

One

Bombs and Werwolves

The last bomb tore the facade off her house. Where there once was a boundary between her bedroom and the street, a curtain of dust now wavered and shimmered in the moonlight. The air-raid alarm had sounded, but she had slept through it even as she heard the wail of the siren as though in a dream. The shattering explosion threw her out of her bed and landed her on the uncarpeted floor. Her mind was jolted from stupor, and she wondered which was worse—a broken hipbone or being under a collapsed roof. She got up on all fours and whimpered, a scared animal. She then rose up, quickly changed from her nightgown to her work clothes, an old sweater and denim overalls, put on her walking shoes, and scuttled down two flights of stairs to the basement. There was an ear-shattering explosion as she was going down the rickety stairs. The steps shook, and there was a loud crash as the three floors of the building imploded and collapsed.

As she stumbled to the floor of the basement, she thought she had gone blind but quickly realized that the darkness was caused by the overhead light on the stairway going out.

“You crashed into me,” said a voice she recognized as that of the landlord who lived in the basement. “Are you hurt?”

“I am fine, Herr Stumpfegger,” she said.

“Damn these Yanks,” said Ludwig Stumpfegger. “They’ve demolished my building. They want to wipe out Berlin, turn it to dust. Look at what they did to the Brandenburg Gate. You know they’ve already dropped thirty thousand tons of explosives on Berlin.”

Hannah Müller paid no attention to him.

“My studio.” She gasped. “It will all be destroyed, my work and the work of others.”

She was thinking not so much of her own paintings but the ones given to her by Wassily Kandinsky and Paul Klee and the works of her peers at Bauhaus. She had kept them in a steel trunk inside a closet in her second-floor studio.

“Just like a woman.” She heard Stumpfegger’s voice in the dark. “There are lives at stake, and all she can think of is degenerate art.”

She knew now what she had suspected all along, and fear seized her. Stumpfegger must have been in her studio without her permission and examined the artwork, deemed degenerate by the Führer. The question why the Gestapo didn’t make their visit to her studio to seize the paintings danced before her with an elusive, elf-like quality.

She heard the sound of a match being struck and saw Stumpfegger lighting two candles.

“I’ve to check on my other two tenants,” he said, putting on a red-and-black swastika-patterned dressing gown over his brown shirt and pants.

“I’ll come with you,” she said.

“Only if you put on a helmet,” he said grumpily as he put on his boots.

He had kept a spare helmet from his days in the army, during the First World War. It was too big for her, but she wound up her long braids around her head to make it fit.

Stumpfegger took a shovel and a pickaxe and strapped on a belt from which hung two flashlights, a spanner, and a screwdriver. He opened the small door that revealed steps to their garden, and as she went up, she saw the crushed tulips and crocuses and then the huge mound of wreckage to her right.

My studio must be at the bottom of this pile, she thought.

Stumpfegger took a ladder that was lying on the grass and leaned it against the mound. Slowly he climbed up the steps until he reached the top. Using quick thrusts with his shovel, he cleared a path all the way down and started shouting, “Frau Rudel, Fraulein Ritter!” at regular intervals. A sparrow cheeped and flew away from a nearby bush. Stumpfegger repeated his operation on the other side and suddenly stopped.

“Frau Müller!” he shouted.

Hannah moved over to his side and saw a woman’s fat, varicose-veined leg sticking out of the mound. It looked like the leg of Else Rudel, wife of Hauptfeldwebel Heinz Rudel, a corpulent sergeant fighting the Russians out there in the East.

“Help me pull her out,” said Stumpfegger.

It wasn’t easy to pull her out, but they did it with a lot of grunting and panting. She was stone dead, with a frozen, insipid smile on her face as though she had been dreaming of sweet and pleasant things.

“She took those sleeping pills of hers,” panted Stumpfegger. “I had warned her not to do that, but she didn’t listen to me.”

He picked her up and carried her to the garden. Hannah saw him kiss her on the lips. She had seen them together, drinking schnapps and eating sausages, but it had never occurred to her they were lovers. Morality goes overboard during the time of war, she thought. But who was she to judge others? She too had been no different—after the end of the First World War, she had been a hostess in a night club and had hung around with personable American soldiers to earn a few bucks until she discovered she was pregnant—but she was only nineteen then, and all Berlin girls did that to survive.

“I have to bury Frau Rudel,” said Stumpfegger. “But first we have to see if Fraulein Ritter is alive.”

They went back to the mound, and he started digging again. Occasionally he would stop to straighten out his back but would get to work again after wiping off the plaster dust covering his face. Suddenly he gave an exclamation and pointed to her what looked like a man’s hairy arm with a tattoo of a skull on it. Stumpfegger grabbed the arm and pulled out a naked young man and along with him, with her arms entwined over his torso, the blond, beautiful Marta Ritter, who lived on the floor above Hannah.

“He must be a deserter from the SS,” said Stumpfegger, scorn dripping from his voice. “The two of them had probably too much to drink last night and didn’t hear the sirens.”

Hannah looked at the two young lovers, arms around each other and a look of bliss on their faces. She thought it was a perfect death, quite unlike what she was used to seeing on the streets after bombing raids, the corpses showing terror and shock on their faces.

“Don’t stand there doing nothing. I need your help,” grunted Stumpfegger.

“What do you want me to do?”

“Cover the bodies up with something, and help me carry them to the garden.”

What difference would covering them up make? she wanted to ask him. The young man and woman were Hitler children, the ones who grew up without religious beliefs and would have preferred to be buried like Adam and Eve. But she didn’t want to argue with him and went downstairs to look for a piece of cloth to serve as a shroud. She couldn’t find anything suitable and came back with the linen tablecloth that covered the dining table.

As she helped him carry the bodies into the garden, she heard what she thought was a steady drumbeat, growing slowly in volume.

“What’s that noise, Herr Stumpfegger?” she asked him, pointing east.

He listened and shook his head disbelievingly. “It’s the sound of artillery,” he said.

Now she could hear shells exploding, and they were coming one after the other. She thought it was the German troops battling the Americans, but the sound was coming from the east.

“It’s the Russian tanks. I’ve to go and join my unit.”

“What unit?”

“I am in the *Volkssturm*, woman,” he said curtly, walking toward the basement. “I’ve to go.”

She knew what the *Volkssturm* was, for Goebbels had been calling all males between the ages of fourteen and sixty to join the last-ditch effort to stop the Russian enemy from entering Berlin. Only two days ago, she had seen two boys in uniforms that were too big for them, strutting up and down the street with rifles over their shoulders and bragging about what they would do to a Russian soldier if they caught one.

