they’ll take you away, like the others. God knows what they have planned, but I suggest forgetting you’re a captain. Just be a simple soldier. That’s all I’ll say.’

While the doctor moved on to other patients, Anton struggled to his feet. Wincing every time he put weight on his left leg, he walked down the schoolroom, through a door that was hanging off its hinges and out into the yard. It looked as though an entire bombed-out city block had been converted into a camp for Polish prisoners of war. In the distance, the roof of the Lvov cathedral had been hit by a bomb too, leaving the shining copper dome shattered and peeled back. It reminded Anton of the torn foil

of an Easter egg. Russian sentries sat casually on rooftops nearby and at open windows, chatting and smoking, ready to shoot anyone who tried to cross the coils of barbed wire at the perimeter.

Anton found a piece of broken wood to support himself as he paced the schoolyard. Now and then he gave it a twirl, as though it were a walking stick of finest walnut with a handle made of brass. His mind was working furiously. Perhaps he could try to escape, but his chances of running were zero until his leg mended. And the Russian guards looked bored; they'd welcome the chance to shoot a limping Polish officer struggling to make his way through the barbed wire. And what was this about being handed over to the Germans, or transported east to Russia, away from Poland? It made him dizzy to think about it.

Think, Anton! he told himself again. What's the most important thing? Stay alive first, then worry about getting to Elisabeth in Warsaw. The doctor's words about officers being singled out and taken away came back to him. The Russians might come around checking everyone's rank this very afternoon. He must do something about it right away, but what?

Anton had changed in those brief weeks of September 1939 after leaving the Winter Palace. Death had become an everyday thing to him in the Kampinos Forest, as men around him were shot or suffered from terrible injuries. Any one of them could have been him. A hardness had crept into his face: the expression of a man living close to death and determined to survive. Only his military pass identified him as a captain. He would tear it up and chew the pieces until he could swallow them. He wore no uniform jacket to give him away, only an army greatcoat over his battledress – the filthy coat he'd lived and fought and slept in for weeks in the forest.

'Name, rank and number.' As a prisoner of war, that was all he was obliged to tell the Russians. Well, he would tell them he was somebody else – a regular soldier, not an officer. A corporal. A simple mechanic. With his skills, he could get away with that. He would tell them his papers were lost. That must happen all the time. But what was his name to be? Anton thought back to the battle in the forest and the men who had died there. Corporal Komarowski was one of them, one of the tank support crew. What had been his first name? Well, any name would do. He would be Jan. With that, Anton picked up his stick and began exercising his leg again. Careful, he told himself. Walk like a corporal, not an officer. Walk like Jan Komarowski. Talk like Jan Komarowski.

Anton wasn’t taken away with the other officers. He wasn’t sent back to Nazi-occupied Poland, either, but stayed on at the bombed-out school as a prisoner of war while the Russians worked out what to do with them. A few months passed and a new year had arrived before the prisoners were marched out and down the ruined streets of Lvov towards the railway station.

Later that day he was on a train again. It was the longest, strangest train he’d ever seen. When Anton craned his head out of the barred window, he could see no end to the carriages far behind as they emerged from a tunnel beneath a looming, wooded mountainside. There were goods and cattle wagons in dun grey; regular passenger carriages in green livery, and even a few sleek blue-and-cream carriages of the Polish Railways Express, which had once travelled daily to Paris, Berlin, St Petersburg.

Anton was not in a First Class carriage this time. Along with a dozen others he’d been ordered into a goods wagon that had straw laid out on the floor. A spike of pain went through his calf as he climbed up into the train, but he told himself that the pain in his leg was less every day. Dr Kantor had done a good job. He was hearing better too, on one side at least. A few of the others in the wagon were prisoners of war, all from lower ranks. The officers had long disappeared, hustled off at gunpoint to whatever fate awaited them. Two families who seemed to be ordinary townsfolk from Lvov huddled together in a corner, murmuring reassurances to each other. Sitting slightly apart was a trio of peasants in descending size: a chubby grandmother, daughter and granddaughter, dressed identically in red headscarves and thick woollen skirts. They were like a set of Russian dolls.

Though none of them knew it at the time, the long train was only one of dozens that were steaming towards the east. A great gathering was taking place. That year and the next, almost a million Poles were rounded up and transported to work in the Soviet Union. The populations of entire towns were scooped up and sent away, leaving the streets empty. If they were lucky, people were given a day’s notice to pack up. It didn’t matter who you were. Postmen and pharmacists, printers and garbage collectors, all were deported indiscriminately, along with their families. They were called ‘enemies of the state’, but that was a bureaucratic euphemism. They were to be slaves, and they were not the first to be abducted in this way. During the

time of the tsars such a harvesting of souls took place every few decades, at times when even more labour was needed than could be beaten out of the Russian serfs.

For a day and a night, those on the train were given neither food nor water. There wasn't even a bucket to use as a toilet. With one of the other prisoners of war, Anton pulled and kicked at a board in the floor until it gave way. This hole was their lavatory. Whenever someone in the wagon needed to squat over it, two of the others would hold up a blanket and everyone else made a point of talking loudly.

Despite these grim circumstances, everyone introduced themselves as formally as if meeting at a promenade concert. 'May I ask you, Mrs Kaszinsky,' Anton asked one of the women, 'did you get much warning about being taken away?' He ensured his voice had a tone of respectful deference. He was 'Corporal Komarowski' now, addressing a lady who was clearly of a superior social class.

As he spoke, the train began to cross over a high trestle bridge. The timber spars trembled, causing the wagon to shrug sideways to the left or right. In silence, they all imagined the deep, rocky ravine below. Only when the train was safely on the other side did Mrs Kaszinsky reply.

'Half an hour. That's what they said. You didn't argue with the Russians. There was a nasty little man wearing spectacles with them who gave the orders. He looked like a Jew to me. We put on as many layers of clothing as we could and gathered a few things together . . .' She gestured to the suitcase next to her.

'Then the Russians searched us before we got on the train. They took everything of any value. One of them even took my watch and put it on. It was a little lady's watch – my husband bought it for me on my birthday – but the soldier looked delighted as he held up his hairy arm to admire it on his wrist. The animal. Like a monkey in the zoo with a shiny trinket.'

She shuddered. Anton remembered his own watch, a Longines, left behind on the bedside table at the Winter Palace. He'd taken a replacement from a corpse during the battle in the Kampinos Forest, but a Russian soldier had stolen that.

'My husband's an optometrist, you know,' the woman went on. 'We have a shop on Market Square in Lvov. He was on his way to visit his mother in Kraków when the Russians came. I've no idea where he is now,

or if he’s safe. And here we are, going further and further east on this train with every hour.

‘Where are they taking us?’ she asked Anton, as though someone in uniform should know, even if he was a mere corporal. ‘Why are we going? What are they going to do with us?’

He had no answers. Nor did anyone else in the wagon. Wrapping his army greatcoat tightly around him, Anton lay down on the straw and tried to sleep. Why indeed? And there must be thousands of people on this train alone.

All the next day and the one after, the train chugged on. It stopped briefly in the mornings and at dusk for a bucket of water, some bread and bowls of salty cabbage soup to be slopped out in each wagon. There was silence as everyone feverishly ate, but for a regular metallic chink as a railway worker tapped the wheels with his hammer. The taps got louder as he approached, then faded as he walked on, down the length of the train. There was something melancholy about that sound, chiming across the empty steppe.

Inside the train, they couldn’t feel the track climbing as each day passed, but they began to feel noticeably colder. It was mountain air they were breathing now. Standing towards the centre of the wagon was warmer, but Anton preferred to be next to the barred window, feeling the cool, fresh air on his cheeks. The taut lines of telephone wires running beside the track now began to sag under the weight of snow, so that they hung in wide bows between the poles.

‘Look!’ cried a boy on the opposite side of the wagon. It was Mrs Kaszinsky’s son, whose father was an optometrist on Market Square in Lvov. ‘We must be crossing the Urals.’

They crowded around the window to see mountain peaks looming ahead of them, golden in the evening light.

‘They’re taking us all the way to Siberia. Mother of God, have mercy on us,’ moaned Mrs Kaszinsky.

On the fourth day, the train began to descend by long curves towards the plains beyond. The locomotive pulling the train picked up speed, as though eager to get home. They passed lakes dark as pools of ink. They saw flocks of white ibis descending on the lakes, hundreds strong. Deer startled and ran from the approaching train, then slowed to graze again. Big, feathery

snowflakes began to fall and did not stop. In the distance, they could make out villages by faint lights at night or by hovering crows during the day.

Anton looked out from the train in wonder as well as worry. They entered a forest of larch trees, which flashed against a white snowy background as the train passed. After a while, the forest lost all depth and seemed flat: a long striped corridor through which the train was travelling. It made Anton feel nauseous to look out of the window. He turned away, desperately wanting to arrive somewhere, anywhere, to see the end of this endless journey.

8

One afternoon Anton's train slowed and came to a halt. The engine kept up steam, though, impatient to get going again. They're changing the points, Anton thought; we must be nearly there, wherever *there* is. Soon the train was moving again and Anton saw he was right. The main track continued straight, tunnelling into the dark forest, but their train had turned off onto a spur line. At last they had arrived.

The heavy wagon doors were unbolted and Anton climbed down with relief onto solid frozen ground. Fewer climbed out of the wagon than had entered it in Lvov. Three of the others had died, including Mrs Kaszinsky's son, whose father was an optometrist. Looking back, Anton saw hundreds of others leaving the train. Some were handing down suitcases, rugs or other possessions that had been hurriedly tied up in sheets. What do you take when you're given thirty minutes' notice to leave your home behind forever, he wondered?

Russian soldiers pointed towards a camp in a wide clearing of the forest, past a little wooden railway station, roughly fashioned in the gothic style. The fencing and duckboards on the road the train's passengers trudged along were made of long pieces of timber. Even the soldiers' coats, stiff with frost, looked like planks nailed together. It was a whole new world made of wood.

At the camp gate stood a long guardroom with a coil of smoke rising from a chimney. There was a warm glow in the windows. From a distance, it looked more like an illustration in a book of fairytales than the entrance to a prison camp. A soldier sitting outside waved at them with his pipe as they went by, a sardonic smile on his face. They walked past a machine shed, where the legs of a mechanic poked out from beneath an enormous truck. Anton caught a whiff of the familiar, friendly smell of engine oil. They passed a pile of great tree trunks that was higher than a house, yet stacked as neatly as firewood. Nearby stood a tall sawmill, and beyond it a row of barrack buildings.

One of the Russian guards shouted something as he pointed towards the barracks. He mimed, putting his gloved hands together and laying his head on them with a grin. Well, I guess that means we sleep here, thought Anton. The long hut was gloomy and damp. A row of small windows let in enough light to show thick swags of cobweb hanging from the rafters like dirty curtains. In the middle was a big iron stove with a rickety chimney that disappeared into the shadowy ceiling. The building was dirty but solid. Despite everything, the engineer in Anton recognised how well the hut was built to withstand the Siberian winter. The walls and pitched roof were made of heavy logs carefully slotted together. Where there were gaps that might let in a knife of cold wind, the space had been rammed tightly with earth and moss. The entrance faced south too, away from the fierce north wind blowing from the Arctic.

Anton claimed one of the lower bunks lining the walls. It had wooden slats, a mattress stuffed with straw, and a few woollen blankets. He luxuriated in lying on his first proper bed since leaving the regimental barracks in Poznań months before. How easy it would be to climb into the bunk and go to sleep there and then. As the hut filled up, children began to cry and arguments began. A woman who spoke Russian went off to complain to the guards that they needed food, and what was the use of a stove without a fire? She had hardly left the building when Anton heard someone shouting at her in Polish.

‘You want to be warm? Chop some firewood! You want to eat? There’s soup in a pan on the stove – cook it yourself! And if you want to eat tomorrow, everyone needs to be outside an hour after sunrise. There are no servants for you here, comrades!’

Anton forced himself to stand, then went to help the others chop and carry firewood from the lean-to at the side of their hut. His injured leg hurt from time to time but at least it got no worse, and he tried to avoid making his limp too obvious. That would mark him out as weak. Within a few hours, the hut had been cleaned as much as possible, and a fire was roaring in the stove, sending out a comforting, unfamiliar warmth. Everyone’s belly was full of turnip soup and coarse black bread. All things considered – and what terrible things they were to consider – this was as good as it was going to get for now.

Only when he went to bed, with the itchy blankets pulled up to his chin, did Anton allow himself to think of Elisabeth. Her photograph was kept

safe, hidden in a narrow slit in the collar of his jacket. He pulled out the little picture and held it close. A photograph is always a poor likeness: the face quite still in two dimensions, without the natural, mobile expressions of the person we know. Flickering light from logs burning in the stove, though, seemed to animate the photograph of Anton's wife now. She appeared to be smiling and talking to him. This was too much.

'Oh, Elisabeth, Elisabeth,' he whispered, tasting salt on his lips from tears that ran down his face. 'Dear God, keep her safe and bring us together again. Oh, my dear, my dear . . .'

Anton surrendered himself to tears, surrendered to his longing for his wife – longing for a time when he could be himself again and hold her tight in his arms. At last he gave a shudder and a long sigh, then stretched out in the bunk. He did not wipe the tears from his face; they made him feel closer to Elisabeth for a while.

We'll get through this, he thought. I'll survive in this place, whatever it takes. He repeated that phrase, liking the sound of it. *Whatever it takes.* The ruthless words gave him strength. I will get back to Poland. Then Elisabeth and I will be together again.

9

When I woke at the Winter Palace, the German colonel who had forced himself on me was gone and the bedroom door left ajar. I must have fallen asleep in the chair after all. My whole body was aching, especially between my legs. I was covered in bruises, tender to the touch. After a long bath, I dressed and went down to the kitchen, ignored by the soldiers who were busy poring over maps and plans in every room. In the corridor, two of them were having an intense conversation about runway drainage pipes. They paid me no attention either, as though I were simply beneath their notice. It was a relief to see the familiar face of Mrs Dudek with some girls from the village, preparing lunch for the new occupants of the Winter Palace. I dearly wanted someone to talk to, but Mrs Dudek didn't give me a chance.

'You're all right up here at the big house,' she said in a low voice that sounded almost resentful. 'You can't imagine what it's been like in the village. I can't believe it myself.'

The Germans had arrived in a long column with dozens of trucks and earthmoving machines, she went on. The first thing they did was go to the mayor, telling him to organise billeting for their soldiers. Maybe they thought Mr Hoffman would welcome them because of his German-sounding name.

'Go to hell,' the mayor said. 'Long live Poland!'

They put a rope around his neck and hanged him from a lamppost, right in front of his wife and children. His feet wouldn't stop kicking as he swung back and forth, so the soldiers took shots at him till blood was spouting from his body like water from a leaky bucket. Then he stopped his dancing in the air.

After the troops organised their billets, kicking some people out of their houses, they collected the shoemaker, Israel Jablonski, with his two little daughters, as well as the schoolteacher, Mr Levi, and his wife. (I nodded, not needing to ask why they had been chosen. They were the only Jews who

lived in the village.) The German soldiers made them strip off all their clothes till they were naked and dig a hole – even the poor, frightened little girls. Then they told them to kneel, shot them in the back of the head and threw the bodies into the pit. Their houses were set on fire, ‘to kill the vermin’, the Germans said.

‘Poor Mr Levi’s son is away with the army,’ said Mrs Dudek. ‘He won’t know a thing about it. If he’s still alive himself, that is.’

I remembered the son, young Josef Levi. A confident, good-looking young man with angelic curls and a constant smile on his face. He’d joined the army at the same time as Anton. They had done basic training together in Poznań, but were sent to different units. Anton had gone on to officer training with the Fifteenth Lancers, his father’s regiment and his grandfather’s before that.

The Germans were going to build an airfield, Mrs Dudek said, and then, please God, they would all go away again.

‘But what about our own army?’ I asked. ‘Have you heard nothing?’

‘Only what the Germans tell us, and they’ve taken over the radio stations now.’

All that day I helped the women in the kitchen, for something to do and to have some company. It occupied my mind, which was still numb after what had happened the night before. I made a private vow to run away that evening. I would go for a stroll and simply keep walking. There wasn’t a woodland path in the area that I didn’t know like the back of my hand. Colonel Wendt would grumble, but surely no one would bother to chase after me. Later, when walking down the drive, I noticed a group of off-duty soldiers in shirts and braces gathering apples in the orchard, chattering and laughing together. They were not wasting time in making themselves at home, I thought bitterly, but at least they didn’t take any notice of me. As I came down to the gates, though, I saw that barriers had been set up between the stone pillars that led out of the estate, and there were soldiers with rifles standing guard. Of course; this was a regimental headquarters now.

‘I’m just going for a stroll to take some air,’ I said to the guards, trying to smile and look relaxed. They just grinned and pointed me back towards the house.

‘Offizierdecke,’ I heard one of the guards snigger as I turned. ‘The officer’s mattress.’ This was army slang, I supposed, and I blushed with shame as they escorted me up to the house again. Back in my room, I

crossed my fingers like a child, willing the German officer to forget me. If I kept them crossed, then everything would be all right, just as I wished. But that evening turned out the same as the one before. Colonel Wendt appeared after dinner. There was the same awful, silent wrestling match on the bed, which left me bruised and weeping once again.

This became the pattern of my life. Forced by Colonel Wendt every night, I dreaded the touch of his bony fingers scuttling across my body when he came to bed. I discovered how it felt to be treated as an object, not a person. To him, I was simply a pleasure machine made of flesh.

This was my home, yet it was not my home. I lost any interest in food and hardly touched the meals that were brought up for me on a tray. Sometimes I found myself suddenly gasping for air, as though I had actually forgotten to breathe. During the day, I tried to keep busy, to distract myself from the dread of the coming night, then would remember with a jolt what awaited me in a few hours' time. At those times, I felt like a sleepwalker who suddenly wakes, barefoot in the middle of a road with the headlights of a truck bearing down on her.

In the end, I found it was easier to cope by pouring myself some vodka to pass the afternoon, drinking myself into a daze. I had never drunk so much in my life, had never before drunk simply in order to get drunk. In the morning I woke with a headache, feeling hungover. Disgusted with myself, I vowed never to do that again. But I would do it again. After a few weeks, I didn't even bother to get properly dressed each day, but sat around in my dressing-gown, flicking through magazines and daydreaming. I daydreamed of ways to kill the colonel. In my mind, I murdered him a dozen times. I strangled him in bed with the cord of my dressing-gown. I poured a bottle of bleach down his throat while he slept. I took a carving knife from the kitchen and plunged it deep into his chest. In another daydream, Anton himself would magically appear at the doorway, knock the German colonel to the floor, then beat him to death with his fists until the walls were satisfyingly splattered with blood.

Eventually, I decided to take the simplest route. That afternoon, I smashed my vodka glass with the heel of a shoe, then hid a piece of glass with a jagged edge under my pillow. Later, I stayed awake as the German slept beside me in the bed. All I had to do was lean over and cut his throat, quickly sawing through the pipes and arteries until there was nothing that could be done to save him. I would hold a pillow over his head to muffle

any cries, and then I would slash my own wrists and throat. I swear it was not cowardice or lack of will which stopped me from going ahead that night, but only this – the thought that, despite everything, Anton and I would be together again. I had to stay alive for him. For us. The next morning, I tossed the jagged glass out of the window and into the bushes below.

I came to know Colonel Wendt better. He had only been in the army for a few years, I discovered. He was a civil engineer. He had worked on building Hitler's autobahns and on projects like Tempelhof Airport in Berlin, he proudly told me. The colonel was a tinpot soldier, then. He revelled in his Nazi uniform and the power it gave him, but underneath it was just another self-important man. When he undressed at night and was standing in just his socks, he would glance at the mirror and draw his stomach in, looking pleased with himself. Was that for my benefit, or simply his own vanity? I imagined him a few years before, wearing a suit in a stuffy, overheated office, squeezing his secretary's backside with a wink. A bully with a smile. This was something his wife must surely have learnt – as a man generous with the loose change of affectionate words, he would use them to have his way and force her to comply in bed as well, whether she wanted to or not.

Stories began to reach the Winter Palace about what was happening in the rest of Poland. Terrible things. Whole cities had been bombed for no other reason than to create terror. Hundreds of thousands of civilians had been killed. The Polish army was defeated, but what about the French and the British? Driven into the sea, the Germans told us. Meanwhile, they rounded up the Jews and the homosexuals, the socialists and labour leaders, even the disabled, and murdered them all on the spot. A woman in our village, Lewicki, made the mistake of putting food on her son's plate before serving the German soldier billeted in their house. The soldier shot her in the head right there, in front of her screaming children. They had to watch her die in a pool of blood spreading across the kitchen floor.

It was that easy, then, to shrug off civilised behaviour, no more trouble than shrugging off a coat on a warm afternoon. What a terrifying, exhilarating discovery the Germans had made – that there was no God, that there were no rules except those they made for themselves, that nothing was forbidden. And on top of these horrors, eastern Poland was somehow Russian territory now, while we were ruled by Germans in the rest of the

country. It was all too much to take in. Even though I'd had no word from Anton, I felt sure that he was safe in a prisoner-of-war camp somewhere: safe at least, with a bed and a roof over his head. If he had died, I would know it in my heart.

10

Anton was woken by the sound of shouting. His legs were itchy, covered in bites from tiny insects. His face was cold too – the fire in the big stove had gone out. This was the first and last time the people in the hut ever allowed that to happen. From now on, it would be kept going night and day, all through the long winter months.

What was the shouting about? He listened again. ‘Everybody outside in five minutes!’

Pulling on his boots and jacket, Anton followed the others from the hut, all of them blinking in the morning light. The cold air hit Anton’s lungs and made him gasp. A man was standing on the back of a truck with a row of Russian guards in front of him. He wore a heavy overcoat with a red armband. Anton envied the man’s thick fur gloves, and pushed his own hands deep into his pockets to warm them.

‘Comrades!’ shouted the man. ‘The corrupt Polish state has collapsed. Thankfully, the Soviet Union, in a spirit of friendship, has intervened to restore peace and order.’

Anton recognised the voice. It was the same educated Polish accent he’d heard shouting orders the previous evening. The accent was not unlike his own, before he’d adopted the rougher tones of Corporal Jan Komarowski, a mechanic from Lvov. Anton examined the speaker with closer interest. The man carried himself like an officer and took care of his appearance. He was even close-shaven, a rarity in this place where Anton and every other man had a ragged beard. The speaker was clearly Polish, and a Communist, by choice or circumstance.

‘Our duty at this time is to support the Soviet peoples through our labour,’ the man on the back of the truck said. ‘We will build a world where there are no Poles or Russians or Ukrainians, but only workers united in solidarity. In this camp we will live, as Karl Marx rightly said, “From each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”’

A woman next to Anton muttered, ‘Major Rybus obviously “needs” those fox-fur gloves, then. Does he really think we believe this shit?’

Anton stifled a smile in case one of the guards should notice him. The man, Rybus, was certainly better dressed than the other Russian officers, with smart black piping on his uniform beneath the warm coat, and soft leather boots as well as the fur gloves.

‘He’s a Polish officer?’ Anton asked the woman softly.

‘That’s what I’ve heard,’ she replied, not bothering to keep her voice down. ‘More shame him. Now he’s with the NKVD, a political commissar. He was in our army but went over to the Russian side when they invaded. Told them he was a Communist. Maybe he was, but it saved his bacon anyway. There’s not many Polish officers left, you must have noticed.’

‘Shhh,’ Anton warned, but she carried on talking as before.

‘Do you think I care? My husband was shot down in front of me. My sister died in the train on the way here. These people can go to hell.’

Major Rybus was still talking, his voice hoarse as he shouted in the cold morning air. Children under fourteen would go to school, he said. Women were to keep the stoves burning and the huts clean, to cook, and had permission to gather berries and roots in the forest. The men would be allocated to logging gangs for work in the forest, felling trees to be sawed up for pit props in coalmines. Sundays were free, but no religious services were allowed.

‘Any questions?’ he said at last.

‘When do we go back home?’ asked one brave voice in the crowd.

‘A very good question,’ said Major Rybus. ‘I’m glad you asked. You’ll go home when the snow turns red.’

The major smirked in the direction of the guards, who all guffawed as he leapt down from the truck and walked away. They had obviously heard this line before. It sounded ominous.

Anton was soon marching through the snow into the forest with a work gang, holding one end of a long bowsaw. Each of its teeth was as big as his hand. Trees over a certain width were to be cut down and stripped of branches. Some would be carried back to the camp for firewood and construction, but most were transported to the river. Here, they were floated downstream to a sawmill. The men worked in silence, absorbed in what they were doing and wary of accidents. Sawing kept you warm, that was something, thought Anton. His sense of time disappeared too, especially as

he had no watch. It was almost a surprise then, when the gang leader called out, ‘Back to the camp, men, or we’ll not make it before dark.’

As they marched back, Anton began to understand why the camp had no fence, and the guards were so easygoing. His work gang was made to squat on their haunches for a headcount before they left each morning, and again when they got back, but the forest was their prison wall. On and on it went for thousands of kilometres in every direction. Anyone who tried to escape would freeze or starve to death, or they would stumble into a river in the darkness and drown. If none of those things happened, then they would be eaten by wolves. As dusk fell, it was a relief to see the camp ahead, with windows glowing, and the prospect of a warm meal and his own bunk to sleep in.

•

The next day was the same, and the one after. Every morning he woke warm and comfortable, although itching from insect bites, and braced himself to go out into the cold again. Every morning he marched with the work gang into the forest. His leg ached sometimes but improved as the day went on and he got warmer from the work. The trees were heavy with fronds of ice now. Late in the afternoon, a wind always began to blow from the north. It made an eerie sound in the trees around them, like the pages of an enormous book being riffled. Anton would gather his scarf more tightly around his face, knowing that in a few hours they would be heading back.

At night, furious snowstorms descended on the camp. The sound was like an angry giant striding around, banging on the roof, kicking over equipment and snapping trees like matchsticks. When the time came for bed, Anton would pull out his photograph of Elisabeth. In these moments, he felt as if he’d slipped into a hidden fold in time where he could luxuriate in remembering her. He would concentrate, trying to relive in every detail a particular day they had spent together. Sometimes it was a special memory, such as their honeymoon in Venice. They had walked for hours, getting lost among quiet streets and squares as though they were wandering backstage behind the operatic magnificence of the Grand Canal and its light-splashed palaces. One afternoon, they had lain in bed and Elisabeth had teased him about having children. ‘We only got married three days ago,’ he protested, laughing. More often, it was the memory of some ordinary thing, such as

the two of them having tea at home, telling each other about their day or smiling at something Mrs Dudek, their cook, had said. These ordinary domestic memories were especially precious. He spent night after night imagining their conversations: remembering the way Elisabeth's nose wrinkled when she laughed, and the way she held her teacup, cradling it with both hands; even recalling the linen texture of her dress as he put his arms around her from behind and drew her close . . . All those days they had taken for granted would go on forever. After concentrating on these memories, if he still couldn't sleep, he would simply begin to count, as he had as a child, until finally he fell asleep.

When Sundays came around, Anton didn't know what to do with himself. Working hard in the forest was like an anaesthetic, helping him to cope with the frustration of imprisonment in the immensity of Siberia. On Sunday afternoons, the others sat around mending clothes or playing cards (betting with matchsticks, for they had no money). To keep himself occupied, Anton would chop firewood for an hour or so, then lie on his bed listening to the chatter around him. In the evening, after they had eaten and the hut was cosy with reflections from logs burning in the stove, some of the others began to quietly sing.

One family had managed to carry a plaster statue of the Virgin Mary on the train all the way from Poland. It had broken in two on the journey but had been mended using tree sap as glue. Despite the Soviets' warning against religion, they had made a little altar of logs for the statue. On the first Sunday in the camp a group gathered around it to sing Polish hymns. Anton stayed in his bunk. In his teens, he hadn't so much lost faith as realised he'd never had it in the first place. The whole business of religion and its sentimental excesses mystified him. After all, he thought, why look to fairytales to explain the universe when the answers lie all around us to be discovered by science?

'Beloved Mother, guardian of our nation,' they sang. 'Grant us the graces to be loyal to you . . . Where we shall seek our solace in distress.'

Within seconds, Anton felt a lump in his throat and tears began to well up in his eyes. The emotion was too painful to bear.

'I'll just get some air. A bit smoky in here,' he muttered to no one in particular and stumbled outside.

Anton was used to clear skies after growing up at the Winter Palace, deep in the countryside, but the stars in Siberia looked supernaturally bright

and close. He stood outside the hut and stared upwards, taking a deep breath as he wiped the tears from his cheeks. Then something wonderful happened. Out of the darkness above, a massive curtain unfurled across the night sky, shimmering and glowing with an icy green fire. It was the aurora borealis.

‘A beautiful sight, isn’t it?’ said a voice in the blackness. ‘We see it often here.’

Anton could hardly make out the figure standing nearby, a darker shape against the dark night. He recognised the voice, though. It was Major Rybus, the political commissar.

‘It’s stunning,’ agreed Anton. He should make the most of this encounter. The man had power, and that could help him get out of this place.

‘You’re not superstitious like the rest of our Polish comrades, then? I’m feeling generous this evening, and pretending I can’t hear the religious nonsense being sung inside.’

‘I’ve nothing against the Catholic faith,’ said Anton. ‘But I don’t see the need for magical explanations. Isn’t the universe just an enormous, beautiful machine that we can turn to our advantage? Is that Communist thinking? Maybe I’ve been one all along and didn’t know it. Anyway, what would I know? I’m only a mechanic. But that’s how I see it.’

‘Exactly, exactly,’ said the voice in the darkness.

The two men stared up at the sparkling curtain in the sky in companionable silence. Anton had not said so many words in a long time. It was a relief to talk to another educated person. The singing from the hut rose to a discordant crescendo then tumbled down again into a singsong hum. Anton saw the other man more clearly now as his eyes adjusted to the darkness. Beneath a smart fur army hat, Major Rybus’s handsome face had an amused expression. It looked familiar; perhaps they had been on army manoeuvres together once, or even attended the same party. Perhaps they had friends in common.

‘And are you fond of music otherwise?’ said the major.

‘Oh, yes,’ said Anton. ‘Polish composers, naturally, but German music too, I must confess. Wagner, Richard Strauss and the wonderful Mahler. I still remember a performance of his Fifth Symphony at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw . . .’

Anton hesitated. He'd spoken too fast. Would a mechanic from Lvov be so knowledgeable about music? And was the major suspicious, leading Anton on so he would give himself away?

'It was my mother who introduced me to classical music,' Anton lied. 'She was a piano teacher who "married beneath her" when she met my father, or so her family said. She was always dragging me along to concerts as a kid. I grew to love it in the end. After all, isn't music a beautiful kind of engineering in sound?'

'Maybe there's something to that,' drawled Major Rybus. 'But you're wrong about that Yid, Mahler. I've heard his music – it's just Jewish sentimentality. Ghetto tunes played by an orchestra. A beggar dressed in top hat and tails. It might sound all right at first, but the stink is just the same. By the way, the Grand Theatre has been bombed to dust – no more opera in Warsaw, I'm afraid to say. The Germans get so overenthusiastic when they go to war.'

What had the Jews ever done to deserve such contempt? wondered Anton. The major's attitude wasn't uncommon in the army. It simply mystified Anton. Even when he was young, his nurse had told him that if he didn't get to bed immediately, the Jews would come in the night to steal him away. They would drink his blood then cook him over a fire. You can tell a Hebrew just by looking at them, she said, for their eyebrows were always joined together in the middle. The next time Anton had seen Mr Levi, the village schoolteacher, he'd stared at his eyebrows but couldn't come to any firm conclusion.

It was all nonsense, of course, just as when the nurse had warned him not to stray out of the garden or the Gypsies would kidnap him and he would never see home again. Still, how many Jews did Anton meet socially himself? He could only think of Peter Jacobowski, the grain merchant who had a big estate to the south of Lewicki. At a house party once, someone had murmured to Anton with a smirk that Peter was 'strikingly dark'. It was a euphemism, Anton realised, for his unspoken origins. Peter had converted to the Catholic faith anyway. He had one of the finest packs of foxhounds in the country – the English ambassador himself had said so when he came to hunt. You couldn't call Peter a Jew, really, not in the usual sense.

Anton put these thoughts aside. He had to make the most of this conversation with Major Rybus before the man went away.

‘I’ve noticed there are always trucks waiting for repair,’ Anton said. ‘It’s this freezing weather. If the camp needs any more help in that line, I’d be happy to make myself useful. I’m a better mechanic than a lumberjack. Jan Komarowski’s my name.’

‘I might just do that,’ said the major. ‘Good night to you, comrade.’

Anton felt he’d been dismissed. He’d certainly said as much as he could, anyway. Probably too much. Out of habit, he gave the dark figure a salute, then went back into the hut. He heard nothing from the major the following week or the one after. Deciding the man had forgotten his offer, Anton resigned himself to chopping down trees to make props for holding up the tunnels in coalmines. At least he hadn’t been sent there to work underground, up to his knees in water all day, hacking at the coalface with a picksaw.

Each morning at the camp was like the one before. He felt he was living the same day over and over again, sawing the same tree over and over again. Was this what eternity felt like? This puzzling about time seemed familiar. It had troubled him before, but he couldn’t remember when.

11

All through the winter, Anton and the others longed for summer. When warmer weather came, they almost longed for winter. The snow began to melt and fell from the eaves with heavy thumps at night, waking Anton with a start. It sounded like dead bodies being thrown from the roof and landing heavily on the ground. That was how he thought in those days. As the ground thawed, the men's boots were heavy with mud all day. Bed bugs and every other kind of insect began to breed too, making night-time even more of a misery. They burnt green branches in the hut to smoke the insects out, but this only made everyone cough and rub their eyes for half the night. During the day, thick clouds of mosquitos followed the logging teams to the forest and back again in the evening. Their faces became spotted with angry red bites that no one could resist scratching.

Yet Anton marvelled at the newly clear spring sky with a few delicate clouds above him – white petals drying on a vast blue plate. Wildflowers burst out of the ground, like dots of paint appearing on a canvas. The unfamiliar light and colours played tricks on his eyes. One afternoon, he looked through the undergrowth and could swear he saw a living room floating and rippling among the trees: elegant striped wallpaper, a chintz-covered sofa and a desk set atop an old afghan rug. He could even make out a shadowy figure there, a woman writing by the glow of a lamp. Then a breeze stirred the undergrowth and all he could see was a copse of young birch, a fallen tree trunk covered in lichen and a flowering bush of cloudberry. I'm going mad, thought Anton. I have to get out of this place.

Behind the barracks hut was a tall wooden fire tower. Anton wondered if he would be able to see a way out of the forest from the platform on top. Maybe there was a highway within a day's walk . . . and sleeping in the tower high above the treetops would be a way to avoid bed bugs and mosquitos. After dinner, he slipped away to climb the wobbling ladder that led onto the wooden platform. In every direction, as far as Anton could see, Siberian larch trees stretched to the horizon. There was no road out. He was

marooned in a sea of forest. Anton lay down with his hands behind his head, waiting to see if any mosquitos had followed him up into the tower. Soon the sky darkened and stars become visible, as they had when he'd lain all night on the college roof as a student. These were the same stars that Copernicus had gazed on four hundred years ago, he thought to himself. Their whirling orbits had revealed how the planets moved in stately procession around the sun. It was these stars, too, that the first astronomers, in their Babylonian towers, had studied a thousand years before, recording their subtle movement in cuneiform script. For them, a comet or eclipse foresaw a triumph in battle, a harvest lost or the blood of a king flowing in a gutter. For Anton, though, there was another meaning which filled his thoughts – at this very moment, Elisabeth might be looking up at the same stars too. In less than an hour, the mosquitos found him.

With summer came more trains from Poland, bringing new inmates. Anton's hut was allocated a few prisoners of war and a couple of families with children. Some of these shared beds, children sleeping head to toe and side by side to keep warm. Anton became friendly with the POWs. Danny Waislitz was a sergeant who had been in the merchant navy before enlisting in the army. Pawel Kurek was a radio operator. His belly was so big that the buttons of his shirt always looked as if they were about to pop off and fly across the room. His nickname, naturally, was 'Tiny'. We'll see how much you weigh after a few months in this place, thought Anton. Rations were meagre and the less you worked, the less you received.

Tiny was a talker, one of those people who had something to say about everything. Sometimes Anton just wanted him to shut up. On other days it was a relief to hear his voice to distract from the ache in his leg or thoughts of home. Then, Anton would move so that he could hear better with his good ear. Tiny told them about the little town he came from and about his surprisingly extensive family. He told them about his work. He explained how radio waves worked, and how some travelled out into space for eternity.

'Imagine,' said Tiny. 'A concert being broadcast today will be heard in distant galaxies long after we are dead, long after the sun has burnt out and Earth ceases to exist.'

They all sat silent for a while, imagining music travelling across vast interstellar spaces and echoing through the canyons of some faraway planet. For a few moments, they forgot that they were inmates of a slave camp

deep in the Siberian wilderness. Tiny brought rare news, too, of all that had happened in the war over the past year. When Anton learnt what Tiny had to say, he almost wished he hadn’t heard.

12

After a few weeks, I could no longer struggle against the German colonel. I felt disgusted with myself and sick with shame, but the fact was it made no difference whether I fought back or not. My dread of Colonel Wendt turned at last into grim anticipation as I counted down the hours. I wanted his lust done with so that I could fall into blessed sleep. Anton must never know what happened in this room, I told myself. If I could keep that secret from him when he returned, then anything could be endured. I no longer flinched when the Colonel's bony hands moved across my skin like a crab. I abandoned myself to him. I abandoned myself. I no longer cared, I told myself, so long as Anton never found out. While it was happening, I tried to hide away in my mind until the man was finished with my body, slipping into the silent moments between the ticking of the clock. They were little crevices in time, to hide in and remember my life with Anton. It was like being in a trance.

On one of those nights, I recalled my honeymoon with Anton. We travelled by night train from Warsaw all the way down to Venice. I strained to remember every precious detail.

Walking out of Santa Lucia, Mussolini's new train station, we saw the Grand Canal spread out before us. 'It's like the curtain going up for a magnificent opera!' said Anton, with his arm around my waist. We had been to see *Der Rosenkavalier* at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw a few weeks before. Our days in Venice followed a happy routine. Each morning we explored the canals, the galleries and ancient palaces.

'Can you believe there are more than two hundred and fifty churches in Venice?' Anton said, reading from the Baedecker guidebook in his hand. He pointed at the building we were approaching.

'This is the Chiesa di San Zaccaria, built in the fifteenth century. There's an altarpiece by Bellini.' Thankfully, the church was closed.

'My feet are so tired,' I said. 'Let's find somewhere for lunch then go back to the hotel before the afternoon sun.'

In a nearby square, we found a restaurant and sat at a table outside, watching the world go by as we waited for our food. There was a priest in a hurry, and a posse of giggling nuns. A smartly dressed couple strolled by, each holding the hand of a toddler between them.

'Uno, duo, tre, *hup*!' they chanted, then swung the giggling child into the air for a moment. A man in a hat and dark suit, clutching a leather bag, rushed in the opposite direction.

'A doctor?' I suggested.

Anton nodded. 'I'm sure,' he said. 'But for a birth or a death? Or a tourist who's eaten too much squid? Isn't it remarkable that we could sit here all day – or for fifty years – and hardly see the same face twice. Each one is so different . . .'

After lunch, we wandered back to our hotel to spend the heat of the afternoon in bed. We made love, talked and dozed for hours. With my eyes closed, I could smell the cologne on his body – the Acqua di Parma he wore every day – and stroked his face, feeling the little patch of stubble on his neck that the razor never seemed to reach. The hum of the street below drifted through the shutters with bars of the afternoon light.

'Uno, duo, tre . . .' murmured Anton, his fingers moving across my belly.

'The child with that chic couple was so sweet,' I said. 'Perhaps we'll have a little girl one day. We could call her Venezia! Just imagine, in twenty years – in 1957 – we'll be having tea on the terrace at the Winter Palace, and I'll tell her about today and how she got her name.'

'There's plenty of time for that,' said Anton, laughing. 'We only got married three days ago . . .'

'Of course,' I said. 'We have all the time in the world.'

So it was that I discovered we dream in order to bear the pain of being awake.

One night, Colonel Wendt left the light on after he came to bed. A little later, I glanced up and saw a pair of naked bodies reflected in the dressing-table mirror, glistening with sweat. It reminded me of the pornographic postcard I'd found on a train as a schoolgirl. Bent forwards on my hands and knees, hair fallen over my face so that I saw only a single eye staring out. Is this me? I thought dully, no longer even feeling disgust.

Another evening, the colonel decided to take me downstairs to dinner with him, to show me off. The Germans had converted our dining room into

an officers' mess. An enormous painting of a battle scene of Frederick the Great hung on one wall in an ornate gilded frame. (Had they transported this all the way from Germany in a truck?) A pair of crossed antique sabres hung on the opposite wall, below a portrait of a man with a clipped moustache: the Germans' Führer, who looked more like a fussy bank clerk than a great leader.

I could tell that getting me ready for dinner entertained the colonel. He insisted on helping to pick out what I would wear. First one dress and then another was pulled from my wardrobe with a flourish, to be held up as he raised a quizzical eyebrow, until I made a sullen choice. It felt like complicity.

'The green one? Or our reliable old friend, the little black dress? What do you think?' he asked.

It was the same for the shoes. Colonel Wendt was a man for detail. Wearing my best jewellery, I was escorted downstairs with exaggerated courtesy, arm in arm with my tormentor. He called me his 'Prinzessin Katze' – 'Princess Pussycat' – in front of the other officers. I'd no appetite and certainly did not want to drink with the Germans, or listen to their triumphant hunting songs. The colonel insisted, discreetly twisting the flesh on my arm until I almost wept with pain. I forced myself to eat, and he wasn't satisfied until the plate was clean and I'd drunk three glasses of claret. A bottle of champagne was produced too, for the inevitable toast of 'Heil Hitler!' I could not do it, but the colonel took the flesh of my arm again and twisted it until the pain was too much and I raised my glass. At that moment, I caught a glimpse of our cook, Mrs Dudek, passing the dining room door and looking in on her way to the kitchen. She had never liked me, I knew, but Mrs Dudek caught my eye now with a look of pure hatred. I blushed with shame and self-loathing. I should not have joined the toast, but what else could I do, faced with the pain and the punishment I would suffer later? This question did not make me feel any better.

During the day, I tried to treat Colonel Wendt with as much contempt as I could gather. With Anton, I was a little shy to be seen naked by him, even after we were married. The colonel stared shamelessly at my body, though, as at a prized possession. In the end, I stopped caring whether he saw me unclothed; it didn't seem to matter any more. One day he came to my room in the middle of the afternoon. This wasn't usual. It was an unexpectedly warm spring day, and I lay on the bed in only my dressing-gown, reading a

magazine. He leant forwards and gently pulled the gown aside to expose my naked body. To my surprise, though, he only sat back in an armchair, put his boots up on the bed and gazed at me without speaking. Ignoring him, I flicked through the pages of a magazine. Cary Grant had released a new film, and Greta Garbo was in a comedy called *Ninotchka*. Cloche hats were coming back into fashion in Paris. The familiar cooing of pigeons in the woods drifted through the open window. There was another sound too, a rapid, light scratching sound. I looked up to see that the colonel had pulled out a notepad, and a pencil was bobbing up and down as he sketched me. His eyes flicked from my body to his drawing and back again.

'Wait!' he said in a firm voice as I started to move.

At last he finished and held up the notepad with a proud, bashful expression. Did he really expect me to praise him? I stood to look, pulling my gown around me. I had to admit the drawing was well done, though I only shrugged in response. There was one curious thing. He'd drawn my naked body but finished it at my neck. There was no head.

Weeks went by, and then months as the seasons changed. I became adept at slipping out of my body when the colonel came for me at night. Escaping into daydreams saved my life. Sometimes they were so vivid, so beautiful, that I was sad to leave them. In one, Anton and I were driving up a steep and winding road through a forest. The night was moonless, dark and cold. I was dressed only in a flimsy evening dress, with a fur coat pulled around me. Snow began to fall so heavily that the windscreen wipers stuttered, struggling to clear the glass. I was worried that we would skid off the road, but Anton drove with confidence. The instrument panel glowed softly, illuminating his face. Snow fell ever thicker, but we finally arrived in the courtyard of a mountaintop hotel, the Waldhaus near St Moritz. Servants rushed out to carry our luggage inside and to garage the car. With blankets around our shoulders, we sat by a great log fire, sipping glasses of whisky and hot water. Soon we would go upstairs to our room, where thick shutters kept out the blizzard. We would curl up in an enormous bed together, warm and safe, before drifting off to sleep. I loved to think of this journey. It was with difficulty that I realised in the morning that it had never actually happened. I'd imagined the whole thing.

I rarely saw the colonel during the day. He was usually busy in his study – Anton's study – with the door closed, in meetings or away at the heath, supervising construction of the airfield. Once I looked through a window

and saw him prowling through the garden holding a butterfly net. He walked slowly, with exaggerated steps – lifting his knees up high – before swooping with a shout of satisfaction, then tucking his catch into a tobacco tin. The man collected insects, then – a lepidopterist. It was the only interesting thing about him.

