

It was still dark. Franz was standing at the door inside the railway station. He hesitated. Outside, it was raining. A shiver ran down his spine. He looked back towards the staircase, undecided.

Two sailors were standing there with a Luftwaffe staff-sergeant, a slender young man. On the pale youth's chest, Franz could see the Iron Cross, First Class, the German Cross in Gold and the ribbons of several other orders.

Now and then, chimneys would remain standing. Dust and smoke and the splintered timber of the beams, while high up in the air, in the crystal blue, dark spots drew white lines, gentle loops on virginal silk.

It was gloomy in the large hall. Franz could smell the humidity and was reluctant to leave the room. The German Cross in Gold sparkled on the grey-blue cloth. All Franz could see of the two sailors was their backs.

The slender fingers round the control stick, his eyes on the panel, the oscillating needles, thin lines above the numbers, phosphorescent green, and outside the plexiglass blue and blue and somewhere in all the blue a little white cloud and perhaps another one, and another, mostly far below the aircraft.

There were soldiers standing over by the closed booking office, and more next to the waiting room entrances. In the middle of the large hall, a number of Wlasow-Cossacks were grouped together in a dense cluster. Some of them were sitting on bundles, others crouched next to them on the floor, all were smoking thick cigarettes which they rolled themselves. A sour smell, mixed with the odour of brandy and ash, enveloped the group. Their dark eyes were focused on the floor, on cigarette-butts, on ripped scraps of trampled paper, on lumps of dirt. The staff-sergeant laughed. He pushed back his cap to reveal dense tufts of hair. Always the same transformation, said Franz to himself. The smell was already changing him; the crossed parachute straps changed him, the vibrations of the aircraft when the engines were warming up changed him. It was too early for the trams to go and Franz heard the rain splashing on the floor whenever the door was opened. It was the heavy rain of the Ukraine. All afternoon they stared through the small windows of the clay hut, while outside the car sat in mud up to its axles, the spinning wheels digging deeper and deeper into the swamp. Shou-

ting and pushing was of little use. The old woman was standing in front of her pregnant daughter, trying to protect her. The officer-cadet smiled. His young face beamed as he gave the old woman something. Most probably something to eat. What else would have been of any value? It was obvious that he had a good opinion of himself and he had an air of maturity about him. And then there was that evening! The labour pains had started, and the groans drifted up towards the window through the darkness of the room. Outside, the rain was splashing down. Sometimes one of the Cossacks stood up and shook his limbs. Franz took no notice. He looked towards the staircase, towards the staff-sergeant and the two sailors. Slender fingers were placed in heated gloves. Boots lined with lambskin, thin wires of tungsten running through them, everything plotted precisely, the green needles, the points, the lines on the monitor, pushing the small button at the end of the control stick. You could feel the plane start to climb immediately. And then, a large loop: just sky, sun, the regular humming of the engines, the gently vibrating needles, every now and then the voice in the headset, that indefinable voice, always the same voice, whether it belonged to the colonel, the senior aircraft man, the lieutenant. Down below, the billows of smoke, the dark blotches, unfamiliar, distant, a square on a piece of paper, a point fixed by letters, a formula arrived at mathematically. Next to the staff-sergeant and the two sailors stood a Red-Cross nurse. She was talking with the three soldiers.

It was dark. Gloomy really. A handful of bulbs threw out a dim light. They swung freely, glowing red dots in space. It was impossible to tell what they were fixed to. The ceiling of the high hall was invisible. Somewhere in all that darkness, the room ended. Everything was grey, black and damp. The humming of the voices, the scraping of the hobnailed boots on the stone floor, the rattling of metal touching metal filled the air with a steady rustling and roaring, which was only occasionally interrupted, drowned and blocked out by the whistling and hissing of the steam engine, the rattling of wheels and knocking of the buffers and the shouting of the railway staff shunting the trains.

Franz stood under the arch of the big doorway. All the openings were boarded up with timber. Only a small door made of undressed

planks led outside. There was a constant coming and going. Franz heard the pattering of the rain. Since the train had passed the summit of the Semmering, the wind had been whipping up a constant stream of rain against the windows of the carriage. The mountains were covered in grey veils of cloud. The trees along the platform were dripping with rain. What kind of trees were they? Birch trees maybe. They might be locust trees. There were often groups of locust trees in the villages. Prickly, stiff and with tall trunks, they stood next to the low huts, spreading a marvellous scent across the roofs and courtyards during flowering. Human beings would disappear among the white trusses of flowers, be covered over, enveloped in sweetness, in the flight of the bees, in the scent of honey, in the mucilage of love. And now the trees were standing there, prickly and bare in front of the little window, and the officer cadet grew pale. He didn't look so good any more. He hardly dared turn around. The old woman was running to and fro. A second woman came, wet, dripping, who knew where she'd come from? She glanced at them both and turned to the woman in labour in the deep darkness of the room, back to the bedstead by the big stove. Franz stared at the dirty floor in front of him. As he had hurried along the now roofless platform towards the exit, he had looked through the glassless windows into the forecourt. In the dim light of a dirty morning sky and a scattering of reddish glowing lamps, large yellowish puddles formed in the round, filled-in bomb craters. Very little exertion was required: push the stick a little towards your body and the aircraft climbed immediately. The blotches became even smaller, became dainty splashes. The next plane climbed too, so did the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, but one over there fell behind. Had it been hit? The little white clouds came bloody close now and then. Sometimes you drifted through them, and it felt like riding a sledge as a child, skidding to and fro. You felt a push, a soft push. But after the load had been dropped, the plane climbed to an altitude beyond the reach of the anti-aircraft guns and it became blue, blue outside the plexiglass window. The needles vibrated and the crew made their reports. The voice of the chief was indistinguishable from that of the senior aircraft man. The instrument panel demanded total concentration from all one's senses. There would be a gap or two, here and there, where the

clouds of smoke, the dark banners from below could push through; but these were immediately drowned out by the familiarly terse and succinct words: military installations in the district of ... have been bombed, and the special announcement fanfares would sound and capture your thoughts back again. After the big attack on London, and then after the mission against La Valetta, everyone was hugging each other and celebrating their lucky return. Emil was hit by a fragment which lodged in his upper thigh and the plane was damaged, but Franz got her home, in spite of the hole in the left wing and some hits to the tail unit. The ambulance was already waiting at the edge of the runway. The Red-Cross nurse's blond chignon was shining. The staff-sergeant offered her a cigarette, before lighting one for himself. Franz watched the way the woman shook her head, laughing. "A German woman doesn't smoke." No, he didn't hear it, and most likely she didn't say it. He only saw how the Luftwaffe officer grabbed the nurse under the arm, how she pointed towards the door and how both, the young staff-sergeant, bearer of the German Cross in Gold, lightfooted, almost dance-like, and the nurse, with small but sure steps, went across the gloomy hall towards the entrance. The sailors followed them with their eyes. They nudged each other. One slapped his thighs. The Wlasow-Cossacks too, woke from their doze as the woman passed them. One of them pushed his sheepskin cap back down his neck, another wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. For a moment, all other noise ceased, and only the steps of the air man and the tripping of the female feet could be heard, then a steam engine roared loudly and intermittently through the darkness, there was a rattling of wheels and knocking together of bumpers. That crying from the darkness, the groaning which often sank into a whimpering. The woman was certainly no older than twenty-three. She was crouching on the edge of the bedstead when they entered the room, and the eyes of the soldiers went straight to her body, especially the swollen belly which she was covering with her hands, as if it was too heavy, and she had to support it with these hands. The officer cadet gave the old woman something. They remained staring at the young woman for a minute, before going to the table by the window. They didn't move from there for quite some time. Streams of water, uninterrupted. It seemed almost as if they were

standing vertically on the other side of the little window panes. No one knew what he had given her. Perhaps a packet of saccharin, perhaps some flints for a lighter, it couldn't have been much, they didn't have much with them. They had been surprised by the rain a few kilometres from the airport, and the car was stuck tightly in the mud on the runway, some two hundred metres away. The water was pouring down and they told themselves it wouldn't last long and a thatched roof was better than a car without a roof and surely the room would be heated. But then it lasted longer, and during the dusk which came on fast, faster than usual, the labour pains started. Perhaps it was all the same to the old woman, whatever it was that the baby-faced man in the foreign uniform had given her. At that moment she was busy with something else, she had no use for it. But the manner in which it was given seemed to reassure her. It seemed to reassure her to such an extent that she disappeared for a good half hour and left the two soldiers alone with the pregnant woman. The men sat in front of the table next to the window, and the woman lay on her bed in the darkness. The officer cadet's voice had sunk to a whisper. He wanted to leave. But where could they go? Their vehicle was stuck in the mud on the runway. The rain was still pouring down like a river, and no matter how hard they stared through the window, they couldn't see any other houses nearby. Perhaps she needs us, he thought, and when the old woman returned, and then later the other woman, clothes dripping with water, and the officer cadet said there must be some other house in the area, he said it out loud as well.

The staff-sergeant and the Red-Cross nurse had reached the wooden door. Franz didn't click his heels, he didn't even salute. He stared at the man's small hands. He knew them, those elegant, well cared-for fingers, fingers that seemed to possess a certain self-awareness, that moved as if they were independent beings, somehow not of this world, fingers that pushed the lever slowly forwards, and then the second one, and waited until the needles passed the first mark on the dial, and then pushed the gears further in, till a constant humming drone could be heard. Release the brakes! And slowly, but then faster and faster down the runway, till the nose and finally the whole heavy craft laden with bombs lifted off the

ground, directed and controlled by the narrow pale hands. But beside him were the bloody hands of the woman, the hands on the body of the woman in labour, the heavy odour of sweat and blood and the groaning of the tormented body. It was too much for the officer cadet. He sat against the wall in the dark, leaning over the table. Outside, it grew completely dark. They could no longer see any sign of their vehicle at all.

‘Hallo Franz! What are you doing here?’, asked the Red-Cross nurse. The pair had stopped in front of him.

He looked up for the first time, looked at her face and saw that it was Erna, Erna, the little girl who had lived in the same building, one floor above him. Erna who played the mandolin and came to see his sister for help with her homework. He had heard nothing of her since 1934. She might have been sixteen or seventeen at the time. Since ‘34! After he had returned from Wöllersdorf, he hardly ever saw her. She didn’t come by any more. Many people he had known before didn’t come by any more. Many people avoided him.

‘I don’t know. A special mission’, he said. Now at last he looked into the face of the officer next to her, finally raised his right hand to the salute.

But the man said only: ‘Hi.’ Judging by his accent he was Bavarian

‘You’ve arrived just in time’, said the nurse. ‘We’ve been bombed out, the whole building is in ruins.’

‘What about mother?’ he asked quickly. ‘And Helmut?’

‘At the moment they’re living in Erlachgasse, I know the house but not the number. If you can wait till five, I’ll be finished here, we could go together, I can show you where they live. They’re quite close to us, in part of a flat belonging to an old professor. We’ve got a new apartment, you see. I have to say, it’s very nice.’ Her voice sounded slightly triumphant.

‘Yes’, he said quietly, and looked at the German Cross in Gold. ‘I can wait till then.’ At the beginning of the war, the doors of the bomb-bay had to be opened by hand, but now everything was electric, hydraulic. One’s thumb had only to press a button and a hidden mechanism operated hinges, the casing of the fuselage opened slowly and the cylindrical explosives with the four metal

fins on their ends left the light blue painted body of the plane.

Again he looked into Erna's face, and then into the hall of the railway station. The sailors by the staircase were still looking at them.

"When did it happen?" he asked finally.

"About...about two weeks ago", said Erna. "By the way, you can go to the shelter over there." She pointed with her hand towards the door. "There'll be something warm to eat in the hall. Just tell the nurse you're a friend of mine. I'll come over at five."

The staff-sergeant touched the rim of his cap with one finger. "Good-bye. All the best", he said. Taking the woman's arm again, the two of them went through the small door into the forecourt. Franz followed.

"Over there", said Erna, and pointed with an outstretched arm towards a wooden shed which stood in a park, or rather, what was left of a park in between tangled broken bushes, split trees, muddy paths and the fantastic remains of park railings. Then Erna and her staff-sergeant were gone, headed off in the other direction. Franz stared after them for a while. "To the air-raid shelter", he could read on a dimly lit signpost: "Mother and Child." He ran through the rain. The tin cover of his gas mask rattled as it banged against his riflebutt.

It was warm in the long low room. Franz had to force his way through crowds of men. All the benches were occupied, even along the walls there were soldiers standing. The air was grey-blue and in places the clouds of the cigarette smoke formed especially dense patterns: waves or circles in silver-grey. Franz pushed himself along past the tables, up to a counter with two Red-Cross nurses standing behind it. While one of them, armed with a large ladle, tipped soup from an enormous pot into the presented plates, the other sorted clean and dirty dishes. It was all accompanied by a lot of noise, and as the men at the tables hardly spoke quietly either, all the sounds blended into a uniform amorphous crescendoing and decrescendoing, humming and scraping.

"What about you, *Unteroffizier*?" asked the nurse with the ladle in her hand. "Don't you want anything?"

"Well, yes", grunted Franz. "But there's no room."

He was right. A number of men were already standing along the

walls of the hut, spooning their soup with their plates clutched in their hands. The nurse shrugged her shoulders.

"What a nuisance", said Franz. "I'd have been better off staying in the hall. But Erna thought...you know, your colleague, Erna Berghofer or Fischl, she's Erna Fischl now with her married name. I was supposed to wait for her here. Damn."

"Erna sent you, did she", said the nurse. Franz looked at her more closely. She wasn't even twenty, surely. "Did you hear Poldi, Erna sent him! She's on platform duty today, in this terrible weather too!"

"Yes, yes", said the other, occupied with a stack of plates. "I heard. Well, come over here *Unteroffizier*, give me the gun and hop over the counter. You're just in time to help with the dishes", she winked at him.

He gave her his gun and stepped over the barrier.

"Come over here", she said loudly, "you can help us with these." She pulled him by his gun into the kitchen, which was right next door. There, she pushed a chair up to the empty table and put a plate of soup and another of stew in front of him. "How do you know Sister Erna?"

"We used to live in the same building." He sat down. With a "Thank you, Sister", he grabbed the spoon.

"Oh", she said, it sounded very matter-of-fact. "Just keep eating. I have to dash outside for a while."

Franz looked around while he sipped the hot soup spoonful by spoonful. He sat at one end of a long refectory table. Behind him was a picture of the Führer, one of the standard reproduction prints. On the other side, at the other end, there was a large kitchen range with some pans, pots and tubs on it, all of them filled with water. Two prisoners of war, somewhat weak-looking men wearing torn Russian winter uniform, were kept busy stoking the fire, carrying wood and coal, and heating fresh water. Every now and then, a third nurse came in from the small room behind the kitchen and gave instructions. Franz had seen a knowing smile on the nurse's face when he told her that he used to live in the same building as Erna. What of it? He had lived in the same house. One floor below her. He had known her since she was a little girl. Her parents had moved in just after he left school. A few bits and pieces swam in the light

brown liquid which the spoon carried up to his mouth: meat, beans, potatoes. Ash-blond plaits. They were hanging over little Erna's blouse, her small mouth was half open. She knelt back on her heels, transfixed. Fascinated, her eyes were fixed on a bare spot in the sunburnt yellow-brown grass. When Franz stepped up beside her, she pointed silently with her little index finger to the ground. Upright, the delicate fangs and the talon-like limbs were wrapped around the other body, the head with its large spherical protruding eyes was held erect, swivelling to the left and the right, turning almost one hundred and eighty degrees, as the half-hidden one consumed her companion. The long, slightly curved antennae pointed forwards, the wings on the emerald body trembled every now and then, while a delicate touch of red gleamed on the shining form underneath. It was difficult to tell what was happening. The organs for ingesting food must be very tiny, they scarcely seemed to move, only the minute leg joints were in almost constant motion. They didn't move far, just gently back and forward, back and forward, keeping the body in front in the right position, back and forward, back and forward. He no longer had a head, but the little thin legs were still kicking, the wings still flapping and the body still twisting under the strong grip of the delicate, talon-like fangs. She was about six centimetres long. Her eyes had a metallic shine. Her neck was erect and seemed almost motionless, while her lower body sought support by pressing itself against the ground. The delicate hind legs, splaying out from the body and thickening to tiny knots at the joints, were like thin threads as they groped through the felted thicket of grass roots. The legs next to the base of the wings rested on the dried-out remains of a broken calendula flower. Sometimes one of the victim's legs would get caught between the hairy leaves of a wild mustard plant, and his wings would twitch more than ever, and the middle pair of legs seemed to want to sprawl out into the stubble of the grass. Then the erect praying mantis pulled the remains of her male partner a little further along the rough bank and disappeared for a moment between the leaves and stems. Only when Erna's little hand pulled the greenish yellow flowers apart could they see the pair again. The male now lay powerless on the ground and had ceased to move. The female's nimble fangs transported the ever diminishing body towards a

greedy, indistinctly formed mouth.

“Well, how was that?” asked Nurse Poldi, returning from the kitchen with a stack of dirty plates. She put the dishes down and leaned against the long side of the table. Its edge pressed into her thighs. Franz watched how the thin blue and white stripes of the nurse’s uniform creased sharply, causing some of the lines to overlap, mask and cross each other.

“Thanks, Sister, it was good to have something hot”, he said, and glanced up from his plate. He stared, but not for long, into the regular oval of the woman’s face below the white cap; one eyebrow was as tense as the other, the mouth slightly arched, without make-up, reminded him of a cherry, the brown hair twisted into a roll: a well-proportioned madonna face. Franz’s gaze slipped back to the table, sought support from the plate in front of him, but slid back to the uniform, where he tried to impose some sort of order upon the chaos of blue and white stripes.

“Where have you come from?” asked the sister.

“I’ve come up from Bologna”, he said and, with a quick glance up to get his bearings, pulled the second plate towards him. He dug around in the plate with his spoon. “It’s still hot”, he explained, nodding towards the table. “Well, Sister, the railway station there looks a right mess! All that twisted iron and crumbled-down walls, one bomb crater after another and everything around completely destroyed.” He lifted the spoon carefully to his mouth, pursed his lips and blew a little, then took a sip and finally put the whole spoon in his mouth.

The blue and white stripes disappeared into a dark gap, a furrow. The nurse had put her upper thigh on the table. Her arms were crossed over her chest. “Did our lot shoot many down?” she asked.

Franz looked again at the regular oval beneath the bright nurse’s cap and the brown roll of hair. Tiny little wrinkles were drawn around her eyes, radiating out from the corners in a star-like fashion. Her full cheeks hinted at a tendency to dimple, and when he answered her question in the affirmative, sure enough, dimples appeared. She smiled. Her mouth pursed, as if she were about to eat something sweet. Her madonna face took on a shine, a delicate lustre. Franz put the full spoon into his mouth. The stew was hot.

His lips opened slightly, to draw cool air into his mouth. The blue and white stripes traced her curves down, starting at the white collar around her neck, were interrupted, began again, continued on in sharply stretched angles, then disappeared under her folded arms, where it was impossible to trace them any further. The vapour trails were white, straight and curved, the exhaust trails were grey, the oil trails black. Smoke. Fumes. The aircraft lost altitude, only a little to begin with, three engines were still working, but the fumes increased. The crew prepared to evacuate. The pilot tried to trim. Gunfire was hammering through the fuselage again. A dark shadow darted past. The second engine stopped. Small flames licked at the wings and died away. The gunner got ready to bail out. A gust of wind blew through the fuselage. A little speck hurtled through the blue air. The mechanic got ready to jump as the radio operator submitted his last report. Then there was a crackling and a rattling. Smoke, vapour, heat and no breath. Gone. Gone. Three white spots glided slowly to the ground while a large black double tongue indicated the tumbling fall of the exploding aircraft. At the inquest, they found the remains of three crew members: burnt remnants of bone, shreds of material sticking to bits of metal, a fleshy left hand, severed and almost undamaged after having fallen from an altitude of three thousand metres. Three twisted legs, half the skin missing, two of which, it was believed, belonged to the same body.

"There are too many of them, Sister. We shoot down five, and ten days later they send another eight."

"Not for much longer, soldier, not for much longer. We'll deploy our secret weapons and it will all be over for them." The nurse laid her hands on the table as she spoke these words. They were short, but very soft, fleshy hands. Her fingers on the table top pointed straight towards his plate. Franz pulled it closer towards him and kept on spooning hastily.

"Haven't you heard about them?" The nurse was astonished. Her foot, freed from the ground, swung slightly against the table.

"A little, Sister, we're not really interested in that kind of thing."

"What are you interested in then?" she asked.

"Living keeps you busy, if you're not preparing to die." Franz had emptied the second plate, pushed it together with the spoon to

one side, and put his hand on the soft hand of the woman. "We make the best of it my dear Sister. Your name is Poldi isn't it? Sister Poldi! Some play cards, skat or maybe taroc. Those are our main occupations! We have a chess club too."

He got up, and sat on the table in the same relaxed manner as her. But while her left leg swung out from the table, with him it was his right.

"What's Erna told you? Was it all destroyed, Sister? Is it burnt to the ground? Was it a heavy raid?"

The nurse moved a few centimetres away from him. She removed her soft hand from underneath his bony one as well. "What are you talking about, *Unteroffizier*? What do you mean, burnt to the ground?"

"The building where we live - or", he hesitated, "where we used to live."

He grabbed again at the hand which rested on the table, this time at the wrist. He held it tightly. He looked into her eyes. "Has Erna talked about it?"

"Oh, the block of flats! You really lived in the same building as Erna? She got a few days leave to look for a new apartment and find furnishings and so on. Everything was buried and destroyed. She says there are still some people digging things up from the piles of rubble, furniture and things. Its all a waste of time of course. Once we've won the war, all the victims will get compensation for the things they've lost anyway. They'll live better than they ever did before."

"Do you believe that, Sister?" asked Franz. Now it was his turn to move a few centimetres away from her. But he didn't release her wrist, instead he gripped it even harder.

"Of course. The Führer promised us again in the last great speech he made. Don't you listen to the radio?"

"Of course we listen to the radio, every request programme that's on. Ilse Werner! Everyone whistles with her when she starts up. And Lale Andersen, ha ha, or *Heimat, deine Sterne!*" He sang the last words protracted and completely out of tune.

The nurse tried to free her left hand from his grip while covering an ear with her right. "Stop it! You're tone-deaf", she exclaimed.

"What, me? Tone-deaf? Don't say that. I played the violin for

years. Ask Erna", he replied.