Stumpfegger suddenly reappeared before her, clad in his First World War uniform and carrying a rifle, a dagger, and a *Panzerfaust*. She wondered how he was going to stop the tanks with these futile weapons from another era as he thrust a bunch of handbills toward her and asked her to distribute them to “everyone you see in the street.”

“OUR FÜHRER IS STAYING IN BERLIN,” she read. “HE IS NOT GOING TO RUN AWAY, AND HE EXPECTS ALL BERLINERS TO DO THE SAME. JOIN THE VOLKSSTURM, AND WE WILL DRIVE THE RUSSIAN HORDES AWAY!”

“What will I do when the Russians come?” she asked him. “I don’t know where to go. I don’t know if any of my friends are alive. I don’t know if they too have lost their homes.”

“You knew this was coming. You’ve been warned again and again. Why didn’t you go somewhere else? Why did you stay in Berlin?”

“For the same reason you are staying here, Herr Stumpfegger. I’m a Berliner. We don’t leave our city.”

He wrinkled his forehead and thought over that for a few seconds. “You can stay in the basement, woman,” he said without enthusiasm. “You can sleep on the couch for the next few days.”

“Everything I owned is inside that rubble,” she said. “I have no money with me. I would only be a burden to you.”

“You may be, at that,” he said with an evil smile. “I’m not doing this for you but for Herr Doktor Dresdner. He asked me to help you if you’re in trouble. He’s a generous man.”

She was shocked by his words and wanted to run after him as he goose-stepped away to the red glare coming from the east. She wanted to ask him how he knew about Emil and her. They had met in the utmost secrecy, and on the nights he had stayed over, she had made sure that the coast was clear before she took him to her apartment. Even more puzzling to her was why Emil Dresdner, the scholar turned healer, the gentlest, most sensitive man she had ever known, would want to ask this strutting fool, whose faith in his Führer and Wehrmacht was that of a fanatic, to keep an eye on her.

Dawn was breaking around her. A boy riding a bicycle stood in front of the steps of the building, gave a surprised look at the rubble, tossed a *Völkischer Beobachter* at her feet, whistled, and went on his way. She had heard the Nazis had stopped distributing the newspaper even though they were still printing it. She then noticed the message someone had scrawled in red ink on the front page: “Today at 4:00 p.m., meet us in the basement of our office in Alexanderplatz.”

Holding the paper gingerly, trying to minimize contact with the disgusting Nazi rag, she walked back to the garden. The three bodies were lying there amid the crushed red and yellow tulips, and Marta Ritter's white teeth gleamed as though she was modeling for toothpaste. Hannah felt like crying and hastily averted her eyes. Blindly, she went down the wooden steps to the basement and went inside. It was dark there, and the air was stuffy. She kept the door open, found the extinguished the candles, and relit them. She felt very tired and wanted to sit down somewhere. She looked around and saw the couch that was going to be hers for the next few nights below the obligatory portrait of the Führer in his SA uniform. The couch was made of brown leather and was showing cracks here and there. There was a beer mug next to it on a small table, and a pack of playing cards. The ace of spades was on top, and Hannah idly picked it up and let it fall to the floor. It fell face down, and she saw a picture of a naked woman squatting, her vulva spread apart. She put the card back on its deck with its face up, thinking that she knew very little about Stumpfegger. What was he? A plainclothesman for the Gestapo? Or an ordinary German who tattled occasionally to get a reward? She wandered around the room and then into a bedroom obviously reserved for Stumpfegger's use. The walls were covered with Nazi insignias and pictures of the higher-ups. There was an SS dagger autographed by Himmler and a picture of Eva Braun playing with Hitler's dog, Blondi. Her eyes fell on two battery-operated radios lying on the floor next to the unmade bed. She turned on the first one and quickly realized it was a Nazi radio—it had only one channel, used exclusively for broadcasting the party line.

“Today is the Führer's birthday,” she heard. “Our beloved leader will turn fifty-six today. Unlike previous occasions, there will be no mass celebrations. The Führer, fighting for the survival of the Aryan race, is preoccupied with the war spawned by the Jewish international bankers and the Bolshevists in Russia. He—”

She turned it off and looked speculatively at the other portable radio. She switched it on, twiddled the dial, and stopped when she heard a speaker with a pronounced French accent saying, “Deutschland, your fight for *lebensraum* has turned Germany into a burial ground.” She turned to another channel and heard an announcer from the BBC speaking in fluent German. He was asking the German public to cooperate with the Allies. “Hitler did this to you, and you have suffered enough. Do not resist us, but act with us to put an end to your suffering.”

She stretched out on the bed and imagined she was in a small boat in the middle of a stormy sea, unaware of where she was and getting confusing signals from various sources on her radio. It was only a week ago Goebbels was assuring Berliners that victory was around the corner, for General Wenck’s army was on its way and would repel the Russian hordes. Now it looked like the British, the French, the Russians, and the Americans were all marching inside Germany, converging toward Berlin. This was a repetition of what had happened twenty-six years ago, in the last phases of the First World War, when Field Marshal Ludendorff and his cohorts were declaring they were winning the war even though it was obvious that Germany had no chance of victory. Soldiers had deserted in droves, and sailors had openly rebelled against the state. Soon the kaiser had been forced to abdicate, and a new republic had been born and along with it the new Weimar culture. She belonged to that new culture, with Bauhaus as its epicenter, influenced by new ideas, new faces, new social mores, and new artists—Paul Klee, Wassily Kandinsky, Piet Mondrian, Josef Albers, Oskar Schlemmer...but that was a quarter of a century ago. The icons had all left Germany, and she felt alone, in a wasteland, without a friend—her son was fighting somewhere in Russia, her half brother was in a detention center, and her lover was helping wounded soldiers at the front.

She collapsed into the bed and pulled the smelly sheets over her head.

She was woken up by a man's angry voice.

"What are you doing in my bed, woman?" Stumpfegger was shouting, angrily waving the *Völkischer Beobachter* she had left for him on the doorstep.

"I got tired; I fell asleep," she said groggily.

"I made it clear that you were to sleep on the couch," he said. "Don't crawl into my bed again."

She didn't miss the sexual connotation—she was a woman; she needed a man and was offering her body to him. Was there any point in telling him she found him disgusting? He would only think she was saying it because she was scorned.

"What time is it, Herr Stumpfegger?" she asked, hiding her resentment.

"It's noontime. There's a lot of work to be done. The three bodies have to be buried in the garden. And I've to assemble the Werwolves and tell them to drag out and shoot the traitors who are flying white flags in front of their houses."

"Werwolves?"

"They are our guerillas who would fight enemies of the Third Reich and cause havoc among the occupying forces. Haven't you heard Herr Goebbels talk about them on the radio?"

