The Other Shore

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Prologue

My friend Bill told me that writing all this down would be of benefit. He said I'll get it all out of my system and then I'll be able to die in peace. He winked at me then, so I knew he was kidding. Well, half kidding anyway. I'm 77 so the thought of dying occupies more of my thoughts than it used to. And what I did during the war, those memories I've kept bottled up inside for decades, well, they're starting to come to the front of my mind more often now. They rise like morning fog in my dreams, all warped and distorted, and I wake up in a sweat. After so long, it's still a wonder I dream about it. But I do. And then I sit in the easy chair by the front window staring out at the dark and I wonder more and more if it's time to reveal what happened.

Coming to Canada at the beginning of the 50's, I was full of hope for my new life and not just for the chance to work in a job that I loved or to start a family in a new country. No, I thought I could also find a way to forget the last ten years of my life. As I boarded the *Italia* at the port in Hamburg in April, 1952, I couldn't conceive of a time when I could return to Germany and that was fine with me. The Russians controlled half of what used to be my country. Berlin, the city of my birth and childhood, was divided, scarred like a pie cut raggedly down the middle by an unsteady hand, a narrow rail corridor connecting it with the West. All the places I grew up in were now verboten to me, all in the Russian Zone, soon to be another country ridiculously called East Germany. As a former *Wehrmacht* soldier, I couldn't simply go there and pick up where I left off. The rumours about what they might do to ex-soldiers scared the crap out of me, thick as they were with stories of Gulags in Siberia or being conscripted to work in some manufacturing plant east of the Urals. Or worse, simply being shot.

And so the decision of what to do was fairly simple. Find a way to leave and start anew. When the British released me from my POW camp in 1946, I'd decided then to finish my University studies in Forestry and take night courses in both Spanish and English. I know what you're thinking. Here's a Nazi who wants to flee to South America and join with the other secret cabals already in place and dream up ways to resurrect the Reich. Well, I'm sorry to disappoint but my reasons were more practical. I was simply hedging my bets so that I'd have more than one option to leave the country. There were plenty of trees in both Canada and South America and both places wanted educated Forestry experts to make sense of the resources they had.

But after being captured by the Canadians and being made their prisoner for months, I have to tell you that I pretty much made my decision to go to Canada. My guards were kind, respectful boys who fed me three meals a day and gave me light tasks such as raking the grounds and repairing leather belts and harnesses to keep me busy. I also learned a bit of English from them, halting phrases to ask for cigarettes or to ask them where they were from in Canada. One of my guards, he just pointed to a table and then slid his hand across the surface. "My home, Jake," he said, "in Madrid, Saskatchewan."

Jake. That's me. Jakob Herrmann, really, but the guards found me more acceptable as a 'Jake' than a Jakob. I didn't complain. Changing my name helped the process of forgetting, so I welcomed it.

In 1950, when I was nearing the end of my studies, notices began to be posted advertising for trained immigrants for Canada, the United States and Australia. This was after Canada lifted the ban on German immigrants. Before then, we were enemy aliens. I

was happy when I saw notices and, given where I was in my programme, I applied. In anticipation of getting a quick response, I gathered everything I thought I needed to live in another country – my books, clothes, money and a passport. As I thought, my acceptance arrived mere weeks after along with material from the Canadian authorities on where to apply for work. The choice was easy. Given what I read, the west coast of Canada looked like the most likely spot, so I applied for a posting with the BC Provincial Forest Service. Once they knew of my studies and that I'd been accepted by Canadian immigration, they hired me for a summer job doing forest inventory. When he heard the news, my uncle purchased a Settler's ticket with the Canadian Pacific Railway for me – one way, Halifax to Victoria, 75 Canadian dollars.

I had another problem. Well, not a problem. How can I describe this? A logistical issue? What am I saying? Ach! I'll just tell it straight out. I met a girl in my English class. Frieda Kiel. She wanted to get out of Germany as well. Her ancestral home – like mine – was in the Russian Zone. Her parents and sister were leaving for the United States and she naturally was going with them until she met me and began to have second thoughts. We'd paired up as conversation partners. That first class was a hoot. We sat facing each other and after a couple of moments said 'Hello', the only English word we knew. And then there was a long silence. We smiled. We looked around at the others. We fidgeted. Finally, the instructor came around and tapped our learning material with a rigid finger, a stern look on her face. "Ja, ja," I said. Frieda suppressed a giggle and we started by mouthing the expressions next to their German counterparts, struggling to pronounce the unfamiliar words.

Four months later, I decided to approach Frieda's father and ask for her hand. I was such a traditionalist. Frieda told me she'd prepare her family and her house for my visit. When I arrived, she was wearing a new dress for the occasion, pinched narrowly at the waist and flaring outward and down to mid-calf, made from a powder-blue fabric that shimmered in the light. She had carefully styled her hair, the dark curls tamed and swept back from her face, which was fresh-scrubbed and rosy, her green eyes clear and bright. She looked heavenly to me. I'd borrowed a suit from my Uncle that was a little big on my frame, but it was clean, the shoes polished, and I thought I cut a respectable figure. After a dinner where the conversation wandered from the war, the re-construction effort and our various plans to leave the country, Frieda's father, Dieter, invited me into his study, alone. He poured me a glass of bourbon, offered me a cigarette and motioned for me to sit down on a two-seater sofa.

"So. We both know why you're here, Jakob," he said. He flicked on a gas lighter and I approached, letting the tip of the cigarette be engulfed in the flame before inhaling.

"American?"

"Yes. Seems they're everywhere now." He picked the box up off the desk. "Lucky Strike."

"I've seen them, but never had one," I said. I inhaled, and as I let the smoke out of my lungs, delicately spat out a tobacco strand. "*Das is gut*." I took a sip of my bourbon.

"You know we're planning to go to the United States?" Dieter asked.

I nodded, waiting to see where he wanted to go with this.

"There are better opportunities for me there. DuPont seems keen. But for you, you want to go to Canada. Why?"

"Well, I, uh, they have a lot of trees," I said. I was nervous. And when Dieter didn't say anything, I got more nervous. But I'd thought about this for a while, so I just kept talking. "As you know, I've finished my studies in Forestry. There are a lot of opportunities for foresters in Canada."

"I see. But what do you know about Canada?"

I shrugged. "What does anyone know about Canada? We know so little. But I met Canadians when I was a POW. They're good people. It gave me a good impression."

"They were our enemies."

"So were the Americans. But not anymore. And like America, their country was untouched by war. It's peaceful. A good place to start a new life."

"I don't disagree. And you have job prospects?"

"I already have something lined up with one of the provincial forest services."

He picked up the bourbon bottle and refilled my glass.

"But Frieda. She will be far from her family."

"Yes, she will," I admitted. Frieda and I had discussed this so I had an answer ready. "But you can visit us, and we can visit you. We can write, talk on the telephone. We will be on the same continent after all."

Deiter nodded, looking gloomily at the floor. "Frieda and I have talked at length on this, weighing the pros and cons. You realize that it is only recently that we have finally been able to live together, peacefully, as a family again. It is hard to consider us living apart once more."

"Is that your only reason?"

"Well, I admit, I have checked up on you and your family. A difficult thing these days. So many records destroyed. But your Professors recommend you and you do come from a solid working class family. That much I was able to determine. Tell me though, how do you feel about the war?"

"A disaster for Germany. A nightmare that went from bad to worse. Perhaps, just perhaps, the annexations of Austria and Pomerania could be justified, but everything else? Now we have a country split in two. I don't know about you but I was on the Eastern front. It's an episode of my life I'm trying to forget. Every German is now tarred with being a racist, or worse, a genocidal maniac. Look what we have to look forward to until we die." I was shaking. I quickly gulped down the rest of the bourbon in my glass and Dieter re-filled it once more.

"Stand up."

I got up from the sofa and he embraced me. When he pulled away, there were tears in his eyes.

"I was in Königsberg. Third Panzer Army. I was one of the lucky ones. I'd been wounded. When we beat back the Russians and forced open a corridor so we could evacuate the civilians, I was loaded onto the last ship leaving Pillau. So many of friends and *komerads* were left behind to die. I will never forgive Hitler, or the High Command, for abandoning so many troops behind enemy lines." He took a few moments to compose himself, and then he led me back to the dining room and announced that I was engaged to Frieda.

This was the same time I was applying for papers to enter Canada and, before we could put the wedding plans into motion, my approval notice came in the mail. It meant

I'd have to leave before we could marry. After more discussion, we decided that we'd marry in Canada but before that could happen, the Canadian authorities needed to see that I was established before allowing her to follow. I had no choice but to go the Victoria alone and settle in.

I can still remember my first view of Canada. Pier 21 in Halifax. The *Italia* glided into the harbour on calm seas past McNabs' Island, a small lighthouse at the tip, the harbour narrowing quickly until we could see the city of Halifax on either side of us. The building on the pier was two stories high, clad in brick and longer than the *Italia*. Windows lined both levels and I could see pillars of smoke and steam rising from behind the building. After the ship was met by the harbour tugs and guided gently to the pier, those of us with tickets for Canada disembarked, walking directly into the building. It was draughty and humid, the high, two-story ceilings amplifying the noise of all those people. We were asked to form into lines, and as we advanced, I saw tables, tens of them, each with an immigration officer. When I arrived at one of the tables, the officer questioned me, and then asked for assistance as they tore my travelling trunk apart. When they found my forestry books – all in German – they asked a lot more questions. You see, I had to convince them that I wasn't importing Nazi literature. I was patient, and took my time to explain what they were about. It worked for they let me keep them all.

After getting my landing card – a flimsy piece of paper with my name, the name of the ship I arrived on, and an official-looking stamp from Canadian Immigration with the date and port of my arrival – we were directed up some stairs and out through a covered pedestrian bridge that crossed over some rail tracks that paralleled the building.

When we descended the steps on the other side, I saw the train yard. Fifteen or so tracks that ended at the pier. This explained the smoke and steam. I boarded a train made up of Settler's cars. The interior was very bare – wood slat seats and lots of room at the front of the car for our baggage. When the train pulled out I eagerly looked out the window to see this city of Halifax but was soon disappointed. I didn't realize it at the time, but Halifax had a population of only 85,000 while Hamburg, the city I'd left so recently by ship, had over a million. I felt like I was passing through a village, what with the low-rise apartment buildings and single-family dwellings crammed next to one another along roughly paved streets.

A week and half later, I traversed the Straight of Georgia on a ferry and landed in Victoria – the capital of British Columbia. I was looking at another Halifax, I thought. Small, gritty, under-populated for what the city was supposed to represent. But it didn't matter much as I didn't have any time for sightseeing. I reported the same day to the personnel office for the Forest Service and was quickly introduced to the number two man responsible for the Surveys and Inventory division. From him I confirmed I had a job for the summer. I would be part of crews they were sending out all over the province, like army scouts reconnoitring a new land, to assist in a massive project to take stock of all of its forestry resources.

At the end of my first week in the bush, on our one day off, I ran through the various things I'd learned in such a short time. It was quite a list. How to read marine charts and tide tables. How to pitch a tent and make a mattress from cedar boughs. How to cook meals on an open fire. How to dry your clothes and boots after a day of working in the rain. How to operate a 12-foot boat and maintain a 5 horsepower outboard motor.

And how to deal with meeting a black bear in the forest (Don't. Make a lot of noise so you don't have to deal with them at all). I wasn't taught any of that in University and felt completely unprepared. But then I thought, hell, I'd fought on the Eastern front. I'd had to adapt to so many different situations, I figured that, on the whole, this was going alright. At least, people weren't shooting at me as I walked through the bush. And the trees here were extraordinary – Spruce and Cedar over 50 metres tall, with trunks as straight and smooth as the main mast of a sailing ship. I was staggered by their sheer size, how much effort it took to walk around one with a measuring tape and be stunned by the result. No, the bear I could live with.

It seems so long ago now when I think of it. How easy it was to become a Canadian, but how difficult it was to forget the war. But I did. Well, I didn't forget it completely, just managed to push it way down into my mind, underneath the effort of learning to live in a new country, making a life with Freida, raising three kids. The business of living helps you forget. But now, the kids are grown up and moved out, building lives for themselves. I've been retired for a while now and the war, well, with all the free time I have, it's been re-surfacing in my mind like a piece of driftwood that mars the perfect beach. And it doesn't help when the 60th anniversary of VE day is being splashed all over the news, either.

I was sitting on my porch in front of my house that day. What am I saying. It was only yesterday. It was a fine night, warm for the Lower Mainland, a balmy 22 degrees and not a cloud in the sky. The kids in the neighbouring houses were still playing hockey on the street or shooting hoops in the driveway, reluctant to go in. I had a glass of scotch and ice at my side, and was slowly swirling it around, remembering, when Bill pulled up

in my driveway. Bill had been my boss for over twenty years, when I'd gotten the job as Chief Forester in the interior with a small, private milling outfit.

"Jake!" he said, climbing slowly out of his car. He could still drive. Not me. My license had been taken away from me years ago. Glaucoma. I can see fine, but I'm not allowed to drive.

I raised my glass. "Bill. Nice to see you. What brings you around?"

He ambled over and sat down in the empty patio chair next to me. "Well, I was just heading over to the Legion. You know, to raise a glass to fallen comrades, and to be thankful to have lived a full life."

Now, you've got to understand something. Bill was a part of Bomber Command. He flew Halifax's over Europe for the RCAF as part of the campaign to bomb the bejeesus out of Germany. And because he was bombing Germany, he was also bombing me. It made for an awkward beginning to our relationship but we hashed it out and got along fine. Bill's presence that Sunday, the exact day when everyone was remembering the glorious moment when my side surrendered sixty years ago, was a little mysterious.

"Just doing the same thing here on my porch, Bill. Still remember that day when I handed my rifle to Canadian troops."

"Yeah, I hear ya. That's kinda why I came over. Seems a shame to me to you're sittin' here all by yourself, while we're over at the Legion Hall rememberin' together. Never a good thing to be drinking alone."

I took sip of my Glenfiddich. I'd tried in the past to meet up with former soldiers – former German soldiers – to talk about those times. They're not exactly difficult to pick out, once you know where to look. The local German club is usually a good place to start.

But to a man they were adamant in their refusal. ‘The war is over, Jacob,’ one of them told me. ‘It’s behind us. I’d rather remember my time in this country, living like a man should live – in peace, surrounded by loved ones, proud to have raised a family and to see your children grow up and succeed on their own.’ I agreed with them, but there was always a part of me that wanted to just talk it out, to see how they felt about those times, to see if what they thought agreed with my own feelings about that experience.

“What are you saying, Bill? I mean, exactly. There seems to be something hidden in that woolly phrase you just uttered.”

“There you go again, using them big words, always trying to confuse and baffle me.”

“Redundant.”

“Huh?”

“Confused and baffled mean the same thing. You’re being redundant.”

Bill chuckled and leaned back in the chair, putting his hands behind his head.

“Alright, you got me. Here’s the thing – I spoke with a bunch of the boys at the Legion. Even though it’s not really permitted, we all want to invite you down to the hall, just for tonight. A lot of us would like to hear your side of the story, if you know what I mean. And hell, we’d all benefit from hearing new stories. We’ve pretty much told our own so many times that we’re getting a little bored with ourselves.”

I took another sip of my scotch. It was beginning to have an effect. I was relaxing in my chair and I saw things in a more, well, friendly light. I was about to say something snarky to reply to Bill and then stopped myself. I thought – this isn’t the time.

"That's a generous offer, Bill. It really is. I must say though, just thinking about it makes me hesitate. It feels like I'm being sent to scout the enemy lines again."

"Feelin' surrounded?"

"Something like that. You sure it's okay with the Legion brass?"

Bill turned and looked at me directly. "I don't frankly give a shit what the Legion brass say. We want you there. In case you didn't notice, there ain't many of us left. And I think you'll find a receptive audience. If you want to tell a story or two. But, you know, I don't wanna force you to do anything."

I took another pull of my drink (it was mostly ice now) and thought about Bill's offer. While I dearly wanted to tell my story, it wasn't exactly what I had in mind for an audience. I had a lot of questions. Had their memories mellowed that much that they could actually accept the enemy in their midst, and then not only that, but listen to how I survived the war? Would they try to correct my version of events? Would their view, distorted as it was through the lens of the victor, simply not allow them to believe my story? I wasn't sure. But I trusted Bill. He had keen instincts and could read people within a few minutes of meeting them. It's what made him an effective leader during the war, and a manager of people after.

Out in the street, most of the kids had packed up and gone inside their houses. The streetlights were popping on, one after the other, and fireflies winked on and off in the air above my grass.

"Okay, Bill. I'll give it a try. Better that sitting here telling the story to myself. Just give me a minute to get rid of this?" I said, waving my glass at him.

"Sure. We got all night. And hey, invite Freida, if you like."

"You allow women into the Legion?"

"Sure we do."

"Well, that's mighty generous, but Frieda is out. At her book club meeting. I'll just leave her a note and get a coat."

So Bill and I went down to the Legion and there were about twenty guys there, some with their wives, and they all looked at us as we walked in. It was awkward, all that attention fixed on me and I stopped on the threshold and for a moment I almost backed out. But Bill put his hand on my elbow and guided me into the room and had me sit down at a table.

"Scotch and water, rocks," he said to the bartender. One by one, the members came over and introduced themselves and I shook their hand. Bombardier. Infantry. Tank Captain. Mortar crew. Machine gunner. They all looked like me – tired, grey, old. Bill came over with my drink and he sat down at the table with me, and this is what I said to them.

Autumn, 1944

One – Call Up

I was young when it all started for me. Fresh out of high school. And just like that, the *Wehrmacht* reached out and grabbed me practically before the ink on my diploma could dry. That was the Spring of 1944. By the summer, I was stationed at a Collection Centre, a sort of glorified camp for young recruits. All the boys were the same age as me, and the training activities we went through were like games boys played, rather than true training for what was to come. We marched, we drilled, we did physical fitness exercises. But no combat training. I still believe the people in charge were hoping they'd never have to use us, that we'd get a small taste of what war was about and be released back home to do civil defence duties, or other light tasks behind the lines.

But that didn't happen. 1944 was a year of setbacks. Not only had you guys managed to overcome the fortifications defending Italy and France but in the East, the Russians were re-taking all the territory we'd grabbed from them over the previous four years. We felt a little hemmed in. We were developing a siege mentality, where we felt the only way to survive was to defend to the last man what we had left.

As the summer drew to a close, the Commanders of the Centre simply marched onto the parade ground one morning and announced that our so-called training was over and that we were being deployed. I still remember that day. So many questions. Us? Deployed? How could *we* help out the war effort? We weren't trained soldiers, just teenagers in uniforms. None of them were answered, of course, before I found myself with two hundred other boys, standing in parade-ground rows on the platform of the *Zoologischer Garten* train station in Berlin. Fog blotted out the morning sun, turning

everything around us gauzy white. We'd all been issued fresh uniforms and the new wool made my skin itch. The helmet was worse. I couldn't get it to sit straight on my head. All my hair had been shaved off, so no padding there. It was if the canvas webbing resisted moulding itself to the shape of my skull. In front of me were wooden freight cars of a train idling on the tracks, the doors open to the humid air. The only sounds I remember were some birds chattering in some nearby trees and the train's steam engine soughing steadily, lost in the fog.

It wasn't long, however, before that peaceful backdrop was interrupted by the sound of hob-nails clicking on the platform. The *Oberst* – Colonel – in charge of our newly formed battalion walked slowly out of the gloom, giving a narrow-eyed look at the rows of young recruits before stopping in front of me. I kept my eyes focussed in front of me. That's how I noticed the Iron Cross 1st Class pinned to his breast pocket. It looked worn and dull in the fog-filtered gleam of the overhead lights. I wondered what the Colonel had done to get such a high distinction and, given its age, when. Just then he took off his cap and I could see that his forehead was shiny with sweat.

H was looking at me, looking right through me, it seemed.

"Your name, please," the Colonel said. His voice was deep and rough and the worn leather of his long coat creaked as he moved. His breath smelled of tobacco and Schnapps.

"Grenadier Jakob Herrmann, sir!" My nervousness pinched my throat and the words came out in a squeak. Some of the other recruits around me tittered. The Oberst turned and looked at them, his face like stone, and the laughter died as if choked.

"You are a warrior, I think?"

"Sir?"

"Your name, Grenadier."

I hesitated a moment, then understood. "Yes sir! My family name is an honour to me."

"Tell me a little bit about yourself."

"Sir, I was born in Berlin, but was raised by my grandparents on a farm near Frankfurt an der Oder. I have completed my high school and have been a proud member of the *Flakhelfer* for these past two years."

"Good," the Oberst said. "With your training, you will be invaluable to your new unit." He gave a thin smile and a nod. I tried to imagine his thoughts, thinking he saw us for what we really were, just boys dressed in new uniforms, like scarecrows being prepared to frighten the enemy. The Oberst stepped back to the edge of the platform and raised his head to look at us.

"Today, you are fresh recruits!" he said, his voice carrying across the shrouded platform. "Tomorrow, you will become soldiers of the Reich! We're being deployed to Holland. You'll be assigned to perimeter protection at one of our Western night-fighter bases. That is all. Heil Hitler!" His right arm shot out in the Nazi party salute.

"Heil Hitler!" we all shouted, saluting in kind.

The salute was a surprise for me. I was told that when I entered the *Wehrmacht* I would use the traditional military salute, with the arm cocked at a forty-five degree angle at the elbow, just like all soldiers do today. We were all taught that at the Collection Centre. Now, the Colonel was using the Nazi Party salute, with the arm extended away from body. I wasn't a party member. My parents, and after they died when I was seven,

my grandparents, didn't agree with what I was being taught by the Nazi party. I'll give you an example. Like all other boys my age, we had to attend Youth Camp. The typical indoctrination you've all heard about – loyalty to the *Füehrer*, memorization of the key principles of National Socialism, the necessity of the war launched by Hitler, etc. But as soon as I arrived home from the camp after summer's end, my grandmother ordered me to strip off the brown-shirted uniform and, after having it cleaned and pressed, re-hanged it in the wardrobe until it was absolutely necessary to wear it again. I wasn't allowed to attend any rallies. My Grandmother always had an excuse ready – I was sick, I had to help on the farm, it was harvest time. The organizers weren't happy but with Grandfather being a veteran of the Great War, the excuses were never questioned. So for me, I knew of the trappings of the Nazi's, but had been taught at home to treat them with a grain of salt. So, the Colonel's salute was a warning to me – he'd been politicized. It told me that the Nazi Party had wormed its way into the *Wehrmacht* and I wasn't sure I liked what I saw.

Meanwhile, the *Feldwebels* – Sergeants – were slowly herding groups of boys into the train. When it was my turn, I quickly stepped into the carriage, through the door into the blackness. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, I saw wooden benches placed around the walls of the freight car. A small wood stove sat in one corner, its tin chimney rising through a hole in the roof, a supply of wood next to it on the floor. A latrine bucket was in another corner. Electric lights had been nailed onto the wall. I didn't have a lot of time to look around with all the other boys filing into the car behind me so I quickly found a seat on one of the benches, stowed my gear on the floor between my legs and propped my carbine between my knees. In total, thirty of us were crammed in with all our

gear before the door was slid shut and the outside latch secured. A train whistle sounded and the carriage jerked a couple of times before the train slowly moved forward, gradually picking up speed as it left the city and entered open countryside. A card game started up in one corner of the carriage. Elsewhere, small groups of recruits talked, heads close, gesturing, laughing, punching each other's shoulders. The air above us quickly turned a hazy blue from the cigarettes we smoked.

I twisted around and peered out a crack in the wall boards. Empty countryside. A village that passed by in a blur. To pass the time, I turned to my neighbours and introduced myself. Meier was on my right, a short, thin boy from Munich whose acne was more severe than my own. Krause was on my left, an ordinary but wan-looking boy from Silesia. Meier leaned in close, gesturing us to listen to what he had to say.

"You know, the Russians, they behead our men, and put the heads on posts facing the German lines, as a warning. They're copying the Romans, of course." He had a twinkle in his eye when he said this and a silly grin on his face.

"Listen to you," Krause said, "telling us tales. It's all propaganda, designed to frighten us, to make us hate them."

"Not true! I heard this from veterans."

"Ach! Even if it is, what if we really do get sent there? Do you think you'll be amongst the living, observing this from a hilltop in the distance? What if it's your head affixed to a post?"

Meier blanched. "I hadn't thought of that."

"No, you didn't. But don't look so worried. Who would send troops as green as us into a battle with the Russians?"

The question hung in the air for a while as we mulled it over.

"I'm just glad to be doing something," I finally said. "I've seen what the *Wehrmacht* can do. I'm from a farm where nothing ever happens. A village where the biggest event of the year is the annual harvest fair in the Fall. Here, I feel I'm in the middle of the action."

"Don't be too eager for action," Kraus replied. "My older brother was at the front. When he was furloughed, he told me what he went through. The rain, the mud, the bombs, the mortars, the bullets. No," he said, shaking his head, "I don't want to live through that." He looked down at his new uniform. "Although, now I don't have a choice."

"What happened to your brother?" I asked.

"He died, killed in action in the middle of a snow-filled cow pasture, just outside of Stalingrad."

God I was naïve.

I should have listened closer to Kraus. In retrospect, he was the most prophetic of us all. But at that moment, I wasn't going to war but rather, on a grand adventure, so I ignored Krause's gloomy predictions. After a while, we continued to talk – me asking Meier questions about Munich and Krause reciprocating with questions about farm life. When the conversations wound down, I dug into my pack and took out one of the books I'd brought with me. It was a copy of 'New America', given to me by my Opa, my grandfather, when I received my deployment orders. Opa owned a small library of books. He'd take me into the village with him whenever he purchased new titles. It was through him that I became familiar with books, so familiar that it became necessary for me to

carry one all the time. Christ, you know me. I always have a book or a magazine with me. To this day, I just can't shake the habit.

Anyway, my copy of New America contained short stories by American authors William Faulkner, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Katherine Anne Porter. It was the first time I had the opportunity to read literature from America. It wasn't long before I became entranced with Faulkner's Emily and was horrified to learn of her murder of Homer and how she kept the corpse, sleeping beside it for years. It brought to mind the gruesome images Meier had just told us of the Russian soldiers and how they treated German prisoners. At the same time, I was captivated by the clarity of the language, his incantation of a 'big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies'. I had never seen houses like this. Our houses were squarish, yes, but with *stuck* – stucco – on the outside, framed by exposed beams. I struggled with the challenge of trying to imagine what these houses looked like.

My other book was a collection of the more famous remarks and writings of Herr Hitler. Don't be alarmed. Everyone carried some of his writings with them, sort of like the Chinese carrying the Little Red Book during the Cultural Revolution. It was part of the loyalty thing we all had to learn. But the writing. I still remember this part: 'One blood demands one Reich. Never will the German nation possess the moral right to engage in colonial politics until, at least, it embraces its own sons within a single state,' or something like that. Horrid stuff. The first book, Opa had said, was to pass the time. The second was supposed to get my spirits up when the going got tough. After comparing the two books, I wasn't convinced Hitler could do a better job of raising my spirits than the American authors.

I read through the day and finished over half the book of fiction when the train whistle sounded and the carriage shuddered violently. The brakes squealed and groaned as the train eased to a stop. The sound of latches unlocking came from up and down the train. When our door slid open, the light of powerful klieg lights made me squint but I could see that we'd stopped in another train station.

Once my eyes adjusted, I could see the Oberst as he paced the platform, bellowing at us to disembark and form lines. I quickly stowed my book, grabbed my gear and rifle and joined the others. The hobnailed soles of my combat boots thudded metallically on the granite platform, like a tap dancer landing hard on a stage. Once we were settled into our lines, the battalion Felds informed us we'd be marched to trucks waiting outside the station and then transported to the airbase. I fell in as we were turned in unison and marched line by line out of the station.

I was marching beside Krause and asked him what he thought about deployment to an air base. He looked sullenly at me, then pointed out just how ill-trained we really were.

"If we were to get into a real battle with the enemy," he said, "our chances of survival are not good."

"Do you really think we'll see the enemy?"

"Probably not. But still, why put us into such a situation without any real training?"

"I've got training," I said.

Krause looked at me. "A *Flakhelfer*, right?"

"Yes."

"It's not the same thing," Krause muttered. "You ever shoot anyone?"

"No. But I've shot down enemy planes."

Krause grimaced. "It's not the same thing as shooting someone you can see. Ever done that?"

"No."

"Neither have I. Neither have any of us. I remember asking my brother about it. He wouldn't talk about his kills. His face just grew hard when I mentioned it. Ach! We're as green as spring saplings. I just hope we can all bend as well as one."

As we boarded the trucks, filing into the rear of the canvas-covered vehicles, I thought about what Kraus had said. I tried to imagine what it would be like to shoot and kill someone standing right in front of me. I could easily imagine it, but there was no emotion, just an image playing in my mind like a grainy newsreel and I realized that Krause was right. I had no idea what it'd be like.

The vehicle pulled out of the garrison and bumped along a wet, rough road. Meier and Kraus were sitting opposite and I couldn't easily converse with them. I introduced myself to the older man sitting next to me.

"Konrad Koch," the man said, extending his hand. I shook it.

"How did you get mixed up with a bunch of high school boys like us?"

Koch chuckled. "I missed the previous call-ups. Civil Defence duty. But this time, my notice came in the mail, just like everyone else it seems."

I went silent for a moment, trying to think of what to say next and as I did, I remember wrapping and re-wrapping the strap of my carbine around my finger.

"I've only pulled some anti-aircraft duty," I finally said. "We shot down planes over Frankfurt an der Oder. But I've never been in combat."

"Me neither," said Koch. "I sandbagged buildings in Hamburg and when the bombs fell, I ran like hell for the nearest shelter. I've never shot at anybody."

"Are you scared?"

"Of course. Only a fool wouldn't be."

"But we have no choice."

"No."

"All the same, I feel like we're doing something."

"Really? What?"

"Defending the country."

Koch grunted. "I hope that's enough." He leaned his head back and closed his eyes. I looked out the back of the truck, the fog-covered landscape rolling by. Was it enough? I realized then I'd never really asked myself if it was. Perhaps I should have, but at sixteen with my head full of Youth Camp slogans I didn't think much past the words.

As the scenery rolled by, my thoughts wandered into thinking about what was expected of me in the days and weeks ahead. I was ignorant and hopeful enough that I could be one of the soldiers I saw in the newsreels receiving the Iron Cross on some far away battlefield. I was still thrilled and awed by the touch and feel of guns, how you could pull a trigger here and over there an instant later, something else happened – a hole in a target, or dirt puffing up into the air, or a spark briefly flashing as the bullet glanced off a rock.

My combat experience was limited to the summer I spent in Frankfurt an der Oder, defending the city from enemy bombers, perhaps even bombers that you flew in, Bill. To this day, I still remember the thrill of pumping flak shells into the sky, filling the air with chunks of metal, watching in fascination as a British bomber flew into the storm of metal I helped create and arc slowly over, smoke trailing from two of its four engines, a giant bird plucked from the sky. It was awe-inspiring really, but at the time I didn't think a moment about the crew in that plane, about what they must be experiencing in those moments before the crash. It's horrible when I think of it now.

I certainly remembered the camaraderie I'd experienced while on station, like the time we stripped off our shirts and stretched out beside our gun emplacement on a clear, sunny day. Our duties complete, we had nothing else to do so we wiled away the hours sunbathing. It wasn't long before we spotted a young woman as she came out of a stairway exit on the roof of the neighbouring building. She took off her dress to reveal the bathing suit she had on underneath and stretched out on a folding chaise. To attract her attention we scrawled our unit phone number on the barrel of our anti-aircraft gun in large, white numbers. I remembered talking to her, her voice playful, attractive, her laughter bright, before the soldier next in line took the phone from my hand.

But as we drove along the road, my thoughts returned mostly to the home and farm I'd left behind. Don't know if you knew it but I was a farm boy for most of my adolescent life. Sitting in that truck I realized it was harvest time and, for the first time since I was adopted by my grandparents, I wouldn't be there to help them take in the wheat and potatoes. It'd be hard on them, I thought. They were aged and as I grew older and stronger, they depended more and more on me for my strength and endurance. Once

the harvest was done on our farm I usually helped the neighbours, the Brasch's, on the next farm over to bring in their own crops. They were older as well, and had a daughter, Olga. She was about my age, just six months older, and we had grown closer the previous summer. I realized then that my life from the time I was seven had been circumscribed by the seasons, each season activating another set of activities around the farm that was necessary to keep it going. But on that train, heading for the fighter base, that was all gone. I had a new life now, full of unknown danger, an uncertain future, every move and action of which was dictated by someone else.

When we finally arrived, we were organized into squads and each of the squads was assigned patrol duty of a section of the perimeter of the airfield. I drew night duty and from my position, despite orders to keep my eyes focussed on the forest surrounding the base, I looked eagerly at the planes taking off. They were Bf 110's, twin-engine light bombers. As they climbed into the black sky, engines roaring, the running lights winking out as the wheels disappeared into the engine cowlings, I admired the bravery of the pilots who flew such deadly aircraft, and envied them for their battles with the enemy.

As one night passed into the next, and one week passed into two, fewer and fewer of the planes came back from their missions. At dinner, we picked at our food and spoke rarely, lost in thought, unable to really comprehend what was happening to our planes. It was our first real exposure to losing and it began to sink in that maybe we weren't being as victorious as the newsreels said we were. It really hit home when, near the end of our second week at the base, a British Beaufighter snuck into a group of our planes as they lined up to land after their mission. It dropped a load of light bombs on and around the base before disappearing into the night. There was no major damage but the surprise of it

shook my confidence. I asked myself, what had happened to our legendary air defences, the very defences I'd trained and participated in for over a year?

The following day, the Felds hastily roused us and assembled us in a field next to the air base. The *Oberst* told us that, with the sneak attack of the previous night, Command felt it could no longer endanger such a green group of soldiers. Our new orders were to proceed to Den Helder, north of Amsterdam, a peninsula of land jutting into the North Sea. It was time for more training. You see, it was time for us to get introduced to the war for real.

Two – Basic Training

When I arrived in northern Holland at the beginning of September, it was cold. The wind, some banshee thing that swept in from the North Sea, funnelled down the channel that separated the mainland from the island of Texel to the north. With two hours of liberty before dinner, Koch and I were joined by Meier and Krause and we walked the pebbly beach, admiring the view of Waddenzee Bay, our cheeks getting red with wind-burn. We threw flat rocks into the surf, trying to make them skip but all they did was disappear into the foaming water. When we arrived back at our barracks, we found we'd been assigned different bunkhouses so we wished each other luck after the meal and turned in.

Oh boy. Was I in for a surprise. None of the so-called training I'd received at the Collection Centre prepared me for what happened next. The very next morning a Feld burst into our barracks at dawn blowing his whistle. The ear splitting blasts made me cringe as I tumbled from my bunk.

"Boots and pants!" he yelled. He went from bunk to bunk, blowing his whistle, yelling out the same order over and over again. I rubbed sleep from my eyes and scrambled into my pants and boots and stood unsteadily at the end of my bunk. After the Feld gave us all a quick inspection, he ordered us to washing troughs outside and gave us two minutes to clean up. It was cold and it wasn't long before my arms and legs and chest were covered in goose bumps and my teeth clacked. Once we finished washing and the Feld judged us clean enough, we were ordered to line up in the courtyard and were taken through a gymnastics routine. At the end of fifteen minutes, my breath was heaving out

of me in gasps and my muscles felt stretched life toffee but it wasn't over. The Feld gave us forty-five seconds to run to the barracks and report back to the courtyard in full battle gear.

I managed it, barely. Back outside, in line with the other recruits, I waited. The wind soughed through the evergreens and the fog gradually lifted, threading into streamers as it was carried away on the breeze. I soon heard footsteps. A tall man came into view. He was dressed in riding breaches, immaculately polished knee boots and a white tee-shirt stretched tightly over his muscular frame. Christ! He was a giant of a man, standing at least a head above any of us. One of the Felds stepped forward and introduced him as *Hauptmann* – Captain – Trudel, our drill instructor.

I heard him walking slowly and quietly between the ranks. I couldn't see what he was doing and it felt like forever before he appeared again at the front of the ranks. Trudel nodded to the Felds.

"Everyone on the ground! On your stomachs! *Schnell! Schnell!*" Anybody who hesitated was soon pushed onto the ground by one of the Felds. Once everyone was down, I could see through the corner of my eye as Trudel started to walk again, this time stepping on each of the recruits. He actually walked on each of our bodies, as if we were stepping stones in a pond.

"This is to remind you that you are worth nothing more to me than the dirt on which you lie," he said. "And even then I trust the dirt to cover me better than you lot. Until I pronounce you ready to assume the mantle of a soldier of the Reich, you will remain a maggot, a simple trainee. But mark my words: I will turn you into the best fighting soldiers this world has ever seen! You will become efficient killing machines.

You will leap forward eagerly when we order you to advance. You will have bloodlust in your hearts. You will not be afraid to defend your life, and those of your *komerads*, when faced by the enemy."

It was ambitious as a goal, but it felt good to hear it. And my turn came soon enough. Trudel stepped on the small of my back, pressing me into the hard earth. My breath whooshed out of my lungs and I gasped, but I didn't cry out from the pain I felt knifing up my spine. After every recruit bore the dirty stamp of his boots, Trudel ordered us into our first exercise. We were split into two groups and I was herded into the first of the groups, assigned the role of transporting wounded personnel. A second, smaller group would play act as wounded soldiers. I paired up with Krause and we linked our arms at the wrists to form a seat to carry our man. Trudel led us out of the camp at a fast jog into the forest. The terrain was hilly. Loose rocks and rotting branches tripped us up. The sun finally burned through the remaining fog and it wasn't long before our bodies ran with sweat.

We covered about two kilometres before our wrists collapsed under the strain. As punishment, a Feld ordered each of us to carry a recruit on our back. I continued for an hour, driven to the limit of my physical capacity. Some of the other recruits fainted, collapsing onto the dirt. Then Trudel changed the exercise. We were ordered to lie down and crawl up a kilometre-long hill. If we lifted our heads, the *Hauptmann* threatened to shoot at us with his pistol. After almost covering the entire distance, he and one of the Felds opened fire on us anyway. I could hear the hot lead whizzing past my head, cracking through the leaves, thudding into tree trunks near me, pieces of bark flying off and hitting us. My heart thudded and the sweat ran off me. But they kept at it until I

reached the top. It was my first experience with someone shooting at me and I was scared to death.

From then on, the days blurred into an endless set of exercises. I traversed a swamp up to my neck while other trainees fired live ammunition over my head. I hurled grenades and used bayonets, stabbing straw-filled dummies hanging from posts. I traversed narrow logs and rope bridges at a run to improve my balance. I was put through endurance tests like the *härteübung*. Yeah, that was a doozy. I had to stay awake for thirty-six hours straight. When it was over, I was given eight hours of rest and then the cycle started over again. I endured general alerts, which tore me from my bunk, forcing me to report to the courtyard in full battle dress, only to learn it was a drill and I could return to my bed. Recruits returned to camp in the evening propped up between two of their *komerads*. I frequently collapsed into my bunk at the end of the day fully clothed. I remember my head aching from fatigue, my mouth dry from thirst, blisters on my feet torn open and bleeding. I remember thinking that I felt like bread dough, some substance to be moulded by Trudel and the Felds into something else to better survive the Russians or the Allies.