To the other Germans, I was a part of the furniture at the house. As they took no notice of me, I was able to listen to their conversations. Now and then I overheard talk about 'terrorists' – Polish partisans living in the forests. They planted bombs in cafes frequented by Germans, or left them by the roadside, hidden in bicycles, timed to explode when an army truck or bus drove by. I was glad. I prayed that Colonel Wendt would be sitting in one of those cafes next time. One night, I made the mistake of wincing as the stubble on his face rubbed my skin, muttering that he hadn't shaven that morning. The next day, and from then onwards, he was careful to be closely shaven. I hated myself for having said anything. His 'consideration' made me feel complicit once more, as though there were some arrangement between us.

Work on the airfield slowed as the Germans battled to finish construction when the winter snows swept in from the east. The tiled stoves burnt all day in the ground floor rooms of the Winter Palace, which the engineers had turned into offices. Even the conservatory at the side of the house was full of desks and drawing boards, where army draftsmen sat in overcoats and scarves, with fingerless mittens on their hands as they worked. One afternoon, I looked into Anton's study and found the Biedermeier desk cluttered with maps and plans of the airfield being built. For the hundredth time, I wondered what Anton and the colonel would have made of each other if they had met in peacetime. One an engineer and the other a builder of airfields. A slide rule and an empty wine glass were balanced on top of a pile of technical books. It was here that I found a half-written letter from Colonel Wendt to his wife.

Dearest Gertl, I hope you and the children are well, it began. *How are things with me? The billet here is comfortable enough, but the February winds are keener than at home in Bavaria. They blow all the way from Siberia. I count the days till I'm home again.* (I recognised his irritating habit of asking a question then answering it himself.)

There has been precious little time for hunting beetles, the letter went on, *but tell little Joachim I have a few interesting specimens for his*

collection when I return . . .

‘The billet is comfortable!’ I spat. ‘So that’s what you call it.’ My lip curled in incomprehension and disgust. Men such as this were surely a different species from Anton.

At last, snowdrops appeared in the garden, emerging shyly from the lawn. Easter came and went. The untended apple trees in the orchard were beginning to blossom when the German airfield was finally finished. One morning, I woke to the sound of trucks growling up the drive. I was alone in bed. As usual, the colonel had risen by 6 am while I still slept. From downstairs came more noises. Furniture being shifted. Boxes being dragged across the floor. I recognised the banter of men in the organised chaos of moving out. I quickly pulled on a dressing-gown, pushed my hair back, then tiptoed out onto the landing to see what was happening.

Down in the hallway soldiers were bustling around, wheeling filing cabinets and boxes out to the row of trucks that waited outside. At the front door stood an unfamiliar officer, talking to a sergeant. His uniform was the blue of the German air force, the Luftwaffe. The officer’s eyes immediately caught mine.

‘Who’s that woman?’ he asked, jerking his chin up towards me. I pulled the dressing-gown more tightly around my body.

‘Colonel Wendt’s whore, sir,’ replied the soldier smartly. ‘When he left to go on leave this morning, he thought you might want to . . .’

So Colonel Wendt had got up, packed and left without even bothering to tell me. I despised him and would have been happy to see him die, but the shameful truth was that he’d been my protector too.

‘Kick her out,’ said the officer. ‘I don’t need a Polish whore cluttering up my new headquarters. Maybe we have higher standards in the Luftwaffe. There’s a round-up of women for labour tomorrow – make sure she’s sent away to do some real work.’

After the abrupt departure of the Construction Battalion, it seemed I was surplus to German requirements, like a piece of redundant machinery. Now that the air force had taken over at the house, I was no longer even needed as an ‘officer’s mattress’.

Unsure what to do with me until the next day, a guard eventually locked me in a stable behind the house. It was empty apart from some hay bales and riding tack gathering cobwebs. I managed to make a bed with the straw

and an old horse blanket, then passed the night turning from one side to the other, barely sleeping, wondering what would become of me.

13

It was Tiny, the new arrival at the logging camp, who brought Anton and the others their first news from the Western Front. He told them all he knew, the day after he arrived, as they marched to work along a path through the thick forest. After invading Poland, the Germans hadn't stopped advancing. Belgium, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway, then France too. The British army was pushed back into the sea, and England would probably be invaded before summer was over. Europe was a German continent now.

'Looks as if Stalin was the smart one, after all,' said Danny, the other prisoner of war who had been in the Polish army. 'He did a deal with Hitler to avoid being invaded, and got half of Poland out of it too.'

'Some deal,' muttered Tiny.

'I bet the Germans will do a deal with Churchill, just like they did with Stalin,' said Anton. 'It makes sense for Germany, from a strategic perspective, rather than taking on the risks of invading across the Channel. Hitler controls the continent, so he's got what he wanted, curse him. Surely it would appeal to the British to sue for peace and become neutral, after their army was wiped out at Dunkirk.'

The others nodded. Anton dropped behind the group as they walked, falling into thought. Despite how awful this news was, surely things would settle down once the war ended. People needed to eat, needed to dress. Bakers would continue to sell bread. New fashions would appear in the shops. The Grand Theatre would be rebuilt. People would get used to the Germans being in charge for now. It had happened before. Somehow, normal life would re-establish itself, as it always did. Anton yearned for this to be true. Maybe Elisabeth had moved back from Warsaw to the Winter Palace already. It was August 1940 now, a year since he had left home. Perhaps the house was unboarded and she was living there peacefully. Perhaps at this very minute she was pruning the dogrose bushes in the garden, waiting for the war to be over so he could come home.

Walking in file behind the others, Anton heard Tiny's voice echo louder than he realised among the tall, dark trees. His tone was sarcastic.

'"From a strategic perspective", indeed. Who does Jan think he is, General Anders?'

'Fair play,' said Danny. 'He might be on the money there. After their clobbering in France, maybe the British would prefer to be neutral and have a quiet life . . .'

'I know, I know,' said Tiny. 'Jan seems a good man. He just sounds a bit of a know-it-all, more like an barrack-room officer than a regular soldier.'

Anton felt his neck blush despite the cold morning air. It was a shock to hear other people talk about him. He recognised his assumed name, 'Jan', now as second nature. Anton had always been proud that he was a gentleman and that he could disregard others' opinions of him. This comment unsettled him, however. It was a warning. He needed to be careful not to sound like an officer or seem too knowledgeable. He had almost given himself away when talking to Major Rybus about classical music during that first week in the camp, sounding more cultured than the simple mechanic he claimed to be. It mustn't happen again.

The forest trail grew lighter as it opened out into the coupe where the the gang were logging. Anton sought out Tiny, threw an arm around his shoulder and told him the most obscene joke he could remember from his time at the army barracks in Poznań. 'Did you hear about the dwarf who walked into a brothel with a donkey and a honeycomb?'

Over dinner in the hut that evening, Anton asked Danny and Tiny about the others who had arrived with him on the train.

'The POW camps are nearly empty,' Danny replied, drawing on a cigarette with some effort. It was rolled with newspaper and stank abominably. 'A lot of our soldiers died during the winter. If cholera or typhus didn't kill them, diptheria would see them off.'

Anton nodded. These diseases were spreading at the logging camp too.

'We're the leftover prisoners of war who've been shipped out to keep you poor things company,' said Danny. 'Maybe they thought you were getting lonely.'

Anton smiled, envying the man's good humour. It seemed to be a thing independent of their circumstances. It came from within.

'There were hundreds of families with us as well,' Danny went on. 'It sounds like the train you came in on – factory workers, dentists, road

sweepers, shop managers, with all their families and children . . . completely random. We're just tree-chopping machines, for all the Russians care.'

'How about that kid?' said Anton, gesturing to a child who was curled up in a corner, staring into space, with a hand in her pocket. He'd seen her the previous evening when the newcomers had arrived. She didn't seem to be with any of the families, and he'd noticed some of the other children pushing in front of her in the dinner queue. She looked to be around nine years old, not that he was any expert. Anton did not have much experience with children, nor had he any particular interest in them, but noticed this one, who seemed to have no one looking after her. The little girl's dress looked good quality but was filthy from the long journey on the train.

She wasn't one of those children people coo over at tea parties, thought Anton. No big eyes or pretty ringlets to draw the fuss and attention of strangers; rather, a pale, narrow face with a big brow and almost translucent skin. Her thin arms were no wider than the pistons in the engine of a car. 'That child needs to eat more,' Anton could imagine Mrs Dudek saying.

'There's a sad story there,' said Tiny, lowering his voice. 'Even in these saddest of days. The girl was with her mother in a wagon next to mine on the train. I heard the woman was too shy to take a shit inside in front of the others. She didn't go for days. Just couldn't do it. Did you use a hole in the floor on your train too?'

Anton nodded with a grunt.

'When the train stopped for soup to be given out, the mother asked permission to get off and squat among the trees. It was the middle of bloody nowhere – she wasn't going to run away. Nothing but trees as far as the eye could see. The next thing we know, the Russians slam the doors shut and the train starts moving while she's still out there. Everyone in the wagon was yelling for it to stop, but they didn't hear or took no notice. I got a glimpse of her running after the train, knickers round her ankles, waving her arms. I yelled too, but it was no use. She got smaller and smaller, then was out of sight. The girl screamed for her mother for hours. Eventually people started shouting at her to be quiet.'

'My God. What happened to the woman?'

'What do you think?' replied Tiny. 'I can't imagine how she felt, listening to the train steam away with her daughter on board until she could hear it no more. Then silence and the endless trees and night descending.

You could walk for weeks and the forest would still look exactly the same. She wouldn't have lasted long without food or water. A pack of wolves probably found her that very night.'

'Poor woman. Poor kid.'

The next evening, Anton walked over to the girl and sat beside her on the floor, casually stretching out his legs.

'I'm Jan. What's your name?' he asked. He resisted an instinct to politely hold out his hand to shake hers.

She replied so softly that it seemed merely two breaths to him. He guessed she might have said 'Sarah'.

'I'm sorry, I didn't hear that.'

'Miss Sarah Bruckner, 4 Lagiewnicka Street, Lódź, Poland,' she said, a little louder.

'Nice to meet you, Sarah. So, young missy, I wonder what you have in your pocket there . . .'

Every time Anton had seen the girl, one hand was always in the pocket of her dress, clasping something tightly. She looked at his face for the first time, then slowly drew out her hand. She held a scrap of paper torn from a magazine. It showed an elegant woman in a cloche hat smiling up at the Eiffel Tower. It looked like a fashion advert.

'Your mummy?' he asked gently.

Sarah shrugged. 'It's not Mummy but it looks just like her. She has a hat the very same.'

Anton gave a cautious, sympathetic smile. 'I see,' he said, 'I see . . .'

He felt foolish. Was this how you spoke to a child? He pressed on.

'Your mummy will be all right, I promise. All she needs to do is follow the railway tracks back to the last station, then catch a train to Lódź. She'll be there now, waiting for you at home. We have to be brave and concentrate on living day by day, so we can go back to our families when the war is over, don't we?'

The girl nodded with a serious expression, putting the magazine scrap back in her pocket. Did she really believe his words or was she humouring him?

'Come on,' he said, taking her hand. 'Let's get some food.'

Dinner was cabbage soup. Anton dipped in a lump of black bread, thinking gloomily of the long-ago day when he and Elisabeth had seen a cabbage rolling towards them on the way home from the lake at Lewicki

and they had rescued the driver of a vegetable truck which had skidded off the road. Best not to think about her too much, Anton decided, or I'll go mad.

To distract himself, he asked the others at the table what they would rather be eating right now.

'A perfect meal?' Danny answered. 'I've heard hunger is the best sauce, but to hell with that. Don't hold back, let's think of anything we like. I'll start us off, because I've been dreaming of it . . . A steak of wild venison, with roasted vegetables and red currant sauce, and a bottle of good burgundy wine on the side. Beat that for a dinner!'

The others gave murmurs of agreement and made exaggerated lip-smacking noises.

'For me, please order some good Polish sausage and new potatoes. That's all I ask,' said Tiny.

'Same for me,' said Anton. 'How about you, missy?'

Sarah thought for a moment, her brow knitted in concentration. 'A big blancmange with raspberry sauce,' she announced. 'Just the way Mummy makes it.'

The others nodded kindly at her, forcing smiles onto their faces. Anton felt a lump rise in his throat.

'Damn these mosquitos,' he said, changing the subject as he rubbed at a bite on his arm. 'I swear I saw one today as big as a blackbird.'

Lying in bed that night, Anton started to feel as if he was being watched. Half-opening his eyes, he looked around without moving his head from the rough pillow. As the fire flickered through the grille of the big iron stove, different parts of the hut lit up for a moment. Everywhere people were asleep, as still as mounds of earth. Everywhere except the corner of the hut opposite him. In the brief light, he saw the flash of an eye. He waited, then saw it again. Someone lying on a pile of rags was awake and staring straight in his direction. It was Miss Sarah Bruckner of 4 Lagiewnicka Street, Lódź. There was an empty bunk next to his which she must not have seen, and so she had lain down uncomplaining on the floor.

Anton sighed. He lifted his arm out from under the blanket then pointed his finger to the empty bunk. A little figure dashed through the shadows and leapt into the bunk.

'Hush, rest now, missy,' he whispered as she gave him a grin and pulled the rough blankets tightly around her. Soon her breathing settled into a

deeper rhythm. Anton did not sleep, but lay awake for an hour or more. He was still young himself, and had not yet learnt that a single act of kindness lets a stranger into your life. An invisible bond is formed. After that, nothing can ever be the same again between you.

14

Over the following weeks, Anton noticed with curiosity how the girl would toss and turn in bed for an hour every night, before finally settling in a starfish position to sleep. The things she said and her reactions surprised him every day. With no experience of children, getting to know Sarah felt to Anton as if he was encountering a whole new species. One day, God willing, he and Elisabeth would have a child, and he found himself wishing she would be a little girl like this.

‘Excuse me, uncle,’ Sarah said one day. ‘I hope you don’t mind me saying, but your beard is so long I think the birds will start nesting in there soon.’

‘I’ll give it a trim tomorrow, I promise,’ Anton mumbled, surprised at how embarrassed he felt to be told off like this.

He made her a crude toothbrush from a birch twig. Despite her protests and grimaces, he insisted she take a bath every Sunday evening, when the children in the hut took their turn in the warm, grey water of a tub. While she huddled with a blanket wrapped around her – melodramatically shivering and chattering her teeth – he washed her only dress along with his own clothes, before drying them in front of the stove.

‘Quick, quick,’ she would say, ‘I’m *freeeezing* to death here!’

Apart from what she was wearing, all Sarah’s belongings had been stolen as soon as she arrived at the camp. Her mother’s suitcase had been ransacked too, when she was left in the forest behind the departing train.

While at work with the logging gang, Anton found himself looking forward to getting back to camp to hear what Sarah had learnt at school that day. The education was surprisingly good. Maths, some basic science and geography, Russian language, as well as a predictable Soviet view of history.

‘. . . and then the brave factory workers and peasants stormed the palace and killed the wicked tsar!’ Sarah told him.

It was a depressing thought that she would believe Soviet propaganda, but when he hinted there might be other ways of looking at things, she pulled a face of mock horror, then laid a finger on her lips and winked. He didn't have to worry about Sarah, he decided.

Sometimes she came to him with other fairytales. Anton had no idea where these strange stories came from, but the camp children delighted in them. Maybe old ladies told tales at bedtime to make the young ones behave. Maybe it was the children who made them up, whispering together in the evening after dinner. Or perhaps stories blew into the camp on the wind from deep in the Siberian forests. A witch lived in a house hidden among the trees. She stole children to be her slaves and they never grew up, forgetting where they came from. There was a talking bear. There was a beautiful princess with antlers who lived with the reindeer. She ran wild with the herd, dressed in a long fur cloak. Garlands of flowers streamed from her horns, Sarah whispered, ivy and eglantine, honeysuckle, daisies and poppies of the deepest red.

This last story, Anton discovered, had some basis in truth. A year earlier, the spring thaw had exposed a long-frozen grave. The body of a young woman lay there, wrapped in a reindeer fur, with a diadem of bronze upon her head. Preserved beneath the tundra for centuries, she looked no different than on the hour she'd died. By the next day she was gone. The grave was empty. Animals foraging, said sensible voices. Others swore that she'd woken and run away to live in the forest with the reindeer. Sarah loved this story and told it to Anton more than once. He found it thrilling to imagine that one day he might introduce Sarah to Elisabeth – one day when the war was over and they were all at home in Poland. After saying goodnight to the others, he lay down and took out his wife's photograph as usual before going to sleep. He told Elisabeth in silent conversation all about the little girl and her strange fairytales.

With warmer weather, the Russian guards took to exercising outdoors on Sunday afternoons. They swung on ropes, roaring with laughter like Slavic Tarzans. They had wrestling matches, their bare chests white and flabby, unaccustomed to sunlight. While sitting on logs and passing around bottles of homemade vodka, they would sometimes pick out two prisoners at random and order them to fight each other, betting on who would draw blood first. No one argued with the drunken soldiers.

Walking to the camp store one day, Anton saw Major Rybus talking to a guard, one who had an extravagant moustache and rarely moved from the guard-house door, where he sat with his feet up on a railing. The major spotted Anton and beckoned him over. They hadn't spoken since that evening standing together in the dark, looking up at the shimmering curtain of the aurora borealis and talking about music. He'd walked past Anton without a glance any number of times. Now, though, Major Rybus smiled, looking glad to see him.

'Well, well, you're a saintly one.'

'I don't understand, Comrade Major,' said Anton, puzzled at this attention. He'd learnt the value of not being noticed in the camp, of not being a nail sticking out that would be hammered down.

'You've taken that child under your wing as though you were Saint Nicholas himself.' Rybus smirked as though he had caught Anton out doing something embarrassing.

'You mean Sarah Bruckner? She's an orphan,' Anton said. 'Lost her mother on the way here . . .'

So there was a spy in their hut, even in the house of slaves, thought Anton. A trade of worthless gossip for a loaf of bread. Well, he wasn't going to blame anyone for that.

'Lost her mother,' repeated Rybus. 'Wasn't that careless of the little girl.'

The guard sniggered into his moustache and glanced at Rybus as though they shared a private joke about Anton and the child. How hateful some people were, Anton thought, feeling anger rise in his chest. They can make a kind act seem like weakness, a shameful thing. Rybus saw Anton's face redden and looked pleased at the result of his provocation. It seemed he was one of those people who twisted the tail of whatever you said, making it seem that you were somehow in the wrong.

'Now, the reason I called you over . . .' Rybus said. 'Our mechanic has died of typhus. Very inconvenient, but thankfully you're here to take his place. Tomorrow morning, report to the workshop and we'll see what you're made of.'

Anton nodded and muttered, 'Thank you, Comrade Major,' before continuing on his way to the store. He was pleased he would not be working on a logging team any more, but it nagged at him that some unknown person in the hut had reported his friendship with the orphan child, and

perhaps hinted that Anton had some unsavoury interest in her. Who was it? And who would look after Sarah if something happened to him? Maybe it was better if she was looked after by a family, not someone such as him, who was under the eye of Major Rybus and the camp authorities.

•

On Anton's first day as camp mechanic, the vehicles waiting for repair were like old friends he'd not seen in a long time. He turned the ignition switch on a ZIS truck to produce a brief rattling sound, more like a few strokes on a typewriter than the roar of a five-litre engine. Anton ran his hands over the truck's engine, methodically checking the carburettor, spark plugs, fanbelt and mechanical parts to diagnose where the problem lay. Soviet vehicles were easier to repair, he discovered. There wasn't the variety of manufacturers there had been in Poland. Many parts were interchangeable between vehicles. By the end of the day, he found he was humming to himself. He'd also made a decision.

Instead of going directly back to his hut after work, Anton visited some of the others, looking up members of his old logging gang.

'Do you know any families who'd take in an orphan?' he asked. 'Or maybe a couple who's lost a child? She's a dear little girl.'

'What's her name? How old?' someone asked eventually.

'Bruckner. Sarah Bruckner. She's about nine.'

'Ask for Ruth Nowak in Hut Twelve,' the woman said. 'Her niece died on the train. She and David might find some comfort in caring for another child.'

By the time Anton sat down to eat with Sarah and the others that evening, the arrangement had been made. Ruth Nowak was more keen than her husband, but Anton could see who made the decisions in their marriage. Mr Nowak started to snuffle and wipe his nose with his sleeve, thinking about their niece, no doubt. His wife ignored him, asking Anton all sorts of questions about Sarah. Things improved from there, thank goodness, he thought afterwards.

It was easiest to pretend to Sarah that this was an official camp directive. Orders were orders. Any parentless children were being relocated to live with families, he said. There was no choice in the matter.

‘They’re nice people,’ Anton assured her. ‘And it’s not as if you’re far. I’ll come and visit you, I promise.’

Sarah didn’t argue, only shrugged to acknowledge her powerlessness then leant silently against him as they sat together. Anton felt her weight pushing against him as though she were willing him to hug her. He put an arm around her shoulder, but she shook it off and pulled away.

‘Well, I’d better get my things together,’ she said. ‘Soonest packed, soonest ready.’

Anton guessed this was something Sarah’s mother used to say. The ‘packing’ did not take long. He watched the little girl gather her few belongings together on her bed. Some ragged clothes. The crude toothbrush he’d made for her. A few little stones she’d collected and arranged on the shelf over her bunk. There was one chip of glowing honey-coloured amber, but the rest looked like ordinary pebbles to Anton. Sarah called them her ‘special stones’. The scrap of paper with the picture that looked like her mother. All of these she gathered in a handkerchief embroidered around the edge with bluebells. The little girl wrapped this meagre collection with such earnest care that Anton had to turn away to hide his tears. It was a heartbreaking sight.

Somehow the next day passed. Anton visited Hut Twelve after work, seeing with relief how soon the Nowak couple had become fond of Sarah. Whenever she was free – and sometimes, Anton suspected, when she should have been in class – she came to keep him company in the workshop. While he was bent over the engine of a truck with its hood folded up, she sat up on the workbench, swinging her legs and chattering about whatever came into her head. Did he think there was a man in the moon? What was his favourite ice cream flavour? What would he do when the war ended? (This phrase, ‘when the war ended’, had acquired a mythical meaning to everyone in the camp: a coming time when Everything Would Be All Right.)

‘If you’re going to come here and pester me,’ Anton said eventually, ‘you might as well be helpful. Why don’t you pass me that monkey wrench next to you.’

Sarah leapt down to deliver it to him. She loved to be useful and needed, he saw. It wasn’t long before she knew the name of every tool in the workshop.

Soon, summer slipped into autumn. Smoke rose again from the stovepipe chimneys that jutted from the roof of each hut. Summer was brief

in Siberia. Only at the end of May had the last patches of snow finally melted. In September, the first fresh falls arrived. In the beginning it was picturesque. The camp looked briefly like a Christmas card. Within weeks, though, heavier snowfalls brought a return to the familiar drab winter landscape.

One night he dreamt that he was lying in an enormous bed, as big as a tennis court. The sheets were drifts of snow but he felt no cold. Elisabeth lay naked next to him. They embraced, then she climbed on top of him, pulling her nightdress off over her head. She moved her hips up and down in a familiar rhythm: it always reminded him of the easy motion of a cylinder in an engine. She moved faster, then slower, then paused with a smile before pushing him deep inside her again. At last they lay back and dozed with the sheets thrown back. When he woke, Anton checked the time on his watch, the silvery disc beside him on the bedside table. He felt a flood of relief. Of course! He was still in bed with Elisabeth at home in the Winter Palace. The war, the camp in Siberia, the major and the little girl . . . it had all been a terrible dream! But, no, he was still in his bunk at the camp, dreaming of a dream.

15

My night locked in the Winter Palace's stable was surprisingly comfortable, wrapped in an old blanket on a mattress of straw. I didn't mind the spiders making cobwebs on the horse tack around me. It was a long time since I had been left in peace at night.

In the morning I was bundled into the back of an open-sided truck and driven away, as the new Luftwaffe commander had ordered. The truck's floor was of rough planks ingrained with coal dust. My hands and clothes were soon covered in black smudges. I wasn't alone. There were already a dozen others in the truck, all women my own age or younger. They were noticeably thin and pale: a reminder that food had become scarce for Poles under the occupation. Despite everything, I realised with shame that I had at least eaten well at the Winter Palace while under the German colonel's 'protection'. A few of the others seemed to know each other and murmured quietly together, but most sat in silence, lost in their own thoughts and fears. One woman, dressed smartly in a pencil suit, turned and vomited without warning over the side. The lingering smell mingled with the truck's exhaust fumes, making me feel sick myself. I had a stomach-ache, but couldn't tell if it was from lack of breakfast or fear of where we were being taken. It was probably both, I decided.

'What do you think they'll do with us?' said a voice next to me.

I turned and saw a face close to mine. It was angelic, like that of a cherub in a church fresco: round-cheeked, with large eyes and plump lips framed by waves of blonde hair.

'I expect the Germans need maids or waitresses,' I said, trying to sound reassuring. 'What's your name?'

'Beata. Pleased to meet you.' She gave a polite nod.

'Elisabeth Lewicki-Radziwiłł. Nice to meet you too.'

I looked closer at Beata. She was wearing a school uniform. Her breasts were incongruously large, but her arms and legs were still the pale, skinny

limbs of a child. I remembered my own adolescence not so long ago, when the parts of my body seemed to grow at different speeds.

‘How old are you, Beata?’ I asked.

‘Almost fifteen.’

‘I don’t know about you, but I’m starving,’ I said, wanting to change the subject from why the Germans were taking us away. ‘It’s been twenty-four hours since I’ve had a thing to eat.’

Beata nodded enthusiastically, giving a little smile.

‘No breakfast,’ she said, sighing deeply. ‘There’s nothing worse.’

When the truck came to a stop, we climbed down, watched by two guards holding rifles. I recognised where we were straightaway. The truck had drawn up in front of a Catholic girls’ boarding school on the outskirts of Poznań. There was a distinctive belltower in the shape of a cross. Trooping through the empty school building, we were led into the gymnasium. A female army sergeant was waiting for us beside a card table piled high with rags.

‘Grab a cloth, girls!’ she called out cheerfully. ‘Let’s see how clean you can get these windows. Up you go!’ she said, pointing at the wooden climbing bars around the walls of the gymnasium.

I joined the others, clambering up the bars to reach one of the high windows. Were we to be housemaids after all? After a few minutes, the door opened. I glanced around to see a group of German officers coming in, their steps loud on the gymnasium’s parquet floor. They wore polished black knee boots and smart grey uniforms. The senior officer carried a swagger stick with a brass handle, which he smacked casually now and then against the side of his boot.

‘Carry on cleaning, girls!’ called out the sergeant.

I could see the officers as I slowly rubbed at the window glass. They went up to the first woman, looked at her from a few angles, then the senior officer – a major, judging from his epaulettes – said a few words to an army clerk, who wrote a note on his clipboard.

When they came to the second woman, the major used his stick to lift up her skirt, exposing her legs and underwear. He nodded appreciatively, as though inspecting a piece of livestock in a market, then murmured something that made the other men snigger. I carried on rubbing at the window, which was already as clean as it could be. My heart was beating so loudly that I could feel it rattling against my chest.

Next in line was Beata, standing high on the wooden bars in her school uniform. Once again, the German major lifted a corner of her skirt, but she immediately smacked it down with her hand.

‘Please, sir!’ she said, looking down like a defiant cherub from a fresco. ‘Have some respect . . .’

‘I beg your pardon, mademoiselle,’ the major replied. As the other Germans laughed, he turned, lifted his stick, then smacked it firmly against Beata’s leg. She gave a yelp, which echoed around the gymnasium, then fell with a heavy thump to the wooden floor.

‘It’s. For. You. To. Show. Respect!’ he said in a level, hard voice. ‘And don’t think you can get away with that attitude easily, either. I have special plans for you.’

So fearful that I could scarcely swallow, I allowed the major to lift my skirt and inspect from below, as he had done to the others. It was a fear mixed with anger that I knew all too well. When the officers had examined everyone and gone away, the female sergeant led us to the school hall, where brightly coloured posters described Polish history. Here, a meal had been laid out on a long table. We stared at what was on offer before us: fresh rye bread, sausages, tomatoes, pickles and steaming jugs of good hot coffee. It was a long time since the other women had seen so much food. We were like geese being fattened for the slaughter, I thought, yet couldn’t help filling my plate too. Beata was next to me, enjoying a bulging sandwich and hoping perhaps that the worst was over for her. As we ate, the German major came back in and stood on a podium at the end of the hall.

‘Congratulations, ladies!’ he said. ‘You have the honour of being selected to serve the Reich by providing comfort to our brave army.’

Some of the women looked at each other with puzzled faces, but I knew exactly what his words meant. I felt numb inside. The major explained what duties would be required. Within a few minutes, no one in the room was in any doubt about what awaited her. He described how we would be prepared, given an identity mark, then allocated to establishments throughout ‘Greater Germany’, by which he meant a large part of Poland.

‘“Establishments” . . . Why doesn’t he just say army brothels?’ I murmured.

The establishments were open for business every evening until midnight, the major explained. Each visit was to last no longer than fifteen minutes. That could mean a dozen men or more every day, I quickly

calculated, beginning to tremble again. I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, forcing myself to think of nothing.

After a shower, we were ushered naked to a room where clothes – all evening wear – hung on racks. There were stockings and high-heeled shoes too. I was given a black cocktail dress with a plunging neckline to put on. Undoing the buttons down the back, I noticed a nametag hanging from a single thread. *Yelena Hirschberg*, it read. Of course. The clothes' owners had all been Jewish. I pulled on a cardigan over the dress to cover my bare arms.

All the while we had been trying on clothes, I was aware of a rattling sound in the background. When we were shown through to yet another room, I understood why. Inside, three women sat at school desks. Beside them were strange contraptions which looked like sewing machines attached to guns, with a web of wires and rubber pipes. They were marking us with tattoos.

When it was my turn, I was pushed forwards and sat down opposite the operator.

'Left arm. Palm of your hand upwards. Push up your sleeve,' said the woman blankly, as she gripped my wrist hard.

I winced as the needle went to work, injecting a pattern of black ink into the soft skin of the underside of my arm.

'This is to identify you if you're ever tempted to run away,' the woman said.

She had pretty features, but her skin was worn and grey. A few teeth were missing too. Perhaps she'd been one of the brothel workers herself, before being beaten up and moved on.

'Don't get a disease, whatever you do,' the woman said, speaking in a lower voice while not looking me in the eye. 'Some of the men will offer you money to do it without a condom, but always say no. They won't insist. It's against regulations. And if you get ill, hide it any way you can.

'You'll be told there's a nice sanatorium where you can get better, but don't believe it. They'll take you off in an ambulance but will stop outside the town, put a bullet in your head and dump your body in a ditch. It happens every week,' the woman said.

'And there you are,' she added in a louder voice. She wiped away the last of the blood and ink. I looked down and read the tattoo on my aching arm. *F H 1508*.

‘What does F H mean?’ I asked.
‘Feld-Hure,’ she replied. ‘Army prostitute.’

16

When winter arrived again, disease began to claim more victims in the logging camp. A growing number of older people and children especially began to fall ill and die. Everyone knew it was typhus, which was always lurking in the camp. With the cold weather, there was more work for Anton too. The tractors used to pull trees in the forest broke down more often after freezing overnight temperatures. He went out with a toolbox strapped to his back to repair them, coaxing the engines back to life. The temperature dropped so low that his fingers would stick to the frozen steel if he didn't wear gloves. He saw how some of the guards moved around easily on homemade skis and soon put together a pair of his own, made from lengths of scrap wood. One of the guards noticed his attempt and gave a thumbs up. He showed Anton how he had nailed a strip of reindeer hide to the base of a ski so that it slid along more easily.

The hides were bought from Nenets, nomadic herders who stopped by the camp every month or so. They arrived on sleighs pulled by reindeer and traded hides for tools as well as empty tin cans which they prized as utensils. Anton learnt with grim amusement that the Nenets felt pity for the camp prisoners, and called them 'The Unfortunates'. A second pair of skis with reindeer hide was soon made, which he traded to a guard for a pair of fur gloves.

Anton's ability to fix and make things gave him a respected position in the camp. He acquired a new nickname, 'Mechanic'.

'You're needed in the sawmill, Mechanic,' said a guard to Anton one morning.

'What's the problem?'

'Why would I know, or care?' said the man. 'I deliver the message. You do what you're told.' He shrugged his shoulders and set off back to the warmth of the guard house.

Anton gathered some tools together in a bag and headed for the sawmill at the edge of the camp. It was a tall wooden shed, open at one side with a

great stack of tree trunks beside it, ready to be rolled in on a long trolley for sawing. On and off through the day, a high-pitched whine from the shed would rise into a scream, as though someone were being tortured, before it turned abruptly to a whirring hum as the saw slowed to a stop. By the evening, a neat stack of planks would be sitting on the other side of the shed.

Anton had never been inside the sawmill before. It was a gloomy space, filled with drifts of dirty sawdust. The dust in the air caught in his throat, and for a moment the smell took him back to the Winter Palace woodlands. Every October, the local farmers sawed down trees to cut into firewood. They took the wood away in wagons to stack in neat piles by a barn to dry out for twelve months before burning. There was no such seasoning of timber at the Siberian camp. Wood was cut and thrown on the fire the same week, even though it spat cinders and didn't burn as well. It was the same with maintenance. Fences, machinery, tools . . . nothing was ever oiled or checked. Things were used until they wore out or broke down, then there were grumbles and complaints, and finally someone would call for a mechanic to 'fix it'. This careless attitude made Anton despair, but at least it kept him busy at the camp, and not so exposed to the weather as the timber-felling gangs.

The sawmill was dominated by a great circular saw, as tall as a man, rusty at the centre but with shiny, threatening teeth around the edge. It was hypnotising. Mounds of unswept sawdust lay beneath it and a tree trunk sat on a trolley ready to be cut into planks. Everything was still.

'What's the problem here?' asked Anton.

'That's for you to tell us,' said the foreman. 'The bastard stopped working, that's all I know.'

Anton gave a grunt, took off his jacket and rolled up his sleeves. To begin with, he hit the big red start button on the wall to see what happened. There was loud whine from the motor and pathetic, flapping sounds from deep in the machinery.

'That's something,' he announced to the crowd of woodshed workers as he turned it off again. 'At least the engine works, so the problem must be with the drive belt.'

There was no safety cage or inspection hatch on the machine, so Anton propped a ladder against the motor to take a look from above. Balancing a torch beside him, he peered into the machinery. The circular saw was

connected to a motor by a jumble of cogs, belts, shafts and gears. They looked ancient and were coated in grease, dirt and sawdust.

‘This must have been built back in the tsars’ time!’ he called out to the others. ‘And it’s filthy,’ he couldn’t help adding. ‘But that’s not the problem, or it would have seized up years ago. I’ll take a closer look.’

Anton bent down into the machine to see better. Now he was hanging over the teeth of the saw, each one as big as one of his hands. Everyone in the mill was silent, watching him work. He concentrated, taking his time to examine the workings, until a loud cough distracted him. Anton glanced up to see Major Rybus had slipped into the shed and must have breathed in some sawdust. He was leaning nonchalantly against a wall, an amused look on his face.

Anton was used to diagnosing mechanical problems with his hands, moving them over the engine of a truck like a doctor checking a body for symptoms: a frayed cable, a pipe wet with leaking oil, a loose connector on a battery. Here, though, he could only use his eyes, peering into the dim machinery to trace how power moved from the engine to the enormous, jagged saw beneath him.

At last Anton spotted what he had been looking for. A woodchip, barely large enough to be visible, had flown into the machine and lodged itself in a ratchet at the perfect angle to stop the drive belt from moving. However, the chip was too far away for him to reach. There was nothing for it; he would have to climb down into the machine. With one foot resting on a wobbly bracket, leaning down as far as he could, Anton was just able to reach the woodchip using the end of a screwdriver. In a rocking movement, he pushed repeatedly at the wood to dislodge it. His stomach brushed against the teeth of the saw just beneath him with his every breath. Sweat gathered on his brow and was running into his eyes, but he didn’t have a hand free to wipe it. He gave his head an angry jerk to try to shake off the sweat. As he did, Anton caught a glimpse of Rybus, who was now standing with his hand right next to the red button which would start the circular saw, the familiar amused expression on his face.

Anton tried to focus. He tried not to think about what would happen if the circular saw started up, the great disc spinning so fast that he would not see the blades. Sweat ran into his eyes and he gave an angry shake of his head again. Concentrate, he told himself. But images burst unbidden into his mind. He imagined himself cut by the blade into a dozen neat slices, like

a cartoon cat running into a butcher's meat slicer, only to pull itself together and continue the chase after a mouse. But it wouldn't be like that, he knew. No, he would explode. There would be an explosion of guts and body parts and blood, with a scream of pain and terror that would be suddenly cut short. Concentrate, he told himself.

The muscles in Anton's arms and legs ached from holding himself awkwardly over the gigantic saw to poke with his screwdriver at the obstruction. How much longer could he keep up this position? he wondered. But at last the little chip was dislodged and fell softly to the ground. What a small thing to have caused so much trouble. Anton began to climb backwards, carefully extricating himself from the machine. Just as his feet touched the ladder, there was a click, a rising whine, and the great circular blade began to spin faster and faster just a few centimetres from his body. He sprang back in horror, falling from the ladder onto a drift of sawdust. Everyone in the shed laughed. A few clapped their hands as he dusted himself down, then patted him on the back as he walked out. Behind him, the machine happily spun its blade and roared, like the lion after Androcles had removed the thorn from its paw, he thought. Ahead of Anton on the path, Major Rybus was walking back into the camp, his shoulders shaking in silent laughter. He must have been the one who hit the button to start the saw. Only two thoughts were in Anton's mind now. He hated Rybus. And he had to get out of this place.

•

A day rarely went by without a visit from Sarah. She made all the difference to his gloomy moods. After not seeing her for several days in a row, though, he called by Hut Twelve to see how she was. Sitting up in bed with a bowl of soup, Sarah waved as she saw him arrive and kick the doorpost to shake snow off his boots before entering. Ruth Nowak was sitting on the bed too, telling her a fairytale.

'I've got the flu,' Sarah said in a croaky voice. 'No school for me this week!'

When he visited the following day, she was asleep, red-faced and sweating. Now and then a cough from deep in her chest made her unconscious body shake, as though some awful creature were trying to escape it.

‘Thank God Sarah can sleep now,’ said David Nowak. ‘She’s been coughing and complaining of pains in her legs all day. She screamed when I pulled back the curtain this morning, as though the light were red-hot on her skin.’

‘Has the camp nurse visited? What did she say?’

‘It could be a bad flu or it might be typhus. We can only pray that she comes through it.’

In his imagined nightly conversation with Elisabeth, Anton told her all about Sarah’s illness. Afterwards, like many an atheist in distress, he found he could only express his feelings in a simple, fervent prayer.

‘Dear God, please let little missy live . . .’

There was not much change over the following days as Sarah slipped in and out of a fever. As Anton, Ruth and David took turns mopping the sweat from her face, Sarah mumbled about her mother and other people they didn’t know. She asked when the girl with antlers who lived with the reindeer was coming to visit. One evening her hand crept towards Anton’s over the blanket, then the tiny fist closed feebly around one of his fingers. He sat for close to an hour holding his hand very still until she shifted in bed and let go.

When Anton returned the following day, Sarah’s bunk was empty. Even the mattress had gone, leaving only the wooden skeleton of the bed frame.

‘She was so young,’ said Ruth, clutching a handkerchief to her face. ‘The poor little thing, to suffer so much and then this . . .’

Anton put his hand over his eyes. He stood silent for a long while, attending to the pain which rose up in his chest. Anton knew with utter conviction that he would never love any child more than he had Sarah.

‘Oh, missy, dear little missy,’ he whispered. ‘You should have been safe at home in Lódź or happily skipping in the park with a friend. You should have been tucked up warm in bed every night with your mother kissing you goodnight. And you ended up here. Fuck Hitler. Fuck Stalin. Fuck them all to hell!’

‘Shhh,’ David said. ‘You never know who’s listening.’

‘Where is she now?’

‘Well, that’s the problem,’ said David.

‘What do you mean?’ Anton asked, wiping his eyes with a sleeve.

‘A guard told us to move her body and burn the mattress. The bunk is needed. The trouble is, the ground is frozen hard. We won’t be able to dig a

grave for months. They told us to put her in the old stable block near the guard house. There are other bodies there, waiting to be buried when the ground thaws. They've frozen solid.'

'I have to see her,' said Anton, rushing from the room.

The unused stables were dark and cluttered with discarded broken machinery and old horse tack. Three corpses had been dumped in a heap near the door, tipped carelessly from a stretcher to lie as they fell. Anton was used to seeing dead bodies on the battlefield, but the sight of these still shocked him somehow. Strangers in life, their bodies were pressed close together now, as in the intimacy of sex. The next stall held an old lady laid out with her arms crossed, a heap of stones at her feet. In the third stall of the stable Anton found Sarah. She looked so small and cold laid out on the cobbled ground. Her eyelashes and hair sparkled in the darkness with a frosting of ice. Already her body looked frozen hard. Here she would lie like an ice princess until the ground warmed enough for a grave to be dug.

As Anton stood beside Sarah's body, his mind full of grief and bitter thoughts, he thought he saw her move.

'Fool,' he said to himself, but he stared more closely. Once again there was a stirring. He definitely saw it this time, a twitching movement as when a sleeping child dreams of running through a park.

'My God,' he muttered. 'She's still alive!'

Sarah's body moved again, her chest trembling. At that moment, a dark shape with a long, thick tail scurried from her side into the shadows of the stable.

Anton shuddered and forced himself to look. Rats had burrowed into Sarah's body and made a nest inside. He felt his gorge rise and rushed outside before vomiting against the wall.

'We have to do something!' he said to David Nowak after running back to the hut. 'We can't leave her little body in that awful place till spring. I won't stand for it. If the ground is too hard for burial, why don't we cremate her? We can say some prayers and have a proper service, then burn her body.'

'That's out of the question,' said David. 'It's never been done here, and the Church forbids cremation. You should know that.'

'It's for Sarah, not for the damned priests and bishops,' said Anton. 'Will you help, or will I do it alone?'

David looked at his wife. She nodded.

‘Why don’t you do it on the waste ground beyond the sawmill?’ Ruth said after a moment’s hesitation. ‘There are lots of offcuts and dead branches over there to make a funeral pyre. And do you have petrol in the workshop? Take a few litres in a can and pour it over her body.’

Anton nodded in agreement. ‘The guards won’t care,’ he said. ‘They’ll think we’re just burning rubbish.’

After taking nearly an hour to gather wood and build a funeral pyre, they stood to watch the smoke rise above the fire, a white column against the dark trees beyond. Anton felt he could say goodbye to Sarah now. White flakes of cinder drifted down all around like burning snowflakes, hissing as they touched the cold ground, instantly extinguished.

17

Anton threw himself into his work, staying late in the workshop every evening. He became curt in his dealings with other people, less inclined to waive payment for repairing a cooking pot or penknife for one of the other prisoners. It was a relief when night came so that he could sleep and be unconscious. Waking in the mornings, he forced himself to get out of bed with the thought that in twelve hours he could slip beneath the surface of sleep again.

Winter turned to spring once more. As one season replaced another, the people in Anton's hut made themselves at home. They decorated the walls, organised little concerts to celebrate saints' days, and even had birthday parties for the children. The place was more and more like a village rather than a prison. Anton realised with horror that the others were becoming reconciled to living here for the rest of their lives. Dear God, he said to himself for the hundredth time, I have to get away from this place as soon as a chance presents itself.

When the weather was warm enough, the guards held their regular wrestling matches on Sunday afternoons, ending with a competition between two prisoners picked at random. Stripped to the waist, red faces atop pale white bodies, the guards drunkenly cheered on the fighters they had placed a bet on. Some guards had elaborate tattoos of eagles, saints and crucifixes on their bodies. One even had a portrait of Lenin emblazoned on his chest. Several had their nipples sliced off, too. This was a well-known punishment by criminal gangs for members who disobeyed an order. Some of these guards had obviously been recruited from the dregs of Soviet prisons.

'It's your lucky day,' said a voice above Anton one Sunday.

He was lying on the ground, eyes closed, enjoying the sun on his skin and attempting with some success to think about nothing. Anton looked up, blinking, to see a dark figure standing over him. He made out the handsome face of Major Rybus.

‘Congratulations, Mechanic. You get to show us your fighting prowess this afternoon. Be ready at three o’clock. And one more thing: make sure you win. I’ve got twenty roubles riding on it. Your opponent knows what’s expected of him.’

To hell with that for a game of soldiers, Anton decided. He’d lose the fight just to spite Rybus. When the time came, he walked over to the grassy area beside the guard house and saw his opponent. It was his friend, Danny Waislitz. They nodded at each other then started half-heartedly swinging and dodging fists. Some in the crowd began to jeer, recognising they were only going through the motions of a fight. A clod of earth hit Anton on the back. While he was distracted, Danny landed a hard smack on the side of his head, setting his ear buzzing. The sailor grinned and landed a punch on the other side of his head before Anton had time to react. So that’s how you want to play it, Danny, he thought.