She stopped him on the staircase, and wanted to know what he had just played on his violin. She had heard it from upstairs and it was so beautiful, he simply must play it for her again. Franz leaned against the bannister and the girl, standing one step higher, held on tightly to the wooden rail with one hand. He gazed into her childlike face, his glance glided down her neck and came to rest on her breasts, two tiny cone-shaped bumps in her chaste dress. Her legs were still a child's legs though. They were always fidgeting. Even later, when she was sitting in a chair in the little room, listening to his playing, she changed her position constantly. Sometimes the right calf rested on the left knee, sometimes the other way round, sometimes, but rarely, both legs lay beside each other, and once the foot of one leg wiggled out of its shoe and up onto the chair and the girl ended up sitting on her bent-up leg. He played a couple of tunes on his violin, concentrating on the notes in front of him, but aware of her restlessness. He played two small pieces by Hindemith and a song by Hugo Wolf. Erna was unfamiliar with the names. She never heard of them before. His sister, a year younger than him, told him after the girl had gone that she only came over because she was in love with him. She wasn't interested in the music. It was already getting dark. They sat at the big table, only partially illuminated by the circular light spread by the standard lamp. The other things in the room, themselves included, were immersed in a green shadowy twilight, a flat green transforming shadow summoned up by the lampshade's dark cloth. His hands were sorting the sheets of music in the lamp-light. He had objected that Erna was only fifteen, and his sister had replied that a girl of fifteen could fall in love very deeply, but Franz just kept tuning his violin and dismissed the remark with a wave of his hand. The next evening he heard Erna play the mandolin again for the first time in ages. She played the standard little songs and marches. But it made him smile. His sister looked up at the ceiling, to where the sounds were coming from. She raised her eyebrows. She's in love with you, she insisted.

The Red-Cross nurse laughed: "That must have been quite some experience!"

“So it was, Sister! Erna used to come over quite often with the express purpose of listening to my playing. You can ask her.”

“I might just do that”, replied the nurse. “What’s your name?” She smoothed over the blue and white stripes of her skirt with her free hand.

“Franz Prannowitz”, he answered.

“Well, I’ll ask her. But you have to let me go now. I have to go back out and help my colleague.”

“In a minute”, said Franz. “I was just wondering, did the Führer say anything about how we were to get our apartments and all our things if we didn’t win the war?”

The madonna face seemed to grow very wide all of a sudden. The lower jaw jutted forward. The dimples disappeared. The two dark arches of her brows were steeply raised. If Franz had put her age at about twenty-one a few minutes ago, it seemed to him now as if he were talking to a thirty year old.

“What do you think you’re saying, if we didn’t win the war!” Her voice too had changed, it was much deeper than before. “We don’t even think about things like that. Its impossible.”

“Yes, yes”, he said and released her wrist at last. “We don’t think about it either, out at the front. But we don’t think about winning it either. We don’t think about the war at all. We think about our cards, our hands at skat, and how best to play our hand in taroc or -”, he paused a moment, and looked across to the range. The Russians had opened the small door and added fresh fuel. “Or we think about the side-trim, engine revolutions, air pressure, the maximum temperature of the cooling liquid. You’re surprised by this, aren’t you? Of course, we do think about other things: beautiful women, for example.” He moved closer to the nurse. “Those Italian women! They’re no good. Pretty, yes, they’re pretty all right, but so terribly Catholic, or at least they pretend to be, and the whole clan, their whole family, watch and protect them, phew!”

The woman giggled. Her perfect madonna face had returned. Even the dimples in her cheeks were showing again. “At least you all remain true to your women”, she said.

“Yes, if I had one”, he replied, and moved so close, that his upper thigh came parallel to hers across the edge of the table. “As it is, I don’t even know where I can rest my weary head this

evening. Especially now, with our apartment in ruins and Mother billeted somewhere in some sort of emergency accommodation.”

The pompous words had the desired effect. He noticed it immediately. The nurse accepted his hand on her thigh without a murmur. His fingers rested on blue and white, on the smooth, strong cloth of the nurse's uniform, while with the second joint of his middle finger, he could feel a hard obstacle. His hand moved a centimetre to the left and one to the right. His finger could feel the little button of the suspender through the cloth. “Two missions almost every day, Sister, one shortly before midnight and then another at daybreak, and if we don't make good speed and get home, we end up with a whole swarm of spitfires on our tail. And now”, he added quickly, “now I don't even know where I'll be sleeping tonight.” The middle finger had been fumbling the whole time with the rubber band of the suspender. Now it stopped.

“If only I knew of anywhere”, sighed the nurse.

“Easy enough to say”, he said roughly. “Two missions every night, Sister, and then when one comes home for a few days, there's not even a place to sleep. Make sacrifices! A nice cliché. When you have to make sacrifices yourself, that's a different story, Sister.” He tapped her thigh with the flat of his hand, got up and made as if to turn away from her.

The two prisoners of war were occupying themselves near the range. One of them stacked briquettes, while the other scraped the cinders from the stove door and tipped them into a tin bucket.

The red gleam of the flames danced upon the two faces, the wrinkled skin seemed to be in constant motion. The noise of the steady rain penetrated the thin walls, the doors and the windows. The raised legs, the convulsing body, the sweaty face of the woman in labour and he, the foreign soldier next to her bedstead, holding her hands, wiping her forehead, pushing back the wet, blond strands of hair. The white body in front of him struggled in the dim light of a stable lantern, while the two old women soothed her. He couldn't understand a word, it sounded like an incantation, like the magic formula of a miracle working medicine man. The red embers of the range made a flickering circle. The vapour from the pots and tubs on the range-top rose whitely and steamed into the darkness, caught a last reflection of the fire and finally disinte-

grated into nothingness. The room ended with the circle of light, and yet seemed at the same time to melt into the never-ending sounds of a world dripping with water. In front of him, a wide face with pronounced cheek bones, a small nose, dark eyes, black, seeming to consist entirely of pupils, animal eyes, deer, calves, their only expression one of pain. No, there was no place for modesty, only need and the urgent plea: Help me! Please help me! The old women turned the pregnant woman onto her side. He had to hold the battered, messy bed-pan. The dirty rags, the smell, the naked behind of the strange woman in front of him, coldly white in the flickering light of the lamp, and only trepidation, fear and agony in the stare of the pregnant woman, and again floods of sweat and the groaning, and then at last water and blood and blood and water and the amorphous looking something which the bloody hands of the old woman pulled from the groaning body. He hadn't noticed that the young woman had dug her fingers into his hand. He watched the old woman, the way she washed her hands, how she made the sign of the cross and how she finally disappeared between the young woman's raised legs. Only now, as the squeaking cry of the child rang out, and the young woman's mother immersed the child in the wooden tub of water, and washed it, and wrapped it, whimpering, in white cloth, did he feel the embrace of the strange fingers. The knuckles gleamed chalk-like, the dark eyes pointed towards the face of the man who sat at her head. But it was clear that they didn't meet Franz's eyes, but rather looked right through them. No, it wasn't over yet, the shivers had started up again, the distraught look in her eyes, the red blood in the lamp-light, and it was only after the old woman left the room with the placenta, that the young mother's eyelids closed, and the expression in her face relaxed. The old women were still moving to and fro, but let Franz understand he wasn't needed any more. He went back to the table at the window. The officer cadet had disappeared. Franz looked around, listening. A monotonous banging could be heard through the pouring of the rain. He opened the door carefully and slipped along the wall under the protruding thatched roof in the direction of the noise. In a small shed, the pale youth was splitting logs in the light of a candle. Water was dripping through the leaking roof, dripping monotonously into little puddles on the floor.

The nurse put her hand on the soldier's shoulder. "Do you really think we make no sacrifices?"

Franz stood, half turned away from her and watched the two prisoners of war. One of them had pulled his cap down over his bald head, the other one's globe-shaped skull was covered in tufts of matted black hair.

The low room of the hut was filled with thick cigarette smoke, the air filled with the perspiration of crowds of men. The benches were all occupied, there were even soldiers standing all along the walls. The two Red-Cross nurses behind the counter looked tired and bleary-eyed. Poldi brought clean plates out and set about clearing the used ones away. Ilse stood next to the large pot, the long handle of the ladle disappeared into the brown liquid. She moved it slightly, swinging it to and fro.

Again the door opened. An *Unteroffizier* of the Luftwaffe entered. He looked around hesitantly, and slowly approached the two nurses at the counter. Poldi hardly took any notice of him. The air was bad, it hung heavily on her lungs and the smoke irritated her eyes. For a moment she thought about the letter she had started two weeks ago. It was to a pen friend; a lance-corporal of an anti-aircraft gun unit. He and his battery were stationed in Silesia. A small photo: dark hair and dark eyes. She imagined to herself the way he might speak, the way he might walk; but then she thought about how it might all be wrong. In his letters there were turns of phrase she was unfamiliar with, spelling mistakes which made her smile. But that wasn't all. The men at the front were dirty and talked about affairs with women, about heavy drinking and about the possibility of getting a few days of pleasure in somewhere. They talked about how to shirk their duties for a while. Was he any different? She stood here, night after night in this smoky, stuffy room. And the Führer! He couldn't afford spare time, holidays or amusements. He didn't even have a wife.

"Well, what about you, *Unteroffizier*?" she heard Ilse asking. The newcomer moved slowly towards them. "Don't you want anything?" She glanced across the counter. A clean uniform, a sunburned face, in his mid-thirties, the grey-blue forage cap on his head. She stacked a few dirty plates. The bent wings of the Luftwaffe eagle, yellow collar badges, a few ribbons on the left

breast of his uniform.

"Well, yes", grunted the man. "But there's no room." The dishes clattered, the spoons rattled as she threw them into the wire basket. She had already turned away to carry a stack of plates off to be washed, when she heard the man speak.

"What a nuisance", said Franz. "I'd have been better off staying in the hall. But Erna thought...you know, your colleague, Erna Berghofer or Fischl, she's Erna Fischl now with her married name. I was supposed to wait for her here. Damn." Now she turned back and looked at him more closely. "Erna sent you, did she", said Ilse. Poldi noticed the way the soldier looked at her colleague. Hold on a minute, what's making him stare at her like that. "Did you hear Poldi?" said the younger girl, "Erna sent him! She's on platform duty today, in this terrible weather too!"

"Yes, yes, I heard", she said. Well then, one of Erna's lot! How many has she got then? Seems to know all the men! "Well, come over here *Unteroffizier*", she said, "give me the gun and hop over the counter. You're just in time to help with the dishes." She winked at him. He gave her his gun and stepped over the barrier. "Come over here", she said loudly, "you can help us with these, if Erna's sent you". She looked cautiously out into the room, at the crowded groups of men. Scarcely anyone noticed them; they sat brooding impassively, or talking to each other, or sleeping at the tables, heads resting on their arms.

Poldi pulled the soldier by his gun into the kitchen next door. There she moved a chair to an empty table and while she put a plate of soup and another of stew in front of him, she asked: "How do you know Sister Erna?"

"We used to live in the same building", said the man and sat down at the table.

My God, it must have been a big house, thought Poldi. Amazing the way they all lie, and every one of them with the same excuse. But perhaps she's told them to use that excuse. It would be just like her, the brainless woman. Not an ounce of sense, no breeding, nothing but beautiful dresses, hairstyles and cosmetics in her head. She turned away. And in the fifth year of war too!. She had almost missed his "Thank you, Sister."

"Just keep eating", she said. "I have to dash outside for a

while.”

When she returned to the main hall, Ilse was still standing next to her big stew pot. There was no way it would occur to her to maybe move a step or two away and collect a few dirty plates, thought Poldi. Full of herself, just because her father's a party leader. She wiped her rag over the tin counter top. Oh well, she's still young. She stands here and sleeps with her eyes open. Hardly surprising, on duty all night and then air-raid warnings during the day.

“Nearly finished now”, she said and looked at her watch.

“There's still one more train to come”, replied the younger girl.

“Yes, but it seems to be very late. Who knows, maybe the next shift can deal with it.” She grabbed a stack of dirty plates and carried them out to the kitchen. The soldier had almost finished his soup. “Well, how was that?” she asked him.

“Thanks, Sister, it was good to have something hot.”

What slim hands! she thought. What did he do in his civilian life? “Where have you come from?” asked the sister.

“I've come up from Bologna.” The plate of soup was empty. He pulled the one with the stew in it towards him. “Well, Sister, the railway station there looks a mess! All that twisted iron and crumpled-down walls, one bomb crater after another and everything around completely destroyed.” He raised the spoon to his mouth.

Well, she thought, we got hit pretty badly here too, there were supposed to have been hundreds of planes. She sat down on the edge of the table and looked at the shirt-neck of his uniform. She saw that he had a dirty collar buttoned in. The smoking ruins, the women and children, the homeless people. “Did our lot shoot many down?” she asked. It's embarrassing, she thought. A short time ago they wouldn't have dared to appear in such numbers. But let them wait!

“There are too many of them, Sister”, the man said and put a spoonful of stew into his mouth. “We shoot down five, and ten days later they send another eight.”

Yes, yes, I know, she thought. But the situation must be about to change. Haven't we had victory after victory on all fronts, don't we have the best planes and the best Air Force. Men like Mölders, Nowotny. And then the Führer! “Not for much longer, soldier, not for much longer. We'll deploy our secret weapons and it will all be

over for them. Haven't you heard about them?"

"A little, Sister, we're not really interested in that kind of thing."

She shook her head. Incredible, after all, it was their problem too. It was a matter of their lives as well. It is a matter of our lives, of Germany. And they don't care! "What are you interested in then?" she asked.

"Living keeps you busy, if you're not preparing to die", said the *Unteroffizier*. By now he had emptied the second plate, pushed it together with the spoon to one side and put his hand on the hand of the nurse.

Who does he think, he is, she thought.

"We make the best of it my dear Sister. Your name is Poldi isn't it? Sister Poldi! Some play cards, skat or maybe taroc. Those are our main occupations! We have a chess club too."

He got up and sat down next to her. "What's Erna told you? Has it all been destroyed, Sister? Is it burnt to the ground? Was it a heavy raid?"

She felt the rough material of the uniform, she felt the bony hand on hers, she saw his eyes very near hers. "What are you talking about, *Unteroffizier*? What do you mean, burnt to the ground?"

"The building where we live - or where we used to live." He almost stuttered as he said it.

Well, he really seems to have lived in the same block of flats. He's upset, that much is plain to see. She felt him grab her wrist. His grip was tight. Almost tight enough to be painful. Maybe he's one of those rough types. Doesn't look like it though, looks rather shy, melancholy, those eyes, he's probably lost a lot, one ought to comfort him. "Oh, the block of flats! You really lived in the same building as Erna? She got a few days leave to look for a new apartment and find furnishings and so on. Everything was buried and destroyed. She says some people are still digging things up from the piles of rubble, furniture and things. Its all a waste of time of course. Once we've won the war, all the victims will get compensation for the things they've lost anyway. They'll live better than they ever did before."

"Do you believe that, Sister?" Franz asked.

Why did he look at her so ironically? Did he doubt it? "Of course", she said. "The Führer promised us again in the last great speech he made. Don't you listen to the radio?"

"Of course, we listen to the radio, every request programme that's on. Ilse Werner! Everyone whistles with her when she starts up. And Lale Andersen." He laughed. "Or *Heimat, deine Sterne!*" He sang the last words protracted and completely out of tune.

"Stop it! You're tone-deaf", she exclaimed, laughing and trying to put her hands over her ears, but he stopped her by holding her left hand.

"What, me? Tone-deaf? Don't say that. I played the violin for years. Ask Erna", he protested.

She just laughed: "That must have been quite some experience!" she said.

"So it was, Sister! Erna used to come over quite often with the express purpose of listening to my playing. You can ask her."

"I might just do that. What's your name?"

"Franz Prannowitz."

Well, I'll ask her. But you have to let me go now. I have to go back out and help my colleague." She tried to free her hand from his grip.

"In a minute", said Franz. "I was just wondering, did the Führer say anything about how we were to get our apartments and all our things if we didn't win the war?" His forehead had become furrowed, his eyes looked at her sideways, it seemed to her as if his chin had suddenly become more pointed, and his teeth showed through his open lips.

Steffi with the pram, and Herbert on leave from the front at Lake Ladoga. We were still besieging Leningrad at the time. There was nothing to be done. Those crowds of people, fresh ones all the time, and then: where would it all end? If they had to, the Russians would retreat behind the Ural. Napoleon even occupied Moscow. Well. Let it be, Herbert, it will all work out somehow. Come on, let's go home. Mother is out at the National Women's League and we'll have the flat to ourselves. Good bye, Poldi! *Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!* The arm around her waist, and then as she watched them go, everything began to swim before her eyes.

“What do you think you’re saying, if we didn’t win the war! We don’t even think about things like that. It’s impossible.”

“Yes, yes”, said the soldier. “We don’t think about it either.” He had released her wrist and she massaged it with her right hand. He had cut off her circulation. Such a bully. But why had he released her so suddenly? His hands were somehow likable. She had ignored the rest of what he had said. Something about engines and temperatures. It didn’t really interest her. But she took notice when he said: “Of course, we do think about other things: beautiful women, for example”, as he moved closer to her. “Those Italian women! They’re no good. Pretty, yes, they’re pretty all right, but so terribly Catholic, or at least they pretend to be, and the whole clan, their whole family, watch and protect them, phew!”

The way he said that! She had to laugh. But why? They were quite right, those girls or their relatives, what did those men want but a bit of amusement, some mindless fun, and then in the end they throw themselves at the women, pure lust (but then, there must be something to say for it, there’s Erna, and Steffi, but she’s married, love of course, that’s different, that has a point, a higher purpose, there? All of a sudden? Between the legs? Or something else?) The woman, the person inside, is of no interest to these men at all. A blond today, a brunette tomorrow, and the wife at home long forgotten. “At least you remain true to your women”, she said. It sounded a little provocative.

“Yes, if I had one”, he replied and moved so close, that his upper thigh came parallel to hers across the edge of the table. “As it is, I don’t even know where I can rest my weary head this evening. Especially now, with our apartment in ruins and Mother billeted somewhere in some sort of emergency accommodation.”

Oh dear, how sad, and she still hadn’t written the letter yet, perhaps he didn’t have anyone to wait for him either. Was she waiting for him? Did she even know him? But after all: one for all and all for one! A blood brotherhood! Yes, that’s it. And then this hand here.

“Two missions almost every day, Sister”, she heard. “One shortly before midnight and then another at daybreak, and if we don’t make good speed and get home, we end up with a whole swarm of spitfires on our tail. And now, now I don’t even know

where I'll be sleeping tonight."

"If only I knew of anywhere", she sighed. She would have dearly loved to take him home with her. We've got plenty of space. But it's impossible. What would mother say, the neighbour, the others in the building? A blood brotherhood! His hand is so heavy on my leg. The weight of five long years of war! All those sacrifices! One for all and all for one! She looked into his face. A handsome, manly face. "*Be steadfast, young maiden!*" she told herself.

"Easy enough to say." His expression grew darker. "Two missions every night, Sister, and then when one comes home for a few days there's not even a place to sleep. Make sacrifices! A nice cliché. When you have to make sacrifices yourself, that's a different story, Sister."

He had patted her thigh; it had felt companionable, comfortable, the way men behaved towards each other. Then he'd got up and turned away. She followed him and touched his shoulder. "Do you really think we make no sacrifices?" she asked.

He remained half turned away, and his glance fell in the direction of the range, where the two prisoners of war busied themselves with the coal and the ashes.

"Of course", he said. "Everyone is making sacrifices. A few years ago it would have been hard to believe the kind of sacrifices people are capable of making. We would have spared ourselves a lot if people had been prepared to make these kinds of sacrifices earlier."

What did he mean by that? "How come?" she asked.

"You wouldn't understand", replied the man, and turned back towards her again. "Lost opportunities are lost. It doesn't make sense to talk about them later. Haven't you ever had that experience?"

"Lost", she uttered tonelessly, while she tried in vain to banish an image. "You're right. Perhaps one shouldn't even think about it." She looked past him along a board fixed to the wall, upon which was placed coffee pot after coffee pot, all polished and shiny. She couldn't help it, it was back again, was powerful and close: polished and shiny they stepped towards her and asked her for a dance, and above them, above the shining boot legs, everything else

was black, the black breeches and the black tunic, the black uniform of the SS. Only the blond hair shone golden above it all. They danced a country waltz, a march and then a slow waltz together. She could feel his breath on her face. His hands, long white hands, rested on her shoulders and embraced her hips; at one point her shin touched the leg of his boot, once a lock of her hair touched his face. But it was only accidental, all just part of the movement of the dance. Her soft hands lay on the black cloth and her gaze rested on Hermann's water-blue eyes, or on his soft, full mouth. It was dark at the gate. The street lights were off due to the blackout. The two stood very close to each other in a recess of the wall, still flushed from the dance. Hermann kissed her on the mouth. She closed her eyes, and when she opened them again, she saw the white skull shining on the man's cap. The stars were shining far away, the music played a march or a slow waltz, she felt the thigh in the black breeches very close to hers. But a few moments later she was standing alone at the window and following the departing man with her eyes. Her mother had a pointed nose and a thin mouth below it, and this thin mouth warned the daughter. Men, men are only after their own pleasure! She spent the next evening at the theatre. It was wonderful, she especially liked Eboli's dress. The way the silk rustled! Those noble figures dressed in dark velvet, in their well-fitted trousers! Don Carlos! The shining hair! In the recess of the wall she felt Don Carlos's hand on her breast, his lips pressed against her mouth. She closed her eyes. Your father never cared for us, said the thin mouth of her mother. I'm quite sure he had a host of other women. When he realized I was pregnant, he just disappeared one day. The thundering applause for Don Carlos was a huge wave, which swept everything along. She felt for the house key. But then she opened her eyes again and saw the white skull bent over her. It was only the skull on the SS-cap, but the thin mouth of her mother told of terrible diseases which women got from men. The sky was cloudy, and she looked in vain for a star. A few moments later, she was standing alone at the window and following the departing man with her eyes. On the third evening, a very light and gentle rain was falling. They stood on the platform and were embarrassed. The engines whistled, and hissing steam poured out from underneath the carriages. People, the men almost

all in uniform, hurried past them. Women stood on the platform, some laughed, some wept, waved with handkerchiefs. They kissed each other once more, then he stood on the carriage-step, then the white skull glinted through the window of the compartment. She received a card, from Stuttgart, later a letter from Poland, he had a good writing style, she read it three or four times, and then one more card from the front. And then she didn't hear from him again. And her mother said: That's men for you! But one day, it was during the third year of the war, she was on duty at the railway station, and she thought she saw him get off one of the trains transporting men on leave. She was serving coffee to the soldiers. There was a long queue waiting in front of her. Most of them were army men, their grey-green uniforms were creased and smelled sour, their boots were dull and stained, brown, dirty hands held out their tins in front of her and she put a ladleful of the brown liquid into each one. She couldn't leave. She couldn't even follow the disembarking man with her eyes. Well, Sister, what's going on! I'd like some coffee too! The opportunity lost.

Her glance flicked back from the coffee pots to the man opposite her. The *Unteroffizier* didn't avoid it. "Nobody can do that!" she said. "Nobody can block out the memories, forget everything that happened."

He had beautiful eyes, she noticed. "Once, Sister", he said, "Once upon a time I didn't think it was possible either. I thought we were constantly connected with the past, like a kind of umbilical cord, if you'll pardon the expression." His eyes wandered from her face to the table where the emptied plates were still sitting, and on to the faded walls, to the range with the red-hot oven door, to the two Russians. Her eyes followed his. Why is he so restless, she thought. "But now I'm not so sure any more. Now there have been so many times that everything has just remained in the past, fallen off, been forgotten. When the aircraft hops along the runway, when it leaves the ground and I steer her higher and higher, everything dissolves. It is", and now he looked into her eyes, "an intoxication: like being with a woman, like making love!"