This went on for two months. Trudel walked through camp like an emperor, trailing a retinue of Felds and barking orders to whatever hapless recruit was in his way. I was witness to his power when one day, I saw the camp Commandant bowing slightly to him when their paths crossed in the courtyard. Trudel put his arm around the Commandant's shoulders and walked with him, talking animatedly. The Commandant nodded, smiling and when they parted, it seemed as if the Commandant walked very quickly to his office, as if in a hurry to execute something Trudel had told him.

In late October, things changed. I was on a break in the courtyard with Meier and Krause. We were swapping complaints about where we hurt the most. As we talked, a small convoy of official cars drove into the camp and stopped in front of the Commandant's office. The first two cars were loaded with officers while the third had a group of men who immediately went to the trunk of their car and removed a lot of photographic gear. Later in the day, after we'd been assembled on the training ground, I saw those same officers on a hill overlooking us, field glasses in hand. Trudel was beside them, making a rare appearance in full uniform, leaning close, talking in their ear, gesturing at us. The other men had set up a movie camera and a still camera on tripods, the lenses aimed at the training grounds.

For the next three days we were observed, filmed and photographed as we were put through a series of now well-known training manoeuvres – marching in formation in the courtyard and conducting live fire exercises; crouch-walking behind an *Exerzierpanzer* – training tank – to imitate an assault behind a tank column; digging a foxhole and meeting an attack from a phantom enemy. After three days, the officers and camera crew drove away and Trudel changed back into his riding breeches and tee-shirt.

In the mess hall that evening, the four of us sat at the same table, eating slowly.

"So. What does it mean?" I asked.

"It means we're going to be deployed, that's what it means," Meier said.

Konrad nodded. "I think you're right. Our little show for the cameras? A demonstration for the High Command that they have fresh, well-trained troops to throw at the front."

"Which front?" I asked.

"You know the answer to that as well as I. Only two options – East or West."

"Well, I don't about you fellows, but West is where I'd like to go," said Kraus. "Look where we are. Holland is far closer to the Western front than the East. Makes sense, no?"

Konrad shook his head. "It doesn't matter where we are. What matters is where the need is greatest. The Amis couldn't take the Rhine with their recent offensive. For the moment, the Western Front is under control. But in the East . . .. We all know what's happening there."

"Oh God," said Meier. "Great. Just great."

"I know. But we need to be prepared." We fell silent, not saying anything more until our food got cold. We rose and took our trays back to the dishwashing station and filed out into the night air and went our separate ways, each of us lost in our own thoughts, I guess. As I settled down for the night, I could hear the sounds of hammers on wood and trucks driving about. Something was being planned for the following morning.

At sunrise the next day, the Felds ordered us into the courtyard in full battle gear. They didn't yell, or blow their whistles. Their stern expressions were gone. In their place were faces with expressions of sadness and regret and so I knew something was up. I was pretty sure our training was over. I closed my eyes as I suited up in the barracks, listening to the buzz of conversation, a sound that was comforting but also, given the uncertainty of our futures, tinged with an anxiety I could feel in the pit of my stomach. I checked out the recruit beside me, pulling a strap tighter and straightening a helmet. I made one last check of my locker and made sure my bed was made to regulation tautness, ready for the next recruit, if there was one. With nothing left to do, I filed outside with the others.

Well, I was amazed. The patch of dirt we called a courtyard had been transformed into some kind of grand parade ground. A reviewing stand that could hold 40 men had been constructed out of timber at one end. Unit flags and the War Ensign fluttered and snapped in the cold breeze. Frost-covered branches were draped over the stand to form a roof and the grounds had been raked. A red carpet had been laid over the stairs and platform. Chairs and a lectern with a microphone were placed on the platform and loudspeakers had been placed in the trees surrounding the courtyard. The camp officers, including Trudel, were dressed in their formal uniforms. Another group of officers were present. They were distinctive as they sported a red line down the side seam of their breeches. I'd never seen this type of uniform before so I asked a Feld who these officers were. "The General Staff," was the whispered reply, his breath pluming in front of his face in the cold. I have to admit that I puffed up a bit when I heard that.

We were marched into the courtyard, our carbines carried with bayonets fixed, the morning sun glinting off the polished steel. A Feld at the head of our group turned and ordered us all to be silent. A trumpeter blew a single note and the unit was formed into position and presented arms. We listened as, one by one, the officers delivered speeches. God was with us, we were told, a message we carried with us wherever we went. That part at least was true. Those very words were inscribed on our belt buckles, right above the eagle grasping a swastika in its talons. I still have one, somewhere in a box in my basement if you're interested.

With God on our side, they said, we had nothing to fear. But I wasn't so sure. I'd never been religious and am even less so today and was wary of the claims others put in a being I couldn't see or couldn't touch. I know some of you are regular church goers so I

don't mean any disrespect but I asked myself - would this being actually choose sides? Others believed it so I thought any advantage I could get in the coming weeks, whether natural, metaphysical or religious, was good enough to help me survive. Mind you, I'm guessing a lot of you thought the same thing, that God was on your side and that you'd prevail. Guess you could say you were right and we were wrong.

As the last officer took his seat, having exhorted the recruits to remain loyal to the *Füehrer*, the swearing-in ceremony began. Each of us was ordered to march to the reviewing stand and pledge his allegiance to Germany. When it was my turn, I marched precisely to the spot I was ordered and stated loudly and clearly before the officers: "I swear to serve Germany and the Führer until victory or death!" (Yeah, I know, heady stuff but you'll see later on that despite the fine sentiment in that oath, it wasn't taken all that seriously). After that, I executed a half-turn and joined the growing group of newly sworn-in Panzer Grenadiers. The ceremony concluded with an army priest saying a prayer and wishing everyone well in the battles to come.

Hauptmann Trudel ordered stewards situated on the perimeter of the courtyard to distribute a glass of wine to everyone. I could see this was the advice-giving Trudel, when he softened his tone and put a smile on his face and wanted to be a father to you, as opposed to the Emperor Trudel, who dispensed orders without a second glance or thought to your well being. I took a glass in hand and savoured the sharp taste and then waited for him to speak.

"Today is a great day for you all," he began. "The day you've been waiting for, the day you've been training for, has arrived. I'm pleased to announce that your training is complete. You are no longer recruits. You are now soldiers in the *Wehrmacht*." A

cheer erupted from the group and I was grinning along with everyone else and I joined my *komerads* in saluting our success by taking another drink.

"I know that I'm sending the Army a good group of soldiers" continued Trudel. "And we have no more time." Here it comes, I thought, as the others around me murmured.

"I'm sad to announce that the Russians have reached – and crossed – the eastern border with Poland. We must stop them before they reach East Prussia and Pomerania. These . . . savages, these uncivilized Bolsheviks must not be allowed to sully all that is good and great in Germany! Therefore, you will proceed directly from this ceremony to the train station. All furlough has been cancelled. A troop transport train will take you to the Warsaw marshalling yards." So there it was. The Eastern front it would be. There was more murmuring amongst the group and I remember hearing a couple of the soldiers near me swearing under their breath. I tried to find Konrad in the crowd to see how he reacted to his prediction being correct but he was in one of the lines in front of me and I couldn't see his face. "From there, you will be assigned to posts in keeping with your training. Your job – your only job - in the coming weeks will be to help us all in holding the Russians where they are. If you can do this one thing, then we will have a chance to survive as a nation; you will all be heroes and have a place in the new Germany. Do your job and do it well!" he said, his voice rising. "Remember your training! Remember the Führer and what he has done for us all! Protect Germany from the invaders! *Heil Hitler*!"

He lifted his glass to the sky. We all lifted ours with one hand and with the other, returned the salute. The roar of all those young voices startled some birds in a nearby tree. I looked at them as they wheeled overhead, frantically beating their wings, looking

for a new place to land. I remember thinking that I hoped the Russians we would soon meet would be just as fearful and scatter themselves to the wind when we arrived before them, although I doubted they'd be too impressed by us. I downed the remainder of my wine and placed my glass on a long table before we were formed into lines and marched out of the courtyard towards the waiting transport trucks.

The ride to the train was short. We disembarked from the trucks into cold air, frost gleaming from the tops of bushes and grass. One of the men next to me grumbled that it foretold a colder than usual winter to come. I boarded the train, found a seat and stored my gear in the overhead rack.

I remember, I was sitting by myself for a while. Krause and Meier were in seats further up in the same carriage but I didn't go to join them right away. Didn't want any company just then. I just wanted to let what was happening to me sink in a bit. Here I was, on a train heading for the front, heading for combat with the Russians. I was of stunned by the thought, first, of being a fully trained member of the *Wehrmacht*, and second, that I'd be going to meet the Russians, an enemy whose exploits were still fresh in everyone's mind. They'd pushed us all the way from Stalingrad to Poland. Stalingrad. It's where everything began to unravel for us. An entire army group surrounded and starved. And as I read after the war, they'd driven us back across the Steppes with American support and factories well-protected behind the Urals, out of range of our bombers. I didn't know what to expect but I was apprehensive, if not downright scared. When I looked around at my *komerads*, the faces I could see were sullen, eyes settled on a distant point, as if they were thinking of some other place.

I looked out the window at the passing countryside, at the frost that covered the leafless brush and trees, like white skeletons of their former selves, the sun sparkling off branches as if coated with diamonds. All that raw beauty, I thought, there for the admiring but with no one to appreciate it. Men jacketed in white would soon walk through there, looking for advantage, looking for their enemy, looking to kill. And all that white glory would be trampled and ground under by men and machines, leaving behind broken trees, shredded brush and earth trammelled.

Ach! I was getting downright weepy. I got to my feet and made my way forward. Meier and Krause sat side by side facing a third soldier I didn't know. But as I approached the seats, he excused himself to have a cigarette in the vestibule.

"What do you think?" I asked, taking the soldier's place.

"We're dead," said Krause. He crossed his arms and turned his head to watch the scenery outside the carriage window. Meier leaned in, touching my knee. "Pay no attention to him. He's the gloomy one of the lot."

"Seriously though," Meier continued, "it doesn't look good. Trainees like us against Russians who have been pushing experienced soldiers back for months? What can we do that they couldn't?"

"Maybe we'll bend," I said.

Meier leaned back in his seat and smiled. "Maybe we will." We joined Krause in looking at the scenery. The other soldier returned from his smoke and introduced himself as Hans. Hans was from Berlin and told harrowing tales of being bombed by British planes, the great air battles he witnessed as Luftwaffe fighters crawled into a sky crowded with thousands of black flak bursts, while on the ground, they moved from shelter to

shelter. Meier told them about his life in Munich, how his father had been killed on the Eastern front and how he had to get used to living with his mother and sister in their small apartment. He was worried he might follow his father to an early grave far from home.

I told them how my parents died in a motorcycle accident when I was seven years old, and how I spent the next nine years growing up on my grandparent's farm near the small village of Boossen, on the outskirts of Frankfurt an der Oder.

"So much space out there. Being raised in the city, I didn't know what to do when I first arrived. All that land for miles around me and no one in it. And my grandparents. In Berlin everyone had somewhere to go and they got there by moving quickly. Not them. It wasn't just their age. Everyone moved slowly in the country. I was so impatient for a time, until I got used to it."

In the beginning, I missed a lot of things from the city. It was so easy to walk about within the huge apartment complex that was my home, to find boys my age to play in the courtyard or in the abandoned lot across the street. I missed my mother's baking, the smell of fresh strudel that filled the apartment on Saturday afternoons or the loving way she poured my bath and cleaned my back. I missed my father, the way he showed me how to fix motorcycle engines in a rented garage down the street, parts strewn in orderly chaos on a blanket on the hard-packed earthen floor, the mysteries of mechanical motion becoming clearer. I can see you nodding Bill. Yeah, that's where my fascination with engines began, right at my father's side.

Bit by bit, as the weeks and months passed in my grandparent's company, I grew to love them and the farm. The smell of the cropped wheat, tilled earth and the long hours

spent outdoors had turned me into a lover of nature. I became fascinated with the variety of plants, herbs and trees that were within just a few short strokes of my bicycle pedals. Although she wasn't my mother, Oma had a way with cooking that made my mouth water with every dish she made. She would use the ingredients around her – fresh eggs from the chickens, herbs and vegetables from the garden, meat freshly slaughtered on a neighbouring farm – to create meals rich in fat and sharp with tastes my tongue had rarely experienced.

After dinner, and after my evening chores had been completed, Opa would light his pipe and talk of the future. As farmers, they were strong believers in Hitler's policy of *lebensraum*, the expansion of German territory through invasion of neighbouring states, to reclaim lands that had traditionally been a part of Germany and Prussia. "Hitler's duty is to right the wrongs perpetuated against the German state by foreign powers, with no knowledge of the complexity of German affairs," he would state over and over again, the smoke pouring from his mouth as he drew hard on his pipe.

When I finished telling the story of my grandparents, Krause, his senses awakened by the conversation happening around him, told us about his life in Silesia. His family were coal miners, his father trudging off to the pits, his own future in the mines set out before him like some ancient prophecy carved in stone. And then the war intervened and Krause was forced to work beside his father until the army couldn't spare him any longer and he was called up. For Krause, it was the happiest day of his life. He could finally escape the dreary, coal dust-laden skies, the grey streets and blackened houses, avoid being among the men walking back from the pits in the dusky light, faces darkened by coal, only the whites of the eyes showing like pairs of tiny, bobbing fireflies.

"Ach, you're a gloomy lot," said Meier. He pulled a deck of playing cards out of his tunic pocket. "Anyone up for a game of *Doppelkopf*?"

Hans and Kraus were smiling and rubbing their hands together at the prospect.

"I'm afraid you'll have to teach me," I said. "We rarely had four people around a table so I never learned the game."

"Not to worry," said Meier. "We'll go easy at first until you understand how it's played."

Another Grenadier wandered by looking for a book and so I loaned him my copy of *New America*. Night fell and the light we needed to keep playing faded as the sun went down. We tried the electric lights on the train, but for some reason, they weren't working so we had to stop playing. I was disappointed. I'd teamed up with Meier for a few hands and was beginning to appreciate the difference between simply playing my cards and strategizing my play. With nothing else to do, we settled down to get some sleep, a challenge as there were no bunks and very little space to stretch out. I lay on one of the seat benches, my legs tucked in out of the aisle. Krause chose the floor and Meier, the smallest of us all, crammed himself into the luggage rack above the seats.

"You have to be a black sleeper to be up there," observed Krause from the floor, noting the bare centimetres of space between Meier's nose and the ceiling of the rail car.

"Good thing I am," said Meier, giving us all a wink before closing his eyes. Some hours later, I needed to pee. I levered myself up and looked around. It seemed to me, at that moment, as if someone had set off a grenade in the carriage, what with all those sleeping boys lying ramshackle throughout the carriage like some kind of battle scene of the newly dead. I shook my head to clear the image and treaded carefully between

sleeping bodies to get to the privy, no more than a gaping hole in the floor of the carriage, covered with the semblance of a toilet seat. When I was finished I returned just as carefully to my seat and tried to get back to sleep but I woke often through the night, and each time I did, the train was still moving, the steel wheels steadfastly banging out their bell-like beat. It felt like living in purgatory or some way station while God decided our fate.

When we finally arrived at the *Heer's* – the Army's – staging area south of Warsaw the following evening, the sun had fallen beyond the horizon and the air in the rail car was so fusty with the odour of unwashed men there was almost a riot when the door was not opened fast enough. When the door finally swung open with a bang, the air that greeted us was clouded with coal smoke, diesel and gasoline fumes. It was the sweetest smelling air I'd ever breathed.

We disembarked into a sea of German soldiers. They were more soldiers, more *people*, than I'd ever seen in one place in my entire life. The largest crowd I'd seen up to then was all the recruits assembled in the courtyard in the training camp, or when the inhabitants of Boossen met in the town square to celebrate. Two hundred people, at most. This throng stretched to the horizon in every direction around me. There must've been thousands. Under arc lights that lit the night like the sun, I saw supplies, equipment, spare parts and ammunition piled in orderly lots that towered over me as I marched to the designated area of the staging grounds. Men and officers scurried past, eyes low, focussed on getting to their destination. Vehicles drove in every direction, routed on their way by traffic officers with signalling paddles in their hands. Artillery and tanks were given priority and my unit had to scramble out of the way more than once as the Panzers,

reeking of diesel and oil, belching black smoke from their exhausts, their engines roaring, were brought into position for loading onto transport trains that would take them to the front. I shrank from the tanks as they passed. I felt puny beside them, vulnerable, knowing they were designed to crush and pulverise men, knowing the Russians had their own tanks that would soon be seeking me out.

We continued to thread our way through the crowd and soon arrived at a cordoned-off area filled with cots. On the thin canvas beds I saw wounded soldiers. Men with head wounds and leg wounds and arms and heads encased in bandages. Some had no legs or were missing an arm. Others lay there, mute, still, blood seeping through thin, dirty field bandages. Medical NCO's rushed about, assisting the surgeons in the dim light cast by field lanterns. Soldier's ponchos were strung out above the patients, forming a thin barrier of protection from the elements.

I stopped and stared because it was the first time I'd seen men injured by war. Hans and Kraus and Meier and Koch bunched up around me but I was so focussed on what I saw I didn't notice them. I looked intently at the suffering men before me. I could smell the raw, coppery stench of blood mixed with antiseptic and sulpha drugs. I still remember the wounded, the sounds they made, the screaming, the pleading for aid, the groaning and whimpering of those newly treated, all the sounds raw with pain.

My gaze settled on a wounded soldier resting on a cot. He's still there in my memory, sharp and clear as if I just saw him yesterday. His head and half his face was covered with a bloody, weeping bandage. The other half of his face revealed an eye barely visible through swollen lids. One leg was a bloodied stump where his knee and calf and foot should've been. His uniform was grimy and tattered. He looked at me,

forcing his good eye open a little wider. He looked right at me and his gaze seemed to bore through me. And then he smiled. I saw a mouth contorted into a sneer. A face transfigured into a bloody frightening mask. I looked away.

It wasn't long before the NCO's attending the wounded noticed us and they made their way over, ordering us to move along. It was only then I noticed I wasn't alone, noticed my *komerads* grouped around me. The Felds barked orders to clear us from the triage center. I had to force my feet to move. I snuck another look at the wounded soldier before turning away. The man sucked from a cigarette, blowing small clouds of smoke above him.

As I marched away from the triage area, I couldn't help thinking of my basic training, of *Hauptman* Trudel firing at me from the top of the ridge, about how easy it would've been for one of those bullets to catch me in the shoulder, in the face, in my leg. I realized then it wasn't dying that scared me the most. After seeing the injured soldier, the mass of wounded packed together as tightly as cattle in a fenced paddock, the surgeons and medical NCO's overwhelmed, I realized that my greater fear was the suffering I'd face from being wounded, maimed or crippled. Surely all those men receiving medical treatment thought as I did before getting to the battlefield, about how easy it was to just go out there and go to war, pick up a rifle and shoot at the enemy, not really realizing that the enemy has guns too, and they'll shoot back at you. And now look at them. Humbled before a God who appeared to revel in their suffering. Yeah, I know I'm using religious imagery. But even though I'm an unbeliever, it just seems appropriate. How else to explain such suffering, how men would willingly step into harm's way?

We continued to thread our way through the thousands of other troops, materiel and vehicles and finally reached an open area at the edge of the yards. The Oberst provided us with our assigned billets and ordered us to stand ready to leave on five minute's notice. Head back on my pillow, gear stored at the foot of my bed, carbine propped against the bed frame, I tried to sleep, but the images of the wounded kept re-surfacing. As I stared at the wooden slats of the bottom of the bunk above me, I remembered a conversation I'd had with Opa.

It was evening on the farm. I'd just finished my first summer at Youth camp. My grandfather was in the barn sharpening the scythes to be used for the upcoming wheat harvest. Sparks flew as he bent over the machine, pressing the thin, metal blade to the grinding wheel, steadily pumping the driver pedal with his foot. I watched from a safe distance. Opa stopped for a moment, inspecting the edge, running his thumb lightly across it. Grunting his satisfaction, he put the scythe aside and grabbed another.

"They are wise men," Opa said, continuing our conversation, referring to the senior officers under Hitler's command. "Men who have much experience in battle, the leading soldiers of their time. Many of them lived and fought through the horror of the Great War. Because of that, they will not sacrifice their men lightly. They will not abuse the greatest asset they have – the common soldier – because they know how valuable real German soldiers are. You have been chosen because you are German, because you are Aryan and you will help build the great German nation."

Opa's words had helped me through past episodes of doubt and uncertainty. But now I was closer to death than I'd ever been and grandfather's words seemed hollow, remote, distant from the reality into which I was about to be thrust.

Three – Arrival Ceremony

After asking Bill for a refill for my drink and a glass of water, I continued on with my story.

We didn't have long to wait to get our first taste of combat. Two nights later, I was roused during the night and ordered to report to the train station, no explanation given. It was cold and I shivered as I dressed in battle gear and grabbed my rifle and ammunition and pack. We were quick-marched to the station. We were barely formed into lines on the platform when the *Oberst* informed us we were being sent to reinforce German lines which were being hammered by concerted Soviet attacks. Most of us cursed, either silently or out loud. The *Oberst* paid no heed and the order was given to depart.

I stepped up into one of the last carriages in the train. When the carriage was full and the door closed behind us, a whistle sounded and the train jolted forward and headed north. I peered out through a slit in the blackout curtain. All I could see was blackness. Towns and villages we passed through were dark, lights extinguished or hidden behind blackout curtains. Forest and village appeared the same, a black unending blur. The Eastern Front beckoned, like some grisly spectre inviting me through the gate to a savage, unexplored land.

I was going to face the Russians. You have to understand something. After all those years of propaganda, to me, they weren't just men. They were some kind of mythic people, and everything I knew about them I'd gathered from stories and what I'd been taught and shown. For example, take the newsreels. Some showed images of snow, mud and charging Russian soldiers shouting 'Ourrah!' Others were lectures, explaining that

Russians were Slavs and Bolsheviks, inferior beings. I was told it was our duty to ensure that Germany remained free of this race, just as we'd contained and then expelled the Gypsies and Jews. Perfectly normal attitude then. Just sounds awful now to say it like that. I remembered the stern tone of the narrator in some of those newsreels, telling us that the Führer had set up camps for them and as they were captured on the battlefield, they would be used as labour for German industry. I remembered the images of the thousands of Russian prisoners as the *Wehrmacht* entered Russia in 1942, overwhelming the meagre defences, the rivers of brown-uniformed men being marched back to Poland and Germany. At the time, I found the narrator's statements reassuring, a feeling that took root in permanence when I saw the serene and content expressions of the boys I was with. Belief and trust in what the narrator was saying. What the Führer was doing.

I'm ashamed to admit this was pretty much how we thought of minorities. There was a real purist streak running through the German population at the time, a total rejection of anything foreign that could possibly control, no matter how insignificant, our own destiny. It was the same on the farm. A few months after I arrived following my parent's death, word went from farm to farm on the talking stick that they were coming through as part of their annual pilgrimage from the east. Yes, you heard right – a talking stick. No phones out in the countryside. So, someone found out about their arrival, scribbled the news on a piece of paper and tied it to the well-worn shaft of wood. The stick made the rounds from farm to farm and from house to house in short order. When we received the news, Oma and Opa quickly busied themselves with a thorough inspection of the house and farm outbuildings, making sure that all our machinery was stowed, the animals were in their stalls and the doors securely locked.

The Gypsies, I was told, were not like the other itinerant merchants we dealt with. They offered insignificant trinkets at high prices, haggling long and hard on price. Meanwhile, their children would sneak around the property looking for ways inside the house or barn where they would steal anything of value, including farm animals. Oma said she had a method of ensuring that the children were occupied – she fed them. Since they were always hungry, her tactic usually always worked.

I remembered the day they arrived. They were dressed in what looked to me like rags. The men had long, tangled hair, beards and tall, peaked hats made of wool. Must have been hot as hell in the summer. The women were dressed the same but no hats and their hair was braided and the braids had silver discs of different sizes woven in. But it was the sight of the children that's stuck with me the most. A new word came into my mind just then, a word I'd learned from the New America book – ragamuffin. Their hair was wild and unkempt like the men, faces dirty and upturned to beseech Oma for food, their eyes begging for what they knew was coming.

If the Russians were like the Gypsies, I thought as I stared at the dark, then maybe they would be easy to control, easy to fool, easy to beat in battle. Thankfully, I didn't have to dwell on these thoughts for long, as Koch came by at that moment. He sat down across from me.

"Koch. It's good to see you. Where're the others?"

"In the next carriage. They sent me to scout out where you were."

"Thanks."

"You okay?" he asked.

"Maudlin is all," I said, "I'm sitting here and looking out the window. There's nothing out there to see. Just blackness. It makes you think morbid thoughts."

"I know." He lit a cigarette.

"We're heading east," I continued, "and I've been trying to remember what I know about the Russians. So far, it doesn't give me much encouragement."

Koch nodded, taking a drag on his cigarette. "I didn't know very much about them either. Probably no more than you. But that was before Den Helder."

"Oh?" I sat forward, eager to hear what he had to say. "What happened?"

"I got to talking to a Feld. Turns out I wasn't the only one to take a smoke by the shore. He told me a few things. Like, what we know about the Russians is – how should I say this – not complete. The Russians aren't that bad of an army. What they lack in tactics and training, they make up for in massive firepower and large numbers. And they have fewer scruples than we do. Did you know they send prisoner battalions across our minefields to clear the charges we've laid? Imagine that! Men as mine detectors. I'd never heard of such a thing."

"That's hard to believe."

"I know. But it's true."

I was silent for a while, trying to imagine men being pushed across a minefield, the terror on their faces, knowing they were dead men.

"We were told we would be reinforcing the German lines," I finally said.

Konrad waved a hand at me, as if batting away a fly. "The Generals make it sound good, like we're going to strengthen already strong German defensive positions. My guess? We're trying to plug the holes in our lines with everything we've got."

"What are we supposed to do?"

Konrad shrugged. "Fight as best we can. Follow orders. And if you get captured, well . . . just don't."

"Because I will be demining the front line."

"That, or worse."

"What's worse than that?"

"Deportation to Siberia, where they'll use you as slave labour. And that's if you survive the march into Russia."

"How do you know all this?"

"My Feld friend didn't always train new recruits. He served with troops in the original campaign into Russia in '41 and '42. He was captured and sent to Tomvos, a camp east of Moscow. He managed to escape but the conditions there were horrible. Four German prisoners were fed one cup of millet per day in exchange for work. If you didn't work, you weren't fed. If you weren't fed, you were killed. Know how they did it? They hammered an empty cartridge case into the nape of a man's neck. Didn't want to waste live ammunition. If it looks like I'm about to get caught by the Russians, I'm not sure what I would do. I may use a bullet."

I was shocked. "You'd do that? You'd kill yourself rather than be captured?"

Koch shrugged and looked down at the floor, sheepish. "I don't know." He puffed on his cigarette quietly, looking absently at the roof above them.

I sat back and stared vacantly down the aisle of the train, my mind whirling at what I'd just heard. What was I supposed to believe? What Koch was telling me had a strange logic to it. We put them in camps. They put us in camps. They treat us badly. If

the logic holds, we must treat them badly. Do we? Maybe. I could understand this even though it was horrible to think about. And now I know we treated them badly. Slave labour they were. Used to supply assembly line workers to fuel our war production.

But I had a bit of a revelation then. I suddenly realized that the German army appeared to value me about as much as a piece of dead meat. If my friend was right, I was being sent to a place where I would be nothing more than something soft to hold up at the front to absorb Russian bullets. A bunch of newly trained boys thrown into a battle with no chance of success. A waste. And it filled me with a new feeling. Anger. How dare they do this to me! How dare they train me, and prepare me for a war, stuff my head full of notions of winning and superiority, only to find out once I'm at the battlefront that I'm simply expendable.

"Listen," I said, "my grandfather told me once that, if I made it into the army, I needed to find a buddy, someone that would look out for me the same way that I would look out for him. I know I hardly know you but, I was wondering . . ."

Koch took a last drag on his cigarette and flicked the butt to the floor. He stuck out his hand and I grabbed it and held on. "It's okay," Koch said. "I understand."

It made me feel better about my situation. Not much, but a bit. As the train rumbled through the dark, I walked to the neighbouring carriage with Koch and we chatted with Meier, Hans and Kraus. They were all worried like I was at what lay in front of them, just as uncertain as to what to expect. As they talked, a Feld walked by and ordered us all to get some rest. "There won't be much sleep for you where you're going," he warned. I looked around but there were no spare seats next to my friends, so I wished them luck and returned to the other carriage with Koch.

I couldn't sleep and so instead, I stared at the black depths of the roof of the carriage. Koch's remarkable stories of the Russians gnawed at me. I dredged my memory for what I knew about the conditions of German soldiers fighting on the Eastern Front, to find some shred of evidence to support what Koch told me. But the only images I was able to conjure up drew from my experiences with Hauptmann Trudel combined with the grey, flickering images of films produced by the Reich Ministry of Propaganda and Enlightenment that I'd seen in cinemas when I was younger or at Youth Camp. German soldiers, sleeves rolled up, casually carrying their carbines, marching in the sun along dirt roads beside German armour, encountering little resistance across miles and miles of unoccupied Russian steppes and rolling hills. When they did encounter resistance, they hunkered down for a short, decisive fight, surrounding the enemy and taking hundreds, if not thousands of prisoners. The men singing as they marched. They would push forward – always forward - and engage the enemy again and the pattern repeated itself. They would always emerge victorious, with Germany remaining intact.

I felt small then, useless really, as consequential as an ant beside the enormity of what I was facing. I began to question my capabilities and any effect I could possibly have on the effort to save my country, my grandparents, even to survive the next few hours.

It was dark when the train finally ground to a halt. By peeking through the heavy fabric of the blackout curtain, I could see we'd stopped in the middle of a field with no station or structures of any kind. Instead there was a line of trucks idling beside the tracks. As Koch and I and the rest of us got off the train and ran towards the vehicles, I could hear and see the sounds of combat for the first time. A low rumble washed over me

like an immense throaty beast wakened from its slumber. Flashes of brilliance flared on the horizon like a summer lightening storm, arcs of light erupting from the earth. Distant explosions and small arms fire assaulted my ears as I scrambled into the back of one of the trucks and settled in. We pulled away from the train and headed in the direction of the fighting.

We didn't travel very far before the truck suddenly accelerated. We were all jostled around the back and we quickly grabbed for something solid – the tarp frame, the bench, each other. The sounds of explosions were much nearer. Machine gun fire stuttered nearby. The truck jounced through holes, sending us all flying in the air, only to bounce back down – hard – on the wooden bench. Just as I got settled again, an explosion rocked the truck, the sound numbing my ears. The truck swerved violently to the left, then the right, sending us all tumbling to the truck bed in a tangle of bodies, guns, packs and helmets.

The truck swerved a couple more times and then suddenly stopped. The driver kept the engine running, pressing on the accelerator, racing the engine. A Feld appeared at the rear of the truck. He dropped the tailgate and bellowed at us, "Everyone out! Now! *Schnell*! *Schnell*!" I scrambled up, untangling myself from the other Grenadiers, lifting the rear tarp. Another explosion rocked the truck, sending showers of dirt cascading down, pelting the canvas over our heads. Through the opening at the rear of the truck, I saw white streaks of light flying above them.

"Shell fragments!" the Feld shouted. "Get down! Get down!"

I dropped to the bed of the truck. We'd been told about shell fragments during our training at Den Helder. Pieces of jagged metal so hot they barely had any solid form. And

if they hit an exposed soldier, nothing could protect him. The driver raced the engine again, impatient to leave. I finally spilled out of the truck, landing on top of the others. The Feld banged the side of the truck with his hand a couple of times once everyone was out, and the truck bolted liked a scared horse, racing off into the night.

We rallied on the Feld who did a quick head count. Satisfied we were all there, he scrabbled off in the direction of a thick copse of trees in the distance. I followed closely behind Koch and tried to remember my training. I kept the tip of my carbine in the air and my body low. I weaved left and right like the others. A column of men forming a rapidly moving human snake in the grass.

As I pounded through the grass I heard a new sound, an eerie whooshing right at the fringe of my hearing. At first, I dismissed it, thinking it was nothing but the blood rushing in my ears. Then our Feld suddenly turned and yelled, "Everyone down, right now! Down! Down! Down!" Soldiers dropped into the grass all around me, disappearing into the tall fronds. For a few seconds I just stood there. I couldn't comprehend what was happening. The sound grew louder and just as my brain realized what it was, Konrad reached up from the grass beside me, grabbed me by my belt, and pulled me down into the grass with him.

"It's artillery! Get down and stay down!"

I nodded absently, terrified. I flattened myself into the grass next to Koch, one hand holding on to my helmet, the other my carbine. The whooshing grew louder, then fainter. I thought it would pass us by, but at that moment there was a loud *WHUMP*! The air was sucked from my lungs and I struggled to breathe. I was lucky. My mouth was open from the exertion so nothing happened to my ears. A shower of dirt and grass

covered us all. Shell fragments hissed madly through the air above our heads. We waited a few seconds, and then the Feld called an all clear and we all sat up, brushing dirt off our bodies. I took deep breaths and risked a look behind me. A large crater had opened up in the earth where I'd been running. There was no sign of the men behind me. I stared intently at the hole, as if willing the men who were there a moment ago to reappear, smiling, all a joke. I took a couple of steps forward and stopping, staring vacantly at the churned ground, the hole in front of me, trying to divine what had happened to the boys who were there a few moments ago. I sagged to my knees, and I dug around in the dirt, not knowing why, until my hands came upon a pair of tags. Soldier's tags like I myself had been issued when I first reported to the Collection Centre. I used my thumbs to rub the dirt off and in the flash of another artillery shell exploding nearby, I saw the name. Meier. I looked around frantically. "Meier!" I shouted his name, over and over again. There was no answer. Koch came up behind me then, grabbing me under my arms, dragging me upright and turning me around, pushing me in the direction of our rally point. I think I pointed behind me and mumbled something like, "Where's Meier? What about Meier?"

"Never mind him," Koch said. His eyes were wide with fear. "He's dead. And so will you if you don't move quickly. Come on, move! And keep down!"

Somehow, I got my legs to work and stumbled forward. My body was cold and I shivered but I pushed forward, stumbling through the grass, forcing myself to put one foot in front of the other. The air smelled of fresh earth, hot metal, burning grass like someone had opened a hole to Hell. I tucked Meier's tags into a pocket as more shells filled the air to the right of me, but no one shouted at me to get down, so I kept running.

Explosions shook the ground. I staggered as the earth convulsed. Koch kept pushing me in the back and yelling at me to keep going.

Bill, you flew bombers and didn't see the ground. You have no idea how terrifying it is to go into ground combat for the first time. How you have no control whatsoever over what's coming at you, or when or how. You just point yourself in a direction, run like hell and hope for the best.

We finally reached the rally point in the trees. I bent over, hands on knees, panting. Looking around, I saw one soldier leaning over, vomiting into the bushes. A few of the faces I travelled with from Warsaw were no longer there. Dead, I thought, or missing. Like Meier. After a few moments of rest, the Feld's quickly reformed the Grenadiers into squads of seven.

I had Koch in my squad, but no one else I knew. I looked quickly behind me for other familiar faces and saw Hans and Kraus being formed into another squad. They looked sick, their faces pale. They stared blankly at me. I had time for a quick wave before being forced to turn, to follow my squad. We threaded our way through tree trunks, the sounds of the battle growing louder until, after half an hour of walking, we emerged at the edge of the copse, perched at the top of a low rise. Looking down, it was clear of trees as far as the horizon. Less than a kilometre away was the front. I could see the muzzle flashes twinkling like flash bulbs from a thousand cameras desperate to capture the image of Marlene. And the sounds were deafening. Artillery shells from both sides screamed overhead. Machine guns rattled continuously. Mortar tubes thudded and thumped, sending round after round into the line. Small arms sounded off in high-pitched bursts, sending streams of bullets into men. The sounds washed over us – explosions, gun

fire, machine guns – and below it all, the low rumble of vehicles – trucks, tanks, armoured personnel carriers all jockeying for the best position to unload their weapons, troops and supplies. It was the beast I'd heard earlier and it was as if we were feeding it with everything we had and still it wasn't satisfied.

Our new gun captain yelled. I could plainly see the man's lips moving and his arms motioning but the words were drowned out in the pounding thunder of weaponry that surrounded us. He gestured again and again, pointing to an area off to the right. I followed his gaze and saw a single-barrelled 20 mm flak gun mounted on a trailer. The trailer was attached to a truck. The vehicles were sitting beside the road as if the crew that had driven them there was off somewhere, taking a break. But I understood. That gun was our gun. Bent low, carbines held high, we picked our way through the scrub brush. When we arrived the captain checked over the weapon and the truck. He then turned to us, gesturing for us all to gather round in a close huddle, yelling his instructions to be heard over the noise of the battle raging all around us.

"Our orders are to set up here! Other guns will set up along the ridge as well, and together we'll form a line! We shoot from the trailers! The Russians will be using their planes closer to dawn!" He stopped talking for a moment as another round of German artillery shells screamed overhead. "It's our job to shoot as many of them down as possible! Everyone clear on that? Let's get dug in!"

It was familiar stuff for me. I'd operated the same kind of guns on the rooftops of buildings in Frankfurt an der Oder. So this was what the Oberst meant about me being an asset to my new unit. One of our squad leapt into the truck, started it up and manoeuvred it off the road and onto a level, stable piece of ground that overlooked the front. Once he

stabilized the gun and the truck, everyone broke out their entrenching tools. We dug trenches on each side of the gun position and piled the dirt on both sides of the weapon to form a high berm providing protection from incoming rounds. After two hours of continuous digging, we were running with sweat despite the cool, night air. My hands were raw and red. I flinched and cowered in the half-finished hole whenever an artillery or mortar round landed close to our position.

We kept digging and after our fortifications were dug to the satisfaction of the captain, Koch and I turned our attention to the weapon. Koch got into the gunner's seat and swivelled the barrel around, testing the mechanism, ensuring that nothing had been done to ruin our field of fire. I inspected the back of the truck and found about twenty ammunition magazines, each with twenty rounds, stacked on the floor of the truck. I manhandled a few of them out to our position. The other members of the squad took up their stations around the weapon. The driver – his job finished for the time being – had dug himself a foxhole in front of the truck and taken up his carbine to keep watch to our rear. The captain poked his head up over the berm, a pair of field glasses pasted to his eyes, scanning the battle raging below and the horizon for planes. The others, assigned as de facto range finders and course and distance calculators, took up station behind Koch. I sat on my pile of ammunition boxes in a deep hole, my head well below the newly formed berm, ready to change in a full magazine when the gun emptied out. Our preparations were complete. There was nothing to do now but wait and watch the raging battle.

While we waited, I took out Meier's tags, fingering them, my thumbs travelling over the punched letters of his name, his number. I remember closing my eyes, conjuring

up memories of Meier, the card game, the discussions around where they would be sent, his joviality amongst everyone else's gloom, and I wept.