"No, Herr Stumpfegger. I don't know much about what's really going on. Why can't we make peace like they did twenty-six years ago, when the kaiser abdicated and a new government was formed?"

"Your question shows your ignorance, Frau Müller. The Führer is not going to abdicate. We aren't going to be defeated. There may be temporary setbacks, but there won't be a second

defeat. General Steiner and General Wenck will drive off the Russians. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

He was condescending, but she decided to let it go. She moved past him toward the dining room, and he said, "Make something to eat, woman. I've potatoes, bacon, and dried peas in the little pantry next to the kitchen."

So that's the deal, she thought. I am going to be the cook and the maid while I live here in the basement. She was too hungry to be resentful and headed toward the pantry. Its walls were lined with many shelves, and she estimated there were provisions adequate for two people for two or three weeks.

She boiled the potatoes on the small coal stove in the tiny kitchen and grilled the bacon. She went looking for Stumpfegger, but he was not in the bedroom. She ran upstairs and saw him dragging the bodies to a newly dug grave. A wave of nausea gripped her, and she went to kitchen sink and retched. She felt better, drank a glass of water, and waited for Stumpfegger to finish his work.

He tramped in a few minutes later, took off his jackboots, and looked at her interrogatively. Thinking he wanted food, she went to the kitchen and placed the bacon and potatoes on the dining table.

"No bread?" he asked.

"I couldn't find any."

"I forgot to get my rations. I'm so busy these days," he said.

He fumbled in his pockets, brought out his ration card, and gave it to her.

"You will get the rations for me," he said. "If anyone asks you where you got the card, tell them you're my guest."

He sat down at the dining table and chewed his food noisily while she moved to the sofa and wondered how and where she could take a bath.

“You aren’t eating?” he asked suddenly.

“I am not hungry.” She lied because she didn’t want to eat with him.

“You should eat something. You’ve a lot of work to do.”

“What kind of work?” she asked, thinking how their relationship had changed overnight from tenant and landlord to that of serf and overlord.

“You are a painter, and I want you to paint some slogans on the walls in the neighborhood. The words are on this piece of paper. There are red paint cans and brushes in the workshop behind the kitchen.”

She looked at the slogans and had to control herself from laughing at their absurdity.

“VOLKSSTURM IS THE SYMBOL OF GERMAN UNITY,” read one. “VICTORY DEPENDS ON YOU,” read the next. The third one simply stated, “LONG LIVE THE FÜHRER!”

“You still think we’re going to win this war, Herr Stumpfecker?” she asked meekly, in order not to offend him.

“The Führer has secret weapons in his arsenal, the V-2 and the V-4 rockets,” he explained, as though she were a child. “Also, it stands to reason that the British and the Americans are likely to join us in our fight against the Russians to save Western civilization from the Bolsheviks. The Americans have crossed the Rhine and met with little resistance from us. They will be in Berlin shortly. In the next few days, the war is going to take a U-turn. We will drive the Russians back to the Urals with the help of our American and British allies—and the Führer will have won a terrific diplomatic victory.”

“You’ve explained everything so clearly, Herr Stumpfegger,” she said with a straight face.

“Now take the can of red paint and a couple of brushes, and start painting the slogans on the walls.”

“If there are any walls left in our neighborhood,” she said and immediately wished she could take back her words, but Stumpfegger didn’t seem to take offense.

“There are plenty of walls left, woman,” he said. “Also store shutters...and bus stands...and kiosks. You will find that traitors from within have been painting lies about the Third Reich on every available space. They say the war is lost and the Nazi Party is dead. Paint our patriotic slogans over them. And if you see white flags hoisted on houses, note down their street address, and the Werwolves will take care of them tonight.”

With those parting words, he stomped off to join his comrades in some basement in Alexanderplatz to make plans to redeem Germany’s honor. Hannah, pushed and pulled by contradictory feelings, didn’t know whether to laugh or to cry. She hated the Third Reich, but she loved Germany, its land, and the culture that had nurtured her, long before the Nazis arrived on the political scene. Now the stage was set for the final act, for the immolation scene in *Gottterdammerung*. She didn’t want to be a witness to it and regretted that she hadn’t gone to America like many of her colleagues at the Bauhaus had—she didn’t want to leave Johann, her half brother, and had stayed on in the hope that she could somehow shield him from the fate that was in store for him, but she hadn’t been able to do that either and could never forgive herself for not giving him the sanctuary he had asked of her.

She suddenly got scared, a pang of fear that gnawed her insides as she saw a rat streak by and disappear into a mysterious hole somewhere. The ceiling of the basement creaked, and she prayed it would cave in and put an end to her life. She crawled back onto the lumpy couch and

lay there shivering from the drafts that seemed to come from the door that Stumpfegeger had forgotten to close properly. She was too tired to get up and shut it and, closing her eyes, drifted into sleep.

Two

Zhukov's Armies and Konev's Tanks

Washing herself as best she could using the water coming out of the kitchen tap, she set forth to do the tasks assigned to her by Stumpfegger. She found the can of red paint in the tiny workshop behind the kitchen and two brushes with wide, hard bristles. And after a little searching, she found a duffel bag to carry the rations home and some cash in a desk drawer.

When she came outside, the sun was shining into her eyes, and it hurt. She squinted at the massive mound of rubble in front of her and looked the other way. The entire Schöneberg area to the east and south of her seemed devastated by the bomb attacks. She wished she could capture the scene for posterity in the manner of surrealists like Giorgio de Chirico or Salvador Dali, even though her style of painting was quite unlike theirs. What she could do more easily—if only she could retrieve her camera and darkroom equipment from the heap of plaster, wood, and steel lying before her—was to make photomontages in the manner of Hanna Hoch of the Berlin Dada group, with whom she had worked for a while before going to Bauhaus.

A small plane was flying overhead, and she saw a red hammer-and-sickle sign painted under its wings. Obviously, the Russians were surveying the damage the Americans had inflicted on Berlin and taking pictures of it.

With hesitant steps, she moved west to Potsdamer Strasse. Kleistpark on her left was completely in ruins, and the only structure left standing was, ironically, the air-raid shelter on its northern side. Dead bodies lay sprawling on the ground, and sometimes she had to step on them or over them, against her moral scruples. Walking north, she looked at the familiar streets—Pallasstrasse, Winterfeld Strasse, Bulow Strasse—and saw ramshackle heaps of plaster and wood

where there used to be houses. The Sportsplatz, where the Führer had given his dramatic speech three years ago and Goebbels had asked the Berliners if they were ready for a “total war” to the accompaniment of cheers from the crowd, was in ruins, and so was the Hofbräuhaus next to it, where the SA used to carouse and molest young men and boys after parades.