"No", she said. It couldn't be true. She stood on her toes a little to make herself seem taller. "No, it's not true, that's a completely different sort of thing. When you're flying, you think about the

final victory, about the future, about Germany's future." She was almost pleading with him.

The *Unteroffizier* smiled, he looked pained. "Oh God, Sister Poldi, do you really believe that? Only the heroes in the school readers think like that. But as soon as we're in the air, we - and most likely the ones on the other side too - we think about, yes, what do we think about? I really believe we don't think at all." He spoke the last sentence very softly.

She winced. No, it couldn't be true! It was impossible, how could the men endure all the dangers and hardship if they didn't believe, didn't believe in the final victory?

The soldier put both his hands in his pockets and rummaged. Finally, he pulled a packet of cigarettes from one and an old lighter from the other. As he offered the packet to her, he asked: "Do you smoke?"

She shook her head.

"These ones aren't for ladies anyway", he said, "very strong tobacco, *Popolari*", and he lit a cigarette.

No, she thought, some might be like that, but most of them must surely think about Germany. "Some of your comrades have told me a different story", she said now.

The white skull glinted, even in the darkness of the wall recess. The total black-out allowed her to see the stars in a way she had never before seen them in the city. The departing man's steps echoed up to her open window. The ridge of the roof opposite drew the outline of the S-rune against the sky. The moon was nowhere to be seen. It had already set. Only the stars twinkled coldly in a small strip of sky, bordered on one side by the edge of her own house and the slightly protruding gable of the neighbouring house, and on the other side of the street by the recessed and protruding edges of the roofs there.

She found the photograph at the bottom of a box. It showed a man with a beautiful moustache and slicked-back hair. He wore a coat which looked like a dressing gown, held a brush and a palette in his hand and stood in front of a painting which had obviously just been started. In spite of that, she thought she could see two naked figures embracing each other. When her mother entered the room, she took the photo off her. She was most indignant and

scolded her.

Nurse Poldi tried to remember everything she had heard about heroic deeds from all the migrating soldiers, so she could show this *Unteroffizier* the way things really were. But he just inhaled his cigarette smoke and looked nervously up at the ceiling. His hand fumbled again in his pocket. He retrieved the packet of cigarettes. Without looking, he took out two cigarettes. "Hey there!", he cried, interrupting her explanations, and signalling to the two Russians. The prisoners turned their heads towards him. They hesitated for a moment. But they came at once when they saw the two white little rolls in his hand. "Spasibo", they murmured, rolling the cigarettes up and down with their dirty fingers and sniffing at the tobacco. Then they went back to the range to get a light.

The soldier laughed: "They like a strong tobacco. I've come across that stuff they smoke, Machorka it's called, or something like that. Its a terrible blend, let me tell you, whole stalks in it."

The nurse raised her eyebrows. He hadn't been listening to her. She frowned. "Don't you know that's forbidden? They get what's due to them, you know", she said.

The *Unteroffizier* stared at her. "Forbidden, forbidden", he said. "Its only humans who have forbidden it, and I'm human too, and I happen to allow it." The corner of his mouth twitched. "One person will do as they're told and will do just fine, another will do as they're told and won't get anywhere. A third person won't do what they're told at all, and will do better than he would have by obeying all the rules. And that", he nodded towards the prisoners without taking his eyes off her, "that's not even worth a second thought."

She frowned and looked over at the two men in the stained brown uniforms. The wrinkled skin of their faces had a greyish tinge. Dark blotches extended from chin to cheek. Those lazy fellows hadn't shaved for days, surely. They looked unsavoury.

What handsome young fellows those SA-men were back then. All of them with shiny faces, fresh and glowing, all in their brown shirts with armbands and tall caps, standing along the edge of the pavement in a long, long row to keep the crowd in order. She and her girlfriend stood amongst the men and women who kept stretching their necks, peering in the direction of the railway

station. To the left of the girls stood a married couple dressed in moss-green loden coats, the man with a large tuft of chamois hair on his hat, the woman with a small feather on hers. On their right was a group of four young males, all about the same age, three of them wearing white shirts and one of them a brown one. They all wore the armband of the Hitler Youth and the same badge as the girls. There was a whispering and murmuring, and every now and then snatches of a march would burst through one of the windows of the surrounding houses, as loudspeakers prepared their listeners for the momentous historical event about to occur. Poldi and her friend Steffi were discussing which uniform they liked best. No, the SA-cap wasn't really to Poldi's liking, she hated the brown trousers about as much. She liked the Transport Unit's uniform combination much better. The black of the breeches was just that much more striking against the brown shirt, but best of all, of course, she liked the uniform of the SS. Everything in black, serious and noble. The curved flat cap too, looked much more dashing than the pot-like ones of the SA. The two sixteen-year-olds wore brown cardigans over their white blouses, black pleated skirts and white knee-length socks. They tried slowly to push themselves to the front. The woman with the moss-green loden coat was telling a corpulent lady with a red fox-fur round her neck and a prominent tin swastika on her already prominent bosom, how to best prepare a leg of a wild hare, by larding it with bacon and vegetables and then simmering it in a sauce. The man with the chamois tuft on his hat had lit a long cigar and was blowing light blue smoke into the air. The SA-men at the front of the crowd were young men, perhaps twenty or twenty-one years old, and in spite of the fact that Steffi also liked the SS uniform better, the girls were soon standing very close to them. One of the four Hitler-Youths, a big fellow with red pimples on his broad face, was making suggestive remarks. Old women shook their heads. The man with the cigar blew dense clouds of smoke into the air, the two ladies discussed recipes. Poldi and Steffi weren't listening, or at least pretending not to listen. They wanted to see the Führer, and pushed themselves further towards the front. The SA-men formed a chain by linking their hands all along Mariahilfer Straße. Two of them let the girls up to the front, and each of them was allowed to stand between two men and to lean against their

linked hands. The SA-men asked the girls whether they weren't cold, as they were only wearing knee-length stockings. The two laughed, no, certainly not, and to prove it, Steffi let one of the men touch her knees. "Higher!" shouted the spotted youth from one of the back rows. Everyone laughed, even the man with the cigar. The girls tossed their heads in indignation, and the SA-man made as if to act upon the suggestion. Steffi slapped his fingers. A few heated words were exchanged. But now the sound of distant shouting could be heard. It must be coming from the nearby Kirchengasse. The radio in the window stopped playing the march, an announcer gasped out a constant stream of passionate words. His voice seemed to vibrate. The shouting grew louder and louder and came closer and closer, now a roaring storm could be heard from the top of Stiftgasse. Now the cries of "Heil!" could be heard clearly. And the head of the motor cavalcade could be seen. Arms were raised, women waved. "Heil! Heil! Heieieil!" All the windows of the houses were flung wide open, people were leaning out. "Heieieil!" The eyes of all were fixed on the man standing in his large Mercedes, lips tight, a lock of hair over his face, his right hand raised to the salute, looking left and right. "Heil! Heieieil!", everyone shouted, the girls too. Steffi stretched out and raised one hand. She hardly noticed that the fingers of the SA-man next to her were resting on her behind and feeling it. After the motor cavalcade had passed by, there was a terrible chaos. No-one had foreseen it. All the people who had been lining the streets till now, streamed after the vehicles. It was not clear why or where they were going, and the people in the crowd probably didn't know themselves. Of course, the cigar was damaged. The girls were separated. Poldi saw only how her friend, one arm around the strong neck of the SA-man, was pushed in the direction of the Rahlstiege. She too felt nothing but bodies, to her left and right, before and behind her, but she managed to manoeuvre her way cleverly through the crowd, and the SA-man who had been standing next to her and, perhaps encouraged by his comrades, tried to make advances, was already separated from her by the lady with the enormously prominent bosom. The tin swastika shone silvery on the lapel of the jacket directly beneath the clean-shaven face of the young man. The round bosom pushed against the shoulder strap which ran across

the brown shirt: an indented balloon! The hair of the red fox stole tickled the SA-man's chin. Now the two moss-green loden coats moved in between Poldi and him, and when the girl arrived at the Rahlstiege, her pursuer had lost sight of her. She looked down the staircase, just in time to catch a glimpse of her friend Steffi, hand in hand with the other uniformed man, disappearing with quick steps in the direction of the city.

She straightened the little cap on her brown hair. She hadn't been able to hold his gaze. Her eyes wandered from his face to the table and on to the range. "Curious views you hold, *Unteroffizier*", she murmured. "What would become of us if everyone did as he pleased?"

Franz shrugged his shoulders. "You can see what's become of us when nobody thinks for themselves about what they're doing and everyone relies completely on orders and regulations."

She looked into his face again. Light blue, she observed, water-blue eyes, a rare combination with brown hair.

She looked at him in earnest now, and saw the eagle above the bridge of his nose. White, he spread his wings above the swastika. The cap sat at an angle on his head.

The spread wings above the swastika. The bent talons. They were standing right under its clutches. Steffi looked so different, much prettier than before and Poldi asked her what she was up to now, because they hadn't seen much of her at the meetings lately. Steffi took a step to one side, Poldi followed her. A party leader came out through the door, under the spot where the eagle hung, resplendent. A man in civilian clothes with the party-badge in his buttonhole went in. Both raised their right arm. Steffi turned away from the staircase. She wasn't going to come any more, she explained, she was going to marry Herbert, even now, after he had been expelled from all the organizations. Poldi looked at her in amazement, why, what had happened? Well - Steffi went down the steps slowly, the girls put more and more distance between themselves and the eagle, themselves and the entrance way - when his Aryan descent was checked, it turned out that Herbert was a quarter Jewish, and there was no room for someone like that in the SA. The two girls had arrived at the bottom of the steps. The path led through the park. Children were playing, girls were skipping, boys were riding around

on scooters. A small plum tree laden with delicate pink flowers stood behind a group of benches. On their back-rests were written the newly painted words FOR ARYANS ONLY. Steffi approached the benches slowly. She showed her friend photographs of the little house that Herbert was building and where they would be living soon, and she also told her she was expecting Herbert's child. And, in answer to Poldi's inquisitive look, she explained that she was only in the third month of her pregnancy and there was nothing to see yet. The doctor, however, had assured her that there was no doubt. The plum tree was surrounded by countless bees, there was a humming and buzzing around the delicate little clouds of pink blossom, which stood out in sharp relief against the pure blue of the spring sky. The two friends were wearing light summer dresses. The sun was warm. It was June. Old women with their bent backs, feeling their way with walking sticks, shuffled to the benches. At the other end of the park, where there were garden chairs set out, mothers sat with perambulators either in front or to the side of them. They had knitting or crotchet work on their laps. Steffi said she was looking forward to the baby. Poldi nodded. She could understand that. They stopped, went to say good-bye, and as they did so, looked back towards the district council building. Two SA-men were herding a group of ten or twelve women and men upwards across the wide steps, a dark mass, holding tightly together, then swallowed by the two large doors. The eagle spread its wings above it all. Poldi remained alone under the plum tree. Her friend hurried towards the park exit. There were garden chairs, and mothers in them, perambulators in front of and beside them, knitting and crotchet work on their laps while they chatted. Girls were skipping, boys were riding around on scooters. On their handle-bars hung little flags with swastikas emblazoned.

"But there are rules", said the nurse, "that nature has instilled in us. Morals and manners." Her voice didn't sound very certain. Her eyes were fixed on the large portrait of the Führer on the wall. She noticed that the picture had darkened considerably. Two crossed flags hung across it. They were already dirty. The red was spotted and brown, the white circle in the middle was grey, full of grease and blotches, dust had collected and the greasy vapour of the cooking pots had soaked into the cloth.

“That’s a matter of opinion, Sister”, replied the *Unteroffizier*. “Morals! Manners! Dear God, they’re all just an arrangement between human beings. Nothing more. Morals are nothing but organized egoism: Don’t hurt me and I won’t hurt you. The laws of nature: drinking, eating, sleeping, love, that is ..., you know what I mean, Sister. That’s the sum of nature for you, everything else has been worked out by human beings. Granted, a lot of useful things we couldn’t have lived together for so long without. But it is written: Thou shalt not kill, and for years we’ve been killing thousands upon thousands of people. Stealing is immoral, but it’s allowed in the name of society or of the people. Yes, that’s the way it is, I’m afraid. You mustn’t take them too seriously, morals and manners, don’t you think so? So how would it be with us then, Sister, if in the name of the people, the *Volk*, we were to sleep together tonight. What do you say?” He put his arm around her shoulders.

She felt the hand rest on her collar bone. It wasn’t unpleasant, she quite liked it even, but in spite of that, she pushed it away with a sudden movement. “You men really don’t think about anything else, do you”, she said. “I have to go outside now. You can wait for Erna here, if you like.”

Quickly she left the room.

“Well?” asked the younger nurse when Poldi arrived back at the counter.

“Oh, a grumbler and a moaner”, said Poldi, nothing more. She stood beside the younger girl and they both looked out at the soldiers, who had become a uniform mass in the grey-blue vapour of the cigarette smoke, in the red light of the weak bulbs along the tables. There was almost no movement. Seldom did anyone get up and leave the room. It seemed the train still hadn’t arrived. An oppressive lethargy hung in the air. The mens’ conversation seemed to have frozen.

“How come?” asked the younger one.

“Oh, he just talks so stupidly.” Poldi stood next to the large pot of brown liquid with the swimming aluminium ladle.

“What did he say?” the other one persisted.

“He really lived in the same building as Erna.”

“So what, that’s not so terrible.”

“Well, no, but what is terrible, is the way that he doubts that all the things destroyed by the bombing will be rebuilt, better and more beautiful than before.”

She stared into the brown liquid. Rings of fat drew strange, irregular, elongated patterns on the surface. The edges shimmered red, yellow and green. The mirror. The material was nothing special, only single width at that, but if she took it in here, and trimmed it with some patterned fabric, the dress might look quite smart. The tape-measure dangled from her shoulder. She stretched the material across her chest. The glass opposite gleamed with a blueish tinge, her face in it shone with a blueish light, the window and the house opposite and the windows of the house opposite all shone with the same blueish hue. The mirror-edge was faceted, red, yellow, green shone round her image. One hand held the material as it fell to her knees and she told herself: a trimming, of a different material. And it was shining red, yellow and green around the fabric stretched across her chest, around her hair which fell across her face, around her legs, naked between her knees and the end of the fabric. It would look good with a contrasting trimming. She would just have to find the right one.

A strong male voice laughed loudly and suddenly. The smoke made it impossible to see which table he was sitting at. A few men turned their heads and peered here and there through the milky cigarette-fumes, then there was just the murmuring again, the scratching and the uniform humming. Nurse Ilse stirred the ladle back and forth a little, then moved it randomly through the brown liquid. Poldi kept staring into the pot.

The fabric was blue, and when she held it up to her face she could see that it went well with her hair. A trimming of blue and white would finish it off nicely, she thought for a moment.

“Men like that should be reported”, said the young girl next to her, without turning her face.

The material had a slight lustre, probably viscose. Blue suited her, even if it was only a second-rate piece of material. She would use blue and white trimming. She remained silent. Her eyes wandered over the men in the smoky room. Three soldiers of the tank corps were sitting at the end of the long hall on a red box filled with fine sand. It was put there according to regulations, in

case of fire from incendiary bombs in an enemy air raid. The three youths were passing photographs to each other and having a good time. It was obviously one of them who had been laughing just before.

Steffi's stomach bulged out like a small ball under her dirndl-dress, her breasts forcing the bodice apart. The girls stood together, following her with their eyes, watching her heavy steps as she walked past the houses. They had all imagined it so differently. They had planned to hold a party for the first of them to become a mother, with songs and poems, with coffee and cake and warmth and happiness. And all the girls had wanted to make something for the new little addition to the human race, the future national comrade, and now nothing had come of it all. Margit, the group leader, talked about the doctrine of heredity at the meeting. They all knew that it didn't happen by chance. That Mendel with his peas and beans! The clerics didn't generally have much of interest to say. Peas and beans! Poor Steffi, she'd had her second one already. Hanne, Leni and Mimi visited her secretly, milk and margarine. And what about me? Mother will come back with her old rucksack, with peas and beans, potatoes and bacon, perhaps a bit of meat and a few eggs. Three weeks in total, cooking and looking after the children, while the women and a few men, prisoners of war, worked outside in the fields. She'll be away for another fortnight. A fortnight, was he going to be here for longer or shorter; it would be shameful if he couldn't find anywhere to stay, it would be wrong of us. One for all and all for one! Make sacrifices on the altar of the Fatherland! But what would Mother say? What about the neighbour and the people on the first floor and the third? Frau Fleck was against it too, at the start, and made things very difficult for Steffi. But now: little Rudolf, one and a half years old, calling her granny. His tummy, a small ball, a white ball, blueish-white skin seen in the bath, Steffi's narrow face and Herbert at Lake Ladoga. There was no guarantee he wouldn't try something. Alone with her in the flat. Alone in the flat. Alone, but why not? Lost opportunities. Always lost. The black boot-legs, the breeches over the top, through the material, she could feel them quite clearly through the material. Lost. The skull on the cap bending over her. No, perhaps the sixteen-year-old would listen to her mother, but that time was over

now. But she couldn't very well go up to him now and say - no, out of the question, especially after all his stupid nonsense. Well, all right, it was nice enough, certainly, but an impertinence as well, but then, it did seem as if he did it without meaning to, without meaning to - as he sat next to her - nervously moving his finger up and down.

"Nonsense!" she said finally, "He has to be brought round to a different way of thinking." That's it. Hanne, Lene and Mimi with milk and margarine. Steffi's little boy was called Rudolf, they had all expected some other name. Rudolf, who was called Rudolf in that family? No-one. Why Rudolf? The sun shone on the basket where the child rested. The girls stood around it and looked at the red face, the little fists. An old name in our country, you know, we saw some Grillparzer and then we read his plays and we said if it's a boy ... Hanne, Leni and Mimi didn't take much notice. They didn't know Grillparzer very well. Only Hanne said she thought his name was Franz. Milk and margarine, and Grete knitted a tiny jacket for the little one and the other girls brought it with them. Nothing was said about mail from Lake Ladoga. Margit, the group leader, wasn't mentioned. The child's underclothes were white, and the basket in which little Rudolf lay was lined with white linen. A woman in a dark, grey dress. That's her, she said and handed her the photograph. That's her, that's his grandmother. Poldi stared at the photograph and didn't know what to say. Bring him round to a different way of thinking! The little one was called Rudolf.

The door of the hut had opened, she looked towards it, could hear the drumming of the rain more clearly. A gust of fresh air shot into the smoky room. A few soldiers turned their heads. Erna stood in the door-frame and looked back at the crouching, lounging, sleepy men. She held the door open a few seconds longer than necessary on purpose. There was no mistaking it: When you came in from outside, you really noticed just how much the room stank.

Those who weren't dozing or asleep looked towards her. One of the young tank corps soldiers nudged his neighbour. A thin infantryman sitting in a crumpled uniform with his back to the entrance turned around with some difficulty. No-one had spoken so much as a word to him. He must have noticed the attention of

the others. The two Red-Cross nurses had been standing at the counter the whole time and the men were free to observe them. Every now and then someone or other had said something to them, a few words, a joke once... The nurses dished out the stew, one ladleful after another. They weren't ugly, God no, they looked a bit tired at the moment, on duty all night in this smoky room, not much fun. The older one had a well-proportioned face, a lovely oval, and everyone who passed by the counter with his plate could see that the rest was all there too. Well-developed breasts. No-one thought much further. The younger one next to her: Why not, somewhat bony, better if she'd push that ladle further down into the pot and fish out a few chunks, if there were any, and not just that watery liquid. No, that wouldn't be so bad. Were there any places left to sit down and eat.

But this one! The one at the door. Of course she was only a Red-Cross nurse too, the blue and white striped dress, a rain-cloak over the top and a white cap with the red cross on her head. Of course there were thousands of them, just as there were thousands of black haired and thousands of blond Red-Cross nurses. She wasn't much different from the two behind the counter. Now she closed the door. The pouring of the rain was muffled again. Her steps were perhaps a little too bouncy, but everything else ... The men followed her with their eyes. Slowly she moved towards the counter. She passed the narrow side of the table, passed by soldier after soldier, hesitating, looking around, moving towards the counter where the pots were sitting.

The scratching of the feet, the murmuring and buzzing in the large hall almost stopped altogether. An artillery sergeant, older than most of the men, with grey hair on his temples and a face furrowed by countless wrinkles, got up and began somewhat clumsily to strap on his belt with its miscellany of dangling military implements. "Get up", he said, nobody knew who to. Nobody took any notice of him. The woman had reached the counter. "Up, you lazybones", he repeated, looked at his watch, poked the soldier next to him in the back with his knee.

The three women now stood facing each other over the counter among the stacked plates and large pots with their murky contents.

"Well", asked Poldi and looked into Erna's face, "finished over

there?"

"Yes, there won't be any more trains before five o'clock today. Could be six or seven, the officer said. Some kind of explosion, sabotage." She turned round slightly and glanced mockingly into the many eyes pointed towards her. "It's gone fairly quiet here too." And without waiting for a reply she gestured to the younger one. The nurse put out her hand and helped her climb onto the metre-high, metre-wide, white tin-clad barrier. She got down again on the other side between the pots.

"The air's terrible in here, like in a goat's pen", she said.

"There's someone waiting for you", the younger one reminded her.

"Oh yes, Franz", Erna looked from one nurse to the other. "Haven't seen him for a long time, nice fellow, used to live one floor below us. Everything's in ruins now. What's he got to say for himself?"

"Just what you'd expect. Depressed as can be", replied Nurse Poldi.

"Seems to be a real kill-joy, your Franz", Ilse interrupted.

"Oh", said Erna and looked into the brown liquid where the ladle swam, "he'll get over it. It's just the blues!" Her eyes wandered up along the handle of the ladle, followed the arm of her colleague and rested for a while on the young girl's face.

In the hall, the soldier next to the sergeant had finally managed to stand up. Annoyed, he rose from the ground and a few men followed him. There was some clattering and rattling, iron on iron, tin on tin.

"The blues. You must be familiar with that, Ilse. Don't you remember, back then, after the business with Peter."

The young nurse looked into the crowded hall. She stared at the spot where the sergeant was getting up and at the soldiers preparing themselves for departure with scraping and stamping. Poldi didn't look at Erna either. She watched as her young colleague struggled to control herself. You could see it in her: with pride and grief. Bearer of the Iron Cross, First Class, the *Fallschirmspringerspange*, the *Kriegsverdienstkreuz mit Schwertern*, and a collection of other medals and decorations as well. Blond like Siegfried. Twenty years old. Sword in hand, in Etzel's burning castle. How sweet is death

for the Fatherland. We shall keep marching on, though everything falls apart around us. A hero. Who among you, who else has a hero like that? You could see it in her eyes! With pride and grief! (Great pride.) With her head held high. *Deutschland*, holy word. Complete self-control when Peter's comrade visited her. They were both standing at the back of the kitchen now, next to the long table where Franz was sitting. It couldn't be true what that injured soldier, that bandaged man had said: To have begged for his life when the people of the Greek Resistance tortured him. What? How? Cut everything off? What? Well, everything that sticks out from a man. They started with the nose and ears and finished below the waist. A hero! No, it couldn't be true! He didn't whimper. He didn't beg for his life. Germany on his lips. It must have been: Germany on his lips. That was his last word.

