

her news to the others. Within minutes the whole basement was on its feet.

Taking the back stairs, I felt my way up to the first floor in order to hide our meagre provisions, at least whatever wasn't already squirrelled away. Before going inside I put my ear to the back door, which was in splinters and could no longer be locked. All quiet, the kitchen empty. Keeping close to the floor I crept over to the window. It was a bright morning outside, our street was under fire; you could hear the whistle and patter of the bullets.

A Russian anti-aircraft battery was turning the corner, four barrels, four iron giraffes with menacing necks tall as towers. Two men were stomping up the street: broad backs, leather jackets, high leather boots. Jeeps pulling up to the kerb. Howitzers rattling ahead in the early light. The pavement alive with the din. The smell of petrol drifted into the kitchen through the broken windowpanes.

I went back to the basement. We ate our breakfast as if in a dream, although I did manage to consume several slices of bread, much to the amazement of the widow. Even so, my stomach was fluttering. I felt the way I had as a schoolgirl before a maths exam – anxious and uneasy, wishing that it was already over.

After that the widow and I climbed upstairs. We dusted her apartment, wiped down the counters and swept and scrubbed with our next-to-last bucket of water. The devil knows why we slaved away like that. Probably just to exercise our limbs a little, or maybe fleeing again into a palpable present to escape an uncertain future.

As we worked we kept creeping up to the window and peeking out at the street, where an endless supply train was passing by. Stout mares with foals running between their legs. A cow dreatily mooing to be milked. Before we knew it they

FRIDAY, 27 APRIL 1945
DAY OF CATASTROPHE, WILD TURMOIL –
RECORDED ON SATURDAY MORNING

It began with silence. The night was far too quiet. Around twelve o'clock Fräulein Behn reported that the enemy had reached the gardens and that the German line of defence was right outside our door.

It took a long time for me to fall asleep; I was going over Russian phrases in my head, practising the ones I thought I'd soon have a chance to use. Today I briefly mentioned to the other cave dwellers that I speak a little Russian, a fact I'd been keeping to myself. I explained that I'd been to European Russia when I was younger, one of the dozen or so countries I visited on my travels.

My Russian is very basic, very utilitarian, picked up along the way. Still, I know how to count and to say what day it is and I can read the Cyrillic alphabet. I'm sure it will come back quickly now that practice is near at hand. I've always had a knack for languages. Finally, counting away in Russian, I fell asleep.

I slept until about 5 a.m., when I heard someone wandering around the front of the basement – it was the bookselling wife who had come in from the outside. She took my hand and whispered, 'They're here.'

'Who? The Russians?' I could barely open my eyes.

'Yes. They just climbed through the window at Meyer's' – meaning the liquor shop.

I finished dressing and combed my hair while she delivered

had set up a field kitchen in the garage across the street. And for the first time we could make out faces, features, individuals – sturdy, broad foreheads, close-cropped hair, well fed, carefree. Not a civilian in sight. The Russians have the streets entirely to themselves. But under every building people are whispering, quaking. Who could ever imagine such a world, hidden here, so frightened, right in the middle of the big city? Life sequestered underground and split into tiny cells so that no one knows what anyone else is doing.

Outside: a bright blue, cloudless sky.

Sometime around noon – the woman from Hamburg and I were just getting the second pot of barley soup, cooked at the baker's for the entire clan – the first enemy found his way into our basement. A ruddy-cheeked farmer, he blinked as he sized us up by the light of the kerosene lantern. He hesitated, then took a step, two steps towards us.

Hearts pounding. Scared, people offered him their bowls of soup. He shook his head and smiled, still silent.

That's when I uttered my first Russian words, or rather rasped them, since I suddenly went hoarse: '*Sh'to vy zhelaete?*' What do you want?

The man spins around, stares at me in amazement. I sense I've taken him aback. He doesn't understand. Evidently he's never heard one of us 'mutes' address him in his own language. Because the Russian word for Germans – *n'emtzi* – means 'mutes'. Presumably it dates from Hanseatic League, over 500 years ago, when German merchants used sign language to trade textiles and lace for beeswax and furs in Novgorod and elsewhere.

Anyway, this Russian doesn't say a thing, answered my question with a mere shake of his head. I ask whether he wants something to eat. With a little smile he says, in accented German, '*Schnaps*' – brandy.