Anton hit back, landing a blow on Danny’s face, cutting his lip so that blood flowed down and gathered on his chin. Anton had been taught proper hand-to-hand combat, but Danny had trained in a hard school. As they fought, Anton remembered the sailor telling him how he’d learnt to swing a punch in a Hamburg bar. He’d learnt how to fight a man with a knife in a Montevideo brothel. He’d learnt to use a man’s own weight against him on the dockside in Surabaya, and this is what Danny did now. Feigning a stumble, he stepped back so that Anton would lunge forwards. At that moment Danny spun around and stabbed at Anton’s face with his elbow before following up with a punch.

Anton felt a wave of pain radiate from his nose, which was now broken, and tasted blood on his lips. This would have been the moment to fall to the ground, losing the fight to spite Major Rybus, but the pain ignited some fury deep inside him. The anger gave Anton energy to throw himself at Danny, raining down blow after blow, which drove the sailor onto his knees. He landed a mighty punch to Danny’s head, throwing him sideways to the ground, where he lay groaning and barely conscious. It was over. There were cheers and bunches of men coming together to pay their bets, then the crowd began to wander away, a few coming to help Danny up.

Major Rybus grinned and winked at Anton, but he only scowled and staggered off to wash his face, and to do something about the pain, which returned in waves, spreading out from his bloody, throbbing nose.

Anton caught sight of himself later in a broken piece of mirror that hung from a nail on the workshop wall. His nose was slightly bent in the middle now, as well as being bruised and swollen. He barely recognised the face. A frowning middle-aged man with a beard looked back at him, more like a battle-weary general than the boyish cavalry officer he was in his mind.

The summer was passing too fast, like a barefoot child running by. Anton and Danny avoided each other's gaze after the fight, looking away when they saw each other, as though they shared the memory of some shameful crime. Every morning soon after sunrise, the women and children set off from the camp to gather juniper berries in the forest. The scene reminded Anton of berry-gathering when he was a boy, but this was different. They carried as many bags as they could and were gone all day. It was early evening before they returned, exhausted, their clothes ragged and torn by brambles, carrying bags now loaded with fruit. Only by selling these at the camp store could they get enough credit to buy food in the winter, when the meagre rations alone would not keep them alive.

•

The first day of August came around. In a month it would be St Bronislaw's Day, Anton thought, two years since he had left home. In September, flakes of snow would start to fall on the camp and the endless forests that surrounded it. Back home at the Winter Palace, the first leaves would be turning golden at the edges. Soon the gardener would be sweeping them from the lawn with his twig brush. Gathering them into a pyramid, he would set the leaves alight, so that the sweet woody smoke could be smelt throughout the garden. Elisabeth and a maid would run around the house, closing windows so the smell wouldn't get into the curtains. Was there ever such a melancholy scent, so laden with emotion?

Anton's daydreaming while he worked on a faulty distributor cap was disturbed by a cough behind him. The Russian guard with the extravagant moustache was standing at the door, looking curiously around the workshop.

'You're back to tree-felling tomorrow, Mechanic,' he said. 'Just in time for next winter. Tough luck.'

'What's this about?' said Anton. 'I've got half-a-dozen vehicles to fix this week alone.'

The Poles and their Russian guards spoke easily to one another now. They each knew their place but ignored formalities, sharing their lives in the remote, forest-bound settlement.

‘There’s a new mechanic arrived. Major Rybus wants to try him out. He decided a change would be good for your health.’

Anton spat on the ground.

‘What do I care?’ he said. ‘And how come Rybus makes the decisions around here? He’s a Pole, not a Russian.’

‘Russian, no. Communist, yes. Remember, he’s a party commissar, looking after your people’s welfare . . .’

‘. . . and making sure we behave ourselves.’

‘Do what you’re told, like I do,’ said the guard. ‘You’ll discover it makes life a lot easier. Report to Logging Team Five tomorrow morning.’

After the fug of the workshop, Anton found that he actually revelled in the fresh forest air, and the smell of earth and wood sap as they cut down tree after tree then prepared them for carting to the river. He enjoyed using different muscles, making his whole body tired so he would sleep better. Working in a team meant there was less time for ruminating than there had been alone in the workshop; less time for his mind to be constantly going over the past, torturing himself by worrying about Elisabeth or thinking about Sarah and her mother. In the forest, he could save his thoughts once again for bedtime, when he took out the faded little photograph of Elisabeth and told her about his day.

In his first week back in the forest, Anton was sent to cut down a stand of Siberian pines on a hillside, sharing a long saw with another member of the logging gang, a red-haired man he’d never spoken to before. Back and forth they sawed, throwing their whole bodies into the action. The saw was the same bow shape as the one used to trim the branches of apple trees in the Winter Palace’s orchard, but this saw was more than three metres long, with each tooth the length of his finger. The apples at home would be ready for picking now, gently twisted off then gathered into big wicker baskets. Anton and Elisabeth carried the baskets into the house, holding a handle on each side. There was a cool and shady room in the undercroft where they set the red and yellow orbs out in rows. Here they would lie in silence through autumn into the winter, waiting to be eaten or cooked in apple tarts. How delicious the tarts were, the soft fruit and the crumbling pastry just right, all with a dollop of . . .

Anton was daydeaming again, but his reverie was broken by a grotesque face looming at him, eyes crossed and tongue sticking out, then retreating like a zany circus clown. As the man at the other end of the great saw thrust it forwards, he pulled a face, looked up at the sky as he drew back, then pulled another face as he pushed forwards again.

The man's a bloody idiot, Anton thought. I'll ignore him. He'll get a smack in the face if he's not careful. But, despite himself, Anton found he was smiling, and then stuck out his own tongue before laughing and falling backwards into the bracken.

'You fool! You bloody fool! What do you think you're doing, pulling those faces?' Anton shouted between his laughter.

The red-haired man was lying back on the forest floor too, leaving the big saw bouncing gently in the half-cut tree. A grin of satisfaction was spread across his face.

'You look so bloody miserable all the time. I thought I'd cheer you up whether you like it or not! You're the mechanic, aren't you? The one who beat Danny in the fight. You scare people, did you know that?'

Anton spat into the grass beside him. He scared people? That was news to him.

'The fight was Major Rybus's idea,' Anton said. 'It was a set-up to fix a bet and make him some money. Danny was supposed to take a fall, while I was supposed to beat him all along. We both had other ideas, but it ended up that way just the same. Anyway, to hell with Rybus. I'll go mad if I spend another winter in this place. Give me a hand up, would you? And what's your name?'

'Bartosz.'

'I'm Jan. But you can call me "Mechanic", like everyone else does.'

The man stood and stretched out a hand to haul him easily up onto his feet. He looked at Anton for a moment, as if deciding whether to trust him, then spoke again.

'I'll show you something, Mechanic. Follow me.'

Bartosz set off through the trees, up the hill that rose in front of them. He lifted his knees high as he walked through the undergrowth like a child playing at marching soldiers, making the bracken crunch beneath his feet. Anton looked around. Everyone else in the logging gang was busy at work. Even the two Russian guards with them were occupied, directing a team

with ropes as they manoeuvred a tree trunk onto the back of a wagon. Their voices echoed through the clearing.

‘Left! No, *left*, you idiot. Okay, that’s too far. Back a bit now . . .’

Anton could see it would take some time to get the wagon loaded with timber this morning. The soldiers didn’t actually need to guard them. Where could anyone run, after all, except deeper into the endless forest?

Anton followed Bartosz to the ridge on top of the hill. The two men squatted down, looking out on the broad valley below them. A wide river curved through the forest, which grew right down to its banks. In the distance, the valley narrowed between two cliffs, where only a few trees could find purchase and cling onto the rock face. Here the river was forced into a torrent. It would take a few hours to get there on foot through the thick forest.

‘See the bridge?’

Anton shielded his eyes and squinted at where Bartosz was pointing.

‘Yes. Looks like a trestle bridge between those cliffs.’

‘That’s it,’ said Bartosz. ‘Now keep watching.’

He glanced up at the sky. The prisoners’ watches had been taken long ago by Russian soldiers, but they’d all learnt to tell the time by the position of the sun and the light in the air.

‘Anytime now,’ Bartosz said. ‘Watch and listen.’

Sure enough, within a few minutes Anton heard the distant chuffing rhythm of a steam train. It grew louder, then they saw the engine flash across the bridge followed by wagon after wagon, travelling west. Anton thought of the model railway he’d had as a child, careering around his playroom, before hurtling across a Meccano bridge between two armchairs.

‘Some go west. Some go east,’ said Bartosz. ‘Raw materials are taken to factories deep in Siberia. They make tanks, mostly. But trucks too. Artillery. Anything you can think of comes travelling back to the west. It never stops. I’ve been watching for weeks. I know the time of every train.’

‘Keep talking,’ said Anton, sitting back against a tree and stretching his legs. He had an idea of where the conversation was going.

‘Most of the trains travel fast, like this one. Twice a week, though, a really big one goes east. It’s huge, nearly a kilometre long, and loaded with iron ore. It needs two locomotives. The weight is nearly too much for the bridge, so it slows right down before it goes across.’

‘And that’s when we jump on,’ said Anton.

‘You’ve got it,’ replied Bartosz. ‘This is the Trans-Siberian line. It goes all the way to Vladivostok on the Pacific coast. The journey takes eight days, but once we’re at the coast anything’s possible. We could sneak onto a ship. We could travel down through China to Hong Kong, or get to India, maybe, and join up with the British army.’

Anton’s knowledge of geography beyond Europe was vague, but he sensed that travelling across China in wartime might be more difficult than the red-haired man suggested.

‘You do know what happens if we’re caught?’ asked Anton.

Bartosz nodded. ‘Kolyma,’ he said.

They both sat in silence for a while. Everyone dreaded being sent to the goldmines in Kolyma. The mines were deep, cold and often flooded knee-deep with water. Prisoners worked for twelve hours a day beneath the ground, breathing in toxic dust as they dug and shovelled the ore. No one ever returned from Kolyma.

‘Count me in,’ Anton said. ‘We’ll just make damn sure we’re not caught. But first things first. When’s the next iron ore train due? We should go soon, before autumn sets in, or we’d freeze to death on an open wagon. And we need a map. Some food. Water.’

‘Good man,’ said Bartosz, gripping Anton’s arm. ‘I knew you’d say yes. There’s a train in two days. And don’t worry, I’ve thought of everything. I bartered some foreign coins I had for two water bottles from a guard. We can steal food from the kitchens after breakfast. We’ll take as much bread and dried fish as we can hide in our shirts. It won’t matter if it’s noticed, we won’t be back! And I’ve a map too: look.’

Bartosz reached under his shirt and pulled out a scrap of paper. It was a map of the world torn out of a schoolbook from the camp school. The man’s knowledge of the world didn’t extend beyond a schoolboy’s flimsy grasp of geography, Anton silently concluded. Who knew what chaos and danger they’d find, even if they survived the train journey. But what choice did he have? Doing nothing and staying at the logging camp was the worst choice of all, whatever the alternative.

‘Thursday it is,’ said Anton. ‘Now, we’d better get back before we’re missed.’

They ambled back through the trees, as though they had only wandered off to take a piss.

When the day came, Bartosz and Anton were sitting in the shade beneath the railway bridge. Neither spoke, each lost in his own thoughts. They had been waiting for more than an hour. Anton must have dozed off in the heat, for suddenly Bartosz was shaking his shoulder.

‘Wake up, Mechanic! Look alive, our transport is arriving!’

Anton leapt to his feet. The train was very near, judging by the sound of it. Once the engine at the front had passed by, they would come out from under the bridge to trot alongside then hop up onto one of the massive open carriages carrying iron ore to the interior.

At last they heard the train roaring above them, followed by the din of heavy carriages rolling across the timber bridge. But there was something wrong . . . several somethings, in fact. The train was going too fast, making the timbers of the bridge tremble. But most of all, it was travelling westwards, in the opposite direction to which they wanted to go. Bartosz poked his head up beside the track then quickly brought it down again to hide among the timbers beneath the bridge.

‘It’s carrying tanks,’ he said, shouting to make himself heard. ‘And the train is armed. There are wagons with anti-aircraft guns pointed at the sky. I’ve never seen one like this before.’

No sooner had the train passed by than they heard another appoaching from the same direction, the beat of the steam engine threatening and relentless.

‘I don’t know what’s happened, but let’s get out of here,’ yelled Anton. ‘If we make it back to the logging team before they all leave, then we’ll be there for the head count back at the camp.’

As they joined the other Poles marching back through the woods, Anton could taste the bitter disappointment in his mouth. Was he really condemned to another winter in this place? It was almost dusk when they approached the camp. A hubbub of voices floated on the air towards them. The sounds of talking and shouting grew louder, and there were bursts of singing. They heard snatches of Polish patriotic songs. Anton and the others exchanged puzzled looks as they hurried forwards.

At the gate they stood in wonder at the sight in front of them. A bonfire was blazing next to the guard house. Prisoners and soldiers were dancing around it, passing bottles of vodka between them and talking excitedly.

‘What’s going on?’ Anton called to a guard.

‘Haven’t you heard?’ the soldier called back. ‘The Germans have invaded Russia. Comrade Stalin has decreed that from today, the Poles are our allies in the fight against Germany, together with the British. We are all brothers now. You’re free!’

18

I'd been tattooed like a piece of livestock. I'd been forced to wear a dress that belonged to some poor Jewish woman who'd been sent to Auschwitz or one of the other death camps. Now I waited with the others in the empty school before we were sent away to one of the German army's brothels. We sat on desks in a classroom, murmuring anxiously together about where we were going and what would happen to us. Some would be travelling many hours' distance away. The German army had 'establishments' all over the country.

There must be dozens of these places, I thought. Until the day before, I couldn't have imagined anything worse than being raped by Colonel Wendt in my own bed. Now there was the prospect of it happening with a dozen different soldiers every night in a seedy brothel smelling of disinfectant. Night after night after night. It was a nightmare. I stared at the tattoo on my aching arm, looking away then compulsively back again. Each time it was a shock to see the terrible letters punched into the skin, marking me as an army prostitute.

In ones and twos, the other women were called away. Eventually only Beata and I were left. A clock high on the wall ticked louder now that only two of us remained. The second hand jerked relentlessly forwards, marking moment after moment of time chopped off and disappearing forever. The shiny metal disc of the clock face reminded me of a butcher's meat slicer – its sharp, spinning blade carving off thin slices until the meat was all gone. As a child, I was always frightened by such contraptions because of the terrible temptation to put my finger in and see it lopped off in an instant.

'Maybe they've forgotten us,' Beata said hopefully, bringing my thoughts back to the present. She was dabbing with a wet handkerchief at the brown and yellow bruise on her thigh where the German officer had hit her with his stick. She winced, then dabbed again, compelled to return to the pain just as I could not help looking at my terrible tattoo.

‘Maybe we could sneak out, walk into town and spoil ourselves with coffee and cakes, then just go back home. Wouldn’t that be nice?’

I couldn’t decide if Beata actually meant this. Perhaps, in spite of all we had been told, a fifteen-year-old really could not understand what it meant to work in an army brothel. I decided it was best to say nothing, and simply gave her a weak smile. Soon, Beata was escorted out, leaving me alone. After a while, the door opened and the female sergeant returned. With her grey uniform skirt and a revolver in a holster on her hip, she looked almost stylish.

‘Count yourself lucky,’ the woman said. ‘You’re coming with me to the officers’ brothel in the city. We get a better class of visitor there. It’s only twenty minutes away on the army bus.’

A Wehrmacht bus drove regularly between German army facilities in Poznań, for staff and couriers to move easily between them. When the bus arrived, grinding its gears as it stopped outside the school, most of the seats were already taken. There were soldiers and airmen, a few nurses, and others on official business clutching briefcases on their laps. I had to take an uncomfortable seat at the very back, with no window beside me to see outside.

My German guard sat close by. She was going off duty, she said, becoming relaxed and starting to chat.

‘The major’s taken a liking to you,’ she said. ‘“Classy” was the word he used. That’s why he wants you close at hand in the officers’ establishment. If you’re lucky, he might choose you as his mistress. You should make yourself agreeable to him, if you see what I mean.’

To distract myself from the woman’s gabbling, I stared ahead. Familiar landmarks began to appear as we approached the city centre. The town hall. Ludomir’s restaurant, which I saw had a new German name displayed above the door. The art nouveau facade of the town theatre, decorated in vines and dancing figures carved in stone. The Poznań synagogue, now covered in scaffolding, with builders’ trucks drawn up outside.

‘What’s going on there?’ I asked.

‘We’re converting it into a swimming pool,’ the woman said. ‘Olympic-sized,’ she added with pride.

What happened next seemed to happen extremely fast and extremely slowly at the same time. I can’t really explain it better than that. The bus pulled up outside an office building where a huge swastika flag hung over

the entrance. It must have been commandeered by the German administration. There was a cafe next door, with soldiers drinking at tables outside. A bicycle leaning on a lamppost. A man wearing a big cap pushing a wheelbarrow. At the moment the bus opened its doors, everything flew violently apart in a flash as bright as lightning. There was a boom which made my ears hurt before stopping almost as soon as it had started, like a switch being flicked on and off.

Inside the bus, shattered glass, metal poles, people and chairs flew into the air and crashed with sickening violence into each other. It was as if the bus had sucked in the explosion when the doors opened. Everything was strangely silent. All around me were bodies with bloody, gaping wounds. Some had arms and legs hanging off. On the street was more carnage. Bodies lay around like rag dolls. The man with the barrow stood in a daze, a few scraps left of his clothing and blood running down his face. I saw all this as though I was sitting in a cinema staring at a screen. There wasn't a mark on me.

For a while I didn't move, my mind and body in shock, unable to take in what had happened. Then time seemed to start up again. People ran from the nearby shops where the windows had shattered to help the wounded on the pavement. There was shouting and pointing, and the distant sound of bells ringing as police and ambulances approached. At the front of the bus, smoke began to rise from the engine and flames played above the bonnet like a fiery lace fringe.

It was hard to think, but deep down I knew I needed to act fast. My muscles urged me to move but I hesitated, so used to doing things only when I was ordered. But this was a chance, the only one I would ever have, to escape the Germans and their dreadful plans for me. My guard lay dead, her body hanging out of a bus window. I stood then shakily picked my way across debris towards the open door at the front of the bus. I tried not to allow my eyes to rest for long on the torn bodies all around, but there was one thing I did see. A handbag lay open on the floor, money visible inside. Without a thought, I plucked up the bag and staggered from the bus, forcing myself to keep walking through the hubbub on the street. In the confusion, no one took any notice of me. Everyone's attention was still on the dead and injured on the pavement. As I reached the corner of the street there was another, smaller explosion. A quick glimpse over my shoulder told me the entire bus had caught fire.

Just keep going, I told myself. It felt good to walk. After a while, I realised with alarm that some men's eyes were following me. Was I being followed? Were they Gestapo? Then I saw the men were smiling. Of course, I realised. It was the middle of the day and I was wearing high heels and the figure-hugging cocktail dress that was meant to be my uniform in the officers' brothel. The last thing I wanted was to be noticed. Maybe I should buy some other clothes with the money I'd found, something that would draw less attention? I needed time to think.

Down the street I saw a church, Our Lady of Sorrows. I pushed open the heavy door then let it slam behind me, before kneeling in a pew towards the back. No one would disturb me here. Sunlight filtered through a stained-glass window, making clouds of emerald and ruby air that drifted slowly across the floor. A priest nodded and smiled as he went by, then disappeared through a door beside the altar. It was very peaceful. Perhaps I could apply to become a nun? I could hide away in a place such as this for years, until the war was over.

It had been by the grace of God I was not killed on the bus by the bomb. It must have been planted there by Polish partisans, in a bicycle perhaps, to kill the Nazi occupiers, I thought. How had I not been hurt myself? My position in that uncomfortable corner seat right at the back meant the bulkhead must have sheltered me from the blast. Yet the grace of God had not done much good for the others who had died, some Poles as well as Germans. It seemed blasphemous to thank God for my survival; an insult to the others who'd been killed. It was purely luck, like everything else in this war: sometimes good, sometimes bad. What mattered was to keep going.

I picked up the handbag I'd taken on impulse from the burning bus and carefully examined the contents. There was cash. There were identity papers in the name of Emilia Witkowska. And there was a letter ordering her to report to the city hospital to start work as an auxiliary nurse. There were also a few toffees. I unwrapped one and popped it in my mouth. Where did she get such luxuries? Perhaps Emilia had a German boyfriend back in her home town.

Did I have the nerve to impersonate the dead nurse? I wondered as I chewed the toffee slowly. If I didn't take whatever opportunities presented themselves, I was a dead woman. As it was, the Germans would assume I'd been killed in the bombing of the bus. But if I was caught, the tattoo would identify me as a fugitive. It was a simple choice between brazenly

pretending to be Emilia Witkowska or being captured and shot. If I were caught, they might even send me to the Fort VII concentration camp outside the city. From the terrible rumours I'd heard about this place from a maid at the Winter Palace, a bullet would be preferable.

With a deep breath and a word of thanks to Our Lady of Sorrows, I left the church and turned towards the hospital.

19

Corporal Jan Komarowski, formerly Captain Anton Lewicki-Radziwiłł, swung his arms in time to the beating of a drum. The rhythm drew his feet into step with the soldiers beside him, as it had for his ancestors over hundreds of years. The ragged Polish army was on its way to Buzuluk, its new headquarters in Russia.

After his time in the logging camp, when every day was like the one before, now everything was changing fast. Anton discovered that Hitler's invasion had struck deep into Russia, laying waste to vast areas, slaughtering whole towns and villages, and besieging Leningrad, the city that was once called St Petersburg. Yet, however deep the Germans penetrated into Russia from Europe, there were still lands beyond their reach. Russia spanned across the globe from Finland to Vladivostok on the Pacific coast, where Anton had dreamt of escaping. From these Siberian depths, the Russians had begun to fight back, metre by metre, body by body, against the German army.

Excitement and disappointment had followed each other time and time again since that day at the railway bridge with Bartosz. It was hard to believe the news when they arrived back at the camp after the failed escape, yet there it was in black and white on a decree nailed to the guard-house wall.

'The Soviet government has granted an amnesty to all Polish prisoners and deportees,' Anton read. 'An amnesty document will serve as a passport and as a one-way travel permit to the destination of your choice.'

To the destination of your choice. The phrase sounded like a prize from a holiday magazine. In truth, there was only one destination. The Polish government-in-exile announced that all inmates of Russian camps were to report to Buzuluk, south of the Ural Mountains, to join the Polish army. A man in a tight double-breasted suit appeared at the camp and read out instructions direct from General Anders, who was in charge of the new army. The Russians had imprisoned and tortured the general in the dreaded

Lubyanka prison in Moscow. Now he had a smart Polish army uniform again, and tens of thousands of soldiers at his command. Anton listened carefully with the others, yet took equal notice of the official's red cheeks and well-fed belly. He looked pleased to see Major Rybus, Anton noticed, greeting him like an old friend. Maybe this isn't the time to reveal my real identity, he decided. What the Russians do today they can undo tomorrow. That much we've learnt. I'll keep my head down as 'Jan the mechanic' for a while longer.

Their release wasn't straightforward. Several weeks passed before new prisoners arrived to replace them at the camp, to keep the supply of timber going. The people who arrived, pouring off the trains, were different, not Poles or Belarussians. Their skin was a little darker. No one understood the languages they spoke. Perhaps they had been deported from the fringes of the Soviet Union. Chechens? Kyrgyzstanis? Tajikistanis? Others had shaven heads and shuffled along clumsily while holding up their trousers. They wore rough grey uniforms without button or belts. This was a sure mark of political prisoners, who were treated even worse than the others.

Buzuluk was more than a thousand kilometres to the south. Anton joined the other Poles swarming onto the empty trains. A lucky few could sit, but most spent long days standing in the swaying carriages. The further they travelled from the logging camp, the more Anton became aware of how ragged they looked. Things they had taken for granted – long beards, clothes in tatters and lice crawling in the seams of their shirts – now marked them apart from other passengers.

Trains were not always going in the direction they needed to travel. Or, after waiting for days, sleeping at railway stations, they would find all the carriages were reserved for Russian troop transport. Children huddled with their mothers on the open platforms, waiting, day after day, many sick or simply starving. Too many of them lay down and never got up again. Their bodies were dragged away and put into shallow graves. There was nothing anyone could do but wait for a train that was going south. There were times when they lost hope one would ever arrive. Some gave up and stayed where they were, setting up shanty towns along the way. Others who had more strength, like Anton, set off to walk for days to another town that had a railway station. Keeping the Volga River on their right, they travelled onwards as the weather grew colder. Anton moved his fingers constantly, as he'd learnt to do at the logging camp, to keep the circulation going. At last

they came to the Kama River, which fed into the great Volga. It was frozen over already. Tyre tracks and footprints led across the ice in wavering lines. With some of the other soldiers, Anton acted as a marshal on the bank, directing the travellers across the frozen river.

‘Spread out!’ he called. ‘Don’t walk close to each other, that puts more pressure on the ice. If it starts to crack, lie down to spread out your weight! Throw your arms and legs out sideways and crawl back in this direction . . .’

The crowd wandered onto the ice. They looked like ants scuttling over a wedding cake. Despite his warnings, many followed closely in the footsteps of those in front, a hard habit to break after weeks of trudging along in a line.

‘Spread out!’ Anton yelled through cupped hands, his voice hoarse in the chilly air.

Far to his left there was a sound of cracking then a scream as a man crashed through the ice into the blackness below. The scream cut out as quickly as it had started when he disappeared beneath the surface. Everyone was still. After a while, they began to edge their way forwards again.

When the time came for Anton to cross, he moved downstream to a fresh patch of the river where the ice was covered by a dusting of snow. Despite the cold, he felt sweat on his face as he stepped forwards, hearing the ice groan and crack beneath him. As Anton’s feet slid along, they pushed the snow aside and he gasped at what he saw.

‘It can’t be,’ he muttered to himself. ‘Don’t look. Just keep walking.’ But his feet couldn’t move.

Beneath him was the body of a woman who had fallen through the frozen river and drowned, and was now encased in ice. A terrified expression was clearly visible on her face. Her hair streamed out behind her. From her mouth rose a scattering of air bubbles, like suspended pearls. Anton saw her hand too, reaching desperately towards the surface. She reminded him, strangely, of a saint painted on the ceiling of a baroque church, defying gravity as she floated up to heaven, arms held out to embrace her Lord. This woman had surely died in seconds, frozen to death even as she clawed upwards to save herself from the icy water.

Anton began to tremble as he reached the far bank, then his whole body began to shiver. It was not the cold that made him shake so. It was the fact of still being alive. He stumbled and ran, not stopping until he reached the

rearguard of the column, running as though the icy river were trying to draw him back under its surface to join the woman who had drowned.

Anton's column reached the Polish army camp near Buzuluk by nightfall. After passing through a shabby town, they came at last to a recognisable army barracks. How strange it was to see the white eagle of the Polish flag flying over this camp in the middle of Russia.

With every day, numbers grew until the camp held more than forty thousand soldiers, and twice as many women and children. Anton settled into training as a soldier again: marching, weapons maintenance, map-reading and navigation, hand-to-hand combat . . . There were even razors and sometimes hot water as well. He was able to shave off his beard and feel his cheeks smooth for the first time in two years. The face in the mirror began to resemble the Anton he remembered, although with more lines and the noble twist of his broken nose. He'd come to rather like it. What would Elisabeth think when she saw him? Anton had changed in other ways, too. He was a very different man from the young captain who had set off from the Winter Palace on his bicycle. And how would Elisabeth look to him after all this time? Would she have changed too? Well, never mind, he thought. Some things alter with time, but others are beyond its greedy reach. How wonderful it would be to live with her again and grow old together at their beloved home.

Along with other professional soldiers from before the war, he was soon picked out and promoted. A sergeant now, he thought, smiling to himself. I'll soon be a captain again if I'm not careful. He saw no sign of Danny, Bartosz or others from the logging camp. There was no mistaking Rybus, though. He was moving up in the world, a full colonel.

Anton felt good to be wearing a Polish army uniform again, even if they had hardly any weapons, as though the Russians didn't quite trust them to be armed. On exercises, they sometimes drilled with wooden rifles and threw white-painted bricks instead of grenades, yelling, 'Explosion! Fifteen-metre radius!' Yet Anton could tell he was not as strong as he should be. The rations supplied by the Russians were barely enough. It was no surprise that waves of epidemic began to move through Buzuluk, as they had through the logging camp: influenza, typhus and other diseases. Once again, it was old people and children who died first. Anton felt sick with sadness every time he saw another little cardboard coffin being carried to the cemetery at the edge of the camp.

Now that the Russians had accepted the Poles as allies, they began to allow mail through from home. Some of the letters were years old. Some had been sent the previous month. There were no letters for Sergeant Komarowski, however, nor for Captain Lewicki-Radziwiłł, Anton discovered after discreet inquiries at the headquarters post office. It took him five agonising evenings to write a letter to Elisabeth, but months went by without a response. No surprise, he told himself – she probably never received it. Once collected from the Buzuluk Camp mailbox, letters were opened and inspected by Russian censors before being forwarded to the Red Cross office in Moscow. From there, mail travelled to a neutral country – Switzerland, Sweden or Portugal – and then across war zones to letterboxes all over Europe. It was a miracle that any of the letters got through to Poland at all. Still, Anton continued to write to Elisabeth and to wait for a reply.

20

‘Excuse me . . . my apologies! Sorry, ladies!’

Anton had opened the door to the gymnasium at the army camp only to find a group of half-dressed women chatting casually to each other as they pulled on their clothes. One was leaning forwards, plaiting her blonde hair into a long braid. Embarrassed and annoyed with himself, Anton quickly shut the door and went back to check the location of his mission briefing on the noticeboard. He was sure that it was to be held in the gym.

When the Polish army had been at Buzuluk for six months, Anton and a dozen other Polish soldiers received orders to report for a mission briefing as part of a joint platoon with a Russian unit to search for German raiders. Fierce fighting was underway far to the south. ‘General Winter’, it was said, had come to the aid of the Russians. The Red Army was equipped for and used to fighting in sub-zero conditions. The Germans, on the other hand, had expected the fighting to be over in autumn. They’d planned to be in Moscow by the time winter came, but now it was December and they were mired in battle far from the capital. They were running short of fuel, food and warm clothing. Hitler, though, had forbidden them from retreating. So Wehrmacht tank and infantry units were marauding through the countryside, desperately hunting for supplies while testing Russian defences at the same time. Anton was to serve in a platoon sent out to hunt the hunters. He was eager to fight again, and looking forward to the briefing. If only he could find the right room.

‘You had the right place,’ said a Russian sergeant he asked in the corridor.

‘But the women . . .?’

‘You Poles are still living in the last century,’ said the sergeant with a tolerant smile. ‘The sexes are equal in the Soviet Union. Nearly a million women serve in the Red Army. They are soldiers, pilots, drivers, gunners.’

The Russian held open the door and ushered Anton back into the gymnasium. He caught a quick whiff of the familiar odour from his

schooldays: rubber, dust, human sweat. The place was filling up with soldiers now, including the women he had seen, wearing Russian winter uniforms as a demonstration for the Polish soldiers. The woman with the long braid had tucked her hair up under a fur cap with earflaps. An orderly was walking around, distributing clothing to the men to try on for size: battle fatigues, fur hats and padded over-trousers and jackets, which made the assembly of soldiers look like a gathering of teddy bears. Over all this went loose white dungarees with a hood, so they would be almost invisibly camouflaged in the snow. It felt very snug.

A Russian officer called the soldiers to order and began to speak. ‘The German soldiers are hungry. They’re cold. They’re running short of fuel, and missing their cosy Fräuleins back in the Fatherland. You think this is good news?’ he asked.

A few of the Polish soldiers cheered and called out, ‘Yes, Comrade Major!’

Anton noticed that the Russian soldiers were silent. They had learnt to be more cautious about committing themselves one way or the other in front of a superior.

‘Good news? You could say that,’ said the major, with a smile that had no glimmer of humour in it. ‘But bad news for you. German soldiers are still the best trained and disciplined the world has ever seen. The Red Army excepted, of course,’ he quickly added.

‘Now they are desperate. The tables are turning. They know Germany itself is facing a life-or-death conflict. They will be more savage than ever, like wolves with their backs against a wall. Frankly, you will be lucky to come back alive. Do you understand?’

There were no cheers now. The major went on to outline the mission. They would form units of twelve soldiers. Each would travel to a different sector of no-man’s-land to seek out marauding German units. And then . . . well, they could use their imagination for that. As the major gave more detailed instructions, Anton looked around at the other troops in the gym. He knew some of the Poles by sight. There was something different about the Russian troops, though. The guards at the logging camp had been tough bruisers, but they were overweight, slow-moving, older. There was a reason they had been selected as just good enough to look after a camp of slaves in deepest Siberia. The Russian soldiers at the briefing were young and fit: more like hunting hounds than flabby old bulldogs.

After an early breakfast the next morning, they were organised into their units and issued with Shpagin submachine guns, which had an unmistakable circular ammunition magazine. Anton felt like a Chicago gangster in a movie when he held it cradled in his arm. Once their three-tonne truck had been loaded up with arms, supplies and skis, his platoon set off in a convoy with the others. The journey ahead would take all day. For a long time, the road ran beside railway lines. There was regular traffic of trains heading west towards the battlefield of the Caucasus, carrying tanks and wagons of fuel and other supplies. From the other direction came hospital trains, their carriages full of casualties, painted white with bold red crosses on the roofs and sides. Anton had heard that hundreds of thousands had been killed already. It was hard to take in.

Eventually, the railway tracks turned south-west towards Stalingrad. Anton's convoy stopped at army checkpoints every hour or so before being waved on westwards, every minute taking them nearer to the German positions. One by one, the trucks peeled off to their targets until eventually Anton's was alone, travelling on a narrow unmade road that was barely distinguishable in the thick snow from the landscape around them. They passed a hillside covered with red snow, as though the land itself had started to bleed in sorrow, sluicing downhill until it froze into a scarlet mantle across the earth. Anton shivered at the sight.

'That's an old iron ore mine,' said someone. 'Water from the diggings rusts when it meets the air outside. After it turns to ice, it looks just the colour of blood. A strange sight, isn't it?'

Anton grunted in agreement, relieved when the hill passed out of sight.

Sometimes they drove through towns which the Germans had raided. They were burnt out, walls scarred by a tattoo of bullets and low mounds covered in snow that might have been bodies lying where they fell. Once they heard an aircraft approach. The driver pulled in under a tree and cut the engine, waiting for it to pass. Anton bit his lip, remembering the fear of his train being seen by a Storch spotter plane in Poland before it was hit by artillery shells. The platoon waited in the back of the truck, talking in low voices, as though fearing the pilot could hear them. Anton's eyes were used to the gloom now. He could make out the faces of the soldiers on the opposite bench. Towards the front sat the female soldier he had seen earlier, with her long blonde braid tucked up under a fur cap. Upright between her knees she held a long rifle with a telescopic sight mounted on the barrel.

She looked to be in her early twenties, the same age as Elisabeth. It was impossible to imagine his wife out here in the killing fields of the Caucasus. Thank God she was safe in Warsaw.

'Be careful, comrade, she might bite,' said a quiet voice.

It was the man opposite Anton who spoke, with a half-smile on his face. He must have noticed where Anton was looking. It was the commissar. Each unit had such a political officer atttached to ensure loyalty and discipline from the soldiers. He had probably served in the KGB before the war, and God knows how many people he had executed over the years, for no other reason than he was obeying orders. Yet, all the same, the commissar had rosy cheeks and a hint of a smile on his lips that never quite went away. His face reminded Anton of the stationmaster at the little railway stop back in Lewicki. That man's principal duties seemed to be contentedly whistling quietly to himself and watering the geranium pots which lined the platform. It was the commissar's principal duty, though, to shoot any Russian soldiers who tried to retreat or run away. His duties also included reporting anyone – soldier or officer – he suspected of insufficient loyalty. That wouldn't be a problem with this platoon, Anton suspected. The German invaders had unleashed a hate that dared to speak its name. Like an insidious virus, this hatred had infected the Wehrmacht so that every soldier was able to kill women, children and old people without conscience, for the sheer evil pleasure of it. There was no appetite in the Soviet army for holding back from revenge. It was personal.

'I was just thinking she is about the age of my wife in Poland,' Anton replied. 'I know there are many women serving in the Red Army, but how terrible it is that they've been drawn into fighting like men. It's so brutal.'

The commissar was silent for a moment before speaking again.

'How many men have you killed, Polish soldier?'

Anton pursed his lips. It wasn't something he thought about. The number didn't interest him; he just did his duty.

'That's hard to say. A dozen, maybe more.'

'You see that woman with the rifle?' said the commissar. 'The one who's the same age as your delicate Polish wife? Her name is Lyudmila Pavlichenko. She is one of the sharpest snipers in the Soviet army. To my knowledge she has killed more than two hundred Germans. One by one.' He raised his arms to point an invisible rifle at Anton. 'Pop! And their heads are blown off. They don't even feel a thing. Think about that.'

When the aircraft eventually flew away, the truck's engine fired up again and they moved on. Snow was falling more heavily now, but the hardy ZIS vehicle continued forwards. Anton had taken apart and repaired plenty of them in his time at the logging camp. The Soviet truck was a reliable machine and he trusted its six-cylinder engine would keep them moving. Before too long, they began to rise up a lightly wooded hill. The driver stopped near the top then manoeuvred to turn the truck around, ready to head back when the mission was over. The soldiers climbed out and began to unload supplies. Anton was glad to stretch and move his body at last, even if it felt cooler in the wind and the falling snow. Equipment unpacked, he stood with the others, hands on hips, looking down to the valley below where the little town of Belenka sat beside a river. Partisans had reported a German raiding party heading in this direction.

Before the war, Belenka had been a holiday resort, the kind of place that Communist Party officials came every summer to relax. There was a restaurant, a fairgound for the children, and pedal boats to take out on the river. Someone passed Anton a pair of binoculars, shaking his head as he did so. Anton soon saw why. The town was destroyed. Blackened ruins were being slowly blanketed by the steady snow. A pillar of smoke rose lazily from one building at the edge of the town.

'There are heavy tracks heading away from the town,' said the lieutenant in charge, pointing to the west. 'I want two men to follow them – carefully – and report back as to where the Germans have made camp. The rest of you, get your skis on and we'll go down to take a look.'

How wonderful it felt to ski down the hill towards Belenka with snow falling around them! Despite what awaited them in the town, Anton remembered winter holidays at Zakopane, an exclusive resort in the Tatra Mountains back in Poland. He had promised to take Elisabeth there and teach her to ski back in 1939. Anton looked around and saw the other soldiers swooping down the hill on either side of him, knees bent, dressed in white camouflage with rifles on their backs. They looked like revengeful wraiths from a children's book illustration. A few pulled toboggans loaded with supplies and spare ammunition.

Once in Belenka, they moved cautiously through the streets, rifles at the ready. The place was deserted apart from a single dog, which ran down the road towards them, gripping something oddly familiar in its mouth. Anton gave a shiver as it raced past. Was that really a little human hand? The snow

gathered on the shattered buildings was like a kindly white blanket dropped from the sky to cover the the horror that had taken place there only a few hours before. The still-smoking building turned out to be an old wooden church, its roof fallen in and burning walls collapsing inwards at an angle. It hadn't been snow falling on them as they skied down the hill at all, but ash from this wreckage of a church.

'Where are all the people?' Anton asked the soldier walking beside him. 'Even if they were murdered, there aren't any bodies that I can see.'

'It's what the Germans have done right along the front line,' she replied. 'They round the civilians up and herd them into a church. Men, women, children, babies. They bolt the doors, then they set the place alight to burn everyone alive. Anyone who manages to climb through a window and try to escape is shot. The Germans think it's quite a game.'

Anton felt unsteady on his feet for a moment, as though they had walked onto marshy ground. The snowbound road was firm, though. It was Anton who had become uneasy for a moment, almost fainting when he heard the other soldier's words. By unspoken agreement, they avoided the burnt-out church; it felt somehow disrespectful and obscene to stare at where so many had died that day. They gathered on a promenade by the riverside. There was a restaurant overlooking the water, with all its windows shattered. A giant cardboard ice cream cornet still stood by the door. At the promenade's end were the remains of a fairground. Parts of it were still burning, the flames like a horde of gleeful devils swarming over the rides. The Ferris wheel turned slowly, like a giant blazing firework. Beside it, a carousel burnt fiercely, the fairytale figures which decorated it melting into grotesque, misshapen monsters. The painted wooden horses had manes of fire streaming behind them, looking briefly, gloriously alive at last. Garlands of light bulbs exploded now and then, while scraps of burning fabric floated by in the air like clothes fleeing their incinerated owners. Anton felt horror and exhilaration at the sight, as though someone had put a torch to Eden and set it all on fire.

'They ravage, they slaughter, and all of this they hail as the building of an empire. And when nothing remains but a wasteland, they call that peace.'

Anton turned to see the the commissar speaking softly to himself as he gazed at the burning carousel. Anton recognised the words. It was a quotation from Tacitus, the Roman historian. The commissar saw him turn, then raised his eyebrows. Anton cursed himself for showing that he might

recognise the lines. Why would a simple Polish foot soldier like him recognise such a classical allusion? Anton had to think quickly.

‘You’ve a fancy way with words, comrade commissar,’ he said to cover himself. The man only gave a slow nod, and then walked away to talk to the lieutenant in charge. They would be planning the raid. Had the commissar believed him?

‘It’ll be dark soon, so everyone take a break in the old restaurant. It still has a roof,’ called out the lieutenant. ‘Have something to eat, check your weapons and get some sleep. We’ll set off early, once we know how far away the Germans are – the people who did this to Belenka.’

•

It was a two-hour trek by ski through the dark to reach the German camp just before dawn. Five Mercedes army trucks stood in a defensive circle at the spot where the road headed into some dense woodland. That meant at least fifty German troops, then, against a dozen in the Russian and Polish unit. Using hand signals, the lieutenant and the commissar sent the snipers to the north, to hide among the trees. Anton and the others were to go around to the south, then crawl across the snow in their white camouflage suits until they were fifty metres away from the trucks.

A single rifle shot cracked the air, followed by others interspersed with angry shouting in Russian.

‘Filthy Nazi scum!’ someone called out in the distance. ‘Fuck you! You’ll die here, you bastards!’ There was another fusillade of shots and more insults shouted out towards the German encampment. They were women’s voices.

What was going on? thought Anton. Why on earth were the snipers yelling like that? But it wasn’t his job to wonder. Some of the Germans shouted back as they shot in the direction of the snipers. Anton and the others in his team waited, lying still and invisible on the crisp snow in their white camouflage uniforms. After fifteen minutes had passed, their signal to move came at last. A series of grenades – one, two, and then two more – exploded in the Germans’ camp, setting two of the trucks on fire. The explosions lit up the gloomy forest landscape for a moment. There were screams and more yelling as shots were fired by the Russian snipers hidden in the trees. Anton and the others rose up, like snowdrifts come to life, and

advanced on the burning trucks. They did not run, firing wildly, as soldiers do in movies. They walked calmly, aiming and shooting methodically when they saw enemy soldiers. Anton ceased to think. Every nerve in his body was focused on survival, on spotting and shooting the German soldiers who were trying to do exactly the same to him. It was a warrior's instinct.

Walking between two blazing trucks and into the camp, he heard bullets flying past him all around but didn't duck. Anton was a professional soldier. He knew that a bullet travels at twice the speed of sound. By the time you heard a gunshot, the bullet had already passed you by. You never hear the one that hits you. Anton shared the superstition of most soldiers, accepting that when his time was up, there would be a bullet with his name on it. Until then, he would be as careful as he could be, and fight as hard as he could too. At times like this – as when he had been fighting with the Polish army in the Kampinos Forest – Anton felt that he and Death had met and looked each other in the eye, then passed on by. They would meet one day, but not yet.

Anton was concentrating now on the Germans who were gathered in a couple of trucks at the opposide side of the camp, aiming and shooting at any who showed themselves. All the German soldiers' attention had been on the snipers to the north, but Anton and the other white-clad figures had advanced into their camp from the south, behind them. They were scrabbling in a panic to deal with attacks from both sides. Out of the corner of Anton's eye, he saw a Russian soldier beside him fall down dead. Another stumbled to the ground, gripping his shoulder in agony. Glancing around, Anton saw the commissar striding forwards with a frenzied look on his face. His arm was stretched out as he repeatedly took aim and fired his pistol, which was attached by a leather strap to a holster. The commissar shouted something Anton couldn't make out over the noise of the battle, before he spun around and fell down. A few more shots rang out and then there was silence but for the crackling sound of the burning trucks and the groans of wounded men as they attempted to hold up their hands in surrender.