Four – Facing the Enemy

I couldn't sleep that first night. Not that I really thought I could. Just when I thought I might be able to doze off, the scream of artillery would force me to scramble for cover as Russian rounds slammed into the earth, the explosions pelting us with clods of earth, waves of sound washing over line. The odd moments when I did manage to doze off, I dreamed of Meier and was shocked awake at the very moment the shell that killed him hit the line of boys behind me, the roar of the explosion in my dream the roar of a real shell landing near us. Machine gun rounds would strafe our emplacement, tiny geysers of dirt marking the passage of hot lead. Explosions from *Stalinorgel* – Stalin's organs – pulsed through the lines in waves, casting aside men and machinery as casually as if flicking a finger at an annoying insect. The road next to us was constantly filled with traffic as fresh soldiers went forward and the dead and wounded went to the rear. Clouds of dust boiled into the air in the vehicle's wakes. The grit settled over us, covering our grey-blue uniforms with a layer of brown.

I was totally surrounded by the howl of war. I couldn't think of much of anything, not home, my family, anything really. It seized our attention, all our senses locked on the carnage unfolding in front of us. And it awakened some instinct within us, something that knew how to keep us alive, because with every shell that landed near us we ducked and went to cover, as if being kept alive to keep some mysterious vigil. Whatever it was it kept my mind off Meier and for that small mercy I was thankful enough.

The hours dragged on. The shelling never ceased. Night slowly turned to dawn and when it did, the wind picked up and cleared out the dust, fumes and smoke. For the

first time, I could see the front clearly and saw that it was moving back towards us. Back towards Germany. I have to tell you I was dismayed when I saw that. It was like looking at defeat in the making and I couldn't help thinking of when I used to sit in a cinema in Frankfurt an der Oder. Before the feature would start, I watched the newsreels and how they told us of another great victory for German forces, the music stirring, the soldiers smiling. Now, looking down at the front and watching German troops falling back, I knew it wasn't always true. The Russians were pushing *us* back. We were being slowly killed. I looked at the others. They stared dully at the battle before them, their expressions unreadable. Our Captain was looking through his field glasses, his lips moving, muttering something no one could hear. I sidled up to Konrad, placing my mouth next to his ear to be heard above the thunder of weaponry.

"Do you think we'll still be here by the end of the day?" I asked.

Konrad shook his head. "No."

I looked at the battle and before I could form a response, our gun Captain suddenly yelled out "All Ready!" I glanced at the horizon and saw the Russian planes. The sight of them cleared my head and I thought, finally, now I can do something to help. I scrambled to the side of the gun and made sure the magazine was full. I opened two other boxes of high explosive rounds, readying them for loading. As Konrad moved the gun around again, I briefly wondered where the Luftwaffe was, why I hadn't seen a solitary German plane in the air. Fucking Goering. Always promising more than he could deliver. Don't look so surprised, Bill. Goering was always boasting to Hitler how well he could defend Germany. You've probably seen some of those scenes captured on film? Goering looking white and bloated in his uniform, standing next to Hitler, that big smile,

all calm and self-assured? For a while, he was right to boast. No one knew how to match the Luftwaffe. Our planes were too fast, too advanced. But near the end of the war, we were scraping the bottom of the barrel, and that day, out there on the line, it was pretty obvious we'd have no air support.

Anyway, I didn't have long to think about it. The Russian planes quickly closed on our position and once within range, Konrad fired, tapping the firing pedal with his foot over and over. The planes roared closer, strafing the battle below them with their canons. All around us the other anti-aircraft batteries opened up. The 20 mm guns barked, the 37's bayed and the 50's thumped, filling the air with bursts of black smoke and shell fragments. Two of the planes were quickly turned into flaming wreckage. As the other planes swooped overhead, Konrad followed them, scoring several hits on one, but the rounds splashed off the armoured underbelly of the plane.

The Captain ordered us to change ammunition. I tore the empty magazine out of the breech and quickly slammed in a mag of armoured piercing rounds and signalled to Konrad. The planes circled around in a large arc back behind Russian lines and came at us again. As they drew near, range and elevation were again fed into the gun. Konrad tapped the firing pedal. The gun barked. He scored a hit. The plane began to trail black smoke and slowly arced downward, slamming into a field in the distance, a fireball rising into the air. One less to worry about.

We continued to fire on the planes. We managed to shoot down two more before we ran out of armoured piercing rounds. Then a runner brought us new orders, told us to ignore the planes and angle the guns downwards to provide covering fire for the retreat. German forces were moving back to establish a new defensive line. It wasn't long after

that the road beside us soon thickened with traffic. Ambulances, tanks, armoured personnel carriers, trucks and troops filed past our position as the front was abandoned. Konrad aimed the gun down the hill, at the front, and fired in a random back-and-forth arc, lending his effort to slow the Russians down, while I slammed in new magazines as the gun ran empty. When we started to attract concentrated enemy fire, the Captain ordered us to stand down and move back. I secured the rest of the ammo while the others hooked the gun to the truck and locked it in place. We scrambled aboard the truck and joined the exodus.

For four days, our squad moved from position to position. I quickly learned we had no time to do anything the way we'd been taught. We didn't dig in but parked beside a road and fired from the trailer for an hour or so before moving on. The 'new defensive line' command talked about didn't appear. No one told us why but we could guess well enough. We were just too green and the Russians were just too numerous. Russian planes strafed our positions incessantly with hardly a German plane to be seen. Artillery shells screamed into our lines, the ground shaking as if God himself was hurling his wrath at us all. Our Captain told us that German units were broken up and scattered over the countryside, like gypsy families in search of a home. The location of the front was impossible to pin down, with Russian and German positions changing hands as many as three times in a single day.

We were all exhausted. I numbly followed orders without a second thought. I would slam in new magazines without thinking. I worked mechanically with the others to set up the gun and then helped them just as complacently knock it down and move it to the next position. We left the dead where they fell. There was no time to bury them, let

alone remember them, or honour them. Cleanliness was impossible. Eating became instinctual, a thing to be done rather than enjoyed. I remember thinking that, if I'd had the strength, I'd have laughed out loud. You see, I felt I was part of some strange stage parody of war at that moment rather than being stuck in the middle of the real thing. We were players, see, blundering about the set, all the while being manipulated by an insane string-puller above us, jerking us one way, then another. Well, it had to end some time. On the fifth day, a *kübelwagen* appeared. The officer in the car issued new orders. We were instructed to bunk down for the night and then report to a new rally point some twenty kilometres to the rear where we'd re-group.

Well, I can tell you I felt relieved that someone was finally taking charge. And so we drove in the direction of the rally point looking for a place to sleep. About an hour later, as we rounded a bend in the road, we came upon a makeshift cemetery. Our driver slowed the truck to a crawl and we all looked solemnly at the graves. Wooden crosses were at the head of each mound of earth. German helmets were planted on top. The graves were tidily arranged in rows and columns. A small oasis of order in the midst of chaos. Some of the crosses were decorated with the I.D. tags of the soldiers buried under them. Unrecorded deaths. Families waiting back home for word of their sons, word that might never come. I absently fingered Meier's tags in my pocket. And then mouthed a silent prayer, imploring a God I didn't really believe to not end my life under a mound of earth in a strange land so far from home.

Leaving the grave site behind, we continued on a little further until we came across a farm house. It looked abandoned. The Captain ordered two of our squad to check it out. We waited while, rifles at the ready, the two men prowled around the house and

grounds, looking for enemy soldiers. They soon signalled an all clear. The house had a large cellar and there was a hand pump in the garden where we could get fresh water. The Captain told us we'd bunk down for the night. We hid the truck and gun under camouflage netting and branches in a stand of trees nearby, and then went down into the cellar. We all found places on the cool, hard-packed dirt floor and most, too tired to even eat rations, collapsed instantly into sleep.

I couldn't sleep. At least, not right off. Instead, I lay staring at the floor boards above me. Feeble light from a gas lantern in the corner threw grotesque shadows across the room. I shifted about, trying to get into a comfortable position. Konrad whispered from where he lay next to me.

"Hey, cut it out. We're trying to sleep here."

"Sorry." I lay still for a moment. "I'm just remembering Amersfoort.

"Yeah. Seems like some kind of holiday resort when I think of it now."

"How many of our original battalion do you think are still left?"

"Two-thirds. Maybe less."

"Is it enough?"

Koch grunted. "Not enough to form a line. They're buying time until they can get enough of us together to make a stand. You know, consolidate units."

"It's frightening."

"Hey, we agreed to look after one another, right?"

"Yes."

"And we're still alive?"

"Yes."

"So we just keep going, one day at a time, one hour at a time, okay?"

"Okay."

I looked at the man for a moment before he rolled over, using his fists to tamp his pack into a more comfortable pillow and lay his head down. I was both annoyed at the quandary we were in and worried about our impotence in the face of a determined enemy. But mostly, I was just afraid I'd die as easily as Meier, so I was glad Koch was with me. I finally drifted off to sleep.

Some time later, someone jabbed me in the side. Thinking someone had just rolled into me in the close quarters of the cellar, I groaned and started to complain but then a hand clamped over my mouth. I opened my eyes in alarm and saw Konrad looking at me, a finger first to his lips and then pointing up. I held my breath and listened. Footsteps on the floor above us. Someone walking around inside the house. I nodded and Konrad took his hand away. I could see that everyone was awake now, sitting quietly, listening. The Captain gestured for us to take our weapons. I grabbed my carbine. I checked the chamber for a live round and then we all aimed our weapons at the trap above.

The footsteps moved around the house. The floor boards creaked with the weight. They were right above us. And then the trap was door lifted up. The Captain gestured urgently for everyone to move back to the walls of the cellar. We pulled back just in time. The barrel of a machine pistol was poked through the hole and it fired, spraying bullets in a narrow circle at the base of the ladder, lead thudding into the dirt. I flattened myself against the wall. The firing stopped and the gun withdrawn back up the trap. A boot descended the ladder. It was still too dark to see whether it was a German boot or a

Russian boot. I was sweating, gripping my gun tightly, trying not to make a sound. The first boot was joined by a second and then was followed by a leg encased in brown uniform pants. As the man's waist and upper body came into view, three of us who were facing the man fired. The rest of us quickly followed. My rifle kicked, bruising my shoulder, but my aim was alright. Seven bullets crashed into the man. He toppled down the ladder to the cellar floor, dead.

The Captain rushed to the ladder, dragged the body out of the way and started to climb, firing his weapon up through the hole. "Follow me!" he yelled. Konrad responded first and began to climb after the Captain. I followed Koch and, as I reached the base of the ladder, I glanced at the body of the Russian. There was a red star on the pocket flap of the man's tunic. Beneath it were bullet holes, neat and round and disappearing in a spreading bloom of blood. Another pool of red, the colour of cooked beets, seeped into the dirt from under the man's back.

I climbed up the ladder behind Koch. The Captain had reached the lip of the hole in the floor and was cautiously peering out and around him, his carbine at his shoulder, firing. I heard a thud, like someone falling on the floor. The Captain pushed further out of the hole, reaching around and dragging a table in front of him, tipping it over to form a screen. I finally reached the lip of the trap. I was sweating so much my carbine slipped out of my hands. It almost hit the man on the ladder below me before I recovered it. I joined Konrad behind the table. The three of us checked our ammo. The Captain told us he was going to check out the house room by room and ordered us to follow close behind to provide cover.

The Captain moved around the table and rushed up to the Russian soldier he's just shot. The Russian was moaning, his hand clamped over a wound on his neck. The Captain pointed his carbine at his head.

"*Skol'ko*" he said. How many?

The soldier shook his head. "*Net*."

The Captain pressed the barrel of his carbine into the side of the Russian's head and repeated his question. The man winced in pain and held up five fingers. The Captain nodded and then pulled the trigger. The shot was loud in the small room, like standing next to an artillery piece. I was shocked. I just stared at the hole in the man's head, the blood-soaked hair, the wet smear of blood and brain splashed across the timber floor. I dropped my carbine and placed my hand on the wall to steady myself, then doubled over and vomited. I don't know why I did this. Shock, maybe, at having to witness such a brutal killing in close quarters. The Captain was pitiless. "Get yourself together, Herrmann!" he said. "I need you to act like a soldier. There are still others around here somewhere."

I nodded and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand. I bent down and retrieved my carbine off the floor. I was a little unsteady but I followed Konrad, stepping over the dead Russian, not daring to look down at the body at my feet. We searched the rest of the house room by room. As our Captain turned and entered the salon, machine pistols roared. He didn't even have time to raise his weapon. He was hit several times from two Russians firing at us from behind a tipped over sofa and he fell face-down onto the floor. We took up positions on either side of the threshold and returned fire. One of the Russians was hit and he reeled backward, crashing through a window. The other

threw his machine pistol on the floor and raised his hands. Konrad rushed into the room, picked up the Russian's weapon and threw it back toward me. He searched the man, relieving him of a pistol and a few grenades. While I covered the Russian, Konrad quickly checked the other Russian soldier. The body was canted over the window frame, his torso lying on the veranda outside, his legs snagged on bloody shards of glass.

"Dead," said Konrad. He turned away, striding for the front door. "Keep an eye on that one," he said, pointing at the other Russian. "I'm going to look around outside."

I gripped my carbine tighter in my hands to stop it from shaking as I aimed it at the Russian. The sleeves of his uniform tunic were rolled up over his wrists. He was as young as I was, a mere boy. Two shots rang out outside, followed by the staccato roar of what I now recognized as a Russian machine pistol. I glanced nervously at the door where Konrad had gone, then back at the Russian in front of me. The Russian used his hands to point at the sofa, miming that he would like to sit. I nodded quickly. Sweat was rolling down the sides of my face. The Russian had tipped the sofa back on its legs and looked at me from where he sat, his face sombre, his mouth downcast. Two more shots rang out in the yard outside, this time further away. Then silence. My worry grew as I wondered what happened to my friend. Then I heard foot falls on the front veranda of the house, the front door opening, closing, someone coming towards the room I was in.

"It's Konrad, Jakob. I got the other one."

I closed my eyes and breathed. I lifted a hand off my carbine and wiped my eyes. The fear, the killing and the blood from the last few days and hours filled my mind. Then I thought of Meier's death and I got so angry right then that, without even thinking, I charged at the Russian. I slammed the butt of my carbine into his head. There was a loud

crack and blood spilled down the front of the boy's face. He doubled over on the sofa, howling in pain, cupping his head in his hands. I was going to swing my rifle to hit him again but Konrad grabbed my arms from behind.

"No! He's unarmed!" Konrad said. My strength suddenly left me then, my rifle falling to the floor, my hands too weak to hold on. I turned and stumbled past Konrad and the body of the Captain as I went outside, breathing in large gulps of air. I slumped on the front step of the house, my head in my hands. My thoughts were a muddle, my mind filled with images of what I'd seen, what I'd done. After a while, I remembered what Krause had tried to tell me, about killing someone you can see. By shooting down an enemy plane, I knew I was killing the pilot, the crew. But I couldn't see the enemy as they died. I wasn't witness to their agony, their suffering. In facing the Russians as I'd just done, I could now see that shooting a man standing in front of me was different. And then I realized that what I'd learned at Den Helder. Trudel wasn't training men to be soldiers. He was training us to unlock a door to a more primitive part of ourselves, to react with the instinct to survive when the end of our lives faced us squarely.

All this was spinning through my head when Konrad stepped up from behind and sat down next to me. He handed me my rifle and I propped it next to me.

"You alright?" he asked.

I couldn't lie. I shook my head. Konrad nodded, staying quiet. We sat there for a few minutes until finally I managed to say, "I think I know why I hit that boy."

He nodded, as if he already understood. "Well, know this. If we hadn't done what we did, maybe it'd be you sitting on that sofa, guarded by men in brown."

I shuddered, remembering our conversation about Russian prisoner-of-war camps. "So, that's it then?"

Konrad stood up. "Come on, we have a comrade to bury and a prisoner to guard." We stood up.

"What about the Russian bodies?" I asked.

"Not our problem," Konrad said. "I doubt we'll be here long."

We joined the others inside. With the Captain gone, we were now six. Two were tasked to guard the Russian. The rest of us carried the Captain's body to the truck. We carefully placed it in the back and drove down the road to the grave site. We took turns, two at a time, digging by lamplight. Konrad removed the Captain's pay book, orders and personal letters as well as the tags from around his neck. We buried him in his uniform. I fashioned a crude cross out of birch branches and hung the tags from the freshly cut wood. Another mother to be informed. We planted his helmet on the grave site like all the others. We bowed our heads for a few moments, remembering in silence. As we drove back to the house, sombre, exhausted, each of us lost in our own thoughts, I reached into my pocket, took out Meier's tags and looked at them again. And then I handed them to Koch.

Koch hefted them, looking at the details on the oval discs. "Where did you get these?" Koch asked.

I told him.

"Why did you keep them?"

"I don't know. Maybe to keep him alive a little longer. It doesn't matter. Just make sure they get home when we get to the next collection centre."

Before bedding down, I volunteered to dress the Russian's head wound. Konrad offered to assist but I shook my head. I wanted to do this myself. As I cleaned the cut, my hands shook but I managed to place a gauze bandage on the wound and circled the boy's head with more gauze to hold it all in place. When I was finished, the Russian looked at me, his face still sombre, his mouth sad. It was just a look, but I felt he understood.

I helped guard the prisoner, taking the first two-hour watch. When I was relieved, sleep didn't come easily. My body cried out for rest, but after the events of the night, I tossed and turned. Each time I woke up it was still dark and I slumped back into uneasy sleep. The night stuck with me, a cloying thing refusing release.

In the morning, we fetched the truck and the gun from the hiding place in the woods. We mounted up, the prisoner docile amongst us. Before Konrad got into the truck cab, he looked in on me.

"How are you holding up?" he asked.

I just nodded, a bare movement of my head, saying nothing. Konrad walked around to the front of the truck, got in, shut the door. The driver started up the truck. As we rolled forward, I looked at my hands. They were trembling. My whole body was shaking, vibrating as if it had spent the night being rattled by artillery fire. I clenched my hands into fists, trying to still the movement. I tried to figure out why, but all I felt was blind, like a man groping in total darkness for a haven from the bullets, blood and muck that followed relentlessly at his heels.

Winter 1944-45

Five – Off The Line

Our squad reached the rally point in a village later that day. Koch and I got off the truck and slumped to the ground, sitting against the wall of a bombed out building and staring out at the milling troops. I saw the Russian boy as he was handed over to the military police. He looked scared, his eyes trying to lock onto anyone. "*Pozhalvĭstas*," he said. He repeated the word over and over. I couldn't understand him but thought the boy was just as frightened of being captured by us as I was of being captured by the Russians. Once he was driven away to who knows where, I closed by eyes. My nerves were dulled and my brain was sluggish as if it couldn't process what I'd just been through. I was still trying to process all this when, about an hour later, we were told that we were being re-assigned to the rear for a period of rest.

We rose unsteadily to our feet and helped the others as we re-stocked with fuel, ammunition and food, and introduced ourselves to our new captain. We drove to a deserted village and it was there, as the days wound down to the end of 1944, we enjoyed a better life than what we'd just lived through on the front. We had plenty of food, we were far from the front and our sleep was uninterrupted by the sounds of gunfire, artillery barrages or moving vehicles for the first time since our training. To keep us busy, our new captain ordered a series of training sessions in machine gun tactics which we conducted in a barn, out of the rain, sleet and snow.

Christmas was a spartan affair. Koch and I dragged a scraggly tree out of some nearby woods that hadn't been overrun by vehicles or shredded by artillery. We scrounged a few items in the abandoned village houses and businesses to decorate it. We

celebrated with men from other units stationed nearby. I remember that vividly for some reason. We sang carols, churning through the words to *O Tannenbaum, O Tannenbaum* and *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht.* We weren't very good; none of us could carry a tune but we had fun and the wine we found nearby helped our mood. Between carols, we would talk about what we'd all just lived through, or what we'd do when it was all over. We spoke of peace or dreams, our voices strangely monotonic, as if our helmets trapped our true feelings within. Our singing grew more and more spirited as we lubricated our throats with more wine. I can remember, vaguely, singing and dancing and telling bad jokes until my voice was hoarse and I was too drunk to care. In the early hours of the 26th of December I finally staggered off to bed, having forgotten, for just a moment, that I was in a war to save the very livelihood I'd just celebrated.

I was lying on my pallet, my stomach warmed by wine, remembering. I started to think of home. I thought of my last harvest in Autumn of 1943. Opa, Oma, me and my friend Olga and her parents from the neighbouring farm were in the fields to collect the wheat sheaves cut the day before. The adults shucked the sheaves up into the trailer, where Olga and I carefully stacked them.

Maybe it was the wine, or maybe it was my mood, but I can remember noticing something different about Olga that day. I'd never before noticed Olga for the woman she was becoming. But that day I noticed her breasts as they swelled the front of her coarse work shirt, how her hips flared despite the bagginess of the pants she wore. I found it hard to concentrate on my own stacking. Olga's sinewy movements, revealed as the fabric tightened and loosened across her body as she moved, was like an unconscious tease with each swing and toss of a wheat sheaf.

The trailer was soon full and Opa was towing us back to the barn with his tractor. I was tired after working all day in the sun. And then there was the odour of fresh-cut wheat, flowers and earth all around us, like a drug. Olga and I were lying on our backs on top of the stack of wheat and I reached over and sought her hand as she lay beside me. She didn't react at first. I was about to take my hand away when she returned the pressure, gripping my hand in hers. My heart beat faster as Olga rolled over and propped herself on her elbow. "Jakob?" she asked. I turned my head and looked at her and I can still remember her golden hair lit by the orange and red of the setting sun, her eyes glittering, her freckled cheeks glowing after a day spent in the sun.

"Olga," I said. "Has anyone told you that you look quite pretty?"

She laughed, tossing her head, her teeth flashing. "A few times, Jakob. Why?"

"Well good. Because you are. You really are."

She chuckled again, and lay back on the wheat. "In our Youth camps," I continued, "we were taught that the German girl – the ideal German girl – has golden hair, fair skin, white teeth; everything you have, really." I have to tell you, if this sounds like so much rubbish, it is. It sounds silly just recounting it to you all.

She laughed again, and then looked at me quizzically. "Oh, really? And what do they teach you about the personality of this ideal German girl?"

"Oh, that she's dedicated to Germany, the Fatherland and the Führer."

"Hmph. And how is she supposed to show this dedication?"

"Well, by taking care of the ideal German man, by raising the ideal German children to be future leaders of Germany."

She laughed again, reaching over and ruffling my hair. “How sweet of them to think so highly of us!” I knew then she wasn’t all that impressed by my propaganda. “But what about you, Jakob? What do you think?”

“Me?” I propped myself on an elbow, facing her and stroking her hand. “I don’t know. I hadn’t really thought about it.” I was silent for a few moments, letting the gentle rocking motion of the trailer guide my thinking. “I think that, if I have to go and fight in this war, I’d want to come out of it alive. And if I do, and I’m in one piece, I’d like to come and find you and live together, maybe go to university and raise a family.”

She looked down at the wheat then, her hand idly playing with the fronds, her face blossoming red. But when she looked at me a moment later, her eyes were earnest. “I would like that very much, Jakob.” I reached over and stroked her hair and kissed her on the lips.

I remembered all that, lying on my pallet of straw on a cold December night in an abandoned village with men passed out all around me. Later on, I woke up suddenly. It was dark. Still half asleep, the memory of kissing Olga came back to me. She was there, just outside my vision, but the image was fading as I came fully awake. I wondered what it was that’d woken me up. I sat up and my stomach lurched and I began to sweat. I stood and tottered to the latrine before all the wine and schnapps and the remnants of the Christmas meal came crawling up my gullet. Once back in my bed, my head aching and mouth dry, I lay awake thinking of the farm, thinking that I could almost smell the scent of freshly cut wheat and apple blossoms.

Two weeks later, our rest period ended. A motorcycle courier arrived with new deployment orders. The Russians had launched another offensive. Our unit was rushed to

the front to help prop up our defenses. It was parody time again. We were yanked from place to place as artillery flattened us and Russian infantry invaded our lines like a human ocean. We were continually on the move - sometimes barely escaping being overrun - and got no rest at all. It rained and as it got colder, the rain turned to sleet and with all the moisture, the ground turned into a brownish grey slurry. The muck became my constant companion, sticking to everything, insinuating itself into my clothes, my blankets, the gun, the truck. Our blankets never dried out. Even when wrapped tightly around me, I shivered constantly. Like the others, I began to seek warmth from any source as my hands became cracked and bleeding from the cold. We'd place our hands on the gun barrel as it fired, willing the spark of heat generated by the firing of a shell to help warm us, even for an instant. I remember fighting with the others to clutch at the hot shell casing as soon as it left the breech, grabbing at it like a starving dog fighting over a single, lean bone.

In a rare quiet moment between bombardments, I took the time to look at myself in my pocket mirror. The face that looked back at me was gaunt, bereft of the baby fat I'd when I was drafted, lined and dreary. The sparse, patchy beard I'd managed to grow over the past two weeks was flecked with dried mud. As I looked at my face, my stomach rumbled. Our rations had been cut so much we ate only a thick, greasy soup once a day.

A day later I noticed that my head itched and so I scratched. It was only when I pulled my hand away that I discovered lice. I examined the rest of my body and found the parasites everywhere – in my hair, under my arms, in my clothes, in the blankets. I was living in filth and couldn't escape them, could do nothing about them but scratch and scratch and scratch.

During the days that followed, sores broke out all over my body and scalp and they bled and got infected and oozed pus. I was going mad with the itching. I requested medical treatment but the Captain just looked at me, his face hollowed from the lack of food, lice sores standing out on his grimy neck, and shook his head. Only those soldiers who were wounded in battle were sent to the *feldlazzarets* – field hospitals - for treatment.

We went on, day after day, setting up the gun, firing more of our ever-dwindling rounds, breaking it down, moving on, sloshing along the muddy roads, wrapped in the humid, parasite-ridden blankets. My mind was numbed by the struggle to stay alive. I had no idea if we were making a difference in the greater effort to repulse the Russians, where they were, or what was coming next. I felt abandoned. By my superiors, by my country, by the God we were told in basic training was with us, who was to look out for us in battle and would support our cause. I felt like a lost soul who could barely remember that a man could be something other than a half-starved skeleton, that I could feel something other than numbing horror and that the earth could be used for something other than burying our dead or as a landing zone for artillery and mortar rounds.

Three weeks after our Christmas rest period came to an end, I tried to manhandle another magazine into the gun. The world suddenly went black and I collapsed face down in the mud, a metre short of the gun. The next thing I saw was Koch and one of the others bent over me, looking at me with concern, lightly slapping my cheek and removing the layer of fresh muck from my face.

"Wha . . . ?" I croaked. "What happened to me?"

"You fainted," said Koch. "How do you feel now?" He kept wiping at the mud on my face.

"Like I could sleep for a hundred years. A little light headed, perhaps. I itch all over from the lice. I need a bath, and a shave . . ."

"Whoah, there. I wasn't asking for a complete assessment. Let's see if we can't get you up," Koch said, reaching under my shoulders and lifting me up to a sitting position. I was too far gone. The world began to spin again. I grabbed hold of Koch's sleeve. "I don't think . . ." I managed before my eyes rolled into the back of my head and the world disappeared again.

The next thing I remember hearing was steel on steel. I felt a rocking motion. And then I heard a murmured conversation and the rustle of fabric and soft footfalls.

I slowly opened my eyes. A nurse was looking at me, her head wrapped in a white wimple, her face creased with concern.

"Where am I?" I said. My throat was parched, the words coming out with great effort.

The nurse's expression changed to relief and she relaxed her grip of my hand. "You're on board a hospital train, heading for the rear. You collapsed at the front; do you remember?"

I thought back. I remembered the fighting, the constant movement, the effort to keep the gun loaded, to keep pounding the Russian positions . . . I finally nodded. I tried speaking again, but this time, my throat failed me and no sound came out. The nurse gave me a cup of water, and I sipped at it slowly.

"How long have I been out?" I asked, returning the cup to the nurse and settling my head back on the pillow.

"About 24 hours." She checked the dressings that covered my sores. I brought my hand to my head. My hair had been washed. I could smell the faint odour of de-lousing powder.

"You looked very calm, sleeping there. You were almost smiling. Were you dreaming?"

"I was."

"Can I ask what it was about?"

"I think it was about a girl I knew before being drafted. But I'm not sure. It's gone now."

The nurse smiled quickly, a quick tug upwards of the corners of her mouth before vanishing. "Too bad," she said. "Too bad you can't remember. You looked so comfortable. Too bad you're here instead." The skin under her eyes was dark and puffy. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm quite tired. Forgive me."

"It's alright. Why did you wake me?"

"We're getting close to Dommelkeim. There is an Air Force hospital there. Everyone has to leave the train. We need to turn it around and go back for more."

"Dommelkeim? Where's that?"

"On the Samland Peninsula."

I had no idea where that was. The nurse could see I didn't and she gave me a sad smile. "It's as far away from the front as we can safely get you before plunging into the North Sea."

"Okay. What will happen to me there?"

"The doctors will examine you and decide your fate."

I think I tried to smile. "Sounds lovely. What do you think my fate will be?"

"Looking at you, I would say that some bed rest is definitely required, to heal your sores and get your strength back. But you're not a serious case and I'm afraid you'll likely be sent back to the front." She rose from my bed and turned away. I watched her as she made her way down the train carriage, stopping at every patient, waking them, talking to them before continuing on to the next person.

The train soon entered the station, and slowly, gently stopped, as if the engineer knew he was transporting wounded men and was doing his part to ease our suffering. I was carried off on a stretcher for the short journey to the hospital and then set down in a neighbouring church basement, set up as an overflow ward. I waited, surrounded by the odour of antiseptic and the moaning of broken men. I shivered. The image of the hundreds of wounded in Warsaw, the NCO's and surgeons working feverishly, leapt into my mind then, sharp and clear. I shifted uncomfortably, knowing I was in a place I'd long dreaded to be.

The longer I waited the more I became aware of the suffering around me. Propping myself up on my elbows, I glanced around the crowded room. I could see one man with a bullet through the leg. Another with skin shredded by a grenade explosion. A third with blood oozing from shrapnel wounds. And I was laid low by lice. I was embarrassed to be there, amongst all those others suffering from what I thought were real wounds. If I'd been stronger, I'd have left my stretcher there and then and walked out of

the hospital and boarded the next train back to the front. But I was weak, and could barely move and so I lay there and suffered silently.

Eventually, a doctor arrived, and after examining me and asking me a few questions on my condition, he pronounced me unfit to fight.

"Doctor, when do you think I can be in shape to rejoin my unit?"

The doctor looked at me, amused. "I really don't know, Grenadier. It depends on how long it will take your sores to heal and your body to get re-nourished. It'll take time. You need bed rest and that's exactly what I'm assigning you. After you're healthy, we'll see." The doctor rose and moved on to the next man.

Two days later, I was transferred to a proper ward with beds. The sheets were clean and the mattress was soft. I ate regularly and slept fitfully. I felt as I had stumbled into a holiday resort. But my lice wounds didn't heal as fast as the doctor said they would. New wounded arrived daily, replacing those released back into combat or sent further to the rear for more intensive care and the dead being sent back to Germany in boxes. The longer I lay in hospital, the guiltier I felt. I was letting down my unit. I was letting down Koch and Krause and Hans. And Meier's memory. I began to feel that the longer I sat in that hospital, I wouldn't able to help my *komerads* in crucial battles, to help my squad survive the day.

I lay there day after day and stewed in my conflicted thoughts. Whatever the doctors were doing wasn't working. The sores healed slowly, so slowly it was as if they weren't healing at all. At the beginning of my third week in hospital, I was laid low by the flu. I ran to the toilet every half hour, scooting back to bed to shiver under the covers as fever overwhelmed me. I was examined every couple of days and at the end of the

week, the same doctor – now paler, his smock covered in blood stains brown with age – signed an order for me to be transferred further to the rear.

"Why?" I asked.

"You're not getting better. You're in all probability getting worse. I just don't know. Look, I'm good at patching people up from gun shot wounds, shrapnel and the like. But what you have is beyond my competence. All I know is that the help you need is there, further back in the rear. Be thankful I'm sending you there and not back to the front." The doctor suddenly sat at the foot of the bed, placed his elbows on his knees, his head sagging between his shoulders. He looked like a prize fighter who just learned he'd lost not only the last round, but the entire fight.

"Many Germans are dying every day," he said. "I treat as many of the wounded as I can, but still they arrive by the hundreds. We have to stack them like cordwood in every nook and cranny we can find."

He raised his head, turned and looked at me. His eyes were dark and rimmed with black. "By sending you back, I'm going against my superior's orders. They'd rather I rotate you back to the front, sick as you are."

I nodded, understanding. "Thank you, doctor. For all of your help these few weeks." The doctor rose from the bed. He swayed, grabbing hold of the foot of the bed to steady himself. Once he recovered, he shuffled out.

Six – Retreat to the Rear

And so I joined the wounded and the sick, herded onto a train. But unlike my previous journeys to the front, this time there were no joyful conversations, no comradely banter. A miserable silence held sway. I retreated into my private thoughts, remembrances of home, of loved ones, of battles fought, of friends that died and, of course, whether I'd survive until the next day.

I was offloaded at one hospital but barely had time to get comfortable before being forced back onto another train and sent to the next *feldlazzaret*. Soldiers too sick or wounded were left lying on station platforms while we went on, the doctors hopeful that the Russians would be merciful and take care of our fallen *komerads*. But I knew they were dead men, whether from lack of care as they lay exposed to the elements, their wounds untreated, or from a Russian bullet whenever the enemy arrived, it made little difference. It was a horrible gamble to take with men's lives, a deadly shuffling of men from one place to another.

At my third hospital in as many days, there was a delay as the doctors were forced to wait for another train. Despite the constant movement I'd endured, I was better. I was still feverish and weak but I could stand and walk and hold down food and water. I felt well enough one afternoon to go outside and get some fresh air. I pulled on my uniform and boots, walked down the corridor, grabbed a blanket from beside the door, and went outside. One of the duty surgeons was on the stoop, smoking. A flag with a giant red cross on a white background flapped in the breeze above our heads.

"How are you feeling, Grenadier?" the doctor asked. His breath steamed as he spoke. Grey hair poked out from under his white cap. There were bags under his eyes, the skin black from lack of sleep. His blood-smeared smock was just visible through the open folds of his winter coat.

"Better, thanks." I wrapped the blanket tighter around me, shivering. "Any news?"

"There are Russians everywhere."

"Really. I had no idea."

"A weak attempt at humour. I'm sorry." He looked into the distance and sucked on his cigarette. "We leave nothing for them. Bridges and buildings destroyed and valuables stripped and taken back to Germany. It's what they did when we entered Russia for the first time. So, we learn."

"Where are the people to live?"

The doctor waived his hand at the horizon. "Wherever they can. The *Wehrmacht* has enough on its hands just getting the troops back to Germany. We need as many as we can save." He took a long drag from his cigarette and looked at me again. "It's over, son. What we took is now being taken. We've come full circle." The door suddenly opened up behind them and heat washed over us. An orderly passed a note to the doctor, who grunted his thanks. He read it quickly and then handed it to me.

"Bad luck for you," he said.

I read quickly. In the text were short, crisp explanations about a shortage of trains and a directive for all the able-bodied to walk to the next hospital. I handed the note back to the Doctor.

There was nothing else I could do. “I’ll get my things together,” I said.

Later that day, I walked with other wounded soldiers and civilian refugees along the road. The doctor had given all the soldiers a loaf of bread and cut orders for us to make our way to the next hospital, thirty kilometres to the west and report to the duty surgeon there. It wasn’t long before I witnessed a group of civilians swarm a lone soldier, desperate for his loaf of bread. I and two others ran to his aid and fought off the civilians. They glared at us, eyes full of hate, before they turned and kept walking. The four of us decided to walk together. As we walked, I kept taking off my coat and then putting it back on again. One of the others asked me what was going on.

“Fever. Can’t decide if I’m hot or cold.”

We walked slowly and steadily. We kept a wary eye on the others. The hours seeped by. The civilians kept their distance. They rarely looked at us and when they did, it was with a mix of fatigue, sorrow and hate.

I wished I could see Oma and Opa. Just to be able to visit the farm, to settle into my old bed, to see animals walking in fields unblemished by war, to do my chores with some semblance of normalcy. It’d give my fatigued and shattered mind a chance to rest and recover from the experiences of the past few weeks. The more I thought of it, the more I wanted to go there, right then, the war be damned. It’d be so much easier than forcing myself to plod along a road to an end I couldn’t see or predict. At least on the farm, I’d be doing something useful, rather than walking to the next *feldlazzaret* to receive my next set of orders on where to go next. What was I doing here, on this road, at this time? What possible good could I do to help my country now? And when I got to

where I was going, what then? You can see how I was thinking. I no longer felt there was a point to anything I was doing. But with no other option, I just kept walking.

The hours went by and we arrived at an autobahn. Its clean lines and freshly poured concrete betrayed its newness. The roads were Hitler's idea to speed the movement of *Wehrmacht* troops and materiel to the front, all built with prisoner labour. Now, it was completely deserted of motorised transport, a paved road running to the horizon in both directions filled with the walking wounded and the dispossessed. Cold wind carried dry snow across the hard surface, drifting into hillocks and dunes, like sand in a desert. We struck out in the direction of the hospital. After a while, I heard the clop-clop of hooves and stopped and turned around. A peasant driving a one-wheeled *panje* wagon, a shaggy pony at its front steadfastly plodding forward. It was primitive but faster and more restful than walking and it was going in the same direction. So we asked the peasant for a lift. The man agreed and we hopped up into the back of the wagon, clearing a place to sit amongst the peasant's belongings.

After several hours, we arrived at the village of Slavskoye and I was not feeling well again so I said goodbye to the peasant and my new *komerads* and reported to the hospital. The duty surgeon examined me and diagnosed jaundice, ordering me back to bed. I felt cursed. Everywhere I turned, everywhere I went, more bad news. Not well enough to either fight or walk on, I resigned myself to another period of bed rest.

After two days, the surgeon came around and announced that the entire hospital was being evacuated further west, to Braniewo, and we all had to leave immediately. My jaundice had receded although I was still feverish. I was well enough to be drafted by the hospital staff to help transport the stretcher cases to the train station. Thinking that we'd

be taking a real hospital train, with enclosed carriages and heat and beds, I was shocked to see we'd been assigned a freight train, little more than open wooden boxes bolted to train bogies. It was minus fifteen Celsius and many of the patients manhandled into the open carriages were not dressed for the weather. Well, we had to do something. I and some others quickly ran back to the hospital and gathered as many blankets as we could carry. We helped the doctors bundle the patients up as best we could.

The train pulled out and it wasn't long before we were all shivering in the cold. I held on to the side of the rail car, jumping up and down to keep warm. But there wasn't a lot of room with all the stretchers packed in the centre of the car and in the end, it didn't help much. I resorted to huddling with a group of other patients in a front corner of the car, wrapped in blankets, out of the wind. We sought each other's warmth. I remember nudging a soldier next to me, the man's head wrapped in a dirty bandage.

"We're quite an army, aren't we?"

"Ach! You got that right. An army of the raggedly dressed, the half-starved and the perpetually sick. And not a gun amongst us. Ivan'll be terrified." Ivan. Our name for the Russians.

I looked around at the men I was huddled with. I took in the row of stretchers exposed to the open air. Pathetic, I thought, my teeth chattering uncontrollably. This is what has become of the Führer's mighty army, a bunch of wounded, sickly men and boys being ferried around west Poland on any train that can take them. My brain numbed at the thought, stalling on the realization of how far we'd fallen in such a short amount of time. What have we become, I thought? What will become of us? What will become of me?