The cave dwellers shake their heads: regrettably they have no brandy or alcohol of any kind. Whoever has any left keeps it well hidden. So Ivan wanders back off, trying to find his way through the labyrinth of passageways and courtyards.

Cheerful bustle of soldiers on our street. Along with two or three other women I venture out to watch. A young man is polishing a motorcycle in our entranceway, a German Zündapp, nearly new. He holds out the cloth, gestures at me to go on buffing. I tell him in Russian that I don't want to, even manage a laugh; he looks at me in surprise and then laughs back.

Some Russians are wheeling freshly stolen bicycles up and down the driveway. They're teaching one another to ride, sitting on their seats as stiffly as Susi the bicycle-riding chimpanzee in the zoo. They crash into the trees and laugh with pleasure.

I feel some of my fear beginning to dissipate. It turns out that Russian men, too, are 'only men' – i.e. presumably they're as susceptible as other men to feminine wiles, so it's possible to keep them in check, to distract them, to shake them off.

The pavements are full of horses that leave their droppings and spray their pee. A strong scent of stables. Two soldiers ask me to show them to the nearest pump – the horses are thirsty. So we traipse through the gardens for fifteen minutes. Friendly voices, good-natured faces. And questions that will keep coming back, heard now for the first time: 'Do you have a husband?' If you say yes, they ask where he is. And if you say no, they ask if you wouldn't want to 'marry' a Russian. Followed by crude flirting.

These two first address me using the familiar 'du', but I dismiss the impropriety by sticking with the formal form. We walked down the deserted green path, as artillery shells arc across the sky. The German line is ten minutes away. No more

German planes, wougn, and naraly any German tlak. No more water in the taps, no electricity, no gas. Only Russians.

Back with the buckets, now full of water. The horses drink as the two men look on contentedly. I stroll around, talking to this Russian and that. It's past noon, the sun so hot it feels like summer. There's something strange in the air though, something I can't put my finger on, something evil, menacing. A few men look past me shyly, exchanging glances. One young man, small and sallow and reeking of alcohol, gets me involved in a conversation. He wants to coax me off into the courtyard, shows me two watches on his hairy arm, he'll give one to me if I . . .

I draw back to the passage that leads to our basement, then sneak out to the inner courtyard, but just when I think I've shaken him he's standing next to me, and slips into the basement along with me. Staggering from one support beam to the next, he shines his torch on the faces, some forty people all together, pausing each time he comes to a woman, letting the pool of light flicker for several seconds on her face.

The basement freezes. Everyone seems petrified. No one moves, no one says a word. You can hear the forced breathing. The spotlight stops on eighteen-year-old Stinchen resting in a reclining chair, her head in a dazzlingly white bandage. 'How many year?' Ivan asks, in German, his voice full of threat.

No one answers. The girl lies there as if made of stone. The Russian repeats his question, now roaring with rage: 'How many year?'

I quickly answer, in Russian: 'She's a student, eighteen.' I want to add that she's been wounded in the head, but I can't find the right words so I resort to the international word 'kaput'. 'Head kaput, from bomb.'

Next comes a conversation between the Russian and myself, a rapid back and forth of questions and answers that would be

senseless to record, for the simple reason that it was senseless. All about love: true love, passionate love, he loves me, do I love him, whether we want to make love. 'Maybe,' I say, and start heading towards the door. He falls for it. The people all around are still paralysed with fear, don't have the faintest idea what's going on.

I flirt with fluttering hands, hardly able to speak because my heart is pounding so. I look the man in his black eyes, amazed at his yellow, jaundiced eyeballs. We're outside in the hall, it's nearly dark, I prance backwards ahead of him, he doesn't know his way in this labyrinth, he follows. I whisper: 'Over there. Very beautiful there. No people.' Three more paces, then two stairs . . . and we're back out on the street, in the bright afternoon sun.

Right away I run to my two horse handlers, who are now combing their steeds. I point at my pursuer: 'He's a bad egg, that one, ha-ha!' The man looks daggers at me and takes off. The horse grooms laugh. I talk with them a while and catch my breath. Little by little my hands calm down.

As I was chatting away, a number of heroes visited our basement, but they were more interested in watches than in women. Later I would see many an Ivan with whole collections on both arms - five or six pieces, which they would constantly compare, winding and resetting, with childlike, thief-like joy.