On Kurfürsten Strasse, which was not as badly damaged as some of the other streets, she saw the “broom girls”—young Jewish girls and Russian women soldiers captured during the war—picking up the debris and sweeping the streets. Dressed in rags, they looked dirty and malnourished, deliberately keeping their eyes on the road and never making eye contact with passersby, fearful of the SS guards who stood watching them, ready to intervene if someone offered the girls a bun or an apple or stopped to have a kindly word with them.

She walked down a side street, looking for a produce market that she used to go to, but it was shut down. A few doors down, crowds were looting from a general store that had its doors blown open by the bombing. She stood in line, and when her turn came, she took a toothbrush and a bar of soap. “Look, there are bottles of honey and jam in the back,” a man carrying an armful of stolen goods said to her. She left two marks for her purchases in front of the cash register—which stood untouched by the looters who would never dream of stealing money, even when no one was watching—and left the store.

Where to go next? She thought she would walk toward the center of Berlin to see what was going on, but as she neared the Tiergarten, she noticed that SS men were hurriedly erecting barricades across several streets.

An old woman standing across the street with a grocery bag came hobbling over to her and said in a whisper, “They say the Russians are firing artillery and rockets at the Reich Chancellery. That’s why these guys are putting up barriers.”

“What’s the Führer going to do?”

“I don’t know. The Russians will occupy Berlin in a couple of days, and we all have to become communists then.”

My mother would have liked that, thought Hannah. Those early days of the November uprising in 1918 came to her mind vividly, as did the fights with her mother, who would drag her to speeches given by Rosa Luxemburg, Karl Liebknecht, and other leaders of the German left.

“Let me stay home with Johann, Mutti,” she would plead when her mother would insist on taking Johann to the meetings and parades.

“Let him learn. Let him watch a working-class revolution. Let him see the red flag flying over the kaiser’s palace,” was her response.

Her mother was never the same after the November revolution had fizzled out. Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht had been killed soon after by the Freikorps, and the working class lost its revolutionary fervor and walked into the waiting arms of Adolf Hitler who won them over with his patriotic rants about the stab in the back by the “November criminals” that had caused Germany to lose the war and the need to fight the Bolshevik and Jewish international conspiracy determined to destroy the purity of the Aryan race. Now, a quarter of a century later, it looked like the Bolshevik and Jewish international conspiracy would end up being the winners, and the red flag would be flying over the Reich Chancellery; in the end, der Führer had accomplished nothing but disaster and defeat.

As though reading her thoughts, the old woman mumbled, “I wish Bismarck was still alive. He picked his fights carefully, unlike Hitler. He would have never sent our troops to Russia. Bismarck was a shrewd man, and Germany was safe under him.”

Hannah didn’t want to get into a political discussion with this woman.

“Where did you get your rations from?” she asked, with a smile. “I didn’t find any stores in Schöneberg.”

“Go two blocks west to Cornelius Strasse, and you will find stores there,” she said and hobbled away to talk to someone else in the street.

There were lines in front of the grocery store in Cornelius Strasse, and Hannah had to wait twenty minutes before she was able to buy potatoes, bacon, butter, and ersatz bread and coffee. When she asked for milk, the shopkeeper abruptly brushed her off by saying, “No milk,” and turned to the next customer. The woman next in line told her, “Goebbels promised milk for our babies, but no store carries it. Our kids are dying from not drinking milk.”

Hannah nodded sympathetically and walked out of the store. The sun was still bright, and the rays glinted from the handlebars of dozens of bicycles stacked in a row across the street in a bicycle rental store. On an impulse, she decided to rent a bicycle and ride around for an hour to see the damage suffered by her city from the last bombing raid.

Leaving her bags at the bicycle store in lieu of a deposit, she got on a bicycle and took off in a southerly direction toward Steglitz. Only after a few minutes did she realize that she hadn’t asked herself why she was going to Steglitz, and she immediately came up with the answer. She wanted to see if Emil’s home was still standing and his wife and children—whom she had seen only in photographs—were unhurt.

There was now gunfire coming from the south, and she wondered if the Russians were coming from all directions, squeezing Berlin by forming a cordon around it. Steglitz had been damaged as badly as Schöneberg, she noticed. Kaiserallee, where Emil lived, was reduced to smoldering ruins, and Hannah was scared of riding her bike through it. She dismounted and looked at the street from the corner of Rheinstrasse. The fashionable women’s boutique owned

by Johanna Koenig, whom she had seen at artists' parties, was wrecked as a result of a direct hit by a bomb. So was the wine bar next to it. And all that remained of the apartment building where Emil and his family had lived on the top floor was a gap and a pile of debris.

What happened to the huge fish store on the ground floor, where I used to watch the turtles swim in water tanks? was her first incongruous reaction, for she felt more empathy for the turtles than the dead people she saw lying in the street. We brought this on ourselves, she thought, surveying the carnage, and we got what we deserved. But she made an exception for Emil and wondered if anyone had notified him of the wreckage. When he returns from war, he will have nothing, she thought. Nothing other than me, that is, if he still wants me.

She couldn't get the image of the dead turtles out of her mind as she rode the bicycle north, toward the Zoo Berlin. She was hoping that she could go in there, as she had done a hundred times before, and be soothed by watching the leaping monkeys, the eternally pacing tigers and lions, and the pelicans and herons meditating before stagnant water. She circled around the bicycle path around the zoo and noticed that several tall trees had been knocked down to the ground by bombs. "What did the trees do to you to hurt them like this?" she asked the unknown assailant—in her mind a pilot wearing an American or British uniform. The gates were closed, and getting off her bicycle, she stood near them, listening for familiar roars and shrieks, but the only sound she could hear came from the periodic bursts of Russian artillery. She wondered if the animals had been removed to a safe place or had perished in the air raids, and she looked for a zoo employee to chat with but couldn't find anyone.

She mounted her bike and rode away from the zoo, making a right turn at the *Bahnhof* and reaching Breitscheidplatz. Her heart thudded against her ribs when she saw that the Gothic spires of the Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church—the Berlin landmark portrayed in a thousand

posters—had been blown off by bombs, making it look like a huge carnivore baring its fangs. Not far from it, damaged beyond recognition, was the Romanitsche Café, her favorite hangout in the early twenties. Every night she would be there with the Berlin Dada group, a twenty-four-year-old girl with short-cropped blond hair and bright-red lipstick, waiting for a smile or glance from the stars of the Berlin art world—George Grosz, Hannah Hoch, Jean Arp, and Kurt Schwitters. Hannah Hoch had taught her how to create photomontages and also to love both men and women, dissolving boundaries of gender, race, and class in the universal sea of human warmth. Hannah's composite montages of nude women had opened up a new world of art to her, as did Hannah's first kiss on her lips. And Kurt Schwitters had taught her how to make art free of realism, political sentiment, and conventions fostered by the doorkeepers of the academy and to be true to one's instincts. Those years were her years of freedom, during which she had managed to acquire the inner strength to resist her mother's urges to join the left wing and her uncle Werner's equally strong pull to join the right and become a true German. Even though the whole Dada experiment had crumbled after four or five years and Bauhaus had replaced Berlin as the artistic center of Germany, the sight of the ruined café revived forgotten memories and the faces and gestures of her various artist friends. They loved me, she thought, for I was one of them, bound together by the notion of changing the world through art.