There was an embarrassing silence between the three women. "Come on", Poldi said at last and nudged Erna in the ribs. Both of them turned towards the kitchen. As they passed the shelves with the stacked dishes Poldi whispered: "Did you have to start all that again?"

Erna frowned. "Her and her hero", she murmured.

"Did you have to?" asked Poldi again. "Did you have to remind her again?"

"For goodness sake", Erna said loudly. It seemed she didn't care whether the young nurse heard her or not, more than that, that she wanted her to hear: "As far as she's concerned, there are only heroes and traitors." Quietly she added: "Don't think I talk like that just because my husband's working in the army abattoir, brings home a piece of meat every now and then, and isn't out dodging bullets at the front. But she will try and tell me about men!"

"That's exactly why you don't need to keep on bringing it up", said Poldi.

They entered the kitchen. The *Unteroffizier* sat at the table, had put his arms on the top, his face in his hands and seemed to be asleep.

A regular knocking could be heard through the pouring of the rain. He plodded on through the darkness, searching for its cause.

In a small shed, where leaking rain dripped to the floor and formed little puddles, the officer cadet was standing, splitting wood by candle-light. "I had to do something", said the pale young man, his voice trembling, "I didn't think it would be so bad."

Franz looked up as the two nurses took a few steps forward, raised his eyebrows and stood up. He looked into Erna's face. The blond plaits touched the ground as she bent down to the lovely insect. Pure curiosity and pleasure were written all over her face. He knew what was happening here, but couldn't explain it to the little girl. He assumed she took the male insect for an ordinary grasshopper, overpowered by the larger animal. Perhaps it was like that. But perhaps she suspected the real explanation. What irritated him was the pleasure with which Erna watched the process. There was no way that the female insect could hide well enough, time after time the girl pushed the protective leaves apart, her teeth glistened between her half opened lips and her eyes sparkled. She insisted that the stomach was growing bigger and bigger, you could see how one animal grew larger as the other one got smaller. She imagined the devoured one as whole inside the female insect's stomach, just like the seven kids in the belly of the wolf. Franz didn't contradict her. She wouldn't understand, he told himself. And when the last remnants of the male had disappeared, and the ends of the delicate legs still seemed to be holding onto something invisible to the human eye, and the head still fidgeted with slightly trembling movements, the girl looked around in the grass, searching for another victim for the greedy praying mantis. She even made Franz help her with her search. Her eyes hadn't changed, grey and firm they stared into his, in spite of the black shadowy rings (the eyes of the other women were ringed in black too, on duty all night in those smoky rooms, no fun, that's for sure) they held his gaze.

"Well then", she said, "have you had something to eat?"

"Yes, thanks", he nodded and pointed to Nurse Poldi. "Your colleague was really very helpful. She told me about our house, at least a bit, she didn't know much."

"There's not much to know. We were lucky. No-one was killed. It's a heap of rubble. Eight people were killed in the house next door." The eyes hadn't changed. The words sounded rehearsed. Then her tone changed: "What are you doing here? Are you on

leave?"

"No, its a special mission. I'm not sure. One of us was transferred into the paratroopers a while back. There's no petrol for the engines any more. Now we're just waiting for the secret weapons, perhaps they don't need petrol." His words were half directed at Nurse Poldi. The tone was mocking.

"We'll go now, if it is all right with you, the relief must be arriving soon." Erna looked at her watch.

"Where's Mother living now?" he asked.

"They've hardly got enough room to move, so she told me when we met at the milk-vendor's. If this all carries on much longer, Helmut will be called up and she'll have more space. I gather the professor gave her the tiniest room to use, not much more than a cupboard, and it's half filled with his books."

"That's just it", said Nurse Poldi. She stood behind Erna off to one side. "He doesn't know if he's got anywhere to sleep tonight."

"Or any civilian clothes", he said.

Erna wriggled her shoulders. "We'll see. There are plenty of suits with no men to wear them any more, and there are plenty of spare beds. Believe me."

A goods station counted as a military target, that was clear to everyone, track-systems, carriages, coal depot for the armament industry, tank-cars for the oil refinery. Thumb on the control-stick button. Smoke and fountains of dust. The aircraft swung slightly to and fro. Three thousand metres, the wind, women and children in the air-raid shelters of the houses below. Twenty bombs of different calibres, perhaps twenty-five or twenty-eight of them. Some plunged through all four floors, some exploded in the second or first floor. Military targets, no, but it couldn't do any harm, it broke the resistance, was called moral military strategy, moral. Incendiary bombs, flames painted the sky red. A crackling noise came from the opening in the range, the round heads of the prisoners shone above it, the men, bent double, attempted to move a large pot filled with water onto the hot-plate

"Don't you have any relatives?" asked Nurse Poldi.

"Not here", he said, "out in the country."

"Never mind", interrupted Erna, "you can come with me first."

You can pull yourself together, have a good wash and things, and than we'll see what we can do."

"Perhaps he could sleep at our place", said Nurse Poldi. She hesitated as she said it, not meeting the eyes of either her colleague or the man. She looked at the wall, where the row of polished coffee pots was standing.

Erna brushed her hands down over her hips. Franz watched her movements. They hardly took any notice of Poldi's suggestion.

Franz looked at the thin blue and white stripes which started at the neck and arranged themselves narrower and wider as they went down to the belt. Every now and then there was a crease in the material. Then the stripes crossed each other. "I didn't know you were with the Red Cross", he said.

"Yes, I have been for a year", replied Erna, "Father's idea."

And then she asked, as if she had only just taken in what her colleague had said: "Have you got the space? What would your mother say?" She half turned towards Poldi.

Franz seized her arm at the elbow. Her hair formed a wreath around her nurse's cap, he could smell it just in front of his face. For a moment he looked across at the well-proportioned madonna face of the other woman, then looked back at the neck in front of him as it disappeared into the regular round opening of the white collar: slightly tanned skin streaked with delicate blue veins, larger ones at the side and, when she turned her head, tendons, clearly visible.

"I just meant if he couldn't find anything else", said Poldi softly. It sounded like an apology. She was still looking at the coffee pots.

Erna patted her on the shoulder. "Oh Poldi, you're a good sort. But you'd just end up in trouble with your mother."

Franz wasn't listening to the two women any more. He was sitting on one of the black chairs in the small room, now no more than rubble, at the back near the wall, by the iron stove, and watching the other two. His sister sitting at the table, notebook in hand, seemed unattractive to him, despite her twenty-five years. Not just because she was his sister, but because her slim figure - skinny, he often thought when he looked at her - was encased in a plain dress, tight around the neck, falling loosely down to the hips and

turning into a bell-shaped skirt below a narrow waist band about a hand's breadth below her pelvis. It was a dress which would be described as serious and severe rather than attractive or enticing, while the little one, almost ten years younger, looked very tempting indeed in her close-fitting dirndl-dress, kneeling on a chair with a bent back and her behind up in the air. The two were busy with a maths assignment that the younger girl had to finish for school. He could have told them how to solve the problem, but sat instead at the other end of the room, leaned against the carved bars of the chair back, and tried to remember what his sister had looked like when she was sixteen. But he couldn't recall the image, no matter how hard he tried, although he remembered quite clearly what they had been doing at the time and what had interested them. The stove pipe ended in the wall above him, disappearing into the chimney, with a flat brass ring closing it off against the wall. How long, he thought, as he leaned back to catch a glimpse of the yellow metal, how long before she'll be running around with boys, and maybe it's true what Leni said, that a girl of fifteen could fall very deeply in love. And why not, she's certainly got all the physical prerequisites. Helmut next door began to shout and cry at that moment, they could hear Grandmother's voice through the door, but couldn't understand what she was saying. Finally he got up, went to the table, took the notebook out of his sister's hand, studied the problem and told them how to solve it. Now he could see her from the front, the blond hair, not in plaits any more, but coiled in rolls on the sides of her head in the fashion of the times, the shining eyes and the white teeth, and he thought of the rickety teeth of his workmates' children, the black rings around the eyes of the women, he thought of Leni's husband queuing for two hours at Waagner-Biró's together with about two hundred qualified workers. Two hours standing along a red brick wall in front of the administration block entrance, all because someone had spread a rumour at the employment office that the firm was looking for three workers; two fitters and a labourer. And he thought about the jars full of jam on the shelves of Berghofer's flat, he thought about the way he'd passed Erna on the staircase in the morning as she was eating a piece of bread smothered in dripping. He thought about the way Herr Berghofer admired the skill of the sparrows when they stole

the cherries from his baskets, but threatened to call the police when a hungry child was tempted by the red shiny fruit and stole a couple. And now he remembered: It must have been after the war, when his sister was fifteen years old, 1922 or 1923, and during that summer she'd gone barefoot because there were no shoes to be had. She wore her hair very short and wispy. He still couldn't remember her clothes. He did know that their aunt sometimes brought second-hand clothes with her, a two-piece suit or a light raincoat, they had to be turned inside out, re-lined and taken in to fit, but what colour were they? Were they all grey? In any case, they went well with the little room, with the furniture which he had painted black. The gaudy colours of the dirndl-dress. His room, the meetings in the cellars, the party headquarters, the meetings themselves, the demonstrations. Those blond rolls of hair, those shining eyes and flawless white teeth would have appeared to him incongruous even at outings of the socialist youth movement, the Red Falcons, their trips to the Hohe Mandling, to the rock faces of the Peilstein, or the flood protection region along the Danube. Both of them looked up at him, his sister with a little pride, the younger girl with obvious admiration. It's quite easy. Didn't you know that this is the way to solve it? He didn't have time nowadays for following the line of the girl's body, starting from the neck and following across the shoulder blade to her gently outstretched bare arms, he turned to go, he had important things to do for the organization. He had no time for things like that. It was during the war, in Krakow that he visited one of those houses for the first time. His comrades took him with them, he didn't really want to go, and even after he got there, he was still embarrassed. The soldiers sat along the wall at tables and drank, they drank the girls' health, bought them beer and schnaps and in the middle of the room, a few couples danced to the music of an old gramophone. The women had tired, worn-out faces, they were dressed slovenly: hurriedly flung-on dresses, one in a dressing gown which wouldn't quite close over her wilted breasts, another in a pair of silk pyjamas which she wore as if they were her everyday clothes. The air was stale and full of smoke, there was a sour odour of sweat and disinfectant. Every now and then, a soldier and a woman would disappear "upstairs". Then, not all that much later, she would return alone,

while next door the soldier got the injection in his cock. No, he didn't like it at all, and after he had smoked two or three cigarettes, and had looked in turn at each bloated or bony face with their bright red mouths, he left the house without taking advantage of the opportunities on offer, and walked aimlessly through the snow of the wintery city before deciding to return to the airport. They had an easy posting, lots of spare time and pretty good rations. It was in Lemberg that he finally found one who met with his approval, no, not one from those places run by the army, but one on the street, who did it all at her own risk, a young Polish woman with two children at home, and he thought it would be all right, what's more he was glad that she couldn't talk much, that she could only understand a few words of German, and that she was so pleased with the bread which he gave her extra. But then back on leave, Herr Berghofer at the door of the building: *Heil Hitler! Heil Hitler!* And Erna, surrounded by sausage, margarine and shoe-laces, she had an even better figure than she'd had when he solved that maths problem, she must be over twenty now, and six months ago she'd married the son of the wholesale butcher; it was quite obvious that in the meantime her body had been developing to the exclusion of any other faculty.

Of course, he said to himself, what did all the other things have to do with him, they were her business; he thought for a moment of the butcher. What about him. Her figure! What else did he want? And while he looked in the direction of the large Hitler portrait opposite the range, the small moustache almost shaved away by the smoke and vapour, the threads of hair hanging over the temples bleached out, he said: "And your old man? I wouldn't think your father would be exactly glad to see me."

Erna laughed. "We don't live together any more. We've got our own flat. My parents were evacuated and they've been living in the Salzkammergut for over a year now. They're doing all right for themselves, I can tell you! Father works at a rations office. Inspection. The business here was too strenuous for him, out there, all he has to do is show off." She laughed again. She sounded cheeky, and a little dismissive.

Franz wasn't used to this tone. Her figure, he observed, her figure was still the same, but her tone, the spite in her voice seemed

to come from a different body, not this smooth, well-rounded one, whose face so readily broke into a laugh which made her cheeks even rounder and rosier than before. And although he thought for a moment about the staff-sergeant with the German Cross in Gold, and saw the way the long arms of the praying mantis pulled her victim underneath the leaves on the ground, a few minutes later he found himself walking along at Erna's side on the way to the tram stop.

The rain had eased off. Only a mild drizzle remained in the air. The winged lion on the railway station roof (where was the other one? It must have fallen down during the last air raid!) could be seen only indistinctly against the background of the grey morning sky, where the clouds chased one another. Sometimes a gust of wind would whip down a stronger shower, sometimes the rain stopped all together. A few soldiers formed small groups, luggage on their backs, guns round their necks, they stood with bent heads, silently, a close-knit cluster, like a herd of animals; resigned and listless they stood, while dampness seeped through the thick material of their uniforms, drops ran down over their caps, through their hair, down the shafts of their guns; the butts were dark, like old pieces of furniture. Their boots stood in puddles of water and mud, the men stood with gently hanging heads and waited. There were a few unshaven civilians too, dressed in rubber raincoats, waiting at the tram stop. Franz thought they looked like feathery black crows, nervously changing from one leg to the other, looking suspiciously in all directions.

Erna talked about her new apartment, the difficulties she had had looking for new furniture and household supplies; she spoke almost continuously. Franz hardly listened, although he didn't find her talking unpleasant. It was a voice he was familiar with. She could have just as well been speaking in Italian or Polish. He wasn't interested in what she said, only the voice! The rain, the black crows, the squelching of boots in mud, everything seemed all right to him, exactly the way it had to be. And as she was explaining to him how he should go about applying for a new suit, what he had to do to get a new flat, as she continued to give him good advice, he wasn't listening. They left a trail in the sandy ground with every step they took, a trail which immediately filled with water. The soil in the

freshly filled-in bomb craters was saturated, they formed large shallow puddles, round mirrors in which the lion could see his silhouette, could see that he was alone on the roof-top, robbed of his companion at the other end, alone, but still with his spread front paws, with his half-opened wings, black with soot and only gradually becoming visible against the slowly brightening sky. It all seemed to him exactly as it had to be, just as it was back then, when they arrested him.

Then they left in the almost empty tram. Erna sat next to him and he felt her shoulder brush against his. She pointed to a house with a large red sign on it, and explained something to him, it was important, he really should remember it, but he only felt her shoulder, and every now and then, when the tram went round a bend, her upper arm. He had to make an appointment with the head of the office here, what's his name, and it really should be done today and he ought to say this and that. The hand on his arm, the hand and the knee and the hip bone, and what did he care for the butcher, a bath after so many months, a tub with warm water, surrounded by warm water, perfumed soap, not hard like stone or sandy so that your skin got scratched, drop by drop, down the glass, along the tiles, amongst the hair, which hair? - the footprints filled up with water, water all around, like in the womb. The maths problems were all solved by now, and those which weren't solved would go up in smoke, burn, fall into ashes now, today, tomorrow, the day after tomorrow, and the head of the office, he was sure of it, wasn't going to be head for much longer, and Erna's beautiful new apartment would be occupied by someone else (a staff-sergeant) or by no-one, he could do nothing for or against any of that. He'd had so much time since that 12th of March, plenty of time, and after he had been called up, even more time. Everyone had so much time now, couldn't do anything but wait, in the rain, at all the tram stops, dressed in damp, creased uniforms with muddy boots, drips along the boot legs, along the flat shiny barrels. But in spite of it all, no-one had any time, everyone thought they were about to miss something, miss something before everything dissolved in the grey of the fog, the cascading water, the unfathomable flowing monotony, the moment was all he was sure about, the moment was all anyone could be sure about. The future he used to believe in,

even after his arrest, even after the death of his sister, the future which he had lived for, had disappeared in the clouds of smoke, had been blown away by the dark fumes from their aeroplanes, eradicated: first in the gay certainty of survival, in the intoxication of the pulsating blood in one's veins, then in a different kind of intoxication, after the attack on London on the sixth of September, or after the mission against La Valetta, constant intoxication, even now it didn't take much effort, you just had to push the control stick a little towards your body and you climbed instantly, the blotches grew smaller and smaller, turned into dainty sparkles, the aircraft off to the side shook a little, had she been hit? The commander's voice in the headset: military installations in the region of ... have been successfully targeted with bombs, the voice of a Pomeranian country squire, one of the people he used to hate. He drank like a fish, the commander, in the bar, young female telegraph operators to his left and right, and the Italian behind the counter filling the glasses, there you go, always bottoms up, his head thrown back, the girls with shiny eyes already, his hands on their knees, and as he kissed one on the cheek, he pinched the other on the bottom. That young strong flesh and the taut skin covering it, his hands wandered restlessly to and fro. Lieutenant-Colonel, Staff-Sergeant Mayer, he turned his head, damn you Sergeant-Major, what is it with you, can't you see I'm busy, the lingerie ribbons were visible through the blouse's thin material, Staff-Sergeant Mayer needs to go home urgently for a few days, his family has been completely bombed out, his wife is expecting their fourth child and doesn't know where to go with the three little ones. They haven't got any relatives. He wasn't yet forty, the lieutenant-colonel, he swung around on his bar stool, leaned against the high counter and looked at the sergeant-major: "Well, Wersowetz, you know that all leave has been cancelled!" His hands rested on the girls' thighs, his eyes gleamed dully. "I thought, Lieutenant-Colonel, that *Berta Siegfried* was to fly to Berlin to collect the new equipment." The sergeant-major didn't finish the sentence, the lieutenant-colonel fell silent for a moment as well. "Well, well, four children", he said finally, "that Mayer, eh? Give him a pass. He's to be back within five days, is that understood? And remind me tomorrow to write to our forester in the Bavarian

Woods. We own a hunting lodge there, she and the children could have a room there.” He was about to turn around, but the sergeant-major didn’t move and he said: “Anything else, Wersowetz?” - “Yes, Lieutenant-Colonel.” - “Well, what is it.” The sergeant-major handed him a piece of paper. The officer skimmed over the lines, jumped down from the bar stool and paced up and down the room several times. The girls whispered among themselves, leaned over his now empty seat, the Italian was washing glasses in front of the shelves of sparkling bottles, the water was splashing, in a corner of the bar four officers were playing skat, slapping down cards. “Out of the question, Sergeant-Major!” shouted the lieutenant-colonel. He lit a cigarette but had hardly taken three drags before he threw it to the ground. An officer cadet and two captains who had just entered remained at the door, the monotonous slapping of the cards ceased. “It’s none of their business!” the lieutenant-colonel was shouting. “What’s it got to do with us that his brother was part of the 20th of July affair, it’s got nothing to do with us at all, he’s a member of the Luftwaffe, and those people have no right to interfere in our business.” Then he stopped before the sergeant-major: “We send no reply at all. Understood? I have nominated flying officer Kaltenegger for the German Cross in Gold, and that’s final, do you understand? And you will try and get me a connection with Field-Marshal Kesselring immediately, I have to talk to him. Understood? When you get the connection, call me, no matter where I am! Anything else?” he asked turning back to his bar stool. He put a new cigarette in his mouth. One of the girls gave him a light. “No, Lieutenant-Colonel.” - “That’s all right, then”, he said, turned around, called for the Italian and ordered three glasses of grappa. One of the girls stroked his forehead: “Problems? Problems?” she said, “shall we get rid of them for you?” After he had emptied his glass he got up, grabbed one of the girls round the waist and the two of them left the bar and crossed the road. The people in the bar could see through the window the way they disappeared through the door of the building where the officers were billeted. The cards slapped down again on the table. The two captains and the officer cadet sat with the girl, bodies, legs, arms, heads. They all knew that the Pomeranian country squire had no interest in what went on inside their heads, whether they were

filled with images of Christ on the altar, as in the case of the sergeant from Berlin, or whether it was the man with the little moustache, as in the case of the officer cadet from Pforzheim, or whether an unknown something covered in grey fog filled the space, as was perhaps the case with him, the commander, and with most of the others. Only the grey sky was real, the drops on the window of the aircraft, the orientation provided by the little phosphorescent specks on the mechanical instruments. Only the experience of the moment in complete and utter exposure, the icy loneliness of the sky, the thin wall separating you from the plunge into nothingness, into total darkness; these were all the certainties there were.

When he woke up and looked around: the white bed linen, the bright curtains, the bedside tables, the cupboards, a picture on the wall opposite the bed: reddish glowing mountain tops towering above dark fir-woods, an alpine hut, cows and calves, a dairymaid, a huntsman, everything clean and well put together, even a bunch of flowers on the table in front of the hut had not been forgotten, everything clean, the room too, Erna seemed to be a very competent housewife. He could hear the clattering of dishes from the kitchen. Boiling water was bubbling in the pot. It was all so very pleasant, so ordered, so soothing, but then he felt again that peculiar pressing sensation in his stomach region, the same one he had felt yesterday - no, it had been the morning of today - in the rain at the tram stop.

He got up, pushed the curtains open a few centimetres, and looked down at the street. The rain had stopped. Children were coming home from school, Helmut, and before that his sister, and before that himself. Which of these streets hadn't he passed through, he had changed schools three times and attended courses evening after evening in spite of four hundred thousand unemployed, not counting those who didn't qualify for the dole or were unemployable, in spite of the academics who were delivering letters, giving private tuition, selling train tickets, he went on with his exercise books, his text books and musical instruments and then in the evening he carried the *Rote Fahne* and the *Unzufriedene* and delivered those papers to the party functionaries.

He pulled on his trousers. There was something he wasn't happy about, he couldn't get rid of the strange feeling in his stomach

region. He looked down at the clean white bed linen. The duvets were turned back, the sheet on Erna's bed was already smoothed out and tucked in. Everything's fine with her, the butcher comes home every day at half past four from the barracks, or the abattoir, or the army ration depot, or wherever else he's been on duty, so that wasn't it. He put on his uniform shirt which hung on a hanger on the side of the cupboard and went out to see Erna in the kitchen.

"Well, did you sleep well?" she asked. She was wearing a simple woollen dress now, with an apron over the top.

"Thanks", he grunted. He stood somewhat undecided behind one of the chairs and watched her handling the pots on the range. The corridor and the staircase, he thought, I don't want to meet anyone there.

"Don't you want a cup of coffee?" she asked. She put a plate and a cup on the table.

He sat down. There was a little pause. He looked around the room. What should he talk about, what was there to talk about any more? "Do you still play the mandoline?" he asked finally. He didn't really care. Why was he asking?

She laughed. "No, what an idea, I haven't played for a long time. It was destroyed in the last air raid anyway." Erna poured the coffee, put bread and a jar of jam on the table. It was good to have the knife, the spoon and the cup to occupy himself with. "Well", he said finally, with his mouth full, "I think I'll try and find Mother and Helmut now, then I have to report to the Regional Air Command."