Our street corner has become an army camp. The supply train is billeted in the shops and garages. The horses munch their oats and hay, it's comical to watch them stick their heads out of the broken display windows. There's a hint of relief in the air - Oh well, there go the watches. 'Voyna kaput,' as the Russians say. The war is kaput. And for us it is kaput, finished, all over. The storm has rushed past and now we're safely in its wake.

Things started happening around 6p.m. A man built like a bull, dead drunk, came in the basement, waving his pistol around and making for the distiller's wife. No one else would do. He chased her with his pistol up and down the basement, shoved her ahead of him, towards the door. She fought back, hitting him, howling, when all of a sudden the pistol went off. The bullet went right through the supports and hit the wall; no one was hurt. The basement broke into a panic, everyone jumped up and started screaming. The hero seemed to have frightened himself and slipped off into the corridors.

Around 7p.m. I was sitting upstairs with the widow, peacefully eating our evening porridge, when the concierge's youngest daughter burst in yelling: 'Come quick, you have to talk to them in Russian. There's more of them after Frau B.' The distiller's wife again. She's by far the plumpest woman in our group, very buxom. People say they like that. Fat means beautiful, the more woman there is, the more her body differs from that of a man. Primitive people are said to have had particular respect for women who are fat, as symbols of abundance and fertility. Well, these days they'd have a hard time finding such symbols here. The older women in particular who had once been quite plump have shrunk terribly, at least for the most part. Of course, the distiller's wife is an exception. Since the war began she hasn't lacked for things to trade. And now she's paying for her unmerited fat.

When I came down she was standing in the doorway, whimpering and shaking. She had managed to run out and escape. But she didn't dare go back to the basement, nor did she dare go up the four flights of stairs to her apartment, since the German artillery was still firing occasional shells. She was also afraid the Russians might follow her upstairs. Digging into my arm so firmly that her nails left marks, she begged me

W YOU WILL NEED TO BE COMFORTABLE TO REQUEST AN ESCORT, SOME kind of protection. I couldn't imagine what she was thinking of.

A man came by with stars on his epaulettes and I tried to explain to him how afraid the woman was, but couldn't think of the word for 'afraid'. He just shrugged us off impatiently. 'Don't worry, nobody's going to do anything to you, go on home.' Finally the distiller's wife staggered upstairs, sobbing. I haven't seen her since; she must have sneaked off somewhere. And a good thing, too - she was too compelling a decoy.

No sooner was I back upstairs than the concierge's girl - evidently the designated messenger - came running in for the second time. More men in the basement. Now they're after the baker's wife, who's also managed to keep a bit of flesh on during the years of war.

The baker comes stumbling towards me down the hall, white as his flour, holding out his hands: 'They have my wife . . . His voice breaks. For a second I feel I'm acting in a play. A middle-class baker can't possibly move like that, can't speak with such emotion, put so much feeling into his voice, bare his soul that way, his heart so torn. I've never seen anyone but great actors do that.

In the basement. The lantern is no longer burning; it's probably out of kerosene. By the flickering light of a so-called Hinderburg lamp - a wick in tallow kept in cardboard - I see the baker's wife in a recliner, her ashen face, her twitching mouth. Three Russians are standing next to her. One is jerking her up by the arm, but when she tries to get up, another shoves her back in the chair as if she were a puppet, a thing.

All three are talking to one another very quickly, evidently arguing. I can't understand much; they're speaking in slang. What to do? 'Commissar', the baker stammers. Meaning, find someone who has some authority. I go out on the street, now

peaceful, calmed down for the evening. The shooting and burning are far away. As luck would have it I run into the same officer who had been so dismissive with the distiller's wife. I speak to him in my most polite Russian, ask him for help. He understands what I'm saying and makes a sour face. Finally he follows me, reluctant and unwilling.

The people in the basement are still scared stiff and silent, as if they all, men, women and children, had turned to stone. It turns out that one of the three Russians has backed off. The other two are still standing next to the baker's wife, arguing.

The officer joins the conversation, not with a tone of command but as among equals. Several times I hear the expression '*ukaz Stalina*' - Stalin's decree. Apparently Stalin has declared that 'this kind of thing' is not to happen. But it happens anyway, the officer gives me to understand, shrugging his shoulders. One of the two men being reprimanded voices his objection, his face twisted in anger: 'What do you mean? What did the Germans do to our women?' He is screaming: 'They took my sister and . . . and so on. I can't understand all the words, only the sense.'