My questions led to darker thoughts, whether because of my mood, the cold or my circumstances or a combination of all three, I didn't know. In Youth Camp, I was taught that the German soldier was the best in the world, not invincible but close to it, practically immune to whatever our enemies could throw at us. *Hauptman* Trudel reinforced that belief, giving us all training that was supposed to prepare us for whatever the battlefield delivered. I'd gone to the front frightened of what I might face, but confident I was prepared for war.

But that's when I'd realized was all that training and indoctrination hadn't prepared me for what I was living through, or the mounds of wounded men growing beyond what the surgeons could treat. Or the thousands of German citizens forced to abandon their houses and villages for a life of constant shuffling from place to place, with little to eat and no shelter to protect them from the cold. I'd been prepared for victory, not defeat. I was as vulnerable in war as any of our enemies, a mere mortal amongst millions.

Maybe this is isn't as dramatic to you as it was for me. That my revelation wasn't so revelatory after all. But for me it was. After three years of brainwashing, and being told just how good we were, it was a shock, really.

It took a day and a night to travel the 60 kilometres to Braniewo, the train slowly winding its way through the countryside. It stopped frequently to allow troop transports carrying reinforcements past and to avoid being strafed by Russian planes. We pulled into the Braniewo rail yard in early morning, the sun a faint, yellowish circle of light behind a thick layer of cloud. I stood up, and oh my God. My legs were stiff and my backside sore, my belly rumbled with emptiness, my throat was dry from thirst and my hands and feet ached from the cold. But I was alive. As I slowly worked the cramps out of my legs,

shifting back and forth on the deck of the rail car, I looked around and saw wounded soldiers as far as I could see. I counted five long hospital trains, red crosses emblazoned on the side of each of the carriages and stretchers stacked three high, visible through the cold-frosted windows.

By some miracle, or because of the constant ministrations of the hospital staff, not one of the stretcher cases in my little open-air carriage had died en route. Other wounded men in other carriages were not so lucky. As I helped the staff move the stretcher cases to shelter, the stiff, lifeless bodies from the other carriages were offloaded and laid out in rows on the platform. After the offloading was complete, I was dismissed and ordered to seek shelter. I wandered from building to building only to discover them already full. Every building in town had already been taken over and converted to makeshift hospital wards and *feldlazzarets*. The wounded forced into the street were covered in primitive tents or soldier's ponchos. It's like trying to protect yourself with paper in winter. After an hour of wandering I finally found a chair in a stairwell in what used to be the Labour Service barracks and sat down, my first real rest since leaving Slavskoye.

My respite was short lived. I was dozing in the chair when the air raid sirens let loose. Russian planes. Everyone was ordered into the bomb shelter in the basement. It was crowded. There was no room to sit with all the stretchers on the floor and so we huddled standing up in the semi-dark, lit only with small candles and waited for the bombs to fall. I stamped my feet, blew into my cupped hands, praying silently to myself. Please God, don't let me die like this. Don't let me die in a hole, in the dark, freezing to death, far from my unit, far from home. It was just like the house and the graveyard all over again.

After a while, I thought we might've escaped the bombs altogether and my silent prayer had been answered. We could hear the planes overhead and the bombs they dropped, but the sounds were faint and distant through the thick concrete above our heads. But ten minutes later, our makeshift hospital received a direct hit. The ground trembled and shook, dust and debris fell from the roof and I sank to the floor, arms covering my head. The candles winked out. In the darkness, through the ringing in my ears, men and women coughed, hacking up spit and dust, struggling to breathe. After the planes passed, one of the doctors checked the exits and found them blocked with rubble. The doctor rounded me up with some of the other more able-bodied patients and formed work parties to begin clearing the debris from the stairwells leading to the surface.

Each party worked one hour on, one hour off. With no equipment, I cleared the rubble with my bare hands. The work was tough and slow. Before long, my hands were bleeding and bruised. For six hours we worked. Russian planes continually flew overhead, dropping new bombs. Finally, a tunnel was cleared to the surface. Once out of the basement and in the cold outdoors, the chief surgeon did a quick survey of the surrounding buildings. All destroyed. He ordered everyone who could walk, including those assisted by crutches, to leave town immediately.

I accepted another half a loaf of bread and joined the long column of civilian refugees and wounded soldiers heading west. As I started to walk, I glanced at my orders. I was to head for Frombork, on the coast between Kaliningrad to the northeast, and Gdansk to the southwest, and report to the duty surgeon there. I hadn't slept for almost two days but exhaustion was becoming normal, joined tightly with the twins hunger and misery. As I plodded along in the company of displaced citizens – most of them women

with panje carts piled high or pulling sleighs in the shallow snow or walking carrying suitcases with all they owned – I turned my mind to the oath I'd taken those few months ago to defend my country and the Führer to the death.

Previous to that moment, when I thought of the oath, it'd given me some sustenance, some strength to continue the fight. It tapped into the duty I felt to help defend my homeland, protect Germany from its enemies. But now, like a candle flame exhausted of wax, it's power had been eroded by our losses, the constant movement from place to place, my illnesses, the wounded and the dead, the thousands of civilian refugees, the disorganized way in which we were retreating. My mind was focussed on survival now, not oaths. I would survive this day, then the next, just as Koch had counselled, on until the end, so I could go home. When I tried to think about duty and the Fatherland, I realized they'd become vague concepts, chimeras, memories from a past that had been changed and warped with time and the experience of war, a past when one could march on a parade ground without being shot at, bombed or pulverised by artillery, when victory was certain, when the purpose of war was clear, when we knew our way forward.

Seven – Across the Ice

I walked and walked and as I walked, my eyes remained fixed on the snow-covered road beneath my feet, my arms wrapped around my body. After a few hours, I crested a small rise and I remember the wind picked up and I could smell the sea. I lifted my head and squinted into the sun and there, below me, tucked neatly onto the shoreline, was a village of tightly packed buildings. Four spires of a cathedral dominated the skyline. The road dipped and curved from where I stood to run past farmer's fields before disappearing into the town. Over the spires of the church I saw the Haff, a frozen channel that separated where I was standing from a peninsula on the horizon and the Baltic Sea beyond. The Haff shimmered brightly, the sun's rays reflecting off the ice and wind-packed snow. Frombork, I thought. So I started walking again.

As I entered the town, I passed through masses of people clogging the streets. They were camped in every road, street, square and alley. I threaded my way through the throng. When I came across a military police officer, I asked him for directions to the hospital and I reported to the duty surgeon. The doctor glanced through my orders quickly and set them on the desk between us.

"The Russians have advanced faster than we anticipated," he said. "They've reached the Baltic Sea near Elblag, southwest of here. The land route back to Germany is now in occupied hands. We've been cut off."

It confirmed what we already knew. The Russians were advancing as rapidly as a wave coming into shore and the German lines were collapsing like so much sand under the assault.

"Is there another way?" I asked. "Our fleet, perhaps, can evacuate us from the Baltic?"

"Already thought of," the doctor said. "The *Kriegsmarine* is sending ships but the most likely evacuation point is Pillau, or Gdyina, where the water is deeper. That means everyone here has to be moved at least another forty kilometres further west." He shook his head. "It's cold. Many of the people coming into town are too weak or poorly dressed to continue. Even if the Navy answers our calls and sends boats, it'll be difficult to get them here, given the ice, and the speed of the Russian advance, not to mention the Russian navy . . ." Hope drained from this face, his shoulders sagging.

"But all the people. The soldiers. What are they doing?" I asked.

The surgeon sighed. "There is one, small chance for those who are healthy enough. You can walk across the Haff from here to *Frische Nehrung*. I'm sure you saw the peninsula on the horizon when you entered the town?" I nodded. "The Haff has frozen solid so it's possible to cross on foot. The *Nehrung* is still in German hands. If you can cross, then you can get to the nearest collection point and catch whatever transport you can find back to Germany."

"What's the distance between here and the Nehrung?"

"Twelve kilometres. I must warn you though. It's treacherous. You must be on your guard for weak spots in the ice. Some have tried to drive their motor cars across and have broken through."

I thought about it for a few moments, imagining what it would be like to walk across open ice in the freezing cold with an enemy that had complete air superiority. "It's the only option, isn't it?"

"Yes, it's all there is, unless one of our counterattacks works in pushing the Russians back from the coast long enough to allow the refugees to get through. I suggest you keep going. It's the best chance you have."

"What about you? What about the rest of them?" I asked, pointing outside to the masses of civilians.

The doctor shrugged. "I have to stay here and help as many as I can." He scribbled an amendment on my orders, stamped them and gave them back to me before turning his attention to other soldiers arriving behind me.

I hurried out of the hospital and picked my way through the crush of people. Mothers seated with children in their laps. Grizzled men with hope in their eyes. They looked to me for help. My uniform made me stand out, a figure of authority. But what could I do? I was powerless even to direct my own fate. I could spare no energy for the thousands around me. I pushed my way through the crowd, keeping my head low, trying not to look at the expressions of despair, knowing that if I did, I might stop. And if I stopped, I might never be able to leave, to keep ahead of the Russians, to get back to my home.

At the small municipal dock on the edge of the Haff, I paused at the shoreline and saw how the crowd of refugees had thinned to form a solid line of people, four or five abreast. They marched purposefully onto the ice, sticking to the path made by others who had gone before them. The line of people was endless, snaking across the ice like a giant, black serpent, disappearing into the horizon. I stood there and waited, unwilling to plunge onto the open ice, the barrenness frightening, discomforting.

But as I stood there, Russian planes suddenly flew over us and I ducked instinctively. When I straightened up, the planes had flown past and were angling down, shadowing the line of people as they marched across the ice. Suddenly, their wing cannons barked. The people in the line scattered. A man ran to the left, striking off strongly across the ice and then suddenly, he broke through the surface and floundered. No went to help him. He soon sank from view. Others collapsed where they were, huddling in small bunches. The planes continued on, unchallenged, firing again. They kept at it until they disappeared into the distance. Once they were gone, most of the people picked themselves up and continued walking. But several remained, unmoving, whether injured or killed by the Russian bullets I couldn't tell. There's no escape, I thought. Unwilling to go forward, I looked back. The people kept on coming, doggedly filing by me, marching onto the ice. Well, I thought, if they can do it, so can I. I took a deep breath, swallowed my fear and forced my feet forward, one step at a time, knowing that at least by walking forward I had a chance to escape the Russians coming at me from behind. I stepped into the line of people and headed toward the peninsula and the promise of freedom beyond.

The surface of the ice had been ground into a fine powder by the thousands of feet that had gone before me. I soon came across a piece of clothing mounted on a stick jammed into a crack in the ice. Then another. And then an oil lamp. And another. I asked a man next to me wearing two coats what these were for. He told me they were markers to show the way ahead, guiding them all along a safe route. The oil lamps were lit at dusk so that people could continue to find their way across at night.

The walking was easy. The worn hobnails on the soles of my boots gripped the roughened surface of the ice, slipping only occasionally. It wasn't long before I again heard the Russian planes behind me. I looked over my shoulder and counted four of them, two in front, two in the rear and I knew they were getting ready for a pass. I walked on, glancing often behind me at the planes as they swooped low. The wing cannons on the first two planes started to spit fire. The rounds slammed into the ice, splintered pieces exploding into the air. I panicked and ran blindly off to the right. The first two planes passed overhead as I searched wildly for somewhere to hide. But the ice was featureless and smooth. I remembered what happened to the lone man as he ran off the path. Terrified of either foundering in the icy water or being hacked to pieces by Russian bullets, I collapsed to the cold, hard ice and curled into a ball, watching out of the spaces between my fingers at the two remaining planes. They began their run, cannons firing, ice chips exploding into the air. Several of the refugees were struck by the bullets and fell. They fired their missiles next. One hit the line of refugees. The explosion created a long, bloody furrow in the tight grouping of people. The ice buckled, cracking in several places. People fled the scene, desperate to stay alive. The smell of the shredded bodies tinged the air around me and my stomach turned. The planes ignored me, focussing on the main line of refugees I'd just abandoned. I got to my feet and brushed the ice and snow off my clothing. I caught another whiff of the carnage and I vomited the meagre contents of my stomach onto the ice, collapsing to my knees with the force of it. I decided to stay where I was, away from the others, to be less of a target.

I rose and began to walk. Off the main path, the footing was treacherous. My boots were almost useless for walking on untrammelled ice. The worn hobnails actually

hindered my progress as I slipped and slid rather than walked. After falling several times I considered re-joining the line. But my memory was fresh with the images of the planes as they flew low, guns firing, the bodies falling, their blood turning the ice dark red. And so I stayed where I was, alone, clinging to the hope that my improvised route would keep me alive.

As I walked, the limitations of my boots and the unblemished ice forced me to develop a half-slide, half-walk to stay upright and move forward. I did my best to ignore the planes buzzing the line of refugees to my left and focused on the ice in front of me, a world white and featureless. My eyes began to water freely from the glare and tears froze on my cheeks. The only thing which broke the icescape was the odd motor car, its front or back end sunk into the ice where it had fallen through, there to remain until the first thaw when it would slip beneath the water to rest on the bottom. I wrapped my arms around my body to shut out the wind as it blew unobstructed across the open ice. It shifted dry snow across the surface, blowing like sand across a desert, hiding the imperfections and weak spots of the ice.

My walk became mechanical - push, slide, step, push, slide, step as I went forward, keeping myself parallel to the refugees on my left. My slitted eyes were focussed on the toes of my boots as they slid forward across the ice, the only detail in a landscape devoid of them. I was wiping at my eyes, removing the build-up of ice crystals, when I heard the cracking sounds, like tree branches snapping under the metal treads of a passing tank. I stopped and looked at the ice at my feet. There was a crack there, a few centimetres wide, cleaving the ice anew.

I studied the ice, trying to divine what it would do next, as if it were some kind of evil, sentient being with designs to kill me. The image of the floundering man and how fast he'd succumbed floated through my mind. To my left, the line of people continued to move and no one paid any attention to me. If I slipped through a hole in the ice and tried to get out, would anyone notice and help me? I didn't think so. They were too absorbed in their own march of survival and avoiding the attacking planes, to worry about me.

I turned my attention back to the ice, and the crack in front of me, and I waited. The ice was now silent. Its secrets frozen. I couldn't stay here for long so I gently slid my right foot forward, off to the right, away from the crack. I slowly put all of my weight on it. Silence greeted me and I let out a relieved sigh, my breath pluming in front of me. I leaned on my right foot and then slid my left behind it, gradually shifting the weight from one to the other. The only sound came from my hobnails sliding metallically across the slick, unyielding surface. No cracking. The ice was being merciful this time. Unhurriedly, but steadily, I began to shift into my previous pattern of push, slide and step. My progress was slow. I glanced at the human stream beside me and could see they were making better progress than I. I looked behind me. I'd barely gone a kilometre, I estimated. Either the planes will get me, or the cold, or a weak spot in the ice. All I could think about was that I need to get to get off that ice sheet and get off now.

I sped up my awkward shuffle across the ice. There were weak spots that showed themselves by pools of surface water, eerily green, the colour of absinthe. Others were holes carved out by Russian missiles. I detoured around them and it slowed me down but I thought that I'd rather be alive than die in the frigid water. The planes made a couple more passes but they ignored me. They turned and disappeared into the horizon and

didn't return. I silently rejoiced their passing. One less thing to worry about. Slipping, shuffling, sliding, I pushed on. I scanned the horizon from time to time, judging my progress. It was painfully slow but the peninsula was getting closer. I held onto that, telling myself that with every step and glide, I was that much further away from the Russians at my back and that much closer to surviving another day.

I soon grew tired with all the concentration I was putting on the ice. My mind wandered. I thought back to the games my friends and I played when I was still living in Berlin, before my parents died. On hot summer afternoons we'd scramble around in an empty lot overgrown with thistle and grass next to a brick factory. In the piles of abandoned brick and thick growth, we played hide and seek all afternoon, the rhythmic sounds of some factory machine and the buzzing of a brick saw in the background. Brick dust formed a thin cloud over where we played, getting into our noses and on our clothes. My mother scolded me when I came home from the lot and told me to stop playing in such a dirty place.

We were there one afternoon when my Aunt Lina appeared at the edge of the lot and told me the news of my parent's death. She told me how the motorcycle with the attached sidecar, the pride and joy of my father, had careened off a curve, flipped over and crushed them. They bled to death before someone discovered them. I took Lina's hand and walked back to my house. I never played in the lot again. I wondered as I walked on the ice whether or not my parents comforted each other in those last moments, whether they thought of their son, who would soon be an orphan. I began to weep as I imagined their last moments together. The tears froze on my cheeks, adding to the ice formed there from my breath.

Some time later, I saw there was a change in the ice. It was firmer, the striations less nebulous. I skated across patches swept clean of snow, thick enough to support me and tens of others, but clear enough to see down into the black void below. It was unsettling to see such darkness under the ice, a depth that looked as if it continued on without end. I thought I could see my parent's faces there, along with the twisted ruin of the motorcycle, the blood. They looked trapped, peering hopefully at the surface, at me, as if through the porthole of some sinking ship. I shook my head, and looked away from the surface of the ice to the horizon. And that's when I saw the tops of buildings above a line of trees. I stared at them in disbelief. I thought I was seeing things. I unfolded my arms from my body, peeled off one of my gloves and forced my numb hand to sweep the frozen snow and ice out of my eyes. I jammed my hand back into my glove and back under my armpit again. The buildings were still there. It wasn't an illusion. I'd made it to the peninsula. I forced my legs forward, too tired to celebrate.

I walked back towards the main column of refugees and soldiers, clumsily crossing snow-covered sand dunes into the scrub forest beyond, searching for the shelter I'd just seen. I soon found a *feldlazarett* where I drank some water, rested a short while and then was told to keep moving. Reluctantly, I forced my exhausted body out of the warmth of the aid station and into the cold once more, past a large building with hundreds of people milling about outside, the smell of gruel wafting through the air.

That was when I saw the children, tens of them, sitting alone and unmoving beside the road, tears frozen on their cheeks. Soldiers were moving from child to child, taking them in their arms and carrying them inside the building. I went up to one of them, a small girl, and picked her up. She was hungry, she said, and hadn't eaten in days. When

I asked where her parents were, she pointed back to the ice. I embraced her, holding her to my body to warm her. I thought of Olga and the life I promised I'd lead when this horror was over. Would we have children of our own, like this little girl? I hoped I would be able to be a father and if I did, I pledged to never abandon my children, or let them suffer as this girl was suffering now.

A *Feld* came by and gently took the girl from me.

"What'll happen to her?" I asked.

"She'll be taken care of. We feed them and let them rest a bit, then send them to Germany as quickly as transport can be arranged."

I waved goodbye to the girl. She listlessly raised her arm as the *Feld* took her to the building for some food. I grudgingly turned away from the children and walked on, not stopping until I reached the next village. There, I collapsed at the door of another *feldlazarett*. The orderlies dragged me inside, fixed me a bed of straw and covered me with a blanket.

Eight – In Transit

At least, that was what I was told had happened to me when the orderlies woke me up the next morning. They also told me I'd slept for eight hours but it felt like I'd just laid my head down. The medical staff gave me some bread and water and examined me. They told me I had a slight fever and was suffering from malnourishment and exhaustion. As if I didn't know. When I asked where I was one of the orderlies told me I was in Lysica, a village midway down the *Nehrung* peninsula. He also told me that rumours were circulating the Russians had cut them off again by thrusting ever deeper into German occupied Poland, sealing off the peninsula. But as they hadn't received an updated situation report for more than 24 hours and didn't know if it was true or not, they were ordering anyone that could walk to push on to the next hospital.

Tired of the familiar refrain, but powerless to do anything about it, I walked on, making it to Sztutowo by late morning, a former beach resort town a few kilometres east of Gdansk. I was off the *Nehrung* peninsula and still in German-occupied territory. For the moment. *Wehrmacht* traffic signallers directed me to a camp set up to handle the refugees and wounded soldiers. Inside a tent I sat on a vacant gurney and rested, waiting for someone to examine me. I noticed a lone soldier standing by the tent flap. I was curious as he simply watched what was going on, his hands firmly gripping his carbine. One of the medical personnel soon approached me. He was wearing a uniform that I didn't recognize.

"What unit are you from?" I inquired, as he began to examine me.

The man hesitated for a moment, looking uncomfortable with the question. Without looking directly at me he said in a hushed voice, "Political prisoner Unit 36."

I put my hand on the man's arm, stopping the examination. "Political prisoners?" I said. His eyes flicked to the soldier standing at the entrance. A guard.

The man then looked at me. "Yes. The *Wehrmacht* is short-handed. We take care of the civilian refugees and treat the sick and wounded. If we do this, then we've been promised our freedom. Please," he said, motioning for me to relax, "let me have a look at you."

I did as he asked. I couldn't help thinking that we must be desperate if we needed to rely on prisoners with the retreat. In fact, what I'd witnessed over the past couple of weeks was strange. The *Wehrmacht* helping abandoned children. The pressing of prisoners into service to assist in the evacuation. Before, we just ignored the refugees, the children, too occupied with saving our own skins. But now, with the Russians overwhelming our so-called historical lands taken at the beginning of the war, it was as if someone had come the realization that we owed these people something. After all, there were thousands of refugees, an unending river of people. By itself, the army was ill-equipped to handle all that on its own. We needed all the help we could get.

My thoughts returned to the orderly in front of me. His presence reminded me of one of my own relatives caught up in the web of SS mistrust. I heard about him when I returned home after passing an enjoyable summer in 1942 at a Youth camp in the mountains. Before you ask, it was enjoyable not for what they were trying to teach us, but rather, the chance it provided me to get away from Berlin. That city can get hot and humid during the summer. The buildings can feel like they're pressing in around you,

making it hotter. It's a relief just to get out of the place and into the countryside. Anyway, I'd finished my chores on the farm for the day and was preparing to go into the house when I overheard an argument between Oma and Opa. Curious, I quickly went to see what was going on.

It was there, around the kitchen table, that I learned of Uncle Otto, a man that had been promoted through the ranks of the National Socialist Party and had gained the confidence of Hitler and his closest advisors. But the more Otto was promoted and learned about his new friends at the peak of the Nazi Party, the more troubled he became. At the beginning of the summer in 1942, he began speaking out against them. He criticized the Party's policies regarding the treatment of minorities. He argued that the labour camp scheme was expensive and drained resources away from the front. At least, this is what he told Oma and Opa the last time he saw them.

The news that had upset my grandparents that day was of Otto's arrest. They couldn't believe it, thinking it was irresponsible. At the time, I thought the same thing. Why speak out? Why put your life in jeopardy? But now, after having survived six months at the front, I was no longer sure I found Otto's actions objectionable. I constantly had thoughts of my own that, if heard out loud would get me thrown into prison. Thoughts like leaving my post, walking away from the line in the middle of the night and never looking back until I arrived at Boossen and the farm. And I wasn't alone. In the past few weeks I'd overheard whispers of desertion and criticism directed at the High Command in the dead of night, after the lights had been doused and the nurses and doctors had retreated to their stations and no one with a command rank was within earshot. I know for me, I didn't want to risk it. It hadn't ended well for Otto. After a

month in an SS cell, he was sent to a political prisoner camp. We never heard from him again. It was if he vanished from the face of the earth.

And what about the man before me now? If he was willingly helping with the retreat, could his loyalty still be questioned? What was a traitor, anyhow? How could someone take care of people so selflessly and be considered an enemy of the state?

A movement at the other side of the tent caught my eye. A soldier with a bandage wrapped around his head leapt from his chair and rushed to one of the other prisoner-soldiers. They exchanged a few words and then embraced, sobbing. The orderly examining me followed my gaze to the encounter.

"I've seen that scene repeated many times since we've been stationed here," he said. "It's good to see relatives re-united, even under these circumstances."

"Yes, it is," I said. I was suddenly very tired.

"Do you have a friend or relative in prison?"

"No. Actually, I really don't know." I lowered my voice. "An Uncle of mine once questioned Hitler's policies and was sent to a camp. I have no idea if he's still alive or not."

"I'm sorry to hear that," the orderly said, turning his attention back to examining me. "Many good people have been imprisoned, or killed for having done so very little."

I dragged my attention from the past to the present. "How did you end up here?"

The orderly paused his exam and looked at me. "Some of my friends and I posed some questions to the *Gualeiter* in Frankfurt. The Governor mistook our questions as incitements to treason and had us arrested."

"What kind of questions?"

"We asked him about the *Wehrmacht* policy of hoarding foodstuffs. The General Staff, the Generals, the Colonels – we could all see they were living it up while ordinary people were subjected to greater and greater rationing."

"Hmph. That's almost funny."

"What is?"

"Hoarding food. I wish we'd seen some of it."

The man looked at me for a moment. "I think I understand."

"I'm glad you do. We've been fed a single serving of something they called soup every day for weeks now. It's not enough to live on, not for what's expected from us. We've been ordered to forage for food everywhere we go. Basically, we steal from the people." My tone was bitter. "I don't know what they're saving the food for, but it certainly wasn't for us."

"I had no idea. All we see about what you fellows go through is what they show us in the newsreels."

I almost laughed. "You won't learn about the true conditions on the front from those."

"Really. It hadn't occurred to me." His words were sincere, but I could see he was being cynical so I decided to tell him a bit more.

"Let me tell you a story," I said. "This was a few weeks ago now. A crew from the Propaganda Ministry showed up on the front line. We'd been fighting hard for days. We were filthy. We hadn't had a warm meal in over two weeks and we were desperately trying to hold the line under a pounding Russian attack. These guys drive up in a *Kübelwagon*, unload their cameras and begin to film us without even stopping to ask our

captain for permission. He was furious. He hustled over to them and knocked the camera over. Their commander, a young lieutenant, simply looked at him and calmly retrieved his order papers from the inside of his very clean tunic and showed them to the captain. My captain read them through, then threw them on the ground and came back to our position. I asked him what the orders said.

"'They've got permission from Göebbels himself,' he said. 'Unlimited access to any front-line unit.'

"During our rest period behind the lines, we had the opportunity to catch up on the war bulletins. We saw the segment filmed at our position but the images didn't correspond to what the narrator was saying. We knew we'd lost the battle that day. In fact, we'd been pushed back more than ten kilometres. But the narrator was full of praise for the valiant troops defending Germany from the Bolshevik Communist invaders, beating them back, scaring them with the might of German arms and the actions of her brave troops. They made it look we'd won the battle, had pushed the Russians back. We couldn't believe it. After we'd retired to our billets, many of us wanted to say something to someone, anyone, about what was being portrayed. But what could we say?"

"You were wise to keep quiet," said the man. I nodded and said nothing. The orderly continued his exam for a few moments.

"So, what's in store for me now?" I asked. "More of the same?"

"Well, compared to most of the people who go through here, you're fit, so I'm afraid so," the man said. "Personally, I would advise you to get going as soon as practical. We've heard the Russians are not far and even we may be forced to retreat."

"I thought as much. It's the same story everywhere I go."

The orderly signed the examination form and beckoned for me to follow him. “Let me take you to the duty surgeon.”

I received the same orders I’d been receiving for weeks now. Continue to the rear. I boarded a train which first went south and away from the coast to Tczew, then crossed the Wista river before turning and heading north, back to the coast and Gdansk. We were crammed into rough freight carriages. The sounds of the war followed us every step of the way. Russian artillery bombarded German defensive positions close to where we passed and enemy planes roared overhead, unchallenged, strafing the train.

I was scared. To be jammed into a rail car with so many other soldiers was one thing. To be bombed, shot at and strafed by enemy aircraft without being able to shoot back, run or find cover was harrowing. I wanted to bolt out of the car every time an artillery round exploded near us or a plane roared overhead. But I was forced to sit and wait it out, praying the danger would pass, praying the Russian gunners were bad shots or would misjudge their range or the Russian pilots above would find some other target of more military value to destroy.

To make matters worse, the train was forced to stop from time to time either in an attempt to hide from an air attack or to let empty trains pass by going in the opposite direction to collect more trapped refugees and soldiers. On one such occasion the engineer slowly rolled the train onto a rail siding covered by overhanging canopies of trees. We were allowed to get out of the cars for a few minutes to stretch our legs and relieve ourselves, but the Felds told us to stay close by.

A group of us descended the train, talking, joking, having a competition to see who could pee the furthest. As I was buttoning up, I looked up and saw some buildings

through the leaves. I looked down the track at the Felds, but they were bunched together, having a cigarette, killing time. I urged the boys with me to follow me. We crept through the undergrowth until we emerged at the edge of a clearing.

It was a camp that sprawled out in the clearing and extended for hundreds of metres on either side from where we stood. Two high fences running parallel with each other topped by barbed wire. Armed guards walking with dogs between the fences. Guard towers spaced around the perimeter giving the soldiers in them a commanding view of the camp and the surrounding countryside. As I took in the scene, a bugle sounded. Some kind of roll call was being called and as I watched, people began filing out of the rows of large buildings and assembling in the central courtyard in ragged lines. One of my *komerades* whispered 'labour camp'. Of course, I thought. I'd never seen one of the fabled camps exhorted by the Nazi Party as a way of 'cleansing' the German state and providing the labour we needed for war production.

Yeah, I know what you're thinking. How could I not see any of these camps before? There were so many of them! Just look at a map on Google and you'll see them sprinkled all over the place. Well, the fact is, I didn't. Not a one until that day. And believe me when I tell you, it was a frightening experience. The hair stood up on the back of my neck as I watched the prisoners lining up. There must have been hundreds of them, poorly dressed, most of them covered in mere wisps of fabric or blankets. Every one of them was walking skelaton, shuffling their way forward through the muddy ground to be counted. Halfway between the barracks building and the courtyard, one of the workers stumbled and fell to the ground. A guard quick-marched over and kicked him repeatedly, screaming at him to get up. We could just hear the guard's curses, the thump his boot

made every time it landed on the prisoner's body. After the guard was finished, the man lay still on the ground. The guard looked at the man for a moment and then ordered two other guards to take the body away.

Our Felds ordered us all back onto the train. I stood there, transfixed, until one of my *komerads* pulled me by the arm back into the trees. We quickly mounted the train carriage. The train stayed on the siding a few minutes more until it was given the all clear and reversed itself to re-join the main line to start on its journey again. I tried to read. My copy of New America was now tattered and dog-eared, some of the pages detached from the binding, but after a few pages, I closed the book. The images of the camp kept swirling through my mind. The look on the prisoner's faces of utter hopelessness and despair. But it was the guard that made me think the hardest. Here was a fellow German, beating senseless, no, beating to death, a helpless, starving man. Why? For what purpose? How did this act protect us from our enemies?

Hate and disgust welled up from within me. But of what? At whom? I hated what that soldier in the camp had been reduced to. A man with no feeling, carrying out orders to flog his charges, pushing them to work ever harder with less and less. Carrying out orders. It was then I realized it was my superiors I was hating. Me and my *komerads* were here at the whim of our commanders, ordered to this place and that. To do this and that. Chess pieces on a board to be moved at will. I understood, now, why my Uncle did what he did. It was a way of regaining control, making sense of what was happening around him. And for that, he was sent to prison. Or worse. And so we blindly followed orders, to move forward, or back, to attack or retreat, or guard prisoners in a camp so we can work

and starve them to death. It was clear to me we'd fallen and become something rude, mean and vengeful.

In that moment of clarity, I wondered if I'd ever see the farm again, ever see the smiling faces of the friends I played with when I was younger, friends that were likely somewhere in this maelstrom with me, thinking of their own homes and loved ones. I wondered if I would see Opa and Oma laugh over dinner and a slowly emptying bottle of wine on a Saturday night. I wondered if I would see Olga and how I would go about finding her when this was all over. I hoped she was still in Boossen, that her home was still intact, saved from the bombings by the British and Americans. Thinking of her put my mind at ease, helped push the jarring images of the camp a small way into the back of my mind and tamped down the hate that threatened to bubble up, overflow, overwhelm everything else.

Spring, 1945

Nine – Home

I took a moment then to look around the Legion Hall at the others. They were studying the bottom of their glasses. We were all dry, but no one had asked me to stop so they could get refills. Well, my butt was sore from sitting on that chair for so long so, when I mentioned it to Bill, he roused himself, got up and encouraged everyone to move to the lounge area of the Hall. There were sofas and easy chairs arranged in a rough circle and we all found a place. We had the bartender refresh our drinks and I supplemented my own with a large glass of water. My throat was dry from all the talking but I could see that no one was losing interest. They all seemed to want to stay and hear the rest. Maybe they all found something in what I said that reminded them of their own experiences. I don't know. But I was touched by their attention, their willingness to remain there to listen to what I had to say. And it was a relief to me, after all those years, to be able to say straight up what I'd been through, without having to worry about what I said, and how I said it. I took a sip of my scotch and kept going.

We crossed the Wista River, our train clattering over a steel bridge, the smell of the water below wafting through the rail car. It made me relax, this odour of water, as it was something fresh, clean and pure, something so different from the putrid odour of the dead and the dying, the harsh, acidic odour of the shells and guns. We all gave a ragged cheer knowing we'd finally crossed into more firmly held German territory. But when I reached Gdansk, I learned my train was the last one out. The Russians had overwhelmed the German defenders and closed the gap, sealing off Eastern Prussia, trapping thousands of refugees and soldiers. The news plunged me back into a gloomy, resentful mood.

From Gdansk, the going was easier. The air was free of Russian planes and the city was unscathed, at least for now. It wasn't long before I was directed to another train. The route unhampered by Russian planes or artillery, I made better time. It took three days to arrive in Germany, a journey of 350 kilometres, all the while hugging the northern coast of Poland. The closer I got to Germany, the more forgetful I became about Gdansk, and appreciative of my luck in getting out. I was alive and at least for now, I could focus on something else than pure survival. I was happy to know I was arriving back home after being away for so long. When the train crossed the Oder River, the natural border between Poland and Germany, I joined the others in cheering until our voices were hoarse. We felt relieved of the burden to fight, relieved of our horrors, if for only that moment.

In the middle of the night of the third day on the train, I woke up. Groggy with sleep, I made my way to the latrine. As I came out and started to make my way back to my bunk I noticed the train was stopped. I doubled back to the end of the car and opened the door to the passageway between carriages and looked around. The train was parked in a station. I looked up and down the platform and saw one of the name boards. Eberswalde. A pang of homesickness struck me. Eberswalde was a junction city, where trains went west to Berlin or south to Frankfurt an der Oder. The southbound trains passed through Boossen, near my grandparent's farm. I decided the opportunity was too good to pass up.

I went back inside the carriage, picking my way carefully between the bodies of my sleeping *komerads,* and retrieved my personal effects. I found a rail worker in the station and asked him if there were any trains still making the run to Frankfurt an der

Oder. He told me there was one scheduled to leave at ten the next morning. I thanked him and made my way to the rail car housing the Duty Surgeon. I found him smoking a cigarette on the platform and formally requested a transfer to my home hospital in Frankfurt an der Oder. This was a lie. The farm was closer to the clinic in Boossen but if I thought if I could just get on the train to Frankfurt an der Oder, I'd be able to get off outside the city and make the journey to the farm on foot. The Duty Surgeon looked at me for a moment, then demanded to see my orders. I handed him my papers. He mounted the steps of his rail car and disappeared inside. He emerged a few moments later, handing the papers back. When I examined them, I found that he'd scribbled an addendum and stamped it with his officer's seal.

I slept the remainder of the night on a bench in the station. In the morning, I went to board the train but found it sitting on a siding, full of people, delayed. I wandered up toward the front of the train and found the crew debating whether they should even leave Eberswalde. When I asked why, one of the crew told me that the Russians had established a beachhead on the German side of the border. The train would have to pass near that position, close enough to be shelled by Russian artillery. After a few more minutes of debate, the conductor overruled them all, saying the longer they stood around arguing, the greater the chance the Russians would simply overrun them where they stood. We finally left Eberswalde, four hours late. The crew was right to be concerned. As the train passed close to the Russian positions, they fired on us. We were all fearful. Mothers clutched children, wives clutched husbands, familial islands formed up, seeking the company of each other before the end. But we weren't hit and the rest of the journey passed uneventfully. I got off the train at Boossen.

As I walked through the village, memories flooded through my mind. I remembered as a small boy when Opa took me on a horse-drawn cart to town to celebrate the fifth anniversary of Hitler becoming Supreme Chancellor. Those were better days. People were proud, optimistic. The town square was crowded and music played from small groups of musicians scattered around the perimeter. The air was filled with the smoke and smell of cooking sausage and I remember begging Opa for one. He relented and I remembered the relish of that first bite, the hot meat scalding my tongue, the fat running down my chin. I remembered the colourful banners and swastikas hung from the town hall, the speeches by local officials and the silence we all observed as we listened attentively as Hitler's voice, carried by radio from Berlin, crackled through loudspeakers set up around the square.

That same square was quiet the day I walked through it after getting off the train, as if everyone had up and left town, fearful for what was to come. I looked around to catch some sign of life but there was no traffic on the road into town. The businesses surrounding the square were shuttered and some of the houses looked abandoned. In the remaining houses that still looked lived in, I could see the residents keeping to themselves, revealing their presence through the flicking of a curtain or a shadowy movement in a window. It was as if the town had died. I grew worried as I thought that Opa and Oma might have abandoned the farm, that I made the journey for nothing. I quickened my pace, heading out of the village.

I arrived at the gate that barred the road leading to the farm. My heart sank as I walked down the track and saw the place. You have to understand something. Their farm was pretty typical of the time – a bungalow-style house with stuccoed exterior walls

framed by 4 by 4 beams. You've seen the so-called Swiss Chalets? Well, same idea but with cleaner, simpler lines. Only a single story and no A-frame. A front yard that led off the entrance stairs into the house and beyond that, a barn for all the farm equipment and storage of the wheat. We had a garden planted between the barn and the house and normally, Oma and Opa kept everything well tended. But not now. Paint was peeling off the window frames. The exterior stucco was streaked with dirt. Weeds overran the yard. The roof on the barn sagged in one corner. The whole place had an abandoned feel to it. I knew Opa would never let the farm decline to such a state unless he had no choice or was no longer there.

As I stood there in the front yard, looking sadly at the state of my home, I heard a noise coming from the barn, the sound of wood sliding on wood. I knew it was the hasp on the main door; I'd heard that sound countless times before. I took my carbine in hand and chambered a round and advanced slowly. I was ten metres away when one of the doors suddenly swung open, the leather hinges creaking loudly. It was Opa, walking with purpose toward the house. He raised his head and noticed me standing there, carbine aimed at him and he stopped, his brows furrowed, an expression of what looked like both puzzlement and anger.

"Opa!" I said. "It's me, Jakob!"

He didn't respond, just stared at me instead, slowly cocking his head to one side. I realized I was pointing a loaded gun at my own grandfather and lowered the weapon, putting the safety back on and re-shouldering it. "I heard a noise. Opa, don't you recognize me?"

The old man shook his head. “No, frankly I don’t. But if you keep that rifle on your shoulder, you can come a little closer. I can get a better look at you and we can talk.”

Well, I was a taken aback, I tell you. I didn’t realize that 6 months in a war zone could’ve changed me so much. But I thought I’d better go slow with Opa so, I slowly walked toward him. He was much thinner than I remembered. His hair was still long and unkempt, hanging wildly about his head but it was greyer, giving the mane an old, lustreless look. The skin on his cheeks was wrinkled and loose and had an unhealthy sallow tinge. The small potbelly that had begun to take shape in previous years had vanished. His clothes hung loosely on him, reminding me of the way our uniforms fitted us. Opa looked old and frail, as if he would blow away with the first stiff wind that came along. His lower lip had a slight tremble to it. When I was about two metres away, I stopped and removed my hat. And that’s when I noticed the change to his eyes. The deep, vivid blue that had once shone with such brilliant intensity had been replaced by a rheumy, washed out colour that was so pale it was almost white

“You see? It’s your Jakob. I’ve come home for a visit. Please. You must recognize me now?”