'That's it!' called out the Soviet lieutenant. He pulled a whistle from his breast pocket and sent out a blast to let the snipers know it was safe to come down from the hillside. The Russians gave a few tired whoops, but mostly they were exhausted. Some went around to collect weapons, for German arms were highly prized. Others went to examine their casualties. Four men

were dead and beyond help, but only a couple of others were wounded. They had got off lightly. After some basic first aid, the injured Russians were lifted onto the supply toboggans, which now served as stretchers, then pulled back up the hill to their truck waiting in the trees. Anton, meanwhile, followed the officer to check on the German prisoners. They had fought hard against the surprise attack as the Russians swarmed into the camp from the rear, but had paid the price. Only half-a-dozen wounded Germans were still alive. They limped forwards, some with raised hands; others gripped their arms and bodies where wounds were openly bleeding. Their faces showed shame as well as exhaustion. The Russian officer gestured at them to line up at the centre of the camp, then to get down on their knees.

'Auf seinen Knien!' he called out in German, pressing gently down on one prisoner's shoulder to make him kneel, then gesturing at the others to do the same. Once they were lined up, he pulled his pistol from its holster and shot the first one in the back of the head. The man slumped forwards like a sack of potatoes tipping over. No one seemed surprised. The other Germans stayed where they were, heads down, faces resigned. One started to weep. The final prisoner turned his head at the last minute and looked up at the captain with a pleading expression.

'Bitte, ich habe Kinder,' he said. Please, I have children.

The captain shot him in the temple and turned to Anton. 'If he knew what we do to prisoners, he would have begged me to shoot him,' he said and walked away.

Anton was too shocked to say anything. This was clearly an everyday event for the Russians and their German foes too. He remembered the empty little town of Belenka and the smoking holocaust of the church. He remembered the dog running past with a child's hand in its mouth. No, he wasn't going to argue.

The snipers had joined them in the camp now. They stood chatting and sharing cigarettes with the other soldiers, sometimes gesturing and laughing. The one called Lyudmila Pavlichenko took off her fur cap to shake her long braid free, before winding it back again in a leisurely movement. Anton sat down to catch his breath and get his thoughts in order about the battle. Everything had happened so quickly. The Germans had more soldiers and a perfect, circular defensive position, yet the Russians had won decisively and ruthlessly. Anton was impressed. How had they done it?

There was no obvious weakness in the Germans' defence, so the Russians created one. The snipers had fired from one direction only, while yelling out insults. This gave the impression of undisciplined attackers, a gang of partisans, and only women at that. The Germans had responded by moving soldiers up to the north of their camp in order to return fire with more force. The Russian women were expert at staying hidden, though, and used a tactic they had developed: the sniper trap. They didn't shoot to kill, only to wound. This drew up more soldiers to help the ones who had been hit, who could then each be shot in turn. This way, they took three or four Germans out of action at the same time instead of one.

In their panic, the Germans left the south side of the camp exposed, unaware the snowdrifts nearby held camouflaged and heavily armed Russians and Poles. With the distraction of grenades exploding in the camp, Anton and the others were able to rise up and storm the Germans from behind. It had all been over in thirty minutes. Anton recognised a tactic he had been taught in officer training, one that dated all the way back to Alexander the Great – 'the long way round can be the shortest way home'.

Evidence of the success of this tactic lay all around Anton as he and the others left the German camp, loaded with weapons they had looted for their own use. The sun was rising above the treetops now, so that the scene of the battle was brightly illuminated. It was like the house lights going up in a theatre after a performance was over, exposing the tawdry scenery and props. It was a scene of horror. Dozens of bodies lay in disarray on the ground and hanging from the still-smouldering trucks.

Anton passed the body of the commissar. That was the end of him, then, Anton thought. He was a brave man, but a dangerous one, too. Anton had to admit he was relieved the man was dead. The commissar would never get to find out how an ordinary Polish soldier recognised a quotation from Tacitus. He would never have a chance to report any suspicions he may have had about Anton to the KGB. There was no time to bury him or the other Russian dead, and besides, the ground was too hard to dig a grave. By nightfall, they knew, the wolves would appear. By the next day there would be little left but a few bones.

How could this scene of slaughter exist on the same planet as Elisabeth and their gentle life at the Winter Palace, Anton wondered as the truck bumped its way back to the Russian lines. What he had taken for granted as normal for most of his life had been revealed as a rare and precious

privilege: a brief time and place when the world had been at peace. The horrors of this war were only worth it to bring peace closer, and the day when he and Elisabeth would be together again. Would she have changed as much as he had in these years they had been apart? And how well had they known each other after all? She was only twenty-one when they'd parted.

No, Anton told himself. She was such a dear, sweet person. If she had changed, it only meant he could get to know her and fall for her all over again. A person you love is like a garden that delights with every change of season. That was the point of this day, then, the point of this battle. Every German he shot, every step he took, brought him closer to Elisabeth – brought him closer to the day when they would sit quietly together at the Winter Palace again and everything would once more be as it was.

21

I left the church of Our Lady of Sorrows and walked through the streets of Poznań towards the city hospital. In my hand I gripped the bag of the dead Nurse Emilia Witkowska. I could have taken a tram to the hospital, but it was good to walk. It felt safer too, despite the occasional looks from men. I could relax as part of the flowing crowd. For now, there were no decisions to be made. There was nothing I needed to do but put one foot in front of the other. How restful these in-between times are – as when you sit in a waiting room, flicking idly through a magazine. For a little while, at least, I could take off that oppressive weight we all carry through each day – the burden of being oneself.

I'd never been inside the hospital, but I knew the building well. It faced a cobbled square where two tramlines met, so there were often crowds of people jostling past each other from one to the other. On Saturdays, before the war, there had been a flower and vegetable market here. Were these still held under the German occupation? I wondered. As a child, I'd giggled at the stallholders from the country who wore giant cabbage leaves on their heads to protect themselves from the sun. The hospital itself was built from brick in a gothic style, with pointed stained-glass windows and tall chimneys in the shape of fairytale towers. Like the Winter Palace, this was a nineteenth-century building, less than one hundred years old. As I tugged at one of the heavy oak doors, a man appeared and pulled it wide to usher me through, smiling and touching the brim of his hat. He had a pencil-thin moustache, and a handkerchief burst extravagantly from the breast pocket of his jacket.

Now there's a man with a high opinion of himself, I thought as he strode away. Beyond the wide entrance hall, two large stone staircases curved towards the upper floors. Between them was a high reception desk, where a nurse in a starched white uniform was sitting. I made my way towards her, conscious of my heels clacking loudly on the tiled floor. A man's eyes lingered on my body as I went past. The tight black dress was

drawing attention again. At a party, it would hardly be noticed, but in the middle of the day in the city, I could be taken for a streetwalker.

‘Emilia Witkowska,’ I said, holding out my papers to the nurse at the high desk. ‘Reporting for duty as an auxiliary nurse.’

The woman barely gave the papers a glance, but wrote down the name and pointed to a bench against the wood-panelled wall where I should wait. I felt exposed now that I wasn’t moving. When a German officer passed by, I looked down, pretending to search for something in my handbag. All anyone had to do was push up the sleeve of my cardigan to expose the shameful tattoo identifying me as an army prostitute, and there would be no escape. To distract myself, I stared at the lurid mural that decorated the wall opposite me. It showed the body of Christ at the foot of the cross, held in the arms of his mother, Mary. The scene looked more like a boxer being tended at the ringside by his glamorous girlfriend.

At last I was taken by a secretary through a bewildering series of staircases and corridors until I found myself in front of a door with no name on it, only the word ‘Matron’.

‘In you go,’ hissed the secretary, pushing me hard in the back then running back behind her desk.

I tapped on the door then gently pushed it open. The first thing I saw was a high window framing a cherry tree, which was ablaze in blossom, like a pink fire. The next thing I saw was a woman reading at a desk with her back to this view. I couldn’t have guessed how old she was, only that she was in middle age and looked very tired.

‘Emilia Witkowska,’ I said, holding out my hand.

‘You were brought up in an easygoing household, I see,’ said the woman, after lifting her head and taking note of the tight-fitting dress I wore. She emphasised ‘easygoing’ as though it were one of the seven deadly sins. Her voice was low, so I had to strain to hear what she said. It would be a mistake not to listen very, very hard, I suspected.

‘First, you do not say anything unless spoken to. You understand?’

‘Yes, of course,’ I murmured, looking down. This place was my only chance of hiding; I must do whatever was needed to fit in.

‘Second, you address me as “Matron”. You understand?’

‘Yes, Matron,’ I said in a quieter voice still.

‘And, finally, you will stand with your hands behind your back when I’m speaking. You understand?’

‘Yes, Matron,’ I replied again, slipping my arms behind me.

It had been a long and frightening day. I’d been taken from the Winter Palace by the German army to work in a brothel. A tattoo on my arm now marked me as a prostitute. I’d been bombed, had escaped and taken on a dead nurse’s identity. Despite all of this, the matron intimidated me as much as anyone ever had. I felt as if I were back in the schoolroom again, fearing the strap on the back of my hand. I wanted to be out of her presence as soon as I could.

‘Nursing is a sacred vocation,’ said the matron. ‘We mend the body so the soul may be saved.’ She glanced at a simple wooden cross on the wall.

‘The body is a holy vessel. As an auxiliary nurse, you’ll become intimately acquainted with this vessel and its parts. The flesh and the blood. Corruption and boils and vile-smelling fluids. Piss, shit and pus. It’ll be disgusting at first. That’s natural. But if you can overcome this, and learn to care for the body and its disorders with tenderness and love, then you may have the makings of a true nurse.

‘I don’t expect I’ll need to speak to you again,’ she went on calmly (and it was out of the question that I would speak to her). ‘But I like to meet all my girls when they start. From now on, I will know you, Witkowska, and you will know me.’

This sounded more like an obscure threat than a statement of fact.

‘Off you go, now. You’ve met Nurse Rula, my secretary. She’ll arrange your accommodation and uniform and give you a tour. You can start work on the morning shift tomorrow.’

By ten o’clock that evening I was lying on the bed in my new room at the nurses’ hostel, hands behind my head. It felt as though I’d lived through the longest day of my life. The room was small, barely wider than the single bed I lay on. Yet it was warm, comfortable and, most important of all, was a place of safety, or as safe as anywhere could be. It was a little nest – a hiding place – away from the Germans and everyone else. All I had to do was work my shifts and not draw attention to myself, then I could come back here to my room every night to be safe and alone until the war was over, until Anton returned and we could be together again.

After drawing a uniform from the stores and changing out of the black dress, I’d been taken on a tour of the hospital. It was vast, even bigger than it looked from the imposing entrance. Buildings of different ages spread out in every direction. Without a guide, I would have quickly become lost.

Unsure how I would cope the next day, I pencilled a map on a scrap of paper to carry with me. It was a whole new universe, full of different worlds: Maternity, Paediatric, Surgical, Orthopaedics, Gynaecology, Oncology . . . on and on it went. Each of these had their own rules and hierarchies. Only the matron, surely, could hold it all in her head and make sure everything ran smoothly. The hospital grounds covered several hectares but were surrounded by high walls, so few townspeople recognised the extent of it. There was a laundry, and even a small farm, I was told, which supplied the hospital with vegetables and eggs. It was a little state within the city, like the Vatican in Rome.

Oh, Anton, I thought after turning off the light. Here I am, safe and waiting for you. Be safe yourself and come back to me, my dear.

22

Anton went on more sorties with the Red Army that winter, but the joint operations came to a sudden halt in the new year of 1942. Rumours had reached the Poles that some Russian units of released prisoners and other expendable soldiers were being used to clear minefields. They were ordered to walk ahead and be blown up so that the regular Red Army could safely march over their bodies. The Polish soldiers had a strong suspicion that they would be used as cannon fodder in this way, with little choice once the bayonets and guns of Soviet commissars were driving them forwards. This was only a rumour, of course, for no one ever came back to confirm the tale. In the meantime, General Anders had other, more substantial, concerns. Stalin ordered the Polish forces to the front line but Anders refused, insisting that most of his troops weren't ready for action yet. The army was still poorly equipped and not fit enough to fight. Anders won the argument, and now something else was being planned for the Anders Army. What it was, they would have to wait to find out.

Spring had returned when Anton and the others finally left Buzuluk. The Anders Army received orders for their mission at last, though no one apart from the senior staff knew what they were. So it was that Anton found himself marching along a road in Kazakhstan to the beat of a drum with no idea where he was going.

The journey had been mostly by train. Anton had learnt to dread these long, cold days in freight wagons trundling through unchanging landscapes. Sometimes disruptions meant they had to make their own way to the next railhead. Leading Anton's column now were a few trucks, piled high with equipment and supplies. Some were powered by wood gas, with iron furnaces burning logs at the back. There were horse-drawn wagons, long lines of marching infantry, and then women and children, some pulling carts with long shafts. At least they were going somewhere, Anton thought, and somewhere had to be nearer to Elisabeth than where he'd been the day before.

Far ahead, jagged mountain peaks looked impossibly distant and romantic, twinkling pink and white like the stage decoration for an opera set in the Orient. Within days, the marching column entered the foothills of the Urals, passing through forests where branches trailed long fingers of lichen, like extravagant seaweed left behind by some biblical flood. They rose finally above the tree line, trekking through a high mountain pass. They wound their way past a gigantic boulder in the middle of the pass, bare stone at the front and cloaked in moss on the leeward side. It looks like the stout old mayor of Lewicki, Mr Hoffman, when he wears his green silk robe, thought Anton. I must tell Elisabeth about it tonight. His nightly imagined 'letters' to his wife were more and more important to Anton, as though she received them in her dreams and was comforted by his voice.

At Aktyubinsk they turned south, into the land of the Uzbeks. Now and then, a shot would echo from the crags high above them, and one of the Polish soldiers would fall down dead.

'The tribes here have been in revolt since the Middle Ages,' the man marching beside Anton told him. 'They never recognised the tsars, let alone the Communist government. When they make a real nuisance of themselves, Stalin sends in bombers or massacres a town or two; otherwise he leaves them alone. They take pot shots at anyone who goes by, for target practice. That rifle we heard is probably a hundred years old. It's quite possible they don't even know there's a war against Germany happening.'

It was hard in these remote places to believe that the war was still going on, but occasionally there was a reminder high above them. White contrails in fading hieroglyphics against the blue sky revealed where an aeroplane had flown overhead, perhaps a German spotter plane. Anton was hardened to the fear of going into battle, but the thought of doing so travelling at 400 kilometres an hour high in the air made him dizzy. I'll fight with my feet on the ground, thank you very much, he decided.

One afternoon they came across the wreckage of a Russian plane. It made a surreal sight. A herd of cows grazed peacefully in front of a gigantic broken wing bearing a red star. Soon they came upon what seemed to be a gigantic insect dangling from a tree. Long diaphanous wings, five metres or more long, hung from the branches, attached to a body that shone with green, enamel brightness. It was the body of a fallen airman dangling from his parachute, which had caught in the branches of the tree. But what was the jade armour which encased him? Puzzled by the metallic glinting,

Anton broke step and walked towards the tree. As he approached, the armour dissolved and scattered into the air with an angry buzzing and the stink of rotting flesh. The pilot's body had been entirely covered by countless crawling flies. Anton saw it now, exposed and burnt, the surface writhing with thousands of maggots. German or Russian, God rest his soul, thought Anton with a shudder, turning back to join the column of marching soldiers.

The army camped on the outskirts of a town. It did not seem to have a name, such a thing being an unnecessary extravagance in this wild place. It was simply called The Town. There was a rumour that it had a bar, so Anton set out with the others from his tent to investigate. As soon as word of the army's arrival reached the town, there had been great excitement. Passing travellers were a rarity in this part of the world. A barn had been quickly lit with candles and some bottles of homemade vodka brought out to create an impromptu drinking establishment. In a desperate attempt to provide entertainment, an elderly woman wailed, unaccompanied, some folk songs, winking grotesquely at the guests.

After a few drinks served in jam jars, Anton decided he'd had enough entertainment and set off to walk back to the camp. Among the rows of dark wooden houses, one stood out, every window ablaze with light and a red candle in a jam jar glowing by the entrance. A few Polish soldiers stood patiently at the door, cigarettes cupped in their hands, joking self-consciously among themselves. They beckoned Anton over, but he shook his head and carried on. So the town with no name even had a brothel. It looked as hastily created as the bar: the locals making the most of the presence of an army before it marched away and disappeared. After walking on, though, he couldn't resist glancing back with a longing expression. It was not the cool fingers of an Uzbek girl undoing his fly buttons that he yearned for, but the simple warmth of a human embrace. It was scarcely believable that he'd once held a woman in his arms, a woman whom he loved. It was like something that had happened on another planet to which he could never return. Anton wished he'd drunk more of the fiery vodka back in the barn so that he could sleep and not be tortured by these thoughts.

After leaving the next morning, the army continued south. Marshals on motorbikes patrolled the line, making sure everyone stayed on the right road and passing orders up and down the column, which was many

kilometres long. An open-top Mercedes sped by, too, with a Polish staff officer in the back. It threw clouds of dust onto the marching troops, making them cough and curse the driver. As the car swept past, Anton recognised the officer was Rybus, feet up and smoking a cigarette. Some turds always float to the top, he muttered to himself. It was something Stan Pawlowski, his old tank corporal, used to say. What struck Anton most, though, was that Rybus had a child on his lap. She sat upright, staring straight ahead. One small hand gathered a fur cape around her shoulders. The child's face was pale but her mouth was red with lipstick. Around her head was a wreath of wildflowers which hung down beside her face, as though someone had decorated her to amuse himself: strands of ivy and honeysuckle, daisies and poppies of deepest red. The girl's expressionless face was unnerving. She reminded Anton of a statue in Łazienki Park back in Warsaw: a stone nymph forever fleeing Neptune, who grasped a trident in his marble hand.

'Did you see that kid with Colonel Rybus?' he said to the soldier marching beside him, but the man only shook his head. Perhaps, after all, he'd only imagined her.

As the army travelled on, the one piece of news that everyone wanted but couldn't discover was their destination. After the excitement of liberation from the logging camp, the training and preparation, where were they going? This had been the complaint of soldiers in every war for a thousand years, he knew, but really . . . were they to be wandering endlessly around Soviet Central Asia like the tribes of Israel in the wilderness? When were they going to fight some Germans? When would they begin the battle to take back Poland and return home? According to one trooper, they were going to cross Siberia to Vladivostok and invade Japan, which had now joined the war on the side of Nazi Germany. No, said another, they were to cross the Hindu Kush mountains into Afghanistan then India, to fight alongside the British and Indian armies in Burma. You're all wrong, said someone else, the fittest are being sent to fight alongside the Red Army, while the rest are being expelled from Russia. Others muttered that the Russians were sending them all into the desert, to simply abandon them there.

Anton didn't argue when he heard these stories, neither believing nor disbelieving them. Instead, he watched the Russian dispatch riders who regularly roared by on motorbikes in leathers and goggles, carrying military

messages. All traffic had to make way for dispatch riders or risk being shot on the spot. He was amazed to recognise the bikes as American: 740 cc Harley-Davidsons. Of course, the Americans were allies of the Russians now. The USA must be sending equipment halfway around the world to support them. How the world was changing! And how he'd love to get his hands on one of those beautiful machines.

One morning Anton recognised a familiar figure marching ahead of him. Increasing his pace to catch up, he called out. 'David! David Nowak! How are you? And how is Ruth?'

It was the man who had looked after Sarah and helped him build her funeral pyre. David smiled to see Anton, but at the mention of Ruth's name, his face crumpled and he looked away.

Something's happened, thought Anton.

'It was typhus. She died at Buzuluk,' David said in a flat voice after a few moments.

'I'm so sorry,' Anton replied. 'Ruth was a good, kind woman.' It felt odd to speak of her in the past tense.

David was looking away again. It was too soon even to speak of her. Anton changed the subject.

'I've not seen anyone else from the logging camp since we left,' he said. 'Everyone was assigned to different regiments. Remember Major Rybus? He's a full colonel now. I caught a glimpse of him sweeping past in a staff car the other day.'

'Yes, I've seen Rybus now and then,' said David. 'He's caught up with some of his old crowd now, so no wonder he's been promoted. Baron this and Count that. It's strange how they come out of the woodwork when they think it's safe. When they think perhaps the Russians aren't going to shoot them after all.'

'I'm sure he still reports to his Communist bosses,' said Anton. 'That's a man who makes sure his bread has butter on both sides.'

'Did you hear about his little joke on the Jews at Buzuluk?'

Anton shook his head.

'At his regiment's stand-to, after the usual announcements, he called out, "All men of the Hebrew persuasion stand forwards!"

'A dozen or so stepped out from the line. "Congratulations!" Rybus said. "A special company of those of Israelite descent is being formed, to

foster ‘esprit de corps’, you’ll understand. Assemble immediately in the field beyond the kitchens and await further orders.”

‘It was a freezing day,’ said David. ‘You remember how the snow would come at you sideways in Buzuluk, the wind blowing from the Arctic was so strong? I was glad to be inside with a stove going in the office, doing my paperwork. Even so, I had on an extra sweater and fingerless gloves.

‘Colonel Rybus was there too, going through some personnel files, sipping on his coffee and humming a tune. Around four o’clock an orderly comes in.

‘“Excuse me, sir,” he says. “The Jews have started falling over.”

‘Rybus clicked his tongue. “Oops, I knew there was something I’d forgotten,” he said, and grinned.

‘We all went to the window and peered out. In the failing light we could just see the Jewish soldiers in the distance. They were like a row of marble statues, bodies and heads completely covered in snow. They must have been standing there for five hours at least. Two of them, I could see, had passed out in the cold and toppled over.

‘“Better tell them to fall out, I suppose,” Rybus drawled. “I’ve changed my mind about having all the Hebrews together, anyway. The odour might be . . .” and he waved a hand beneath his nose. Another officer in the room laughed.

‘“God willing, we’ll be back in Poland in a few years. If any Jews are left after the Germans have cleaned them out, we’ll take care of the rest then.”’

‘The man’s evil,’ said Anton, without going into his own dealings with Rybus.

‘If he is, then he has plenty of company,’ replied David. ‘The poor Yids get a lot of people’s backs up, there’s no denying it.’

As they marched on, Anton kept an eye out for what the dispatch riders on Harley-Davidsons were wearing, what kind of dirt was on their bikes. When the Polish army first set out, the riders going by had been wrapped up against the cold in blue padded jerkins, thick leather gloves and jackets. The motorbikes’ wheels had been caked in mud or dirty snow. More often now, he noticed, the riders wore shorts and had tanned skin. Some of the bikes had sand on their tyres. The road they travelled would take them far south, Anton guessed. The journey that started so long ago at the front door of the Winter Palace in Poland had taken him in a gigantic arc to the logging camp

near the Arctic Circle, down through Siberia to the Asiatic states of the Soviet Union, and now around again towards the Caspian Sea.

It grew warmer every day, until the men were marching in just their shorts and boots. The agonies of a sunburnt back soon taught them to wear their shirts again, however. The towns they entered had mosques and minarets now. Bukhara and Dashoguz. Ashgarbat, Taraz and Zanafshan. Some were built on hillsides, the houses and gardens like scattered suitcases spilling their exotic contents towards the valley floor. In Samarkand, they saw the Tomb of Tamerlane, the arches of its vast gateway inlaid with mosaics of gold and blue. In the ancient slave city of Khiva, the army set up camp for a week to rest and buy provisions. A constant procession of Uzbek and Tajik traders went past on the way to market, with caravans of camels loaded with cotton bales, luxurious rugs and bulging sacks trailing scents of cinnamon and cloves. The weary Polish soldiers bought food as the merchants passed by: dates, nuts, roasted peas with raisins, and juicy pomegranates. There were lines of shackled prisoners too, barefoot and wearing rags of clothing. Guards with long black beards and antique bolt-action rifles watched over them as they shuffled along towards the market. Some of the prisoners looked African, while a few were fair-headed – men and women you might see on the street in Warsaw or Paris. Where were they all from? Where were they going? Local women walking by were entirely covered in their robes, moving like columns of blue smoke. Anton felt as though he had wandered into the pages of *The Arabian Nights*, which he had read as a child, with its sinuous illustrations by Edmund Dulac.

The next day, Anton walked into the city in search of a machine part he needed (flanged bolt, 80 millimetre shank). When his skills as a mechanic had become known, he'd been increasingly called on to help with repairs to army vehicles. The bolt wasn't urgent, but he was curious to see the city and the enormous minaret at its centre, as high as a factory chimney but shining like a slim porcelain jar of blue and gold. After exploring the old town, Anton found the market square, where he surprised himself by finding the exact bolt he needed deep in a box of rusting pieces of machinery. Feeling pleased at the discovery, he set off for the army camp. The way back felt longer, somehow, and the sun was directly overhead now, insufferably hot. He looked for somewhere to escape the midday heat for a while, to have a cool drink in the shade. A cafe came into sight: an awning over the entrance to what seemed like a dark, cool cave. Anton ducked

inside, blinking as his eyes adjusted to the dimness. A brass lamp hung from the ceiling, illuminating a room with richly patterned rugs on the floor and a pair of low divans against the walls. Above one hung a portrait of Stalin gazing soulfully into the distance, painted in lurid colours like a Hollywood poster of Cary Grant. The cafe owner appeared and gestured for Anton to sit. He had a great beard and a pair of extravagant eyebrows that rivalled Stalin's moustache.

'Welcome! My name is Odil,' he said, then called out, 'Coffee! Water!' to someone in the kitchen behind an embroidered curtain. A girl with dark eyes and a blue shawl over her hair soon appeared with the drinks on a tray, muttering some sharp words. She managed the difficult task of scowling at Odil while smiling towards Anton at the same time, then turned on her heel, pushing aside the curtain into the kitchen with a dramatic flourish.

'My daughter,' the man said, his expression showing a mixture of embarrassment and pride.

Anton relished this brief respite. How nice it was to simply sit and do nothing for a while, as though time itself were taking a break. He watched the world go by outside while sipping the sharp coffee and cool water in turn, each creating a thirst for the other.

There were more people on the street now as the afternoon wore on. People leading donkeys laden with goods. A couple holding the hands of a small child between them. Odil called a greeting to a man going by, bent and straining to pull a cart stacked with a pyramid of furniture, bulging bags, pots and pans, books, rugs and a birdcage where a tiny blue bird sang, dangling from the end of a broom.

'Their landlord's kicked them out,' explained the cafe owner, 'so they have to move across town to stay with his mother. He'll have a long, hot journey with that cart on a day like this.'

That cart is like our memory, getting heavier and heavier with every day, thought Anton. The random clutter of his own life piled up high: school days, the pain of missing Elisabeth, the precious moments gone forever, and the moments he would rather forget, such as his comrades dead or dying around him in battle. A few hours later, Anton was back at the tented army base, lying under a truck and hammering out a split bolt with rather more force than was necessary.

Soon it was time to leave the camp at Khiva. In the morning they were woken by the muezzin's call to morning prayers, soon followed by the

trumpeter’s reveille call. As the army marched out through the city, they passed the city square, where a gigantic white statue of Stalin stood, his fist raised to the sky. The place might be part of the Soviet empire, but life went on here as it had for centuries, untouched by the war in Europe. Khiva stayed in Anton’s mind all day as he marched, like a lingering musky scent. He was sorry to leave. The place was so strange and entrancing, yet everyday, humdrum life in a European city must seem just as exotic to an Uzbek like his new friend, Odil the cafe owner, he supposed. The idea of ‘normal life’ was a very moveable feast.

When Anton saw David Nowak the following day, there was a big grin on the older man’s face. Something’s cheered him up, Anton thought.

‘Guess where we’re heading?’ said David.

‘Tell me, for God’s sake,’ said Anton. ‘I’m beginning to think we’ll be wandering for forty years in the desert.’

‘I’ve seen the paperwork for the order of the day. The general will be announcing it to the troops this evening.’

‘And . . .?’

‘We’re going to Jerusalem!’

23

Anton stood on the Persian shore. Naked and freshly washed by the waters of the Caspian Sea, he lifted his arms to feel the warmth of the sun on his body. So this was how freedom felt. He'd forgotten.

Around him were dozens of other Polish soldiers standing in relaxed poses, as though modelling nude for a sculptor. Some of the men stood alone, staring out to sea and lost in thought. Others were in groups, talking casually. Some huddled in more furious conversation, drawing deeply on cigarettes held in cupped hands to protect them from the breeze.

Far down the beach, the women were unclothed too. Children played around them, running in and out of the surf with squeals of excitement. Two little girls held hands and waited for each wave then hopped across it together. Time after time they jumped, never tiring of the game. They could be children anywhere, at any time, thought Anton: in Ancient Greece or China, Australia or the Baltic coast. On the beach behind them was a great bonfire of the Poles' ragged clothing, which sent billows of black smoke over the sea.

Anton had arrived with the Anders Army in Krasnovodsk on the Russian side of the Caspian Sea a few days before. After much officious checking of papers and stealing of belongings by Russian soldiers, they had been allowed to board some rusty freighters for the voyage to Persia before travelling on to Palestine to join the British army there. Stalin must have rubbed his hands together with satisfaction at having rid himself of General Anders and his army, which the Russian dictator had never quite trusted. The Caspian voyage lasted two days and nights. When the freighter docked at the port of Pahlevi, the Poles were met by British soldiers and nurses. They were taken to a nearby beach and told to undress and hand over their lice-infested clothes for burning.

'Everyone must shower for disinfection,' a Polish-speaking British officer called out, 'then report to the quartermaster's tent to be issued with new uniforms.'

Anton was in no hurry to dress again. He enjoyed the feel of sand beneath his feet and warm air caressing his skin. The great pyramid of foul clothing was still burning further down the beach. Ash drifted down like black snow from the pillar of black smoke. Only at this moment did Anton realise he'd left Elisabeth's photograph in his jacket. It must be burning now with the rest of his clothing. The years of handling since he'd left home had worn away the image. Her face could barely be seen any more, yet the little square of acetate was still precious to him: a totem of all he had left behind, and to which he was drawing closer again. How could he have forgotten the photograph? Anton bit his lip and walked towards the tent to collect a new uniform.

The Russians and the British had done their paperwork: new identity documents were waiting for him in the name of Sergeant Komarowski. Bureaucrats are the same tribe everywhere, he thought. Anton almost announced his real name to the British officer in the quartermaster's tent, where identity papers were spread out in alphabetical order on a trestle table before him. One look at the man's face told him it would be a bad idea, however. The officer looked hot and flustered. He was not in need of some Pole explaining in broken English that he was actually Captain Anton Lewicki-Radziwiłł – for whom there was no record whatsoever from the Russian authorities, by the way. That wasn't how things worked in any army. Without paperwork, you didn't exist. What did it matter, anyway? The name Jan 'Mechanic' Komarowski fitted him like an old coat now and would get him through the war.

It took four days to get to Palestine, travelling in a caravan of lumbering, antiquated buses along the Persian Corridor, an unpaved single-lane road which snaked through Persia and Iraq. Palestine was run by the British as a 'mandate' approved by the League of Nations. In other words, it was part of the British Empire. Anton's unit finally arrived late at night at their barracks west of Jerusalem. It was an old cavalry depot, with stables around a cobbled courtyard. A gallery ran above this on all four sides, leading to offices and accommodation. There were no longer any horses here. The courtyard was full of cars and trucks, while the stables were used for storing supplies and equipment. There was still a faint smell of straw and horse dung as they walked through to the bunk rooms, and Anton remembered his old barracks in Poznań with a sad smile.

He shared a room with the nine men in his patrol. They slept on narrow camp beds. Beside each was a wooden chest to keep valuables and belongings. There were no valuables or bunches of letters tied with ribbon in Anton's chest, only a large sheet of paper with a pencilled drawing on it, carefully rolled into a tube. It still troubled him that he'd lost the photograph of Elisabeth. It troubled him even more that he had difficulty remembering quite what she looked like. Lying in bed that night, he imagined that she was there beside him in the dark. He whispered to her in his mind.

I've drawn a plan of the Winter Palace, he told her. It's as accurate as I can make it. I've marked improvements in red pencil, so we can use it to renovate when the war is over. Oh, my dear, I miss you so much. Everyone here is in the same boat. They haven't seen their families for years either. I never complain. And so many have died. No, not 'died'. They were killed. Not everyone is as lucky as us, I remind myself. I'm alive, and I have to believe you're safe at the Winter Palace or with your aunt on Sielecka Street.

For the thousandth time, Anton recalled Katerina Zalewski's Warsaw apartment, as though he was seeing through Elisabeth's eyes at this very moment. He tried to imagine her there as hard as he could, going up in the ornate wrought-iron lift, then looking down from the balcony onto the quiet street lined with poplar trees, where a lone blackbird sang from a chimney top every evening. There was an afghan rug on the parquet floor. A marble fireplace and, above it, a mirror in a gilt frame. On the opposite wall hung a watercolour of Cairo, painted by Katerina's great-aunt in the 1880s. At night, you could hear the last tram squealing around a corner nearby and would know it was just after midnight. This sound was especially poignant, as he imagined Elisabeth hearing it every night as she lay safe in her bed.

•

The months that followed were a tumult of activity. What Anton noticed most was the food. The British ate so well! The Polish soldiers grew stronger as they drilled and went on exercises. There were cleaners too – imagine that! A dozen young servants, some little more than children, moved silently through the barracks every day with brooms and dustpans, keeping the place 'Bristol fashion', as the English said. The equipment

impressed him too, after the hand-me-down weapons the Russians had reluctantly issued to the Anders Army. Anton hadn't seen such well-maintained guns and tanks since 1939.

Army manoeuvres took place in the hills outside Jerusalem. There were often joint exercises with British and Australian troops. He made a point of talking with them, to improve his schoolboy English and to pick up any scraps of news about the war in Europe. English seemed lacking in sufficient consonants, he felt, the words little more than soft breaths of air, only accented in different ways. The sentences faded away when English people spoke, so he had to concentrate to hear how each one ended.

Anton became friendly with Roger Affleck, a lieutenant from Perth in the Australian Sixth Division. Both men wanted to transfer to tank regiments but neither had had any luck so far. He learnt from Roger about how Poland was suffering, how badly Warsaw had been bombed. But surely Elisabeth was safe, he told himself, on quiet Sielecka Street.

One day on exercises, as they were leaning against a stone wall to eat lunch, Anton and Roger saw a dozen soldiers strip to the waist before lining up to have numbers written on their chests in charcoal. Those men leant down so that others could climb on their backs, then a shirt was waved like a flag and they set off, racing towards a line a hundred metres away. Dozens more soldiers whooped and cheered them on, waving their slouch hats in the air. At the end, they lifted the winner onto their shoulders and paraded him around.

'What was that all about?' asked Anton.

'It's the Melbourne Cup!' said Roger. 'This is the twenty-first of November. Surely you've heard of the Cup in Poland? It's a famous horse race in Australia, held around this time every year. The men were running it with the same "horses". I bet on number seven, so that's two shillings I'll never see again.'

Anton had known Roger for more than a month before the Australian casually mentioned that he had a wife. They lived in married quarters at the Australian army camp, he said. They should catch up for a drink sometime so that Anton could meet Aviva.

'She's Jewish?'

'Well, yes,' answered Roger. 'Is that a problem?'

'No, no, of course not. Why should it be? I'd like to meet her.'

Anton knew some soldiers went with local women, both Arab and Jewish, but this was the first time he'd heard of one getting married. He hoped Roger knew what he was doing.

Sometimes the Poles went on manoeuvres near Haifa, on the coast. Anton's boots sank into the sand as he led his troop up a dune, carrying rifles and kit on their backs, with dummy explosions going off all around them.

'Lift your knees up as you run!' he shouted over his shoulder. 'Keep your rifle clear! Lean to the front! Push yourselves! Go, go!'

He led from the front, willing himself forwards, drawing the clean Mediterranean air deep into his lungs as he ran up the dune. Exhausted but satisfied, he led them back to camp for dinner at the mess before heading to their tents to sleep. More than a hundred of these were laid out in neat, numbered rows. In the moonlight they glowed like lines of bell-shaped lanterns.

Lying in his camp bed, Anton was woken by a voice singing in the darkness. One of the English soldiers was drunk or simply overcome by yearning for home. The clear voice was as pure as a choirboy's in a cathedral.

'Oranges and lemons, say the bells of St Clement's.
You owe me five farthings, say the bells of St Martin's.
When will you pay me? say the bells of Old Bailey.
When I grow rich, say the bells of Shoreditch.
When will that be? say the bells of Stepney.
I do not know, says the great bell of Bow.
Here comes a candle to light you to bed.
Here comes a chopper to chop off your head.
Chip chop chip chop – the last man is dead.'

There was laughter in the darkness then silence again. How beautiful and strange, thought Anton. It felt like walking into someone's room and being confronted with something intimate he wasn't supposed to see. But before he could muse any more on the curious song, Anton fell fast asleep.

24

When I began work as a nurse at the Poznań hospital, my duties were simple at first. I started at the bottom. Changing bedclothes. Emptying bedpans. Collecting blood-soiled dressings from the surgical wards and taking them to the incinerator in the basement. The first time I did this I vomited at the stench of decay. After a month, I found I was barely aware of the smell. As well as the byzantine layout of the hospital, I gradually got to know the staff too. Dr Laski was one of the senior surgeons. He was the smiling man who had held the door open when I first arrived. Standing in a lift one day, I felt a hand lightly caressing my backside. The touch of a man's hand for the first time since Colonel Wendt made me tremble inside with fear. I could hardly breathe, but said nothing, not wanting to make trouble or draw attention to myself. I forced myself to turn and look at the man next to me. It was Dr Laski, smiling back as though he was doing me a kindness for which I should be flattered. I nodded and smiled faintly, then felt sick with shame for the rest of the day.

I chatted with the other nurses in the little spare time we had. From them, I learnt the lore and rumours of the hospital. The matron had favourites, I was warned. Be careful who you cross. The chief surgeon had lost his wife and two sons when the Germans shelled the town back in 1939. He had a limp from polio in his childhood, meaning he threw his left leg forwards as he walked, as though kicking an invisible football. Somebody was stealing drugs from the hospital and selling them on the black market. Nurse Kaseja was the mistress of a Gestapo officer; don't say anything about the Germans in front of her. Watch out for Dr Laski, he's like an octopus. His nickname was 'Dr Hand'. This gossiping was eventually tiresome and even a little disgusting. I smiled but didn't join in the conversations.

After a while I was assigned to other, more responsible duties – randomly, it felt, but no doubt according to some great plan recorded in the matron's office. Once a day I collected medications from the hospital

pharmacy for delivery to the wards. There they were kept in a locked store behind the sister's station. It was in the pharmacy that I learnt the hospital was not so immune to the German occupation as I imagined – or, rather, as I yearned for it to be. Mr Lubansky, the white-coated pharmacist, liked to talk, and to talk to me especially, it seemed. I couldn't understand why, for I'd decided I looked like an anaemic nun in my nurse's uniform and white cap. There were dark rings under my eyes and my back ached every morning when I woke. Still, the pharmacy was a quiet place in the basement to rest for five minutes as I pushed my trolley in to collect the morning's medications. It was one of the few locations well away from the eyes of the ward sisters and Matron, and the door was kept locked to secure the store of medications. They would fetch a high price on the black market if stolen. Mr Lubansky had made himself a comfortable private nest here. I could smell coffee, and music played softly from the horn of a gramophone which sat on a bench. I recognised a familiar song. It sounded magical.

'I miss hearing music so much,' I said. 'Is that by Schubert?'

The pharmacist nodded with a little smile, pleased that I had recognised the composer. When the Germans occupied the country, they ordered that every radio in the country be handed in at the nearest police station. This meant we couldn't hear broadcasts from the Polish government-in-exile, but neither could we hear music at home, except for the few who had gramophones. Every evening, Polish families sat around in silence or making desultory conversation, glancing now and then at the corner where the radio had been.

'There are still concerts at the town hall,' said Mr Lubansky, taking the pipe from his mouth, 'but only German music is played, and only Germans can attend.' Such was our life now.

'I hope you're never tempted to listen to an illegal radio,' he continued. 'If anyone suggests it, say no and never speak to them again. It's dangerous. A neighbour of mine was caught listening to the BBC. The Germans shot her and her two children on the spot.

'Now, take the weight off your feet for a while, Nurse Witkowska,' Mr Lubansky said. 'Sit yourself down. Would you like a cup of coffee? I'm just going to heat some up.'

After making a pot of chicory coffee (for the real thing was almost unobtainable these days), the pharmacist sat opposite and found he'd nothing to say for the moment. Mr Lubansky was one of those people who

managed to be shy at the same time as being quite insistent. He took a sip from his cup, smiled and looked at the floor. Every so often, I caught a whiff of his stale breath and leant backwards a little. It must be this wretched so-called coffee that he drinks all day. What a bore the man was, but at least he wasn't a bottom-pincher. In the end, I took pity on the pharmacist, asking what he did in his free time.

'I don't play the piano myself – no talent – but I love to listen,' he said. 'It was always a treat to take the train up to Warsaw with my mother for a concert at the Grand Theatre. Not any more, naturally. So now I must make do with listening to my records. I have more than fifty, it's quite a collection. Perhaps, one evening, you'd . . .'

The sentence petered out and Mr Lubansky fell silent again, distracted by a coffee stain on his trouser knee, which he rubbed at ineffectually. He couldn't quite bring himself to ask if I would like to visit him one evening. It was unimaginable to him that I would say yes, and so it was better for him not to ask and embarrass us both. I said nothing either, not mentioning that I played the piano sometimes. Sitting in this man's dull apartment, listening to records and dreading some clumsy approach, was out of the question. I also hadn't left the hospital grounds since arriving nearly a year earlier. It was my hiding place now. To go out into the town would risk exposure as a fugitive and capture by the Germans. I didn't want to think about what would happen then.

'Not that I get much chance to listen to my collection now,' the pharmacist went on. His head was turned to one side, as though he were speaking to a nearby cupboard rather than to me. 'I work late most nights, as we're so short-staffed since they took Esther and Michael away.'

'They were . . .?'

'Jews, yes.' Mr Lubansky nodded, his voice dropping a little even though we were alone. 'Both were pharmacists here. They didn't turn up for work one morning after the Germans arrived. "Relocated to the east", I was told when I went to the Gestapo office to inquire. It wasn't far to the east as it turned out. We heard later that all the Jewish people in Poznań were taken by the busload to the edge of town, stripped and shot, then thrown into an old quarry. It wasn't only the Jews, either. Socialists, trade unionists, Gypsies, homosexuals . . . Anyone they thought might cause trouble, or they simply didn't like the look of.'

I tried to imagine the shy pharmacist turning up at the Gestapo headquarters in the city and politely requesting to know where his colleagues were.

‘Anyway,’ I said, ‘at least the Germans don’t seem to bother us here in the hospital.’

‘You might think so,’ said Mr Lubansky. He paused and took a sip of coffee. ‘You might well think so. But the German army take their pick of the drugs for the military hospital. Some get stolen for the black market as well. It’s wicked. We have to make do with what’s left. Rationing what we have is a nightmare, I can tell you. How do you choose who is to get medication and who isn’t? Between you and me, we sometimes have to give a patient sugar tablets, so at least they think they’re getting help.

‘And there’s something else,’ said the pharmacist. ‘I shouldn’t tell you this . . .’

In which case don’t tell me, I thought. Already I’d learnt that simply knowing things could be dangerous.

‘Have you noticed there’s no psychiatric ward here?’

‘You’re right. It hadn’t occurred to me.’

‘We used to have a ward here for psychiatric assessment. If someone was seriously ill, they were sent to the Owinska Asylum in the countryside.’

‘I’ve heard of it,’ I said. ‘As children we used to tease each other about being sent there.’

‘No one goes there any more,’ said Mr Lubansky. He was looking directly at me now. ‘The Germans murdered every last patient there, more than one thousand of them. Then they shot the psychiatrists and nurses. Buried them in the woods. The place is empty. We were told to shut the psychiatric ward because “that problem has been eliminated”.’

The pharmacist’s words went round and round in my head for days. It made my hands tremble to think of them. I’d suffered in my own way from the Nazi occupation, and it might not be over for me either. Yet the cruelty being dealt to others affected me more, and there were so many who had suffered. I daydreamed often of killing Germans with my bare hands, stabbing them, blowing them up until not one was left alive.

As time went by, though, my thoughts were drawn back into the routines of the hospital. Each day the sick arrived from all over Poznań, were healed and mended, for the most part, then discharged home again, limbs bandaged, sight restored, the lame made able to walk. I began to

understand what the matron had said about the hospital being an almost holy place, dedicated to life as opposed to the machinery of death, which was doing its work through Europe and now in Russia too. That summer, there had been another march of the machines. Tanks, artillery and armoured trains had rattled past all day and through the night as the German army streamed eastwards to launch a surprise invasion of Russia. We learnt later it was called Operation Barbarossa. So many bombers had filled the sky that they were impossible to count. It was like the migration of some gigantic, winged fairytale monsters. Surely the Germans were invincible? Yet at night I still heard explosions or the crackle of gunfire as partisans from the Polish resistance mounted an attack before melting away into the darkness again.