Once again the officer speaks, calming the man down, slowly moving towards the door, and finally managing to get both men outside. The baker's wife asks, hoarsely, 'Are they gone?'

I nod, but just to make sure I step out into the dark corridor. Then they have me. Both men were lying in wait.

I scream and scream . . . I hear the basement door shutting with a dull thud behind me.

One of them grabs my wrists and jerks me along the corridor. Then the other is pulling as well, his hand on my throat so I can no longer scream. I no longer want to scream, for fear of being strangled. They're both tearing away at me, instantly I'm on the floor. Something comes clinking out of my jacket

pocket, must be my key ring, with the key to the building. I end up with my head on the bottom step of the basement stairs. I can feel the damp coolness of the floor tiles. The door above is ajar, and lets in a little light. One man stands there keeping watch, while the other tears my underclothes, forcing his way—

I grope around the floor with my left hand, until I find my key ring. I hold it tight. I use my right hand to defend myself. It's no use. He's simply torn off my suspender belt, ripping it in two. When I struggle to come up, the second one throws himself on me as well, forcing me back on the ground with his fists and knees. Now the other keeps lookout, whispering: 'Hurry up, hurry up.'

I hear loud Russian voices. Some light. The door opens. Two, three Russians come in, the last a woman in uniform. And they laugh. The second man jumps up, having been disrupted in the act. They both go out with the other three, leaving me lying there.

I pull myself up on the steps, gather my things, drag myself along the wall towards the basement door. They've locked it from the inside. 'Open up,' I say. 'I'm all alone, there's no one else.'

Finally the two iron levers open. Everyone stares at me. Only then do I realize how I look. My stockings are down to my shoes, my hair is dishevelled, I'm still holding on to what's left of my suspender belt.

I start yelling. 'You pigs! Here they rape me twice in a row and you shut the door and leave me lying like a piece of dirt!' And I turn to leave. At first they're quiet, then all hell breaks loose behind me, everyone talking at once, screaming, fighting, flailing about. At last a decision: 'We'll all go together to the commandant and ask for protection for the night.'

And so finally a small platoon of women, along with a few

men, heads out into the evening twilight, into the mild air smelling of fire, over to where the commandant is said to be staying.

Outside it's quiet. The guns are silent. A few men are sprawled in the entranceway - Russians. One of them gets up as we approach. Another mumbles, 'They're just Germans,' and turns back over. Inside the courtyard I ask to speak to the commandant. A figure breaks away from the group of men standing in the door that leads to the rear wing of the building: 'Yes, what do you want?' He's tall, with white teeth and the features of someone from the Caucasus.

He looks at the pitiful group of people come to complain and laughs, laughs at my stammering. 'Come on, I'm sure they didn't really hurt you. Our men are all healthy.' He strolls back to the other officers, we hear them chuckling quietly. I turn to our grey assembly: 'There's no point.'

We leave and return to our basement. I don't want to go back, don't want to look at their faces any more. I climb upstairs, together with the widow, who's hovering over me as if I were sick, speaking in hushed tones, stroking me, watching my every move to the point where it's annoying. I just want to forget.

I undress in the bathroom - for the first time in days - and wash up as well as I can with the little water I have and brush my teeth in front of the mirror. Suddenly a Russian appears in the doorframe, as still as a ghost, pale and tender. 'Where, please, the door?' he asks in a quiet voice - in German, too. He's evidently strayed into the apartment. Frozen in shock, wearing nothing but my nightgown, I point the way to the front door, leading to the stairwell, without saying a word. 'Thank you,' he says, politely.

I hurry into the kitchen. Yes, he broke in through the back door, which the widow had blocked off with a broom

cupboard - he simply pushed it aside. The widow is just coming up the back stairs from the basement. Together we barricade the door again, this time more thoroughly, piling chairs in front and shoving in the heavy kitchen dresser for good measure. That should do it, says the widow. As always she bolts the front door and turns the lock twice. We feel a little secure.

A tiny flame is flickering on the Hindenburg lamp, casting our overlarge shadows on the ceiling. The widow has set up a place for me in her living room, on the sofa bed. For the first time in ages we didn't let down the blackout blinds. What for? There won't be any more air raids this Friday night, not for us, we're already Russian. The widow perches on the edge of my bed and is just taking off her shoes when all at once we hear a clatter and din.