"Good, fine", she said, it was clear from her voice that she didn't want to hold him up, her hands were occupied again with something else. He didn't look, but could tell they were busy with some task, perhaps peeling potatoes or stirring the contents of a pot. "If you're still here tomorrow, come and visit, or pick me up from work." And now she explained to him quickly where he could find the house where his mother and Helmut were living. She only needed to mention the joiner at the corner, the cobbler next door and the tobacconist, yes, the one with the rusty sign of a camel, traces of it are still recognisable, and he knew his way around. Then she reminded him that he still had to see the head of the district office about a flat, moved on without a pause to talking

about her daily tasks, and finally he had to listen to explanations of the food she was about to prepare.

Yes, he knew it, the thin wall had been broken now. This meant the fall into nothingness, into mutual emptiness, to be without meaning, without existence, without the ability to want or give. An emptiness you couldn't escape, you could only cover it with words, cover it with empty words, the more words, the better. Had he expected anything else? And doing things! He had known it for a long time, doing things was the way out, frantically doing things, everyone suddenly felt the necessity to do something, had to do this and that, immediately and urgently. There it was again, the icy loneliness of the sky, cut up by the frantically rotating propellers, cut up into thousands, no millions of lonelinesses, which unfolded like waves of sleep, penetrating the last and tiniest of rooms: the clenched fists and the sweaty face of the young woman. The cheek bones became prominent, a small nose, dark eyes, black, only the pupils visible, till finally there was a gushing of water and blood, and the seemingly amorphous something in the hands of the old woman: a new loneliness, extinguished in the darkness of a dreary day as it dissolved into streams of water.

There was a smell of milk, of newly washed nappies and a little wood smoke. Poldi took off her muddy shoes at the door and put on the slippers which Steffi took from a small cupboard. She was now sitting next to an iron kitchen-range and watching her girlfriend change nappies. Everything was blindingly white, the sheet on which the boy lay, the little jacket in which his restless arms were placed, the knitted pair of trousers in which the whole parcel of rubber, nappies and little pink abdomen were packed. Those little hands, those little ears! A large number of dolls, big ones and little ones - she hadn't started school yet, but even so - and one had eyes that opened and closed, and when she pressed its tummy it squeaked out an indistinct "mama". But best of all she liked the one with the real hair, brushing it, dressing, undressing it and dressing it again, giving it a bottle, taking it for a walk and showing the neighbour; some of them lost an arm or leg in the process, they were attached with elastic inside the body, cotton elastic, and you had to go to the dolls' hospital to get everything fixed. The two

women sang a song under their breath which the child seemed to like, for as soon as they stopped singing, the child started blubbering which made them both laugh and start up a new melody. Steffi stopped suddenly and listened. She lifted the now fully dressed infant and passed him to Poldi: "Take him, I think Rudi is awake." As soon as Poldi had the baby, a mass of wriggling arms and legs, in her arms, the young mother turned towards the door of the bedroom. The child whimpered wah! wah! wah! and when Poldi held it in her arms and tickled its chin with her middle finger, it began to laugh. "*Hänschen klein, Hänschen mein*", she sang. The first one was called Rudolf and all four girls bent over him. Nothing was said about Herbert at Lake Lagoda. They joined hands and sung a lullaby. It was so pretty. Four of five, each of them had four or five dolls, they joined hands and sang, four or five, each of them wanted four or five, but at least three, all around them, snuggling up to their feet, playing, beautiful, they knew the scene in all its variations from the picture cards from the German House in Munich. Poldi was the only one who brought some ration coupons with her. No, really, we just didn't think of it, definitely next time, we'll beg them off mother, that's all arranged, by the way, at the People's Welfare Office, at Mother and Child, expecting and breast-feeding mothers, The NS-League of Women, of course, that's what they're there for, it's difficult for you to come into town with the child, yes, it's true, it is beautiful here, but a bit out of the way, we have to collect metal now, there's a lot to do and you can win bonuses. Steffi came back, shook her head and started to unbutton her dress from the neck down. "No, he's asleep", she said, and sat down on the chair she had pushed next to the table. "Don't you need the butter coupons for yourself, Poldi?" she asked while she uncovered her left breast.

"It's all right", replied her girlfriend, "you know I get my meals at the railway station." She bent forward and handed over the child, which stopped struggling as soon as it felt the smooth skin of the mother, just wriggled around a little with half-closed eyes and open mouth and finally, when Steffi put it in the right position, started sucking greedily on the nipple.

The wood was burning in the stove with a cracking sound, the child wheezed a little, the wind outside blew the branches of a

spruce about in front of the low windows, and the melody of the last song they had sung still seemed to hover over the room. They had sung it as usual in two parts. Poldi felt very contented, she didn't think about the words of the song "*I heard the sickle rushing, it rushed through the grain*", she never thought about the words of songs, she felt totally secure in the melody, a melody you could dissolve in, get lost in, surrender to, each melody working in a different way, slowly, solemnly, tempestuously, longingly - melody, it let her retreat into herself and become something new with each new tune she heard, to approach the unknown, innocent as a child, secure, a child herself, with the rosy cheeks of the singer, a child's cheeks, and further and further back, playing with dolls, dolls, the dolls' house, the dolls' pram, pressing the doll's tummy: "Mama", real hair, dolls in the house and outside, and then of course in the bathtub, at least there was something she liked to have with her, something she liked, that gave her pleasure, water all around her, no, that wasn't it, she thought the water all around her was strange, she had a celluloid fish for a friend, she never let it go, she tightened her hand round its body and her mother got angry because she wanted to soap her fingers, let go of the stupid fish, no, she wouldn't let it float away, it was hers, hers only, she passed it to her other hand, she pressed it against herself, sometimes she sat on it, yes, at these times it was hers only, nobody saw it, only she knew where it was, mother couldn't find it any more, couldn't take it off her, but then it burst one day, split open along its edge, filled with water, stayed on the bottom of the bathtub, even when she lifted her small thighs to let it escape, and she was most astonished when it didn't rise up between her legs as usual to dance on the surface of the water, she felt for it with the spread fingers of her right hand and pushed it back and forth along the bottom of the galvanised bathtub.

"If we're lucky, Herbert will be home from the infirmary by Christmas", said Steffi and patted the child's body, because it had fallen asleep, and still needed to drink a little more.

The fish had to be emptied, the water poured out from the split, it streamed in a bright arch onto her chest and flowed down between the two brown circles of her nipples; she enjoyed it at first, but then grew sadder and sadder that it couldn't rise up from the bottom of

the water by itself any more.

“He wrote that he’ll still be able to feel them for a few more years”, Steffi continued. “They couldn’t get completely rid of all of the smaller shrapnel.”

She knew it would go on for ages now. Her friend would tell her all about the injury, and about how lucky Herbert was that it was only his thigh that had been hit. It could have been much worse, a shot in the abdomen, say! She had already heard it all, once, twice, three times, but she came because of the *Unteroffizier* and the fact she wanted to hear Steffi’s opinion, she wanted advice on how to get a lodger assigned to her officially. “Of course, it’s possible he might limp for a while, but it won’t be too bad. The doctors said it will only take a few years for the tendon to grow stronger again and he’ll be able to play sports.” The branches of the spruce in front of the window swung backwards and forwards. The wind hadn’t died down. Far away, a large flock of black birds flew across the mottled sky. Poldi looked through the glass at the clouds. Traces of today’s bombing attack could be seen in the dark stripes, dirty brown with a rusty red sheen below. From the bank on which the little settlement sat, you could see the city. Here and there, fires were still smoking, but from this distance, the view of the city showed no change. “Most importantly, the bone isn’t damaged. Although these days of course, there are several operations available. Come on, drink up!” She took the nipple between her index and middle fingers and pressed it against the small lips.

She’d show him. She’d show him that they were prepared. That they were prepared to make sacrifices, even here. She’d see to it that he had a roof over his head. And her mother? Perhaps she hated her mother. In any case, she’d show her that she could do whatever she wanted. And just what did she want to do?

The lips smacked again.

The fish sank deeper and deeper, from the long stripes in the sky to the bottom of the bath-tub. There was a separate entrance from the entrance-hall. There was no reason why he shouldn’t sleep in the spare room, he wouldn’t disturb her or her mother. The celluloid shimmered, and after a while, the burst part began to scratch her thigh when she lay on it. But she couldn’t part with the fish for a long time.

While the child slept in its basket, the girlfriends leaned against the window and looked out into the tree-tops, into the bare scraggy branches in the garden below the house, looked further across the reddish-brown bank, patterned by the different roofs of a collection of small houses, into the regular grey arrangement of the city streets.

"I don't want Herbert to have to go to the front again", said Steffi. And Poldi suddenly thought, yes, yes, I can understand that. To have someone. Not to be alone. To feel a strong arm around your shoulder, hand in hand, on his lap, what would it be like, really be like, imagine, you can imagine a lot and then it turns out to be different, but still, even in the imagination: the way everything contracts inside, everything tenses up, right to one's nipples. I can understand why she doesn't want him to go, but *Deutschland!* - press hard against it, even if it hurts, Germany, the holy word! - for me, just for me, when the ripped edges hurt against my thigh, the celluloid burst, mother could never understand how it happened - *über alles in der Welt!* - she won't be able to understand this either, but when it's official, she won't be able to do anything about it, if the head office makes a decision, assigns a lodger, what can she do?

"You know someone in the Regional Accommodation Office, don't you", asked Poldi, hesitantly.

"Yes, Lechtaler, why? Have you been assigned a lodger?"

"Not yet", Poldi was still hesitant. The large flock of black birds had disappeared. The cloud banks were dissolving.

"I've met someone who's been bombed out and we'd rather take him than a stranger." Wasn't he a stranger too? What did she know about him? Morals are nothing but organized egoism. If we didn't win the war! What strange opinions he had! She didn't share them, and yet, sacrifices had to be made, hadn't he said that too? The individual is nothing, the people, *das Volk*, everything! Still: Steffi didn't want Herbert to go back to the front again, and all of a sudden she could understand it. The white skull shone in the recess of the wall, a ladleful of brown liquid for everyone. Behind her, she could hear the child's quiet breathing.

"You could go and see him. Give him my regards", said Steffi, "he'll help you out if he can." And then she began to talk about

Herbert again, endlessly, without interruption, Poldi couldn't get a word in. Maybe she didn't even bother to try any more. His name was Lechtaler. That was all she needed to know.

Franz asked the guard at the door for directions to the department described only by letters and numbers on his written orders. The guard, an older man, a reservist, explained the way somewhat clumsily and in a heavy Viennese dialect. Fourth floor, room number two hundred and thirty-eight.

Franz hesitated for a moment. "What's this then?" he asked the lance-corporal standing at a desk behind a partition near the door. Except for the telephone and the telephone directory, Franz couldn't see anything particularly official looking on the desk, only a tin filled with ashes and cigarette butts, a few empty beer bottles, three or four pulp novels and a large chunk of bread and dripping wrapped in a piece of greasy, oily paper.

"You have no idea how many departments there are in this building, it's impossible to know them all." Franz was used to the informal tone, but the familiarity of this lance-corporal - he had a prominent moustache as well, which was rather unusual - surprised him for a moment. He didn't know him, and even though the lance-corporal was old enough to be his father, he was nevertheless rank and file and would have to expect an *Unteroffizier* to find fault with such behaviour. But a moment later, all Franz could think about was the bread covered with dripping. Where did this man get the dripping from? Beautiful white dripping with golden pieces of crackling throughout. How they would crunch between the teeth! He hesitated to leave the entrance, so the lance-corporal continued: "An easy job up there, good people, all of them." Then he stopped, nodded a few times with his head and looked out of his partition. Franz turned around and clicked his heels. "Good day, *Herr Oberleutnant*", he heard the lance-corporal behind him say, and when he turned back to him, he saw the old man break off a piece of the bread and put it in his mouth. "Good morning, Nowak", said the passing officer.

Where did Franz know that voice from? He could only see the back of the tall, very slim man, who soon disappeared up the staircase.

“That’s him”, said the guard, and chewed heavily on his bread. “Its strange for him to come that late. Fourth floor, room two hundred and thirty eight.”

Franz turned towards the staircase.

In the corridors, in the lobbies, in the halls, there were soldiers everywhere. Every now and then a soldier with different coloured folders under his arm would pass along the corridor. There was the sound of telephones ringing in the offices, typewriters rattling and fragments of conversations emerging in between the opening and closing of the tall, white double doors.

Franz went up the stairs.

He climbed higher and higher. A glance at the altimeter told him that the aircraft was already over two thousand metres high. White walls pushed themselves in between the planes. The first squadron had already disappeared, he could still see the tail of the craft next to him, the glass cockpit of *Marta Nordpol* sparkled in a gap in the clouds in front of him, Egon was the pilot, and again the white wall covered him up. The smell of thyme and the delicate pink of the first flowering almond trees. He would never have believed it. The allotments of his childhood, a miracle of blossoms, behind it the chimneys of the factories, the siding of the large bread factory, the untidy bank behind the Preyer childrens’ clinic, the smoky meeting places; there was a smell of stale beer and strong ammonia from the nearby urinal, five, six, sometimes there were more of them, the campaign committee, a welder, a tool maker, two bookbinders, Astmayer the student, for work, freedom and justice, at all costs, machine-guns in the cellars, hand-grenades, secret printing-presses, each municipal house a citadel, white fog all around, the navigation dials, the variable speed dial, the temperature of the cooling liquid, the revolution indicator, the body of the plane filled with heavy bombs and the belts filled with explosive projectiles, but in spite of it all, the smell of thyme, and the sight of the delicate pink of the first blossoms of the almond tree, but close nearby, the dirty houses, the glassless windows, torn underwear in dark streets, ragged, hollow-eyed children, and “‘Eil ‘Itler! ‘Eil ‘Itler!” To hell with your “‘Eil ‘Itler!” It was obvious that the commander, the Pomeranian country squire, had been fed up with it all for a long time, and there was only one way out: Out with the throttle till the

engines thundered and then away, and then in the evening, in the bar: out with the throttle again, one marsala after the other, to your left and your right a bit of skirt you could disappear with afterwards. Out with the throttle! The smell of thyme was new to Franz, as was the flaky pink of the almond blossoms, a gust came from his right, the voice of the lieutenant-colonel crackled in the earphones of the headset, a slight change in course, Lieutenant Mann asked the name of the radio operator in the aircraft beside them, the plane shook, rolled through the white milky broth; then nothing but tin, aluminium, pipes, cables, hoses, dancing vibrating needles. It darkened around them, the commander ordered them to increase their distance, bright lights flashed in front and below. The engines hummed evenly, drove the bombers through the thunderstorm towards the African coast. His thoughts kept drifting back to the almond blossoms and the grey houses, to the strong scent of thyme and the unkempt bank by the Preyer childrens' hospital, but in spite of that, something inside him was growing tenser and tenser, and the moment the noses of the *Ju 88* squadron shot out of the walls of cloud, the blue sea far below them and the thin yellow line on the horizon, it all disappeared. The voice of the lieutenant-colonel came through the headset again. The formation closed up. The yellow line widened, a thin white line was already discernable between it and the blue of the sea, and now the yellow increased with tremendous speed, conquered the blue, expanded into a vast distance, infinite. Bright spots sparkled on a peninsula, suddenly tiny white clouds appeared above them, a bunch of white carnations, he could already see dark spots between the wings. The commander's plane *Anton Anton* had almost reached the bunch of carnations when the order came: dive! At that same moment he saw the first aircraft dip downwards, *Anton Berta*, *Anton Caesar*, *Anton Karl* followed and now everything was roaring and singing around him, the body and struts of the plane were groaning and straining, the handle of the control-stick trembled in his fists, his eyes were fixed on the altimeter, the commander's voice in his ear was useless, the procedures for cases like this had been established long before take-off, the needle dropped down and down, something sent a sudden shock through his fingers but they clutched at the control-stick almost without him noticing, the needle

sank and then suddenly a jolt went through his entire body, the whole plane, the whole world. The stick was pushed hard up against his body, for a second his stomach seemed to want to come up through his oesophagus, but then his eyes caught a glimpse of the needle climbing again, and now he had time to risk a glance through the cockpit. Black clouds of smoke were drifting over the still recognizable fortress. He could make out the flashing of the anti-aircraft guns too, and as he increased his altitude and negotiated a slight curve, he noticed a number of ships on the water. "Franz", he heard Lieutenant Mann say. Mann was his lookout and gunner. "Franz, we've got a great hole in our right wing."

Up on the fourth floor, the doors weren't as high as the ones on the lower floors, there weren't any soldiers hanging about waiting either. Franz was the only one walking down the long corridor, searching for the right door.

Surviving, he thought, as he went from door to door, examining the names on the plates and the numbers above them, surviving is what matters. It wasn't even any use telephoning the Luftwaffe Ministry nowadays: air support wasn't an option, there wasn't any fuel. White painted doors, noises behind them. The only light in the corridor came from the windows at the two narrow ends.

*Oberleutnant of the Reserve* Richard Wohlleben was engraved on one of the doors. Franz knew now why the voice at the entrance had sounded familiar to him. February 1934. He could still hear Leni's story: of course they died, they dropped like flies, they had no combat experience, children, they didn't even reach the barricades in front of the closed iron gate. The workers had stacked up rubbish bins filled with sand and park benches, filled the gaps with cobble-stones and placed machine guns above it all in the narrow windows of the corridors, while the other windows were blocked up with wardrobes and other pieces of furniture. Their men were lying on the pavement in their green *Heimwehr* uniforms. Only the armoured police vehicle made it up to the door, shattered the windows, rammed the stacked buckets without being able to dislodge them and retreated when some workers threw hand grenades at it from the staircase. Astmayer, the student - it was at his request he had printed the leaflets which landed him in Wöllersdorf - Astmayer crouched on the roof, watching all the enemy movements

and reporting to the comrades on the other floors.

Two hundred and thirty-eight, he read on the door. He knocked. Come in, called a female voice, he opened the door and entered the room. It wasn't all that big, but roomy enough to provide space for three desks and two smaller tables for the typewriters, as well as some roll-top cabinets. Two women, both wearing civilian cloths, and an *Unteroffizier* were in the room. One of the two women, the younger one, sat in front of a typewriter and stared in front of her at a piece of paper filled with narrow lines. The other was sitting at a desk with two, three books in front of her, holding a pencil in one hand, the other sunk in a stack of writing paper directly in front of her. The *Unteroffizier* stood next to the window, he seemed to be looking out, turned around when Franz entered and looked at him, the women too had their faces turned towards the door. *Oberleutnant* Wohlleben was nowhere in sight. Franz presented his papers and looked from face to face, uncertain.

"Is this the right place?" he asked, holding the folded piece of paper in front of him. Now the *Unteroffizier* approached him and looked at the document. In the meantime, Franz noticed there were doors to the left and to the right, leading to more rooms.

"Yes, yes", said the *Unteroffizier*, "you've got the right place. If you'll wait a moment, I'll announce you to the *Oberleutnant*. Let me take this." With that, he took the papers from Franz and disappeared with them behind one of the doors.

The two women looked him up and down. The one at the desk asked: Are you with the flying corps?"

"Yes", he replied shortly. He sounded reluctant to enter into conversation.

"Oh, does that mean you've actually flown?" inquired the younger one sitting at the typewriter. She had turned slightly to face him.

He nodded. "I'm a pilot."

"But you've got no badges. Most of them have a bar here." She pointed at her breast, which pressed up against her pullover in a mellow curve.

Franz smiled. "Yes, well", he said and unintentionally made a negative, almost dismissive gesture, "we take them all off. It's the custom at the front." With his right hand he pointed to a number

of small loops on his uniform jacket.

For a moment there was an uncomfortable silence. It was as if everyone was embarrassed, although no-one really knew why. Franz kept his eyes on the door that the *Unteroffizier* had disappeared behind. *Oberleutnant*, *Oberleutnant* he kept mouthing inaudibly. Then he looked at the two women.

The old forester woman and the young blond one stood together. The latter wore a blazer loosely round her shoulders, and Franz could see the round badge on the collar. The forester's wife welcomed him with joy in her voice: "Imagine! Our Erich has come back. This is Elisabeth, his wife." In the garden, he could see three little children playing at the base of the roughly-made table. He knew Helmut wouldn't be able to spend the summer with the Wohllebens this year. But it didn't distress him greatly, for a few minutes later the "prodigal son" came through the door, his father, the forester, behind him. Franz, who was standing next to the women, couldn't avoid shaking hands with Ernst, the SS officer. The old man showed some embarrassment but said only: "Yes, he made something of himself out there". Then the two men went off to the pub, and Franz heard the voice of the young one talking loudly and continuously about the great era into which they were about to embark. He met Ernst's brother, Richard in the kitchen. He was filling cigarette papers with tobacco. After they'd said hello, they sat silently for a while at the narrow table. Richard's hands were in constant motion, they pressed the tobacco into one half of a tin pipe, closed up the two halves, pulled the empty paper shell over the now closed pipe, pushed a wooden stopper through, and laid the finished cigarette in the case. Franz pulled slowly and with pleasure at one of the cigarettes offered him. "Yes, that's the way it is", said Richard Wohlleben finally. "And that was all for nothing too", he pointed to his head where the traces of a scar were still visible. Franz understood: all for nothing, just as Richard's silence on Leni's whereabouts had been. He hadn't been able to save her. "Be careful", said Wohlleben. "I've got a brother who is a member of the Blood-Order. But you - you've got to be careful." He looked out at his mother and sister-in-law, while his hands continued to occupy themselves. But it seemed to Franz that Wohlleben didn't see them, he looked through the kitchen window

at them in the same way he might look into a never-ending distance.

"Where have you come from?" The woman at the desk interrupted his thoughts.

"From Italy", he answered, happy to have found a new topic of conversation.

"Oh, that must have been lovely", remarked the young one. "I've always wanted to go to Italy some day. Were you far south? Tell us about it!"

"I was there right from the beginning, in Sicily, stationed on the Po river-plain up till now." A pretty child, he said to himself. He thought she might be about twenty, a little fragile and boyish, with dark hair and dark eyes. "Oh yes", he said, "there are wonderful landscapes down there, when I think back to the agaves, the almond blossoms, the stone-pines; it's really worth seeing."

"Is it really like it is in the pictures?" asked the dark-eyed one and her softly rounded lips remained slightly open. She was facing the speaker now.

"But it's all so dirty", said her older colleague, "and the people are all gipsies, you can't trust them, they've always betrayed us, they always ran away, just when it mattered."

"Oh well", said Franz, and looked at the woman. She might be around thirty, with permed brown hair held together in a light-blue ribbon. The upper part of her body, Franz could only see the upper part of her body, was covered in a marine-blue jacket with chequered facings. She was wearing spectacles which suited her. "There are a fair number of people who don't think much of Mussolini's politics. Up until the war with Abyssinia he had a number of followers, but then most of them found out where it was all heading. You know, people down there live much more intensely, in fact, they probably like living a lot more than we do. And why's that? Maybe because they're of a less problematic nature, because they live for life's sake, and not for the sake of an idea."

"Exactly", said the woman behind the desk. "Those people don't have any ideals, they never did have any, they just live from day to day, just for what they need that day, for the most primitive things."

He nodded: "Quite right, not for ideals but for realities."

"How inferior", said the woman, and wrinkled her nose.