Throughout it all, the hospital continued its daily routines. I'd never given much thought to the hospital until this year, yet here it had been all along. Despite the war, babies still needed to be born. Despite the war, children still fell from bicycles and cracked their heads. Women called up the courage to have a lump on their breast investigated. Appendixes and tumours needed surgery. Arms and legs were broken and needed putting in plaster. Despite everything, life goes on, I thought as I lay on my bed in the dark. That is our work. And I will ride on this tide of precious ordinary life, like a leaf on a stream, until it delivers me to Anton again.

•

Sleep comes easily after a twelve-hour shift working on your feet. Each morning, I woke yearning for another hour's sleep. Another quarter-hour. Another few minutes. Only after a shower did I feel properly awake and ready to face the day (always careful to lock the cubicle door, so no one would see the tattoo on my arm). My first task this morning was to deliver the day's medications to Surgical Ward Three, then go from patient to patient with the ward nurse, learning how to take their vital signs in the familiar ritual of temperature, pulse and blood pressure. The patients were usually awake and chatting, eager to hear encouraging words. 'You're looking better today . . . we'll have you out of here in no time!' I was learning how important it was for them to believe they were getting better; that imagining something can help make it a reality.

One exception was the man in the bed nearest the door of Ward Three. Curtains were drawn around the bed all day. He did not talk to anyone and received particular attention from one of the specialists. The notes on the clipboard that hung at the end of his bed read *Kidney stones removed*. I'd heard whispers that these stones were made of metal and shaped like bullets. Was he a partisan? Hiding the man away like this seemed a good way of drawing attention to him, I thought. The ward nurse was holding a patient's wrist to measure his pulse when shouting from somewhere in the hospital distracted us.

'Bother,' she said with a frown. 'Now I'll have to start again.'

But the shouting didn't stop, becoming louder still. There was a clattering of boots on the stone staircase outside, and then the doors of the ward burst open. Half-a-dozen German soldiers with rifles entered, followed by an officer. For a moment, everyone was still, nurses, patients and soldiers each sizing up the new situation. I noticed the 'death's head' emblem on the officer's cap. A fly buzzed against a window then settled again. One of the curtains around the wounded man's bed was pushed aside, and then everything began to move again. One of the younger doctors stepped out from behind the curtains.

'This is a hospital. You've no right . . .'

Before the doctor could go on, one of the soldiers smashed the butt of his rifle into the side of the doctor's head, knocking him to the ground.

'We have every right,' said the German officer. 'You've no idea how many rights we have. We have every right you can possibly think of, Dr Kapinski.'

So they know his name, I thought. It felt strangely sacrilegious to attack a doctor. Someone at the hospital must have been talking to the Germans. Dr Kapinski lay on the floor, curled in a ball, gripping his head and groaning quietly. One side of his face was pulpy and bleeding.

'Take him away for questioning,' said the officer, kicking at the doctor's leg. As Dr Kapinski was being roughly lifted and led away by a pair of soldiers, the officer pushed over the screens around the bed, sending them clattering to the ground. The man in the bed – a wounded resistance fighter – lifted his bandaged arm weakly, but the officer ignored the gesture. He nodded to his men and stood back as two soldiers lifted their rifles and brought the butts crashing down on the man's legs. There was a crunching sound of bone splintering that made me feel sick. Someone screamed, but

from the partisan himself there was no sound. He wouldn't give any German the satisfaction. The beating went on until the bedsheet was mottled with patches of fresh crimson blood. All the while, other soldiers held everyone else in the ward at bay with their rifles. One of the other nurses had begun to weep quietly.

'That's done the job, I'd say.' The officer spoke calmly as he looked around at us. 'I think everyone here has got the message about helping wounded terrorists. Let's take this one away.'

A pair of soldiers grabbed the partisan's feet and pulled him from the bed. An intravenous drip in the man's arm popped out as his body slammed to the floor. Dragged by the feet out of the ward and across the landing, he was pulled roughly down the wide stone staircase. I ran forwards with the others to the balustrade, watching in horror as the man's head smashed onto one stone step after another as he was taken down the stairs.

'Please, God, let him be dead already,' I whispered.

Through the wide-open doors of the hospital, I saw the soldiers grip the partisan's body by the ankles and arms then toss him into the back of an army truck outside. The powerful engine fired up, its loud rumble making the whole vehicle shake, before it drove away to leave a strange, uneasy silence. Still nobody moved, stunned and terrified by this public display of brutality. How powerful the Germans were, with their guns and tanks and warplanes, but most of all with their shameless willingness to be violent. How foolish it was to resist them. How impossible to do anything else.

At last I turned and saw the matron standing, white-faced, behind me. She was staring down at the wide hospital staircase, the steps covered in blood.

'That's enough,' she said loudly. 'It's over. I need a couple of you to clean the floors immediately. Everyone else, back to your duties. This is still a hospital, remember? We have work to do.'

I stepped forwards to help clean the blood from the floor and steps. It felt like a gesture of respect for the resistance fighter who had died before our eyes. At this moment, it was fair to say I'd forgotten that my real name was Mrs Elisabeth Lewicki-Radziwiłł.

25

Anton's leadership abilities were soon noticed in the new Polish army. The army was still short of officers. Within a few months, he was promoted from sergeant to lieutenant. Another problem for General Anders, the army's commander, was that many of the Jewish soldiers deserted after arriving in Palestine. Of the several thousand Jews in his army, eight out of ten had disappeared, leaving their bunks empty. Anton disapproved, as a professional soldier, but he also understood their reasons. Being taken to Siberia as slaves had actually saved the Jewish soldiers' lives, for staying in Poland would have meant being murdered by the Nazis. After the long exile in Russia and wandering through Soviet Asia, they had ended up, through the caprice of war, in the Holy Land itself. It was no wonder many decided enough was enough and deserted to settle there. There were rumours that many planned to put their army training to use by fighting to create a Jewish state.

Being a lieutenant meant a platoon of thirty men was now under Anton's command. Back in Poland, he'd been commissioned directly as an officer. This time, he felt he'd earned his rank the hard way. Still, the promotion felt like slipping on a pair of favourite leather gloves. Walking down a corridor in the officers' section of the barracks in Palestine, Anton felt pleasantly self-conscious in his smart new uniform. It was a cold day. In Poland he would have called it fresh spring weather. The temperature hovered around freezing, and snow had fallen overnight in Jerusalem for the first time in more than twenty years. Outside the barracks, off-duty soldiers were having a friendly snowball fight with some local boys and any passers-by who wanted to join in. It was Poland versus the world.

'Mechanic!' called a voice from an open doorway.

Anton stuck his head around the door. It was Colonel Rybus's office. In front of his desk was a comfortable old armchair pulled up to a fireplace, where Rybus sat. He'd grown a neat moustache above his lip. It reminded Anton of a British film actor, David Niven. Rybus was cultivating an

English manner too, with a silk dressing-gown over his uniform and a slice of bread on a brass toasting fork held towards the fire.

‘Congratulations on your promotion, Lieutenant Komarowski,’ he said. ‘Damned cold out there. Raisin toast?’

‘Thank you, sir. No thank you, sir,’ he said, saluted, and carried on his way.

Anton shook his head. It was hard to believe this was the same man who had helped the Soviets rule the logging camp so brutally, and forced him to fight his friend, Danny. The same man who had told the Jewish soldiers to stand in the freezing cold all day as a joke to amuse his friends. Rybus was even more ruthless than he realised. For a man such as him, other people were simply unwitting servants to be used for his will or pleasure. What an exhilarating power that must give him. There was something terrifying about it. The man was a born survivor, adapting effortlessly to his surroundings, whatever they were, in order to flourish. In Siberia at the logging camp, he’d become a more dedicated Communist than the most patriotic Russian. Now, in British-run Palestine, he’d slid easily into behaving like a stage Englishman.

I suppose we’re both survivors in our own ways, Anton thought ruefully. Yet there was something hateful about Rybus, something almost frightening. He was like a shape-shifting demon from the folktales his nanny had told him in the nursery. Damn the man. I’ll think no more about him.

Military training in Palestine and Egypt intensified as the new year went by. The British and Australian troops were already battle-hardened. They had defended Tobruk. They had pushed General Rommel and the German Eighth Army back across the North African desert and into the sea. The Poles were eager to prove themselves as warriors too. Anton got to know Palestine a little better, picking up enough Hebrew and Arabic to make himself understood, along with improving his English.

‘I explored the old city of Jerusalem today,’ he told Elisabeth in his nightly conversation with her invisible presence in the darkness. ‘I walked down an alleyway that had been there since Roman times, where Jesus might have walked. I came upon a bar: English soldiers drinking beer at tables outside while a radio played American big-band music. Just when we think life can’t get any stranger, something else happens. What strange things are you seeing, dear? I hope nothing more than the leaves turning

gold on the poplar trees outside your quiet window in Warsaw. What more can happen before we see each other again?'

One warm September evening Anton met up with his friend Roger Affleck, the Australian officer, and his wife for a drink. They met at Casino de Paris, the most fashionable hotel in Jerusalem. A bar on the flat roof of the hotel caught the evening breeze even on a hot summer's day. Anton arrived early, but the place was already filling up. He was lucky to get a table. There were cheerful advertisements behind the bar for Pernod (a cancan dancer gaily lifting her leg) and Dewar's whisky (a soldier in a kilt playing bagpipes). One of the barmen had a French accent. Another shaking a cocktail mixer was an African. Anton caught a few voices speaking in Polish as well as English. There was even a group of soldiers from the Indian army, wearing smart uniforms and turbans. The Sikhs were disciplined and formidable soldiers, he had heard.

It could have been a bar anywhere in the world on a Friday evening, thought Anton. Cairo. London. San Francisco. Everywhere, terrible battles were being fought. Bombs were tumbling down on cities from Coventry to Darwin. In fields of snow and beneath shady palm trees, murder was being done on a vast, horrific scale. Anton looked around the bar, at the groups of laughing officers and young couples holding hands across a table, staring into each other's eyes. Every person here, he thought, must be worried like me about someone they love far, far away. And yet, and yet . . . in this place, at this particular time, surely we can allow ourselves to relax and be almost happy for an hour or two? Surely God would forgive us that – if there is a God, he added to himself. In a few weeks, everyone here might be in battle themselves, with explosions and bullets flying all around them.

Roger Affleck soon arrived with a woman in a smart army uniform. She wore her hair in the fashionable style, with a long wave hanging down on one side of her face. Anton was reminded of Rita Hayworth, the American film star. So this was Roger's Jewish wife, Aviva. She spoke English with an accent that Anton could now recognise as distinctively Scottish. Anton gave his best smile as he stood to shake hands. Aviva worked in signals for the British army, she explained. She was born in Glasgow, but her parents had brought her to Palestine when she was a child. Roger looked proud to introduce Aviva to Anton, and equally pleased to introduce a new Polish friend to his wife. The walls are all coming down, Anton thought as they drank and chatted. Country. Class. Men and women. None of the old

distinctions seem to matter as much any more. There was a corner of Anton's heart that was sorry about this: the loss of the old familiar certainties he had inherited from his father along with his estate. There was a growing part of him, though, which was exhilarated by the prospect.

If you hated fascism and wanted a better life, then we were all part of one tribe now. Things will surely be different after the war, Anton recognised. He felt comfortable with the prospect of this new world they were fighting for, but what about Elisabeth? He imagined Roger and Aviva visiting the Winter Palace one day after the war. What would she make of this Australian friend and his new wife from Palestine, who spoke English with a Scottish accent? And what would they make of Elisabeth? As the sun went down, lines of light bulbs, strung across the rooftop bar, flickered then lit up: blue, white, orange . . . like a strange new constellation in the sky, conjured by a circus ringmaster.

Anton was sorry when the time came to leave. The evening had been an island of happy chatter and calm in his military life. It was a novelty to spend an evening in the company of a pleasant, interesting woman. Talking to Aviva inevitably made him think of Elisabeth. It helped him to recall her more vividly. Time and the war had blurred his memory of how she looked, as when a painter leaves a watercolour out in the rain.

By the time Anton set off to walk back to the Polish barracks, he was full of longing for Elisabeth. Bounding up the stairs towards his quarters, he was ready for bed. All was dark and quiet on the corridor except for a sliver of light from beneath one of the office doors. Somebody was working late. As Anton approached, he heard a sound from inside the room. It was strange enough to make him freeze and listen more carefully. It was a rhythmic, high-pitched whimper. The sound reminded Anton of when he had rescued a cat in the woods at home, its foreleg gripped by the steel jaws of a trap. He pushed open the door.

Colonel Rybus was holding a young boy up against the fireplace, gripping him by the shoulders. Heat from the blazing logs scorched the back of the boy's legs so that he writhed in pain as he whimpered, but could not escape the man's grip. He looked no more than twelve years old. A table lamp threw their shadows high upon the wall behind.

As Anton stepped into the room, Rybus turned his head towards the door, a snarl on his face. When he saw who it was, his face relaxed.

‘Come on in, Mechanic. I won’t be long. I’ve just caught this thieving Arab poking about in my desk, so he’s getting a lesson he won’t forget.’

‘Cleaning, sir, cleaning . . .’ moaned the boy, feebly twisting his legs to avoid the burning pain.

‘That’s enough, Rybus,’ said Anton. ‘Let the boy go.’ He spoke calmly, but it was not how a soldier should speak to a superior officer.

‘Well, well, Lieutenant Komarowski. I think you’re forgetting your manners,’ Rybus replied, yet he let go of the boy, who dropped to the floor, legs trembling uncontrollably. He started to rub one of his calves but pulled his hand away from the scorched flesh with a yelp.

‘Get out of my sight, and don’t let me see you in here again!’ said Rybus to the boy, who stumbled out of the room, half walking, half on his hands and knees.

‘Quite the saint, aren’t you, Mechanic? Always ready to help the meek and the mild. Just like your little girl at the logging camp. What was her name again?’

The reminder of Sarah and how she had died was too much for Anton. Without a thought, he hit Rybus in the face. It was less a punch, more of a hard slap.

‘Oh, touched a nerve, have I?’ said Rybus, smiling despite the blow. ‘That’s not a nice thing to do in the Holy Land.’ His voice was sarcastic, provoking.

I won’t even talk to him, thought Anton. It had felt surprisingly good to hit Rybus. He did it again, smacking the man’s head harder so that he stumbled back onto his desk.

‘Cat got your tongue?’ said Rybus, moved to anger at last. ‘Who do you think you are, anyway? Charging into a senior officer’s room while he’s disciplining a servant? Hitting a colonel is a serious offence, you know.’

Without warning he lashed out at Anton, punching his face and cutting his lip. Encouraged, he kicked at Anton’s shin, then landed another blow on his chest. Anton staggered back, winded for a moment.

Rybus put his hands on his hips. This was the end of the matter, his stance said. Anton had been put in his place.

‘Why don’t you run along now?’ he said. ‘We’ll say no more about it.’

‘Fuck you, Rybus,’ spat out Anton.

All that had happened to Anton in the war now boiled over inside him. The attack on Poland and his exile from Elisabeth and the Winter Palace.

Stalin’s cynical deal to carve up the country with the Nazis. The Russians’ invasion, abducting so many decent, innocent people to work as slaves. The terrible Siberian winters and the death of little Sarah. All of this was somehow the fault of Rybus, and people like him. At this moment, the neat figure in front of him with the film-star looks was the very devil.

Anton swung his fist at Rybus but missed entirely. The colonel laughed.

‘Really, now, why get so upset about a little Arab kid? They’re not like us, you know. They don’t feel things the same way we do. It’s a scientific fact. They’re more like Jews than people like us.’

Anton punched again, not misjudging the distance this time. Landing his fist on Rybus’s nose, he was satisfied to hear a yelp and see blood on the man’s face, dripping onto his white shirt. Rybus looked down. The offence to his shirt seemed to infuriate him more than the punch.

‘You damned fool! You won’t get away with this, you know,’ he said. ‘Do you think some Arab kid really matters in the scheme of things? There are plenty more where he came from. Admit it, they’re just household appliances for us to use, aren’t they? Be honest.’

Rybus leant against the desk with a sigh. He wiped the blood from his chin, then looked at Anton in the manner of a disappointed teacher. His expression was oddly calm now. How infuriatingly sure the man was of himself.

‘We’re all machines in one way or another, aren’t we, Mechanic? You should know that. Machines for eating and drinking, for shitting and fucking. Machines for feeling sorry for ourselves or for other people. It’s all the same.

‘Sentimental robots, that’s all we are,’ Rybus went on with a note of sadness in his voice. ‘You might as well accept the fact. I’ve found it makes life a lot easier to bear if . . .’

Rybus’s words were cut short as a series of punches from Anton landed home, splitting his lip and rousing him into action again. Taking off his tie, Rybus squared up, fists ready, then jabbed, landing blow after blow to Anton’s face and chest.

Back and forth across the room they fought, knocking over chairs, grunting now and then, but speaking no more. Anton began to worry at Rybus’s ability to punch back at him repeatedly, no matter how hard he was hit. It was as though some dark energy was powering him, grinning through his bloodstained face.

The night wouldn’t end well, whoever won the fight, thought Anton. All that mattered for now was to beat the man down until he did not get up. Then he could go to bed and sleep, and whatever the consequence tomorrow, so be it. As Rybus came back at him yet again, Anton did something different. Instead of parrying punches, Anton ignored them, letting the fists pummel him. Then he gripped the other man by the front of his shirt and pushed with all his strength. Lifting Rybus off the ground, he slammed him as hard as he could against the wall.

A look of surprise spread across Rybus’s face, and blood began to trickle from the corner of his mouth. Anton leapt back, fists ready, preparing to land a punch while his opponent was winded. He hesitated as Rybus made no move to defend himself. In fact, he made no move at all. At this moment, Anton became aware of heavy steps approaching and raised voices somewhere in the building.

Anton stepped forwards and slapped Rybus on the shoulder. Rybus swayed slightly, a surprised expression still on his face. ‘What’s this?’ Anton muttered, still breathing heavily. Looking closer at the colonel, he saw with horror what had happened. Rybus was pinned to the wall. The sound of boots clattered on wooden stairs nearby. Without intending to, Anton had slammed Rybus into the wall exactly where a metal coat hook protruded. He’d pushed him with such force that the hook hammered into the back of Rybus’s neck right where his spine met the skull, killing him instantly. As if to confirm this realisation, the body of Colonel Rybus slid off the hook and slumped to the floor.

As Anton stared in disbelief, the heavy footsteps arrived at the door. It flew open to reveal a sergeant of military police, with his revolver drawn, and, behind him, two soldiers pointing their rifles at Anton. One of them flicked on the main light, turning the room into a bright, shadowless crime scene.

‘Hands up! Stand still!’ yelled the sergeant.

Anton stood with his arms above his head, imagining the scene through their eyes. A colonel of the regiment was lying dead and battered on the floor, while over him stood a junior officer, dishevelled and his face streaming with blood. He saw something else too. One of the soldiers was Danny Waislitz, his old friend whom he’d beaten to the ground in a fight at the logging camp. They had never spoken to each other after that day. Since

the Anders Army was formed, he'd never even seen him. That's sunk it, thought Anton, looking at Danny's impassive face as he pointed the rifle.

He tried to regain his breath so he could speak.

'There was an Arab boy, one of the cleaners,' he began. 'The colonel was hurting him. I came in and . . .'

'A boy, eh?' said the sergeant, looking around the room with a mocking expression. 'Maybe he's hiding up the chimney, what do you say? Save it for the court martial, soldier. You can explain everything then, before you face the firing squad.

'What a bloody mess,' he went on, bending to look at Rybus. 'Maybe there wasn't a boy after all. Maybe the colonel took your girlfriend and you decided to teach him a lesson, eh? Well, the court will teach you a lesson too.

'Private Kaminski, stay here with the body while I call for an investigation party, and don't touch anything. Waislitz, take this man down to the barracks lock-up. We'll transfer him to military police headquarters for questioning first thing in the morning.'

'Yes, sir,' barked Danny as he saluted. 'This way, prisoner, and keep your hands up.'

26

Like everyone else in Poland, I felt hungry most of the time now, a constant gnawing in my stomach that was hard to ignore. You just had to put up with it. The German authorities cut our rations and then cut them again. I lost weight. The rings around my eyes were darker when I looked in the mirror each morning. The hospital was busier than ever as hungry people became weaker and more vulnerable to infections and disease.

There was more German spoken on the streets of Poznań these days. Tens of thousands of Poles had been sent to work as forced labour in factories in Germany, a yellow *P* sewn onto their jackets to identify them. The Nazis then encouraged their people to resettle and live and work in what they called ‘Greater Germany’. (Free housing! Cheap businesses available!) These ‘incentives’ had been seized from murdered or deported Poles. Poznań was renamed Posen. Even the street signs were changed, so that Mickiewicz Street became Albertinerstrasse, and so on. It created chaos for anyone who was lost and needed to ask for directions. With newspapers and radio stations controlled by the Germans, it was hard to know what was really happening in Poland, let alone beyond its borders. One thing was for sure: the whole world was at war. Meanwhile, I decided to make a gesture of my own. I would decorate my room in the nurses’ hostel. This was at least one tiny corner of the world that I could control. When a rest day came around, I took a tram into the city. It would be the last time I enjoyed this luxury; from the following Monday, only Germans were to be allowed on trams.

It was restful to rattle along like in the old days. There were only a few other passengers. A well-dressed man stood, legs apart, holding a double bass in its case, as big as himself. A German. He looked like a groom with his mechanical bride. Opposite me, an old lady in a woollen cap had an immovable smile on her face. Could she really be so happy? Or perhaps all her family had been murdered and she’d gone quite mad. It was impossible to say. Standing at the front, talking to the driver, was an old soldier with an

empty sleeve attached to the front of his jacket by a giant safety pin. Every time we passed a young woman on the street, he prodded the driver on the shoulder and both of them gave a guttural laugh, nodding in furious agreement at how lucky the woman would be if either of them got their hands on her.

I turned away, thinking back to other, more luxurious shopping trips I'd taken while staying with Aunt Katerina on Sielecka Street in Warsaw. The last time had been back in 1939, when I'd bought a pair of embroidered linen blouses. How nice it had felt, riding home on a tram with the blouses in a smart bag from Jabłkowski's department store. The shop assistant had folded them carefully in tissue paper, as though they were precious relics. And yet, how quickly the magic fades after new clothes have been unwrapped and worn a few times, becoming absorbed into our everyday lives. In years to come they would be thrown away or torn into dusters. Wasn't it the same for people as for objects too? For me, Anton and everyone else – even for Colonel Wendt? Do we all simply get worn out, die and be forgotten in the end?

My own few clothes were shabby, patched things now, apart from my nurse's uniform. What was the point of replacing them, even if I could afford it? To dress nicely and be noticed was the last thing I wanted. Getting off the tram, I headed for the bridge over the river Warta. This had become an unofficial market for people with a few last possessions to sell, just to buy food and stay alive. On my way I regularly passed Germans – soldiers, or well-dressed, well-fed housewives out shopping. I lowered my head and looked away. If the pavement was narrow, I stepped into the gutter to let them go by. It was what you did. Plenty of people had been shot for less, their bodies left for days on the street where they fell as a reminder.

All along the sides of the Warta bridge, people were sitting on the ground, wrapped in layers of ragged clothes to keep warm. In front of each one was a bag or suitcase which they would open as I approached, then close again, like rows of mussels responding to the tide. No one looked me in the eye, but turned their faces away as if in shame. Who were these poor creatures? Some were too old or weak to work, or had no family to help them. The Germans wouldn't even want them as slave labour. Some might have been 'respectable' people like myself before the war. What a meaningless word that was now.

A boy with a freckled face was the only one doing any serious business. He wore a grown man's jacket, many sizes too large, with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow, exposing the striped lining. A blanket was spread on the pavement before him, displaying a random collection of rings and watches. There was no need to guess how the light-fingered boy got his hands on them. He went about his business with the solemn expression of a banker in a high collar, very conscious of his own dignity. Only now and then did he glance around, to keep an eye out for any policeman approaching.

On the ground next to him was an old woman wearing a filthy postman's coat with one sleeve missing. Her spindly legs splayed out awkwardly on the ground, and between them was a cardboard box which she gripped tightly, her only possession in the world. She lifted the lid to reveal a few broken dolls, some empty perfume bottles and photographs in broken frames. I shook my head and moved on. Most of these pathetic items were scavenged from bins and tips, I guessed. Or perhaps they were her last treasures from a house once full of fashionable possessions. Even in those sad days, it was a heartbreaking sight. To complete the scene, it began to rain. I had no umbrella and within minutes looked like a drowned rat, my hair down and streaking across my face. Well, what did I care?

When I arrived back at the nurses' hostel, there was a precious purchase beneath my coat: an antique cup and saucer with only one small chip, all wrapped up in newspaper. There had been no haggling; I handed over the coins without a word. I placed the cup and saucer on a shelf where I could see them from my bed. This was my secret memento of the Winter Palace. Like our tea set at home, the Meissen teacup was decorated with a pastoral scene that looked like a delicate, miniature painting by Watteau. In the cup I arranged flowers picked from the hospital grounds as a private evocation of home. Honeysuckle, poppies, eglantine and daisies all reminded me of our garden at Lewicki. When the dogroses were in bloom, I made a pot pourri, collecting the white petals to dry on an old blue plate I had found. This shrine of memories helped me to survive through the days and nights of the war. Did others seek this solace in the familiar too, in Poznań, Warsaw, London and other cities? I imagined millions of families around the world huddled by the glow of a fireplace, blackout curtains pulled tight. With the lamp turned low, they could pretend for a while that everything was all right, as it had been before the war. In the soft light, they could see the family china and the pictures that had hung on the wall for years. The

photograph of a grandmother when she was young, in its shrouded velvet frame. The living room door that squeaked when you opened it. The ivy-patterned wallpaper, a little grubby around the light switch. There is such comfort in those ordinary things we live with year after year.

I looked forward all week to my one day off. I took a leisurely shower, eyes turned away from the mirror as I dried myself. I didn't like to see the tattoo on my arm. It reminded me of another reflection, when I had seen the German colonel and myself in the bedroom mirror, naked together on the bed. Once in my dressing-gown, I could lie down in solitude with the curtain pulled back, looking out at the stars and remembering the time before the war. That was my real life. I tried hard to imagine Anton's arms around me, to recall the scent of his skin and the musky cologne he used. Somewhere in the world he was looking up at the same sky, perhaps thinking about me at this very moment. It made him feel closer. I daydreamed about his life in a prisoner-of-war camp, wondering about his days there, his friends and how they passed the time. By the next morning, I was ready for work again.

27

Danny Waislitz led Anton at gunpoint through the barracks, under arrest for the murder of Colonel Rybus. Danny showed no sign that he recognised his former friend. Surely he knows me, thought Anton. After I beat him so badly in our fight back at the Siberian camp, I must be as good as dead to him. In the courtyard, Anton turned left towards the lock-up where he was being taken.

‘Wait!’ hissed Danny. Anton turned. The man still held the rifle pointed at him. Perhaps he was going to shoot him, to have the satisfaction of doing it himself. But Danny Waislitz was grinning.

‘Hello, Mechanic,’ he said. ‘It’s good to see you again. That fucking Rybus had it coming, no mistake.’

‘Good to see you too, Danny,’ said Anton, with relief. ‘Even on this strange night. I never thought you’d speak to me again after that business at the camp.’

Anton’s good manners took over, and he held out his hand to shake his friend’s. Danny gave him a curious, amused look, then lowered the rifle and took the hand.

‘Anyway,’ sighed Anton, ‘you’d better get me locked up for the night or you’ll be in trouble with your sergeant.’

Danny snorted as though this were a good joke.

‘Don’t worry about that. But you’re right, this isn’t a time to be chatting. Now, here’s what we’re going to do . . .’

Danny drew a key from the bunch at his belt, then unlocked the door to one of the old storerooms facing the cobbled yard.

‘Hide in here,’ he said. ‘I’ll lock you in, then say you knocked me over and ran for it out of the barracks.’

‘Are you sure that’s a good idea? I don’t want you getting in trouble as well.’

‘In you go,’ said Danny, giving him a shove. ‘And do as you’re told. You’re my prisoner, remember? They’ll send out a search party, but this is

the last place they'll look, here in the barracks. I'll be back for you tomorrow. Be patient, and keep quiet.

'Oh, one more thing. Give me a punch. Don't get carried away, now! Just enough to give me a nasty bruise. You've done it before.'

Anton winced at the thought of hitting Danny again, but saw the sense in it, to give the man an alibi. Taking a deep breath, he punched him on the cheek. Within minutes, he knew, there would be a nice bruised swelling there to cover any suspicion that he'd helped Anton escape.

Danny gave a low growl as Anton's fist hit him, then he nodded and locked the storeroom door. There was silence for a moment, then a yell in the yard outside and a shot ringing out, a loud crack in the night air. With a soldier's instinct, Anton hit the ground, flattening himself against the cool brick floor. The storeroom still held a faint smell of horse dung, even though it hadn't been used for horses in years. The odour reminded him of home, of playing in the Winter Palace stables as a boy.

'Stop! Stop or I'll fire!' he heard Danny shout. There was another shot, then boots sounded on the cobbled yard as someone ran towards the gateway, out into the street. Other soldiers came running, roused by the noise and gunfire.

Anton lay very still, sure the men outside would be able to hear the thump of his heart beating. The shouting and running back and forth lasted a long time. An hour went by before it was quiet and dark again. Anton stood up stiffly and looked around the room. There were a few straw bales left from when a cavalry regiment had been based at the barracks, but most of the space was occupied by boxes of military stores. He was so tired. He arranged the bales into a rough bed and wrapped himself in an old horse blanket. Despite the fact that he'd just killed a man and was hiding out so near to the scene of the crime, Anton fell into a soldier's immediate deep sleep.

The sun was up before seven the following morning, sending a single bar of light into the stable through a high window. For a few seconds Anton didn't remember all that had happened the previous day. Once he moved, though, aches and bruises all over his body brought back the awful reality of it in his mind. Although he knew it had been crazy to attack Rybus, he felt no remorse. The man was a swine and Anton was glad he was dead. All the same, his death made Anton a murderer and a fugitive. How could he return to Poland and be reunited with Elisabeth now? Maybe Rybus had

been right. Why hadn't he walked by and ignored what was happening? The army would soon be on its way to Europe, to fight their way back to Poland with the British and other allies. God willing, next year perhaps, he would walk through the gates of the Winter Palace and be reunited with his wife. Anton lay for hours, going over and over the previous evening in his mind. If only he'd walked past Rybus's door and forgotten the boy's whimpering cries inside. However many times he thought of it, though, he couldn't imagine ignoring that little sound that had pierced his heart. There had been no choice.

In the light of day, the stable had little more to recommend it than the night before. Most of the room was taken up by stacks of wooden crates bearing stencilled numbers. Anton lifted the lid of one, pulled back a layer of oily cotton and saw rows of what looked like black pipes. Sten guns, he thought. They had been disassembled but he recognised the familiar shape.

The sten gun was a beautifully simple weapon – if beauty was a word you could apply to a submachine gun. There was little more to it than a barrel, a trigger and a magazine of bullets jutting from the side. They were deadly and easily hidden, used by resistance fighters in Poland and France as well as by British troops. It had been good to hear that the Polish partisans were getting supplies dropped to them by the RAF.

Here I am, thinking like a loyal soldier, Anton realised, when I'm a murderer on the run, as far as the army's concerned. Well, they haven't caught me yet.

As though conjured by his thoughts, there was a rattling of keys at the door. A soldier walked in, blinking as his eyes adjusted from the sunlight to the shadowy stable. Anton jumped up, ready to knock the man down and make a run for it. But the private only gave a cursory nod, as though expecting him to be there. His eyes were on the stack of crates. The man's army blouse fitted badly and his shoulders were slouching. Stand upright, man, hold yourself like a soldier, Anton felt like saying.

It was a relief to see Danny appear in the doorway behind the other man. Beyond him was the open rear of an army truck, backed right up to the stable.

'What sort of room service do you call this, Waislitz?' said Anton dryly. 'I ordered sausage and eggs with strong black coffee.'

Danny gave him a distracted smile. He wasn't in the mood for jokes.

‘Eating is for later, Mechanic. You’ll be able to clean up your face then too. For now, help Aaron here load up these crates. Take it nice and slow. Act as though you’re just another soldier with a boring job to do. That shouldn’t be too hard for us, eh?’

The boxes of sten guns and ammunition were soon loaded up and then they were on their way. Danny drove fast, weaving through Jerusalem’s ancient narrow streets until they were clear of the old town. Anton and the other soldier stood in the back, holding on to the frame of the truck to steady themselves. The long crates clattered against each other whenever Danny drove around a corner. They looked like piles of children’s coffins. Anton couldn’t get this idea out of his head, thinking grimly of little Sarah Bruckner as they bounced along.

‘What’s the story?’ he asked the other man. ‘Where are we heading?’

He must be in on Danny’s plan to get me away, thought Anton, but in reply the badly dressed soldier only put a finger to his lips. They had left the city well behind now, travelling on a bumpy dirt road into the hills north of Jerusalem. After a few hours, they turned off into a small settlement. The place was like a model village, with signs over the doorway of each building they passed. Bakery. Canteen. Library. School. *Buchsbaum Orphanage*, read the sign at the main building where the truck drew up. Men and women ran out to lower the vehicle’s tailgate.

‘Move, move!’ cried one of them, as they started to unload the crates of guns and carry them away towards the bakery.

‘What’s going on?’ asked Anton.

His travelling companion still did not speak, only winked and hopped down to help the others. None of the men were in uniform, British, Polish or otherwise. All they had in common was a simple black skullcap – a kippah – on top of their heads. Despite his question, Anton now realised exactly what was going on. There were many Zionist groups fighting for a Jewish homeland in Palestine. Some fought politically. Others were arming themselves to do battle with anyone who stood in the way of establishing a state of Israel. There were even some who attacked the British while the allies were struggling to defeat Hitler in Europe. Among these, he knew, were Jewish soldiers who had deserted from the Polish army. It was well known they were receiving undercover help from comrades who stayed on under General Anders’ command. Danny Waislitz, Anton now realised, was one of these. He was stealing guns and ammunition for a Zionist group.

Anton hopped down from the truck, assuming this was where he would be hiding, but Danny beckoned for him to get into the cab beside him.

‘What you don’t know, you can’t tell,’ said Danny with a broad smile as they drove away. ‘So forgive me if I say nothing about what you’ve seen. For that matter, you’re safer if they know nothing about you either. As a man on the run, you might put them at risk as well. Better if you go somewhere else entirely, another kibbutz deep in the country. I expect you disagree with us – well, tough luck, we’re all the friends you’ve got!’

‘Whether I agree or not depends,’ said Anton. ‘Not if your group is attacking the British, while the war’s not yet won . . .’

‘Our group isn’t shooting at anyone,’ Danny broke in. ‘Not yet, anyway. And I’m a soldier. I obey orders. When my government says fight, I fight.’

What ‘government’ was this? wondered Anton.

‘By the way, one of the guys at the orphanage thought he recognised you. “That looks like Captain Lewicki-Radziwiłł,” he said. Mean anything to you?’

Anton almost trembled with shock. He’d kept his true identity secret for so long, it made him feel uneasy to hear it spoken out loud.

‘Doesn’t mean a thing to me,’ he said, staring ahead down the road. ‘He must have mistaken me for someone else.’

They were travelling through a forest of oaks, sunlight and shadows dappling the road. For a moment it felt like being home in Poland at the height of summer. Anton had never imagined Palestine could be so green. From what he’d learnt in religious instruction lessons at school, he’d imagined it as a desert place. There was a burning bush. There was a sea where you could float while reading the newspaper. And a little town called Bethlehem where snow was always falling. In a cosy, candlelit stable, a donkey and a cow watched over a mother and her newborn baby.

The truck turned off the road and up a rocky track to where a farm gate blocked their way. Danny switched off the engine and there was sudden silence. All they could hear was the gentle scraping of eucalyptus branches against each other in the breeze. It sounded as if someone in the trees was sketching with a gigantic pencil. A young woman was perched on the wooden gate, casually swinging one of her legs. Her hair was tied in a scarf. She wore an old army shirt over a short khaki skirt and was eating an apple. She also cradled a rifle confidently on her lap. Anton recognised a Lee–Enfield 303.

She gave a wide grin and waved. We're expected, then, thought Anton.

'What's the password?' she yelled out, blinking as a shaft of sunlight broke through the branches above them.

'The password is "Open the gate or I'll smack your backside!"' Danny yelled back, leaning out of his window.

'That's Rachel,' he said to Anton, as though this explained everything.

The woman chuckled. She jumped down to open the gate then closed it again after the truck passed through. A sharp whistle from her was followed by crashing in the nearby bushes as a big German Shepherd appeared. Bouncing through the undergrowth, the dog rushed up to Rachel and put its front paws on her shoulders, wagging its tail.

'Come on, Misha,' she said, 'time for your dinner.'

The woman pulled open the passenger door of the truck and squeezed in beside Anton. The dog leapt up too, sitting on the floor between her knees.

'Please excuse me,' said Anton instinctively, moving along the seat to give her a little more room. Danny drove slowly down a rocky track into a lush valley where the kibbutz lay. They passed through a grove of orange trees spreading out across the hillside.

'So, who's your handsome friend?' the woman asked Danny, leaning forwards to talk across Anton. He saw a tumble of black curls over a pair of large brown eyes. Anton recalled his Polish neighbour Peter Jacobowski being called 'strikingly dark' as a snide euphemism for his Jewish appearance. Where was Peter now? he wondered.

Rachel spoke in a mixture of Yiddish and Polish with some Russian and English expressions thrown in – an argot Anton had become familiar with in the past year. It was a survivor's language. Despite the war raging in Europe, refugees had continued to arrive in Palestine from Poland, Romania and other lands. They came legally or without any papers at all. Some came by boat. Some on trains from Persia or Turkey. Some appeared out of the desert, shimmering figures who had set out walking to escape the Nazi exterminations and miraculously survived.

'He's just a friend on holiday from Poland,' said Danny with a straight face. He didn't take his eyes off the road.

'Uh-huh, your friend who is an army officer,' the woman said brightly. 'A murderer and not a murderer. A mechanic who has such beautiful manners, almost like an aristocrat.'

This was the second time in a day that someone had suspected Anton's real identity. He'd better be careful of this woman.

'Hello, Mr Mechanic,' she went on, looking directly at him for the first time.

'Hello, Rachel,' he replied. 'You see, I know your name too.'

'Ignore her,' laughed Danny. 'Rachel works on our farm here. The chairman of the kibbutz is her uncle. He should be careful what he says in front of her.'

'My uncle trusts me! I know when to keep my mouth shut. You trust me too, don't you, Misha?'

The dog began to lick her face as enthusiastically as if it were a gigantic ice cream. They were at the bottom of the valley now, driving past long chicken sheds then into a square bordered by white-plastered buildings. Behind them rose a water tower decorated with a menorah, the wrought-iron shape towering above the kibbutz. Beyond the square were more farm buildings, then groves of olive and orange trees stretching down the valley.

'I'm most grateful to you for taking me in,' said Anton to Gideon, the kibbutz chairman, when they met before dinner. Something about the man made Anton speak formally.

They sat with Danny Waislitz on a terrace overlooking a pond. Their couch was an old bus seat. A pair of ducks cruised back and forth on the water, quacking amiably at each other. Anton felt almost shy in front of Gideon, the stranger who had agreed to hide him for a while. He wore corduroy trousers held high on his lean body by braces. They were almost up to his chest. In one hand he had a glass of wine. In the other was a skinny cigarette. Anton had watched in fascination as Gideon rolled it with the fingers of a single hand. Though his beard was full, his head was close-shaven. Every few minutes he put down the wine glass and passed a hand over his scalp, feeling the bristles with his palm. He might have been Abraham himself in the Old Testament. Now that was a man who would have worn his trousers high, thought Anton.

'Danny vouches for you. That's good enough for me,' said Gideon. 'The man you killed was a Nazi?'

'Not a Nazi, but he was no friend of the Jewish people, that's for sure. Or anyone else for that matter, except himself.'

'You can say that again,' replied Danny. 'Every day he isn't breathing makes me a little happier . . .'

‘Sounds as good as a Nazi to me,’ cut in Gideon dryly. ‘Now, you must stay for a few months at least,’ he said to Anton, dismissing the subject of Rybus. ‘Let the search die down, and perhaps something else will happen to keep the British distracted. That’s one thing you can say for sure about Palestine. Another day, another bomb. Another shooting.’ He gave Danny a meaningful look.

His friend made an innocent face as though to say, ‘Who, me?’ like a naughty schoolboy. ‘I haven’t bombed or shot anyone,’ he protested. ‘Not yet.’

‘Danny and I disagree about a few things,’ said Gideon, rubbing a hand over his head again. ‘This kibbutz is a peaceful community. We don’t argue with our neighbours, Jewish, Arab or even British.’

Anton remembered the rifle on Rachel’s lap that afternoon but said nothing.

‘We live by the laws of God, not of man,’ said Gideon, ‘but some want to dirty their hands in politics and fighting, to make a Jewish state one day. Danny, I’m afraid to say, is one of these misguided souls, so we agree to keep off the topic – most of the time, at any rate.’

‘I’d like to help while I’m here,’ said Anton, steering the conversation away from talk of bombs and shootings. It made him feel uncomfortable. ‘If you’ve any vehicles or machinery that needs repair . . .’

‘. . . and fruit to pick,’ said Gideon, ‘and potatoes to sow and chickens to feed. Don’t worry, we’ll keep you busy. We have few rules. Work hard, and don’t interrupt me when I’m listening to music in the evening! The bunk rooms are all full, but you’re welcome to sleep in the space over the barn. You can move on in the new year, in the spring, perhaps.’

‘I’ve been thinking about that,’ said Danny to Anton. ‘You need a new name. A new passport. My boys will organise something, don’t you worry. Then you can do as you like. Go back to Poland. Go to South America. Whatever you want.’

So it was settled, there on the terrace overlooking the duck pond as the sun went down. Anton mentioned how the white buildings of the kibbutz reminded him of a village back in Poland.

‘I came from a village like that too,’ said Gideon. ‘Lipniki, do you know it? Near Lublin, in the east.’

Anton shook his head.

‘We left back in ’32,’ Gideon went on. ‘Rachel’s parents – my brother and his wife – died in the cholera epidemic here the following summer. The village has gone now. We’ve heard the Germans shot everyone there, all four hundred souls. Jews and Christians. Women and children. Old and young. “Untermenschen”, they call the Poles. Subhumans. Killing us apparently doesn’t legally count as murder these days. I dream of the village often, but with empty streets and the wind blowing through the broken windows.’

The evening sun was warm on Anton’s skin, but he found himself shivering slightly at Gideon’s words. It was some time before he stopped.

28

Anton settled into the routine of the Yehuda kibbutz. After breakfast in the big communal kitchen, he joined one of the gangs going out to work on the land. Digging. Picking. Pruning. Clearing out the chicken sheds with a scarf around his nose to shield it from the acrid smell. It was a different routine to the one he had become used to in Siberia. Instead of sawing down trees in the snow – the temperature dipping towards minus twenty degrees, and the wind blowing so hard he couldn't feel his ears – now he was picking olives with his shirt off. In the warm Levantine weather, he no longer felt any pain in his leg when he woke. The hearing in his right ear was still a little muffled; that would never change. It was something he accepted; he was lucky to get out of that bombed train alive. One sunny day followed another. Yehuda was a respite from worry for a while before he ventured out into the world again, towards Poland and home.

Anton was working with a team cutting back vines after the grapes had been picked. There was something satisfying about clipping the knotty stems, moving methodically down the row with his shirt off, feeling the sun on his back. He didn't need to think. Laughter in the vines brought him back to the present. Turning around, he saw Rachel leave a group of women and come walking towards him.

'Hello, Mr Mechanic. You should wear a shirt and put a hat on. Your white skin will burn. I'll fetch you one.'

'I don't need a hat,' he protested. But she was gone and then back again carrying a hat from a basket at the end of the row of vines.

'Put this on, and don't argue,' she insisted, wagging her finger at him.

Anton did as he was told. Jamming the wide straw hat onto his head, he immediately felt his shoulders cooler in the shade. Why had he resisted? Feeling the need to assert himself, he asked Rachel the predictable question: what did she want to do with her life, after she left the kibbutz?

'What do you mean, "leave it"?' she said. 'This is my life. I can't imagine living anywhere else.'

‘It feels as though nothing changes here, doesn’t it?’ he replied. ‘It’s so peaceful. Yet everything around us is in turmoil. It isn’t just the war. There’s what will happen to Palestine. It seems the British have promised the Jews independence, but always “later”. And inconveniently, they seem to have promised exactly the same thing to the Arabs. Something’s got to give.’

Rachel shrugged her shoulders. ‘What about you, anyway?’ she asked. She was instinctively more interested in other people than in talking about herself, Anton realised. He told her his plan to rejoin the army under a new name, to fight with them now that the allies had invaded Europe.

‘Once Danny brings me some new identity documents, I’ll join the British army. Less chance I’ll be recognised there. The Russians are pushing Hitler back from the East, and the British and their allies have landed in France. The Germans are being squeezed from both sides. In a year I could be back in a free Poland and see my wife again.’