He continued to examine me closely, as if looking for a sign that could prove to him that I was, indeed, his adopted son. But I could see that he was struggling. I looked down at myself. The thin, filthy young man I was now looked nothing like the younger boy that left the farm to report for duty. I hoped Opa would see the small familiar details of who I was, like how I parted my hair on the left. As I waited for a sign of recognition, I shuffled my right foot back and forth across the dirt.

Opa seemed to recognize the nervous tick because his gaze shifted to the foot moving in the dirt. I remembered then, whenever I got into trouble with him, I would stand before him, head bowed, my foot dragging back and forth in the dirt, like a pendulum marking the seconds to my punishment. Opa smiled, holding out his arms.

"Jakob! Now I see that it's you! Come here and give an old man a hug!"

I was relieved and rushed to him, almost crushing him with the ferocity of my embrace.

"Easy there, you'll hurt me before I've had a chance to celebrate," Opa said. He held me at arm's length, looking at me intently. "We thought you were dead, or worse, captured by the Russians. Your last letter is weeks old. You've changed, young one," he said. As his hands grasped my boney arms through my uniform jacket, I could see the sadness in his face at how I'd changed. But he quickly recovered, putting on a smile again.

"Where there was a boy, there is now a man. Come, come inside. You must tell us all about it." Opa put his arm around my shoulders, leading me towards the house. As he did so, I glanced around the farmyard. Through the open door of the barn I noticed Opa's farm cart loaded with items from the house. Carpets were rolled tightly and placed beside a bureau. Chests and trunks took up the rest of the space.

"Are you going somewhere, Opa?" I asked, gesturing toward the barn.

Opa followed my gaze. "A precaution. With the Russians getting closer every day, we have to be prepared."

My reunion with my Oma was no less joyous. She covered me with kisses. Like Opa, she'd thinned since I'd left home. Her long hair was now almost completely grey

and tied up in a tight bun behind her head, her cheeks were the same unhealthy pallor as Opa's and her arms had shrunk to loose folds of skin that hung loosely off her bones. I was sad to see them that way. I'd always imagined them to be solid, like pillars of marble, strong and indestructible. What a difference a few months can make. They looked old and fragile, as if time had caught up with them in a sudden rush, readying them for death.

They sat me down at the kitchen table. I offered to assist Oma, but she placed a firm hand on my shoulder, directing me to stay seated. As she gathered together some food, I told them my story, from the time I left Berlin en route to Holland, to when I jumped off the train at Boossen an hour ago. As I finished, Opa was looking at me with a grave expression on his face.

"Are you still considered by the *Wehrmacht* to be sick?" Opa asked.

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, I don't want to be unkind, but you don't look sick now."

"Other than malnourishment, you mean? No, nothing else."

"Ach! We're all malnourished," he said dismissively. "From what I can see, you're able-bodied. You need to get re-assigned as soon as possible." Opa leaned forward, staring hard at me. "Things . . . well, things have changed a lot around here."

"I can see that. And not just on the farm. What's happened here?"

Opa paused and took a deep breath before replying. "Rationing. For everyone. For the last six months, we have had to scrounge for food. I mean, look at us! Thin as fence posts."

Oma put a plate of black bread and homemade cheese on the table.

"You see?" said Opa, pointing to the plate. "Hardly anything substantial."

"It's alright," I said. "It's much more than I've seen in a long while." I hungrily dug in while Oma sat down and picked up the story where Opa left off. "The police don't exist anymore, Jakob. The Party has folded them into their organization. They're now the *Feldgendarmerie* – the Home Guard. They have new powers to execute deserters, or just about everybody else without proper documentation." She shook her head. "They hang bodies of soldiers on lamp posts or trees by the road, desecrating them. Examples, they say."

"Just like the army. The Party is worming its way into everything."

"It's necessary," said Opa. "The Party is the one institution that can rally us all. And we need all the soldiers to continue the fight," he continued, "to defend our homes, our country. We can't afford to have them wander off the lines when they get scared. Discipline must be maintained, now more than ever. If the Party can provide that extra boost in discipline, so much the better."

I didn't say anything to this. I wanted to challenge what Opa was saying. I wanted to tell him about what it was like to be in the battles I'd been in, how hopeless it all felt, how we'd been pushed and pushed and pushed by the Russians and now they were at our doorstep and I couldn't see how Germany could hold them back, let alone the Americans and British to the West. But I didn't. I kept my silence and placed another morsel of cheese on my bread.

"And there's more," continued Oma. "Hitler has declared a number of cities to be Fortresses."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Residents of these cites have been ordered to assist the army in defending it to the death. The regional *Gaulieters* are to take charge of the defences."

I shuddered, almost choking on the half-chewed piece of bread in my mouth. I knew what it would be like for unarmed civilians, led by Party officials with little or no military training, to resist a concerted Russian attack. Bodies. Blood. A wasted effort.

"He's declared Frankfurt an der Oder to be one of those fortress cities," Opa continued. "It's on the border with Poland so that's normal. Everyone is being told to remain within the city walls to defend it to the last man." He shook his head. "I don't know about Frankfurt. It's a shadow of what it once was. The last time I was there, everything was bombed or shelled. The buildings were black or grey from the fires. Ash everywhere. People living like rats in holes in the ground. I doubt they can do much to defend the city." He looked up at Jakob. "That's why you need to get back into a fighting unit, Jakob. It's critical. We need every experienced soldier we have to defend what's left."

I wanted to tell them that with everything I'd gone through, how impossible the situation was. How, no matter how many civilians or soldiers we threw at the Russians, we'd be defeated. But I could also see the desperate hope in their faces and I couldn't let them down.

"I know what I must do," I finally said. My heart was heavy as I forced myself to swallow the bread in my mouth, the burden of rejoining the fight again weighing me down. "I'll be reporting to the Duty Surgeon at the clinic in the morning. But, Opa," I said, trying a different approach, "don't you think there could be another way?"

"What do you mean?"

I shifted in my chair, uncomfortable with challenging my grandfather this way. I'd never challenged him, never contradicted what he said. He always seemed to know what to say, and when to say it. But not this time. His point of view felt wrong, so I felt I had to speak up. "Yes. Another way. If you could've seen the things I've seen. Refugees, Germans civilians, thousands of them, women and children, walking with every precious thing they own and we do nothing for them. Children orphaned along the escape route. I held one in my arms for a few minutes. Her parents were gunned down by Russian planes as they strafed the refugee columns. And then there are the regular troops. The fighting we've been through, the horrendous conditions, the lack of food, the disorganization. We can't just keep going like this until there's nothing left. We must find another way to end this before we disappear entirely, no?"

Opa sat back in his chair, sceptical. "Perhaps. But, Jakob, you must trust our leaders. They have the wisdom to know when the fight is hopeless. For now, we fight on. You must do your duty, as you've been taught."

I nodded at the familiar argument and gave Opa a reassuring smile, not willing to ruin our reunion with a pointless argument. I knew that my grandparents were prisoners of their thinking, that they couldn't imagine any other scenario. That to do so would mean the end of hope. Besides, I thought, they hadn't been on the front lines and hadn't witnessed what I'd seen. Their image of the war was formed by what the Party fed them through their radio broadcasts. A valiant army fighting for the survival of Germany.

Later, as I prepared for bed, I made an effort to change my dour thoughts. I asked Oma about Olga.

"She was around for a while after you left," she said, "but I haven't seen her for over three months now. I'm sure her parents know where she is. They still live on the neighbouring farm." I thanked Oma and bade her goodnight. As my head hit the pillow, I contemplated what I would do next, what I could do that would mean the greatest chance of staying alive. I concluded that I had two choices, neither one of them very attractive.

I could desert. That I thought of the word at all surprised me. The call to do one's duty, to obediently follow the orders of my superiors without question, had been drummed into me since I was twelve. I wasn't sure when I started to doubt all that. Was it my first full week on the front, our positions being overrun? Was it in the house, facing the Russian boy? Was it crossing the Haff, watching German civilians being slaughtered and abandoned? The German soldier mindlessly kicking a starving man? All of them together? I didn't know but I knew that to continue to follow orders blindly might mean my own death. And so I forced my mind to contemplate desertion.

So, I thought, what would happen if I did? Before there was a Home Guard it would've been hard, but perhaps feasible, to slip away, throw my rifle into a ditch, burn the uniform, get civilian clothes, disappear, wander from farm to farm, to hole up and hide and wait it out. But now I wasn't sure. There was the extra vigilance of the Home Guard. And if my grandparents were any indication, the population had been brainwashed about loyalty and duty to the state. They'd be unwilling to provide comfort to a deserter. Instead, they'd turn me in. I'd be shot and hung from the nearest lamppost or tree.

My other option was to do as Opa wished and report to the Duty Surgeon. That man would in all likelihood declare me fit for combat and assign me back to the eastern

front. My rank and training would guarantee I'd be assigned as far to the front as Russian snipers would permit. I'd be dead within the week, given what I'd seen so far of the fighting.

But then I thought of Koch and my old unit. If they weren't dead, then they were out there, somewhere, fighting on. And if they were, then I thought there might be a third option – to report to the Duty Surgeon with a request to be transferred back to my old unit. As I thought about it, I realized that I missed them, missed their company. There's a certain comfort to be had in sharing that kind of experience with men who'd lived through it. You all know that. You don't have to explain anything. And I missed Koch because it was he that'd promised to be my buddy, to help me survive. So that's what I would do the next day.

Ten – "Eyes and Ears Everywhere"

I woke late the next morning, dressing quickly and I was going to leave the house without eating. But as I went through the kitchen Oma refused to let me out the door before sitting me down to a breakfast of eggs and black bread. Where she got the eggs I couldn't tell as all our chickens were gone. The smell and sounds of the eggs frying in the pan re-awakened a hunger I'd been carrying for months. As soon as the plate hit the table, I scooped food into my mouth quickly, not stopping to even taste what passed over my tongue until I wiped the plate clean with a last piece of bread. Contented, I kissed Oma in thanks and went out the front door and walked through the yard. Opa was coming towards me on his way to get his midday meal. He stopped and gave me a hug and wished me luck.

When I arrived at the Duty surgeon's office in the village I was heartened to learn that he was none other than our own family doctor. While Dr. Dege was a laconic, severe man, I thought I might be able to reason with him and convince him to accept my third option. I walked into his office, clicked my heels as was required and saluted.

"Grenadier Herrmann reporting, sir!"

Dr. Dege nodded. "Papers, please," he said. He had still had his thin, reedy, nasally voice. One of the only men I knew that could put a sound to the sneer on his face. He held out his hand with an impatient air. He was resplendent in a new uniform that was freshly pressed. As I handed over my orders, I glanced around the office. Medical instruments racked in precise rows on freshly cleaned linen. Textbooks neatly arrayed in an oak bookshelf behind the desk. A portrait of the Führer and the local *Gauleiter* on the wall.

"Report, Grenadier," the doctor said as he unfolded the tattered paper gingerly, holding it with his finger tips. I quickly summarized what I'd been through since fainting at the front line to when I left the train at Boossen the previous night. Dr. Dege nodded from time to time.

"And how do you feel now?"

"Sir, the sores caused by the lice have healed. The jaundice is gone and my temperature appears to have returned to normal."

"Alright. Let's get you onto the table so I can examine you." Dege put my orders on his desk blotter and gestured at an exam table tucked in one corner of his office. He removed his uniform coat and hung it on a coat tree. He rolled up his shirtsleeves and washed his hands thoroughly. He looked in my eyes and ears and examined my throat and checked my blood pressure and temperature. He examined closely the sores left by the lice, nodding approvingly at the pale, puckered scar tissue that now sealed the wounds.

The doctor washed his hands again and rolled down his sleeves. He put on his coat and sat down again behind his desk. I re-buttoned my own shirt and put on my tunic.

Thinking this might be my moment, I put my proposition to him. "I wonder, sir, if I could be transferred back to my old unit. We've been separated for some time now, and I'd like to re-join them as soon as possible."

"Not possible," Dege said. "The strategic situation has changed considerably since you were declared unfit for front-line duty. Our orders from central command are that no effort is to be spared for the defence of the homeland, and especially, the defence of Berlin." He picked up my orders again, studying them. He shook his head, sighing.

"Frankly, I'm troubled by all these referral orders. I've been seeing a lot of this lately. I'm very puzzled by the actions of my colleagues."

"Sir, with all due respect, there simply wasn't time for any other action."

"Yes, yes, yes," the doctor said, dismissing my remarks with a wave of his hand. "I've heard it all before. You're all the same. As soon as you are questioned by me, the excuses come out. It's always the 'Russians this, and the Russians that'."

Dege had been kind to us over the years and had even formed what I thought was a friendly bond with my grandfather, so I hadn't expected these kinds of remarks. But then, he was like the rest of the population. He'd never been the front. He pushed paper around and examined soldiers like me. Rather than get angry, I tried one last thing.

"Permission to remain at my Opa's farm for a few days to continue recuperation, sir," I said.

Dege looked at me with contempt in his eyes, but finally nodded. "Permission granted. But I'm only doing this because your grandparents are loyal supporters of the Führer. I'm granting you four days, after which time you must report to the Front Reassignment office in town." The doctor scribbled the orders hurriedly, stamped them, handed them to me and saluted, dismissing me without a second glance.

In two weeks, I thought, I'll be dead, just like Meier. I was sure of it. I hadn't counted on being thrown into some desperate plan to defend the homeland. But if I was, at the very least I wanted to be with people I knew, to be surrounded by my old unit. Without them I felt I'd soon be nothing more than another bag of bones and flesh, lying prone and rotting on the ground, waiting for burial and graves registration.

I walked aimlessly around the town, casting about in my mind for a way of getting out of being deployed to the front. As I wandered, I came upon a flak battery next to a barracks. I hadn't noticed them on the way to the doctor's office. The buildings of the barracks were being boarded up. Trucks were being loaded with equipment and boxes. The flak battery looked well dug in, as if it was there to stay. I stopped walking and stood there, looking at the gun barrels pointing into the sky, thinking.

I started walking again, but instead of heading home to the farm, I entered the grounds where the battery was dug in. I found the battery commander's office and quickly explained who I was and my background and asked the commander if they needed a mechanical trouble shooter. It was the best I could think up on the spot. Well, the commander was a little surprised by my audacity but I didn't care. I just wanted to find a way to stay behind the lines. After a moment, he started to ask me questions about my training and experience. After hearing the responses, he demanded my orders and changed them on the spot, ordering me to report in four days to the battery instead of the Reassignment Office.

"You can change the duty surgeon's orders so easily?" I asked, not ready to believe what had just happened.

"Of course," the Commander said. "Battlefield commanders have precedence. You're worth more to me here than to some new unit being formed to be sent into the maw of the Russian front."

I was thrilled at my sudden change of fortune. I'd be close to the farm. I wasn't with my friends, but I was in a situation that was far less hazardous than being sent back to the front.

I walked quickly back home, aching to tell my grandparents the good news. But when I arrived at the track that led to my home, I stopped and looked further along the road to the next farm in the distance. Olga's farm. I started walking again along the main road, eager now to see the girl that'd captivated my thoughts for so many months, to share with her my experiences as a soldier, to show how I'd been changed. Very heady stuff, I know, but I was sixteen. Time seemed to pass by in a rush as I walked. My skin tingled with anticipation and if I remember right, I smiled and laughed to myself at the thoughts my mind conjured up as I walked. I must've looked like some kind of mad man just then. But I didn't care. All I could think about was finding a private place, of drinking her body in with my eyes, of exploring every nook and cranny with my hands.

When I arrived at her house, I banged on the front door. As I waited for a response, shifting nervously in place, I had a look around. Outbuildings and farm equipment. Fields lying fallow and choked with weeds for lack of sowing. I was about to knock again when the door scraped open. It was Olga's mother. She'd always been a thin, small woman. But in the time since I'd had seen her last, she'd undergone the same transformation as my grandparents. Her hair had greyed, her skin hung loosely on her frame and her face was now a skein of wrinkles. The woman's eyes narrowed at the sight of a soldier at her door, her face clouded with suspicion.

"Yes?" she said.

I quickly removed my hat. "Frau Brasch, its Jakob. Jakob Herrmann from next door."

"Jakob?" Her eyes narrowed further and she leaned forward. I thought then that she looked just like my grandfather did the day before, confused by the changed man

before her. “Frieda never mentioned that her Jakob was coming home. I’m sure she would’ve said something.”

“I just arrived yesterday afternoon. It was unplanned.”

Frau Brasch scanned my face intently. Her eyes, whose vivid green colour I remembered, were now as pale as dry grass, as if the colour had leaked away. “Yes, perhaps it’s you after all,” she said. “You’re here to see Olga?”

I smiled, my face flushing. “Yes. Yes I am. Is she here?”

“I’m afraid not. She hasn’t been living here for a few months now.”

“Oh. Well, do you know where she is, where I could find her?”

Frau Brasch drew herself up a bit. “She’s in the village, staying at a friend’s house. She does clerical work at the Front Reassignment office. You can find her there, six days a week, from eight to six.”

“That’s . . . that’s wonderful! Thank you, Frau Brasch. Thank you so much.” I turned quickly, running off the front porch.

“Jakob,” Frau Brasch called out. I stopped and turned to face her again. “I would suggest you find her during the day, at her office. At night . . . at night she has another job and sometimes she doesn’t get back to her room until late.”

I took a few steps towards the porch. “What kind of work?”

“You’ve been on the front all this time?” she asked.

“Until yesterday. Why?”

She cast her eyes down at the worn boards of the porch at her feet. “You must be careful, Jakob, about who you meet and what you say. There are eyes and ears everywhere now.”

"The Home Guard?"

"Them. And others." She looked up at me, turning to go back inside the house. "Just find Olga. She'll tell you," she said over her shoulder. The door clacked shut and I was alone.

I walked out of the yard and re-joined the road. My mood, so full of hope and playfulness just moments before, was dampened by Frau Brasch's cryptic remarks. Taken with the conversation I had with my grandparents the night before, unsettled thoughts re-entered my mind, like the remnants of a bad dream. I couldn't shake the feeling as I walked, going again past the track that led to my home, my feet propelling me to the centre of Boossen once more, past the scattered houses on the outskirts of town, past the houses jammed one next to the other in the village proper, all the way into the central square. There, I stopped and surveyed the centre of town. Nazi party flags hung limp on their poles in front of the mayor's office. There was a short line up of people in front of the baker, another line at the butcher. The café's were mostly empty. The taverns closed. A few people trudged through the square, heads bent low, collars turned up, looking like ghosts wandering aimlessly.

I sought out the building where Olga worked, finding it easily enough. On the other side of the square, tens of soldiers from units scattered to pieces by the fighting mingled in front, talking amongst themselves in small groups, smoking, waiting their turn to be seen by the duty officers inside. I walked solemnly by them all towards the front entrance, my unease sharpened by knowing where these men would be going next.

I went in the front door and walked up to a desk. A couple of harried-looking female *Nachrichtenhelferin* – army auxiliary – were busy directing the soldiers arriving before them to various offices in the building.

"Excuse me," I said to one of them, "but I wonder if . . ."

"Are you here for re-assignment?" one of them interrupted without looking up. She was older, her greying hair tousled, the worry lines on her forehead prominent.

"No, I'm not. I'm here looking for someone who works here."

The woman looked up at me, an impatient look on her face. "Who? Quickly now, I haven't all day."

"Olga Brasch."

"Second floor, office 210."

"Thank you," I said, turning to head toward the stairs.

"Wait a minute. Where do you think you're going?"

"Upstairs of course. Why?"

"Because you can't just wander around here like a tourist. Authorized personnel only. You need an escort and we don't have the personnel to provide one right now. We're short staffed these days."

I grimaced, keeping my anger in check. "Look. I just arrived here in the district after seven months at the Eastern front. I haven't seen her since I was shipped off last year. Please, you must let me see her. I just need a few minutes."

I got some help from one of the men waiting in line behind us. "Come on, *mein frau*, let the boy see his girl." Other men joined him and soon they were almost shouting at her to let me see Olga.

"Alright, alright, settle down," she said loudly. She looked exasperated. "This is not how it's to be done," she muttered, "but alright, go on up. But be quick. If anyone inquires, just tell them you're lost and they'll direct you back here."

"Thank you," I said. I turned, gave a nod of thanks to the other soldiers, and went up the stairs, taking them two at a time. I opened the door to the second floor and quickly found the door with 210 stenciled on the glass and went in. There were four desks in the room, each of them occupied by a female auxiliary in grey-blue uniform dress and tunic, typing at large, heavy typewriters. My entry caused them all to stop their typing and look at me. No one said anything as I scanned their faces, looking for Olga's distinctive features and hair. I spotted her at the back of the room, her familiar freckles, her long blond tresses tied up in a neat bun on her head.

"Olga," I said, looking at her, my face breaking into a smile. She frowned, cocked her head to one side, clearly not recognizing me. Jeez, I thought. Is it going to be like this with everyone I meet from my past? "It's Jakob." She rose quickly from her chair and walked up to me, her eyes searching my face. Her mouth opened in surprise and she smiled as she recognized me.

"Jakob!" she said, flinging her arms around me. We hugged each other fiercely. The other girls in the room started to giggle quietly, hands over their mouths, leaning towards each other, talking about this new spectacle before them.

"It's so good to see you," she said. Her words warmed my blood and the urge to kiss her there and then was overpowering but for the presence of the other girls in the room. I fought back the impulse and resorted to hugging her again.

"Is there somewhere where we can go?" I asked, breaking the embrace, holding her at arm's length. "I have so much to tell you, so many things I've seen."

"Yes, yes, of course." She looked around at her colleagues. "But not right now. I have to stay here until six. Are you staying at the farm?"

"Yes, I am, but only for the next four days. After that, I have to report for duty."

"I understand. We have some time," she said. "Pick me up here at six tonight, and I promise you, we'll have all evening to catch up."

"I saw your mother earlier. She mentioned you had another job in the evenings. Will it be alright?"

She glanced down at her feet, her face flushing slightly. "Yes, it won't be a problem." She embraced me again, clutching me hard. We stayed that way for a few moments, until I reluctantly let her slide from my embrace. I watched her walk back to her desk. When she was seated and looked at me again I smiled at her. She returned the smile but it was fleeting, the brightness of her eyes dimmed by something I couldn't see.

It was mid-afternoon when I returned to the farm. Opa and Oma were happy when they learned I'd be staying with them for another four days and be stationed nearby after that. I told them about my meeting with Olga. They teased me, grinning playfully. After eating some lunch, I stripped out of my uniform and into civilian clothes. Oma took the uniform and washed it, wanting me to look my best when I met Olga that evening. In the meantime I helped Opa with some chores around the farm. Later in the afternoon, I cleaned myself up, shaved and put on my now-clean uniform. The fabric was showing severe wear and tear but at least it no longer smelled like I'd been living in it for days on end, or looked like it had been dragged through the mud. I ate an early dinner and packed

some food for Olga in a basket. Opa went to the cellar and brought up a bottle of wine to complete the meal. I hugged my grandparents and told them not to expect me back before curfew that evening.

Walking down the track and onto the road, my unease returned. All afternoon, working beside Opa, I'd managed to push it to the back of my mind, to crowd it out with the concentration needed to complete my farm chores. Now, alone on the road to town, with little to occupy my mind, it re-surfaced, like a piece of sea junk that refused to sink, it's stubborn buoyancy the product of Frau Brasch's warning and Olga's attempt to not talk about what she did in the evening. I hoped she was not in trouble, that she was alright, but the more attention I gave the problem, the more concerned I became. I quickened my pace.

Eleven – "You Have to Be Careful About Her"

As I came into the village I glanced at my watch. It was coming up on six o'clock. I arrived at the town square and decided to take a few moments to cool off from my walk. I placed the basked on the ground and leaned on the building beside me and took in the scene. The taverns were open now. There was a constant stream of soldiers coming and going through their doors. Every time one of the doors opened, the sounds of shouting, laughing and singing soldiers spilled into the square, echoing off the faces of the buildings. The cafés were open as well, but were less busy. A few tables were occupied, but with the rationing in effect, I doubted the fare was substantially better from what I was eating on the farm.

Across the square, light blazed from the windows of the Front Reassignment office. A few soldiers milled about in front. A few minutes past six, I saw Olga come out the front entrance and stand to one side. I smiled when I saw her. Like me, she'd changed in the intervening months. She looked taller, but maybe that was just because of the high heeled shoes she wore. Her exposed calves, bare of hose, were slender and shapely. But her uniform coat looked too big for her as it draped loosely over her frame. Her hair, now down and cascading over her shoulders under her cap, shimmered under the fading light. But to me, it was her face where the change was most noticeable. Before it was broad and open as she smiled and expressed unrestrained joy about the world. Now, it was leaner. Her eyes were narrower and her chin was raised slightly, giving her a determined bearing, a confident gaze of someone focussed on a goal.

As I stood there admiring her, a man approached her out of the shadows next to the building. He was dressed in a trench coat and fedora, the shadow of the hat covering

his face. They exchanged a few words and I could see Olga shaking her head, pointing at her wristwatch. They talked a bit more, and then the man moved off, entering one of the taverns, disappearing inside. I thought this odd. I picked up my basket, slipped out of the shadow of the building and walked towards her. When Olga spotted me, she broke into a big smile and strode quickly across the macadam, her heels clicking loudly. As we embraced, I buried my face in her shoulder, smelling her hair, losing myself in the moment before I pulled back and held her at arm's length, looking at her.

"You look marvellous, you know that?" I said. Olga laughed, throwing her head back. Just as she used to do when they were last together.

"And you, you look more grown up somehow," she replied. "Much thinner than before."

"Why, thank you," I said. "All these past months of service haven't been a total waste after all." She laughed again, taking my arm and leading me toward the road that led out of town.

"I noticed that man talking to you."

She stiffened momentarily.

"No one important. He was just asking me whether the taverns were open or not." A weak excuse, I thought. Anyone could see the taverns were open. She looked ahead of us as she spoke, down the road. Her face was hidden by the drape of her hair and I couldn't tell if she was being truthful or not. She snuggled in closer to me and I pushed by suspicions to the back of my mind for the moment.

"Where are you leading me?" I asked.

"Well, you asked me if I knew a place where we could go. Our farm."

"Aren't your parents there?"

"They won't even know. We'll be in the barn. It's practically empty since the army confiscated the animals. My father rarely goes there at night. And they also know I'm staying at Erika's – my friend in the village – so they won't be expecting me. So you see, it's perfect!"

"Speaking of perfect, I have something here that I think you'll like." I reached into my basket and pulled out the bottle of wine, showing it to her. She smiled and put her head on my shoulder as we walked.

By the time we arrived at her farm, it was dark. The houses we passed along the way were shrouded in blackness, as if abandoned. Blackout curtains hid our passage from those inside. We quickly and quietly stole into the barn. In a stall unused for some time we spread a thick carpet of clean straw and arranged our coats on top. Olga mounted a single candle on a holder half-way up the enclosure and lit it. The feeble light was more than enough to illuminate our small, improvised room.

I started to take items out of the basket, thinking that Olga would want to eat after a long day at work. Instead, she laid her hand lightly on mine, stopping what I was doing. She reached for my tunic, detaching the buttons one by one. I moved the basket to one side and began to unbutton her blouse, adrenalin spiking my system. My hands shook and I fumbled with the buttons.

We made love and it was very, very good. At least, that's how I remember it. Don't know if it was that particular point in time, the feeling that we'd better do it then and not wait for a 'better' time or what but, I still have a fond memory of that moment. It

seemed to me then to be very sweet, very tender, very idyllic I would say. Listen to me. A maudlin old man reminiscing about losing his virginity. Anyway.

After, we lay on our coats, eyes closed, catching our breath, letting the last of the pleasure course through us, willing it to stay even as it faded. When my heart had settled back into a calmer rhythm, I slowly opened my eyes. Olga was languid, a lazy smile on her face.

"I think we should try some of that wine," I said. I sat up and fished the bottle out of the basket and opened it. I searched through the basket for a moment and then turned to look at her. "Only thing is, we have no glasses to drink it with."

"I don't mind drinking it from the bottle," she said, taking it from me and upending it, swallowing a couple of mouthfuls before handing it back. "And I just realized I'm famished. What did your wonderful grandmother put in that basket?"

I showed her what was packed inside and she took some bread and cheese and cold sausage and began to munch hungrily. I arranged the coats around us so we wouldn't get cold. As Olga ate, she looked absently at the exaggerated shadows on the walls and roof of the barn thrown off by the flickering candle.

"You remember the summer before you were shipped off? We were doing chores in your barn."

I took a swig of the wine. "I remember. I was on the floor winching some hay up to the loft, where you were supposed to unhook and stack it."

"But then I got into trouble and you had to come up to help me out."

"What was the trouble again?"

She giggled. "There was no trouble. I faked it. I wanted you up there with me."

We told stories like this all night about the times we spent together before the war. Like when we hatched a plan to steal some beer. We waited until the delivery truck arrived at one of the taverns and when the owner went inside with a box of bottles we went up to the truck and stole two. When the owner saw us riding down the alley and two of his bottles missing, he ran after us. But he couldn't catch us. We were pedalling too quickly on our bikes. I think we got drunk that day.

Some hours later, I wandered back to the farm. It was the early hours of the morning. I was alert for patrols looking for curfew breakers but saw no one around. All was still and quiet as if the earth was gathering itself. I entered the house quietly, not wanting to wake my grandparents. I fell asleep on top of my bed without removing any of my clothes. Oma found me there the next morning. She hadn't disturbed me, letting me sleep until I woke well past noon. My head hurt from the wine but my mood was joyous. It was if I could see everything in a new light. Before, the villagers in the square resembled refugees, the tattered and worn outbuildings of the farms resembled bombed and shattered houses, the lack of food reminded me of scrounging parties we formed to take what we needed. Now, things took on a new perspective. Conditions were harsh, but as long as I had Olga there was hope that things would get better in some other life after the war. It was the contemplation of the after that I finally was able to focus on. Before, all I could think about was the present, how to get past the hour in front of me and nothing else. Now, having stepped out of the war, even for a few days, I was allowed to think in another way. I still had three days of furlough ahead of me and I intended to use them to their fullest. I had already promised Olga to meet her at one of the taverns in the village that night, after she finished work.

My grandparents could see the change in me. I was being more attentive and I smiled more often. But Opa still had work to do around the farm so when I had finished a late lunch, he ordered me to change out of my uniform and into civilian work clothes. I complied willingly, relishing the physical labour that didn't involve digging holes in the ground or cringing and ducking for protection from bullets, bombs or shells.

After dinner, I walked back to the village and went into the tavern where I was to meet Olga. The place was beginning to fill up with off-duty soldiers passing through and the odd villager and farmer as they finished their day of work. I picked a place at the bar as I agreed with Olga and ordered a beer. The owner, a solidly-built older man with a jovial face, looked at me for a moment, probably thinking I looked a little young, but just shrugged his shoulders and siphoned the beer into a glass.

"Where you from?" he asked as he placed the glass on the bar in front of me. Froth overflowed the stein, pooling on the wooden bar.

"From here. I live here," I said, taking a sip, letting the warm liquid slide down my throat. I wiped the froth off my upper lip with the back of my hand.

"Really? Where?"

"The Herrmann farm, up the northwest road."

The owner's face lit up and he smiled. "Of course! Now I recognize you. We don't get many local boys in here anymore. Home from the front?"

"Yes, for a few days anyway. I'm going back on post soon."

The owner looked at me a little more intently.

"What?" I asked.

"Wasn't it you and some girl that stole a couple of bottles from me last summer?"

I put my glass down and groaned, realizing that the tavern I was in was the same one we'd stolen from.

The owner laughed. "I don't care. I have to tell you, though, I almost got a heart attack running after you. It was only after I realized that the rest of my beer was sitting unattended in the truck back at the tavern that I gave up."

I gave him a weak smile. "Thanks for being so understanding about it."

"No problem. So, how's that girl now?"

"She's supposed to meet me here soon. You can ask her then."

"I'll look forward to that." The owner moved off to serve another customer and I drank my beer slowly, wistfully thinking about the caper to steal the beer. I shook my head at the memory, smiling to myself at the silliness of what we did.

A half hour later, I glanced at my watch. Olga was late. The tavern was close to capacity now, the noise of the conversations having notched up to such a point that the owner had to lean across the bar to be heard. I was just starting in on my second beer. I was telling the owner about a nearby swimming hole we used to frequent during the summer when the man suddenly leaned closer to me.

"Look. Near the door. You see her?"

I swivelled in my chair, peering through the smoke-filled air toward the front door. Olga was standing there, chatting with another soldier as she slowly scanned the room. Looking for me.

"Yes, I do."

"You have to be careful about her."

"Why?"

"She works for the *Schutzstaffel* – the SS."

I turned to him, shock on my face. "What do you mean?"

"Not directly of course, but she comes in here twice, maybe three times a week in the evenings. She'll strike up a conversation with a soldier. Gets him talking as he drinks. She'll spend a couple of hours with him and then move on to someone else."

I took a hurried swig of beer, the acid taste it produced almost making me gag.

"Does she leave with any of them?"

The owner looked at me. "Oh, Jesus. It's her you're waiting for, isn't it?"

I nodded. I felt numb.

"No, she doesn't. She always leaves alone near closing time. Jesus. Like I said, just be careful around her, okay?"

I nodded. I took another swig of my beer, this time the liquid going down better. *Wehrmacht* and SS were like oil and water. They were bullies, strutting around in their special uniforms, ordering regular army soldiers around like slaves, like they were part of some fraternity sitting at the right hand of God himself. They'd taken some of our *komerads* in the dead of night, charging them with treason and we never saw them again. How's that expression go? Fear and loathing. That pretty much captures how we felt about the SS.

And Olga was caught up with them. Mind you, I thought at the time that she was probably doing the best she could. Maybe she did it for extra money, or extra food rations. But then I realised it didn't matter why. How could I judge her and what she did with her life, especially now? I'd done things I wasn't proud of. I thought of what I'd done to the Russian soldier, the unchecked rage I felt, how I wanted to kill a mere boy.

I'd never harboured feelings of killing before then. Maybe Olga was in a similar position. I didn't know what she'd lived through since I left for the front, how bad it was for those left behind.

Heart heavy, I swivelled in my stool and faced the door. I waited until she was looking in my direction before raising my hand to get her attention. She saw me, smiled, said a few words to the soldier and pointed in my direction. She made her way over to me through the crowded tables, enduring the odd cat call and the admiring stares of the other men.

She joined me at the bar, leaned in and gave me a kiss on his cheek. Several men at neighbouring tables groaned audibly at the sight and went back to their conversations.

"You're popular," I said.

She giggled, lowering her head, blushing slightly. "It's not the first time I've been in here."

"So I've learned."

She looked up at me, her eyes narrowing slightly at the harder tone to my voice. "What do you mean?"

"Not here." I signalled the owner and ordered two bottles of beer. The man fished them out of an ice box, plunking the large porcelain-capped bottles on the bar, cold water beading down the sides. I paid for the beers, put them in a carry bag and took Olga by the arm, leading her out of the tavern.

We walked across the square to an unoccupied bench and sat down and I placed the beers at my feet. Olga joined me and put an arm across my shoulders.

"Jakob, what is it?"

"Why didn't you tell me, Olga?"

Her hand fell away from my back. "I was going to. I just didn't want to ruin our reunion. Your letters, they stopped coming. Even your grandparents hadn't heard anything from you in a while. I think we began to resign ourselves to waiting for word of your death. And then you showed up. It was miraculous. Joyous. I didn't want to spoil that."

I nodded. "I think I understand. But tell me, what exactly do you do for the SS?"

"Little things. If I notice someone, someone new to the village, I report them. Anyone on the undesirable list, like Jews, Gypsies and the like, I point them out. I don't see any of them now. Conversations I overhear in town, conversations that I know don't sound right, I report them too. But recently, recently it's been about soldiers. They come through the village all the time now. I go to the tavern, and after a few drinks, some of them tell me their stories. It's horrible what's happened to them. I never imagined it would be so bad. And they want out, anyway they can. It's easy, really. Just sidle up to them, buy them a drink, and before long, they're pouring their heart out to you."

I reached down for one of the beers, popped the cap and took a swig. I passed the bottle to her and she drank from it.

"When I met you here last night, I asked you about the man you were talking with. You told me it was someone asking about the taverns. He's SS, isn't he?"

"Yes. He's my controller. He was expecting me to do one of the taverns last night, but I told him you'd arrived and I couldn't, not for the next few days, not while you're here."

We sat there for a few minutes, not saying anything, just sharing the beer.

"Why, Olga?"

"I told you last summer. I wanted to help. Opportunities for women are few. The office job is okay, but I wanted to do more. My controller approached me one night after work. I don't have to do much, and it helps, or so I'm told."

"What do you get out of it?"

"Extra rations. My parents need it. They're too frail to do farm work without animals."

I put my arm around her and I could feel the relief overtake her, her body going soft as the tension left her like water disappearing down a storm drain. She leaned her head on my shoulder.

"This whole thing is shitty," I said. "I just want it to end."

She nodded, staying quiet. We finished our beer and I put the empty bottle in my carry bag.

"Back to the barn?" I asked.

"Back to the barn," she replied.

How do you react when you realize the woman you love is spying on soldiers like you, giving information to those bastards in the SS so they could arrest them, detain them, torture them and kill them? That's what I asked myself throughout the rest of my furlough. The question is clear enough, but the answer remained landlocked in the conflicted emotions I felt for her. I really loved her. At least, I thought I did. But then she had this other side to her that I couldn't reconcile. And what she did opened me up to thinking about what I was doing, how the lines between what was considered good and bad blurred into a messy amalgam of actions designed to ensure I survived. Add all that

to my feeling of not wanting to judge her for what she did, given the reasons she did it for. But was that enough? Then, I couldn't answer that question. Now, I know that what she did was right. She was surviving like I was, in any way she could. It wasn't moral or easy, but it worked.

The rest of my furlough passed quickly. I worked days on the farm, helping Opa tidy up the place and Oma prepare the vegetable garden for sowing later in the Spring. Using a garden fork, I turned the soil. It was backbreaking work but I only had to glance at my grandparents to know that they were in no shape to do it themselves. And I knew they would need the garden, now more than ever.

In the evenings, I went to town and met Olga. I would have a beer with her at Karl's tavern. We would spend the night talking until the tavern closed. On these occasions, I felt I had to hurry to get everything out of me I wanted to say for I knew I'd be leaving soon and I didn't know if I'd survive into the next month. We discussed our past, what we were experiencing then and how we might live in the future, once the war had run its course. I wanted to live with her when it was over. I wanted to settle into a house or apartment, to go to university, perhaps even travel. Olga agreed with me that the war was nearing its end and she confessed to me that she felt the same way about what our lives might be like after the war. She didn't reveal any definitive plans to me, but she did emphasise that, whatever they would be, they'd include me. We promised each other that if we survived, we'd seek each other out and start this new life together.

The last night of my furlough, I returned to the barn with Olga and we made love again. Through it all I tried to make every moment last, to remember what her body was like, to fix a memory of her in my mind so I'd never forget. When it finally ended, when I

felt my memory filled to overflowing with her, I walked Olga back to her friend's house. I stood with her in front of the darkened building in her arms, not wanting to be the first to pull away.