She bicycled eastward on Tauentzienstrasse, stopping only when she saw a huge gaping hole in the street. Cautiously she peered down and saw dead bodies lying on the subway platform. A large bomb or missile must have created the hole and killed the people who had gathered for shelter in that subway station, she surmised.

She moved the bicycle to the other side of the street and pedaled on to Nollendorfplatz, where Russian refugees, numbering tens of thousands, used to live twenty years ago, and there was an

array of restaurants lining the streets where one could get blinis, shashliks, and borscht and have one's fortune told by gypsies. Sometimes she would go with her mother and Paul to the Café Leon, where Russian intellectuals hung around drinking endless glasses of vodka. There would be heated discussions about Lenin and Trotsky, and Paul, an emotionally volatile man, would get into violent arguments with his equally combustible compatriots. She saw in her mind's eye, as in an old family photo, her beautiful mother with her hair worn loose and her full breasts bouncing under her coarse linen blouse, putting her arm around Paul, trying to calm him down after one of his tirades. The image vanished quickly, for the Café Leon no longer stood in its accustomed place, and all she saw was the remnant of a wall with shards of glass scattered around it. "The old Berlin I knew is gone," she said to herself. "My past, embodied in the streets and buildings of this city, has disappeared. So has my identity. I have no money, no studio, no loved ones, no place of residence. The life I had lived once exists now only as tendrils, ethereal plumes of memory that are easily wafted and carried away."

She returned the bicycle to the rental place on Cornelius Strasse and walked to her house, carrying the heavy bag of groceries and the sack containing the red paint and brushes on her shoulder. She thought she would dump the latter somewhere, but then her eyes rested on a white remnant of a wall standing on a side street, like the jagged tooth of a prehistoric monster dug out from the earth. She stood next to it and painted "DEATH TO THE FÜHRER!" in large letters.

As she was walking off, pleased with herself, a shadowy figure suddenly materialized before her and said, "I've never seen you before. What group are you with?"

Taken aback, she walked away from him, but he followed her, saying, "We are your friends. Come and join us tomorrow night. We are going to celebrate the death of the Third Reich."

He must belong to the Berlin underground, she thought, one of those leftwing radicals and artists who were now coming out of the woodwork.

“Are you an artist?” she asked.

“No, a movie director,” he said. “We make documentaries and send them abroad. We have a party meeting tomorrow, and some of our comrades returning from exile in Russia will be there. Why don’t you come? It’s in the basement next door to the Saint Ludwige Kirche.”

“I will try,” she said with a smile and walked away from him.

But she had no intention to attend a Communist Party meeting and felt the same resentment toward the man that she had experienced toward radical groups at Bauhaus who used to pester her to show more commitment to the left. She belonged to no party, and she followed no dogma. She was happy forming her own idea of the world from what she saw and heard around her and wanted to make her own decision about events and persons. As Kandinsky had once told her, politics was the serpent in the artist’s Garden of Eden—it seduced you and made you lose your bearings. His was a voice of authenticity, for she knew he was speaking from his own experience.

She gazed at the several piles of debris on her street, and it took her a few minutes before she recognized the mound of wood and plaster that used to be her house. Going down the steps, she opened the door to the basement and saw a group of men standing around, listening to Ludwig Stumpfegger. They were all dressed in makeshift uniforms and carried old rifles. None of them were young or in good physical condition.

She figured they were members of the Volkssturm present at an impromptu meeting. Stumpfegger was pointing a pencil to a large hand-drawn map of Berlin that he had tacked onto a wall.

“Marshall Zhukov’s armies are closing in from the east and the northeast,” he said, “and Marshall Konev’s tanks are massing up in the south of Berlin. It will take many weeks before the Americans reach Berlin. I am told that Stalin wants a total victory over Berlin before May Day.”

“What do we do next?” asked a man with a large Adam’s apple, wearing thick glasses.

“We may have to fight them from the rooftops if they start patrolling the streets. We will provide you with rifles.”

“There are only a few rooftops left in this neighborhood,” said another man with an unshaven face and a cynical expression.

“Kill Ivan when he patrols the street at night. Use grenades and bombs on cordons of soldiers; set booby traps with sticks of dynamite.”

Nobody responded, and their glazed eyes wandered here and there until they settled on her, with questioning looks.

“That’s Hannah Müller,” said Stumpfegger. “She is my tenant and lives in the basement, for the time being, as my guest.”

One of the men raised his cap and bowed, but the rest paid no attention to her.

“We need refreshment,” said Stumpfegger to her. “Give us something to eat, woman. There’s food in the kitchen.”

He’s making my role clear to these numbskulls, Hannah thought. She controlled her anger and went into the kitchen. On the counter, there was a large bag of sausages, two pumpernickel

loaves, and a dozen bottles of schnapps. He must have gotten them from the black market, she thought.

She felt hungry and cut herself a piece of the pumpernickel bread. She lit the stove and heated the sausages on the grill. She ate a sausage and thought it was very good. Then she took a tray with bread, sausages, and bottles of schnapps to the sitting room.

“The golden pheasants are leaving Berlin, I understand,” she heard a man say. “They’re heading west to escape the Russians.”

It took her a moment to figure out that he was alluding to top Nazi Party officials, the bureaucrats who had been running Berlin for more than a dozen years. It didn’t surprise her that they were leaving. They wanted to move west to be in the American-occupied part of Germany. Once there, they would deny they had anything to do with the Nazis and cut a deal with the conquerors.

“The Führer is staying,” said Stumpfegger. “That’s all that matters to me.”

He stretched out his hand in a Hitler salute, but none of the other men responded. Stumpfegger became angry, and he vented his rage on her.

“Why are you standing here, woman?” he asked her.

“I came here to bring the food,” she said, pointing to the tray.