‘That’s wonderful!’ Rachel said, squeezing his arm.

Anton silently described Rachel to Elisabeth as he lay in bed that night, one arm behind his head.

‘She’s a real tomboy. I hardly see her indoors, hates a roof over her head. She’s always outside, running around in the fields and the woods with that dog of hers. You should see them together. Sometimes she closes her eyes and lets him lick her face! Maybe you’ll meet her one day, but it’s strange – I can’t imagine her in Poland. I can’t quite place her. It’s not obvious what her background or class is either. Those things don’t seem to matter here. Or maybe I’m changing and they don’t matter to me so much. Who knows?’

29

Almost two years had passed since the morning I had first walked into the Poznań hospital. I would know my way around the maze of hospital buildings now with my eyes closed. Though I didn't know the names of all the staff, I certainly knew their faces. It was a relief to stop and chat with them now and then to take the weight off my feet – nurses and porters, cleaners and the wan-faced young girls who worked in the hospital laundry. Halfway through my medication delivery one day, I realised I'd left my clipboard in the storeroom of the surgical ward. Annoyed with myself, I took the heavy trolley back and unlocked the storeroom again. Pushing open the door, I stopped in my tracks. There was someone there. A man with his back to me was hurriedly emptying boxes of drugs into a doctor's Gladstone bag. He swung around at the sound of the door opening.

'Well, well, it's Nurse Witkowska,' the man said. His expression relaxed as he recognised me. It was Dr Laski.

'Come on in,' he said. 'Don't let me disturb you. I was collecting some drugs for a patient.'

I pushed the trolley inside and let the door slam behind me. Something was wrong, but what? Firstly, medications were always collected by a ward nurse. The doctor also looked anxious, even guilty, fiddling with the catch on his bag and clearly keen to leave. However, his way was blocked by my heavy trolley. And he was sweeping boxes of drugs into his bag, not carefully picking the tablets needed for one patient's dose that day.

'Can I ask what you are doing, Dr Laski?' I said.

'Why, just picking up some drugs for a patient. You know . . .' His voice trailed off without finishing the sentence.

'Into your personal bag?'

'Look here, I won't have some little nurse questioning my authority.'

Despite his words, I saw that Dr Laski was nervous. His tongue flicked out to lick his lips. His eyes kept looking at the door, yet he made no move to push past me. I knew it was improper for a junior nurse to question what

a doctor was doing, but this felt very wrong. Everyone had heard that precious drugs were going missing from the hospital. I had no choice.

‘Now then, Witkowska,’ Dr Laski said, attempting a smile. ‘What’s your first name again?’

I didn’t reply. I’d never told him my name and he’d certainly never asked before. The only thought in my mind was that I’d caught the doctor stealing drugs to sell on the black market.

‘You know you can trust me, don’t you?’ he went on. To my horror, he stepped forwards and put his hand on my waist. He gave another smile, more confident now I was in his grip.

‘Let’s keep this our little secret, shall we? No one else needs to know. Just you and me. That’s a good girl. What do you say? What was your name again?’

As Dr Laski spoke, his face drew closer to mine. I realised he was going to kiss me. With a cry, I punched at his chest and wriggled free.

‘You disgust me!’ I cried. ‘You’re a dirty thief, stealing drugs from a hospital to sell to your rich private patients.’

‘It’s not like that,’ he said, slipping nimbly past the trolley towards the door. ‘It’s not like that at all.’

‘Isn’t it?’ I said. ‘Then tell me what it is like. And you can leave that bag here, too.’

Dr Laski had his hand on the doorhandle now. He turned and gave one of his familiar smiles. I’m sure he practised them in front of a mirror every morning.

‘All right,’ he said. ‘You asked, so I’ll tell you. The fact is, I’m taking it to help the partisans. Now do you believe me?’

Tell that to the fairies, I said to myself as he left, closing the door behind him. Did the man think he could charm and lie his way through anything? I would report what I’d seen to the matron this very morning. Only then did I realise that the bag full of drugs had still been in his hand when he left.

This was serious, but delivering medications to the other wards was the more important matter. It was nearly an hour later when I tapped on the matron’s door and walked in. Dr Laski was there, standing next to her. The pharmacist, Mr Lubansky, was in the room too, sitting in an armchair with a pipe in his hand.

Damn Laski, I thought. I should have known he’d try to get in first. But I know what I saw. He can deny it all he wants. I stood with hands behind

my back, waiting for the matron to speak.

‘You’ve come, no doubt, to tell me some story about Dr Laski stealing drugs from the hospital.’

‘Yes, Matron. He gave some cock-and-bull story about taking it to help the partisans.’

‘And what if I told you that was the truth?’

‘With respect, I’m sure that’s what he told you too.’

‘It’s not a matter of what Dr Laski tells me,’ said the matron. ‘It’s a matter of Dr Laski doing what I tell him.’

‘What you tell him to . . .?’

‘Sit down, Nurse Witkowska,’ said the matron.

Dr Laski offered me a chair with a smile that was almost a smirk.

‘Since you know a little, you must now know everything,’ said the matron. ‘When Dr Kapinski treated a wounded partisan in the hospital, he paid for it with his life. You were there. You saw what happened. None of us will forget it. We were lucky everyone in the hospital wasn’t machine-gunned by the Germans that day, and I’m not exaggerating. That’s why we will never treat one of the underground fighters here ever again. You understand?’

I nodded.

‘Instead, Mr Lubansky, Dr Laski and I make sure injured partisans are still treated, but in safe houses well away from here. There are others who help. You don’t need to know who they are. That way, the hospital itself isn’t implicated.’

‘You understand how scarce medications are, Emilia,’ said Mr Lubansky. ‘The German army and authorities take what they want, and we get whatever is left.’ As always, he looked away shyly while speaking, only glancing up for a moment at the end of each sentence, as though to confirm I had heard him.

‘Well, now and then we invent a “ghost patient” who needs certain drugs,’ said the matron. ‘We take these to help the injured fighters. On paper, nothing looks out of order. Mr Lubansky schedules the drugs for the non-existent patient. You innocently deliver them to a ward, and Dr Laski collects them to take to the safe house.’

‘So you were telling the truth,’ I said to Laski, almost disappointed to have my accusation disproved.

‘I’m afraid so,’ he replied, with a faint smile. ‘I hope that doesn’t damage my reputation as a scoundrel.’

‘But the fact remains, Nurse Witkowska, that you’re now in on the plot, so to speak,’ said the matron.

‘I’m not sure what you mean . . .’

‘What she means,’ said Mr Lubansky, taking the pipe from his mouth, ‘is will you help us, now that you know? Laski here needs an assistant when he operates. Are you willing to go with him to one of the safe houses to help? You understand what will happen if the Germans find out. You’ve seen it with your own eyes. It’s all right if you say no, of course, and we’ll mention it no more. Maybe you’d like some time to think about it.’

‘Of course I’ll do it,’ I said without a moment’s hesitation. ‘Of course I will.’

For the rest of the day, this decision would almost slip from my mind, then come slamming back like a punch to the stomach. What had I been thinking? I could have said no and stayed safe in my room at night, instead of risking my life! What about Anton? But I knew that I had no choice. I was Polish. That was reason enough.

Over the next few weeks, I was given some basic survival training. In the basement of a remote part of the hospital, I met regularly with a woman who never gave her name. She showed me how to move unnoticed through a crowd. How to tell if I was being followed and how to shake off the follower. How to fire a gun. How to change my appearance quickly with a few simple props: a different-coloured scarf or a coat I could turn inside out to change the colour. One lesson was more of a challenge: how to kill someone with my bare hands.

‘Forget about any fancy moves. You don’t want to waste time fighting someone, you want to kill them. It needs to be quick,’ she said. ‘Remember, there’s no time to be squeamish. It’s them or you. Don’t have any doubts – if you’re taken prisoner by the Germans, they’ll torture you in ways you cannot imagine to find out what you know, to “persuade” you to give names. After that, they’ll torture you for the sheer pleasure of it.

‘Your best option is never to be in a situation where you have to kill or be killed. And, believe me, either of those is better than ending up in Fort Seven,’ she said. I nodded. Everyone had heard of this place on the outskirts of Poznań. The Germans had turned it into a death camp, and the very name made us shiver with fear.

‘If you do find yourself in such a situation, then it’s likely to be a surprise. You won’t be expecting it. Act fast, like a wild animal. Have no mercy. If you don’t have a weapon, look around you. Everything is a potential weapon. A pencil. A jagged piece of glass. Your finger, even. Attack where someone is most vulnerable – between the legs, the eyes and mouth, the throat. Get in close and don’t let go. Bite them to death if you must!

‘One of our people was caught and questioned by a German officer. He grabbed the officer’s spectacles and jammed one of the arms into the man’s eye, pushing it as hard as he could into his brain. The German screamed and quivered for a few minutes then lay dead.’

‘Killed with a pair of spectacles . . .’ I murmured, trying to imagine the horrific scene yet impressed at the ruthlessness. ‘But what happened to the partisan?’

‘The Germans were so angry they shot him on the spot. It was a blessing.’

•

When the call came to go on my first mission, I met Dr Laski as agreed at a side entrance of the hospital. It was seven o’clock in the evening. As arranged, I wore a dark raincoat over my nurse’s uniform to be inconspicuous. He carried a surgical kit and other supplies stuffed into his leather Gladstone bag.

‘Put your arm through mine, Nurse Witkowska,’ he said. ‘It looks more natural that way. To anyone who sees us, we’ll seem like a couple out for a romantic stroll.’

Reluctantly, I looped my arm through his and we sauntered through the streets towards an apartment where we’d been told a wounded partisan was hiding. Rain had fallen that afternoon and the ground was still wet. The low sun bounced sheets of light off the tarmac ahead, as though great mirrors had been laid on the road. As we passed a long laurel hedge, I saw raindrops fall from leaf to leaf, making each bend and bounce back, one after another in a slow timpani. How carefree and happy we must have looked to other people as we walked arm in arm along the glossy streets.

‘Do you think we’re being watched?’ I asked quietly.

‘Oh, we’re being watched, all right,’ said Laski. ‘Some of our own people are shadowing us, looking out for any Germans who might be following. Don’t worry, they’re all armed.’

The thought that a gunfight might start at any moment didn’t make me feel any safer. After taking a circuitous route, we finally arrived at the apartment block as the evening was drawing in. It was a tall building with ornate ironwork balconies, and mouldings decorating the doors and windows. Dr Laski pulled me into a doorway and waited until a woman with a shopping bag came out of the gateway opposite and gave him a discreet nod. The way was clear.

The apartment was on the top floor. There were tall bookshelves all around the walls, full of volumes on history and art. On the polished parquet floor were afghan rugs, and a white cat slept on an antique sofa. It was a long time since I’d been in a comfortable, civilised room such as this. How nice it would be to take down one of the books and curl up on the sofa with the cat, to read. There was no sign of the owners, only a bearded man with a sten gun who ushered us wordlessly through to a small bedroom where the blinds were drawn. Perhaps the owners were asleep, or away in the country. Maybe they had fled overseas. Maybe they were dead.

On the bed was a young girl, no more than sixteen years old, with a snub nose and curly hair tied up in a scarf. She made an effort to smile when we walked in.

‘What’s the story?’ asked Dr Laski. ‘The short version.’

He peeled back a sheet to reveal the girls’s legs. One was strong and tanned; the other was covered in blood and dirt, with a long jagged gash in her calf.

‘Last night,’ said the bearded man. ‘Attack on the railway yards. Grenade. We got away but some shrapnel caught her leg.’

‘So, more than twelve hours since the injury?’

‘Closer to twenty-four hours.’

‘Then we’d better work quickly,’ said Laski. ‘Remove her clothes from around the wound,’ he said to me. ‘Cut them if you need to, then put some water on to boil for my instruments.’

I took a large pair of scissors from the doctor’s bag and cut the girl’s khaki skirt, gently lifting it away from her leg. The fabric stuck to the dried blood, so she winced and made a whooshing sound with her lips to cover the pain.

‘Has it been hurting much?’ I asked.

The girl nodded.

‘Piotr here has been dosing me with brandy. I hate the stuff . . .’

‘No names,’ said the bearded man quickly.

Of course, no names. Matron had told me that too. The less we knew about each other, the less we could give away under torture if caught by the Gestapo.

After washing the girl’s leg, we could see it was a mess. As well as the deep wound in her calf, there were other, smaller fragments of shrapnel. Each piece of metal had dug into her flesh and turned it inside out. The wounds had been untreated for a whole day, so the risk of infection was high. Laski was right. We would have to work fast.

When the surgical instruments were sterilised and laid out neatly, Dr Laski gave me a nod. I put a gag in the girl’s mouth for her to bite, then held a pad soaked in chloroform over her face, moving it rhythmically away then back again. After a while, her body went limp. It was a crude anaesthetic and there was a risk of causing heart failure, but we had no alternative. Dr Laski got to work, making incisions to remove the twisted pieces of metal, cleaning out each wound then stitching it up. After one was done he moved on to the next without a pause. It was slow work and sweat was dripping from his face. All the while, I strained my ears for the screech of a German army truck pulling up outside or the sound of heavy boots on the staircase. Once I heard a thud and some rapid steps, but I saw it was the cat, jumping down from a table, drawn by the smell of blood.

A sweet, sickly odour rising from the chloroform pad began to make me sleepy too, so I moved my head away to inhale deeply before turning back to watch Dr Laski work, passing instruments to him when he nodded for the next one. I wondered how he could see the female body in two quite different ways. The man was a sleaze who had trouble keeping his hands off any woman. Yet here he was with a half-naked teenager in front of him, focused entirely on tending the wounds in her leg. For that matter, he was one of the most self-centred men I’d ever met, and yet he was risking torture and certain death to help a partisan fighting the Germans. Perhaps he was simply in the same situation as me: he found it impossible to say no.

It was a relief when the girl woke after nearly an hour under chloroform. I secretly feared that after all Dr Laski’s work, the girl simply might not come round again. It happened sometimes. Struggling to sit

upright, she retched and vomited, but I was ready with a bowl. After leaving clean dressings and a box of sulfa tablets to fight any infection, we made our way out to see the sun was just rising. As we left the building, a boy sleeping rough in the doorway opposite roused himself and set off walking ahead of us. We had a scout. He must have been waiting there all night. Perhaps there were others too, on rooftops or walking nearby, ready to help if needed. The streets were still quiet. Only one vehicle went by: a truck heaped with coal and pulled by a pair of horses. Petrol was becoming scarce and the German army had first call on any supplies, so this was a common sight. It wasn't uncommon either to see a truck powered by wood gas, with a tall furnace behind the cab, chuff-chuffing along the road like a steam train. We had almost reached the hospital when a whistle like a bird call rang out twice in quick succession. That was a signal from our scout walking ahead. Dr Laski grabbed my shoulders and pushed me up against a wall, kissing my neck while his hands burrowed under my blouse, his cold fingers reaching towards my breast. I felt sick and started to push him away, but seconds later, a German patrol car drew up: a regular Peugeot saloon painted grey with the Wehrmacht cross on the side and roof. Two soldiers got out. One stood looking around, holding a rifle, while the other approached us.

'Your papers,' said the soldier. 'And why are you out so early in the day?'

'Here we are,' said Dr Laski, giving the soldier a wide grin as he held out his pass. 'It's my pleasure.'

I groaned inside. Did he really think that one of his smarmy smiles would work on a Nazi as well as it did on some impressionable girl? As I handed over my own identity pass, the soldier's hand brushed against the sleeve which hid the tattoo on my arm, still as clear as the day it was written, 'F H 1508'. All he needed to do was push up the arm of my coat to see it.

'And your reason for being out at this hour?' repeated the German, holding on to the passes and tapping them on his other hand.

'That's simple,' said Dr Laski, beaming at the soldier. 'I've been fucking one of my nurses all night, and now she has to work the morning shift. Life's just not fair for the fairer sex, is it?'

I blushed deeply, yet this disgusting man-to-man explanation seemed to work. It was exactly the sort of thing that Laski would say, anyway. The

soldier grinned.

‘Give her one from me next time,’ he said with a wink, handing both passes back to the doctor before getting into the grey army car and driving away.

As we walked through the side gate into the hospital grounds, I found myself churning with emotions. Pride in the work we had done to help the wounded partisan. Relief at having got past the German patrol. But also a great welling of anger at Dr Laski’s attitude towards me. It wasn’t only him, either. It was the German who had said ‘Give her one from me’ while I stood right there. It was rage at Colonel Wendt, who had raped me every night as though it were his God-given right. Were all men like this secretly? Seeing women only as objects for their pleasure? It was too much. I had to say something. Turning suddenly on Dr Laski, I took hold of his shirt front with both hands and pushed so hard that his back slammed against the brick wall.

‘Listen!’ I said, my voice tight with anger. ‘I admire what you did tonight. I’ll help out again. But I want you to understand one thing, okay?’

‘All right, all right . . . what?’ he said, ruffled and taken aback at this sudden violence.

‘You’ll never, ever touch my body again without permission. Never. *Never.* Do you understand?’

‘Yes, yes,’ he said, clearly resisting an urge to reassure me with a stroke on the arm. ‘If that’s what you really want. What a fuss . . . I promise.’

I nodded and let go of his shirt. My fists hurt from gripping it so tightly.

‘That’s understood, then. Good morning, Dr Laski.’

The doctor kept his word. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had decided I was a lesbian – for what other possible reason could there be for rejecting his advances? We would work together again, I knew, visiting safe houses all over Poznań in secret to operate on wounded partisans, but he would keep his hands to himself. The hours alone in my room became even more precious now, contemplating the flowers I had picked, and the red-and-blue Meissen teacup that held within it my life at the Winter Palace with Anton before the war. The next time I was called on by the partisans would come sooner than I expected.

30

‘Did you hear those shots last night?’ Anton asked the others one morning as they took a break from cutting back rows of vines.

He’d been woken by three rifle shots, distant but clear in the night air. Rachel gave a quick nod.

‘Someone hunting on our land, probably,’ she said. ‘Or one of our guards taking a pot shot to scare them off. Didn’t you ever go poaching as a boy? Or maybe you had a gamekeeper to shoot the poachers?’

She left the question hanging but Anton changed the subject. What was it that made her question whether he really was Jan Komarowski the mechanic?

‘Danny will be here on Sunday,’ he said. ‘You’ll be able to irritate him instead of me then!’

But there was no sign of his friend at the end of the week, nor the following Sunday. A conversation with Gideon hinted at a possible reason. It was the time that came to be known as the ‘Hunting Season’.

‘It means trouble for everyone if we don’t keep our heads down,’ Gideon said.

He explained this Hunting Season to Anton. All through the war, there had been an informal truce between the British administation and the Haganah, the Jewish Agency which represented the Jews in Palestine.

‘Let’s deal with Hitler first, then you can have independence,’ was the line from the British High Commissioner.

Many Jews signed up with the Haganah’s militia. Some, however, disagreed with the truce. They did not see why they should wait to fight for a Jewish state. One of these groups, the Irgun, declared war on the British Mandate. They blew up the oil pipeline from Iraq and sabotaged railways. Another group assassinated the British minister responsible for Palestine. This was too much for the Jewish Agency, whose authority was being challenged as much as that of the British. There is no conflict as vicious as a civil war. The Jewish Agency launched an attack on the radical Zionist

groups. There were kidnappings, torture and murder. It was a frightening time of violence by Jews against Jews.

Gideon gave an order that no one could leave the kibbutz without his permission. The number of perimeter guards was doubled. They started carrying guns all the time.

‘What’s going on? I don’t understand Jews turning on each other,’ said Rachel, ‘however much we disagree.’

‘Don’t ask me,’ said Anton. ‘It seems crazy.’

Gunfire echoed around the hills for hours on some nights. He felt the kibbutz could be attacked by one side or another at any time and he might fall into the hands of the British. There would be questions, and maybe there would be answers about a wanted man who had murdered a colonel. More worryingly, though, there was no sign of Danny. ‘I haven’t shot anyone . . . not yet,’ Anton remembered him saying. Maybe that time had come.

It was well into the new year before he saw his friend again.

‘Danny will be by the gate at six this evening,’ said Gideon. ‘Don’t be late. He’ll be in a hurry, I can promise you that.’

Anton made sure he was at the gate early. The sun was setting, making the distant mountains of the Golan Heights glow a sultry pink. How romantic it looked, he thought grimly. The perfect setting for a sentimental reunion. At last a truck came rumbling up the rocky track. He recognised the vehicle in which he’d arrived months before. The British army markings had been scraped off. It was dusty and battered, as a truck might look after driving fast at night with its lights off, bullets flying in the air as it fled another ‘incident’. Danny looked as worn as the truck: his cheeks unshaven, his shirt streaked with oil and dirt, and with the face of someone who hadn’t slept in a bed for many weeks. From his belt hung a holster for a revolver on one side and a long bayonet in a scabbard on the other. Across his shoulder was a bandolier packed with bullets. He looked fearsome.

A man with an armband bearing Hebrew letters stood guard by the truck while Danny came towards Anton. The guard held a sten gun and stared warily around as if the bushes themselves might leap up and attack them.

‘Don’t ask,’ Danny said in response to Anton’s surprised expression. ‘I’m alive. I’m happy. That’s enough. You’ve heard of the Hunting Season? Well, it looks as if I’m the hunted. The Jewish Agency has put a price on my head and wants me dead or alive – preferably the former. I’m fighting

for our homeland today, which seems to upset them. But enough about that. What about you, Jan Komarowski, or whatever your damned name is? I always keep a promise – here are your new papers.'

Danny pulled a wad of documents from his pocket. 'You've destroyed the old ones?' he asked.

Anton nodded. 'Lieutenant Jan Komarowski is no more. Goodbye, old friend.'

'Then hello, David Ginzburg,' said Danny, handing over the papers and shaking his hand. 'That's everything you'll need. Birth certificate, employment card, British Mandate identity pass. From now on, you're a Russian Jew born in Minsk. You arrived here in Palestine with your parents fifteen years ago. They're both conveniently dead.

'It also seems,' he went on, 'that you died in an automobile accident last month. Fortunately, my friend in the public records office forgot to issue a death certificate. Very careless of him. So you're reborn, my friend! By the way, I don't know if you're . . .' He gestured towards Anton's groin.

'Yes, thank God. You don't need to perform a circumcision with a rusty bayonet, if that's what you're thinking.'

Danny laughed, then looked up at the darkening sky. The mountains to the north had turned a dun grey. Above them the first stars were beginning to twinkle in the cold air.

'I have to keep moving,' said Danny. 'We'll meet again in some camp or crime scene, perhaps.'

'In Poland, I hope.'

'I'll never go back,' said Danny. 'Palestine is my home now, and Israel is my future. But before I go, do you remember I told you about a man who says he knew you back in Poland? Well, here he is . . . Josef, come over!'

Danny's companion slung his gun over his shoulder and walked towards them. He was tall, with a halo of curly hair and a neat beard.

'My God. Captain Lewicki-Radziwiłł,' the man said. 'It really is you, after all! I was sure I recognised your face back at the orphanage, when we were unloading that truck.'

A chill went through Anton. It was the first time he'd been recognised since destroying his identity card at the prisoner-of-war camp back in Lvov at the beginning of the war.

'I'm sorry, I don't . . .' he began to say, denying the name from years of habit.

‘It’s me, sir. Josef Levi. The schoolmaster’s son from Lewicki. You look different – don’t we all now – but I’d know you anywhere.’

‘Josef! Josef Levi, my dear man!’ cried Anton, recognising him at last. Anton saw Josef now as he’d been years before: with no beard, in Polish army uniform. And remembered him five years before that, as a stringy-legged schoolboy riding his bicycle lazily up and down the street in the village.

The two men gripped each other’s arms. They were like shipwrecked sailors finding each other on a desert shore after each had believed he was the sole survivor.

‘It’s wonderful to see you. Here of all places,’ said Anton, the words pouring out of him. ‘You were with Anders in Russia? Which regiment? And how are your family? Have you heard from your father? I wrote a few letters home through the Red Cross myself but heard nothing back. It’s amazing the mail can get through at all in the middle of a war . . .’

Anton stopped short. What a clumsy, stupid thing to do – to breezily ask a Polish Jew if he’d heard from his family recently. He was gabbling, so excited at meeting someone from home.

‘I’m sorry, I . . .’

‘All gone. My parents and both my sisters. At least I know for sure,’ said Josef, looking steadily at Anton. ‘The Jablonski family, too. The mayor as well, and dozens of others. Who knows who’s left. Your wife . . .’

‘Yes, Elisabeth left the day after me,’ said Anton. ‘She’s waiting for me in Warsaw. As soon as we’re back home, I’ll go there to meet her. Now that I have a new identity, thanks to Danny, it should be so much easier. Hitler’s on the run, anyone can see that, though God knows it’s all far from over yet.’

‘Captain,’ said Josef. ‘I have to tell you, sir, that your wife is dead.’

31

Josef looked steadily at Anton. ‘Your wife is dead,’ he had said. He was expressionless. The Jewish fighter was a man who had known so many horrors that it was all the same to him now.

‘No, no,’ said Anton. ‘You’ve got it wrong there. I know she left for Warsaw just in time when the Germans invaded.’

‘I’m sorry, but it’s true,’ said Josef, speaking slowly, as though explaining something to a disbelieving child.

‘I was there,’ Josef went on. ‘We – the Fourteenth Infantry, that is – copped the start of the Blitzkrieg, German air raids that went on for hour after hour. Stuka bombers were diving out of the sky like devils, with that screaming sound they made. It made you shit your pants to hear them. Headquarters was bombed. Our transport, munitions, radios – everything was gone. Those of us who were still left alive were running around like ants after their nest is smashed.

‘I ran and ran, and ended up hiding in a barn on Dudek’s farm before making my way east, where the Russians captured me. I suppose I should be grateful. Anyway, I was at the farm for a week. Good old Dudek left a plate of food out for me every evening. You remember him?’

Anton nodded, rendered dumb and powerless by Josef’s words. He knew the Dudeks, of course. Mrs Dudek had worked as their cook at the Winter Palace since he was a boy. Despite that, Andrej Dudek was not one of his better tenants. He was a grumpy character who drank too much and always needed reminding to mend the fences. Yet this man had risked his life to hide a Polish soldier, a Jewish one at that. How terrible that it takes a war before you can see what a person is really made of.

‘Old man Dudek told me everything that happened in the village. About my family and the Jablonskis too. Even how they burnt down our house afterwards. And your wife – you thought she’d left, you say?’

‘On the Warsaw train.’

‘The Warsaw train,’ repeated Josef. ‘That’s right. Dudek told me the train was bombed by the Germans. Totally destroyed, no one was left alive. I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this.’

Anton couldn’t speak. He stared at the young soldier in front of him, in his dusty clothes, with a sten gun hanging comfortably from his shoulder. Between them, it seemed, a deep black hole had opened up in the earth, into which Elisabeth had plunged. All he could feel was a yearning to follow her, so she wouldn’t be alone in that dark and terrible place.

It was Josef Levi from Lewicki in front of him, all right, yet it was not him. Everything had changed. This had been the skinny son of the schoolteacher, the one who had joined the army. Anton had seen him now and then in the distance at the Poznań barracks and raised a hand in friendly greeting, despite their difference in rank. That boy was no more. He’d become the man standing in front of him now on a hillside in Palestine. Anton must look different to Josef too. Instead of the officer who lived up at the big house in Lewicki, he’d become a slave worker in Siberia known as Komarowski, the Mechanic. Now, from this hour, he was reborn again as David Ginzburg, a Jew from Minsk. How is it possible to live and be yourself when everything changes from day to day?

Elisabeth, too, had perished, but had not walked out of the flames reborn as he had. Anton was not yet ready to take this in. Only the night before he’d been speaking to her in his mind as he lay in bed. How many times had he done this since the war began? For how many years? Deep in the winter of the Russian forests. Along the road to Samarkand, staring up at the stars with his hands behind his head. In the Holy Land, on the run and in his room at the kibbutz. All this time he’d imagined Elisabeth safe in her aunt’s quiet, stuffily furnished apartment on Sielecka Street, where the blackbird sang at dusk every evening. It was impossible to believe she’d been dead all this time. He had been in conversation with a ghost.

‘Get up now. There’s a good man.’

He felt Danny grasp one of his arms while Josef took the weight of the other. Anton was weightless for a moment as he rose into the air, then was standing again. It seemed he’d fallen to the ground and been on his hands and knees, staring at the earth and whispering to himself.

‘Are you sure you’re all right?’ said Josef. ‘We need to get going. There’s a job we have to do in Haifa tonight.’

‘I’m okay. I’m okay,’ said Anton, his voice hoarse. ‘Bit of a shock. Thank you for telling me, Josef. Thank you, Danny, for everything. I’ll see you when you pass by next.’

Gideon was checking the doors were all locked before going to bed when he saw Anton return later that night. Caught in the light of Gideon’s lamp, he held his hand to his eyes and brushed past, clothes muddy and torn as though he’d been rolling in the undergrowth.

‘My wife, my wife,’ was all Anton could say as he pushed by.

Anton lay awake that night, seething with hatred for Germans. He wanted to rip one apart with his hands and see his guts spill out. He wanted to join the army again so he could go and fight in Europe, although the war was almost over now. Most of all, he felt a terrible loneliness, more alone than he’d felt in the depths of the Siberian nights. He’d never felt this way before.

So this was hatred. He began to understand how men could murder without hesitation. This was how they felt, those people who left bombs in railway stations or bars full of cheery people. If the people were Germans, he would do it willingly himself and look at the bloody consequences with a shrug of his shoulders.

•

Danny and Josef took their time on the way to Haifa. They avoided the main highway where there might be checkpoints, keeping to minor dirt roads. They didn’t want any British soldiers poking around in the truck’s precious cargo. It was destined for a secret Irgun safe house near the port city. Even so, they still met other vehicles on their night journey. Who were these people, driving trucks and cars, and even riding bicycles along the dark, rough roads? The other drivers avoided Danny’s gaze. He kept his eyes trained ahead too. Everyone was busy about their own business. He just wished the truck behind him would overtake so he didn’t have the glare of its lights constantly in his mirror.

‘I’m sorry to hear about Mechanic’s wife,’ he said to Josef. ‘I hope it was a direct hit when her train was bombed so she didn’t suffer.’

‘There was no bomb,’ said Josef after a moment’s pause. ‘She’s still alive, as far as I know.’

‘What the hell do you mean?’ shouted Danny. ‘You’ve just told a man that his wife is dead! What in God’s name are you playing at?’

Danny was so angry he was tempted to pull the truck over, but they were on a schedule and couldn’t waste any time.

‘It was an act of kindness,’ explained Josef coolly. ‘Better for him to believe she’s dead than know the truth.’

‘Spit it out,’ said Danny. ‘What do you mean?’

‘You remember I told him I hid out at the Dudek’s farm when I was on the run? Well, Mrs Dudek worked up at the big house, the Winter Palace. The Germans kept her on when they took it over as a headquarters building. She didn’t say anything about a train being bombed; I made that up to spare the captain’s feelings.

‘What Mrs Dudek did say was that Anton’s wife was sleeping with a Nazi officer. She became the mistress of the German colonel who moved into the house. The woman was hardly out of his bed, Mrs Dudek said. You could hear all sorts of things going on in there. They left the light on one evening, and she looked through the keyhole. It was disgusting, like a room in a brothel, she said. And then Mrs Lewicki-Radziwiłł would come down to dinner, cool as a cucumber, all dressed up in fancy clothes and jewellery, arm in arm with her German officer. She would sit with the rest of the Nazi scum to eat and drink and toast Herr Hitler. Mrs Dudek saw it with her own eyes. She’d never liked Anton’s wife, she said. How could I tell a man all that about his wife? Better for him to believe she’s dead.’

Danny grunted. ‘Poor bastard. But he’s probably not the only one,’ he said. ‘And I wish that damn driver behind me would overtake. I’m sick of the glare of his lights in my eyes.’

Danny slowed and signalled for the other driver to go past, but the truck behind only slowed to match Danny’s speed.

‘I think we have a problem, Josef. Prepare the guns, will you, while I try to outrun him.’

But Danny didn’t have time to speed up. As Josef loaded and cocked the sten guns, another truck appeared, coming towards them, and drew across the road. Danny pulled up, caught in the headlights of the two vehicles.

‘Do you think they know what we’ve got in the back of the truck?’ asked Josef.

‘Maybe yes, maybe no,’ said Danny. ‘But I’m afraid it’s me they’re after, and they’ve got their man. They’ll get a surprise if they start firing,

that’s for sure. Let’s shake hands, count to three then jump out and run for it.’

Josef was chewing casually on a dead match. Danny might have been suggesting they go on a stroll in the woods for all the emotion he showed. On the count of three, they threw open the truck doors and leapt out, ready to start shooting. A swarm of bullets hit them before their feet touched the ground, so many that their bodies danced in the air like puppets being jerked on a wire. Seconds later, another burst of machine-gun fire hit the truck, detonating the twenty boxes of high explosives stacked up in the back.

32

‘This is London calling,’ said the announcer on the radio.

I immediately recognised the warm voice of Josef Opienski, a familiar announcer on Polish Radio before the war. Just listening to those words was enough to have me shot by the Nazis, I knew. It was frightening. It was exciting.

When I had entered the hospital pharmacy a few minutes before, Mr Lubansky put a finger to his lips and beckoned me to sit down by the bench where he prepared compounds. With a sharp tug on the shelf above, the wall swung open like a cupboard door. Hidden in the cavity behind was a box holding a bundle of valves and wires, with a dial on the front.

‘It’s a . . .’ began the pharmacist.

‘I can see what it is!’ I hissed back. ‘You warned me I’d be shot by the Germans if I even listened to a radio, and here you are with one yourself! What do you think you’re doing, risking our lives like this?’

‘This radio is special,’ whispered Mr Lubansky. ‘I built it myself. The partisans have printed thousands of pamphlets on how to make one. It’s surprisingly easy.’

He gazed proudly at the contraption, seeming oblivious to the danger it posed, then plugged in the power and waited for the set to warm up. The dial on the front had been salvaged from another radio. It showed all the frequencies and a familiar row of stations. Rome. Hilversum. Luxembourg. Cairo. Sydney.

‘It’s so long since I saw a radio,’ I said quietly. ‘When I was a child, I loved turning that dial to tune in to different places around the world. It was such a thrill to hear voices from those faraway cities, even though I couldn’t understand what they said. I remember how we used to fine-tune the signal to hear the sound of an orchestra emerge through the clouds of static . . .’

‘Hush,’ said Mr Lubansky, putting a finger to his lips again.

‘This is London calling,’ said the man on the radio again, and he began to read the news.

The pharmacist turned the volume down very low so that the newsreader's voice was muffled by the music playing on his gramophone. Anyone passing in the corridor would be familiar with that. We bent our heads down close to the radio in order to hear. Despite the pharmacist's breath, stale with pipe tobacco, I kept my head near his in order to hear the news. For all the danger, it was thrilling to listen to the radio together.

'This is the BBC Polish Service,' murmured Mr Lubansky. 'There's Dawn Radio, too, a Resistance station that the Germans think is based in Warsaw. They hunt everywhere for it! But the British are clever. I've been told it's actually broadcast from somewhere in England.'

I listened, gripped by the news and almost forgetting to breathe. There had been a terrible battle in Stalingrad. The Russians were fighting back against Germany and had already crossed into Belarus and Poland. All through the winter, the Red Army had pressed on, metre by metre, taking heavy casualties. They were experts in winter fighting, with equipment and clothing that allowed them to withstand freezing temperatures of minus twenty degrees. The Germans, though, often found the engines of their tanks would not start. Thousands of their soldiers froze overnight as they lay in their trenches. Meanwhile, the Soviet army had pressed on. In the west, British and American troops had entered France and were advancing towards the German border. On the other side of the world, the Americans were turning the tide on the Japanese. It was all too much to take in. We had heard rumours, but this was confirmation. The Germans were on the defensive, but that made them more dangerous, like a cornered beast.

After the news summary, I was about to speak when Mr Lubansky held up a finger, signalling for me to wait.

'Anya waits for the woodpecker's song. Uncle Tomas plays chess in the dark . . .' said the announcer, reading out a series of cryptic sentences.

'These are secret messages for the partisans,' said the pharmacist. 'They mean nothing to the Germans who must be listening, nor to you or me, for that matter. For someone with the right code book, though, certain words in combination give detailed instructions on where guns and ammunition will be dropped by the RAF, as well as orders from the Polish government-in-exile on where to attack and when. With the Russian army driving the Germans back through Poland, a time will come soon when we rise up and attack them from the rear!'

Once again, Mr Lubansky's words excited and frightened me at the same time. Dangerous days were coming for us all, but if we survived, then Anton and I might be together at the Winter Palace next year, in 1945.

'A time will come soon,' Mr Lubansky had said. It came within days.

I had just come off a night shift and was looking forward to bed one morning when I was called to the matron's office. Dr Laski and Mr Lubansky were there already. The pharmacist was standing at the window, looking out at the garden below and whistling quietly to himself. The doctor was sitting on a corner of the matron's desk, casually swinging his leg. They were clearly waiting for me. This would not be a routine meeting about a change to ward shifts.

'You've been doing well helping wounded partisans, Dr Laski tells me,' said the matron. The doctor grinned, defying me not to smile back. I nodded. He had, at least, kept the promise to keep his wandering hands to himself.

'Things are changing,' she went on. 'The partisans have been preparing a revolt for more than a year. A big one. Operation Tempest. Once the Russian army approaches Warsaw, Lvov and other cities in the east of Poland, we'll rise up and attack the Germans from the rear.'

'In Poznań too?' I asked.

'Not here,' said Mr Lubansky, still standing at the window but facing me now. 'We're too far from the front line. Our group is responsible for sending supplies to the partisans in the east of the country, and that includes medical equipment – what little we have – for their casualty stations.'

'When does this happen?' I asked.

The matron gave a look that reminded me that my job was to answer questions, not ask them.

'Never you mind your little head about that,' said Dr Laski. 'Everyone has their part to play in preparing for the uprising. We have ours. Yours is to deliver a message to one of the supply coordinators.'

A spasm of irritation went through me at the doctor's attitude. I had to remind myself that he too was risking his life to fight the Germans.

'And the message?'

Mr Lubansky took something from his waistcoat pocket and tossed it to me. Without thinking, I reached out my hands and caught a matchbox. I opened it enough to see that it was crammed with strips of paper printed with long strings of random-seeming letters. I stopped myself from asking

what it all meant. The message was in code, and my job was simply to deliver it to the right person.

‘When would you like me to go?’ I asked.

‘Now,’ said the matron. ‘Right away, as soon as you go through that door. You can sleep when you get back. Memorise this address: 23 Grunwaldzka Street. The Germans have changed the name to Grünewaldstrasse. It’s a butcher’s shop. You’ve got that?’

I nodded.

‘Ask for some liver sausage and say it’s for your sick uncle. Mrs Milosz works in the shop every day. She’ll recognise the phrase and know who you are. Only give the matchbox to her, you understand? No one else.’

I nodded again, repeated the instructions, and ten minutes later was walking through town towards Grunwaldzka Street. The butcher’s shop was easy to spot. Pheasants hung from hooks outside and cuts of meat on trays were on display in the window. Few Poles could afford to shop there these days, and I was sure only Germans or their Polish maids ever walked through the door. A bell tinkled as I entered and a man in a striped apron behind the counter looked up from cleaning his nails to give me a welcoming smile.

‘Good morning,’ I said, flustered, as I had been expecting a woman. ‘Is Mrs Milosz here? I mean, um, do you have some liver sausage? It’s for my sick uncle.’

The words sounded foolish the way I blurted them out, but the butcher gave an understanding wink.

‘Welcome, welcome,’ he said. ‘Come through to the kitchen, it’s more private there. Mrs Milosz should be here very soon. Take a seat and I’ll give a call to tell her you’re here.’

The man ushered me into the room behind the shop, took my coat, then went to a telephone in the hallway.

‘Your friend is here, Hanna,’ I heard. ‘We’ll see you soon? Good.’

I had never been inside a butchery before and looked around. Half of a pig that had been sliced down the middle lay on a thick wooden table, a bucket overflowing with intestines on the floor next to it. A fly, shining green in the sunlight, was circling the bucket, hardly able to believe its luck. On a cooking range, a big pan of giblets bubbled contentedly in boiling water. Beside a wooden clock on the wall, a faded chart displayed a cow with all the cuts of meat marked by dotted lines – sirloin, brisket, silverside

and so on. It had never really struck me before that these were names for parts of a living animal as well as for something cooking in an oven. It was a long time since I had eaten a roast dinner. Even so, I would be glad to get away from this stuffy room.

The butcher came back in, sat opposite me and smiled, not saying a word. The fly took off from the window and began to buzz over the bucket of offal again. A hand shot out and the man caught the fly, crunched it between his fingers then flicked its body onto the floor. He winked at me again. There was a loud tick as the minute hand of the clock advanced a notch. This wasn't how it was supposed to be. My heart beat faster. Something was wrong.

'I'm sorry, I can't wait,' I said, standing up abruptly. 'Tell Mrs Milosz I'll see her another time.'

The man stood up too, blocking the way to the door. He held a gun in his hand.

'You'll see her this afternoon, I promise,' he said. 'A car will be here soon to take you to join her at Gestapo headquarters.'

Once again, the hand on the clock jumped forwards with a click. The Germans would be here within minutes, and then God help me, and God help those I would be tortured to betray. The thought that the lives of Matron, kind Mr Lubansky and Dr Laski depended on what I did now filled me with an urgent energy. I looked around. Despite being a butchery, there were no knives or cleavers lying about. Everything had been cleared away, ready for this moment. I had no idea who this man in the butcher's apron was, but – whether he was German or a Polish traitor – I had to kill him. The difficulty of doing so while a gun was pointed at my chest only made my mind move faster. I bowed my head, put my hands over my face as though crying tears of despair, and turned my back on the man. My shoulders trembled with the motion of weeping. In front of me was the range.

With both hands, I took the handle of the bubbling pot of giblets, then spun around and threw the boiling water at the man's head. His hands flew to his scalded face as he screamed in pain and dropped the revolver, which skidded across the floor and under a workbench. Even so, he took a step towards me. I gripped the iron pot tighter and hit his head as hard as I could. Flecks of blood burst from the scalded flesh of his face. It was a ghastly sight. I wasn't sure if he could see me, if the boiling water had burnt

his eyes, yet still he staggered forwards. I drew the heavy pot back and hit his head again. The pot flew away and this time he fell to his knees, groaning in agony. Flinging out his arms, he gripped my legs. Breathing heavily with the effort of bringing the man down, I found myself hearing everything acutely: the tick of the clock on the wall, the sound of voices and cars on the street. Any one of them might be the dreaded Gestapo arriving outside the shop.

'Everything is a weapon,' I had been taught, yet what was there within reach? Leaning forwards, I pushed the man to the ground, sitting on his chest and trying to pin his arms with my knees. Even then, he wriggled a hand free and grabbed onto my dress, desperately wanting to keep me there until the Gestapo arrived. This wasn't in the training, I thought absurdly, and felt an extra surge of urgency and anger at the man. I reached out to the butcher's table and grabbed a jug which was standing there. I brought it down as hard as I could on the tiled floor. It smashed into pieces, sending a splash of pigs' blood over the front of my dress. The handle stayed in my hand, attached to a jagged shard of pottery. With all my strength, I pushed the sharp point as deep as I could into the man's neck.

That was enough. His body trembled violently. An awful sigh came from his mouth, then he was still. I surely had only moments to spare, yet I checked his pulse in case. There was nothing.

Satisfied that the man was dead, I rushed to pull on my coat to cover the bloodstained dress, pushed back my hair, then hurried from the room and out into a side street. Dreading the sound of heavy footsteps or a black Gestapo car pulling up beside me, I forced myself to take deep breaths and stay calm as I walked back towards the hospital with my head down. My heart beat so hard, I felt sure passers-by could hear the thudding sound, and had to tell myself that this was nonsense. What wasn't nonsense, though, I realised with horror, was that I still had the coded message on me. I fumbled quickly in my pocket to open the matchbox and take out the bundle of paper. I popped it into my mouth and chewed hurriedly, forcing myself to eat it. Swallowing the little wad of paper hurt my throat, but what a relief that it was gone!

As soon as I was back in the hospital grounds, I ran to the matron's office to tell her what had happened. 'Poor woman,' she said. 'Hanna will be tortured, but at least she doesn't know your name, only that a messenger was coming. You killed the man who saw your face. You escaped. You

destroyed the message. In the circumstances, that's the best we could have hoped for. The job of the partisans now is to discover who betrayed her. There's a special team for that.

'Well done, Emilia. You must be exhausted. Have a bath, change your clothes and burn that dress in the hospital incinerator. Try to get some sleep now.'