"I hate this war," I said, my face deep in the crook of her shoulder, smelling her hair.

She stroked my head. "Just do your time," she said. "Stay alive and come back in one piece."

"I will."

I held her a while longer, then she slipped from my arms and went up the walk to the front door of the house and went inside. I waited until a light went on in an upstairs window and I saw her, framed by the light, her hair loose on her shoulders. She pressed a hand to the window and I waved, turning reluctantly and slowly walking away.

I thought about going to Karl's for a last drink. But as I passed slowly through the village square, it was devoid of life, the taverns and café's closed. A limp wind blew dust and flotsam across the macadam. As I walked the dark road home, I felt cut off from everything, as if I'd dropped into a well. A man alone in the world. It took a long while for me to get to sleep that night as images of Olga framed in the window, a dark, featureless figure, kept surfacing and every time they did, I was filled with sadness.

Twelve – "I'm Finished with That"

The next morning, after getting up early and eating a hearty breakfast, I said my goodbyes to Opa and Oma. I promised to try to do what I could to see them as much as I could as long as I was stationed nearby.

I slogged back toward town in battledress, the canvas webbing of my helmet stiff with dried sweat, hard and unyielding on my head after an absence of four days. I entered the grounds where the flak battery was dug in and reported for duty. I received a briefing from the commander on the current situation on the front. The damn Russians were massing troops and resources on the pre-war border with Poland, just on the other side of the Oder River from our position. Our own intel suspected they were preparing for an all-out attack on the German capital. While they prepared, however, there was a lull in the fighting.

In addition to my regular duties of troubleshooter, I was included in the pool of those required to pull guard duty. I was doing the circuit one night, relishing the time it afforded me to think and remember the past four days, when I passed on the far side of the perimeter and noticed a camouflaged blind set in a small copse of trees. It was one of our forward observer positions. I looked around, could see no one, and approached the blind carefully. I whistled my approach and a soldier popped out of the blind, rifle at the ready. After we established our *bona fide's*, the observer invited me inside. After my eyes adjusted to the dark, I saw the periscope binoculars mounted on a tripod aimed across the river.

"See anything interesting?" I asked.

"Take a look," the man said. I propped my rifle beside the entrance and sat on a wooden crate the observer used as a chair and placed my eyes on the soft rubber cups of the eyepieces. The image was blurry. I turned the focus wheel slowly until the image cleared. "Jesus," I think I said. "Is that what I think it is?"

"If you're seeing trucks, men and equipment, then you're looking at a whole lot of Russians. But if you see any girls, please let me know."

I chuckled. "What do you mean?"

"Ivan has female combat soldiers."

"I didn't know that." I kept scanning the opposite river bank but had no luck in seeing any women. "Do we know how many there are over there?"

"Our intelligence is not all that great. We're estimating maybe a million and a half. Add to that the tanks, artillery pieces and Stalin's organ rocket batteries." At the mention of the feared rockets, I remembered them from my first days on the front, the seemingly never-ending sound of tens or hundreds of rockets leaving their launchers and hitting our lines, leaving behind broken men and machines in their wake. The very sound of their launching made my bowels clench.

I withdrew from the binoculars and whistled. "And us?"

"Maybe a half a million," he said. "If we're lucky. We're getting reinforced but most of what we get are *Volkssturm* – boys and old men. No training. I wouldn't count on them."

"They'll all die," I remarked.

The observer nodded. "Yes. They will."

I looked again through the binoculars. "Any German civilians on the other side?"

"Some."

"Any word on what it's like for them?"

"We're making random phone calls. Some of the time we get a German resident and they provide us with information. Most of what they tell us is horrible to listen to. Russian soldiers living off the land and using flush toilets as washbasins. Women gang-raped by drunken soldiers, then shot when the soldiers have had their fill. And then the Russians figure out what telephones are for and rip them out of the walls."

"What do you mean, 'figure out'?"

"Most of the Russian soldiers have no idea what a phone is. Never seen one in their lives. Only the officers know and by the time they get around to finding them, we've had a good run in talking to someone on the other end."

"Jesus. I'm sorry I asked." I got up, allowing the observer to re-take his position behind the binoculars.

The observer put his eyes back on the eyepieces, looking again across the river. "When the fighting starts," he said, "I'd recommend you just keep your head down and head the other way."

The lull dragged on. I requested furlough days, telling my commander about my grandparents living nearby. The commander thought about it and then agreed on one day a week, on the condition that I turned in a spotless performance record the week prior to the furlough day.

On my first furlough day, ecstatic about being able to visit Olga, I requisitioned a bicycle and pedalled quickly into the village. There was no question of getting a vehicle. Petrol was too precious, and we didn't have a lot of vehicles to begin with. I was able to

get her to leave her work for a couple of hours and we sat on a bench in the square and held hands and talked. I told her of how things were at my new post, about the large numbers of Russians just across the river, waiting to attack. I told her what the Russians were doing to the civilian population on the other side.

"Olga, when they cross the river, and they will cross the river, you must get out. Pack a bag, tonight and put it by the door and be ready to leave at a moment's notice."

"What of my parents?"

"Take them with you. Just take them and keep moving."

"But how will you find us?"

"When this is over, I'll be a prisoner of war. I can't prevent that. I'll be in uniform until the end. I'm hopeful it's safer than deserting. It'll be a while before we can see each other again. But I'll find you when I get released. Just stay in the west. Stay under the protection of the Amis or the British. Christ, if they're anything like the *Wehrmacht*, they'll keep records. I'll find you."

Olga's two hours were soon up and we kissed each other goodbye. I promised to visit her again on my next furlough day. I re-mounted the bicycle and quickly rode out to the farm. When I arrived, I learned that during the week Opa and Oma had abandoned the idea of leaving the farm. They told me they were too old to endure what could be endless days of trudging along the road in a refugee column, of sleeping in draughty barns on a floor covered with straw, of searching for a piece of bread, a potato or sausage to eat. So I helped Opa unpack the cart, and we stored as much of their belongings as we could in the potato cellar under the barn. They kept a space clear so they could hide when the time came and stocked it with some food and water.

The following week, I was cycling toward the village again, eager to see Olga once more. As I rounded a bend in the road, I suddenly applied my brakes and looked, aghast, at what I saw in front of me. Two young soldiers shot through the head hanging from a tree. They had signs hung around their necks, one with the word 'Deserter', the other with the phrase 'Here I hang because I did not believe in the Führer' scrawled in red. The bodies swung to and fro in the breeze, the skin pale, the legs grossly swollen. Despite my confidence and trust in Olga, one of the first thoughts that entered my head was whether she had something to do with their deaths. I immediately felt ashamed for even thinking that she'd be capable of such a thing, and yet, the thought reared itself nevertheless.

Later, sitting with Olga on the bench, I told her about the soldiers, about how they looked as if they'd been beaten, their faces bruised and misshapen.

"Did you have anything to do with their deaths?" I asked.

I was being a brute. My only excuse was that I was young and inexperienced. I could tell right away that I'd made a mistake even asking her the question for she looked horrified at the accusation.

"No! I swear, nothing at all. After you returned to the flak battery, I told my controller I was finished. All I could think of was reporting about you and I knew then I couldn't go through with it anymore. I'm finished with that."

I was relieved. Even as she leaned into me on the bench, her head on my shoulder, I couldn't help but wonder if she'd contributed to some other poor soldier's death prior to me arriving in the village. And then I asked myself if I should even care. What business was it of mine?

At the end of the day, as I cycled back to the battery from the farm, I came upon a Home Guard checkpoint. There were four *Volkstuurm* manning it. Two young boys no older than fourteen. Two old men, their grey hair visible underneath their caps. They were armed with ancient weapons and I wondered if they were even loaded. The old men stood apart. One of the young boys put up one of his hands as I rode up.

"*Halt*! Papers, please!" he demanded.

I stopped and took out my orders. The young boy scrutinized the paper intently, while his young companion circled slowly around me, a hunting rifle at the ready. I noted their uncompromising, unsympathetic eyes, their harsh and cruel expressions. I knew that if they found anything, I could end up like the two bodies I saw only that morning.

"Why are you using a bicycle?" the boy examining his papers asked.

"Because we have to ration fuel for the trucks."

"Do you know that we need bicycles for our anti-tank troops?"

I had no idea what he was talking about. "I'm sorry. I don't understand."

"Are you deaf and stupid? We strap two *panzerfausts* on each side of the front forks of the bicycle. Volunteers from the Youth Corps ride out to their assigned posts and shoot at enemy tanks."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I was about to say something dismissive, challenging what the young boy said, saying how ridiculous it would be for unarmed, untrained boys to ride up to a Russian tank and try to take it out on their own, particularly with *panzerfausts*, a weapon that mis-fired as often as it found its target. But the young man's eyes gave me pause. They were feral, like a starving wild animal on the hunt for

food. I decided to there was no point in getting him angry. “So, what do I do about the bicycle?”

The youth handed back his orders. “It just so happens I don’t have any instructions to seize bicycles yet. You may go. Hiel Hitler!” He saluted. I returned the salute, tucked my orders back into my tunic and cycled on. It was absurd. A boy giving orders to another boy. A war fought between children. Yet I felt relieved not to have my orders ignored, to not be sent somewhere else, closer to the front, or worse, found to be a deserter and shot on the spot.

I passed every furlough I was granted visiting Olga, talking as long as our limited time allowed about what we’d do after the war. I confessed to her that I hadn’t really thought about what I might want to do. The duty to perform on the front and the burden of staying alive gave me few chances to think of other things, particularly the future. But it was then I told her of my interest in trees and flowers and shrubs being re-kindled, that I liked examining them more closely, marvelling at their growth and their individuality. Whenever we came across a forest or copse of trees, I would look longingly at the unspoiled growth. An island of life in the midst of a destroyed landscape that filled me with joy. I remember Olga smiling when I talked about the trees. She didn’t know quite what she would do either, but she knew she wanted to do something that helped the living. Maybe a nurse. Or a doctor. She’d had enough of death and dying, of sending boys to their death.

I also took the time to care for Opa and Oma, who by now had little or nothing to do around the farm. Their team of horses and one tractor had been confiscated by the army. Crop maintenance and renewal was impossible. Their fields soon took on the same

condition as those of the Brasch's – fallow and strangled with weeds. Without horses or the tractor, they couldn't leave. They butchered the remaining pigs on a regular basis and I became popular with my new unit as I returned from my visits with fresh provisions such as porc and milk.

Ah, yes, I just remembered. It was about this time that I celebrated my seventeenth birthday. It was a day that started out like every other. Me repairing one of the guns. Metal parts littered the ground as I and another mechanic disassembled, cleaned, greased and reassembled the firing mechanism. We loaded in one shell and test fired it. The empty shell popped out of the breech. We watched the sky and cheered when the shell burst, black smoke from the shell fragments arcing downward like a flower. It reminded me of fireworks. Celebration. And that's when I remembered it was my birthday so I told the others. They hoisted me on their shoulders and took me to the mess. They convinced the cook to prepare something special. With the eggs from my grandparent's farm and some valuable flour, he rustled up a cake. There was no sugar so it was bitter. We washed it down with beer and schnapps and we retired that night light-headed and bleary-eyed and slept the sleep of the dead.

A couple of days later, at the end of March I think it was, we were roused in the middle of the night to find out we were being transferred. We were given only ten minutes to pack our gear. Well, I was angry because how could I leave so suddenly without saying goodbye? I asked, practically begged, to get permission to leave the battery and see my grandparents and Olga one more time. The officers refused. The battery Commander just shrugged his shoulders and said 'orders'. Frustrated, but with nothing else to do, I mounted up with the rest of the unit. We drove all night to our new

position in Neu-Friedland, a hundred kilometres north of Frankfurt an der Oder, closer to Berlin and a long way from the farm and the village. When we arrived, we dug in behind the gun emplacements. But after only a metre down in the rich, dark soil, our entrenching tools sank into the water of the Oder. It was a great place for growing crops, but it played havoc with the gun embrasures and bunkers we were supposed to dig in preparation for the Russian attack.

I pounded the dirt mercilessly with my shovel, pouring my frustration into the effort of digging my hole. I wrestled with the liquid dirt, water and mushy ground, wanting to bend it to my will. After two hours though, I gave up, exhausted. As I rested, I had a look around me for the first time. It was actually pretty peaceful. It was warm for spring, bringing with it birds who were singing their choruses and flowers and fruit trees blooming everywhere around us. It was so quiet I could hear the bees droning through the blooms. Yet, despite my newly professed love of the trees and the joy I usually felt in their presence, none of what I was looking at cheered me much.

Our commander kept us busy. We completed drills, walked the line on guard duty and went on food scrounging sorties. When one of our trench mates - an ardent Party supporter - began to speak around the fire at night about the need to defend the Fatherland, to re-double our efforts, to fight to the death, I wanted to hit him in the mouth. Instead, I bit my tongue so hard it bled. I got up and quietly slipped away, out of earshot, not wanting anything, even a stupid remark or a rash act, to jeopardize my promise to Olga, to survive any way I could so that I could re-join her at the end of the madness.

As the days passed, I willed the Russians to attack just so that we could get it over with, get on with the last battles and end the war. Funny, eh? Me, wishing for a battle. On the radio, Hitler predicted that the Russians would launch their offensive on the 14th of April. I listened contemptuously as his band of believers in the trenches strutted proudly when they heard this. Hitler was showing his genius once again, they said. You have to understand – he was mythologized in those last months. He was a person with uncanny foresight we were told, able to predict future events. It was all just a bunch of crap. The date came and went and there was no attack. I was pretty happy to see them – now full of doubts– slink back into the shadows and begin to look just as fearful as the rest of us.

I sat and waited, idly wiling away the hours, as prepared as I could be. I listened to the propaganda that blared over the radio aimed at encouraging us to fight. Atrocity stories about how the Russian army treated captured and wounded German soldiers. On the evening of the 15th of April, the Felds walked the line, ordering us all to turn over any pieces of white fabric. You see, the officers didn't want anyone to surrender before the Russian offensive began. I gave up a handkerchief without comment and slumped back into the trench, anxious and frustrated. I looked absently down at my belt buckle. The moonlight caught the tarnished metal of the inscription – *Gott mit uns*. God is with us. Please, I silently prayed, looking up into the starry sky, if you really are with us, let them attack.

April-May, 1945

Thirteen – The Value of Prayer

I looked around the room. The men were still with me, although it was pretty obvious everyone was tired. While I had been speaking, some pulled over ottomans to prop up their feet. Others used the recline function on the Lay-Z-Boys to get more comfortable. It was late, after midnight now. I noticed Bill had his eyes closed, but when I nudged his foot with my own, he held up a hand.

"Don't you worry about me. I'm listening. Just resting my eyes is all. Is the bartender still with us?"

I looked toward the bar but couldn't see anyone behind it. Then I noticed that he was just outside the circle of men listening to me, sitting on a chair, his bar towel over this shoulder, his arms crossed.

"Yeah. He is."

Bill opened his eyes. "Tommy? Refresh us all, will you? And put a pot of coffee on as well. I have a feeling we've got a ways to go."

I wasn't so sure and expressed my discomfort to Bill. "Nah. Don't worry. We got nowhere else to go."

"Just the same. I think I'll let Freida know that I'll be later."

"Sure," Bill said, waving in the direction of the bar. "Use the phone and let her know."

I got up and almost sat down again. My legs were stiff and I had to take a bit of time to limber them up. I did some basic stretching to work out the kinks in my back and wandered over the bar and dialled my home number. Freida picked up on the first ring.

"It's about time. I saw the note and wondered when you'd be finished. I got worried."

"Don't be. I'm fine. I'm still at the Legion."

"What's taking so long?"

"It's a long story to tell."

There was silence on the line for a few moments. "I don't understand."

"It's bringing back a lot of memories, things I'd almost forgotten. That's why it's taking longer than I thought."

"You've never wanted to tell your story. You were always afraid . . . no, *we* were always afraid of what people would think."

"I know. But tonight, I just figured the hell with it. And Bill was generous with his offer, more generous that he had a right to be, particularly regarding the use of the Legion Hall."

"I can't argue with that."

"Hey, Freida. Do you want to come over, hear the rest of it? Bill said it wasn't a problem."

"It's very kind of him, but it's late and I'm bushed. No, I think I'll go to bed and go to sleep with the thought of you quietly unburdening yourself. It makes me happy."

I wished her a good night and promised that Bill would deliver me back home in one piece. By the time I got back to my chair, the smell of coffee filled the air and there was a fresh scotch on the little table next to me. I took a sip and started where I left off.

Before the sun rose the next morning, my prayers were answered. An artillery and rocket barrage lit up the night. I scrambled in the dark to find cover as shells and rockets

exploded in blinding flashes of light. The very ground I was sitting in heaved and dust clogged the air. Rocks, clods of earth and water pelted down on my helmet as I clamped my hands tightly over my ears and kept my mouth wide open to prevent my eardrums from being burst. I squatted under the berm of the trench, cowering, eyes squeezed shut. White hot shrapnel filled the air, hissing and whistling overhead.

I stayed that way for a long time. My legs cramped up but there was no way I was going to make myself a bigger target than I already was. Something crashed into me then, almost knocking me over. I opened my eyes a crack, thinking a piece of a shell or machinery had hit me, and I quickly patted my arms, legs and body looking for signs of blood. I found nothing and so I looked around me in the trench. Caught in the light of a shell burst, I saw another member of our gun crew. He'd scrambled past me and taken off his helmet and crammed it between his legs, squatting on the floor of the trench. He was screaming loud enough to be heard above the roar of the exploding shells. "I can't take this anymore!" He screamed it over and over again. Spittle flecked his mouth. His eyes were wide with terror. He tried to stand up, as if to leave the trench and that's when I moved without thinking. Keeping my head down I duck-walked over and threw myself on top of him, wrestling him to the ground. Another shell exploded near the berm of the trench almost burying us both with earth. The man clawed and struggled as if possessed, trying to break free. I raised myself up and hit the man across the face and jumped on him again. The man stared at me wide-eyed, mouth frothing, unmoving. I eased off and pointed to a hole in the darkened berm where the man could get protection. But as soon as I did this, the man screamed again and in an insane show of strength, bucked me off and leapt to his feet, clearing the trench in one jump. Bare-headed, he ran toward the rear,

disappearing into the smoke and dust. I barely had time to get back to cover as another hail of shells descended, sending me cringing into the berm, hands over my ears.

The barrage continued for five hours. At least, that's what we were able to determine once it was all over. But during the bombardment, we couldn't do anything really, couldn't respond with shelling of our own and couldn't move. We were pinned like a fly in a spider's web. My memory of that day is bit fuzzy as if my brain is trying to block it out. I know I withdrew into myself, trying to focus my mind on something else, to stop thinking about every shell that landed nearby and the fear that raced through me with every explosion, screaming at me to run, to get away. I thought about my promise to Olga. How could I avoid being hurt or maimed or killed? My fellow man couldn't be relied on to protect me. Who else? What else? Again I turned my thoughts to God. Oma thought it folly to cater to the church and its rituals. "Look at the world of men," she would say. "You think God has a hand in this?" But there, at that moment, with no one else to rely on, I believed my crude prayer of the previous night had been answered. And so, I turned my thoughts again to God.

For the first and last time in my life, I prayed aloud knowing that no one could hear me, no one except the being for whom the prayer was intended. I don't really remember what I prayed for. It's all jumbled in my mind. I know I prayed for my life, and Olga's life, and I prayed that nothing would happen to my grandparents. I repeated these prayers over and over again, rocking back and forth in the trench. The prayers transformed, gradually becoming more elaborate, turning into vignettes of the time I spent with Olga, remembrances of childhood. How my parents had died, my Aunt telling me the news, my new life on the farm. Random memories spilled out of my mouth like

the chaotic ramblings of a confused raconteur, a life story being told for an audience of one. And I remembered I cried, tears streaming down my face, runnels of salty water cutting into the muck and grit caking my face.

My hands were pressed so tightly to my ears, my concentration so focussed on the past, that when the shelling finally stopped, I didn't notice it. Not at first. One of the other soldiers had to nudge me, to force me to open my eyes and look around. It was daylight. I took my hands off my ears, wiped my face, my fingers coming away muck-smeared. I'd been deafened by the shelling. I looked at my commander and saw him yelling and gesturing with his hands at us to get into position. I gathered myself, rising slowly up and out of the trench, my body numb, as if my brain had forgotten how to control my limbs. The memories generated by my intense praying began to fade and my brain sluggishly turned to my duties. I looked around me. Our gun was miraculously intact but there were deep impact craters filled with black water all around us. We were lucky to be alive. My body began to move more normally as I joined the crew to get the flak gun into operation. And as we did, the first Russian planes began making their run over our lines.

I fought hard, helping my *komerades* shoot as many planes as we could, but we were short of ammunition. Frankly, with the number of planes the Russians had, we might as well have been shooting blanks. In the evening during a break in the action, I could hear tanks and trucks moving around somewhere in front of us. The next morning, through a rapidly thinning fog, I made out Russian units advancing toward us. I could see the tanks piled high with infantry and masses of soldiers walking behind them leaving us no choice but to pack up and retreat.

For the next two days, we conducted what our commanders called a 'general retreat'. To me it was more like a frenzied run away from an overwhelmingly superior force. We scrambled from position to position, parking our gun beside the road and going to cover as Russian planes roared overhead, dropping bombs and strafing the retreating German military columns with machine-gun fire and wing-mounted rockets. By the third week of April, we'd been pushed back as far as the village of Sternebeck, forty kilometres to the west of our original position. But at least here we were finally able to dig our gun properly into the hills overlooking the town. The commander ordered everyone to dig only a foxhole, rather than trenches, as he didn't expect us to stay for more than a day.

Well, he was wrong. We sat there for two days. But not because we'd suddenly become better at defending ourselves. No, the Russian advance had mysteriously halted. It was during that pause that I overheard the radio broadcast announcing Hitler's birthday. It seemed so unreal to hear that in the midst of what we were living through. But as I listened, I kept my face carefully neutral because I didn't know how many of my *komerads* were friends or foes of Hitler. Privately, I chafed at the requirement to listen to the well-wishes of what sounded like hand-picked people, the speeches by a small number of loyal staff officers. They sounded like sycophants clinging to memories of what was, desperately glossing over the reality of a country dying.

The next morning, we woke up to a tank firing at us. The shells came screaming in from across the valley. I got a glimpse of the tank in the dawn light before fog hid the valley bottom. For the next hour, we heard the sound of diesel engines and the squeal of metal tracks coming from the valley floor. Then, as the sun rose the scene changed as in a

theatre play. The fog quickly burned away and I could count at least fifty Russian tanks and an assortment of armoured personnel carriers, their guns aimed at our positions. The battery commander ordered us to open fire. Shells from multiple positions screamed into the valley, into the mass of Russian metal. I could see the shells from our smaller guns bouncing off the tank's front ends with barely a flicker of flame and a puff of smoke. I knew that only the German 88's could penetrate the Russian tank armour. And I saw one of these heavier shells hit one of the Russian tanks. The metal monster disappeared in an expanding ball of black smoke. The turret, sheared off the chassis, tumbled out of the smoke cloud, rolled over a couple times before stopping, flames pouring out, the metal twisted and buckled. The tank's ammunition and fuel reserves exploded next, gouts of fire spewing in all directions. There were several other hits, equally as spectacular, but I knew we had only a few of the 88's left and the Russian tanks kept coming, neatly steering around their burning comrades, locating our gun emplacements and taking them out one after the other. Tank shells shredded the pine trees behind me, sending a mix of shell fragments and wood splinters whistling through the air. My unit couldn't open fire on the tanks. Our shells were too small to penetrate tank armour. But behind the tanks were trucks full of Russian infantry. Once they were within range, we opened fire. The trucks' canvas sides were soon shredded from the impact of our 20 mm rounds. Russian soldiers bailed out of the rear of the trucks, only to be cut down by other gun emplacements. Their bodies jerked like marionettes as they were hit with high velocity lead.

And still they came on, the tanks placing round after round into our positions. As the shells got closer and closer to our position, I dove into my foxhole. Torrents of earth

and sand poured down on me as I cowered in the hole. A white flash brightened the air as if the sun had descended from the sky and all the air around me whooshed away, leaving me gasping for breath. The lip of the foxhole lifted, then slammed down, burying me in an avalanche of sand. I blacked out.

When I came to, I coughed and spat sand from my mouth. It ran into my eyes, blinding me and I blinked furiously, my eyes tearing. Still alive, I thought. It took me a few moments to remember where I was. Sand and earth filled my foxhole, almost burying me. I forced myself to calm down, to breathe and to listen. It was deathly quiet. I couldn't hear any tanks firing or machines rattling or shouts of men. I wasn't sure if I was deaf or if the battle was finished.

I struggled to sit up, freeing first one arm, then the other. I slowly poked my head up over the lip of the hole and looked around. The three flak guns of my battery were destroyed, hit by tank shells, the barrels bent, punctured or torn off their mounts. Equipment was strewn everywhere and the gun crews nowhere in sight. Three bodies littered the holes behind the guns. One man's arms were bent around his torso like liquorice, his legs folded impossibly behind him. I looked away. Swallowing bile, I raised my head further, peering into the valley. A Russian platoon was setting up a mortar tube not more than 200 metres in front of me. I ducked down again, panicked at the thought of being captured. In a burst of energy and strength, I quickly wrenched my legs free from the dirt and sand and scrambled up. I grabbed my helmet, jammed it onto my head and ran up the slope behind me, zigzagging left and right through the shattered pine trees. Shots rang out. The bullets impacted the ground around me but I made it to the top and

over the other side without getting hit. I continued to run, heading towards the rear, my heart racing, the sweat pouring off my body.

Dodging and weaving through the trees, constantly looking over my shoulder, I was almost through a small clearing when, as I turned to look ahead of me, I almost ran headlong into two *Waffen*-SS officers running in the opposite direction. They were carrying a heavy machine gun between them. One had a scar running along his cheek. The other was unshaven, as if he'd just woken up from an all-night party. Their eyes were wide and dark and primeval. When they saw me, they dropped the machine gun to the ground and pointed their pistols at me. I raised my hands, fearful for what could happen next.

"You!" the man with the scar said. "Identify yourself!"

I looked down at myself, genuinely confused. And then I saw why they'd asked the question. My grey-blue uniform was covered with mud, dust and sand. It was now tan brown, like a Russian uniform. I looked up, frightened by what they thought I might be.

"I am Grenadier Jakob Herrmann, of the 26th Flak battalion," I said quickly.

The two officers exchanged glances. "Papers!" said the unshaven one. "Let us see your orders, Grenadier!"

"If you will permit me . . ." I said, indicating that I wanted to put my hand into my tunic pocket. "*Ja*, *ja*," the man with the scar said.

I removed my orders, gingerly handing them to one of the officers. "As you can see, a Grenadier, attached to the 26th Flak battalion, as I said."

The two SS officers looked over my orders, looked at me, then back at the orders. After a few moments, they handed them back to me, and I returned the precious paper carefully to my tunic pocket.

"Your tags," the man with the scar said. "Let us see your tags."

I carefully reached inside my shirt and pulled out the tags hanging around my neck. The man with the beard approached used his pistol barrel to pull the tags off my chest and examine them closely. After a few moments, he let them fall back to my chest and holstered the gun.

"All right, we believe you," he said. "We're on our way to get some Ivans. Have you seen any?"

I tucked the tags back under my shirt, my only thought to get out of this situation as soon as possible. "Are you kidding? Keep going about two kilometres that way," I said, pointing behind me. "I saw a whole platoon setting up mortar positions."

"Good, good. Excellent, soldier. Carry on." The two officers picked up the machine gun and broke into a jog, heading in the direction I'd come from. I thought about what the two SS officers were doing. They were going *towards* the enemy. They acted as if they'd no idea what lay beyond the hills behind me, that our lines had been overrun. All I could think was that they were dead men.

But I couldn't waste time thinking about them. I had to keep moving. I continued through the forest and soon arrived at a road. I decided to follow it in the hope that it would lead to a village or town. There might be an army collection point to re-organize the troops. That way I could re-join my unit. After jogging along the road for half an hour, I came to a road block manned by a Home Guard unit. I cursed and looked around,

trying to find a way to bypass them but I couldn't see any. It was well situated in a narrow cut in the road, making it very difficult for anyone to avoid without calling attention to themselves. I approached with trepidation. There was a small group of soldiers waiting on a grassy bank beside the road. A motley, sullen crew of men from different units waiting for whatever the Home Guard unit commander – a young Youth leader from the looks of it, barely old enough to shave – planned to do with them. I presented my orders as requested, but the commander wasn't interested.

"I have been charged with the establishment of a rifle company," he said, waving away my orders as if the paper was nothing more than a grocery list. "Our defensive objective is Berlin. No soldier of the Red Army must be allowed to reach the heart of Germany. You will wait with the others. When my company is at full strength we will establish defensive lines and wait."

I was trapped. If I ran, they might shoot me in the back. If I argued with them, they would arrest me, interrogate me and once they were finished, shoot me in the head. Resigned to my fate, I reluctantly joined the others. I took note of the collection of weapons the Youth leader had gathered for his 'defensive line'. There were hunting rifles, a few shotguns and two *Panzerfausts*. I wondered how they would halt the advance of the armoured column that overran my position with two anti-tank missiles. I chose a place in the tall grass next to the others, sat down, took a spear of grass and placed it in my mouth, chewing absently.

I was still alive and that was something. Hell, that was everything. The more I thought about what I'd experienced in the last few days, the more I realized how lucky I was. I thought of the intense praying I did in the trench and wondered. The few times I

remembered attending church with my grandparents, before Oma withdrew from the parish in disgust, I'd repeat the liturgy without thought, mumbling along with everyone else, but it held no more meaning for me than incantations, something to be said rather than believed. And so, I was surprised with myself that in an intense moment of desperation, I prayed. And my prayers had been answered. There wasn't a scratch on me. I didn't know if it was God who was protecting me or just plain luck, but I was thankful all the same.

A few minutes later the ground began to tremble slightly. I waited, listening. Russian tanks? Then I heard what sounded like a farm tractor. Curious, I straightened up, looking down the road. A dust plume rose around the bend from where we sat. What was a farmer doing running around on his tractor so close to the front, I wondered? As I waited, the tractor rounded the bend and came into view. A Flak soldier was at the wheel, towing a 37 mm flak gun. The gun crew was spread out on both the tractor and the trailer behind it. Two other tractors followed the first and I recognized the two trailing guns as the remnants of my now shattered unit. I saw an opportunity. I got up and walked quickly toward the Home Guard commander.

"Sir," I said. "That is my unit and I am going to rejoin them. Good luck with your defence plans. Goodbye!" Before he could protest, I turned and ran toward the tractors. Trotting along side the second tractor as they slowed and rolled through the road block, I identified myself and asked the men clinging to the gun trailer to give me a hand up. They looked at me for a moment. They looked at the Youth leader and the road block. Then one of them extended his hand down to me. I reached up, grabbed hold and leapt onto the gun trailer, thanking the men for their understanding.

"Oh, it's quite all right, Jakob," one of them said. I wasn't surprised by the use of my first name but I didn't recognize the man who addressed me and looked a little closer. Dark grime layered on the man's face. His uniform tattered and helmet dented. I remained puzzled until the man suddenly winked and smiled. A rush of recognition enveloped me.

"Konrad!" I reached toward the man and hugged him, almost causing us both to tumble off the trailer. After months of being on my own, the rush of emotion that welled up from within at the sight of my long lost friend almost overwhelmed me. I couldn't say a word for a while. And so I didn't.

Fourteen - Reunion

We rolled down the road, the tractor tires kicking up dust. I looked at the men around me and saw shattered men riding on shattered equipment, all of us serving in an army on the point of implosion. I slowly calmed down. The joy I felt at seeing my friend after such a long absence reminded me of when our cat disappeared from the farm for a few days when I was eight years old. The cat showed up a few days later, walking around with her tail in the air as if nothing had happened. I remembered scooping up the animal, angry that she'd decided to abandon us so casually but joyous that she'd decided to return. I cried then as well, tears of pure relief at the sight of the unharmed animal.

"*Mein Got*," I said, "It's really you. I thought you were, I don't now, missing, maybe taken prisoner or …"

"Or dead?"

I nodded.

"Hey, easy there," Konrad said. "I'm not. We just got moved around a lot. Tell me, how've you been?"

I told the story of my travels. Just like you've heard here, I told him of what it was like to walk with the refugees, those old men and women, the children, starving, the desire to stay ahead of the Russians their solitary goal, the lack of any support from the Army, *our* army. Of the walk across the ice, more children left abandoned beside the road. Of the smell of the Wista River and the camp I saw through the trees. Of my reunion with my grandparents and the time spent with Olga, how time itself slowed to a crawl for those four wonderful days.

"The thought of being with her," I said, "of re-uniting with her, kept me going during the early days at the front. When we finally met, it was wondrous. If we hadn't been in uniform, it would've been like we always were before I was shipped off to the front."

"Had she changed?"

"Yes. And no. The same physically, but it's the inside that's changed. It's like a part of her has died. She's stuck in the village, her parent's dependent on her. So she works two jobs. By day she's a clerk re-assigning troops. By night, she spies for the SS."

"What? Why?"

"Extra rations."

Konrad nodded but said nothing. And by saying nothing, it was if he was agreeing that finding food was a good enough reason to justify almost any method. He glanced absently at the sky over my shoulder and as he did, I looked a little closer at him. The filthy skin, the bloodshot eyes, the grimy hands. His fingernails black patches of grit. The uniform threadbare with holes in the elbows and knees. The leather of his boots thin, scuffed, the polish long worn away. The soles falling off. The figure before me was a walking thin man absently wringing his hands together, rubbing the dirt that was gathered there deeper into his skin. I looked at the other men. They all looked the same. Dirty, ragged, eyes haunted by their battlefield experience, an experience that I knew had ripped something of them away, leaving them pensive, edgy and anxious.

"How's it been for you? And what happened to Hans and Kraus?" I asked.

"Hans and Kraus I lost sight of, not long after you collapsed and were sent back. They were rotated out to another unit and I haven't seen them since. As for me, well,

things didn't get any better after you were shipped to the rear. We were kept on the move, with no time to rest. We were constantly reformed into new battle groups as our numbers were whittled down, playing a game of fight and run until we were pulled back to add strength to the defensive line to hold the Russians at the Oder River, just like you were. Food? Ach! There was no food! Up to two days ago, we were getting a single *Kommissbrot* – a dark bread roll – and some cold soup each day. For the rest, we scrounged the countryside like savages, taking what we could find from the civilians who'd remained behind. There're only the old and the infirm left because they can't up and join the refugees on a march to the West. They're worse off than we are and we probably made their lives a living hell."

He stopped, staring down through the trailer frame at the road that passed beneath us. He grimaced. "Two months after you left, I was drafted for firing squad duty. A firing squad to take care of a common thief. I don't think I'll ever forget that day."

"What? Theft isn't a firing squad offence. Unless they've changed the rules again. Seems their always changing the rules these days."

"Not this time. The regs still say that it's an offence punishable by prison time. But it turns out not only did the thief steal a food parcel from another soldier but he managed to kill his only witness. If you kill a fellow soldier, it's death by firing squad. And that's what he did. After the theft, the thief and the witness were assigned guard duty together. The witness confronted the thief, telling him what he'd seen and that he should return the goods, or he'd report him. The thief must've panicked. He rushed to a nearby machine gun, pointed it at the witness and strafed the man. He threw several hand grenades in front of their position. When other soldiers arrived to see what was going on,

the thief claimed he'd repulsed a Russian attack that had wounded his *komerad*. The injured man was taken to hospital. He died shortly thereafter, but before he did, he regained consciousness for just enough time to report the incident to the medical officer on duty."

"My God. What was the firing squad like?"

"It was the afternoon. I remember it was cold. There was a thin layer of cloud obscuring the sky. The sun was barely visible, like a headlight in the fog. Each member of the firing squad was from a different unit. We'd been trucked to the execution site individually. Once the shooting team was assembled, the regimental legal officer arrived with several military police in a truck. The thief was hauled out of the back and carried between them. He was a sorry looking bastard. His uniform was stripped of all insignia. He could barely walk and his head sagged onto his chest."

Koch paused, looking at the blue sky, his gaze to the horizon, as if he could see the event transpiring next to them.

"The police took him to a pole driven into the ground" he continued, "and bound his hands behind his back. They blindfolded him. The Division Chaplain talked quietly with the thief for several minutes. In the quiet, we could hear shells exploding from the front in the distance. The Chaplain soon finished. The *Oberleutnant* looked at his watch and then gave the order. We raised our rifles to our shoulders, aimed and when the order came, we pulled our triggers. The medical officer examined him to see if we had succeeded but the man, I couldn't believe this, the man was still alive!"

"How many were you?" I asked.

"Six. Six bullets and still alive. And then I was sickened with the thought that maybe we'd have to do it all over again. But before I could ask someone about it, a Feld went up to the man, raised his pistol and fired it into the man's head at point blank range." Konrad shuddered slightly. "The police untied him from the stake and laid him in a plain box. They loaded it into the back of the truck and drove away."

Konrad looked at me, an inner pain contorting his face. "You asked me how I felt. I was sure at the time it was right. He needed to be punished. An example needed to be set. But after the sounds of the shots had been carried away in the afternoon breeze, after witnessing our own NCO shooting this man through the head as easily as he puts his pants on in the morning, I wasn't so sure anymore. Who would know? There was only us, a small group of ordinary soldiers drafted for the purpose. No one else was around. What we did that day still haunts me. We pulled the triggers because we were ordered to, but now, after having the time to reflect on it, it no longer seems the right thing to do."

Konrad leaned forward, elbows on knees, his gaze troubled. "This man I shot, he was no older than you. He had his whole life ahead of him. In one act of desperation, he steals because he's hungry. Frankly, I can't really blame him. We're all hungry. And the machine gun incident? He was scared. Again, who among us is not? Scared and hungry. Pretty much describes the condition of all of us, no?"

Konrad settled back on the barrel of the gun, letting the questions hang in the air. I thought about what my friend had said and it rang true. I'd been scared countless times on the front. And each time I thought I was going through the most terrifying experience of this life, another battle would come upon us and I would go through another round of fear that seemed more terrible than the last. Will I ever get used to being under fire, I

thought? Will I ever be able to sit out a bombardment without being so scared that I'm rooted to the spot I'm cowering in? I couldn't imagine not being scared. When a shell screamed in and landed near me, the sound was deafening, the explosion so final there was no escaping it. Unless you run. Unless you're in the wrong place at the right time. Unless you're ordered to move just as the shell that has marked your position is fired. It was luck, I thought. Like throwing dice and leaving it to chance that your number will win the toss and your life will be saved.

"Where are we off to now?" I asked.

"Wismar."

Hearing the name of the city I thought that luck, or God, was still with me. You see, Wismar was over three hundred kilometres to the northwest from where we were right then, on the other side of Berlin and far away from the Russians. It made no sense to send troops there, but I knew there was an official reallocation centre for the Flak battalions. And when Konrad told me that the Americans or the British, or both, were driving towards Wismar and that if we arrived at the same time we might be able to surrender then and there, I thought for the first time that I might be able to fulfill my promise to Olga after all.