She turned her back on them and went into the kitchen to unpack the groceries she had brought in. She was still feeling hungry. She ate another sausage with a chunk of bread and drank water from the tap. She brushed her teeth with the newly brought toothbrush and washed her face with the new cake of soap. She wondered if she would be killed by Zhukov’s armies or by Konev’s tanks. In a way, she was glad that the curtain was going to fall on the Thousand Year

Reich. She felt very tired and wanted to lie down somewhere. The couch was out of the question because some men were sitting on it. She stretched herself on the kitchen floor and fell asleep.

Three
“Voyna Kaput”

When she awoke, it was dark in the kitchen even though her wristwatch—given by Emil and set in a gold bracelet—said it was six o’clock. There was no one else in the basement.

The men must have gone to set their booby traps, she thought.

In the sitting room, there were empty bottles of schnapps and remnants of food served last night. She lit the stump of a candle on the dining table and found a note from Stumpfegger next to it.

“I am on a mission,” it said. “I don’t know when I’ll be back. You’ve to do without my help. You’re on your own.”

She smiled, thinking of the connotations contained in the few words. It was presumptuous of him to think she was dependent on him, but he was a fool.

She cleaned up the living room, made a cup of coffee, and washed her hair using the water from the kitchen tap. She was surprised by the accumulation of dust and grime in her hair and wondered if they contained toxic or cancer-producing chemicals.

Drying herself, she went to Stumpfegger’s room and turned on the Nazi radio. Goebbels’s high-pitched, excited voice was asking the Werwolves to rise against the enemy.

“Berliners, have courage,” he shrieked. “Berlin will be free. We will win this war. The Führer is not going to abandon you. He is in the Reich Chancellery, directing the course of the war.”

The other radio carried a broadcast from the Russians.

“We will free Berlin in two days,” it said. “We will arrest the Nazi war criminals. Berliners, you have nothing to fear. Your government, and only your government, is responsible for the atrocities committed on the Russian people. We do not believe in collective guilt.”

What did all this talk mean? She had a sensation of being crushed between two huge rocks, one with a swastika painted on it and the other with a hammer and sickle. All her life she had wanted only to paint and had never been able to do so except for her interlude at Bauhaus. Wars, famine, riots, secret police, torture—these seemed to be the norms of existence in her universe. And she had a premonition that her life was moving from one inferno to another. She had no illusions about Russia because Kandinsky, living as an exile in France, had written to her about the fate of artists and writers who had crossed the party line set up by Josef Stalin. She did not want to live in another police state, and she wondered if she could persuade Emil, after his return, to move elsewhere. What shall I do about my brother? she asked herself, feeling lost, confused, and powerless in the vortex of events.

She didn't want to sit around and feel sorry for herself, so she looked for things to do. Her wet hair had dried, and casting her eyes around, she found a tortoiseshell comb in the bedroom. It had Stumpfegger's red hairs on it, and she rinsed it under the tap before running it through her hair. She then got dressed in her old work clothes and went outside to the street.

Mixed with the acrid smell of bombs, there was the scent of spring flowers—lilacs and sweet pea and marigolds—from innumerable small gardens in the area. She saw a blackbird flying around, chasing its mate. Nature seemed to carry on, oblivious of the carnage inflicted by humankind.

She finally plucked up courage to face squarely what her eyes had been avoiding—namely, the huge gray-and-brown mound before her. She wondered if she could dig a hole from the side

and somehow stumble upon the steel case in which her paintings were kept. She ran over to the garden and brought back a spade. She tried digging on the side where she thought the studio had collapsed, but the chunks of plaster and pieces of beams were too heavy for her to move. In despair, she was ready to give up the project when she sighted the boy who had delivered the *Völkischer Beobachter* a day ago. This time he had a package for Stumpfegger, and he brought it over to her.

“What is in this package?” she asked him. “It’s heavy.”

“I think it’s a machine gun, Frau Stumpfegger,” he replied, and she couldn’t suppress a smile at the absurdity of being labeled as Stumpfegger’s wife.

The boy was about fifteen and built strong, and an idea came to her.

“What’s your name?”

“Walther,” he said.

“Can you dig through this pile and look for something that belongs to me, Walther?” she asked him. “It’s a black steel case, and it must be on the side where I’m standing now.”

“I’ll give it a try,” he said.

“I don’t have much money, but I can give you a new bottle of schnapps. A bottle of *Fürst Bismarck*. You can sell it to someone.”

“Schnapps is as good as cash,” he said with a smile.

He climbed up the mound and started digging, but it didn’t seem to be an easy task. The plaster had hardened and clung to the chunks of wood and metal. The boy was tired after a few minutes and came down.

“I’ll bring my friends Franz and Gunter. They’re bigger and stronger. With their help we can drag out the box.”

“I don’t have any more schnapps to give,” she said.

He looked disappointed, but it was only for a moment.

“Maybe you can give us something belonging to your husband. A dagger or a pistol will be great.”

“I don’t know. Let me look around. When will you be back with your friends?”

“It won’t be until tomorrow morning.”

“Can’t you come back later today?”

“We have to report for duty soon,” he said, puffing up his chest. “We’re in the Boy’s Battalion. We’re being trained to kill the Russians.”

The Russians will kill you first in all likelihood, she thought as the boy left with the bottle of schnapps. Only fifteen years old, and you will be sacrificed to appease the Nazi demons.

She was about to go downstairs when the side of the mound nearest to her cracked and heaved, and a huge chunk fell off. She saw the handle of a box and, without thinking, ran up the mound and pulled at it. When she brought it down, she realized the box didn’t belong to her. It was locked only with a clasp, and on opening it, she saw a new pair of shoes, a sweater, two blouses, a skirt, and a pair of slacks, all neatly folded. It must belong to Fraulein Ritter, and she must have packed her clothes to go on a trip to a foreign country with her boyfriend, since women weren’t allowed to wear slacks in Germany by order of the Führer. These clothes would fit me, and the sweater and slacks would be welcome additions to my nonexistent wardrobe, she thought, even though they’re meant for a younger woman.

She took the box downstairs, removed the clothes, and placed them under the couch. She was wondering what to do with the box when the entire basement shook, and she heard explosions all

around her. American bombs? British bombs? Russian bombs? She no longer cared. They were all welcome to put an end to her life.

She opened the last remaining bottle of schnapps and had a drink to steady her nerves. She turned on the radio and learned that American B2 bombers had dropped incendiary bombs in Tiergarten and Schöneberg areas and that a water tank had been hit. She went to the kitchen and turned on the tap, and it spewed forth some brown stuff, sputtered, and stopped. Were they going to kill all Berliners by cutting off water? It would be collective punishment in its most extreme form, she thought, worse than the incendiary bombs and the disruption of food supplies.