"How honest", he replied. "After all, everyone wants to live."

"But not without honour", she protested.

"They love life", he insisted, "and that is honest. How could something honest be without honour?"

"Do you call their politics honest too?"

"What do you mean by honest? It all depends on your perspective. Badoglio's politics are honest, honest for the women and children whose husbands and fathers threw away their guns last July and made for home with a 'Guerra é finita' on their lips. For them, yes!"

By now his utterances were almost frightening even him. He was relieved that the woman didn't take much notice of them.

"Is it honourable to leave a friend in the lurch?" she asked.

"Friend! Friend!" he said. "Maybe some Giovanni is going to go through thick and thin for Hans and Peter, who he's lived beside for years, but hardly for *allies*, it's far too abstract a notion for him. Do you understand what I'm saying? They're like children, and in this respect they're closer to nature in every way. They can be cruel in the same way that children can be cruel, for example."

"Most certainly cruel, when I just think of all the little birds they shoot", the woman looked indignant.

"They're mostly larks", said Franz, he seemed to derive pleasure from provoking her. "They display them in the markets on long tables or hang them on strings, head down, like pearls on a string along the stalls. You can buy plucked birds as well. Just imagine, tiny naked birds, no feathers, little heads and legs." Did he want to make her angry?

"Stop it", said the woman. "It makes me sick just thinking about it."

"What do they do with them?" asked the young one matter-of-factly. She seemed to want to learn more.

"Boil them and fry them, of course", explained Franz. "There's not a lot of meat on these little things, but they seem to be a speciality. You just have to eat more of them to get full. They cook them with a whole range of herbs. You know, I tasted them once, I can't say I liked them, a bit too bitter."

"What, you've eaten one of those little birds?" The woman

stared at him in dismay.

"And why not? I'm sure you've eaten a chicken or a goose, haven't you?"

"That's completely different!" she protested. "They're domestic animals."

"All right, so you wouldn't eat partridge or wild geese then?"

"Yes, but such little birds!"

"And sardines, they're smaller than cod and carp."

"But the birds sing, and they're so useful too. They control pests."

"Maybe the little fish sing too and I'm sure they're useful for something. Everything is useful for something else."

"And you've really eaten things like that?" the young one asked now. There was no dismay in her voice. "What was served with it?"

"White bread, of course, and red wine. A soup to start with, whether it was made from those birds or not, I don't know. It was at some festival and I was invited to eat with a family. I didn't want to be nosy and ask."

"They must have been uncivilised people", the woman flared up again. "What sort of people were they?"

"It was a large family, there are lots of them in Italy. The father was employed with the railway, one daughter was a teacher, another a nun, one son had been captured in Africa by the British and another was in a German camp. He's the one they worry most about."

"Why?" asked the young one.

"He was taken hostage with thirty other men in a village near where partisans blew up the railway line. Neither his parents, nor his wife who lives with his parents now, have heard from him since. They all assured me that he had nothing whatsoever to do with that sort of thing. And I accepted it as the truth. I had a lot of sympathy for those people. But what could I do?"

The woman sighed: "Yes, that's war for you. Think how many of our brave soldiers could be killed by an attack like that on the railway."

"But if he had nothing to do with it", asked the young one, "why was he taken?"

"It's called collective responsibility, it's meant to be a deterrent."

"But it wasn't his fault!" The girl didn't seem to be able to understand.

"Didn't you know that?" he asked.

"What?"

"That they take civilian hostages whenever there are attacks behind the front? In this case it worked out relatively well, because no-one was killed. The men were sent to Germany. But if a transport had been blown up, the men would have been shot on the spot, the women driven away and the village burnt to the ground."

"But how come, if it's not even the people's fault?" repeated the younger woman, "most likely they don't even know who the culprits are."

"That's how it is in war time", said the woman behind the desk. A satisfied expression rested on her face.

At that moment, the door opened, and the *Unteroffizier* returned: "You have to be patient for a minute or two. He's on an important long distance phone call." He came closer to Franz and looked at his uniform jacket. "The badge for wounded soldiers?" he asked and pointed at the small loops which were just large enough to thread a big needle through.

"No", said Franz, "the Iron Cross, First Class. At Tobruk."

"Well, you've got a veritable collection there", remarked the other man, and gestured with his finger at the loops just above.

"They just keep on coming", Franz grunted. "I've been at it long enough."

"Were you in Russia?"

"There too."

"Do you have the Frozen-Meat-Medal?"

"Of course."

"He's a pilot", the girl interrupted.

"I thought so", said the *Unteroffizier*, put his hand in his trouser pocket and brought out a packet of cigarettes. He offered them to Franz.

"You smoke, don't you?"

"Yes, thanks" said Franz, took a cigarette and searched his pockets for matches but the other man was quicker. He took a

lighter from his pocket and lit it.

"41/42 was a grim winter, wasn't it?" he asked, and moved across the room.

"Well, the next one wasn't much better", replied Franz. He hastily pulled on his cigarette and blew the smoke across the table. "We flew food containers to Stalingrad, snowstorms, sometimes the first glimpse we caught of our landing strip was at ten metres above the ground. And he almost got us in one of the small dirty villages around Donez."

"Who's 'he'?" asked the girl.

"Ivan, of course. We went back in March for a few days, a miserable affair." Franz inhaled the smoke deep down into his lungs. He joined the man. Now they were both standing at the window. Franz looked out.

At first it was only now and then, but then he'd visited the house near the runway more and more often. The officer cadet never ever spoke of it. But he knew nonetheless where Franz took the bread, the tin of condensed milk and the pickled meat. It was a boy, and Franz was amazed at how fast the child grew, how fast the mother recovered. The full, well-rounded breast which the baby suckled, the cheek bones, the dark hair, the eyes, the hollow eyes! He hadn't forced her. One evening, the child was asleep, she took him by the hand and pulled him down to her on her bedstead by the stove. The old woman hid herself away on the narrow bench by the wall. It was almost dark in the small room, only the suckling noises of the child could be heard as he put his fingers in his mouth and sucked at them. Her features were vague in the dim light, but it looked to him as if she was smiling. Her dark eyelashes were lowered, her mouth opened slightly and her arms encircled his neck, later they slid down over his shoulders, pulled him even closer towards her body and didn't release him, even at the height of their passion. Then waking up during the night: only the red gleam reflected on the bare wall of the hut, the dark silhouette of her pelvis and the knocking rhythm again, the rhythm of their bodies till they sank into exhaustion and unconsciousness. The next morning, the old woman drove him to the airport in the small horse and cart. The first snow had fallen. Like delicate icing sugar, it covered the heaps of earth, the furrows in the fields, the ridges of the roads. The black

branches of the trees along the road drew bizarre lines onto a very heavy, almost compacted grey sky. Snow! Snow! The smell of fir-needles, roasted apples and log fires, mixed with the scent of candles. They sat at the table, drank tea with rum and ate cake which her mother had baked. The young woman had managed to get hold of a guitar, she played and sang in a soft alto voice and although he couldn't understand any of the words, he kept asking her to keep singing. He took the child out of its basket and into his arms, rocked and cuddled it. It was called Pjotr, after its father. Never before had he held a child in his arms like that. A small hand reached for his nose, one, two tiny fingers. Later on, he stood alone with the woman in front of the hut, the snow glistened in heaps all around them, and above them, the light of the stars shone down from a far away crystal-clear Christmas sky. They didn't talk about it. But they knew all the same that they were man and wife. Their thoughts took place outside of time. But time did exist, and time passed, and in the week before Easter his unit came back to the region. For a short time they pushed the front forward again to the Donez river. His young friend, who in the meantime had been promoted to lieutenant, had warned him: "Who knows what you'll find there", he said. But he had to go and see for himself. He wanted to see her again. They started their journey in a Volkswagen, the lieutenant came with him. But from some distance they could see the bare black skeletons of the locust trees, burnt and cracked they stood silhouetted against the soft blue sky of early spring. "I did tell you", said the lieutenant, but he drove on anyway, towards the heap of rubble with only the chimney sticking out. The stable and the shed were totally burnt down, the thin walls of the house had collapsed, partially charred beams lay over the remains. The men got out, walked around in the rubble, pushed a beam here, another one there with their feet. Finally, the lieutenant went back to the car, leaned against the door, smoked a cigarette and watched him. How small the house was! It was only now that you could see how small! Over there, where the stable used to be, where the goat had lived and the hay was stored, there was nothing but a heap of ashes. He went over there too, poked about with a stick in the remains, compacted now by the rain and the snow. He was about to return to his friend, when the top of his boot felt

something hard. He looked more closely, dug about in the loose mass of hay ashes, and drew out a bone. He bent down, kept scratching with the stick, and after a few minutes he unearthed the larger part of a charred skeleton, with the tiny head of a child at its breast. The lieutenant threw his cigarette away, and stepped up behind him. The bones were charred, but the tightly stacked hay inside the stable seemed only to have smouldered. He was on his knees and scratching the rest of a twisted figure free with his stick. "Franz", he heard the lieutenant behind him say, "leave it alone, Franz, I'll fetch the spade!" But he didn't leave it alone. When he went to lift the skeleton, it disintegrated into a formless heap. The head fell into the middle. He stared in front of him, still on his knees, and it seemed as if he wanted to stay that way, for every now and then, his hands lifted a tiny bone, let it drop back to the others, lifted another one, twisted it between his thumb and index finger and let it glide down into the ashes again. How long he remained in that position he didn't know, perhaps he didn't even understand clearly what his friend said to him, for he looked bewildered when the lieutenant set a slightly charred board in front of him, which both recognised as the top of the little table they had sat at. Only now did he notice that his friend had thrown loose rubble into one of the many holes, hiding the water which had covered the bottom and reflected the sky. They put the table top with the few human remains on it in the hole, covered it over and formed a mound above it. His friend did most of the work. Then they both stood at the grave. The officer took off his cap and he followed the example. He looked at the mound and then at the churned up earth beyond, at the black tree trunks with thorns glittering on the branches. He didn't know what he was thinking. Was he thinking at all? They merely registered with him: branches, thorns, blue sky with white fluffy clouds in it and then, like mockery, the warble of a lark high above them. Then he turned around and suddenly, as if possessed, ran to the car and started the engine, so that the roaring and humming drowned out everything else. The lieutenant hardly had time to put the spade back and take his seat before the car was speeding away back across the runway.

"Just imagine, Herr Rothensteiner", he heard the woman say to the *Unteroffizier* next to him, "he ate fried larks in Italy! Isn't it

barbaric?"

The *Unteroffizier* laughed and patted Franz on his back in a friendly gesture. "Terrible! Terrible! You'll get into Frau Eichinger's bad books if you tell stories like that."

Franz didn't say anything. He took a long drag on his cigarette. Through the window he could see the courtyard of the big building. The canopies of three very tall locust trees almost reached up to the fourth floor. And although he was looking out the window, he could tell that the girl still hadn't turned back to her typewriter and that the woman at the desk was still shuffling her papers mechanically without looking at them. How they blossom, he thought, how they throw out their scent and shimmer brightly, and then the thorns, sharp, in all directions.

"Tell us about what it's like to fly instead", said the *Unteroffizier*.

"Oh yes", said the girl. Her face took on an enchanted expression, "that must be so wonderful, gliding high above the earth, like a bird. Please tell us!"

"But what can I say?" Franz turned towards his colleague. "Can you swim? Yes! Well imagine someone who can't swim asking you what swimming feels like. The first few times in the air, your heart beats faster, and you feel a little peculiar, and then you get used to it, just as Mother gets used to 'Uncle' coming over at weekends."

They all laughed. Then the woman remarked: "But it's dangerous. We heard about terrible crashes even in peace-time, that sort of thing must happen even more often now."

"Well", said Franz, "at the training school there was a crash almost every week. All that was left was a heap of rubble, you could hardly retrieve a body from it. Those young people thought they could fly like Mölders or Rudel right from the start. Idiots! If you took your time, got through it all without a broken neck and graduated from the flimsy training planes you were all right. Our planes are okay. I've never experienced anything drastic. Little things, some instrument or other malfunctioning, but you learn to deal with situations like that."

"What kind of plane did you fly?" asked the other one.

"A *Ju 88*. But of course we've only been flying night missions recently."

“The Americans almost always come during the day”, said the girl.

They all fell silent for a while.

The branches waved gently to and fro, yellow dried leaves hung like fringes from the thin twigs. The trunk, dark and speckled, seemed to vanish between the walls the further down you looked.

“We used to fly in closed formations during the daytime as well”, he said.

They all fell silent again.

Why was there such regret in his voice as he spoke? Wasn't he happy that this damned war was coming to an end, coming to an end in this way? But there was regret in his voice as he said the words. He remembered the days in France: They flew into death and they flew death with them and they didn't think for a moment about what one death or another death might look like, it was only when they travelled through bombed Essen that they became aware of death's face. They had known it all right, but they hadn't seen it for themselves, hadn't experienced it for themselves. But now, whole suburbs of the city were there in ruins for him to see. He didn't know anyone in that city anyway. Of course, the Krupp factories were there, and he knew: 80% were workers' families.

The men had to be quick with the installing of the bombs, the filling of the tanks, the air-pressure checks on the tyres and all the other routine servicing tasks. They flew twice, three times across the Channel. The First International, a welcoming address by Karl Marx. Swirling and crackling, clouds for miles, the white paths of the vapour trails, the dark stripes from hit aircraft, spitfires. Finished, over and out! What was there to be sorry about? An end at last. He'd longed for it, but done nothing to bring it about. That the war should end in this way, what had he contributed to it? What was he contributing now? He waited in front of the *Oberleutnant's* door, that former member of the *Heimwehr*. Certainly, he'd been generous, he hadn't betrayed Leni and her husband, hadn't told the authorities, and Helmut always stayed with his parents in the holidays. But weren't the two of them on different sides?

There were windows at the other end of the courtyard too, people at desks with typewriters sitting behind them, papers and dossiers in front of them and the branches drew a confusing web between

them, without any symmetry, apparently without any order.

"They've got incredibly fast fighters", he said finally, "and so many of them, a few years ago we wouldn't have believed it possible." He thought of the student from Berlin, the lawyer from Pforzheim, the teacher from Stuttgart and the shop owner from a village in the Eiffel mountains. He saw them walking up to their planes in the dark, parachutes on their backs, climbing into the cockpits, and he was unable to produce one more cheerful sound.

"But not as fast as our *Me 109s*?" asked the girl.

"I don't know", he avoided the question. Enough, he thought, what else can I tell you? You know the truth as well as I do, but how could we talk about it? The truth is dangerous. The truth is always dangerous.

At that moment, the telephone rang on the *Unteroffizier's* desk. He answered: "Section Alpha, Air Battalion Four, *Unteroffizier* Rothensteiner." He fell silent for a moment. "Yes, *Herr Oberleutnant*. At once, *Herr Oberleutnant*." He put the receiver down and motioned with his head towards the door. "He's expecting you", he said to Franz.

Franz turned around, the window, the branches of the locust tree in front of it, the woman at the desk, the girl at the typewriter all disappeared, the white door beyond them, a small room with shelves full of dossiers, and opposite the door, another door, also white, exactly the same as the one he had just gone past; it had to be here. He walked past the shelves which extended from floor to ceiling, their content arranged by colour. He went past the rigidly ordered cartons, his eyes recognised numbers and letters, lingered a little longer on this and that, but his inner eye saw Wohlleben sitting in the kitchen of the forester's house, pushing one little white paper tube after the other over the tobacco-filled tin cigarette-maker and heard him say "Be careful!" But now: *Oberleutnant*, *Oberleutnant*. He's an academic. There are plenty of academics among the rank and file. I saw him a few times in the second district, with Erich's wife, his brother's wife, blond, the round party badge on her high chest, but I've never seen him wearing one, not one of the simple punched out ones, nor the proper party badge, the old man wore one, at the beginning, a simple one made of tin about half a centimetre wide. Once I saw them coming out of a hotel, but they

didn't see me. What else could they have been doing in the hotel? Perhaps I felt some pleasure in the fact that he was betraying this SS-officer with his blond wife. It pleased me, and I imagined the whole affair in some detail, she was well put-together. He reached for the door handle, and with each step he saw the short skirt moving to and fro over the woman's hips. He opened the door.

A quick glance showed him an office with a few shelves and a large desk, behind which - the window was just to the left - the *Oberleutnant* was sitting. Franz closed the door and stood to attention, bringing his heels together and slightly raising his arm: "*Unteroffizier* Prannowitz reporting..."

"That's enough of that", interrupted the *Oberleutnant*, as he came around the table and shook hands with him. "We know each other, don't we? When was the last time we met? Must have been the autumn of '39, a long time ago, but", he paused a moment. The men measured each other with their eyes, "your unit didn't want to release you. I've tried it twice before."

Franz knew the firm handshake well.

He could clearly feel each finger of the hard and bony right hand, while the left pulled him gently onto the bench behind the oak table. They were surrounded by the dimly lit vault of a brick cellar, a half-filled wine glass was sitting in front of Wohlleben, a pair of young lovers sat opposite, next to them was a fat man dressed in a grey suit trimmed in forest green, a hat with a chamois tuft on his head. At the table next to them sat a soldier and a young fellow with rather long hair, they had two girls with them and were flirting. Smoke, milky white smoke filled the air and they themselves were increasing it. They both lit a round *Juno* and Wohlleben ordered a glass of wine for Franz as well, no no, he insisted on paying, he was happy to have met up with him again, yes, that was life, so much has been happening lately, the situation in Czechoslovakia, in the Memel and now we just have to wait and see what will come of it all, and his brother was sent on an important mission to the former Bohemia a few days ago, well you know, he's become a hot shot. Me? - no, I'm working for the monestary at Klosterneuburg, a provisional administrator actually, a forester. And then he asked about Helmut. Franz would have preferred to remain silent but he couldn't manage it: These kids, they're talking

about planes and tanks, when we were their age, we collected coloured pictures of birds and plants, or newspaper articles on African safaris, they're into U-boats and cruisers." The other man nodded. "It'll be soon enough before they...", said Franz, but didn't finish the sentence; his brother is a high-ranking functionary, and as for him, he's probably got his job because of his brother. The other man took a sip from his glass and mentioned Leni, his sister, she was worried that the child's education might be influenced by the wrong people. Wohlleben stared at the table in front of him: "By us perhaps", he remarked with some bitterness. "What are you up to these days?" Franz talked about the printing press, an excellent position, proof-reader, correcting mistakes, but what was correct about abandoning his orphaned nephew to the mercy of these terrible times. "A good position?" asked the other man. Cigarette smoke. The man with the chamois-tuft on his hat, the fine hair bouncing up and down, the half-open eyes, too much to drink already perhaps, the lovers.

Wohlleben looked at him, expecting some answers.

"You held an important position within your unit?" The officer's eyes lingered a second or two on the thin loops on Franz's uniform.

"Pilot", Prannowitz said, "*Ju 88*."

But perhaps he hadn't drunk that much after all, and was just pretending, watching and listening to what the others were talking about, one of them about a member of the Blood-Order, about the provisional administrator, about estates which were being confiscated from the clergy, another about the kind of work he had always dreamed about, about the texts; it was better to keep quiet about the content of the type-set and printed material. Why, didn't anyone care? No, it wasn't that no-one cared, but the thick fingers over there were tapping on the handle of the wine glass, that lower lip, the way it drooped down fleshily, the hat tilted slightly towards his forehead, and next to him the blond girl with the surprised-looking round mouth, totally naive in that respect. His brother is in Bohemia, a higher position, with political connections, his beautiful sister-in-law with the party badge on her blouse, but as for him, he hadn't changed, at least not on the outside, still a slim figure with an angular face, the high forehead with the scar from his injury.

But what lay behind it? The green-trimmed suit, the wine glass with a handle! A banner above the door to the guest room dominated the room: ONE PEOPLE, ONE REICH, ONE FÜHRER! was the message.

"I presume you've been flying sorties continuously?" asked the officer.

"Ever since Russia." Franz tried to gauge a reaction in the face of the man opposite him, but it remained impassive.

"And, as I see, you've been decorated several times", said Wohlleben, and his eyes fixed again on the loops on Franz's uniform. "By the way, congratulations, I have received a telex from your unit: you've been promoted to sergeant."

"Is that so?" Franz reflected that others had reached that rank faster than him.

"Yes, as of the first of last month. You'll receive back pay."

"I'll be able to make good use of it, *Herr Oberleutnant*. We've been bombed out at home", said Franz.

"What about Helmut?" Wohlleben asked quickly.

"He and Mother are all right. They've been billeted with an old professor. Everything's a bit cramped there, but otherwise fine."

"But Helmut?" the officer asked again.

"He's supposed to finish his apprenticeship next year."

"Well, let's hope so", said the *Oberleutnant*. It sounded somewhat ambiguous and Franz stopped short. He noticed the way the officer's gaze fixed pointedly on his chest again. "If I remember correctly", said Wohlleben, "you know a few foreign languages. We need people with skills like that around here, people on whom we can rely absolutely. I know you and believe", he hesitated, stepped back to the desk, his hands nervously shuffled papers: "Well, I believe you will like your new position. Or would you have preferred to remain at the front?"

"No, *Herr Oberleutnant*, only, I confess, I have some reservations regarding my knowledge of languages. I learned them for my trade you see, to read and to type-set. I've no idea how to pronounce them."

The *Oberleutnant* made a dismissive gesture. "That's hardly important. You'll see." His fingers felt in different directions. They moved across the table-top like nervous animals. "Pranno-

witz", he said, a little more softly and hesitantly, "you've got a lot of decorations." He paused again and then continued: "What do you think about this ... about our situation. I mean the war and all that?"

Franz looked into the dark eyes of the man facing him: The wine cellar, shortly before the war started: Neighbours might be listening! His brother wears the insignia of the Blood-Order! The relationship with his sister-in-law! The vault with its red bricks weighed heavily on their heads. The light was dim and made the yellow-green liquid in their glasses shimmer. The air was saturated with milky cigarette smoke and marching music played continuously from some loudspeaker into the room, every now and then there was an interruption and an important piece of news was reported. Everything was there again for a moment, the new job as proof reader, the new type-setting machines, the long tables with the type-sets, the galley proofs, the newly acquired suit, the standard issue People's Wireless. The feverish tension, the swirling uncertainty and the floating between the horrors of yesterday and tomorrow. The breathtaking pressure of ten years unemployment and the breathtaking pressure of the certainty of the approaching evil! And the marching music in between, like an assurance, so to speak, and the voice of the announcer in between, you didn't need to understand what he said, like a seal, so to speak. His brother on a higher mission in Bohemia, with shiny boot legs and a tight shoulder belt and a pistol loosely in his pocket. The man opposite with the nodding chamois tuft and the two girls moving closer to the men, one of whom was already wearing army uniform. There was nothing to be said about that, not a word, a sip from the glass and another, yes, a glorious time, so much is happening, so much, and another sip, and Helmut, Mother, yes, how are your parents, quite all right, and what about dear old Tasso, the way he offers you his paw to shake, don't forget: ONE PEOPLE, ONE REICH, ONE FÜHRER!