The thought that I could stop running from the Russians, that I could stop walking from one place to the next, dangled in front of me like an entrance into a magical world. I felt I only had to stride toward it, cross the threshold and I could be out of that hell forever, walking down the road, turning south, finding my village and Olga and my grandparents and picking up where I left off a year ago. I'd see to getting some animals for Oma and Opa so they could be self-sufficient. Then I'd move to Frankfurt, attend

university classes, study to become a forester or plant biologist or an agricultural scientist. Olga would be at my side. We'd raise kids, make love, go on picnics by a river or on the shore of a lake. Holiday in Austria or the Alps or France or even America if we did well enough. This enticing vision unrolled before me, all based on the tiniest slivers of hope.

But I wasn't there yet. I was sitting on a heavy metal trailer, the barrel of the flak gun next to me pointed at the sky, with other soldiers sitting as listlessly as I, who no doubt dreamed as I did for an end to it all, moving steadily away from one front toward another inside of an incredibly shrinking country. For the moment I needed to keep going, to keep following orders for just a little while longer. It's important for you to now that I wasn't doing it because I believed in defending the *Führer* and his cronies in Berlin. I was doing it because I still thought I had my home and I had my promise to Olga. And so, I thought, as long as I could keep ahead of the Russians and avoid their wrath, I might just make it through to that end I dreamed and the promise it held.

I leaned over to Konrad. "Let's hope we get to Wismar before the Russians get us," said Jakob.

"Amen to that," said Konrad.

Two hours later, we rounded a corner and descended a small hill and rolled into the village of Willensdorf. It'd been converted into a temporary re-allocation centre. Hundreds of troops from all kinds of units were crammed into the small town square. I saw uniforms from the *Luftwaffe* Auxiliary, the *Wehrmacht*, the SS. Most of the men were sleeping under the sun, looking as if they had collapsed where they stopped. Others sat in groups playing cards or smoking.

I absently scanned the throng. I spotted a half-track with a trailer-mounted 20 mm gun parked next to a small group of men. I pointed them out to Konrad, who in turn alerted the *Oberleutenant*. The Lieutenant questioned the motley group, eliciting a story that was now familiar: complete defeat. Konrad shook his head and I turned and spat into the dust. Of an original contingent of 140 that started out six weeks ago, there were only these 12 men, a scant remnant of a once proud fighting unit, reduced to little more than a squad and running, starving, from the enemy. They were happy to see us as their ranking officer was missing and probably dead.

The *Oberleutenant* decided to fold the group into our unit and tasked Konrad to take care of them, with the immediate priority of finding shelter for the night and food. I watched as the men slowly levered themselves up at Konrad's urging, as if the very act of moving had become a burden. Their uniforms hung limp and loose from their shoulders, covering bodies that had shrunk to something barely more than a skeleton. I helped Konrad round them up and led them on a slow search of various buildings near the square, finally finding an abandoned school house where we settled in for the night.

Sleep came easily for me. Despite the hard timber floor and the snores and snuffling of the other men, and the rumblings of my constantly hungry stomach, my exhausted body craved rest and I quickly dropped off. And I dreamed a dream that I'll always remember. I was part of a group of emaciated soldiers, heading toward the front, driven on by an obese General sitting languidly in a *kübelwagon*. Remnants of food decorated the General's uniform tunic like war ribbons. He used a riding crop to urge us on, slapping it on the hood of the truck, exhorting us to continue the fight for the Führer and for the Fatherland. Each of his words was accompanied by a shower of spittle. It

sickened me to look at him. As we stumbled toward the front, I saw soldiers in front of me being mowed down by concentrated machine-gun fire. They did nothing to protect themselves, or to fight back. I turned around, frightened by what I saw, wanting to get away, but I couldn't go back. The pressure from all the other walking skeletons was too great and they pushed me along, relentlessly forward, toward the slaughter.

I woke up with a start, sitting up suddenly, covered with sweatsheen, gulping air as if surfacing from a long dive under water. It was still dark. For a moment I thought it was the shock of the dream that had woken me but as my breathing and heart slowed, I heard a slight, low rumble in the distance. I stood up, yelling at everyone to wake up. "Tanks! We've got Russian tanks headed this way! Everyone up! Come on, up I said!" I ran from man to man, shaking them or nudging them with the toe of my boot. They scrambled up, dazed, wiping sleep from their eyes. Konrad and I made sure they all had their packs and helmets, guns and ammo packs and then we shoved them outside. Tumbling out the door, we looked frantically left and right, trying to spot from which direction the tanks were coming. Flares rose up into the air on our right. Russian flares, lighting the way for the tanks and infantry that followed them. We quickly broke left and ran for our half-track. "Forget the gun," yelled Konrad. "Unhook it and leave it behind. We need speed more than weapons!" We worked the hitch and disengaged the trailer from the half-track. We tumbled into and on the vehicle while our driver started the engine. In a cloud of black, acrid diesel smoke, the machine bolted forward, joining up with the tractors and heading out of town.

"I didn't think they would be here that fast!" I yelled to Konrad sitting beside me.

"Think about it," retorted Konrad. "*Volkssturm* units against Russian T-34's and battle-hardened infantry? It was never going to be that long."

I nodded, thinking of the young boys and old men shooting at tanks with hunting rifles and shotguns. Rolled over, ploughed under like so much grass. After about a half an hour of making good speed, the half-track suddenly slowed to a crawl. I wormed my way through the other men to the front, peering into the driver's cab through the separator window.

"What's going on?" I asked the driver.

"Traffic jam," the driver replied. "Looks like we'll be stalled here for a while."

I told Konrad what was happening. "Wait here," he said, slipping out of the vehicle and jogging to one of the tractors behind them. A few minutes later, he jogged back. "The *Oberleutenant* says to abandon the vehicle. We walk from here."

The driver pulled the half-track to the side of the road, while I crawled back into the troop section of the half-track and explained to the men what was happening. The vehicle stopped and we all piled out the rear hatch. We gathered around the Lieutenant and with a small electric torch, he pointed to our next destination.

"Bernau is where we go next."

We all grabbed what gear, guns and ammo we could carry. The Lieutenant took Konrad and I aside. "I have a job for you two," he said. He handed each of a grenade.

"What's this for?" I asked.

"Blow the tracks," he responded.

He turned and told everyone else to clear out to the other side of the road. Konrad counted to three, and then each of us pulled our pin and placed a grenade between the

heavy metal track and one of the driving wheels. We ran across the road, fording a drainage ditch. We got maybe twenty metres onto the open field before the grenades exploded. The shock of the blast staggered us, pushing us from behind to our knees. When we got up, we turned to look at what we'd done. The vehicle burned brightly in the night, sending black, oily smoke into the night sky. As we stood there, we saw other explosions up and down the road as other soldiers did the same thing as we had done. Fires dotted the road like streetlamps and we could see hundreds of soldiers take to walking. We turned and struck off across the field ourselves, away from the abandoned vehicle.

It was a clear night. As I walked, I looked at the field of twinkling stars above my head. I wondered if Olga was looking up at the sky, right now, and thinking of me. I was still alive and out of the clutches of the Russians. Another day gone. Another step closer to surrendering to the English or Americans and to going home as soon as I could. I had my memory of her, the stars above my head, and the men who walked with me, marching away from the front, away from the Russians, to someplace else, someplace I'd hoped would be safer than where I'd just been.

Fifteen – Capture, and Escape

We walked for five hours through fields and meadows. My boots were cracked and as we splashed through the cold, spring muck, my feet got soaked and were cold to the bone. We traversed fences, forded streams and skirted small settlements, all with the intent of staying off the main roads, which is where we knew Russians would be. It was eerie, really, to see hundreds of us skulking through the night as if afraid to show ourselves in our own country. When we finally reached Bernau, ten kilometres to the north-east of Berlin, what greeted us was deathly silence. We walked through streets packed with rubble. Shops had been emptied as if looted. Buildings were ghostly remnants of their former selves, what with walls crumpled and holes gaping in roofs. We found a pub that was still open and we all crowded in to rest and eat. We learned the owner was leaving. "All my customers are gone," he said, "so why stay?" All he could offer was some crusts of stale bread and water. We ate anyway, grateful for what we found. The owner had his radio turned on. Goebbles was delivering a speech, exhorting Germans to believe in the Führer, stating that he was the only one that could lead them out of their difficulties. We listened because we had nothing else to do. But nobody made a sound.

I didn't believe a word of what was being said. Even a quick look around would prove that these remarks, as patriotic as they were, had no connection with the reality of what was happening on the ground. It was as if our leaders lived in a cocoon, cut off from the real world or they simply refused to see what was happening around them. They'd nothing left to throw at the enemy but an idea, a belief in one man to rally the people for

a last, doomed stand against a superior force. I remember reading after the war, how Hitler, in those last days, was exhorting his Generals to deploy units, even whole Army groups, to different places to shore up our defences. But those units and Groups only existed in Hitler's mind. They'd all been destroyed weeks or months ago. That image was frightening when I read of it, a leader ordering a phantom army to defend the country, like so many ghosts. But back in that pub, as I listened to Goebbels, my thoughts turned bitter, the bread souring in my mouth in mid-chew. All of my carefully constructed beliefs about the wisdom of our leaders, their intelligence, their commitment to their troops, their love for the German people – all had finally been revealed to be a flimsy house of cards easily knocked over and sent scattering by the hot wind of battle and the crushing weight of the Russian advance.

After a short while, the *Oberleutenant* told us we'd continue on to Wismar. It was the only logical choice as we were all flak gunners and the last clear instructions we'd received were to re-deploy to that city. No one argued the point. We all knew that by going west we'd stay ahead of the Russians and would leave behind Berlin. We believed the closer we got to the Americans and British, the better off we'd be. We all crowded around the man and bent over a map he'd unfurled on a table.

"Okay, look here" he said, stabbing the map with a dirty finger. "We're going to take the road northeast, to Rudnitz. Then we turn west, to Lanke, through to Schmachtenhagen, then Oranienburg. From there, we should be able to get to Wismar relatively unscathed. We stick to the main roads. It'll increase our chances to get a lift."

"Why head northeast from here?" asked Koch. "Why not just go west and cut across the top of Berlin. It would shorten our route."

"It would, but the last intelligence I received has the Russians pushing directly for the city. If they follow through, the most likely scenario is that they'll try to encircle it, just like they did in Stalingrad." Stalingrad. Another ghost that followed us everywhere we went. Our troops encircled, refusing to give up the fight, not permitted to surrender by Hitler. Finally, with his men dying around him, Field Marshall Paulus defied Hitler and gave the city up. No one wanted to be caught like rats in a trap, circling each other, feeding off each other until dead. "If we cut across to the north, we'll run smack into a Russian armoured column as it blockades the city," the *Oberleutenant* continued. "If we head northeast from here, it gets us out of their path much quicker, and out of any immediate danger. Then we can turn and push west."

We all nodded. An officer who was taking care of us. Who could argue the point? As he was folding up his map, planes flew over the town, strafing and dropping bombs. Explosions rocked the pub, the walls wobbling on their foundations. The pub owner grabbed a bag and his coat and scuttled out of the building. "Okay!" the *Oberleutenant* yelled as the planes roared overhead. "Let's move out!"

I paired up with Konrad, sticking close as the squad trotted rapidly out of the pub, found the road out of town and kept going. After only a few kilometres, we reached Rudnitz and found an inn. The Lieutenant decided we should rest there. I was grateful as I was at the end of my strength after walking for two days with no food and the occasional scoop of water from a ditch. But while I suffered, I was in better shape than the small group we'd picked up a day ago at the collection point. They all leaned or squatted against the wall of a building, panting with exhaustion, looking like dead men. And so for them I was relieved to see the *Oberleutenant* was right. The Inn and the town

were peaceful and we were far enough from the front we saw no planes or armoured units heading our way. I could hear the occasional artillery round far off in the distance, the only intrusion into our peace and quiet as we bedded down for the night on real beds. I immediately collapsed into a deep sleep.

The next morning we traipsed west out of Rudnitz. We had to keep shuffling off to the side of the road as the traffic was constant and steady. A collection of half-tracks, three-ton trucks, *Kübelwagons*, armoured cars and even horses with panje carts passed us by. And amongst them all, a continual stream of civilian refugees, belongings piled high on pull carts and farm wagons. As this parade of the desperate passed us by, choking us with dust and fumes, we were trying to flag down one of the military vehicles to get a lift. After an hour, a three-ton truck, lightly loaded with machine guns and ammunition, pulled over and let us climb aboard. I helped the most desperate of our group to choice places in the back, under the tarp and out of the sun. When the rear was full, the rest had no choice but to cling to the sides or crowd into the cab with the driver. Despite our best efforts, there simply wasn't room for all of us. I volunteered to walk and Konrad quickly joined me. The *Oberleutenant* wished us luck and passed to Konrad orders requiring us to report to the reallocation centre in Wismar and a map to continue the journey. He squeezed into the cab and slammed the door. We watched as the truck pulled into the stream of traffic and lost itself in the dust.

Konrad and I walked on the side of the road, our uniforms turning brown from the swirls of dust kicked up by the traffic that passed us by. For company we had hundreds of civilians. They were a sorry lot, thin to the point of emaciation, eyes sunken and black, bodies bent as if against a strong wind. Unlike the civilians I'd seen on the road in

Pomerania, not one of them acknowledged our existence. They kept to themselves, eyes focussed on the road, walking mechanically, as if pacing themselves, preserving their meagre reserves of strength to survive another day.

I continued to try to flag down another vehicle to help us continue our journey faster but the vehicles that passed were already so crammed with soldiers and equipment, none of them had any room. We finally reached Schmachtenhagen around midnight. After walking almost thirty kilometres, we were exhausted, thirsty, hungry and filthy. We found an empty barn and collapsed into the straw. The next morning, an abandoned rooster roused us. I watched listlessly as it pecked at the ground, finding a morsel here, a grain there. Slowly, I rose and began to explore the grounds, finding a working water pump. We both drank greedily until our stomachs bulged and the water sloshed within. We rejoined the road, continuing on in the direction of Oranienburg, seven kilometres to the west.

After an hour of slogging through the dust I began to pay more attention to the garbage that littered the side of the road. Paper, typewriters, files, boxes, cabinets, briefcases all flung haphazardly along both sides of the road. Some of the material had landed in the drainage ditch and now floated on the water's surface, lifeless and disowned. As a way of occupying our tired minds, we slowed our pace and began to pick our way through some of the material, curious about what we might find. We found propaganda leaflets dropped by Russian planes, thousands of them lying on the road, in the ditches and in the neighbouring fields like giant snowflakes. Konrad picked one up and read it aloud as we walked.

> "'*German soldiers! You are spilling your blood for Hitler, a sacrifice that benefits neither yourselves nor the German people. Nothing can save you from this*

carnage. Break from this army of Hitlerite oppressors, otherwise you will face destruction.'"

He threw the leaflet aside, where it floated back to the ground. "There's some truth in what they say. However, I don't think I'll take them up on their offer."

"No argument there," I said, not looking up from my search. Picking through the assembled papers and other effects, I found cargo manifests for freight shipments to the eastern front. Lists of medicines in short supply. Requisition requests for bullets, food, guns and bandages. The requisitions were from places now in Russian hands. Supplies that would never be delivered to men no longer there. Phantom supplies for Hitler's ghostly army.

I was absently reading some of the requisitions when I noticed Konrad suddenly bend down and pick up a briefcase, holding it aloft for me to see. It was made of fine leather. Mud and water dripped from its sleek sides, but I could clearly see the imprint of a large eagle grasping a swastika, the mark of rank and privilege.

"What is it?" I asked, striding over, intrigued.

"Officer's briefcase, I think," responded Konrad. He sat down on a rock by the road, the briefcase balanced on his knees. He wiped off the water and mud with the sleeve of his tunic and gingerly opened it up. He took out its contents for us to see.

"Let's see," he said, "blank paper, some pens, some orders – obviously intended for someone on the line, but finally not given – and, what's this?"

"What? What did you find?" I tried to peer into the case, past Konrad's hands.

Konrad drew it out for me to see. It was a small, round piece of wood, with a swastika carved into the top. When Konrad turned it over and looked at the other end, there was a rubber stamp mounted into the wood, the wings of the eagle carrying the

swastika readily visible, blackened by dark ink. “An order stamp,” Konrad said, his voice hardly louder than a whisper.

“Oh,” I said. I didn’t know what else to say. You see, we both knew the stamp validated the orders an officer wrote. Our *Oberleutenant*, before leaving in the truck, had stamped the orders Konrad had in his tunic pocket. The imprint of the Eagle grasping the swastika was inked over the text near the bottom, marking our orders as genuine. Seems odd nowadays that such a simple thing would guarantee orders as being genuine. I’m amazed that more men didn’t falsify orders. Or maybe they did.

“What do we do with it?” I asked.

Konrad said nothing for a few moments. He threw the stamp lightly up in the air and caught it as it came down. He repeated the gesture over and over again. After a few minutes, I couldn’t stand the suspense. I grabbed the stamp out of the air as Konrad launched it skyward yet again, breaking his rhythm.

“Well?” I demanded.

Konrad sighed. “We do nothing. We put it back and leave it here. We don’t need it.” He held out his hand, waiting for me to return the stamp.

I held onto the little piece of round wood, gazing at Konrad quizzically. “You’d consider faking orders?”

“Absolutely.” No hesitation in his voice. His eyes clear. “If it could get me closer to the Americans or the British, I’d do it.”

I handed back the stamp. “That’s a firing squad offence,” I said.

“That’s true,” agreed Konrad. He put the stamp and other effects back into the briefcase. He snapped the case shut and threw it back into the ditch. It landed wetly in the

mud. So much was duty drilled into us, we just couldn't contemplate drawing up phoney orders. At least, not then. I don't know why. Maybe we still felt some allegiance to the *Wehrmacht*, that it could somehow still help us get out of the situation we were in. Maybe it was in honour of our last Lieutenant. Who knows?

We continued to walk down the road, the sun arching over our heads, beaming down forcefully. I stripped off my uniform tunic, tying the sleeves around my waist. The sun was high in the sky when we crested a hill overlooking a small valley. I was walking in front of Konrad and when I saw what was in the valley bottom, I stopped.

"Down there. A roadblock. I think its Home Guard." I glanced behind me at the line of refugees. Some looked at me but quickly averted their eyes. Konrad and I turned to the right, walking over the drainage ditch and into the grass next to the road. We kept walking until we got to a line of trees. Glancing back at the road, making sure that none of the civilians were taking too much of an interest in what we were doing, we dropped onto our bellies. Using the tall grass and brush under the trees for cover, we slowly approached a vantage point on the ridge where we could observe the roadblock, but not be spotted by those manning it.

"What do you think?" I asked, looking to the left and right of the roadblock, searching for a way around it.

"I don't know," said Konrad, studying the terrain intently. The roadblock straddled a bridge that traversed a small creek. "There doesn't appear to be any way around it. We'd have to go a long way off the track and ford the stream. We need to find a way to get them to move out of the way."

I thought for a few minutes. "What about we use the Russians?" I asked.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, when the Russians get close enough, I'm sure the Guard unit will dismantle the roadblock and move it further to the rear. I'm betting they think like us. They don't want to get captured by the Russians either. What do you think?"

"I don't know. It's dangerous. We'd have to wait here until the almost the last moment before we moved out as well. There's a risk we'd get caught by the Russians if they're advancing too quickly."

"True enough. But on the other hand, I'm more comfortable taking that risk, rather than get caught by them," I said, pointing down into the small valley.

Konrad chuckled. "Point taken. What the hell. Let's give it try. And while we wait, it's not a bad way to get some rest as well." He turned over, laying on his back and closing his eyes. I untied my jacket and laid it on the ground, using it as ground cover, keeping my eyes focussed on the Guard unit below.

The sun shone strongly out of the brushed blue sky. As I lay there in the grass, I began to get sleepy, my chin slowly sinking to rest on my hands. The sun seemed to press my body into the warming earth. I must have dozed, struggling to watch the roadblock below me, when I suddenly came awake. I could hear the faint but unmistakable sound of tanks coming our way, the sound of small arms fire. I heard a *Panzerfaust* sizzle out of its tube, the shell exploding, a tank firing in response. I glanced over at the road and noticed that the continuous column of refugees had thinned to a solitary person here and there hurrying forward, ahead of the advancing Russians. I reached over and shook Konrad's shoulder. "Wake up. I think it may be time for us to move out." Konrad opened his eyes, rubbing them with the backs of his hands and rolling over onto his stomach. Together we

observed the Guard unit below, hoping they would soon detect the armour so they could be on their way. But the unit remained oblivious. I was just about to get up and start crawling around the roadblock when one of the Guard soldiers stopped pacing in front of the wooden barrier.

"Wait a minute," Konrad said, putting his hand on my arm. "I think he finally heard something."

The soldier sprinted up the hill and stopped when he reached the crest. Using a pair of field glasses, he examined what was coming down the road. Whatever he saw was enough to spin him around and send him running pell-mell back down the slope. He screamed something at the others on the roadblock. They were spurred into sudden action, knocking down the barrier, grabbing their gear in the grass beside the road and running up the other side of the valley.

"That's our cue," Konrad said, getting to his feet and moving rapidly down the hill, threading his way through the thinning trees and grass, eventually re-joining the road. I followed, hurriedly putting my tunic back on and picking up the pace, trotting fast but keeping well behind the retreating Home Guard unit.

It wasn't long before we arrived in Oranienburg. We found the town deserted. Buildings knocked down and burnt. Smoke rising from the ruins. Rubble choking the main road through town. We stopped in the middle of the town square. I could see where there used to be a fountain but now there were only a few stones lying in a rough circle.

"Now what?" I asked, panting, bent over, hands on my knees.

"Keep going, I guess," Konrad replied. "There's nothing here. The army must have destroyed it to prevent the Russians from gaining any advantage."

"Just like the half-track," I said.

Konrad nodded. "Just like the half-track." He consulted his map again. "Lowenberg. We try for Lowenberg next. Maybe our unit will be there. Come on, there's nothing here. We've got to keep moving."

"How far?"

"About twenty kilometres."

My God. I didn't think I could go on. I was exhausted. I just wanted to crawl into some dark corner of a building somewhere and forget about everything. But I didn't. The two of us struggled on for another five hours. The road was a dusty track, the air so dry it was as if all the moisture had been sucked from it and put somewhere else. We coughed and spat dirty saliva. We found a small stream and drank from it, careful to sweep away the ash and dust that clogged the surface of the water. We went on. I was numb. My thoughts were as sluggish as my body. I would think of something mundane like a bush beside the road or a house in the distance for long minutes, as if the thought were blocked by a clot in my brain. I'd trip over small pebbles or a bump in the road but Konrad was there to catch me before I fell and we pushed on, legs moving mechanically.

We arrived at some hamlet, smaller farms and buildings beside the road, and as we trudged over a hill, we ran into another roadblock. Exhausted from the walking we didn't notice the barrier until we almost ran into it. Gun raised, one of the young military police motioned us to the side of the road. As he examined our orders, Konrad tried to reason with the man, imploring him to let us continue. But the police officer ignored his arguments and mechanically pointed to a grassy area next to the barrier where we were

told to sit and wait for transportation. Out of options, and too tired to run, we collapsed on the grass, thankful at least for the chance to rest.

"What do we do now?" I whispered.

"Do as they say," Konrad whispered back. "We wait for transportation. Regardless of what our orders say, they're commandeering isolated soldiers and redeploying them."

"Let me guess. Berlin?"

Konrad nodded wearily.

Two hours later. It was early evening and the sun was beginning to set. A transport truck arrived. The MP that captured us conferred briefly with the truck driver, turned and motioned us to get into the back of the vehicle. We slowly complied, expecting the truck to go south, back the way we'd come, toward Berlin. But the truck went north, up the road and away from the front. We looked at each other, baffled. The truck turned off the main road and rolled down a soft, dirt track. The tarp was tied up at the rear and we could see the road was flanked on both sides by tall trees that extended far into the distance, a thick forest that cocooned us.

The sight of intact trees stunned me. They were magnificent. Tall and slender, well spaced with almost no undergrowth. I could see myself walking in there for hours, inhaling the verdant odours, caressing the coarse bark as I passed by first one tree, then another. But more than the sight of the trees, I was struck by how the war hadn't reached here yet. The sight of healthy trees, grass and bushes untouched by machines and bullets and battles jolted me into remembering that the land could play more than a supporting role, be more than the backdrop to the terrible events forced upon us.

The truck rolled on for a few minutes more before it slowed and stopped in a clearing. The driver got out. A door to a building opening and closing, the sounds of muted conversation. We edged our way to the rear of the truck and peered out, looking around. Our eyes widened when we saw where we were. To the right of the parked truck was a large, two-story building, the colour of alabaster, straddling an opening large enough to accommodate covered three-ton trucks. On an iron gate pulled shut across the entrance metal letters were affixed: *Arbeit Macht Frei* – Work Makes you Free.

Oh yeah. We'd been brought to a camp. We looked at each other, understanding where we were hitting us both at the same time.

"It's just like the one I saw last year," I whispered.

"Yes, but the question is, what does that make us – prisoners or guards?"

I couldn't answer but Konrad was swinging his leg over the tailgate as if he knew.

"What are you doing?" I asked. I was afraid we'd be caught and be made prisoners for real.

"Getting out of here. Somehow I don't think we're prisoners. If the Home Guard didn't like us, they would've just shot us on the spot and hung our bodies from the nearest tree rather than taking us to a prison camp." He swung his other leg over the tailgate and dropped softly to the ground. He leaned into the back of the truck, keeping his voice low but talking fast. "So that makes us guards. If that's the case, we'll be stuck here until the Russians knock at the gates. We need to get out of here, and quick, while the driver is still occupied with the SS personnel in the gate house. Come on!"

I hesitated. I couldn't believe I hesitated given what I know now but I was still struggling between my sense of duty and the camp I saw by the railway, the way the

guards treated the men and women under their control, the way the labourers looked. I shuddered. It didn't take me long to figure out that Koch's argument made a lot of sense. Decision taken, I swung my leg over the back of the truck, following my friend. We trotted rapidly back up the dirt track. We didn't look back. No one noticed our absence. There were no shouts of *Halt*! echoing through the trees as we quick marched away from the camp. I noticed the road had been heavily trampled by many feet, and very recently. I pointed this out to Konrad, who just shrugged. "Prisoner evacuation, maybe. If it was it supports my theory that they need more guards to replace the ones that left with the prisoners. Come on, we should hurry."

We picked up the pace, practically running until, gasping, we re-joined the highway and folded ourselves into the refugee column heading west towards Lowenburg.

Sixteen – Musical Chairs

The road was thick with refugees and soldiers. Konrad and I blended into the crowd, just another pair of *Wehrmacht* Grenadiers amongst all the other military personnel on the move. I glanced over my shoulder every once and a while, searching for signs of pursuit but there was nothing and after a while, I stopped looking.

One image refused to leave me. As we'd run along the road away from the camp, I'd stolen glances at the trees on both sides of the track. Just like I'd seen from the back of the truck, they were straight and true, unblemished by blight or war or the touch of humanity. And the smell. It was heavenly, like the smell of newly tilled soil in the spring, just as I remembered it on the farm, exploding with possibility after a winter's sleep. I remember I almost stopped to savour the odour, but then I remembered what was behind me and I kept running, the forest a sharp and pungent memory for me to treasure.

The sun was almost down. We trudged along the road, through the dust kicked up by passing vehicles and the gloom of the approaching night. A four-wheeled farm wagon pulled by a pony moved up behind us, the driver cluck-clucking at us to move off to the side of the road. I gave it a casual glance, as I would any other vehicle passing me. It was the same as all the other wagons that I'd seen rolling along the road. Sides and flooring of roughly cut planks, the cargo bed piled high with belongings, a family riding on the buckboard in front. As it passed, I was at the point of looking away when I spotted a soldier riding in the back. He was sitting next to a tarpaulin-covered bundle. It reminded me of my own experience in getting a lift some weeks ago from the peasant on the deserted autobahn. But there was something oddly familiar about this man and so I looked closer, straining to see through the dust-shrouded twilight.

"*Unterfeldwebel*!" I finally called out. I quickened my pace, closing the gap between me and the rear of the wagon. The soldier lifted his head, peering through the dim and the dust at me.

"It's Grenadier Herrmann!" I said.

When I had almost reached the back of the wagon, the soldier suddenly switched on an electric torch, sweeping the beam over my face and my eyes squeezed shut at the glare and I blinked away the tears that formed.

"Jakob! My God!" The soldier turned and asked the cart driver to stop by the side of the road. Konrad and I approached the rear of the wagon. With spots still in my eyes, I introduced my friend to the soldier in the wagon. "This is *Unterfeldwebel* Rainer Braun, my weapon's repair instructor from the collection centre last summer." Konrad shook the NCO's hand.

"A pleasure Grenadier. Jakob, where are you headed?"

"Wismar, via Lowenberg."

"Happy coincidence. I'm off to Neu-Ruppin, just to the west of Lowenburg. I could use the company. Hop on you two."

The Sergeant pushed the covered bundle as far toward the front of the wagon as he could, creating more sitting space at the back and we squeezed in beside Braun. Once the driver had the cart rolling again, Braun asked me why they were going to Wismar.

"The Luftwaffe has a re-assignment centre there for the Flak battalions."

"Well, what would you think about riding with me for a while? I can add you both to my orders temporarily and it certainly is in the right direction. What do you think?"

"We already have orders. What's the advantage for us?" inquired Konrad.

"You two are separated from your unit. Have you seen the checkpoints?"

"We've been through a few of them," I admitted.

"Well then, you don't need me to tell you that alone, you're in danger of being re-deployed to Berlin. With an NCO along, it'll give you a bit more heft when negotiating with the personnel manning the roadblocks."

"And why would you offer to do this for us?" asked Konrad.

Braun smiled. "You're suspicious, Grenadier Koch. Don't worry. If I were in your boots, I'd ask the same thing. I served with Jakob's father. And I know his grandfather. I was both happy and sad to see Jakob show up at my weapon repair course. Happy as I knew him. Sad as he was so young. I do this because I want to see Jakob survive this war. If you're a friend of his, that's all I need to know."

"Alright," Konrad said, smiling. "We'd be glad to ride with you, Sergeant."

"Excellent! You won't regret it."

"Can you tell us why you're headed to Neu-Ruppin?" I asked.

"Certainly. I'm carrying a load of spare parts" he said, gesturing with his thumb over his shoulder at the bundle behind them. I looked at him, puzzled. He smiled. "I can see you're confused. Well, don't be. It's miraculous really. No matter how desperate the situation, the bureaucracy continues to function."

Koch and I looked at each other for a moment, then said the word "Orders" at the same time. The three of us laughed.

We chatted the whole way to Neu-Ruppin, each of us sharing our individual experiences of the last year. We arrived in the town late at night and were assigned berths at a school and bedded down. The next morning, we reported to the local collection

centre. We requested details on the location of the headquarters of the 23rd Flak Division, the unit we were supposed to be joining. The Station Officer, a morose-looking soldier with large ears and a sad mouth, consulted his notes and informed us that the headquarters had not yet arrived. He directed us to report to the Air Force collection centre in Wittstock, a long walk out of town. Braun shook his head, looking pained. He took the Station Officer aside and the two of them chatted. We could see the Sergeant taking out his orders and the two men consulting them. Finally, the Station Officer nodded, counter-signed Braun's orders, and waved him off. The NCO turned around, a big smile on his face.

"What did you say to him?" I asked. Braun took us by the arm and steered us outside.

"I told him my orders were for the transportation of strategically vital spare parts. This part is true. I simply embellished the orders somewhat, implying the spare parts came with specially trained personnel – namely you two. He didn't question me too thoroughly. As you can see, he has a queue of soldiers to process that's quite long."

"So, now where do we go?" Konrad asked.

"Well," the Sergeant sighed, his face losing its joyous smile. "I'm afraid that's the bad news. I've been asked to deliver my parts to the 2nd Flak Corps. They have a collection centre in Prenzlau."

"Prenzlau!" I exclaimed. "That's back towards the east, towards the front."

The Sergeant nodded. "I know. But it's the best I can do. The Station Officer confirmed to me that his job was to assign all non-affiliated soldiers to the defence of Berlin. Either you accompany me, or you go to Berlin."

Konrad put a hand on my shoulder. “Come on. I’ll admit it’s not great, but at least it’s better than the prospect of facing the Russians again.”

“Your friend is right, Jakob” the Sergeant said. “Given the chaos right now, there’s a good chance you’ll be re-deployed yet again. Come, we need to get moving as quickly as we can, before they change their minds.”

Braun was right. The next week passed in a blur, a confusing mélange of villages, collection centres and contradictory orders. We went from one town to another, only to be ordered back to the town we’d just left. We arrived in one village and were told to wait. We cooled our heels for more than two days before being ordered back the other way. We awoke one morning under attack from Russian planes which forced us to abandon our positions. We were then ordered to an area that was obviously in Russian hands and as we proceeded along roads choked with vehicles and refugees going the other way, we were picked up and told not to bother and were ordered back to our original destination – Wismar – for further processing. At one point, Braun found his unit and reported in – his duty completed – and Konrad and I said goodbye to our new-found friend.

Sitting in an inn in Lowenberg, our original destination of more than a week ago, we consulted our map, curious to see where we’d been ordered during the past few days. We calculated how many kilometres we’d travelled. In the span of seven days, *Wehrmacht* officers had ordered us to report to no less than five collection centres in five different towns or cities. We had criss-crossed the entire state of Branden, north of Berlin, and had logged over 400 kilometres. We looked at each other in amazement. What was the *Wehrmacht* doing with us? We were being yanked from place to place. It

was as if the officers were unknowingly colluding to send soldiers onward in a real-life game of musical chairs, as long as the final place they were sent was not the front – any front. With orders for us to proceed again to Wismar, we folded our map, and bunked down for the night.

The next day, ah yes, the next day! This is a bit of a story for you boys. This was my one and only brush with a member of the High Command. We were making our way to Hochen Lychen, a town 25 kilometers north of Lowenberg. We arrived in late afternoon after a day's walk and drew travel rations from the collection centre and looked around for a place to sleep. As we walked through the village, a small motorcade passed us led by motorcycles and an armoured *Kübelwagen*. A black Mercedes with small flags fluttering on the front fenders glided by, the back windows curtained. A General Staff car. I was suddenly overwhelmed with a desire to confront whoever was in that car, to demand answers to what was going on, to know when this would all end. I started to approach it but was quickly blocked by a motorcycle following behind, the driver looking severe and bug-like in his road goggles. Konrad came up behind me, took me by the arm and led me off to the side of the road. We watched the procession as it drove off into the distance.

"There was someone important in that car, someone on Hitler's staff," I said. "Did you see the flags?"

"Yes, I did."

"Maybe they could've answered a few questions. Like how much longer this was going to go on."

Konrad gently pushed me along the road and we started to walk again. “I doubt it. Even if they knew, do you think they would tell you anything?”

“No. Not really, I suppose. If they told me, I’d tell you and we’d tell others along the route and the whole thing would collapse. The whole German defence effort crumbling because of one soldier with a loose mouth.”

Konrad chuckled. “We should be so lucky. Come on. We need to find a bed.”

I didn’t know it then, but the person in that staff car was none other than Himmler himself. Turns out he was fleeing Berlin in a moment of panic. He’d managed to convince Hitler he needed to review the front line troops but what he actually did was visit a spa. Needed to calm his nerves. Seems comical now, when I think of it.

We kept walking until we came across an abandoned hospital. The building, empty of people, still had beds, the mattresses stripped of bedding. I collapsed onto one of them, passing out into a dreamless sleep.

The sound that woke me up was something I hadn’t heard since we’d picked up the twelve stragglers in Willensdorf. Just on the edge of my thoughts, my ears picked up the sound of glass vibrating against glass. The sound was constant, as if someone were bumping an armoire full of fine crystal repeatedly with their foot, causing the glasses to vibrate together, as regular as a heartbeat. My sluggish, sleepy mind tried to fathom just what it was that was causing such melancholy ringing and slowly, I began to fill in the blanks of information, like a child who’d recently learned her numbers connecting the dots in a drawing. My eyes opened and I remembered where I was. The ringing I was hearing came from two medicinal beakers on the table next to my bed. I looked over at them. They vibrated steadily now, the ringing of the glass intensifying, increasing in

pitch. I reached up and separated them and as I rested my hand on the table, I could feel the vibration through my skin, penetrating through to my bones. Tanks, I thought. It can only be tanks. The Russians must've been keeping up a ferocious pace to make it this far north of Berlin. And there wasn't much to stop them.

I turned over and faced the bed beside me. Konrad was curled into a foetal position. He breathed slowly in and out, sleeping the sleep of the dead, like so many of the soldiers I'd served with, all of us experts at sleeping through just about anything. So peaceful, I thought. If only we could stay like this for a few days and not have to worry every minute of every day if we live or die, be captured or not, be sent somewhere to fight in another hopeless battle. If only it were over, and I could relax, sleep, spend languid evenings sitting on a veranda with my arm resting comfortably on Olga's shoulders, watching the sun set, the air filled with the sounds of cicadas and frogs. But there were no cicadas or frogs. Just men and machines, the sounds of bullets and shells, the smell of the burned land and diesel fumes and exploded shells. The displaced walking doggedly along the road. Ghosts wandering on the strength of a sliver of hope that safety was just ahead. I sat up, wearily swinging my legs over the side of the bed and placing the tattered soles of my boots firmly on the floor. The sound of vehicles was loud in the street outside. People ran by the window, shouts laced with worry and fear. Konrad finally opened his eyes, looking at me.

"We've got to go, I take it?" he asked.

I nodded. "Russian tanks again, I think." A plane flew overhead. A bomb screamed into the ground, exploding nearby. The hospital shuddered and dust fell from the ceiling. The plaster on the wall at the far end of the room cracked, the sound as loud

as a rifle shot, making us both jump. Konrad got to his feet. “Definitely time to leave,” he mumbled, yawning as he headed for the door. We ambled outside, our bodies befuddled and numbed by slumber. The street outside overflowed with people, vehicles, horses, panje carts, soldiers shouting orders. A chaotic jumble of humanity, machines and animal flesh. I could see panic in the eyes of the people as they streamed past. We forced our way into the crowd, elbowing our way forward. The crowd pushed us along, dogged in its determination to leave, to avoid getting captured by the Russians entering the other end of the town. With buildings on either side of the street, we were hemmed in, like cattle in a chute, being driven in one direction. We stumbled along and desperate people wormed their way between the two of us, separating us, the distance between us beginning to grow. I tried to keep close to my friend, but it was if the crowd refused to obey my wishes. I put all my energy into elbowing my way through the people in front of me, into regaining my position just behind Konrad. But the harder I tried to get closer to my friend, the more the crowd seemed to thicken between us. Konrad was five metres away before I yelled out to him. “Konrad!”

Konrad looked behind him, spied me in my predicament and tried to stop. But the crowd refused our wishes again, continuing to push him along with the rest of them, the gap between us getting wider. With one final, frantic effort, I pushed my way forward again, diving between two people ahead of me with my arms extended, trying to wedge my way forward. An elbow came up, hitting me in the nose with a loud crack. Stunned that a civilian would strike a soldier so boldly, my strength ebbed away like air from a punctured tire. With one final heave, I managed to get out of the thick crowd and into a doorway. There I crouched, nursing my now-bleeding nose, swearing loudly as the crowd

continued to stream by me. I looked again for Konrad, saw him one final time – pushing and trying to force his way back to me – before he disappeared around a corner, lost from sight. I swabbed my wounded nose with the sleeve of my tunic and waited for the crowd to thin before trying to get on my way again.