Feeling frightened inside the basement, especially of the rat, she decided to go for a walk, even if it meant being killed by a bomb or a bullet. She changed into the sweater and pants belonging to Fraulein Ritter, which fitted her perfectly—the sweater was made of cashmere and silk, and the pants were Merino wool—and she thought she looked good for a forty-five-year-old woman with a 50 percent chance of being found dead in the clothes.

When she climbed the stairs and reached the garden, she noticed that the mound was gone, replaced by charred, burning lumps. Her street had been firebombed, and there was nothing but smoking ruins as far as her eye could see. A few women were coming out of basements here and there, wandering around to see the damage done to their street. We've been reduced to a nation of basement dwellers, she thought—all that's needed is to disrupt the supply of candles, and we will have to live like moles.

She walked up the street for a while and stopped when she saw a young woman dressed in a Frauenschaft outfit with a Hitler button pinned to her breast making signs to her from across the street.

“The Russians have reached the east of Berlin,” the woman said. “They’ll be here by tomorrow.”

“I don’t care anymore,” said Hannah. “I just want the fighting to stop. Look at the damage done to Berlin.”

“You wouldn’t want to talk that way if you knew what the Russians are like,” said the woman. “I spoke to a refugee from Silesia yesterday, and she said the Russians were beasts.”

“So were the Nazis.”

“I wouldn’t talk that way if I were you,” the woman said with a grim smile. “Two blocks down, in Kreuzberg, there is a man hanging from a tree. The Werwolves hanged him for collaborating with the Russians.”

“I am no collaborator,” said Hannah.

It has come down to this now, she thought. We’re all going to accuse each other of being traitors.

“Be careful what you say, and don’t wear pants if you want to stay alive,” said the woman spitefully and walked away to her own subterranean abode.

Rattled by the manner in which the woman had spoken to her, Hannah walked the two blocks to Kreuzberg to check out what she had said. Ten minutes later she came across a small crowd staring at a man hanging from a tree. Pinned to the tree was a handwritten placard saying, “TOMAS BUTSCH WAS A TRAITOR AND DESERVED TO DIE. BERLINERS BEWARE!”

Nausea seized her, and she hurried away, taking a northern route. “Think pleasant thoughts,” said Hannah to herself. “Think of your childhood in wonderful Schwabing, the kind people in your mother’s circle, the marzipan sweets they brought for you, and the games they played with

you.” But nostalgia didn’t work this time, and Hannah trudged along, finding a path amid the debris all around, stopping only when she saw a Russian soldier.

He wore a greenish-khaki uniform with a closed collar and brass buttons on his front and on his epaulettes. He had light-blond hair covered by a peaked cap and carried a machine gun. He looked like her son from a distance, and she assumed he was from Ukraine, where many people were of German stock.

The soldier was surveying the wreckage and paid no attention to her. He must be on a reconnaissance mission, she thought. It was hard to think of him as an enemy, and she wanted to accost him, to ask him questions about the war. But he merely looked around, ignoring her completely, and walked back eastward.

There were leaflets trailing in his wake, and she realized the soldier must have strewn them around. They were in red and white and had a hammer and sickle sign in the middle. They warned that the end of war was near and asked ordinary German citizens to cooperate with the Russians in identifying the Nazis and turning them over. Next to them, and muddied by the feet of passersby, she saw leaflets with swastikas in black and red threatening to imprison Berliners who read or distributed enemy propaganda. Hannah picked up both leaflets and put them inside her sweater. I’ll save these as historical records, she thought.

She turned south in the direction of Tempelhof, but there were too many barricades, and she went the opposite way, up Prinzenstrasse. There were markings on walls, giving directions to the Volkssturm, and she wondered if Stumpfegger was going to fight the Russian tanks on the southern front. A few shops were still open, and there were women standing in long lines in front of them to buy potatoes and butter.

“The Russians are in Nikolasee,” she overheard one of them saying. But a few feet away, another woman was saying they were in Müllerstrasse. So they are streaming into Berlin from the south and the north, Hannah thought. But to make the situation even more confusing, a burst of Russian artillery lasting several minutes came from Oranienstrasse in the east.

The women fell flat on the street as shells exploded, and Hannah followed suit. The impact of the fall hurt her palm and elbow. She lay on the dirty street, with the dust blowing into her face, while planes flew over her, firing machine guns. She didn't know who they were aiming at, and the sound of rushing feet made her look up. She saw German soldiers, unshaven and dirty, running away from the enemy fire, stumbling and panting, looking very different from the golden warriors who had marched behind Panzer tanks through these same streets a year ago.

A few minutes later, the women got up and methodically went back to their prior positions in the food queue. Hannah too got up and noticed with chagrin a huge black smudge on her newly acquired sweater. She didn't want to walk around with that stain and decided to go home. She turned to a side street and walked rapidly, afraid of another artillery attack or air raid. It was a narrow street cluttered with debris, and when she climbed over a mound, she stumbled on the body of a dead messenger boy, with his bicycle still between his legs. He was lying on his face, and from above he appeared to be in his early teens, and this was confirmed by the Hitlerjugend armband he was wearing. She pushed aside the blond hair matted with blood, and on turning his face toward her, she saw it was Walther, the newspaper boy whom she was supposed to see the next morning with his two friends. Impulsively, she kissed his forehead and mumbled, “Rest in peace, Walther.” As an afterthought, she took his bike away from him and the small pistol that was in a holster on his belt.

She pushed the bicycle through the debris-laden street until she reached the relatively uncluttered Alexandrinenstrasse, when she got on the bicycle and rode homeward. She had never ridden a man's bicycle before and had trouble maneuvering it, but pedaling it was easy. Several women stared at her as she went down the street, and she realized they were trying to put two and two together in figuring out what she was up to—for she had a large ugly patch on her sweater, she was wearing pants, and she was holding a pistol in her hand.

She put the bicycle in the garden and went down to the basement. She hid the pistol under the couch and took off her sweater. The two leaflets fell to the floor, and she picked them and put them on the kitchen table. She washed her sweater with water she had saved in a jug earlier and was pleased to see the large patch disappearing as she scrubbed. She hung it out to dry in the kitchen and boiled two potatoes while she changed her clothes to the outfit she had worn in the morning.

Going into Stumpfegger's bedroom, she turned on the short-wave radio. The smooth, urbane voice of the BBC announcer merely recapitulated what she had already guessed—namely, that the Russians would take over Berlin in a matter of hours. The voice calmly asserted that Germany would be divided into four zones, with the eastern half going to Russia and the western to the Americans, British, and French. And Berlin also would be divided likewise.

So, my city is going to be cut into four pieces, thought Hannah. A wave of despondency overcame her, and she cried for a while, after which she felt exhausted and closed her eyes.