Today, the two men faced each other without witnesses. The room was bright, outside the window was an October sky covered in long-fingered grey clouds. It seemed very far away. In front of him stood the trim figure of the officer and to Franz the scar on his forehead seemed especially prominent. "This situation, the war and

and all that”, it was meant to sound casual, but Franz felt that more lay behind it, it wasn’t simply a casual question.

“You know where I come from, *Herr Oberleutnant*”, said Franz, still on his guard. Then he fell silent.

“Yes”, Wohlleben said. “I know. We imprisoned you in Wölersdorf and you shot at us from the Karl-Marx-Hof.”

“Ancient history”, said Franz. “And I was behind bars during those days in February, I was hardly in a position to be shooting.”

“I’m sure you know I didn’t mean it personally. See here, this hole, my brother didn’t shoot me in the head with his own hand either.” As he spoke, Wohlleben quickly wiped his forehead. “But he arranged for me to spend the whole war here up till now. That’s how it is: The deed turns against the doer. It’s always like that.” He made a wry face.

What did he mean? Surely he wasn’t trying to say that him holding this position now was turning him against those who shot him then? But Franz had no time to think it over.

“And Erich”, Wohlleben continued, while his face took on a stern and aloof expression once more, “I mean my brother, Erich was blown up in Serbia. Partisans.”

Both men remained silent for a moment. Franz thought about exploding crates of ammunition, about red hot poles of burning railway carriages, about dark, black smoke trails of the flames from bombed oil or petrol storage tanks, the figure of the SS-officer stood like a ghost in front of it all. Then Wohlleben continued: “A gruesome business, I’ve heard.” He looked towards the window: “But I can understand these people, can understand why they use the methods they do, even if I can’t condone them. I spoke to someone who was there with him, who had escaped the same fate only because he’d been ordered to attend a training course a week before.” Again he paused. “They behaved like pigs. It’s not surprising that they got treated like pigs. You might even get to meet this man. There’s just the question whether ..., no matter, I don’t think much of those kinds of methods, whoever uses them.”

“I don’t know”, began Franz. His eyes glanced over the papers on the desk: “If you’re thrown into a situation like that, by fate.”

“By fate?” asked Wohlleben and took his time over the word, stretching the single syllable out as far as he could.

“Or lets say by circumstances, by coincidence.”

“Coincidence?” Wohlleben asked again.

“Of course. Or are you trying to tell me that it wasn’t coincidence in 1934 that this man”, Franz gestured to his forehead, “pulled the trigger before you did?”

Wohlleben looked at him for a while silently, then shrugged his shoulders: “Perhaps it wasn’t a coincidence.”

“But you, you wanted to shoot him too”, said Franz.

“Yes, I wanted to”, Wohlleben replied, “but you see, I hesitated. Yes, I think I’d say that there’s a big gap between wanting to do something and doing it. Maybe I hesitated without even knowing it, but in all likelihood it was because I don’t believe in solutions like that on principle.”

“And now you have to serve a system which uses solutions like that all the time”, said Franz, and thought: The way we’re talking in circles; the way we mean something completely different to what we actually say. The way we’re testing each other out, listening so carefully.

“Me, serving it?” asked Wohlleben. “Well, you can only do what’s within your capabilities.” Then he asked suddenly: “So then Prannowitz, what do you think of a surgeon who operates on wounded men in a field hospital? Do you think he necessarily condones those sorts of “solutions”, just because he heals the soldiers and makes them ready to fight again?” He stressed the word “solutions”. It sounded strange, as if the speaker was using it to stand in for some other word he didn’t want to use.

Franz looked past the man standing opposite him, to the grey pattern of cloud which filled the square of the window. The stripes moved from right to left in long protracted patches of light and shadow. Pieces seemed to be unravelling lower down, and every now and then there was a bright yellow spot, a place where the sun shone through.

“When it comes down to it, we’re all caught up in this”, he said without taking his eyes off the distant sky. “We’ve all been yoked into it, every one of us, willingly or unwillingly, yes, you work for the system, even if you’re not willing. Otherwise do you really think it would have been possible for things to go on for so long ..., I mean the war would have been finished long ago if that were the

case.”

The *Oberleutnant* smiled cynically: “There are surgeons who patch up the wounded and send them back to the front. And then there are physicians who never heal them, send them from one test to another and everything takes a very long time. Do you understand me, Prannowitz?”

“I understand, *Herr Oberleutnant*. But how does that really change anything? A few hundred, maybe a few thousand soldiers aren’t sent back to the front.” Franz made a helpless gesture.

“They’ve won the war.” The officer spoke softly, but with conviction.

Franz was silent.

“You know, maybe it wasn’t completely pointless”, said the *Oberleutnant* and gestured fleetingly towards his head.

Franz remained silent.

They started at 0:20 hours on the dot, the map co-ordinates had been marked, a slight pressure on the little button, you could feel the plane grow lighter, red flashes, the light of fire and then white clouds above it. The pale fingers of the searchlights felt across the dark space of the sky, the staff-sergeant from Berlin, the officer cadet from Pforzheim, the student of theology, they couldn’t go off to some other square on the map, it was clearly marked, the course was worked out, the weather clear, the defence moderate: every day, every night, hundreds of kilos of explosives, iron, where were they headed? If the engines were running, death was running too!

“Have you been here long?” said Franz, finally.

“Since mid-nineteen forty. My brother, you can imagine, he had connections.”

“Yes, your brother. He sacrificed everything for the final victory”, and after a short pause Franz added, “only, it’ll be terrible for his wife and children.”

“You’re right. He really believed that. And maybe its the best for him ... its just the way it happened ... You needn’t worry about the wife. She’s remarried. A surgeon-major in Hamburg, fifteen years her senior. He took her along with all the children.”

“Congratulations, but what possessed your brother to bring her here?”

The officer smiled faintly, sat down in the chair behind the desk and pointed to a chair positioned at the narrow end of the desk: "Please, take a seat. There were family reasons, you see."

Franz sat down. "I was under the impression", he hesitated, "you never really got on with him."

"Got on! Yes, that was one thing we agreed on: I never said anything at home about the fact that he was there when I got this hole", his hand moved again towards his head, "and he never told the authorities how I got it. More than that, he tried to hush it up, and finally the rumour emerged that I got it during the February uprising. The officer looked Franz in the eye. "One ashamed of the other. That was the way we got on."

Wohlleben was silent for a moment and stared in front of him. Then suddenly he leaned forward and said very softly: "Do you still have connections with your old friends? You know what I mean, your party friends."

What did he want? Of course, they had known each other a long time, ten years, and he'd done him a few favours. How often had Helmut gone to stay with them! But they hadn't seen each other now for many years. That time, before the war, in the Augustiner wine cellar, the chamois tuft on the hat of the man sitting opposite them, yes, it was a good job, and good pay, he'd bought this and that, they discussed everyday trivia, Tasso, the dear old dog, he still raised his front paw for you to shake and sniffed about for game. Certain questions, however, were avoided, as if they were tabu, well, his brother wore the insignia of the Blood-Order, you didn't have to ... you could always talk about the motorbike.

But now, what did he mean by this direct question?

"No", said Franz. "I don't meet with anyone any more."

He watched the other man. It seemed to him as if Wohlleben were disappointed. "There'd be no point", he added.

"You shouldn't say that", said the *Oberleutnant*, leaning across the table now. And then, as if he wanted to encourage Franz: "I meet with some of my old comrades, and our lieutenant-colonel here was with Schuschnigg's troops."

Franz's expression didn't change.

His expression hadn't changed back then in 1938 either, when the official from the Fatherland Front had approached him. He was

an engineer with a radio firm, and although he lived in the same block of flats, he'd never taken any notice of Franz before. A few days after the Federal Chancellor's speech in Innsbruck, the official had suddenly greeted him when they met on the staircase and now, as he stood leaning against the main door in the entrance hall, as he often did, the engineer stopped and asked him whether he was still out of work, nowadays you just have to take whatever's going, you know. Franz didn't intend to dignify this tall man with his broad shoulders and blubbery lips with a reply, he was about to turn away and go inside; but then he thought better of it and asked: "Do you know of anything?" He looked the man up and down. The engineer was wearing a grey sports suit. Over a blue striped shirt hung a tie with a blue and brown pattern, and he'd fixed the narrow red-white-red ribbon from his buttonhole to the edge of the lapel. His broad face shone, encased in its smooth skin, his thick gingery hair had a few natural waves and was brushed back. It doesn't pay to be choosy, especially now, when it's so important to save all one's energy for the strengthening of one's Homeland, he remarked. Franz noticed the smooth, well-shaven chin, the clean shirt. He was told a thing or two about a meeting in the Rose-hall, about National Consciousness, about goulash-soup and the union of all real Austrian patriots, no matter which political persuasion. Then he offered him a cigarette, a *Sport* even, and promised him five more if he came and clapped loudly during and after the official's speech. Franz shook his head thoughtfully: Well, he'd think about it, and then he asked whether he could have another cigarette - as payment in advance, so to speak. The official of the Fatherland Front hesitated, then drew out his cigarette case, it was almost completely full, and took out one more *Sport*. He handed it to Franz with the reminder: "But you have to make sure you come, make sure!" But then the goulash-soup had failed to eventuate. As he walked down Favoritenstraße on the appointed evening, it became increasingly certain. Men were standing on street corners, discussing things. Police were patrolling the streets in pairs. There was a strangely tense atmosphere. The plebiscite, which should have taken place on March the thirteenth, had been postponed indefinitely. When he arrived at the Rose-hall he saw a notice announcing that the meeting had been cancelled. He walked swiftly on,

passing several groups of people and listening to their discussions along the way before arriving back at home. At that moment, the official came running down the staircase: "Important meeting! Important meeting!" he shouted. It seemed he had long ago forgotten about the meeting in the Rose-hall. "You'll see, Herr Prannowitz, things will change now, now there'll be progress!" With that, he reached the door. Franz followed him with his eyes. He watched as he ran across the street and got onto the pillion of a waiting motorcycle, which took off immediately. He could still see the boot-legs, he saw them hurry past, running through the darkness of the entrance-way, and then gleaming next to the shiny metal of the *Puch* motorcycle, as if they were part of the machine. He'd never seen the official in boots before. He shook his head and went up to the third floor to see young Dozekal. He'd only been released from prison in February thanks to an amnesty for political prisoners. It was only after Franz had knocked several times and called out his name that the man opened the door. He made a sorry picture. "The SA has seized power in Graz", he said, as the newcomer took off his grey loden coat and put it over the back of a kitchen chair. "Serves them right, the bloody Conservatives. Now they'll see what happens when they collaborate with that rabble. It's all over for them now." When Franz told him that he'd met the official he said: "Most probably a Nazi too!" Then they went into the poorly lit room, from whose ceiling a single low wattage bulb hung. The windows were covered with rags and Dozekal immediately put on a pair of radio earphones. Franz sat down, took a battered tin from his pocket and offered it to the other man. They smoked thin cigarettes and remained silent for some time. Then Franz got up and went to the window. Dozekal watched his movements. "What's the matter?" he asked. He had the earphones on and couldn't hear the singing in the streets: "*Und heute, da hört uns Deutschland und morgen die ganze Welt!*"

"*Herr Oberleutnant*", said Franz, "my best friend was arrested a few weeks after the annexation. He died before the war started. Twenty-five years old, died of pneumonia, or so his relatives were informed. Two of the others disappeared, left the country, I believe; and those who stayed were called up, most of them sent to the front without delay."

"A pity", said the *Oberleutnant*, who had leaned back into his chair again. His voice had become impersonal and what followed sounded almost like a military brief: "Well, just get your bearings. Hours of duty are from eight to twelve and one to five. You may sleep at home, if you so wish. No, I forgot, I see your family has no room. We'll find you barracks quarters."

"*Herr Oberleutnant*, maybe I can sleep at a relative's, I'd have to ask around first." Franz visualised the two Red-Cross nurses. Surely something could be arranged.

"Very well, you can have two days off to arrange your affairs", said Wohlleben.

"To be honest", Franz laughed, "I'd really prefer private digs."

The officer smiled back. "Don't expect too much from your relatives. Many have been disappointed." Wohlleben stood up. "I only ask that you to report to me immediately when you've found somewhere. We have to be able to find you."

Franz stood up too: "I'd like to thank you, *Herr Oberleutnant*, for thinking of me. What are my duties to be?"

The officer came around the desk: "Translations, in writing, you'll be able to cope." It sounded encouraging. "And there's something else: what we have discussed here is between us. That applies to the future as well: what passes between the two of us is for no-one else's ears. Not even the personnel in our unit." Both men turned towards the door and went single file, the officer in front, through the narrow passageway where the many dossiers were sitting on the shelves, across to the room where Franz had waited. The girl at the typewriter was attacking the keyboard furiously.

"Just a moment", said *Oberleutnant* Wohlleben. "I want to introduce you to your new colleagues."

The young girl stopped typing. The woman behind the desk and the *Unteroffizier* stood up.

"Well, this is our new man, Sergeant Prannowitz. The news of his promotion preceded him. And this is Frau Eichinger", with these words he pointed to the woman at the desk. "One of our most capable assistants." The woman smiled briefly, took off her glasses and set them down on the pile of papers in front of her, and when Franz extended his hand across the desk, she pushed her body up

against the edge of the table-top so that the wood made indentations in her round form. Franz held the soft fleshy fingers a moment between his, but they failed to respond to his pressure. "Fräulein Inge Grazl", continued the *Oberleutnant*. Only now did the girl at the typewriter get up hastily. That one's not even twenty, thought Franz, eighteen maybe, if that. Her figure looked boyish. Her upper body was clothed in a loose pullover, her wide skirt reached down below her knees. She shook hands vigorously. The man felt her hard narrow fingers in his. Her dark eyes were moist and shimmered, the skin of her lightly tanned face was firm and slightly shiny. "She's the youngest in our department and her only knowledge of chocolate comes from hearsay." They all laughed. Then they turned to the window. "And this is *Unteroffizier* Rothensteiner, the cock of the roost up till now. I hope you'll both get on in spite of that." He disposed of a few more formalities and returned to his office.

Here he is at last, thought Wohlleben when Prannowitz entered the room. Leni's brother! How the situation had changed. The first time was just after my discharge from the *Heimwehr*: 1934. I'll never forget it. He told me of her death. The city lay before our eyes.

"*Unteroffizier* Prannowitz reporting..."

"That's enough of that", Wohlleben interrupted him. Looks fine. The salute doesn't seem to afford him much pleasure, he seems to have difficulty raising his arm. He came around the table and shook hands with the *Unteroffizier*. "We know each other, don't we? When was the last time we met? Must have been the autumn of '39, a long time ago." He's put on some weight, he thought. When he told me about Leni's death he was as thin as a skeleton.

"Your unit didn't want to release you, I've tried it twice before", said Wohlleben as he looked at the uniform of the man facing him. The broad silver trimming didn't go right round the whole collar, it just encircled the yellow collar badges of his lapels. "You held an important position within your unit?" Wohlleben's glance rested for a second on the thin loops on Franz's uniform jacket.

“Pilot”, said the other man, “*Ju 88*”.

Of course, it had been in '39. The gloomy vault of a wine cellar, surrounded by bare bricks, wine glasses in front of them and opposite, a couple, some lovers, beside them a fat man dressed in a grey suit trimmed in green, wearing a hat with a tuft of chamois hair. He was about to ask, drop hints, but his companion told him instead about his new job as a proof-reader, about the motorcycle he'd been able to buy. The wine in the glasses in front of them had a greenish tinge, and the man opposite them stared with half-open eyes at the table-top, the chamois tuft nodding on his head. But for him, it was easy for him, his brother was a member of the Blood-Order, it was a protective shield and if you had one you could take liberties others couldn't afford. Dr Mayerhofer, he'd said, what's become of your Second German State now? That was how they started talking. Establishing connections. The half-open eyes, the nodding chamois tuft. No, it couldn't be! Listening or not listening. YOUR YES FOR THE FÜHRER. Even the socialist leadership had voted for a Greater Germany, you could see it all in black and white in the *Völkischen Beobachter*, and the couple pressed themselves into a nearby corner. Wohlleben could smell the wine, the air full of cigarette smoke and the sweat of the patrons.

But that was five years ago. Hadn't many people found their way back?

“I presume you've been flying sorties continuously?” he asked.

“Ever since Russia”, Prannowitz looked into his face.

Into the grinder! Perhaps he's already been ground down into the uniform brown mush, the unadulterated hero mentality. “And, as I see, you've been decorated several times.” He knew how these things happened: the Iron Cross, Second Class after so many sorties across enemy territory, the Iron Cross, First Class after so many more sorties and so on. A man just did his duty. Non-compliance, dropping out, would be much more of an act of heroism. But who would be prepared to do that? Decorations for non-heroes. “By the way, congratulations, I've received a telex from your unit: you've been promoted to sergeant.”

“Is that so?” asked the other man. He didn't seem particularly impressed.

“Yes, as of the first of last month. You'll receive back-pay.”

Well, that at least seemed to mean something to him. You could see it. He was no idealist, that was for sure.

"I'll be able to make good use of it, *Herr Oberleutnant*. We've been bombed out at home."

Leni stood in front of Wohlleben, the woman he had admired so much and never been able to reach. The boy next to her. Summer after summer, a part of her, his little hand, his little face, just as Leni used to be, his clear voice boyishly undeveloped; his mouth, his mother's hair.

"What about Helmut?" he asked quickly.

"He and Mother are all right. They've been billeted with an old professor. Everything's a bit cramped there, but otherwise fine."

"But Helmut?" he asked again. He had changed when he wasn't able to visit them any more, the apprenticeship, mixing with men, the times, the constant agitated beating of the drums. Not so much like Leni any more. Maybe his father? Only seen him once, for a short, no, a long moment.

"He's supposed to finish his apprenticeship next year", he heard Prannowitz say.

To be finished, to be free, thought Wohlleben, how often have we said those same words, how often have we heard them. It's hard, almost impossible to imagine. How would it be? The way it was before? The disharmony, the constant squabbling amongst the political parties? All right, this Dr Mayerhofer had said you got to know each other in Dachau, he was there himself for more than a year. But the young ones, this boy, next year! "Well, let's hope so!" He looked into the face of the *Unteroffizier*. "If I remember correctly, you know a few foreign languages. We need people with skills like that around here, people on whom we can rely absolutely. I know you and believe", he hesitated. Do I really know him, what do I know about him, what's he been doing for the past five years? All those decorations! "Well, I believe you will like your new position. Or would you have preferred to remain at the front?"

"No, *Herr Oberleutnant*, only, I confess, I have some reservations regarding my knowledge of languages. I learned them for my trade, you see, to read and to type-set. I've no idea how to pronounce them."

Wohlleben made a dismissive gesture. "That's hardly important.

You'll see." In the wine cellar, the wafting smoke, the bare brick walls, the vault, the man in his green trimmed suit sitting there able to hear every word spoken. The lovers next to him, maybe they weren't lovers at all, who could tell? But here, here they faced each other without witnesses. But in spite of that, it wasn't easy. "Prannowitz, you've got a lot of decorations. What do you think about this ..., about our situation, I mean the war and all that."

It took a while before the *Unteroffizier* replied: "You know where I come from, *Herr Oberleutnant*", then he was silent.

Of course, I know, I know, but how many others have come from the same place as you, and yet today they're informing on their former comrades. "Yes", he said, "I know, we imprisoned you in Wöllersdorf and you shot at us from the Karl-Marx-Hof."

"Ancient history", remarked Prannowitz.

Wohlleben stared in front of him. They could hardly see each others' faces in the dark vault, they were sitting too close together and then of course, the man opposite them, the one with the chamois tuft on his hat. All in all, it was unlikely that Prannowitz would be able to understand that these people still met with each other. He could tell at a glance that it wasn't a real tuft of chamois, goats' hair maybe. You couldn't say anything without this man hearing. Dr Mayerhofer, he'd never taken any notice of him in earlier days, in the days when the students came to the pub for their drinking binges. As he drove into the city, he could see for himself, big banners displayed on all the large factories: 100% OF OUR WORKERS ARE MEMBERS OF THE GERMAN LABOUR FRONT! Prannowitz would be a member too. A proper bunch, like a shaving brush. The horn buttons on his jacket were of inferior quality as well. A workers' party, the organization's propaganda was in full swing in the factories, in the workshops. He could afford this and that now, spoke of a motorcycle, of travelling. The bookshops were filled with books, only Nazi literature visible in all the windows, that's what he'll have to deal with day and night, day and night he'll inhale those ideas. But the nodding hat with the chamois tuft could prick up his ears, quite right, they'd be harmless if they were only lovers, but who knows who's who nowadays. It doesn't make any sense to do anything else but drink wine and talk about everyday trivia; a motorcycle, really, marvellous, a *Puch*, of course,

and still no woman to settle down with, it's high time for that. The cigarette smoke covered everything in light-blue mist, but the narrow banner was still visible above the cupboard: ONE PEOPLE, ONE REICH, ONE FÜHRER!

But here, here, why couldn't he reach the other man? Ancient history!

So be it, he just doesn't want to. It might be Erich, the Blood-Order, blocking the very possibility of contact. They sat down, and he talked about his brother's fate.

Finally he asked him straight out: "Do you still have connections with your old friends? You know what I mean, your party friends."

When Wohlleben raised his eyes, he noticed the grey pattern in the square of the window. An oblong bright spot had developed into a continuous yellow stripe, dividing the grey into two sections of differing sizes. He watched the sky for a few seconds, then looked again into Prannowitz's eyes. Certainly, there too was the reflection of the grey and yellow.

Light and dark everywhere.

Grey and yellow. And in front, the jumble of bare river-meadow trees, he'd noticed them before. They seemed to walk this way quite regularly, or at least frequently, they looked familiar to him anyway, the two girls and the boy, he saw their figures clearly silhouetted against the yellow morning sky. They walked along the winter-grey row of bushes. It looked almost like a shadow-show. Lovers, he thought at first, and then: that early in the morning? He had just got out of bed, and was dressed only in a knee-length nightshirt, but he fetched his binoculars from the living room and watched the three of them. The girls were about seventeen or eighteen, the boy just old enough for military service. He wore glasses, as did one of the girls. They were dressed very simply: loden coats or jackets. They stopped at one point, looking around searchingly, one of the girls stayed on the track with her back turned towards her observer, the other two busied themselves with a heap of stones some way off the path. The network of young saplings was so dense that he couldn't see what they were doing. It seemed nothing of an erotic nature however, in spite of his hopeful imaginings. He didn't have much time, he had to shave and

breakfast, he didn't want to be late for duty either. He had hardly put on his boots and his uniform jacket, when he stepped towards the window and raised the binoculars. The three had vanished. Even when he searched further afield, he couldn't see any trace of them. They must have taken the path down to the convent which led through a gorge-like dell.

Wohlleben's glance returned to the eyes of his companion. Maybe I shouldn't have asked him so directly?