Seventeen – End of the Reich

I was surrounded by the sounds of war. The growl and clank of tanks. Small arms fire crackling and popping. Men fighting a running battle, trying the slow the Russian advance. As the sounds of battle drew nearer, I could see in the glow of flares that the street crowd had begun to thin so I scuttled out of the doorway, hurrying down the street, hoping to re-connect with Konrad somewhere ahead of me. I swabbed my nose with the sleeve of my tunic until the bleeding stopped. Ten minutes later I reached the edge of town. There was no sign of Konrad anywhere. I looked and looked, peering through the gloom, calling his name. There was no answer. I waited five minutes, then ten. Small arms fire banged closer. *Volkstuurm* troops ran by where I stood, kids younger than me with terrified looks on their faces. They ran right past me as if a freight train was chasing them. My friend had disappeared, as if he'd never been. I stood at the side of the road, anxious about the loss of my friend. And then it hit me like a punch to the gut. Konrad had our joint marching orders for Wismar in his tunic pocket. If I was stopped by a Home Guard roadblock, I'd have no papers to show. I'd be considered a deserter and shot.

I can tell you that my anxiety ramped up a notch, frankly threatened to overwhelm me and freeze me to the spot where I stood. It was then that I remembered when we'd found the order stamp in the briefcase not so long ago. So I began looking around for anything that had the appearance of an official building. As I searched, a tank shell screamed into the ground a hundred metres away, dirt and macadam blossoming, the ground shuddering. I went to cover and almost moved on until I spotted a building in the dark with a tattered *Reichskriegsflagge* hanging limply above the door. That's your basic black swastika on a red background, with another, smaller swastika in the upper left

corner. I raced into the building. Of course it was abandoned. Paper littered the floor. File drawers hung half open. I quickly rifled the desks, yanking the drawers out one after the other, throwing them to the floor. After going through three desks and finding nothing, I stopped, breathing hard, thinking. If there was an order stamp, where would it be? I ran into the back of the building. A Commander's office perhaps? I pawed through the desk, the filing cabinets, the bureau. Again, nothing. I was getting frustrated and more anxious as I looked around the room. Where, dammit, where, I asked myself? I forced my brain to think as I scanned the room. I had to move quickly because I could hear tank tracks squealing on the cobblestones outside and feel the vibration rippling through the floor as they approached. Machine guns burst, grenades exploded, *Panzerfaust's* fired. I noticed the painting on the wall. It was askew. I dashed over, unhooked it and flung it aside. There was a safe embedded in the wall, its door ajar. I thrust my hand inside and almost cried with relief. I couldn't believe my luck. Nestled next to a pile of blank memorandum paper was a cylinder of wood. Grabbing the stamp and some of the paper, I jammed them into my bread bag along with a stamp pad and ran out the back of the building just as machine gun rounds raked the front entrance.

Running along the road, I caught up with the main refugee column and slowed to a fast walk, blending into the crowd, panting, pulse racing. Walking fast it took me two hours to reach Furstenberg, twelve kilometres west of Hochen Lychen. All the public buildings were full to capacity with other soldiers, so I started banging on doors of private residences, desperate to get some kind of shelter for the rest of the night. The houses were dark and no one came to the door. I was at the point of giving up and seeking out a barn, when I saw one more house on the road. I knocked. The door opened

a crack. An old woman peered into the night. She looked frightened. She stared out at me through the small space between the edge of the door and the threshold, one eye visible, a candle in one hand, its flame fluttering.

"What do you want?" she demanded, the voice tremulous.

"Shelter for the night and any food you can spare," I asked.

"Why?"

"All the buildings in town are full. I would rather sleep in a house than in a draughty barn. Can you help me?"

"Are you alone?"

"Yes."

"Are you a deserter?"

"No. I'm on my way to Wismar, to be re-assigned and was sleeping at the hospital at Hochen-Lychen. Then the Russians came into the village. I had to run . . ."

"The Russians have reached Hochen-Lychen?" she interrupted, the door opening a little wider. Her face was now filled with fear.

"Yes. They'll likely bunk down soon. You'll probably have to leave in the morning. Look, I have my orders." I could feel my face threatening to turn red with the force of the lie, so I hurriedly continued. "I'm sure you know that deserters get rid of their weapons." I un-shouldered my carbine, making it clearly visible to the woman. "Would a deserter carry this?"

The woman hesitated as she considered all the information she had been told. Her expression softened and her eyes became less fearful.

"All right," she grumbled, swinging the door wider to let him in. "You can stay the night."

Grateful, I propped my carbine by the door and took off my dilapidated boots. My socks were so worn there was barely enough thread between the holes to still warrant the name. The woman clucked her disapproval. "I wish I could offer you some replacements," she said, looking at my feet, "but ours aren't in much better shape." She busied herself in the kitchen, pulling together a spare meal. She had a vacant bedroom and when the door was closed, and I was certain she'd bedded down for the night, I dumped the contents of my bread bag onto the bed. I took a sheet of memo paper and using my pen, carefully scripted what looked like official orders, trying to recall what the *Oberleutenant* had written for Konrad and me. I read them through and wasn't happy so I crumpled the sheet and took another. After several attempts, I was finally satisfied with my work. I carefully stamped the order paper and signed it with an unreadable signature. I hid the stamp at the bottom of my shaving soap tube and then took the false orders and smoothed the paper on my leg a few times, giving the paper a wrinkled, used look. Then I folded and tucked the orders into the inside pocket of my tunic and stored the rest of the paper in my bread bag. I burned the crumpled paper in the fireplace in my room and blew out the candle and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

The woman woke me the next morning. Her entire family had packed their belongings into carry bags. They referred to a map that the woman's husband had spread over the kitchen table. I discovered that the town of Waren, on the shores of Lake Müritz, was on my way to Wismar. My Aunt lived in Waren with her husband and I thought it was as good a place as any to aim for. I would find sympathetic civilians, a place to sleep

as well as some food for me to continue on to Wismar. But it was almost 70 kilometres away. Two long days of walking. I thanked the family for their help, wishing them good luck. Carbine on my shoulder and bread bag on my belt, I rejoined the road.

I was alone again. As I walked, I wondered what'd happened to my friend. Why hadn't Konrad waited for me by the road? What had prevented him? Did he panic and jump on the first transport he found? I didn't think so. Fighting alongside him, I'd never known Konrad to panic. He'd stuck with me for the past weeks and even volunteered to stay with me when the truck they flagged down couldn't take the whole squad. So why now? I couldn't understand it. As time passed with the walking, I settled on thinking that it wasn't me, but something that happened to him. It was dark. There was fighting all around. Maybe Konrad was clearly ordered to get on a transport and figured he'd look for me at a collection centre in the rear. Whatever had happened, I was now alone, and had to survive the next few days or weeks on my own wits. I had my 'orders' and my rifle so I'd continue to push west as fast as I could.

Five hours later I arrived at the village of Neustrelitz. The road I walked was quiet and peaceful. No Russian planes ran bombing runs. The sound of Russian tank guns remained far in the distance. I trudged through the town centre. Abandoned buildings. Empty roads. A dry wind that blew the dead leaves of the previous autumn through the square. The same abandoned feel as most the towns I'd been through in the past weeks. The road wound through buildings to the outskirts of town. After about a kilometre I again entered open country. As I completed another turn of the road I came upon a group of multi-storied concrete buildings. They were surrounded by a fence two metres high topped with barbed wire. There was a guard station at what looked like a main entrance.

Refugees streamed into the complex through a ripped open gap in the fence. Two guards stood by, looking useless as they tried to reason with some of the people going in. Another guard, their NCO, sat on the ground, smoking a cigarette, wearing an expression of resignation and disgust.

I approached the entrance. “What is this place?” I asked the guards.

One of them looked at me, frustration and anger on his face. “A supply depot, foodstuffs for the *Wehrmacht*,” he said.

My stomach growled and my mouth flooded with saliva. Without waiting for further explanation, I started to walk into the compound along with everyone else.

“Hey, wait a minute!” the guard said. “It’s for the *Wehrmacht*. Do you have any loading papers?”

I turned and looked at him, bewildered. “What about all of them?” I asked, pointing to civilians entering the breach in the fence.

“I can’t do anything about any of them. They’re civilians. But not you. You’re Army. If you want to go in there, you need properly signed loading papers.”

“And if I go in there without loading papers? What will you do?”

The guard looked around nervously. “You will be detained until transport can be acquired. You will be sent to the nearest camp where you will be held prisoner.”

I smiled. “Which camp?”

“Well, um, Orienenberg?” The guard looked unsure.

I walked slowly up the guard. “Orienenberg was overrun five days ago. It’s in Russian hands.” I turned around and walked into the complex. The guard didn’t say another word to stop me.

I walked to one of the buildings. There were staircases at each end. People going up with empty bags. People coming down with full ones. Desperate, savage looks on their faces. I muscled my way into one of the staircases. It was narrow, barely able to accommodate two adults abreast. Pushing and shoving my way through the crowd, I climbed the stairs, forcing one foot in front of the other. At one point, there were so many people in the stairwell I didn't have to expend any effort at all. I was carried upwards as part of the group, pushed by desperate people from behind, squeezed through the stairwell like cream from a tube. As I reached the first floor landing I was expelled out of the stairwell like a shot.

Recovering my balance, I looked around and was astounded by what I saw. Mountains of bread, large packs of butter, chocolate, honey and marmalade. Tinned foods arranged on shelving that extended to the roof. Slaughtered oxen, pigs and lamb hung from hooks in an adjoining hall. In another section, cases of cognac, champagne, wine, vodka and schnapps. The warehouse was full of people, quietly but hurriedly filling what bags they had with a selection of everything. A group of men were manhandling some of the hanging meat. They each bear-hugged a carcass of their choice, unhooked it and walked out. A hunger pang lanced through my body, reminding me of why I was there. I quickly grabbed tinned meat and lard, some chocolate, bread and a bottle of schnapps. I took off my belt, put my poncho over my head and then re-attached the belt. In the space between the poncho and my tunic, I dropped as many of the tins of meat and chocolate as I could carry. I put more tins, some bread, and the schnapps into my bread bag.

When no space was left in either my poncho or my bread bag, I turned reluctantly back to the stairs, forcing my way back down, using all my strength to get by the crush of

ravenous people going the other way. When I reached the ground floor, I heard the sound of people crying out in pain. I rushed toward the sound, almost running past a spiral chute that ascended to the upper floors. A group of people were crowded around the entrance to the chute. I asked what was going on and was told there were people on the upper floors who were tossing down tins, not realizing that others had jammed themselves into the narrow space at the bottom, desperate to get to the upper floors in search of their own food. The cries of pain I was hearing were from the people inside the chute being hit by falling tins. I grabbed two of the onlookers and we pulled people out of the chute. When I was sure they were all right and everyone was out, I turned and continued out of the building.

I quickly re-gained the road, leaving the complex on the far side of the guards. They paid me no mind. They were in earnest conversation with another soldier, no doubt trying to convince him not to enter the complex, threatening him with all kinds of disciplinary measures. I munched on chocolate and bread and my midriff bulged with cans, rolling and clattering together as I walked, my bread bag thumping heavily on my rump with every step. If I was careful, I thought, I figured I had a supply of food that could keep me going for several days. Certainly more than enough to get me to Waren.

As the afternoon wore on, some of the people I was walking with began to talk excitedly, heads bent low together, arms animated. I couldn't hear the substance of what they were saying but as I walked, two words reached my ears over and over again – 'Hitler' and 'suicide'. I sidled over to a group of civilians who were chatting amongst themselves and politely asked what the news was. They suddenly went silent, their distrust and hatred etched on their faces. As I mulled over whether I should say

something else, or walk away and ask someone else, an old man in the group glanced at me. His face was pinched and his eyes were sunk deep into his face, the orbs black and featureless. He wore an overcoat that looked tailored and was probably dashing in its prime but was now tattered and covered in road dust and mud. He looked at me again, this time for quite a while, eyeing my stuffed bread bag. I was about to repeat my question when the man spoke.

"I'll trade you some food for some information," he said. As I considered his proposal, I spied a small girl peeking out from behind the folds of the man's coat as they walked. As she shyly looked at me, I noticed that she was as emaciated as the man protecting her. Her eyes were circled by black rings, her cheeks were sunken and her fingers clung so tightly to the coat they were white, like bleached bone. She reminded me of the children I saw by the road on the Nehrung, after I'd crossed the ice. They were abandoned, crying, begging for help from anyone who passed by. And I wasn't able to help them.

"Give me your bag," I said to the man, swinging my bread bag off my belt and up to my chest. The man quickly complied, taking a bag off his shoulder and opening it between the two of us. I quickly transferred a loaf of bread, several tins of meat and lard and some chocolate to the old man. He quickly closed the bag and slung it back over his shoulder but before we could continue our conversation, the girl reached up and tugged on the bag, whimpering. The man gestured at a tree beside the road ahead of us. We walked over, leaving the stream of people on the road. Under the tree, the man put his bag on the ground and got out a piece of chocolate and some bread. He passed the

chocolate to the girl. She bit into it savagely, chewing quickly. The man took a bite of the bread.

"Thank you," he said. "I'm grateful. I didn't want to risk going into the supply depot. There were too many people. I could've gone myself, but that would've meant leaving Sarah here by herself."

"I understand. It was chaos in there. I was almost crushed in the stairs."

"So. You want to know what has happened to the Führer?"

"Yes, of course."

"There's a rumour. He's taken his own life," the man said. "Eva Braun as well so they say. A hell of a honeymoon for a couple so recently married."

My mind reeled with the news. "Suicide? The Führer?" I said. The man nodded. I didn't know what to say. I walked slowly over to the trunk of the tree and sat on the ground, my back resting against the tree trunk. I stared dumbly at the people walking by.

The man looked at me. "Are you alright? You look a little pale."

I nodded. "How did he die?"

"Poison. And a bullet to the head, just to be sure."

"Christ." I was silent for a few moments, trying to process the news. "I think I'm just going to sit here for a bit. Rest a while."

"Come on, Sarah," the man said, taking the girl's hand in his. "We've still got a lot of walking to do before it gets dark." The girl had finished her chocolate, her hands and face brown smeared. But before she left with her father, she walked over to me. "Thank you," she said. I looked at her, amazed, and then nodded, unable to speak, struck dumb by the civility of this girl at such a moment in her life. The man took her hand and

together, they quickly folded themselves back into the flow of people. I watched them until they disappeared from view.

Hitler dead, I thought. While his soldiers suffered around him, some loyally defending him and the Fatherland to the last man, the Greatest Warlord of All Time (that's what he called himself in his more lucid moments) took the easy way out, killing himself. As I started to think about it, I realized the leaders in Berlin knew that the war was coming to an end, just as I did. But they were the ones that had planned this whole thing. They wouldn't likely want to be captured, fearing retribution or torture or death. It made sense in its own twisted way. But deciding to kill oneself was the coward's way, I thought. Like a petulant child who walks away and sulks when things go wrong, when he's no longer in control. My soldier's oath – said with such pride only a short time ago in Holland – was completely meaningless now. I felt a release of some kind of weight, as if heavy iron shackles had suddenly dropped off my wrists and ankles, my body lighter. I got up off the ground, shouldered my carbine, and re-joined the road. Like little Sarah, there was nothing left except to survive, to live another day, and then another, until the war was over and I could return home.

Eighteen – A Fencepost In a Field

At nightfall I found an abandoned barn by the road and flopped down on some old straw. The next morning, the sun slanted into the barn through a large gap in the wallboards and woke me up. I ate from one of my tins and drank from a stream that trickled through the property. All that day I walked, resting every couple of hours, drinking when I found water, eating when I was hungry. The sun set and still I kept going, knowing that Waren, my Aunt's house and a bed were ahead of me and a lot more distance separated me from the Russians behind.

I finally reached Waren at around midnight. I was exhausted. I started searching for my Aunt's house, stumbling through the darkened town, houses looming out at me from beside the road. I studied each one, wracking my brain trying to remember what the house looked like. The last time I was there was before the war. A rare trip off the farm when I was twelve, a week without chores, relaxing by the lakeshore and eating meals in the back garden. But with all the residents studiously sticking to the instructions to keep all the lights off or draw their curtains, my sense of direction was fouled. I couldn't orient myself and I stumbled from house to house, haphazardly banging on doors, waking frightened civilians in their homes.

I'd almost visited every house in town and still I hadn't found my Aunt. I was getting anxious, thinking that I'd need to spend another night in a barn on the sly. I approached another dark house and hammered on the door. Unbelievably, the woman that came to the door was my Aunt. She was dishevelled, her greying hair loose around her face, her skin wrinkled and pallid but it was her. I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief. She had a candelabrum in her hand, the flame on one small candle flickering.

"Yes?" she said. You see, her eye was just visible through the narrow crack in the door and it squinted at me as she tried to make out who I was.

"It's Jakob, Auntie Lina. Gerhard's son."

Lina squinted harder into the night. She raised the candle higher and the feeble light washed over my face.

"Jakob! Oh my. You look terrible! Come in, come in. Quickly now." She turned, nodding to someone inside and swung open the door. As I went in, my Uncle came out from behind the door, a hunting rifle across his chest, the barrel pointed up, a finger on the trigger guard. He had a suspicious look on his face. "Take off your hat. Let me have a look at you," he commanded.

I stepped a little further into the house while Lina closed the door behind us. I removed my hat, smoothed down my filthy hair and looked at my Uncle. After a long moment, his Uncle lowered the rifle and stood it beside the door. "Yes," he said slowly, "it is you after all." He opened his arms, inviting a hug. I let him envelope me, revelling in his warmth, so very glad to be amongst family again.

When my uncle was finished, Lina pinned me in her own hug. As she released me, she wiped at her eyes. She took the candle and walked to the kitchen at the back of the house. We all sat around a small table. In the small circle of candlelight, I told my story. When I arrived at the point of hearing of the rumour that Hitler was dead, I asked them if they'd heard any official news.

"Yes, we have," my Aunt said. "There was a report on the radio that confirmed that he had died four days ago, his new wife at his side." She got up and walked over to the cupboards, rummaging for something to eat.

"Lina," I said, "don't bother. I have food." I told them about the *Wehrmacht* food supply depot. She sat down at the table again.

"So it's true then," I said, sitting back in my chair. I shook my head in amazement.

"What will you do now, Jakob?" my Uncle asked.

"That's a very good question. I've thought of nothing else since I first heard the rumour. Up to now, I've been faithfully following the orders given to me. You can't imagine how we've been shuffled about, like a parcel with the wrong address. One day we go forward, the next day back. There's the Guard to contend with. There's no food to eat. There's almost no ammunition left. And then of course, the Russians keep advancing. I haven't been involved in a serious, coordinated battle for weeks. But now Hitler is dead. The only thing left to do is surrender, to become a prisoner of war."

"You may be right," Lina said. "The details of who is in charge now are confused. We've heard the Allies – that's what the English and Americans call themselves – are close and advancing rapidly. We're hopeful they will reach us before the Russians."

"The Allies. How close are they?"

"We don't know for sure," my Uncle said. "What we get for information is still run through Berlin. Can't trust that too much."

"Well, the Russians continue to advance as well. I've managed to keep ahead of them all the way from Hochen-Lychen but the *Wehremacht* is not slowing them much. Not that we have much to slow them with these days."

"This is bad news," said Lina. She turned to her husband, her face worried. "What do you think we should do now?"

"We wait and see which of the two armies reaches here first," my Uncle responded. "We pack what we can and be ready to leave. Jakob," he said, turning back to me, "if the Russians arrive here first then you must get out of here quickly. They're bound to treat civilians better than the soldiers. We can survive if they come, but you, you must leave."

I nodded. "I understand, Uncle."

Lina rose from the table. "It's settled then. With what we have, I will plan a good dinner for you for tomorrow night, in the hope that the Allies reach here first." We said good night to each other. Lina gave a spare room to me to use and, after cleaning myself, I sank into the bed with immense relief. I fell asleep immediately, relishing the smell of clean linen.

I rose mid-morning. All of my clothes were gone. I walked out of my room in my nightshirt and discovered that Lina had washed my uniform. It was in a neat pile on a kitchen chair, ready for me to wear. I was touched at the generosity of this simple act. Except for my brief furlough on the farm, I'd had to scramble, search and steal every bit of comfort I could for almost a year. I sank into a nearby chair and didn't move. I think I was stunned by the normalcy of how my Aunt and Uncle were living. It was then that Lina came into the kitchen from outside and found me there, looking blankly at my clothes. She pulled up a chair next to me, and put her arm around my shoulders.

"How are you?" she asked.

"Numb."

"You've been through a lot. More than most young men should have to go through at seventeen years of age. A young man like you should be in University, making friends, going out with girls to dances."

I smiled. "That would be heaven. I want to do that when all this is over. Do you remember Olga?" She shook her head. "She lives on the farm next to ours, in Boossen. I saw her for four days, on a furlough earlier last month. We've made plans. We want to be together after this madness is over."

"That's good. You know, Hitler's death will force an end to the conflict. There have been rumours of an armistice with the Allies. Even the Russians may stop their advance. If all this comes about, then there will be an opportunity to start again. Your uncle and I, we think you should go to the Allies. We think you'll be better treated than with the Russians."

"I don't think the Russians will stop until they've taken Berlin," I said. "It's too rich a prize to resist." That's when we heard the sound of a machine gun fire in the distance. Lina stood up, excited. "The Allies," she cried, her face breaking into a smile.

I stood up, grabbing my clothes. "I'm afraid not, Lina. That's a Russian sub-machine gun. I've heard so many of them I can tell what sound they make in my sleep."

Lina's face grew worried. "Then you must hurry," she said, "You haven't much time." I rushed into my room, changing quickly. The sound of machine gun bursts got closer and was joined by the firing of an occasional tank gun. As I pulled my boots on, I noticed that someone – probably my Uncle – had re-glued the soles. I stamped into them, grabbed my hat and rushed back outside, heading for the front door. As I shouldered my carbine, my Uncle burst into the house, his face flushed, breathing heavily.

"There are Russian tanks entering the town from the east!" He saw me, fully dressed. "Oh, good," he said, "you're ready to go." I packed my poncho into my bread bag, on top of the food that Lina had placed into it. I quickly tied the bag to my belt, turning to my Uncle and Aunt.

"I'm really sorry that I can't stay. Thank you for everything." I quickly hugged my Uncle and Aunt and then opened the front door. A tank shell screamed overhead and landed harmlessly in a neighbouring lot, ploughing a crater in the black earth and showering the area with dirt. I turned and ran down the road without looking back, plunging into a forest on the side of the road.

I ran through the open ground under the trees, using the rolling terrain to remain hidden from the road. I crested a small hill and pounded down the other side and almost careened into an old woman. She was on her knees, sifting through the broken branches and dead leaves on the forest floor. She looked up at me briefly, her eyes vacant, hollow, and then turned back to her culling. I looked around and saw that she was part of a larger group of women and children, tin cans beside them, on hands and knees, scrabbling through the grass and leaves on the slope of this small hill. Every once in a while one of them would find what they were looking for – a beechnut – and put it into the can beside them. I felt sick. A whole population desperate for food, scouring the forest floor for something to eat. I picked my way slowly past them. "The Russians are coming," I said to the old woman. I said it to each of them as I passed. They all nodded and went back to their work.

I felt bewildered and awed by what I saw. There were do dedicated to finding whatever food they could, yet they went about it so calmly, without an outward trace of

fear. It was so different from what I observed on the line, the men fighting like dogs for scraps, stealing from their neighbours, from the farms and businesses nearby. I couldn't afford to linger long so I picked up my pace, trotting through the forest. When I felt I was far enough from the Russian advance, I re-joined the main road. A few people walking. A wagon or two moving slowly. Quiet. I walked quickly, all the while looking around me for anything I could scavenge from the belongings abandoned along the road, something that could help me get more distance between myself and the Russians. I spotted a bicycle and fished it out of the ditch. It dripped with water and was covered in mud and strands of grass. The rear tire was flat. I cleaned it off, mounted the seat and pushed off, testing it to see how it worked. Except for a slight wobble from the back wheel, it rolled along fine and was faster than walking.

I pedalled west through the afternoon and into the night, passing quickly through a number of small towns, all the while praying that the back wheel would hold out. I chose a winding route. I didn't know the towns in that part of Germany and had no maps to guide me so I relied on my instincts and the sun to find west. I avoided main thoroughfares, choosing instead less travelled rural roads. It seemed to work as I never had to contend with many refugees. They were few and far between on the country tracks. I made easy progress, stopping now and then to eat something and to drink from the streams I crossed. I didn't sleep and didn't want to sleep. Knowing the End was near, I ploughed on, wanting to get as far west as I could, as fast has I could.

The sign at the edge of town said Sternberg. I couldn't tell how far I'd come, or where I was in relation to Waren. The sun was coming up behind me. As I cycled through town, the back wheel of the bicycle broke in half. I tipped over onto the cobblestone

street with a crash. I wasn't injured, just a couple of scrapes and bruises. I looked at the bicycle but there was no way to fix it so I left it on the road. Digging into my bread bag, I fished out a bit of black bread and some cheese and continued on foot.

I walked through town and out the other side, continuing along the road, the sun at my back. I looked absently at the vehicles beside the road. Panje carts and farm wagons with belongings still packed in the cargo areas. Abandoned. Silent. They were intact, unblemished by any attack or sign there was an encroaching army just over the horizon. I remembered back to my long walk in East Prussia to the Baltic and across the ice. The Russian planes that targeted everything in their path. Here though, the only sign that there was a war on was the blasted and smoking military vehicles. Half-tracks, trucks, camouflaged communication vans and tanks. All smoking blackened ruin. Whoever attacked here only targeted the military vehicles, not the civilian ones. It struck me as odd, out of place.

I suddenly heard a low, droning sound. War planes. I stopped and scanned the horizon, searching, turning in a circle on the road. The sound got louder and I suddenly saw black dots to the west, flying abreast and low over the countryside, heading in my direction. I looked for a place to hide, finally running for one of the abandoned farm wagons by the roadside, dropping to my stomach and crawling underneath. As the planes approached, I peered out from underneath the wagon, straining to see the markings. They flew closer and closer to my position, before speeding by in a blaze of speed and colour. I saw white and black stripes on the fuselage and on the underside of the wing, a blue and white circle with a red spot in the centre. British. I knew now I was getting close to Allied

positions. I waited a while, making sure that they didn't circle back for another pass, and then crawled out from under the wagon, quickly walking westward again.

The planes didn't return. At around noon, I reached the town of Brüel. It was abandoned. There are no collection centres or places where I could acquire more food so I continued to walk, passing through the centre of town and into the country. On both sides of the road were farmer's fields and as I walked I saw farm hands tilling the soil, as if oblivious they were in the middle of two armies clashing on either side of them. They saw me and called me over, inviting me to sit with them and share their meal. I agreed gladly, happy to be in the company of farmers again. I talked fondly of the time spent on the farm harvesting the wheat crop, tilling the garden and planting the potatoes. At the end of the meal, I asked them if they knew where the Allies were. They told me the last they heard the Allies had reached Schwerin, a major town about eleven kilometres down the road. Schwerin. The small city was south and west of Wismar and from my recollection of looking at maps of my planned journey to Wismar, I'd travelled over 150 kilometres since leaving Waren. Heartened by the news, I thanked them for the food and hurried on my way.

Less than an hour later, I walked into a small village, the name of which had been stripped from the signpost at the outskirts. In the centre of town, a communications van was parked in the square, antennae sprouting up along the roof. The uniforms of the men sitting near the vehicle looked similar to mine. I walked over to them. Two soldiers were sitting on the running board of the truck, calmly smoking cigarettes.

"Hello," I said.

Both men stared up at me but said nothing.

"Have you heard anything about where the Allies might be? I saw a squadron of British planes a while back, so I know they're close."

One of men leaned forward and turned this head toward the front of the vehicle. "*Unterfeldwebel*! There's another one for you." He settled back, leaning against the side of the van, taking another drag from his cigarette.

The driver-side door of the van opened. A burly man in Luftwaffe blue stepped out of the cab and slammed the door behind him with a clang. He walked toward me.

"Name and unit," he demanded.

Reflexively, I stood straighter. "Grenadier Jakob Herrmann, sir, of the 23rd Flak Division."

"At ease, Grenadier. You're a long way from your unit. What are you doing here?"

"Orders, sir. We were told to proceed to Wismar to the Luftwaffe collection centre."

The man looked at me, a queer look on his face. "How long ago was that?" he asked.

"Almost two weeks, sir."

"And no word since then from any of your commanders?"

"No sir, none at all."

"Wismar is in the hands of the Allies now. Proceeding there is a waste of your time. With Hitler dead, Admiral von Friedberg is now calling the shots. He's negotiated a cease-fire with the Allies. As far as we're concerned, the war is over, Grenadier."

Well, I can tell you, with the news delivered the way it was, I was speechless. I'd been walking towards the Allies for days, contemplating what it would be like to surrender and finish this war, trying to slowly wrap my mind around what life would be like after war's end. And now, this Sergeant was telling me it was over. Just like that. No fanfare, no big deal. After all the running, my body was conditioned to keep running, to keep walking. It's difficult in a single instant to go from run, run, run to stop and run no more. All this was going through my mind as the Feld looked at me, waiting for me to say something.

I finally got my brain to work. "Sir, I've been on the road now for almost twenty-four hours. I last saw the Russians entering the town of Waren. At their current rate of advance, if they're advancing, they could be here soon."

"Well," he said, "That changes things a bit. In Waren twenty-four hours ago you say? Crap." He turned to the two soldiers sitting on the running board of the van. "Hans, let's get packed up. We're moving out. This young man here," he pointed at me, "will be joining us. Look alive, gentlemen! Let's go!"

I didn't have time to thank the Feld. The man had already moved off, circling the van, rounding up his men, getting gear together. I followed him, picking up and throwing boxes, packs and other gear into the back of the van.

"Sir," I said, puffing as I grabbed another box and slung it into the truck. "Do you know where the Allies are now?"

"We had a report about an hour ago from another signals unit about six kilometres from here. They had just been overrun by British tanks."

"They're very close."

"Yes they are and they're coming on strong."

Ten minutes later, with all the gear packed and all the men either inside or clinging to the outside of the van, we drove off down the road. Just outside the village, two women were bicycling by and signalled us to stop. The driver obliged and the women breathlessly told them that the British were less than four kilometres down the road.

The Feld turned to the driver next to him. "Driver, keep going." He turned back to the girls. "Thanks girls. You be careful now. The Russians might be coming from the other direction. Find someplace to hide and be ready to get out of their way." They both nodded sombrely. As the truck pulled away, I could see from my perch on the outside of the van as they turned their bicycles around and followed us.

We drove on but went less than a kilometre before we were stopped by a traffic jam. There was an endless line of refugees, panje carts, farm wagons, soldiers in stripped military vehicles proceeding very slowly down the road. The Feld ordered everyone out of the van. We abandoned the vehicle on the side of the road and we began to shuffle forward with everyone else. After asking the people ahead of us, we learned that at the head of the traffic jam were British soldiers who were processing refugees and separating out the German soldiers, who were being taken prisoner. Finally, I thought, I've gone as far as I can. The NCO took out his pistol, disassembled it and threw the parts into the ditch beside the road. I was about to do the same to my carbine, when the Feld stopped me.

"Keep your rifle," he said. I looked at him quizzically. "It's for surrendering. You need your weapon with you and you need to formally surrender it to them. That way they

know that your rifle is not in the hands of somebody else. Just eject all the shells." I nodded and ejected the bullet in the chamber and reached into my pocket to remove the others. When my hand came out, I had only two. I threw them into the ditch.

We trudged on, the sun arching over us. Morning passed to afternoon. The dust and heat were almost too much to bear, but I could also see that we were slowly getting closer to the British checkpoint. Finally, late in the afternoon, we arrived at two barriers set up on the road. To the left, refugees were entering for identification and processing. To the right, a soldier, his uniform a tan colour, his helmet sporting the distinctive British wide brim, demanded in passable German that I surrender my carbine and place it on a pile next to him. A squad of British soldiers stood off to the side, compact sub-machine guns in hand, watching us. I passed next to the young man and threw my carbine onto a pile already over a metre high. As I turned to continue on, I noticed that on the man's sleeve, above the unit insignia, was a Canadian flag. He's Canadian, I thought in wonderment. He's from the land of untold wealth, echoing what I'd been taught in school about the Americas. I admit I gawked at the man, fascinated, trying to spot some difference that would set this man apart from myself. But the soldier looked like any other young man in uniform. I couldn't see any difference. German, Russian, Canadian. I realized that we were all just boys fighting each other at the behest of someone else. The soldier paid me no mind, his eyes focussed on the next soldier surrendering to him. I kept staring until I was nudged along by my fellow Germans to move along.

Now a prisoner, I finally allowed myself to relax. I not only surrendered my weapon, but surrendered any attempt at keeping up appearances of a soldier of the Reich. I let go the worry about where to get my next meal, and where next to sleep. Those

questions were out of my hands now. I was marched with the other prisoners to the village of Bad Kleinen, I began to reflect on my experience, on my journey and what I wanted to do after I was processed and had served my time. Once in the village, we were separated into groups of one hundred. We spent the night, under guard, out in the open, under the stars. The next day, the groups were marched further behind Allied lines, west to the town of Gadebusch, where the British had prepared a large field surrounded by a single strand of barbed wire. Truck-mounted fifty calibre machine guns were parked at each corner to prevent the escape of any of their new prisoners.

I settled down in the grass, resting my back against a freshly erected fence post and watched my fellow soldiers stream into the compound. Most were difficult to read, their faces like weathered carved stone, their eyes unmoving, their mouths set in thin lines, moving forward like automatons, their feelings buried under layers of horror and fear. But others had wide grins on their faces. Somehow, these few had found a way to force their feelings past their recent experiences, to feel alive where just a few days ago, they lived in constant fear and hunger. They shook hands with their captors and danced in the bright sunlight that streamed down from a clear, blue sky, their joy unleashed with the knowledge that the fighting was over for them.

I looked inside myself, searching for my own reaction to the end. Relief at arriving at the end. Sadness at having been witness to the death of a country. My pride, my loyalty, the very beliefs I grew up with had been shattered as easily as dropping a mirror onto the macadam. The once proud German state had been reduced to disputed territory fought over by two giant armies. But I was glad to be here, and not in some compound guarded by soldiers sporting the red star on their tunics. I contented myself

with that, focussing on the end of running from the Russians, of being shot at, shelled and mortared, the end of digging trenches and foxholes, the end of the mud, the rain, the cold, the end of scavenging for food like a wild man. And yet, while it was the end of so many things, it was also the beginning of something new, something I alone would shape, hopefully in the company of the woman I loved and surrounded by my family.

Epilogue

The room was silent. I looked at the clock on the wall and saw that it was after one in the morning. Most of the men had their heads back, their eyes closed. A couple were snoring. Bill revived himself, gave me a wink as he sat up, his recliner folding closed under him. He got up, stretched his arms to the ceiling and shook himself before he went around to each of the others, telling them they should go home. As they stirred, like so many of my *komerads* had in the trenches when the shelling stopped, they came over to me one by one and shook my hand and gave a little word of encouragement. 'Good story'. 'Loved every second.' 'Now I understand a bit better.' 'Christ, you're just like us. I never knew.' 'Come back any time. You'd be welcome.' As they filed out the door to their cars, I helped Bill and the barkeep tidy up, stacking the bar stools upside down on the bar, getting all the glasses rounded up. The barkeep gave the keys to Bill and left and Bill and I shut off the lights and locked the front door.

We stood on the front porch for a moment. I looked up at the sky. The stars were still out, but the temperature had dropped. The humidity made it seem colder and I shivered a bit. I zipped up my coat and thrust my hands in the pockets.

"Quite a story," said Bill.

"Hmm. You think?"

"Are you kidding? Knocked me off my feet."

"Literally, I could see."

He chuckled. "I can't believe you're such a joker after living through that. Christ! The Russians. The Eastern front is like this big bogeyman we always talk about. But it's just talk. We have no idea what it was like. Now we do. And the ice! Christ. I hate ice.

Can't even stand walking on river ice, let alone lake ice. Makes me wobbly at the knees. How'd you overcome your fear?"

"When you have no options, you don't think about it. Not really. You just go. If you were to think about it, you wouldn't go anywhere. You'd be rooted to one spot in fear."

"Yeah, I guess. I can relate. A lot a guys wouldn't get on the plane when they heard the stories about the flak you guys were sending up into the air over the targets. So we'd tell 'em just don't think about it. Think of something else. Anything else but the flak. Still, I had crew shaking in their seats all the way there and all the way back."

"That's what's always amazed me about your time in the war. I have difficulty imagining being a gunner in one of those little turrets on the bottom of the plane. You're so exposed. That would've freaked me out."

"That's the thing. Doesn't matter what we did, or what side we were on, we can all relate."

We didn't say anything for a while so we went down the stairs to Bill's car and he drove me home. He drove into the driveway and parked and shut off the engine. The house was dark, but Freida had left the outdoor lights on and just that touch made it feel like the most inviting thing I'd ever seen. I was about the get out of the car and wish Bill a good night, when he spoke again.

"So tell me. How come you're not married to Olga? What happened to her?"

"I have no idea. After I got released from the POW camp, I couldn't just go back and look for her in Boosen. It was in the Russian zone. I tried locating her through some

of the refugee organizations like the Red Cross, but I couldn't find her. I kept up the search for six months but nothing ever came to light, so I gave up."

"You mean, you met Freida."

I think I blushed. "That was later, but, yeah."

"Hmph. Still, it's too bad. Olga sounded like she was a feisty woman. Lots of character. A survivor. I'd like to know what became of her."

"So would I, but it's been so long, I wouldn't know where to start."

Bill yawned and re-started the car. "I've got to get home before I fall asleep. Good night, Jake. And thanks for accepting my invitation. I really appreciate you coming down to the hall tonight."

"Well, thanks Bill." I was quiet for a moment or two and then I turned to him. "You know, now that I've said it all, I wonder what I should do now."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, I've been carrying this around for so long and to suddenly just tell it like I did in such a spontaneous way, it seems, I don't know, incomplete."

"Probably just the novelty. I know that when I started to tell my own story, I wanting to tell everyone, just to make sure they all understood what I went through. It became a compulsive act. You have to watch that. Not everyone is open to hearing about the war, and in your case, not everyone wants to hear how the other side fared. If I were you and you haven't already done it, I'd start by telling your family. They have a right to know what happened. And you'll feel a lot better just by doing that."

"You may be right. Freida knows parts of it, but not all of it."

"And the kids?"

"Almost nothing."

"There you go. And another thing. Maybe you should write it all down. When you write things, you remember more. It's more – what's the word – contemplative than just telling it like you did tonight. Besides, once you do that, you'll get it out of your system and then you can die in peace."

I looked at him. "You're kidding, right?"

He smiled. "Only a little."

I got out of the car and waved at him as he backed it up into the street and drove away.

So that's what I've been doing ever since I got home. Writing. And Bill was right. It does feel good to write it all down. To get it out of my system, as he said. I feel lighter somehow. And it's not just from a lack of sleep. I really feel as if some great weight has been lifted off my back. So, it's time to lay the pen down and get some rest. And later today, I'll talk it out with Freida and then find a way to get this entered into a computer so I can send this off to my kids. It's past time they knew.