She was woken up by the sound of a woman's scream.

"There's someone in your bed, Ludwig," she heard a woman yell.

She saw a buxom blonde who reminded her of the slatternly dancing woman on beer mugs sold all over Germany, singing, "*Froh beim bier Das lieben wir.*"

A moment later Herr Stumpfegger rushed in with a gun in his hand and, on seeing Hannah, said in angry voice, "I've told you not to sleep in my bed, Frau Müller."

"Who is this woman, Ludwig?" the blonde asked.

"She's an artist who used to live on the third floor. I gave her permission to sleep on the couch, and now she has taken over the bedroom."

Hannah got up and walked out of the bedroom.

"She isn't my girlfriend, Liebchen," she heard Stumpfegger tell the blonde. "I let her stay here as a favor to her boyfriend, Herr Doktor Dresdner."

"Are you sure you aren't making this up?" asked the blonde.

"No! I'll ask her to leave the house if her presence bothers you."

"Forget about her. Let her stay tonight, and we'll decide tomorrow what we will do with her."

"Ja, let's go to bed. I am tired," said Stumpfegger.

Hannah, still drowsy, stumbled out of the room and went to sleep on her couch. Hours later, she was woken up by sounds coming from the bedroom—a rhythmic creaking of the bed and grunts and screams—and remembered the arrival of the blonde last night. Stumpfegger likes women on the plump side, she thought. She wondered why humans made so much noise while copulating, while animals were quiet even at the height of sexual frenzy. On the whole, she did like the sounds; there was something positive and life affirming about them, she thought. It was like the thumping rhythms in the opening movement of *The Rite of Spring*, and it drove away the images of death and destruction all around her. The blonde enjoyed life; she was like mother

earth—unlike Hannah, an artist who was incapable of immediacy in feeling other than through paint and brush and had to go through convoluted mental processes to classify and process emotional experience.

That is the way it goes, she thought. We're what we are, and we cannot be someone else.

She again drifted into sleep.

A loud banging on the door to the garden woke her up with a start, and when she looked up, she saw two stocky Russian soldiers with machine guns standing a few feet away from her. They were not like the soldier she had seen yesterday. These had Mongolian features and coarse, oily black hair.

“Why are you here, standing and looking at me?” she asked them in Russian.

They were taken aback by her words.

“Where did you learn Russian?” asked the older one, staring at her with suspicion.

“From my stepfather,” she said. “He came from Moscow.”

“What was he doing here?”

“He was a sculptor.”

They looked at each other for a few minutes, uncertain of the next step.

“*Voyna kaput*,” said the old one in Russian—the war is over.

“We're the victors,” said the second one.

She got up and, out of habit, looked at the watch she kept next to her, wound it, and put it on her wrist. It was past nine o'clock.

The Russians moved close to her. The older one pointed to the watch and said, “Give.”

“It's mine. It was given to me as a present.”

The older soldier grabbed her elbow tightly as the younger one took the watch off her wrist. She screamed and struggled. The Russians were gentle with her, but they wanted the watch and took it off her.

The bedroom door opened and Stumpfegger, in red pajamas patterned with the sig runes used by the SS, rushed out, holding his pistol in his hand. Instantly, the younger soldier turned his machine gun on him. The older one looked at Stumpfegger closely.

“Who’s he?” he asked her in Russian.

“A friend.”

“Is this his house?”

“Da, da.”

“Is he a Nazi?”

She hesitated before answering. “I don’t know,” she said.

“What are you jabbering?” asked Stumpfegger, turning to her.

“They want to know if you’re a Nazi. I told them I didn’t know.”

“I am a Nazi and proud of it,” he said, and gave the Hitler salute.

The older soldier now leveled his machine gun at Stumpfegger and asked the younger man to search the bedroom. The soldier went there and quickly came back.

“There’s a woman sleeping in there,” he said with a smile. “Do I wake her?”

“No. Go see if there’s anything that shows he’s in the SA or the SS.”

The soldier went into the bedroom and soon returned with Stumpfegger’s Nazi Party card that he had taken from his wallet.

“This is what I found,” he said.

“Cover him,” said the older soldier and took the card from him. He spat on it and threw it on the floor. He then took down Hitler’s picture from the wall and stomped on it with his dirty army boots.

This was too much for Stumpfegger. He fumed, he cursed, he shouted, and he rushed forward, cocking his pistol. A burst of gunfire came from the machine gun, and Stumpfegger lurched and fell dead on the floor with a heavy thud.

The blonde came out of the bedroom, still sleepy and disheveled. One of her breasts was popping out of her chemise, and her plump thighs were bare up to her crotch. The two soldiers stared at her, mesmerized.

The blonde peered at Stumpfegger’s body and gave a cry of anguish. “He’s shot,” she said. She looked at the soldiers and said, “You killed him.”

“Explain to this woman that he pointed his pistol at us, and we had to shoot him,” the older soldier said to Hannah, in Russian.

“These men are Russian soldiers. I saw Herr Stumpfegger raise his pistol at them,” said Hannah to the blonde. “They had no choice but to shoot him.”

The blonde looked at Hannah for a few seconds, struggling to understand the sequence of events.

“Ask them to take this corpse away,” she finally said and went back to the bedroom.

Hannah translated the request, and the soldiers reluctantly carried the heavy body up the steps and into the garden. She saw them dig a shallow grave and place Stumpfegger in it. After they had covered it, they looked around, and their eyes fell on the bicycle that she had acquired the day before. They wheeled it away, and she saw the younger man trying to ride clumsily on it.

She was relieved that they were gone and thought she had seen the last of them. But they were back two hours later, drunk, with machine guns dangling from their shoulders.

The older soldier went into the bedroom, and she heard him say, “Frau, *komm.*”

But the young man, she noticed, was coming toward her, and in a quick movement, he grabbed her and laid her on the couch. He unbuttoned his trousers, pulled down her underwear, penetrated her with a quick, hurting thrust, and ejaculated inside her after a few savage movements. The butt of his gun kept knocking against her knees, and she thought it would break her kneecap.

He soon got off her, buttoned his pants, and walked out of the basement. Soon the older soldier followed him, giving her a wink.

She got up and slowly walked to the kitchen, wanting to wash—she felt so unclean. There was brownish water dripping from the tap, and her mind revolted at the thought of using it on her body. She went to the bedroom and saw the blonde cleaning herself with one of Stumpfegger’s shirts, and she followed suit.

“Who knew it would come to this?” the blonde said with a sneer. “An Aryan in the morning and a Mongol in the afternoon. I might as well set myself up as a barracks whore.”

The blonde’s name was Ilke, and her words were prophetic.