It was extraordinary how much those few words of praise from the matron meant to me. I could have wept with gratitude. As the war and the world went about its business that day, I slept deeply amid a kaleidoscope of dreams. The scalded, blistering face of the traitor as he screamed and staggered towards me. The ceramic point plunging deep into his flesh. A pig squealing in pain as it was sliced in two and fell apart, sending a wave of blood over me. And a dream, too, of reuniting with Anton when peace came again. I saw us walking hand in hand through the garden at the Winter Palace. He would tell me stories about the prisoner-of-war camp. I would tell him about . . . what? Should I cause him the pain of telling the truth about being raped every night by Colonel Wendt? Of being marked as an army prostitute and escaping from a burning bus? Of joining the partisans and killing a man with my bare hands?

I was a very different person from the young wife he had left behind.

33

After Anton was told that Elisabeth had died in a bombing raid, he stayed in bed with the shutters closed all the next day and through the following night. It was impossible to imagine that he might ever get up, that he might eat and talk and do the ordinary things that other people did. All he wanted was to sleep, to be free of the pain of being awake and grieving for Elisabeth. Yet, to sleep felt like a betrayal of her too, so he lay awake for hour after hour, remembering in agony the moment when they said goodbye and he had cycled away, leaving her alone at the door of the Winter Palace. He imagined the sound of her voice and bit his lip until it hurt. He went over every detail of their life together. All the plans they had for the garden, for travel and for starting a family one day. It felt as though he were living a posthumous existence himself, now that Elisabeth was gone. For the first time in his life, Anton could imagine why people committed suicide, like the student who had thrown herself from the library roof when he was at university. It would be like falling into a blessed sleep. He would never have to wake to endure the pain of being alive again.

On the second morning, there was a tap on his door. It opened before he could call out ‘Go away’. A steaming mug appeared, followed by a hand, an arm and then the rest of Rachel tiptoeing exaggeratedly into the room. Her dog, Misha, followed, claws tapping on the wooden floor.

‘I thought you might like some coffee,’ Rachel said, putting the mug down on the floor next to his bed. ‘Gideon told me your news. I’m so sorry about your wife.’ Her words were blunt, her voice was gentle.

Anton nodded, not trusting himself to speak. Rachel stood beside him, looking solemnly down, like a doctor visiting the bedside of a patient. It was unusual to see her stand still. Rachel was always in motion, so rarely at rest. She wore her regular outfit: a loose shirt over a khaki skirt and a pair of sturdy boots. As usual, her legs were scratched from walking through the undergrowth with her dog.

‘We’re mending the fences in the far orchard today,’ she said. ‘There’s no one else free, so it would be a big help if you could give us a hand.’

Before there was time to answer, Rachel turned and clattered down the stairs again, followed by the German Shepherd attending her closely like a guard. Anton lay still for a while. Eventually it seemed to him that there was no choice. He could stay in his bed with the same grim thoughts circling in his mind or he could spend the day hammering fencing posts into the ground and nailing lengths of wires between them. Slowly, his body began to move. He splashed his face, dressed, pulled on his boots then put on a wide-brimmed hat. Ready to leave, he saw the mug Rachel had brought him, forgotten on the floor. He took a sip. It was tepid, almost cold. Only now did it occur to him how she must have made the coffee especially for him then carried it delicately across the yard and up the steps to his room, careful not to spill any on the way. Tipping his head back, he drained the mug.

It made a difference to get up and make himself useful. Like a car engine starting after a long time out of action, Anton slowly found a rhythm in his life again. It was a rhythm, though, that contained a howling, silent grief for Elisabeth, entwining the days and weeks with his pain. He hadn’t yet discovered that grief carries its own solace, like a seed within a dark and heavy fruit. He was not yet able to look forward to the day when he woke, but only counted the hours until he could go to sleep again.

It was during these months that Anton had a reminder of his precarious position in the world.

‘We’ll need to get out the best tea set this afternoon,’ Gideon said to him, trying to put on a lighthearted tone.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Our English friends are paying us a visit. There’s going to be an army raid on Yehuda.’

Anton never discovered how Gideon knew the kibbutz was going to be raided by the British army, looking for weapons. They arrived punctually at 3 pm. A jeep led the way, followed by two lumbering trucks full of soldiers. The officer in charge shook hands with Gideon before they disappeared together into his house. The troops, meanwhile, leapt down and fanned out to search the buildings. They took their job seriously, tapping floors and walls to look for hiding places, even crawling among the stench of the chicken coops to plunge their bayonets into the ground beneath. They had

done this before, it was obvious. Only as the army trucks drew up did Anton realise in a panic that he might be recognised by one of the British soldiers as a wanted man. Damn fool! he cursed himself. I've become complacent here. I should have grown a beard at least.

All that afternoon, as the kibbutz was being searched, he made sure he stayed in the gloom of a workshop, with oil smears on his face as a meagre disguise. Head down under the bonnet of a tractor, he took his time changing the spark plugs and cleaning the battery connections. Eventually, though, he felt a firm tap on his back.

'Identity papers,' said the soldier in a bored voice, holding out his hand.

He was a typical British squaddie in long shorts, with a big sunburnt nose. On his head was a beret with a regimental badge that Anton didn't recognise. It looked like a leek.

'David Ginzburg,' the soldier read from the identity card, enunciating slowly as though the name were a particularly tricky crossword puzzle clue. He looked at Anton with renewed interest, staring at his face.

'I know you,' he said abruptly. The way he spoke, it sounded like an accusation. The man had an unfamiliar singsong accent that puzzled Anton.

'I don't think so,' he replied, putting on a slow Russian accent himself.

Anton took a deep breath as he smiled at the soldier. There were not many options if the private recognised him as a fugitive. He casually took hold of a heavy wrench from his workbench and kept it in his hand. If necessary, he would hit the man on the head to knock him out – and then what? He would have to take his chances and run, go as far from the kibbutz as he could so that Gideon and the others wouldn't be blamed for sheltering a murderer.

'Oh, yes, I remember you,' insisted the soldier. 'I never forget a face. I've got your number, boyo. I just can't place you. Give me a mo' and it'll come, don't you worry.'

The man tapped the side of his nose then ducked further into the workshop. He sat down on an empty oil drum, lit up a cigarette and gave a sigh of satisfaction in a minor key. So that was it, thought Anton. The man was a slacker. He recognised the type and despised it – soldiers who took pride in doing the absolute minimum and avoided work at every opportunity, leaving it to others to do their share. He noticed the man didn't even offer him a cigarette. How tempting it was to bark out in his natural

officer's voice, 'Stand to attention, man! Show me your orders. Who's your commanding officer?'

Instead, Anton put his head back under the bonnet of the tractor, going through the motions of repairing something or other while keeping a firm grip on the wrench, ready to hit the soldier if he recognised him as the man known as Jan Komarowski, wanted for murder.

'I've got it!' cried out the man.

Anton jumped upright, banging his head on the tractor bonnet.

'Now I remember,' the private went on in his singsong voice, standing to drop his cigarette butt and stamp it out with his boot. He came forwards and jabbed Anton in the chest.

'You worked on the bar at Shepheard's Hotel in Cairo, mixing cocktails. I'd know you anywhere, right?'

'Not me, mate,' said Anton. 'I've never been to Cairo in my life.'

After the soldier had swaggered out, Anton spat on the floor. 'Shepheard's, indeed,' he muttered. Everyone knew it was the most fashionable bar in Cairo. That man wouldn't know where to find the place if he tried, and if he did, they wouldn't let him in. The accent and the cap badge of a leek clicked together in Anton's mind. Welsh Guards. How I'd like to have a word with that man's sergeant-major.

'It was a routine inspection,' said Gideon later. 'I know the British officer in charge. And he knows we're not harbouring any terrorists here. They've orders to search every kibbutz in the region for arms and explosives, and so they do what they're told. A nice report gets written and everyone's happy. That's how it goes in the army, I don't have to tell you.

'He asked some other questions, too. About smuggling. About illegal immigrants. Escaped criminals. The usual stuff. You should know, your picture was one of those he showed me. "Jan Komarowski. Deserter. Wanted for the murder of Colonel Rybus." Sounds a desperate character, doesn't he?'

'Damn,' muttered Anton.

'I thought they might have forgotten you, but the army is a bureaucracy, my friend. Everything stays on file. The army never forgets. You can pass yourself off as David Ginzburg with your new papers, but there's not much you can do about your face. I'd make a special point of avoiding any contact with the authorities if I were you, just in case.'

This had been a narrow escape, Anton realised, narrower than he'd thought at first. If the lazy Welsh Guards soldier had recognised him from the photograph, then he might have been put on trial and faced a firing squad within weeks. For the rest of his life, the threat of being caught and put on trial would hang over him.

Nearly a year went by before the Jewish militias stopped fighting each other and the Hunting Season came to an end. Gideon did his best to explain all that had happened. 'You have to understand,' he said, 'that like all families, the Jewish people love to argue among themselves, and there's no fight more bitter than one between brothers. But here at Yehuda we have a peaceful, communal existence. We live in harmony with all our Jewish and Arab neighbours. That's not how most people are thinking these days, though, more's the pity.'

Now that the Germans were close to defeat in Europe, the different Jewish groups began working together against the British administration, which was trying to limit the number of Jewish refugees entering Palestine. Almost a third of the population were now Jews, and the British feared unrest among the Arab Palestinians if it crept nearer to 50 per cent.

Anton came to understand that the worst of human tragedies occurs when two rights collide. The Arab majority were fearful they might never gain the independence they had been promised as the Jewish population grew daily from the influx of refugees. For Jewish people who had escaped the horrors of Nazism, Palestine seemed the only place left in the world where they could have a homeland and feel safe. It wasn't only the Germans they distrusted. Some French, Poles and others had given enthusiastic help to the Nazis in rounding up Jews to be sent to their deaths. A story circulated about camp survivors, walking skeletons, who had made their way home to Poland, only to be turned away by neighbours who had taken over their houses and were not inclined to give them back.

Some of these tales came from the mouths of newly arrived refugees to the kibbutz. They were not country people, most of them. Brought up in Kraków, Lvov or other cities, they were disconcerted by the silence of the night at the kibbutz, deep in the hills north of Jerusalem. Many stayed for a while, grateful for a place to rest their heads, but then drifted away to Tel Aviv, where there were more jobs. For every one who left, though, others arrived to take their place, each with their own extraordinary story of survival.

34

‘Come to the kitchen!’ called Rachel to Anton one afternoon. (He was trying to fit a homemade leather fanbelt in a traction engine.) ‘You’ll never believe what Mrs Boorstein has brought all the way here.’

Anton put down the fanbelt with a sigh. It always puzzled him how he found Rachel’s interruptions irritating and welcome at the same time. Anton recalled Mrs Boorstein. She’d arrived a few days before, a woman in her seventies with a halo of frizzy white hair around her face. He very much doubted she had anything that would be of interest to him. Still, if he didn’t come now, he would never hear the end of it.

A dozen people were gathered around a long table in the kibbutz kitchen, men and women in their work clothes who had been called in like Anton himself. Even Gideon was there. Next to him was another old woman Anton had noticed a few times. No one could figure out how she’d made her way to Palestine, for she was either mentally ill or had been driven mad on the long and terrible journey. Her eyes were never still, moving constantly from one face to another. She murmured to herself, always in conversation with invisible companions. Her hands were rarely still either. Her fingers moved up and down as though grasping at a world which was rushing past, and on which there was less and less purchase as she tumbled into madness. However, Anton saw even she had become still now.

All eyes were on Mrs Boorstein. Sitting at the head of the table, she began to unwrap a parcel of brown paper and string. They were used to hearing about refugees smuggling out necklaces and gold coins in their underwear, but what Mrs Boorstein revealed in the parcel was quite different.

Everyone crowded around the table, leaning towards the package as though it contained a precious jewelled icon. There were gasps and whispers. Anton had difficulty seeing through the crowd.

‘What’s all the fuss about?’ he asked Rachel.

‘Shhh,’ she hissed, jabbing him in the ribs with her elbow.

Craning his neck, Anton saw that Mrs Boorstein had unwrapped a thick volume with cardboard covers and faded lettering on the cover. *Warsaw Telephone Directory 1938–39*, he read. Why had the old woman carried that heavy thing all this way? It seemed another form of madness, but Anton soon found out the reason.

Mrs Boorstein and her husband had fled from Poland to France, she explained, taking the telephone book with them. Friends had looked after them, but her husband died suddenly of a heart attack in Marseilles. She had taken a ship to Palestine, then been smuggled ashore at night in a rowing boat. Somewhere between Warsaw and Jerusalem, Mrs Boorstein had lost her false teeth. Her mouth was drawn back into a fleshy crater, yet her voice was clear and steady.

‘On the ship I had to sleep with the phone book in my arms every night to protect it,’ she said, ‘or the rats would have eaten the whole thing.’

She began to turn the pages delicately, fragments of the cheap paper flaking off the edges with every touch. It was the last relic of a disappeared world, Anton saw, crumbling even as they stared at the columns of dense lettering.

‘Can you look up Julius Poczetnowski, please?’

The hesitant question came from a young woman seated on Anton’s right.

Mrs Boorstein riffled through the pages.

‘Julius Poczetnowski, Kryzek Street, 44,’ she read.

The woman nodded slowly, staring at the name before them confirming that, yes, her husband really had existed. That address had been their home.

‘How about Brill – David Brill. Ludomirki Street, number three,’ asked an elderly lady. ‘Doctor,’ she added with a hint of pride in her voice. Mrs Boorstein, custodian of the volume, turned to the B’s and ran her finger down the names. There it was in black and white.

‘My son,’ said the lady, bringing a handkerchief to her mouth.

‘Michalska family. Adam Michalska, my brother,’ said a bald-headed man. ‘They lived on Kobuza Street, 176.’

Once more the fingers turned the pages, their edges crumbling all the while, making a dusty border around the book.

‘I bet I remember the telephone number: 10 21 58. Am I right?’

Mrs Boorstein solemnly read it out – the number which was all that remained of Adam Michalska and his wife and daughters.

Anton felt everyone around the table becoming emotional, but, like him, they couldn't turn away from this magical volume which had tumbled from the past onto the kitchen table before them.

'Katerina Zalewski, Sielecka Street, number eight.'

Some recognised the fashionable address and turned to see who had spoken. Anton bit his lip as everyone looked at him. The entry for Elisabeth's aunt was found and read aloud: the telephone number and address of the place where he'd assumed Elisabeth had been safe after he'd left the Winter Palace. For so long he'd imagined that one day she would pick up the receiver there and hear his voice again.

'Sielecka Street,' said someone. 'Very nice area – near the Botanic Gardens, isn't it? All gone now. The Germans shelled it during the Uprising. Completely destroyed. There's not one brick standing on top of another.'

Anton nodded in acknowledgement. Of course. It was all gone now. The quiet, elegant apartment with the Biedermeier table in the hall. The French windows onto the balcony with art nouveau ironwork. In summer, the windows were left ajar in the evening, so the breeze could cool the apartment. The gauze curtains ballooned and drifted down again as he had sat in the darkening room with Elisabeth's head leaning on his shoulder, listening to the blackbird sing in the plane tree outside. All these memories unfurled from one line of tightly set text in the telephone directory.

On they went around the table, naming sons and daughters, fathers, mothers and friends – all drawn closer now. Behind each name lay a world of love.

Anton blinked at a tear then tasted a salty globe of water on his lips: a drop of memory squeezed from time. He was not alone. A man in paint-spattered overalls beside Anton put an arm around his shoulder. Anton did the same to the person next to him. Still the names were called and whispered. For a while it felt like a magical ceremony: that while they stood together around it, everyone in that precious book – the living and the dead – was momentarily present, with arms around one another, till there was silence at last.

•

‘Let’s go for a walk,’ Anton said to Rachel as they filed out of the kitchen. ‘I can’t face going back to work yet.’

They made their way along the bank of the river which wound through the valley. It was in full flood after recent rains, as though someone had turned on a gigantic sluice upstream. Rachel’s faithful dog, Misha, followed close behind. They walked in silence, deep in thought about the ragged and precious book of names. Rachel slashed aimlessly at the long grass with a stick she carried, then finally spoke her thoughts.

‘How can there be a God, to allow all this to happen? If there is, then damn him to hell.’

Anton was no believer, but something made him argue back. It wasn’t that her words were sacrilegious, but that they were somehow against reason. That mattered to him more.

‘I understand, I do,’ he said, ‘but imagine if God – if there is a God – did intervene in our lives. Think about the implications. The consequences.’

Rachel gave him a wary look, but carried on walking, swinging her stick at the grass. The dog watched the stick move back and forth, pleading with his eyes for her to throw it. You can carry on talking, Rachel’s expression said to Anton. I’m listening, but don’t expect an answer.

‘Let’s say that God saved Mrs Brill’s son, whose name was read out,’ he said. ‘Imagine an angel appeared on Ludomirki Street and led him to safety. Then why not save everyone else’s family? Not only Jewish lives, but everyone who’s been killed in this bloody war?

‘Think of it. God would need whole squadrons of angels, streaming out of the sky, turning bombs to explosions of rose petals over Warsaw and London. See them raising up the dead from cemeteries and mass graves hidden in forests . . .’

‘Yes, and why would God stop there?’ broke in Rachel. ‘Surely he would need to do the same with the victims of Stalin and Genghis Khan and every other tyrant who ever lived.’

Rachel was already ahead of him, Anton saw. She wasn’t just the simple country girl he might have thought when they first met.

‘So, you see,’ he said, grabbing the thread of the argument. ‘A God who stopped evil happening would take away our free will. God would be utterly alone in the universe: an old toymaker surrounded by dolls and tin soldiers obeying his command. We’d be no different to mechanical toys. Instead, we

have this extraordinary freedom that also allows terrible things to happen. Does that make sense?'

Rachel answered by slipping her arm through his, so that they walked in companionable silence again. How comforting it was to feel that someone understood him. The pain and sorrow of these years was not his alone, but was shared by Rachel and the others who had stood around the kitchen table; shared across Europe, Russia and half the world. How many millions had died, ground up in the great clanking mincing-machine of war? A million Elisabeths. A million Stans. A million little Sarahs. All of this because we were free to do good or evil to one other. It was the terrible price of being such infuriating creatures who possessed our own free will. To be able to go on living meant coming to terms with this hard reality.

Anton's thoughts turned to Elisabeth and the others whose names had been intoned around the fraying telephone book. More than a year had gone by since Josef had told him Elisabeth was dead, yet he still felt a kind of guilt for accepting that she was gone and lost in the past. It was like taking off a heavy pack filled with the cargo of his grief. He'd carried it on his back for so long, it felt a part of him. Now he must lay it down and walk on by himself. Could he really live so unencumbered?

Lying in bed that night, Anton emptied out his pack of memories, turning over and weighing in his mind its precious freight. This was what little Sarah Bruckner had done at the camp in Siberia, solemnly examining the paltry possessions that were all she had in the world. A handful of pebbles and a piece of glowing amber. A magazine cutting. The handkerchief given to her by the mother who had been left behind to die in the vastness of the Siberian forest. His cheeks were wet with tears again, but it was strangely consoling when they touched his lips.

Anton had dreamt for so long of his own personal promised land. All through the Siberian winters and the long trek with General Anders' army, he'd yearned to return to the Winter Palace and his life with Elisabeth. But this was not his future, only a broken reflection of the past. He would never see Elisabeth again. Every day he'd missed her, and then found her each night in imagined conversations before he went to sleep. It was like a long game of hide-and-seek, until in the end she was hidden beyond all finding.

35

It took all morning for me to cycle from Poznań to the Winter Palace. After three hours I reached our little town of Lewicki at last. I rode by the airfield that the Germans had built: a concrete expanse more than a kilometre long, the buildings now bombed and in ruins. Weeds already poked up through cracks in the runway. What had happened to Colonel Wendt? I wondered. Dead on the Eastern Front, almost certainly. The war had been over for nearly a year now. Throughout Poland, the Russians were in charge.

The centre of Poznań was in ruins after a terrible battle for the city in the winter of 1945. Buildings not destroyed by Soviet artillery were brought down in savage street-to-street fighting with tanks and grenades. The hospital was mostly spared, though the front of the building was half-collapsed after a bomb landed in the square outside, and all the windows along one side were shattered. By the end there was no medicine left, hardly any food, and the power was completely cut off for days. All we could do was huddle in the basements, deafened by the sound of explosions outside and praying the battle would end soon. We provided what little comfort to the sick that was possible. Many of them died, with a little water on their lips all we could do for them. It was terrible to see. When the fighting slackened off at night and it was safer to go outside, we dug a shallow pit in the kitchen garden by candlelight and burnt the bodies of the dead there.

Only when the Russians had complete control of the city did we dare to venture beyond the hospital grounds and onto the streets. I heard that Poznań's German commander, General Gonell, had lain down on a Nazi flag and shot himself when he realised the battle was lost. The next day, what was left of his army surrendered.

Little by little, a ghost of normality returned. German prisoners of war were set to work clearing the roads of rubble and dead bodies, still in their ragged uniforms, wearing handkerchiefs as makeshift masks over their noses and mouths. A sharp smell of brick dust hung in the air for most of that year. Everywhere we saw Russian army engineers out on the streets,

repairing water pipes and setting up poles and wires to get the telephones working again. They were used to this, I realised. All across Russia and Poland they had fought and destroyed towns occupied by the German army. Once the towns were conquered, the Russians had set to work rebuilding them.

After six long years of war, I was simply grateful to be alive. Millions of people had been killed, yet somehow, by chance, I was one of those who survived. And if I'd managed to live, then why not Anton too? I hadn't been back to Lewicki since being bundled into the back of a truck and sent away to Poznań to work in the German army brothel. Though the war was over, I still kept my sleeve down to cover the shameful tattoo I'd been marked with on that day. I pedalled my bicycle through the streets of Lewicki. It felt strangely like 1939, before the Germans had invaded. Familiar things whispered to me, 'Nothing has changed, everything is as it was.' The rusting sign of a yellow seashell hanging at the petrol station. An apple tree that I looked forward to seeing in blossom every year. Here it was still.

Things were different on the main street. Many of the houses were in ruins, the empty windows framed by smudges from fire and smoke. Walls everywhere were pockmarked from sprays of machine-gun fire. A German platoon must have made a last desperate stand here against the advancing Russians. It was the same as in Poznań. A few people passed by as I rode. I didn't recognise any of them. Most of the shops were closed, although one was busy with women coming and going, carrying large shopping bags and avoiding my eye.

There was a notice in the window. *No food today, but we have handkerchiefs, candles (some used), three spark plugs and the inner tube of a bicycle.*

And some black market sausages and butter, I suspected, thinking to call in myself on the way back.

I turned onto the laneway that led up to the Winter Palace. Reaching the gates, I dismounted and pushed my bike slowly up the drive. A sparkling in the orchard caught my eye. I looked closer. A chandelier was hanging from the bough of an apple tree, turning slowly in the breeze. I walked on. In front of the house, there was our beloved grand piano set down in the middle of the lawn. One of its legs was missing, and the keys were smashed off like broken teeth. The grass around it was churned up into mud, as though motorbikes had been going round and round the piano.

These strange sights unsettled me. Perhaps there were people at the house, people I should worry about. Standing still, I listened for a moment. Apart from the melancholy call of pigeons in the nearby wood, everything was silent. There would be vehicles if anyone were here, I told myself. The front door stood wide open, so I leant my bicycle against it and walked inside. The house had been ransacked. Furniture, rugs and curtains, light fittings and even the doorknobs had been taken. In the dining room, a half-burnt chair leg lay in a mound of ash. Blocks from the parquet floor had been prised up and used to make a fire. The kitchen ceiling had collapsed. Part of the bedroom floor above was hanging down at a crazy angle, exposing joists and twisted pipes. Some of the bedroom wall had fallen, too, with its Victorian wallpaper of delicate dogroses and ivy. It was strange to see this juxtaposition of rooms, as if the past and present were crashing together. It was like memory made manifest.

My heart beat faster as I went upstairs, my footsteps loud on the bare boards. The bedrooms were in the same ruined state as downstairs. The entire house had been stripped. In the bathroom, the taps and even the bath itself had disappeared, leaving water pipes jutting awkwardly from the wall like severed brass limbs. This was the work of Russian soldiers, I decided. The Soviet army was notorious for looting, taking as their due any property they came across. It was said that soldiers from remote parts of the Soviet Union had never seen such wonders as doorknobs and taps, and so gathered sacks of them to take back home.

My bedroom had been wrecked, like all the others. It brought back so many memories – of my first happy years there with Anton, and then of the German colonel who had kept me as his slave. The memories crowded each other out until my mind became blank. I felt myself floating through the room as if in a dream. Of the furniture, only the dressing table was left, tipped on its side with the mirror smashed. The empty drawers had been thrown around the room. One still had its lining of folded newspaper. ‘Poland and Britain Sign Naval Treaty,’ I read. A passenger train had crashed near Danzig, sending two carriages rolling down an embankment. I turned the page over. There was a photograph of a fox hunt about to set off: well-dressed riders on horseback and a manservant offering them glasses of port on a silver salver. ‘Mr Peter Jacobowski welcomes guests from England for the last meet of the season,’ read the caption. Peter owned a neighbouring estate, and I’d met him a few times at parties. The newspaper

date was 2 May 1936. Anton and I had married the week before. While we were on our honeymoon in Venice, a maid had prepared the room and lined the drawers ready for our return. That trip felt like a scene from a romantic movie, not a memory from my own life.

What had happened to that maid? What had happened to our Jewish neighbour, Peter? Perhaps it was best not to wonder. I went to the fireplace and carefully put my hand up inside the chimney. It was beyond belief that Anton's watch would still be where I'd hidden it so long ago, on the day the Germans arrived. But, yes, there it was, the silver disc and leather strap in my soot-covered hand again.

I went to the bathroom to wash, forgetting that the taps had gone. There was probably no water pressure anyway. I cleaned my hands in a water barrel behind the house, wiped them on my dress, then sat on the front steps to eat the sandwich I had brought. For a long time I sat looking out over the garden and familiar view of the woods and distant hills.

I tried to wind the watch but the bezel refused to move. Perhaps I would have it repaired. I sat on the wide doorstep for another hour, leaning against the doorframe. Holding the watch tight in my hand, I became lost in memories. At the hospital, everyone knew me as Nurse Emilia Witkowska. Yet I was someone else too: Elisabeth Lewicki-Radziwiłł, who had said goodbye to her husband on this very spot. After a while I remembered that I had an early shift at the hospital the following morning. Climbing back onto the bicycle, I set off on the long ride back to the city.

36

A year passed quickly at the kibbutz: a procession of festivals that were becoming familiar to Anton. Chanukah. Passover. Rosh Hashana. Yom Kippur. Anton tried to learn the meaning of each, so they would be as familiar to him as Easter and Christmas. It made his new identity as ‘David Ginzburg’ more authentic, although Gideon and Rachel now knew his story and his real name. Rachel was a patient teacher, but he learnt more from the simple beauty of the festivals’ Hebrew names and their different emotional resonance.

One morning, a hot, dry wind rose from the south. It blew on and off for weeks, carrying sand which gathered on window sills and even got into Anton’s coffee cup. The grass turned brown and the nights were hot, making it difficult to sleep. Everyone was irritable. This was the Khamsin, he was told – one of those winds like the Sirocco in Italy or the Föhn in Switzerland that are supposed to drive people mad. Each spring the Khamsin arrived in Palestine, meaning summer was not far behind.

News came thick and fast from Europe. Anton gathered with the others around Gideon’s radio every evening to hear the BBC news. The volume was turned up and everyone leant forwards whenever there was a mention of Poland. Week by week, day by day, Germany was squeezed between the Russian army pressing from the east and the Western allies who had pushed through France and the Netherlands into the northern plains of Schleswig-Holstein.

Only after the last shot had been fired, after the generals had signed the surrender and shaken hands, did the full horror of the past six years become clear. The war had been a gigantic machine of death. Into one end had been fed soldiers and civilians, doomed sailors, and airmen falling from the sky. Christians and Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. All of these, and every Jewish man, woman and child the Germans could find. It was hard to believe it was all over.

For the Polish people, a war was won and a war was lost. Anton stared at the *Jerusalem Post* spread out on the kitchen table, his eyes stinging with tears. He'd heard the latest news on the radio, but seeing it in front of him, in print, made it brutally real. Churchill and the American president had made a secret pact with Stalin to win the war. They divided up Europe between them. Stalin was allowed to take Poland as part of the Russian Empire. In Warsaw, a Communist government was in charge now, taking direct orders from Moscow.

'I'll never see Poland or the Winter Palace again,' Anton told Rachel. 'This little valley in Palestine is the only home I have now.'

Rachel took his hand in both of hers, kneading it gently, then blushed and pulled away.

'You have the whole world, Mr Mechanic,' she said, though her smile showed more sadness than joy.

Jewish refugees arrived at the kibbutz in ever greater numbers, fleeing in the aftermath of the great bonfire of Europe. Some were family. Some were old neighbours bringing news from Chelm, Tarnopol or other communities that no longer existed. Anton heard one of the arrivals mention Poznań and pulled him aside. He couldn't help himself.

'Do you have any news about Lewicki?'

'I only know the Germans built a massive air base there for bombers to attack Russia – much good it did them.'

'And the people?'

The man shrugged his shoulders. 'What do you think?' he replied. 'I did hear that the mayor was hanged from a lamppost. As for the others . . .' He left the sentence unfinished.

I shouldn't have asked, thought Anton. It just gets me upset all over again. He saw that some of the new arrivals bore telltale tattoos on their arms. They had survived slavery or concentration camps, but wore a constant reminder of their murdered families.

'Have you seen that Yelena Gridinski yet?' asked Rachel as she and Anton took her dog for his evening walk. 'She's one of the refugees who arrived last week. Gideon's put them in tents behind the big barn for now.'

'Yelena Gridinski,' repeated Anton, stroking his chin. 'Is she good-looking?' he said with a wink.

'Ha, ha,' said Rachel, giving him a punch on the arm. 'Not at all. Scrawny and pale like a weed. She's probably your type. Everywhere she

goes, you hear this little jangling sound. She carries around a bundle of silver teaspoons on her belt, tied up with string. Never lets them go.

'They're all she has left of her family home. Imagine carrying them all this way from Poland to Palestine. A bunch of spoons! It's tragic, God knows, but you have to admit, it's a little bit funny too.'

'You might think so,' said Anton stiffly. How easily he could imagine gripping on to a bunch of spoons if they had come all the way from the Winter Palace. Rachel was practically a 'Sabra', he reminded himself: a Jew actually brought up here in Palestine. She felt sympathy for refugees, naturally, but didn't know first-hand the horror of war, the feeling of being exiled from everything one held most precious. Rachel's innocence was dear to him, but it created a distance in their friendship too.

The little bunch of spoons did not surprise Anton. *The Warsaw Telephone Directory 1938–39* had been joined by dozens of other objects saved from the great holocaust of the Jews in Europe, each one a talisman of love. A dog-eared photograph. A tortoiseshell brush with a few precious hairs remaining, all that was left of someone's mother. A watch. A chipped and lustrous cup of red and blue, crossed swords of Meissen on the base – just like those they had had at the Winter Palace – miraculously carried in a bundle of clothes across a dozen countries.

Anton looked out for 'scrawny, pale' Yelena Gridinski among the recent arrivals. They had been given the job of extending the kibbutz vegetable gardens. She stood out immediately, a slim young woman who managed to look stylish even while digging a row to plant potatoes. Anton chatted to the foreman about the repairs he was making to a mechanical hoe, noticing Yelena over the man's shoulder. She pulled off a headscarf to reveal two long braids, reminding him of the sniper back in Russia. She stretched her arms, then languorously tied her hair back as she spoke to the man next to her. She had a familiar accent: the educated drawling Polish of a woman from the upper classes. Perhaps he would get to know her better. There was a dance coming up at the kibbutz in a few days. That would be the time to introduce himself.

The following evening, Anton lay dreaming in his room over the barn. Had he ever met any Gridinskis? Perhaps Yelena knew Peter Jacobowski, the grain merchant who'd lived near Lewicki. What had become of that poor man? he wondered, not for the first time. Peter's wife had been charming too. He recalled her at a ball, wearing a strapless gown and long

black gloves up to her elbows. What lovely arms she had. Before the war, Anton had read in newspapers about Hitler making a fresh start for Germany, of ‘clearing away the garbage’. Anton hadn’t taken much notice. It had sounded almost idealistic. Now that he knew what those horrific words meant, Anton felt sickened by his own ignorance at that time, so proud of being a country gentleman who didn’t bother himself with politics.

Anton’s thoughts of those faraway days were interrupted by a clattering on the stairs, heavy boots followed by the unmistakable sound of a dog’s paws. Damn it, he wasn’t in the mood to be disturbed.

The door flew open without a knock. Into the room burst Rachel and Misha, who was wagging his tail and panting.

‘What do you think?’ Rachel called out, giving a proud smile.

Am I being slow? thought Anton. Was there some news he hadn’t heard?

‘What do I think . . . about what?’

‘My outfit for the dance, silly!’

Rachel did a pirouette then gave a mock curtsy. Anton looked closer. Misha had a spotted bow tie attached to his collar. Rachel had on her usual workboots, but with white socks peeking out. She wore a freshly ironed brown skirt and bright blue blouse. Her face was smeared – that was the only word for it – with make-up she must have applied without any help, and possibly without a mirror, Anton decided. Looking closer, he saw that she’d tried to shave her legs, for they were nicked here and there with cuts and patches of dried blood.

‘Good God, Rachel,’ he said. ‘What have you done to yourself? You look a mess . . .’

As soon as he spoke, Anton wished he could catch the words in the air and cram them awkwardly back in his mouth. Rachel’s expression went stiff, though whether it would turn to anger or tears was impossible to guess.

‘What I mean is,’ he said quickly, ‘I love you just the way you are. Why make yourself up like this? It’s just not you.’

Rachel’s lower lip had begun to tremble. The dog looked from one of them to the other with his head tilted to one side, trying to make out what was happening.

‘And that blouse. Bright blue with a brown skirt,’ he went on, trying to make light of his words. ‘The colours clash completely. Surely you’ve

something else to wear?’

As Anton spoke he realised that, almost certainly, she did not have anything else to wear. The bright blue shirt with oversized collars would be her precious ‘best’ blouse, brought out only for special occasions. Why couldn’t he keep his damned mouth shut?

The dog barked. He’d had enough of this human indecision. Then, with a clatter of boots, the swish of a skirt and the whisk of Misha’s tail, they were gone. Did he imagine hearing a shuddering sob as Rachel ran down the steps? Anton didn’t dare to follow and find out. Surely she’ll get over it, he told himself. She’ll be back tomorrow, her usual self.

But Rachel did not come to Anton the next day. Nor the day after that.

37

The evening of the dance arrived. Anton helped to clear a space in the big barn before the guests from neighbouring kibbutzim arrived. Hay bales were stacked around the walls to make rustic chairs and tables. A simple stage was set up at one end for the band. Homemade lanterns covered in coloured paper hung from the rafters. It was a merry sight.

Anton drew a glass of the kibbutz's own wine from a wooden barrel. The first guests arrived, hopping down from the back of a truck, self-conscious in ill-fitting best clothes. A man in a double-breasted suit gave an armful of flowers to Gideon and they embraced. Other guests followed, carrying baskets of food and gifts. There was much bowing and shaking of hands and exchanging of kisses. Some had known each other in Poland, Anton realised. Not so long ago, back in the 1930s, the same people might have visited each other's houses on Shabbat. After dinner, they might have chatted about their families over a strawberry tart and cups of coffee.

'Young Eli is going to university next year,' Anton imagined the man in the double-breasted suit saying, back in Lvov long before the war. 'That boy takes after his mother, not me, thank God.'

But young Eli had been sent to the Treblinka extermination camp, where his mother, sisters and most of their family were also killed. Only his father was left alive. The old man had somehow survived and was standing in front of Anton now in a barn in Palestine, his ragged trousers clean and neatly pressed, arm in arm with a man he'd just met who had known his cousin in Odessa once.

The barn was becoming crowded, filling with the sound of chatter. A fiddler began to play, jerking his head and arms to the tune like a puppet on a string. An elderly couple started to dance. Children followed, copying the couple's moves, and then there were a dozen people on the dance floor. Now and then someone lifted up a giggling child to swing them in a circle before putting them down again. Anton looked past the dancing crowd and saw Yelena Gridinski. She was leaning on the wheel of a tractor as though it

were the fashionable Column Bar of Warsaw's Hotel Bristol. Three men stood around her, competing for her attention by telling stories. Anton saw their eyes glance repeatedly at Yelena's dress, where her breasts met in a warm, shadowy cleft. She laughed at some wisecrack, lifting her head and giving a brief shimmy with her hips. He saw the little bag of silver spoons hanging from her belt. He noticed her eyes, too, glancing nervously around as she laughed to gauge the impression she was making. Anton stared gloomily at his empty glass. He could join the others around the honeypot, he supposed, or just pour another drink and sit back to watch.

'I'm sure we met in the Column Bar back in '39,' he imagined saying to Yelena, silencing the others with a commanding voice. 'Why don't you come and dance with me right now?'

'What a fool I can be,' sighed Anton.

He poured another glass and settled back on the hay bales where he'd made himself comfortable. Why hadn't Rachel arrived yet? Perhaps he'd put her off. Or maybe she would turn up when everything was in full swing, rush over to him with a smile and say, 'Let's dance!'

Anton was finishing his fourth glass of wine when Rachel finally arrived. She moved between groups of visitors, holding people by the arm as she kissed their cheek, or leaning forwards to whisper something that made them smile and shake their heads. How he envied those people. At last she came towards him, then walked straight past, ignoring Anton even as he opened his mouth to say something. Soon she was dancing in a circle with a dozen others, holding hands with a young boy on one side and an old lady with a feathered hat on the other.

Anton sat alone. It struck him that not one person in the entire world knew or cared where he was, now that Elisabeth was long dead. Even Rachel's not my friend any more, he thought, recalling their evening walks by the river at dusk, talking about everything from the origins of the universe to her recipe for elderflower wine. Anton was a stranger to self-pity, despite all that had happened to him. He didn't know how it felt. Now, though, catching glimpses of the woman in a short brown skirt and blue shirt dancing in the circle, he'd never felt more alone in his life. Did you have to hurt someone to realise, too late, that you were in love with them?

You bloody fool, Anton, he thought to himself. Go home to bed and get some sleep.

Anton felt sick when he woke the next morning. He had a headache and couldn't taste a thing of his breakfast. The hours dragged through the day. It's not just the wine, he decided. After some consideration, he came to the conclusion that all tastes, all places, all people were the same to him now. Nothing seemed to matter very much. He settled down in bed that evening with the book from his bedside table. This was a tea chest on its side, on which an oil lamp stood and which also served as a container of all his worldly goods. The book was *Bleak House* by Charles Dickens. Anton had found it in the kibbutz library. There was a circular stamp on the title page: *Royal Artillery Regiment. Staff Officers' Library. Do not remove.* The novel would improve his English. It was a distraction. And besides, he wanted to know what happened next. Would Richard and Ada gain their rightful inheritance?

Anton's reading was interrupted by a scratching on his door. He listened, feeling the back of his neck grow cold. There it was again, as though someone couldn't quite bring themselves to knock. Yet he hadn't heard any footsteps on the wooden stairs.

'Hello, is somebody there?' he called.

After a moment, the door slowly opened and there stood Rachel. She looked her usual self, but barefoot, with a scratch on her knee from some adventure with her dog. She wore her usual skirt with a loose army shirt. Did the girl really possess no other clothes? Her hair was even more tangled and wild than usual.

Neither spoke. Rachel looked at him from under her dark eyebrows, gave a brief nod, then wandered into the room. Have it your way, thought Anton, you can speak first (and besides, he didn't trust himself to say the right thing, whatever that was). He turned back to his book. Rachel went over to the wide window ledge, sat and stared out into the night. She gave a deep sigh, eyes still focused on the darkness beyond. All she could see, though, he was sure, was a pale reflection of the room lit by the oil lamp's flame.

London, Michaelmas Term lately over, and the Lord Chancellor sitting in Lincoln's Inn Hall. Implacable November weather. As much mud in the streets as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth . . .

Anton read the first page of *Bleak House* again, yet his eyes travelled over the words mechanically. He couldn't have told anyone what they meant. He looked up to see Rachel sitting at the end of his bed. When had

she moved? And so silently. Her bare knee was inches from his foot. Her face, usually so bright and carefree, had a serious expression he'd never seen on her before.

'Anton, I've been thinking. I want you to answer honestly. Did you mean what you said the other day?'

How deep and lovely her voice was. Had he not noticed that until now? And what did she mean? Anton tried to think fast. He remembered every syllable of their last conversation before the dance when she'd become upset, but what words did she mean? And was she still angry with him?

'You mean . . .' he said.

'I mean, when you said you loved me just the way I am.'

At that moment, something gave way in Anton's heart, something that had been frozen in solitude and then in grief for so long. It was a cold and hard thing, which had helped him to survive the war, perhaps. But now it was like a glacier melting and abruptly giving way, the waters sweeping away towns and villages and memories before them. Everything was changed. Nothing would be the same again.

Rachel's face grew larger until it filled his vision. Had she come closer or had he moved towards her? Their faces were almost touching. She was like a force of gravity. Anton felt himself falling towards her, falling through the tangles of her hair until his lips touched her neck and her cool arms were around his head, pulling him closer.

•

Anton and Rachel lay together on his bed for hours. They whispered and they kissed. For long periods they simply smiled at one another, nose to nose, like conspirators admitted to an extraordinary secret. They stared in fascination at the loveliness of each other's faces, seen so very close now. The delicate skin in front of her ears. His blue eyes which had seen so much more than hers.

Both knew what was to come, but there would be a time for that. For now, it was enough to lie like this in sweet anticipation, bodies snug against each other. The hour for dinner at the kibbutz came and passed unnoticed. Rachel asked him question after question: What's the first thing you remember in your life? Have you ever seen a ghost? What would you do if you won a million pounds? Do you sometimes know what's going to

happen a moment before it does? The evening light faded slowly into night. Darkness was like a warm quilt around Anton and Rachel. It draped the bed and room, and flowed outside to cloak the surrounding hills. They had found each other. It felt impossible they should ever need to move from this bed again.

They slept and woke again in utter darkness. Rachel gave Anton a loud, exaggerated kiss on the cheek.

'I love you,' she whispered.

Anton drew her closer, luxuriating in the touch of skin upon skin.

'I loved you the first time I saw you,' she went on. 'When I was waiting at the gate. When Danny drove up in his truck and I saw you, with that big smile and even that bent nose of yours!'

'Yes, the day I arrived,' he said. 'It feels so long ago now.'

Rachel took his hand in hers, stroking it gently as they lay together in silence.

•

After you've been alone, to love someone again populates the world. Everything else is scenery. Everyone else is an extra in the drama of your lives. So it was for Anton and Rachel in the days that followed. They moved in each other's orbits, measuring time by when they would be together again. Slowly they got to know each other better, filling in the gaps from their past. They discovered each other's habits, both good and bad. There was the shock of their first argument and then the sweet reconciliation.

Taking Misha for his walk one evening, Rachel and Anton heard a stuttering of gunfire echo from the neighbouring valley, as they had during the time of the Hunting Season. Both flung themselves down flat on the ground, Rachel pulling Misha close. The sound had been a rapid burst from a sten gun. A few single shots fired back, then the machine gun again. Then silence.

'Someone's not happy,' said Anton. 'I wonder what that's all about.'

Rachel frowned. 'Let's go and ask Gideon.'

They found her uncle at home, sitting next to a hot stove with a little grille revealing the inferno within. A coffeepot sat on top, making contented gurgling noises. Gideon looked comfortable, listening to the radio in his vest with braces hanging down. Embarrassed at being found in this state of

undress, he quickly pulled the braces over his shoulders and signalled silently to them.

A finger was held to his lips. (‘Don’t speak yet!’)

A gesture to the radio on the shelf beside him. (‘I’m listening to a concert.’)

Five fingers held aloft. (‘But it’s over in a few minutes.’)

Anton and Rachel sat down to listen. The soprano’s voice had to struggle at times through surges of hissing and crackling on the radio, like a brave swimmer beating her way through the airwaves. Anton recognised a favourite opera he had last seen at the Grand Theatre in Warsaw, sitting in a box wearing evening dress. How strange to hear the music again in his dusty farm clothes on a kibbutz in Palestine.

‘This concert is coming live all the way from Paris,’ whispered Gideon in wonder.

More than two years had passed since the liberation of France in 1944. Even so, it still felt strange to Anton that the war was finally over, that everything was as it had been before. Yet it was not the same. With Poland and half of Europe now part of Stalin’s empire, Churchill had spoken of a Russian ‘Iron Curtain’ cutting the continent in two. Only the previous week, Anton had read in the *Jerusalem Post* that there were more than six million refugees displaced by the war. Some, at least, could apply to emigrate to countries that needed workers, such as Canada or Australia. The newspaper had a photograph of a family posing stiffly on the Haifa quayside with a pair of cheap suitcases in front of them, about to embark for a new life in Calgary. They looked worried.