On one of his following days off, he passed the place where the three young people had stopped. There was nothing out of the ordinary to be seen. Only when he poked among the stones with a stick did a piece of oil-cloth appear. He bent down. There were a few slices of bread, some bacon and half a packet of tobacco wrapped in part of an old handkerchief. Little pink roses, faded from frequent washing, formed a pattern. What was the meaning of it? Who was intended as the recipient? Wohlleben wrapped everything back up in the oil-cloth again and was about to heap the stones over it all, when it seemed to him that his fingers could feel something else in the packet. He opened the oil-cloth wrapper once more and found a letter in between it and the paper covering the food. Cyrillic letters covered the paper in a somewhat clumsy arrangement. Even if you didn't know the handwriting, you got the immediate impression that the writer of these lines was not well versed in the writing of Cyrillic. Were the young people involved? How careless!

"No", said Prannowitz, "I don't meet with anyone any more." It sounded unfriendly. He didn't change his expression, even when Wohlleben told him that the lieutenant-colonel had been a member of Schuschnigg's troops.

It was clear to Wohlleben already: He wasn't going to be able to break through the other's reserve. Perhaps he'd made a false move, maybe the time wasn't right, perhaps he had just been wrong all along.

Both men got up. A little small talk and they went back into the front room.

When Wohlleben returned to his room after introducing Prannowitz to his colleagues, he noticed again the grey square of the window. The clouds had opened up a little more, the yellow

patch had melted down into a mere strip.

Five Russian prisoners of war with a soldier, an older man as guard, trotted down the path to the Danube. Two of the Russians pulled a large-wheeled hand-cart with shovels and pick-axes on it. Inge Grazl stood in front of the entrance-way to the large convent church, next to her were the young man and the second girl, both wearing glasses. When the *Oberleutnant* crossed the square, Inge greeted him, slightly embarrassed. It was obvious: the three of them had just left the church. There were a number of other church-goers in the square, more coming out through the large door. Wohlleben had to acknowledge a few salutes, there were still some believers among the military.

He stepped towards the window, and looked across at the nearby garden, then across the park behind it; both belonged to the old castles on the other side of the road. The evenly trimmed but now bare tree-hedge wound in a serious and sombre ribbon from the low grounds of the Rennweg to the heights of Upper Belvedere. He made sure the girl got work near him. But what use would it be? Her shorthand was quick and she could Greater Germany a final copy fairly competently and without many mistakes. Her father was in Norway and her mother had worked in the ticket office at the Klosterneuburg-Kierling station ever since the total war effort began. The yellow strip had almost completely disappeared by now, the grey-blue wall of cloud had closed up again, a few light-grey fluffy tufts moved faster than the rest of the grey mass behind it on their route from south to north, only to dissolve into flakes of foam just behind the bright shiny cupola of the Salesianer-Church to the right.

The prisoners of war had been put to work repairing the path. He must have seen them do this before, but never taken any notice. The garret which housed his bedroom and offered views down to the river wasn't a place he ever went during the day. But the housekeeper watched him, shaking her head. He'd inherited her from his predecessor, a gamekeeper and confirmed bachelor with a beard. And he could feel it: dressed only in his nightshirt, down the wooden staircase and through the sitting-room was highly improper, even if she was over sixty and he needed the binoculars urgently. He made the girl copy out the list of increased penalties

for communicating with prisoners of war to put on the notice-board. They could be court martialled and given the death penalty. One of the Russians busied himself with the heap of stones. The guards kept an eye on those working on the potholes. They dug into the soft ground where the wheels of the heavy lorries regularly drove down to the river. The prisoners put large pebbles in the largest holes and road-metal carried in small hand carts was spread in between. The dome of the church shone brightly across the roof-tops.

It might have been half an hour later when Franz crossed the square in front of the railway station. She wasn't in the hall. He waited a while. He watched the nurses come and go. Erna was nowhere to be seen either. The only one who looked familiar was the young one busying herself behind the counter. He sat at one of the long tables and smoked a cigarette. He sat right on the end of the bench with his back leaning against the wall, left arm on the table, surveying the whole room. The room looked even more depressing with the daylight pouring through the window than it had in the diffuse light of night: the dirty table-top made of cracked soft wood, the worn greasy benches, the filthy walls and the oily floor with its oscillating pattern of black and blue. True, the air wasn't as suffocating and foul, as smoke-filled as it was during the night; a hint of the new day's freshness as it emerged from the drizzle of the morning was mixed in. The windows must have been open for a while. But now you noticed the acidity and the distinct odour of sweat, of disinfecting liquid, of tobacco, of boredom, of accumulated lust, of wretched tiredness. At this time of the day there were hardly any soldiers in the room. The two Russian prisoners swept the floor, emptied the tins which served as ashtrays and one of them wiped the tables with a rough dark cloth, dipping it from time to time in a bucket whose contents already resembled a dark dirty slop. The Russians seemed to have recognised him. They greeted him, spoke to each other, then one of them disappeared, and came up to Franz when he returned a few minutes later. "No nurse", he said.

"Aha", said Franz, "is she off duty, or somewhere else?" The Russians, both of them standing near him now, shrugged their

shoulders. They didn't seem to have understood him. Franz put two *Junos* on the dirty bench. The soldiers nearest to him were three or four tables away. But he didn't care. So what if they saw. He was an old hand and they could just take their bloody regulations and stick them up their arse. "No nurse today?" Franz tried again. He pointed towards the kitchen. That, they seemed to understand.

"Njet", said the Russian, took the cigarettes and murmured "Spasibo." He gave one to his comrade.

"Where? Where?" asked Franz.

The Russians looked at him again, devoid of understanding.

Franz pointed to the kitchen, to the door, in the direction of the railway station. "There nurse?" he asked each time.

A few infantry men at the third table looked across at him. There were three corporals, one private and an *Unteroffizier*. Their uniforms showed greasy marks on the collars and sleeves. Franz imagined lice. He'd never had lice. He thought of the castle in Tuscany with the beautiful wrought iron gate, the marvellous staircase and the high windows with their view of the mountain-ridges. He thought of the big rooms with their ornate stucco work where they'd had their flimsy camp-beds. He thought of the bed-bugs which had tortured him night after night in that castle.

One of the corporals got up and came over to him: "What are you after, *Herr Unteroffizier*?" he asked.

Franz looked up into the unshaven face. A field-cap rested on unkempt dark hair. The large head looked rough and coarse. From Silesia, if the pronunciation's anything to go by, he thought. "I was just asking him about the nurse I talked to last night", he said.

The corporal turned to the Russian and snapped at him in a Slavonic language. The prisoner took a step back and answered shortly. His comrade busied himself again with the broom. He swept the dirt out through the open door. The corporal kept on talking at the Russian. The Russian said something else, turned away cringing, and left the hall quickly. The corporal shouted a few words after him. Then he turned to Franz: "A pack of lazy oafs", he said. "What they need is a good kick up the arse. They could've finished cleaning up here long ago, I've been watching them for a while. It's enough to make you explode, watching those buggers,

you know? They need a rocket up them to make them work faster. - Anyway, *Herr Unteroffizier*, the nurse you were talking to yesterday is only ever on evening shift. That asshole didn't have a clue what time she'd be on. He doesn't seem to know what a watch is."

The corporal laughed.

"Thank you, Corporal," said Franz somewhat stiffly: And as the other one showed no sign of moving away, he added: "Been in Russia?"

"That too", said the infantryman. "You mean because of the language. We always spoke Polish at home."

Franz looked at the coarse, rough fists. "From Silesia?"

"From Kattowitz, *Herr Unteroffizier*", replied the corporal.

"Oh", Franz grunted. "The Upper-Silesian coal."

"Yes, but I worked in the steel works." He came closer to Franz. "Would you happen to have another cigarette, *Herr Unteroffizier*?"

Franz reached into his pocket, took out a packet, had a look - there were still six - and gave it to the infantry man. "Share them with your comrades", said Franz.

The man smiled broadly: "Of course, Luftwaffe, they always get that little bit extra! Thanks, *Herr Unteroffizier*", he raised his hand in the German salute, turned around and went back to his comrades.

Damn it, thought Franz, I had a feeling she said something like that, that she wouldn't be on duty till the evening. A tricky situation. And what do I do if it doesn't work out? Erna? Her man sleeps at home at night, leaves early in the morning. Pity! But she'll sort something out for me.

Later on, he passed the back of the Red-Cross-hall on his way to the tram. The two Russians sat on a board next to the overflowing dust-bins, smoking his cigarettes. They made moves to rise when they saw him. He motioned them not to. Pity, he thought, I don't know any Slavonic languages.

He entered a carriage. He saw Groß standing on the front platform. He hadn't seen him since thirty-eight. The man had grown old, and a little hunched. Franz left the half-empty carriage and went out to him. "Good morning! How are you?" He didn't quite know whether he should address his old comrade formally or not.

The other one didn't give him much time to think.

"What d'you think?", he said, "bloody awful! But it can't last much longer, you know." He spoke as if they'd seen each other only yesterday.

"That's what they told us back in thirty-nine", Franz remarked.

"Yes, but who was doing the telling?" The old man laughed dryly. "Now I'm the one telling you, so now you can believe it."

"There's nothing clever in that!" laughed Franz.

"Where do you get off?" Groß asked. "Keplerplatz? Then we're going the same way."

He observed Franz with tightened lips and furrowed forehead. "Weren't you in Wöllersdorf?"

"Hmm", said Franz.

"Did you know they've arrested fourteen people at Laaer Berg? Leaflets, a small hand-press."

Franz looked around. They were alone on the platform. "How would I know about things like that, I've been at the front the whole time. This is my first day back."

"I see", said the other man.

"I visited Schmied last holidays, he greeted me with a '*Heil Hitler*'." Franz looked through the window. They passed a few gutted houses. Incendiary bombs, thought Franz. White fingers glided across the sky, a red wreath below them. Docks, ship-yards, harbour quarters, workers' housing. There was a glowing and a smouldering, and every now and then new red spots would erupt. The oil temperature was normal, the engines hummed uniformly, the needle of the turning-gauge gleamed phosphorescent through the night of the cockpit. He saw only the contours of his look-out, bent over his instruments. Past his legs, he could see through the thin glass walls, down to the burning districts of London, the centre of liberty, the First International, how often had they hoped: 1934, February, September, and then a year later at the conference of Stresa. In 1936 there was a "Committee on Non-Interference", while the "Condor Legion" flew sorties, and the armour-plated vessel "Deutschland" shelled Almeria. They had still been hoping even in 1938, but Eden was banished, Lord Halifax and Chamberlain had the final word. Here and there new red spots came alive and erupted, danced in the black space; London docks, the

industrial plants in Coventry. The phosphorescent dials trembled very slightly.

The former socialist party headquarters stared at him with dark windowless openings as they passed by: gutted! Incendiary bombs, he thought. The white fingers of London. The gleaming flashes and sparks below the thin glass. They had turned the socialist party headquarters into a Nazi party office. The flag flew day and night, a red tongue with a white pill placed on it, a bitter pill. The flag. First on the lantern in front of the opera house, then in front of the chancellery and finally up at the imperial castle. Dozekal pointed out the flags to him on the 10th of April when they walked through the bannered streets after the voting. "Here, there, there, they were all comrades back in 1934!" The white pill on the red cloth was everywhere. Oval signs made of paper with red backgrounds and gold lettering and enfolding oak-wreaths were hanging in the windows of proletarians and petit-bourgeois alike: ONE PEOPLE! ONE REICH! ONE FÜHRER! or YOUR YES FOR THE FÜHRER! Dozekal could name them all. The one with the Yes for the Führer was a Bohemian cobbler, the one with the large flag a boiler-maker at Waagner-Biró, the one with One People! One Reich! One Führer! a turner at Czeija & Nissl. "But there's nothing there, and there", said Franz. - "Empty flats", replied Dozekal. "They've gone, and this one, his name is Hock, was arrested last week, and the one over there is already working in an ammunitions factory in Germany." They were still watching the bannered fronts of the houses when Dozekal said after a while: "Only there, you see that dirty window on the top floor. That's Brunner." He fell silent. Then after a while he said: "A communist." And after another pause: "I've had enough. Next week, I'll be in Czechoslovakia." Two days later, they had both disappeared, Dozekal and Brunner. The Gestapo acted quickly. Franz found work, and every evening when he went home from his work place, he passed the shop window of the cobbler where two flags with swastikas were stuck in shiny black goloshes in such a way that the two sticks holding the glued red paper crossed each other above newly soled ladies' high-heels shoes. Incendiary bombs, container-loads full, they just tumbled out of the bodies of the aeroplanes. It gleamed red, it sparkled, a fiery trace in the night.

Franz was still looking out the window. The door and window openings on the ground floor were boarded up with timber, sometimes if there was only rubble left, there weren't even any boards.

Groß made a dismissive gesture. "That Schmied is an arsehole! How long are you staying?"

"I don't know. I'm supposed to be on duty here."

"The fourteen from Laaer Berg. People's Court", said Groß after a while. They had almost reached their goal. "Three widows and seven dependent children. The others were just young boys."

Three widows! Franz thought for a moment. There'd surely be accommodation to be had. But he dismissed the idea. It was too dangerous. The women were almost certainly being watched by the Secret Service.

Dozekal, his friend, slim, he stood next to him, looked up at the notice board of the GERMAN LABOUR FRONT with him: the big ships of the *Strength through Joy* movement with the cog-wheel on their flags and happy waving people standing at the railing; the holiday homes surrounded by forest, the settlements, house after little house, a private home for every worker, children playing between them, young clean women with blond locks of hair, babies in their arms, rosy cheeks, no dirt in sight, smiling everywhere, beauty, harmony; two pictures next door: a squalid factory-yard and below, an image of what *Strength through Joy* had made of it, a garden with smooth lawns, beds of flowers and some shrubs. Pictures in greenish ink on slightly shiny paper, and above it all the slogan YOUR GRATITUDE TO THE FÜHRER!

"There! Beautiful, isn't it? Everything nice and clean. Dirt's only where the others are. Beautifully combed children, clean dresses. Snotty noses aren't German! A small house, small garden, a dear wee mother! Long live the German Philistine! An idyll with barbed wire! George Grosz, Beckmann, Käthe Kollwitz or Barlach, the things they showed us. But of course, the healthy instinct of our people discovered very quickly that truth, beauty and nobility are the only things worth paying any attention to, and that those goals can only be attained through *Strength through Joy*."

"What are you getting worked up about? Everyone wants to show their best side. And you can't deny that there has been

progress for the workers.”

“Don’t talk such rubbish! You must know what’s behind it all. Have you seen the tanks, the bombers?”

“I know. I’ve seen them. The most modern technology there is, certainly.”

“Oh modern technology! Who cares about that! Do you think about Rathenau, about the Reichstag fire?”

“I know. But what do you care about that if you and your family have been homeless for years, and now you’re told you can move into one of those houses? How does that interest you if you’ve been out of work for years, and then you’re told that you can have a job in a factory and earn a living for your family?”

“Ugh! A flock of sheep. I couldn’t stand it.”

Franz shrugged his shoulders: “Everyone wants to live.”

That was his last conversation with Dozekal. Pneumonia, the camp administration told his relatives. How many had died that year of pneumonia or something similar? Dozekal. He couldn’t go on living.

They left the tram. Franz noticed the crowd, mostly elderly people, women and children, all going in the direction of the city centre. Groß said: “Aha, planes over Carinthia-Styria.”

It didn’t take long for the sirens to start wailing the advance warning. Groß said good-bye: “I hope we’ll see each other while you’re here, you know where I live.” They stood at the corner of Gudrunstraße-Sonnwendgasse, people hurried past them, locomotives whistled at the nearby shunting station, Franz thought of the destroyed railway station in Bologna and looked along the walls of the houses with their crumbling mortar, holes fixed only temporarily with bricks, and the smashed window-panes replaced by cardboard and chipboard. Groß turned back once more: “Frau Liebeneder has the worst of it, three children.” He shook hands with Franz and disappeared in the direction of Wielandplatz.

Franz trotted along Gudrunstraße, but had only gone a few hundred metres when the siren wailed again in a crescendoing and decrescendoing tone, bawling from several roof-tops. Franz began to run. It wasn’t far to Erlachgasse, where Mother was living now. As he was about to turn the corner, Erna stepped out of a grocer’s shop and the owner closed the sliding shutters right behind her.

Franz almost ran into her; now he flung his arms around her body, they both laughed. Erna was wearing her nurse's uniform again, and asked him if he wanted to come with her, she knew a good air-raid shelter. Franz looked up the street. It was now almost completely devoid of people, every now and then a woman wearing a head-scarf and carrying a large bag ran from one door to the next, or a man with a protective helmet on his head and a blue armband over his sleeve cycled past. He could still hear a car rattling through Sonnwendgasse. The sirens in the area had fallen silent, their crescendoing and decrescendoing wails could be heard only from far away, another district. He hesitated for a moment, but Erna pulled him along by his sleeve and they both disappeared through the entrance to a building. The air-raid shelter was in the backyard and as they ran across the courtyard, the first rumbling sounds announced the engagement of the anti-aircraft guns. They could both still hear the noise of exploding shells from the anti-aircraft fire, when there was suddenly a humming, a rumbling and whining all around them. About thirty people, mostly children, women and older men, stood and sat in the low cellar room which was supported by a number of added beams. The light was dim, the smell stale, sourish. An old spinster with a pointed nose ambled through the room holding a list in her hand and noting who was in the cellar. They were all tenants in the building. They knew each other. Franz was the only stranger, but no-one took any notice of him. He sat next to Erna on a low stool and flattered himself that he could feel the warmth and smoothness of the female body next to him through her clothing.

Erna asked him what he'd heard at Headquarters.

He told her that he had been promoted to sergeant and was going to be stationed in Vienna for the time being, that he had two days leave and was now looking for somewhere to sleep.

"I see", she said and reached into the shopping bag that lay on the floor between her legs. She took out a bread roll. "Have you got a knife?" she asked, as she kept on rummaging through the bag with her right hand.

Of course he had a knife, a solid pocket knife with two blades. He unclasped the larger one and handed it to her. She was still rummaging through her large bag, she nodded, but had no hand to

spare. Then she took out a second bread roll and a portion of sausage wrapped in white paper. "Help yourself."

He was still holding the bread roll in his hand after she had already begun chewing. "Well", she said, "aren't you going to eat?"

"I'd like to keep it for Helmut", he said. "Have you got a piece of paper to wrap it up with?"

She looked at him curiously, shrugged her shoulders, felt about in her bag and finally handed him an empty paper bag.

He thought of Frau Liebeneder, the woman old Groß had talked about. Three children. He couldn't remember her. But he hadn't remembered Groß either, all those years at the front, but then before, when he'd stood next to him, it felt as if he'd seen him only yesterday at the party office. No, the name Liebeneder meant nothing to him. But then he thought back to the time when he'd worked for the party - it seemed to him now that a whole life lay in between - the woman might well have been a girl still, and have had a different name. A whole life: the coastline of Africa, yellow, a yellow strip after the vast blue, the iron bed with the creaking frame, squeak, squeak, a few crumpled notes in exchange for the privilege of disappearing into the darkness of the black hair, life and death, in between life and death, in the black burning flag in the yellow sand. *The Marta Nordpol.*

"Your colleague", he said, "you don't suppose we could ask her?"

"What?" asked Erna. She had crossed her legs, was leaning back and looking out into the low-ceilinged room. "You won't win that one over so fast."

A woman with two girls was sitting opposite them. She'd sat the smaller one up on her knees, the bigger one was sitting on the bench pressed tightly up against her. There were two older women sitting on the bench as well, headscarves pulled low down over their faces. Their tightly clasped brown hands lay in their laps. Now the rumbling of detonations could be heard, the earth trembled, the light faded, for a moment it looked as if it would go out all together, but then it came back on again. The children moved closer to the woman. The talking stopped. It was very quiet in the room. You could hear the sound of crumbling mortar. Franz looked

across to the little girls. The bigger one had most unchildlike furrows on her forehead and was frowning, she looked as if she wanted to cry but couldn't.

"But", and here he beamed at Erna, "there's nothing going on between us; I'm only thinking of somewhere to sleep. She mentioned it first, didn't she."

"Oh, she wasn't thinking about what she was saying. They've got room certainly, but she'd have to ask her mother first and as she told me just a while ago, her mother is off trying to get some food from the farmers."

Again they heard detonations, again the earth shook, sand ran down the walls, the children pressed up against their mother and one of the old women crossed herself.

It is not all that close, thought Franz, and it won't help you anyway, only the side wind matters, and whether the man pushes the little button a moment earlier or later. But it would be a pity, a real pity, now when I could go to bed with Erna at five o'clock, fresh linen and hey presto, let the butcher worry about the consequences. But these women, they're nearly eighty and still enjoying life, strange when you think about what they could possibly find attractive about it still, no teeth, only a little hair left, gouty joints, scarcely enough to eat, and the place between their legs surely doesn't give them any pleasure any more, why do they enjoy living so much if they think it's so beautiful in the other world. Cheek by jowl, force of habit, there's nothing more certain than what you've got, and those years, a whole life, you carry it along, can't leave it, enjoy it, a hump, a stoop, a burden which makes you sigh, which makes you happy, sigh happily. Cheek by jowl. That's the little button of the suspender, you can feel it plainly. The poor children. Erna must have been about that old. Mandoline. But later, only later did she come down to us.

He had put the bread and sausage in his pocket.

"If she's on duty all night she doesn't need to worry about me. I'm not going to do anything to her", he said, "and you'll be able to reassure her that I don't steal or set fire to things. Well, what about it? And I'll be at your place by five. How would you like that?"

She seemed to consider. Again, the rumbling and thundering,

but less severe this time. The hits already seemed to be further away.

“Fresh and rested”, he said and pressed his thigh against hers.

A moment later there was only dust, falling pieces of stone and brick, darkness and the ear-splitting noise of an explosion around him, the rumbling of collapsing walls and the rattling of rubble. During the uncanny silence which followed, he could hear the blood singing in his ears, feel a heavy weight on his body, then he could distinguish between hard and soft, could perceive groaning and whimpering and finally the voice of a woman. She was shrieking continuously through the darkness, a single word that he was unable to understand.

He felt around him. It was Erna’s body. Now he discovered that she was moving. Then his fingers encountered timber. One of the reinforcing beams must have fallen on her. A hand gripped his uniform jacket, clutched at the material. The fingers on his jacket, the clenched fingers in the darkness, birth in the small Russian cottage, the drizzling of the rain, clearly audible, the sand across the beams, the hands, the face, the rushing of the water in his ears, fine sand. Black sand, black, death drizzling down.

The beam pressed against his shoulder. He could hear gasping coming from Erna’s mouth nearby, could feel how hard she tried to raise her upper body as it lay spread across his knees. “Franz, Franz”, she stammered, “what happened, what happened?”

Again you could hear the noise of detonations, the rumbling of collapsing walls and then in the following silence, the whimpering and the inarticulate shriek of a woman. The next hit was further away again. The rolling action of the bombing wave was clear.

Franz tried to get up but Erna was still on top of him. Her body seemed to be made up of heaviness itself. The weight shifted. Erna’s hands pressed down against his thighs. She seemed to be trying to get up. His right hand slid downwards over her hip. Her skirt must be torn. He noticed and forgot it at the same moment.

“Light! Light!” shouted someone. The whimpering grew louder. The croaking cries for help changed into a breathless inarticulate “Help! Help! Help!”, gasping in fits and starts, sometimes breaking off, then slowly quietening down. Stones tumbled, sand crunched, something metallic made a bright hard ringing noise