‘Wasn’t that beautiful?’ said Gideon when the concert ended and the Parisian applause died down. He turned the radio off. ‘The final scene of *Tristan and Isolde*. I’ve always loved the “Liebestod” in the final act. The lovers dying but united forever through the power of music. I’m glad they’re still playing Wagner, even if he was a favourite of the Nazis. Now, what did you want to ask me about?’

Rachel told Gideon about the gunshots they had heard from the next valley.

‘From near the Arab village,’ added Anton. ‘Dayr Tarif.’

Before answering, Gideon lit a match and held it over the bowl of his pipe. He made some extravagant sucking noises and the tobacco began to glow. He gave a grunt of satisfaction.

‘Ah. The shootings. It’s not a pretty story. Now that the British are getting out, why can’t we have a secular state, live together and follow our faiths peacefully? It tears at my heart, but no one listens to common sense any more.’

‘And the gunshots we heard?’ prompted Anton.

‘They call it “relocation”,’ said Gideon. ‘In other words, Jewish settlers forcing Arabs out of their homes and off their land, then driving them away. If they fight back, a few truckloads of militia arrive and start shooting. That could be what happened in Dayr Tarif this evening.’

Gideon knocked the dead cinders from his pipe and began to fill the bowl again.

‘Some of the men here were muttering about joining the Irgun and getting involved,’ said Rachel. ‘Did they talk to you about it?’

Gideon nodded as he bent forwards to light the pipe.

‘A few have left,’ he said. ‘But who am I to stop anybody? I told them they were free to do as they liked, but our kibbutz was not the place for them. They won’t be back. It’s happening all over Palestine. The Arabs are shooting and planting bombs too. Meanwhile, the British are trying to keep order while walking backwards out of the country. English soldiers are being shot at all the time. Looking for the man who killed Colonel Rybus isn’t exactly a priority at the moment, I’d say! So long as you stay as David Ginzburg, you’ll be safe.’

‘There’s going to be real war in this place, isn’t there?’ said Anton.

‘There’s no doubt about that,’ said Gideon. ‘A bloody war.’

Anton couldn’t sleep that night. Lying in the darkness, he realised that both his fists were clenched tight with anger.

‘The stupidity of it!’ he said when Rachel slipped into bed. How warm and calm her body was beside him.

‘After all the horrors of the past ten years, all that death and sacrifice, to start it up again because two peoples can’t agree to live together in their holy land.’

‘Hush, now,’ said Rachel, propping herself up on one elbow. ‘We’ll be all right here at the kibbutz.’

She blew gently on Anton’s brow, her face almost touching his. This usually aroused him. He would grip her bare arms and cover her face with kisses. Tonight it only irritated him. He sat up, restless with anger. This was about him as well as about Palestine. Soon it would be 1947. For the past

eight years, he'd been driven from one place to another. He was without a home, and his dear wife had been killed. He'd served as a soldier and a slave, lived under false names and been hunted as a murderer. Now he wanted to make a new life for himself with a woman he loved. And what happens? Another war. For all the rights and wrongs of both sides, he was sick of it all.

'We've found happiness in this valley,' he said. 'Now it's going to be kicked over and smashed as if it were no more than a little glass snow dome.'

'You think it'll be that bad?'

'You and Gideon know better than I, Rachel. What do you think?'

Rachel sat up beside him, a thoughtful expression on her face. She took his hand.

'Yes,' she said quietly. 'There's so much hatred on all sides now. Once your own family has been killed, there are no more arguments. The violence feeds on itself. When the British leave, all hell will break loose. This valley will become a battleground. Even if Gideon manages to protect the kibbutz, we'll feel constantly under siege. It'll never be safe.'

'And every other village will feel the same, even when the shooting stops,' Anton added.

'If it ever does,' said Rachel. 'You and I should go off and form our own country. The People's Republic of Anton and Rachel.'

Anton laughed, drawing her back down onto the pillow.

'Maybe we should leave. But where? And what about Misha?' he asked, relieved that Rachel would consider leaving Palestine, though unsure if she was including her dog in their plans.

'Gideon will look after Misha,' she said.

'And what about Gideon? How would he react to you going away?'

'Don't worry about that. I'll talk to Gideon,' she said.

It was decided in an instant, then, Anton saw. He was awed by her decisiveness. It was almost brutal.

The following day, after much rummaging in the woodshed, he found the newspaper he'd seen with the article about settlement of refugees overseas. Taking a deep breath, he wrote a letter of inquiry to the emigration office in Jerusalem.

Rachel brought a map of the world from the library to his room. It came from a 1937 edition of *National Geographic* magazine. They unfolded it on

the bed. Huge areas were coloured in red. The British Empire dominated the world. How things had changed in ten years.

‘Okay,’ said Rachel, ‘let’s get started.’ She squeezed her eyes shut. ‘Shall I stick a pin in the map?’

Anton laughed. That was effectively what they were doing to decide the rest of their lives. Well, why not? At least it would be their decision.

‘How about Canada?’ he said. ‘It’s somewhere completely different. We can make a new start there. We could change our names, become new people!’

Rachel shook her head. ‘Too cold for me,’ she said, remembering an article she had seen in another *National Geographic*. There were pictures of polar bears and a woman in thick furs fishing through a circular hole in the ice.

Anton opened his mouth to speak, about to insist on the many reasons why Canada was the best place to go. After all, it was his first choice. But something made him pause. Why should he always know best? Better to talk it through.

‘What about England?’ said Rachel brightly.

‘Maybe,’ he replied, ‘but would it feel too close to Poland, where I can never go again?’

‘How about South Africa, then? Or Australia?’

Anton had not thought about Australia for years. He remembered Roger Affleck, an Australian friend from his army days. Roger would be back home in Perth now with Aviva, his wife. He had spent a merry evening with them at a bar in Jerusalem before the dreadful fight with Rybus changed everything. He remembered the Australian soldiers cheering and laughing as they raced their own version of the Melbourne Cup on piggyback.

‘How do you feel about Australia?’ he asked.

Rachel tipped her head to one side while she considered the idea. Australia seemed like an utterly alien place. It was hard to imagine.

‘I get a picture in my head,’ she said. ‘A desert with a kangaroo hopping across it.’ This entirely exhausted her knowledge of the country.

‘There’s more to it than that,’ said Anton. ‘An Australian soldier told me all about the place. It’s a whole continent, bigger than Europe. There are vast forests. Empty beaches a hundred kilometres long. Then there are high mountain ranges. They get more snow than Switzerland, he said. Imagine that!’

‘I’ve just one question,’ said Rachel. ‘It’s important.’

‘Yes?’

‘Can we get decent rye bread there?’

As a good Pole, Anton immediately saw the importance of this question.

‘I’ll make inquiries,’ he said solemnly.

Anton couldn’t sleep that night. The great decision they had come to so casually made his mind race. Other memories crowded into his mind too, bitter and sweet by turn.

Marching with the Anders Army through the desert and arriving in a town as the call to prayer sang out from the towering minaret of a mosque. The moment he’d first seen Rachel, perched on a farm gate, cradling a rifle in her lap. Hearing of a mother wandering deep in a Siberian forest, the howling of wolves approaching as night closed in. The woman’s little daughter, Sarah, solemnly wrapping her meagre possessions in a handkerchief before leaving Anton’s hut. Standing naked on a beach in Persia, knowing he was free after long years in the Russian slave camp. And cycling down the drive as he left the Winter Palace in 1939, casually lifting his arm in farewell to Elisabeth, sure that he would see her again in a few months. How he wished he’d turned around to look at her one final time.

Anton fell asleep at last.

Six months later, he and Rachel were walking down the steep gangplank of a migrant ship onto the wharf at Port Melbourne. How strange it felt to stand on dry land after the long voyage to Australia. How strange to see the silvery trees beyond the promenade and hear the cries of unfamiliar birds. Anton gave Rachel a nervous smile and she squeezed his hand in reply. They joined hundreds of other refugees waiting on the quayside. Some cradled babies in their arms, holding up hands to shelter their faces from the heat of the sun. Others held suitcases or big carpet bags tied with rope. The ship had been a hubbub of voices in half-a-dozen languages as it drew into port, but no one was talking now. After a while, a line of buses arrived to take them to the Bonegilla migrant camp. The crowd moved forwards, taking Anton and Rachel with them into their new world.

38

Now that the war was over, it was time for Anton to come home. He would be released from a prisoner-of-war camp, free at last. It was certain that we could never live at the Winter Palace again. Soon after my last visit, when I saw our home in ruins, squatters had moved in and started a fire that got out of control. The Winter Palace was burnt to the ground. After the Communist government seized the estate there were plans to build a factory there, but nothing ever happened. The house remained in ruins, the walls overgrown with ivy and honeysuckle. Only when I close my eyes is our home intact, exactly as it was on the day that Anton went to join his regiment. The Gothic silhouette of battlements and spires. The stained-glass window spilling pools of colour over the great staircase. The dogroses and the orchard where we gathered apples. The lawn where a fox left footprints in the snow each winter's morning.

I waited at the Poznań railway station as often as I could, confident beyond reason that Anton would be among the hundreds returning from exile. There were slave-workers coming back from Germany with a big *P* badge on their jackets, prisoners of war, even some who survived the Nazi death camps. But for every man or woman who returned, there were thousands of others who had perished. As the months went by, the numbers arriving at the station dwindled. Sometimes only a solitary, haggard figure stepped down from a train to stare around the platform, looking for a family who were no more. Yet why shouldn't Anton be one of the last to come home? I had waited for him to return for so long, it felt I'd kept him alive all these years through sheer force of imagination. Sometimes I feared that Anton believed I had died in the chaos of the war, and had started a new life somewhere out in the wide world. Other times I dared to imagine we would lie in bed together again one day, as we had on the morning he left the Winter Palace. Our limbs were so entwined, I could not tell which were his and which were mine.

I stayed on working at the hospital, where everyone knew me as Emilia Witkowska. I was only a simple nurse, but if anyone found out my real name was Elisabeth Lewicki-Radziwiłł, I could still lose my job or worse. Now that the Communists were running the country, it wasn't a good idea to confess you were married into the old landowning class. As soon as I could, I'd made a trip to Warsaw to look for my aunt, but I got lost trying to find the street where she had lived. The entire city was a surreal landscape of ruins, mostly destroyed in the uprising against the Nazis, and then bombed and pounded to brick-dust as the Red Army fought to take it.

In Poznań, much of the city was in ruins too, but at least the hospital wasn't as badly damaged by the Russian assault as the rest of the city. All the colour had been blasted out of the town, leaving everything in shades of dusty grey, with just a bright red Communist flag breaking the monochrome here and there. A hungry year passed, and still the occasional displaced person (DPs, we called them) arrived at the station. Not all who survived and came back had a warm welcome. Many returned to find that their home and everyone in it had disappeared. Some came back to find that neighbours had taken over their house during the war. After somehow surviving a concentration camp and making the journey back, they were driven away with sticks and threats, as though the new inhabitants were outraged that the victims had dared to stay alive.

Anton was far from the only soldier who had not yet returned. All of Europe was awash with displaced persons – men, women and even little children without identity papers or money, all struggling to get home somehow. On a wall near the hospital, I saw a poster with a smudged, badly printed picture of a boy's face.

Has anyone seen my son, Pawel Moder? it read. *Sent as forced labourer to Essen by the Nazis, 18 July 1943.*

Within a few weeks, I noticed dozens of similar posters had appeared on the wall. The first one was already tattered and starting to peel off, but new ones appeared every day now. Piotr, prisoner of war, not seen since 1939. Marian, thirteen years old, snatched from the street by German soldiers two years ago. Henryk, sent to Bavaria as a factory worker, never returned home . . . there were so many! The fluttering of the posters in the breeze made a susurrating murmur as I passed, as though whispering the names of the missing. Similar advertisements started to appear in the Poznań newspaper, the *Gazeta*. Some days they filled an entire page. It was futile, of course – I

could see that. The chances of finding someone this way were invisibly small. But I recognised, too, that it was a solace. People could feel they had done everything humanly possible to find the person they loved and had not seen for many years. Why not try it myself? I began to wonder. After all, what was there to lose?

I spent most of an evening with a pencil and scraps of paper, trying to write my notice.

CAPTAIN ANTON LEWICKI-RADZIWIŁŁ, I wrote in capital letters, and then, *Missing in action, September 1939. Have you seen him? Reward for information.*

After a moment's thought, I crossed out the offer of a reward. All I had in the world was the little money I'd saved over the past year. It would attract too many people ready to lie and waste my time to get their hands on some cash. Putting on my coat to go to the newspaper office, I glanced at the advert again, then scribbled the offer of a reward back in. It was such a long shot, I would be silly to reduce my chances even further.

The sight of Anton's name boldly printed in black and white in the newspaper was strange, even exciting. This was my own name too, kept secret for so long under the Nazis and now the Communists. Seeing my notice made his return feel more certain, like a hint from the future that all would be well. Yes, the chance of finding someone who knew Anton was slim, but what did I have to lose?

At the end of the week I went to the *Gazeta* office to collect any replies to my box number. There was just one. It was probably just a crank or someone after the reward, I told myself, sitting on a bench and scrabbling at the envelope.

I remember the captain well from the war, it read. *I served in a Poznań infantry division until captured by the Russians. If you'd like to hear more, come along to Ludomir's next Monday after work. I'll buy you a drink. Gregor Marek.*

This wasn't quite what I expected, but at least the words were encouraging. After an anxious few days, I set off the following Monday when my shift at the hospital was over. Pulling a raincoat hastily over my uniform, I made my way towards Ludomir's restaurant. There had been no need for directions; everyone in Poznań knew the place. In a grand old building near the town hall, it had been the haunt of politicians, police officers and journalists for as long as anyone could remember. If you

wanted to know something, Ludomir's was the place to stand at the bar and keep your ears open. During the German occupation, a new name had appeared over the door: Restaurant Rathaus. It became the smart place for Nazi officers to take their wives and girlfriends. Now it was Ludomir's again, and only the few people who could afford it after the war went there. The place was popular with Communist Party officials, one of the other nurses told me.

'Everything changes and everything stays the same,' the nurse had said, nodding slowly, pleased to have come up with this profundity.

Soon after I left the hospital, the sun disappeared behind a cloud, a sharp wind stirred and dusk began to draw in rapidly. I hugged the thin coat tighter around my body, wishing I had worn something warmer. Eager to reach the restaurant and get out of the wind, I hurried along and rounded a corner by the ruined town hall. Every house on the street had been bombed. Only the teetering chimney stacks remained, like brick ziggurats poking into the sky. In between them were rough pyramids of rubble, cleared from the road by German prisoners of war, under the eye of Russian guards. There was no mistaking Ludomir's at the end of the road. The restaurant was the only building still standing on the street, its walls peppered with bullet holes and blackened by smoke but supported by steel beams on either side.

Pushing open the door, I walked in and stood for a moment while my eyes adjusted to the dim light and took in the room. Logs were burning in a wide fireplace and there was a faint smell of woodsmoke hanging in the air. Behind the bar, candles in painted jam jars gave off a flickering red glow. On the walls hung a collection of old paintings. Family portraits and fox-hunting scenes, retrieved, I guessed, from bombed-out houses. A random selection of chairs and tables were scattered about the room – school desks, a formica-topped kitchen counter and one old-fashioned oak dining table. The place would be a sad sight in daylight, but with candles and a log fire burning, it was positively cosy. There was just one customer, bent over a bowl of soup. Seeing me, he pushed back his chair and came forwards. A tall man, he walked with a slight limp, as though carrying an invisible heavy suitcase in one hand.

'Major Marek,' he announced with a brisk nod. 'And you are box number 457?'

‘Eryka,’ I said with a smile, holding out my hand. ‘Eryka Kaminski. Thanks for answering my notice. It means a lot.’

The idea of using a false name had come to me just that morning as I saw my face in the bathroom mirror. Seeing the Communist Party badge on the lapel of the man’s jacket, I was glad I had a name ready to trip off my tongue.

‘Call me Gregor, please. I often dine here after work. The pea soup is very good. I’m a section manager at the Ceglorz factory and I have no wife to cook for me, so it’s convenient.’

‘Ceglorz?’

‘You haven’t heard of Ceglorz? We make every train you’ve ever ridden on in Poland. I was there before the war and I’m glad to say they’ve taken me back. There aren’t many men left with my experience, I can tell you. May I offer you a drink?’

‘Just a coffee, thank you.’

Major Marek’s fingers had been playing with an empty vodka glass as he spoke, spinning it impatiently one way then the other. He raised a hand to the waiter with an imperious gesture, as though he were in the Column Bar of the Hotel Bristol in Warsaw, not a gloomy eating house in a bombed-out city. I noticed his expensive-looking cufflinks, but the cuffs of the shirt themselves were a little grubby, the sure sign of a man who lived alone.

The major might have been handsome once. He had large blue eyes, like Anton’s, but they kept darting around the room nervously before returning to meet mine. His puffy cheeks and the limp made him seem an old man already. Whatever had happened in the war – together with a lot of alcohol, I suspected – had made him seem prematurely old. He had been wise to join the Communist Party to have a chance of getting his old job at the train factory back.

‘Now, the captain . . .’ I said when the drinks arrived.

‘I knew him from a distance,’ Major Marek said, lighting a cigarette. ‘He was cavalry, in a tank regiment, as you know. I was with the Fourteenth Infantry Division here in Poznań. It was chaos back in ’39. The Germans moved so fast around us. We were scattered all over the countryside. Finally we joined up again deep in the Kampinos Forest, where we had some cover. That’s where I saw him. Regiments and divisions had lost meaning there. So many men, so much equipment, had been lost. We were organised into

new, makeshift fighting units to go out and harry the Germans, to slow their march on Warsaw.'

The major paused, drawing on the cigarette cupped in his fist as memories from the first days of the war came back to him. People who worked in the open air smoked like this, I'd noticed, to shelter the cigarette from the wind. Old soldiers did it too, from long habit, to hide the little glow from an enemy sniper so that it would not be the last cigarette they ever smoked.

'There was hardly any food, and my stomach was aching with hunger most of the time,' Marek went on. 'It really hurts when you don't eat, you know. I made myself a little bivouac in a ditch filled with leaves near the hospital tent. That's where I noticed the captain. Every evening he walked by to visit his men who were wounded, to comfort them.'

I nodded for the man to continue. My coffee was untouched on the table. My hands were on my lap, nails digging into my palms. I could hardly breathe at hearing the first news of Anton since we had parted at the Winter Palace all those years ago.

'One evening, the captain came out of the hospital tent and called to me. "You, Corporal! What's your name?" "Marek," I said. "Well, fetch a spade, Marek, and help me bury a brave man." We dug a grave together beyond the far side of the camp, then covered over the dead soldier and said a short prayer together. That was the last time I saw him.'

'He called you "Corporal"?' I said.

The man's eyes skittered to a far corner of the restaurant then back again. He knocked back the vodka in his glass then immediately held up a hand to order another.

'Well, that was before my promotion, naturally,' he said at last. 'Anyway, we're all comrades now.'

The major, or corporal, or whatever he had been, changed the subject and went on to explain how the ragtag Polish army broke out of the forest and commandeered local trains to try to reach Warsaw and defend the capital.

'The Germans were bombing any railway tracks leading to Warsaw, so we kept having to change our route and travel at night. Somehow our train ended up going in the wrong direction, towards Lvov, straight into the arms of the Russians, who were invading from the east.'

'You were captured?'

‘Well and truly. I ended up deep in Russia, in Yekaterinburg, as a forced labourer in a hinge factory. Hinges . . . can you imagine? It was making two hundred of them a day or no dinner for me. But even a country at war needs hinges. Life goes on. You don’t realise that in wartime a country still needs doorknobs, balls of string, ink bottles, uniforms, mugs to drink your coffee from. All the same, I never want to see another hinge again, I can tell you.’

We were both silent for a moment.

‘As for Captain Lewicki-Radziwiłł, who knows? To be honest, I wouldn’t expect him back, young lady. Even if he’s alive, the Russians are in no hurry to release prisoners. I was just lucky. You’re his fiancée?’

I shook my head, not trusting myself to speak for a moment, while I thought about what he had told me. So, Anton had ended up captured by the Russians! He must have spent all this time in a prisoner-of-war camp somewhere in the Soviet Union and not Germany. I told myself this was good news, better than him being at the mercy of the Nazis for all these years.

Marek was about to say something, then paused and swallowed the words again. He stared down at his empty vodka glass as though waiting for something to happen.

How could I have forgotten . . . I reached into my handbag to pull out a wad of notes.

‘Thank you again,’ I said. ‘I know I offered a reward. This is as much as I have, as much as I could save over the past year.’

‘No, no,’ he said, waving the notes away. ‘You keep your money, dear. I’m sure you work hard for it. I don’t imagine you earn much as a nurse.’

How did he know where I worked? But, of course, he had glimpsed the uniform beneath my loosened raincoat. He could probably guess which hospital too, and track me down if he wanted to.

‘Listen,’ he said, pulling his chair closer to the table with a scraping noise. ‘You seem like a nice girl. These are hard times, and I’d like to help if you’ll let me. Why don’t I make you an offer? I’ll rent a cosy place for you and come round to visit a few nights a week. We could have a bit of a cuddle. It’s a place of your own to live. You can have your things around you, and I’d make sure you have some spending money. How about it?’

‘Mr Marek, I’m not that sort of woman,’ I said, my body stiffening. Pushing my chair back, I went to stand, but he put his hand lightly on my arm.

‘Why don’t you think about it?’

I pulled away and stood to draw my coat around me. Why did he have to say these awful things?

‘Come on,’ he continued. ‘There are plenty who’d be grateful for an offer like this. You should be flattered. We all get lonely, shivering in our single beds at night, you know,’ he said, his voice becoming a whine as I walked away, out into the chilly air.

A high wind blew through Poznań all that night. Lying in bed, I heard it whistling through the window frame. Now and then, a dustbin lid clattered free and tumbled along a distant street. It was impossible to sleep. I lay for hours thinking about Anton and about this major who was really a corporal, with his cufflinks and his grubby shirt. He was probably right. There might be many women in the ruined city who would take up his offer so they could be confident of a meal that day, to have a roof over their head and know there was a little ‘spending money’ in their purse. Who was I to judge?

What would Anton have thought of Marek? ‘Not our sort of person,’ I could imagine him murmuring with a smile. How simply we saw the world in the days before the war. What assumptions of superiority lay behind our innocence. And who was ‘my sort of person’ now? A woman who had submitted every night to a German officer whom she hated? Was it the people I worked with now? The nurses at the hospital, and all the others there who went to bed exhausted every night? The hospital porters and cleaners, whose every name I knew? The men who toiled deep in the dark of the hospital basement to keep the boilers going night and day? The pale-faced girls who worked in the hospital laundry and always looked so tired?

And who were Anton’s sort of people now? Poland had suffered and changed so much over the past seven years. I had changed too. Would he still know and want me after all that had happened? And would I recognise Anton as the same person who had cycled off to war as I stood at the front door of the Winter Palace? How had the years as a soldier and prisoner of war changed him? Would we still know each other instantly when he returned, so that nothing else mattered and the lost years would vanish in a moment?

39

As time went by, all the rubble from bomb damage in Poznań was cleared away. After a few years, it was hard to imagine that the city had been a fierce and bloody battlefield. The old town centre was rebuilt so that it looked just as it had before the war, as it had done ever since the Middle Ages. Even today, it feels strange to walk through the great market square. The place looks just the same as when I was a child, and yet is not the same. My memories have been reconstructed with bricks and mortar and replica stonework.

Beyond the old town centre, tall apartment towers began to rise, where thousands of people could live. There were young families everywhere in those years, as though the country had set about replacing all the people who had died in the war. When I went shopping at the market, there were always so many mothers pushing prams, the babies settled comfortably in nests of cabbages, carrots and potatoes. I felt a pinch in my heart to see a little face in a pram like that and had to look away. Anton had said we were too young to have children at first, that there was plenty of time for that, and then he disappeared. I used to daydream about us having a little girl. I imagined her playing hide-and-seek with Anton in the garden at the Winter Palace on a summer's day that would never come, giggling and squealing in mock terror until he caught her at last. He picked the child up and carried her towards me – laughing and kicking her legs – to place into my arms. Those thoughts became too painful. I tried to avoid them.

There wasn't much time to mull over what might have been while working hard at the hospital, and that's how I liked it. Every evening after dinner, I sat at the desk in my dear little room, turned the lamp onto my medical textbooks and manuals, and studied for my nursing qualifications. This was my peaceful time. The books I studied were my friends. It was hard to put them aside when it was time to sleep. I discovered the joy of learning. More than that, everything I learnt would make me a better nurse and help my patients get better.

On my first day at the hospital, Matron had told me that nursing was ‘a sacred vocation’. Her words made the prospect sound a little grim, as though I were turning my back on the world and entering a nunnery. I took hardly any notice at the time, still in shock after escaping from the bombed bus and grateful for a place to hide from the Germans. Now, though, I understood what she meant. By a strange accident, I had discovered what I was always meant to do. Helping people recover after illness or injury gave me a satisfaction that I hadn’t known existed. It felt good to see a patient ready to go home, standing by her bed with a grin and changed from hospital pyjamas into unfamiliar everyday clothes (‘How heavy these shoes feel on my feet!’ they would sometimes say). My work was a kind of love, flowering from the dark seed of my grief for Anton.

Each morning, I put his old watch on my wrist to keep me company through the day, though I never had it repaired. It was a strange comfort that the watch hadn’t been wound since Anton had done so in our final days at the Winter Palace – that very moment lay suspended in its cogs and wheels. Sometimes I was on duty in the operating theatre when Dr Laski was the surgeon. His eyes over the surgical mask avoided meeting mine if he could. After the Russians took over, he was one of the first to join the Communist Party, proudly wearing the badge on his jacket lapel, a little red flag made of tin. Within a few years, he was promoted to a senior position in Warsaw. Dr Laski was on the way up, pinching bottoms in the Health Ministry all the way, no doubt. Matron stayed on, as stern and unchanging as a marble statue in Łazienki Park.

Mr Lubansky was still the hospital pharmacist too. We became friends of sorts, old wartime comrades. He asked me to his apartment to listen to classical records, and somehow this became a weekly habit. I didn’t like to disappoint him, and besides, what else did I have to do on my day off?

We listened to recordings of piano concerts which he had managed to hold on to, by Richter, Horowitz and of course Paderewski, who had been prime minister of Poland as well as a concert pianist. I became quite an expert at telling the pianists’ styles apart. Most of the big old records dated from the 1920s and ’30s, all with the familiar label of a dog looking into the horn of a gramophone, listening to his master’s voice. We sipped cherry liqueur from a pair of cut-glass tumblers that were all Mr Lubansky had been able to rescue from the ruins of his mother’s house. He was not someone who worried about the layers of dust accumulating on every

surface, but the apartment was kept scrupulously tidy. If I casually put down a book, he would swoop in to slot it back in the correct place on the bookshelf with an apologetic smile. I recognised the habits of someone who lives alone and has their own set routines. These visits were somehow boring and restful at the same time. I came to appreciate his quiet good humour, always seeing the best – or at least the humour – in every situation.

When warmer days arrived, he suggested we have a picnic in the park. This was a welcome change from sitting in his apartment, where all the furniture held a stale odour of pipe smoke. Mr Lubansky – as I always thought of him – insisted on bringing the food himself. When I arrived at the park, he was already there, proudly unpacking a wicker basket on the lawn with his plump little hands. A loaf of rye bread with a pat of butter in greaseproof paper. Fresh tomatoes in a blue-striped bowl. Smoked cheese from the Tatra Mountains, and his favourite, smoked hunter's sausages of pork and juniper. He laid everything out on a gingham tablecloth, which he had spread out with a flourish on the grass. It was like a picnic from a painting. The name of this painting came to me later. I called it *Still Life with Lovelorn Pharmacist*. I noticed a solitary white cloud drifting across the sky. I noticed two little girls skipping in harmony on the other side of the lawn. But I did not notice how the pharmacist carefully cutting the loaf into slices was looking at me.

'There's something I've been meaning to ask you for a long time,' said Mr Lubansky, putting the knife down. 'I look forward every week to our evening together. My feelings for you have grown stronger, you must have noticed, and I hope maybe you feel the same . . .'

I put my hand out in a panic, as though that could stop the words coming from his mouth. But when a shy person finally summons the courage to speak, there is no stopping them.

'So many times I've wanted to put my arms around you, to kiss your face, your arms, but haven't dared,' he said. 'Do you think if I asked you to marry me, you could say yes?'

However fond I'd become of the pharmacist, the thought of being held or kissed by him or any other man made me shiver with horror. No one would ever touch my body again but Anton. It would feel like a breach in the wall of myself. I wouldn't be able to breathe. I would crumble and disappear.

Words wouldn’t come. I could only look down and shake my head, until Mr Lubansky slowly stood and walked away. He stopped by an ornamental pool, staring out across the water. His head was soon enveloped in a cloud of smoke as he puffed away furiously at his pipe. I felt so sorry for the poor man. It was my fault too, I decided, for not noticing sooner. By doing nothing, I’d encouraged him. I imagined how much courage it had taken him to build up to speaking. I imagined the many times he must have almost spoken, but put it off without me even noticing. How many nights had he lain in bed, rehearsing the different form of words that he would use, imagining my reaction?

I walked over and took his arm in mine.

‘You’re my best friend, my only real friend,’ I said gently. ‘But we can never be more than that. It’s nothing to do with you, dear – the fault is all mine.’

What I did not say was, ‘And I’m already a married woman, waiting forever for my husband to return,’ for he knew nothing of my secret past. He did not know my real name. He knew nothing about Anton and our life at the Winter Palace, nothing about the tattoo beneath the long sleeves I always wore. He knew nothing of my shame at being an ‘officer’s mattress’ for the German colonel.

Staring out over the pool, Mr Lubansky’s eyes were damp with silent tears. He drew a chequered handkerchief from his pocket to blow his nose. After solemnly examining the contents for a moment, as though divining a message about the future, he tucked it away again.

‘Well, we’ll say no more about it,’ said Mr Lubansky, taking a deep breath and forcing a smile. ‘What say we try some cherry juice and have something to eat?’

Things became easier after the picnic conversation. We were both more relaxed. Our weekly dinners continued as before. We listened to his classical music records and exchanged hospital gossip. Sometimes he asked friends to join us, usually other pharmacists and their husbands or wives. For all their differences, I began to see that the couples who came to dinner had one thing in common: in every relationship there is always the lover and the loved. Sometimes it’s easy to pick. The one who always glimpses across the dining table to see how the other reacts to some joke or comment. The one who makes the first move to reconcile after an argument. I found I

could soon tell that, however happy or equal a couple seemed, there was always one of them who needed the other more. The lover and the loved.

Would this be true of Anton and me if he returned? When he returned, I corrected myself, as though it were bad luck to even contemplate that he would never come back. After all, long after the war ended, a POW or displaced person would still appear now and then from God knows where, a dazed expression on their face and barely able to speak, as though they had been suddenly transported through space and time from the other side of the world. When Stalin died in 1953, the last POW camps in Russia were closed down and the prisoners freed at last. According to the *Gazeta*, a dozen freed prisoners were due to arrive the very next day at the Poznań station. My stomach churned with anxiety as the train approached the platform. Scared that I would faint from sheer panic, I leant back against a wall so I would not fall to the ground if I saw Anton and passed out.

How would Anton look to me after the long years as a prisoner? And how would I seem to him when he returned? He would look older, of course, and a little battered, like anyone who had spent time in a Soviet camp, but I would know him. Maybe he would have a beard. Maybe even some injury, a limp like Mr Marek – but none of that would matter. After all that had happened to us both in the lost years, we would be together again. We would hold each other tight. I would feel his warm, familiar breath on my ear as he whispered again those words he had said on the morning that he left.

He was not there. There were no more returned prisoners after that.

Was this the moment when I allowed myself to think that Anton would never return home? The following Friday, I hardly said a word when I visited Mr Lubansky. He knew nothing about Anton or my life before the war. He knew nothing about my wait at the railway station, barely remembering to breathe in my excitement. If he noticed, he did not ask. That was typical, figuring that if I wanted to tell him anything, then he would wait for me to speak. Poor Mr Lubansky understood that I was fond of him but that was all, while his devotion to me was without limit. As we held our dinners for friends, I discovered how he always dipped his napkin in a glass of water after eating, then dabbed at the corners of his mouth while saying, ‘Very nice, dear.’ I found that it was the fate of a companion, even an occasional one like me, to hear the same story told over and over again at different times, in different company, and to make sure that I

always laughed. And so, Mr Lubansky's company was good for me. Left to myself, I approach each day warily, always expecting disappointment. When I buy eggs, I always check inside the box, convinced that one will be cracked and spoilt, leaking a sticky mess into my bag. Mr Lubansky never checked when he did the shopping. For him, everything in life would turn out all right in the end. He was cheerful for no other reason than 'Why not?', and this lifted my spirits too.

In this way we passed our days. How inadequate are the words, 'time passed', for those hours and weeks, for those long years lost to us forever. And how strange that time, which extinguishes us all in the end, can also be our greatest solace. Before long, there were patients at the hospital who had no memory of the war. Born after 1945, they only knew the German occupation from black-and-white documentaries on television. They rolled their eyes when their parents told stories yet again over the dinner table about their days with the partisans, fighting against the Nazis.

After becoming a registered nurse, I was still keen to learn more. How wonderful it would be to study medicine and become a doctor! Even a few years before, I would have thought this a foolish dream. Now, though, I had years of experience working on the wards and operating theatres. I had become more confident. Doctors were in short supply after the war, so the authorities were keen to train anyone with medical knowledge. Why not? I thought, and made an appointment with Matron to talk about applying to study for a medical degree.

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'This is the hottest July since 1963,' Mr Lubansky said one day, reading from that morning's *Gazeta* as we drank our morning coffee in the pharmacy. 'Imagine that!'

'I've never understood why people are impressed by the "hottest or coldest day since whenever",' I said. 'Surely every day is hotter or colder than some other day sometime in the past.' It made no sense to remark on it, and I told him so. Mr Lubansky nodded, giving a resigned smile, and took a packet of tobacco from his pocket to concentrate on refilling his pipe. Immediately I felt sorry. How dear and childlike he still was, to be excited by some trivial piece of news about the weather. And how thoughtless of me to puncture this enthusiasm with a jab of cynicism. Well, he would live.

What was I doing back in July 1963? For a moment, all I could remember was that President Kennedy had been shot that year. We had spent the whole day frightened that the Americans would blame Russia, that there might be a war. More than ten years had passed by since then, yet it felt so recent. Each year lasts just long enough for us to forget how hot a summer's day can be in July, how deceitful the spring each April. Why is it such a surprise every year? Perhaps our minds have no real sense of time. Memory is a deep pool into which our days slip, one by one, and lose their sense of order. We reach in and pull one out like a glistening pebble, yesterday as fresh and bright as that day long ago when I met a boy with blue eyes fishing in a woodland lake.

In time, I qualified at last as a doctor and returned to work at the hospital. In time, the matron died – the only way she would be happy to retire. Her position was abolished and a new director was appointed by the Health Ministry in Warsaw. He wore an expensive suit and looked so young, though I found out later he was forty-three. A new wing was built at the hospital, with a nuclear medicine facility. And then one afternoon, coffee-break conversation turned to retirement.

'That's years away!' I protested, but people were already making plans. Moving nearer to their grandchildren. Walking holidays in Czechoslovakia. A holiday cottage on the Baltic coast. I wasn't interested, I said. It was around this time that Mr Lubansky started to cough at dinner one Friday night, badly enough that he had to leave the table.

'I'm so sorry,' he said, coming back from the bathroom with an apologetic smile and taking up his knife and fork. Five minutes later, it started again.

After Mr Lubansky's operation for throat cancer, he retired early. Spending all day at home listening to music on the radio, he gave up shaving and grew a beard to cover the scars of surgery on his neck. His eyebrows grew long and straggly. He wouldn't let me trim them, waving my scissors away with a sad gesture as if to say, what's the point? After a second operation, he was unable to speak, so carried a notebook and pencil to write down questions when I visited. Some notes he kept to re-use, scrabbling in his pocket to find the right one: What's the news from work? Would you like some cherry liqueur? Could you read the newspaper to me? They were heartbreaking, those crumpled little notes.

Within a year, the cancer had scurried right through his body and he was dead. It was like some awful conjuring trick. He was there and then he was not there. There is a terrifying majesty to the act of death. It takes your breath away to see it happen. After all this time, there was no one to visit and care about now. There was no one to ask about my day. Memories of him kept bubbling up in my mind, such as the way he lit his rosewood pipe with a long match, turning the bowl into a miniature furnace for a moment as he sucked on it, then giving me one of his shy smiles. I thought over and over about Mr Lubansky's gentle friendship and how he'd never pushed himself on me. I felt an awful guilt, like a sour taste in my mouth, that I'd never been able to kiss him, never allowed his hands to touch my body. I ached from the loss of Mr Lubansky, yet the truth was that, in my heart, I still missed Anton more – the husband I'd not seen for more than thirty years.

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After a certain age, you discover that you view the world with the eye of a melancholy god. You have seen so much that you never thought possible. Nothing is new. Nothing is left to experience for the first time, except that final quietus.

A few years after Mr Lubansky died, I retired from the hospital. I expected to have more time on my hands. What I did not expect was that time itself would change. At work I used to squeeze errands into my day – dashing out during the lunchbreak to pay a bill or buy a loaf of rye bread. Now even one of those tasks seems to take up half the day. Working at the hospital, time pushed me relentlessly forwards like a hand on my back. Every day there were patients to see, meetings, case notes to write, test results to review . . . When I retired, though, time slowed to a gentler flow. Sometimes the hours speed over the shallows of a day; sometimes they linger in eddies over deep and obscure pools of memory.

After the long years of waiting, I still wear the watch that Anton left behind on the bedside table when he went to war. It hangs a little looser on my wrist now. It tells the correct time just twice a day and there are brown patches of rust on the antique dial. I am old, but I am not a fool. I know Anton is likely dead and lying in Katyn, where thousands of Polish officers were executed by the Russians. All that's left of him may be shards of bone and shreds of rotted uniform buried in a gloomy forest beneath a soft carpet of pine needles. But I've learnt, too, how General Anders formed a Polish army in Russia made up of former prisoners of war. They marched through Siberia to Uzbekistan and Soviet Central Asia, and on to the Levant, where they joined with the British army. Shut out of Poland after the war by Stalin's Iron Curtain, they scattered in a diaspora to Canada and Britain, India and Australia. Why shouldn't Anton be in one of those places now?

Sometimes on the long nights when I cannot sleep, I lie in the dark and imagine Anton far away, on the other side of the world. He sits by a window which frames him like a photograph. The garden beyond is bright with

purple bougainvillea. Strange birds, unknown to me, hop among the flowers, drawing on the nectar. A walking stick leans against Anton's chair, but he looks alert and at peace. I decide he's listening to a favourite piece of music, from Wagner's opera *Tristan and Isolde*. Perhaps, now and then, he thinks of his first wife, Elisabeth, believing I died back in Poland during the war. A little girl runs to him. He reaches out to take her hand and she climbs up to his lap. The child leans back, lolling against his chest, listening as he points out a red-billed bird in the garden. He explains the bird's name and how it flies every year from far Siberia to Australia and back again.

It may be that an answer lies deep in the archives of the KGB in Moscow, a record of Polish prisoners of war and the truth about their fate. I imagine a typed report furred with dust, as thick as a telephone book and neatly bound with pink ribbon, the Russians as methodical in their brutality as the Nazis. Here and there the metal type has smashed through the flimsy paper to make tiny rips in the page, and I read at last, *Lewicki-Radziwiłł, Anton. Captain, Fifteenth Lancers Regiment. Executed.*

But no history book I have found ever mentions Anton. It is as though he existed only in my imagination. Or perhaps it is he who is alive, and I am his imagining. These are foolish thoughts. Although no document exists to show he lives, it is memory which persists and makes a fool of time – and aren't memories all that any of us have left in the end?

If you are reading these words, then Anton lives and the Winter Palace still stands, preserved in amber for eternity. It's still that morning when I saw Anton for the last time. It's still that moment when we said goodbye. He pulls me close. He lifts his hand and whispers in my ear the age-old statement: two pronouns embrace a simple word, like heraldic creatures in a coat of arms supporting an emblazoned shield. It's such a little word – just a breath, really – moving for a moment from tongue to lips then freed into the air.

That word is all around me now. How many times has it been said in the history of the world? On a hospital ward, behind curtains softly drawn around a bed? Before how many voyages and battles? In tearful partings on railway platforms and by airport gates? In how many operas and songs, and on sentimental greeting cards? In telephone calls from burning towers? Spoken by how many mouths, in lust or tender whispers, in every language ever known? Yet despite its ceaseless trafficking, the word does not diminish in meaning or in worth. Like an ancient coin passed for centuries

from hand to hand, use only makes it shine the brighter and grow in worth, that untarnishable word which is love.

41

Notice on the Polish Family History website

Anton Lewicki-Radziwiłł
Captain, Fifteenth Lancers Regiment, Poznań Army Group.
Born, Lewicki, Poland, 1915. Missing in action, 1939.

Do you have any information about the fate of Captain Anton Lewicki-Radziwiłł? If so, please contact Marta Rabinski, School of Astrophysics, Poznań University, at the email address below.

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From: Elisabeth Ginzburg
To: Marta Rabinski
Subject: Captain Anton Lewicki-Radziwiłł

Dear Marta,

I am responding to your notice on the Polish Family History website regarding Anton Lewicki-Radziwiłł. He was my father.

I was astonished to see my father's original name, before he changed it to David Ginzburg and emigrated to Australia in the 1940s. I'm eager to learn how you know about him, and am happy to tell you as much as I can too.

My late parents arrived by ship in Australia after the Second World War, like so many refugees. My father worked for a few years on the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Scheme, then was offered a job as a car mechanic in Sydney. My mother, Rachel, worked in a garment factory and studied at night school to become a teacher.

She was nearly forty when I was born. I was a surprise baby! By this time, my father owned a garage specialising in European cars. He employed half-a-dozen mechanics, but couldn't resist sometimes taking off his jacket and tie to dive under the bonnet of a car and sort out a problem. He had a special magic with engines.

Like many refugees of that time, they said little to me about the war. After 1945, the Communist regime ruled Poland and the Iron Curtain came down, so there was no possibility of my father returning home again. The moment they stepped off the boat in Port Melbourne was when their life began again as New Australians. They only spoke English to me when I was a child. After I went to bed, though, I sometimes heard them murmuring together in what sounded like their own private language. It was only when I was an adult, and a parent myself, that they decided to tell me the details of their life before emigrating. I was astonished to hear about my father's real name and story, about the Winter Palace, his time in Siberia and the Anders Army before arriving in Palestine. (My parents left before the founding of Israel.) I learnt, too, that they named me Elisabeth to honour the memory of my father's first wife, who had died in the war.

Thank you for your interest in our family. I'm very curious to discover what you know about my father's life before emigrating. We must stay in touch. I am planning to visit Poland next year – perhaps we might meet then.

Best wishes,
Elisabeth

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From: Marta Rabinski
To: Elisabeth Ginzburg
Subject: Re: Captain Anton Lewicki-Radziwiłł

Dear Elisabeth

It was so exciting to get your message. I'm a student at Poznań University, working part-time as an aged care assistant. One of the

people I helped was a lady in her nineties, Dr Witkowska. We became friends in the year before her death, and during that time she told me the story of her life. She revealed her real name, which she had kept secret since the war.

I have to tell you that Dr Witkowska's original name was Elisabeth Lewicki-Radziwiłł – your father's first wife and your namesake. I don't know how he came to believe she was killed in the war. Those were terrible years, when millions of people were murdered or displaced, as I don't need to tell you. It's little surprise that he was told she was dead amid all the chaos of those times.

Elisabeth survived the German occupation, changing her name to save her life. She waited for Anton for years after the war, sure that he would return one day. She never married again. Elisabeth worked at the hospital here in Poznań for many years, as a nurse and then a doctor. She had no family, so towards the end she gave me something which meant a great deal to her. It's Anton's watch, which he left behind on the bedside table on the morning he went to war in 1939. When you visit, I'd very much like to pass it on to you. Or, rather, return it to you – as you are your father's daughter, that is as it should be.

Warm regards
Marta

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Winter Palace is a work of fiction. All characters are inventions except for historical personages such as General Anders. The Soviet Union's exile of vast numbers of Poles to Siberia and the extraordinary story of the Anders Army are true, however, and I am glad to contribute to making them better known. Nevertheless, events, space and time remain subject to the dictates of art.

I am grateful to those who shared the stories of their families with me, including Phillipa Castle, Mary Ryllis Clark (née Herniczek), Rod Freeman, Antoni Jach, Andrew Kostanski, Michael Lester, Krys Modrzewski, Alex Skovron, and Bartosz Skrocki of the former Krześlice Palace Hotel. Chris Wroblewski of the Kresy-Siberia Foundation kindly reviewed the manuscript for historical accuracy.

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Paul Morgan is the author of two previous novels, *The Pelagius Book* and *Turner's Paintbox*, both published by Penguin. He was born in London, educated at the University of Wales, where he studied Philosophy and English, and lives in Melbourne, Australia.

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