Poor back door, pitifully erected bulwark. It's already crashing down, the chairs tumbling against the floor tiles. Scraping of feet and shoving and several rough voices. We stare at each other. Light flickers through a crack in the wall between the kitchen and the living room. Now the steps are in the hall. Someone pushes in the door to our room.

One, two, three, four men. All heavily armed, with machine guns on their hips. They look at the two of us briefly without saying a word. One of them walks straight to the chest, rips open the two drawers, rummages around, slams them back, says something dismissive and stomps out. We hear him going through the next room, where the widow's tenant used to live before he was drafted into the Volkssturm. The three others stand around murmuring among themselves, sizing me up with stolen glances. The widow slips back into her shoes, whispering to me that she's going to run upstairs for help from the other apartments. Then she's gone; none of the men stop her.

What am I to do? Suddenly I feel insanely comical, standing there in front of three strange men in nothing but my candy-pink nightgown with its ribbons and bows. I can't stand it any longer, I have to say something, do something. Once again I ask in Russian, '*Sh'to vy zhelаете?*'

They spin around. Three bewildered faces, the men lose no time in asking: 'Where did you learn Russian?'

I give them my speech, explain how I travelled across Russia, drawing and photographing, at such and such a time. The three warriors plop down in the armchairs, set aside their guns and stretch their legs. As we chat, I keep my ear cocked for any noise in the hallway, waiting for the widow to return with the neighbours and the promised help. But I hear nothing.

Meanwhile the fourth soldier comes back and leads number three into the kitchen. I hear them busy with the dishes. The other two speak quietly to each other, evidently I'm not supposed to understand. The mood is strangely restrained. Something is in the air, a spark, but where will it land?

The widow doesn't come back. I try to draw the two men into conversation again, as I get under my quilt, but nothing comes of it. They look at me askance and shift around. That's a sign things are about to happen - I read about it in the papers, when there still were some - ten or twenty times, what do I know. I feel feverish. My face is burning.

Now the other two men call them from the kitchen, and they get up clumsily and stroll over there. I crawl out of bed, very quietly, put my ear to the kitchen door and listen a moment. They're obviously drinking. Then I slink down the pitch-dark corridor, silently, on bare feet, grab my coat off the hook and pull it on over my nightgown.

I cautiously open the front door, which the widow has left unbolted. I listen at the stairwell, silent and black. Nothing. Not a sound, not a shimmer of light. Where could she have

gone? I'm just about to go up the stairs when one of the men grabs me from behind. He's sneaked up without a sound.

Huge paws. I can smell the alcohol. My heart is hopping like crazy. I whisper, I beg: 'Only one, please, please, only one. You, as far as I'm concerned. But kick the others out.'

He promises in a low voice and carries me in both arms like a bundle through the hall. I have no idea which of the four he is, what he looks like. In the dark front room with hardly any windows he unloads me on the former tenant's bare bedstead. Then he shouts a few short phrases to the others, shuts the door and lies down beside me in the dark. I'm miserably cold, I beg and plead for him to let me back into the made-up bed in the next room. He refuses, seemingly afraid the widow might come back. Not until half an hour later, when things are quiet, can I get him to move there.

His automatic clanks against the bedpost; he's hung his cap on the bedpost knob. The tallow light has gone on burning quietly, for itself. Petka - that's his name - has a pointy head, a widow's peak of bristly blond hair, it feels like the nap on a sofa. A gigantic man, broad as a bear, with the arms of a lumberjack and white teeth. I'm so tired, exhausted, I barely know where I am. Petka fumbles around, tells me he's from Siberia - well, well. Now he's even taken off his boots. I feel dizzy, I'm only half present, and that half is no longer resisting. It falls against the hard body smelling of curd soap. Peace at last, darkness, sleep.

At four o'clock I hear the crowing of a rooster, part of the supply train. Right away I'm wide awake, pull my arm out from under Petka. He smiles, showing his white teeth. He gets up quickly, explaining that he has guard duty, but he'll definitely be back at seven, absolutely! In parting he practically crushes my fingers.

I crawl back under the blanket and sleep fitfully, in fifteen-minute intervals. Once I think I hear the word 'Help!' and

jump up but it was only the rooster. Now the cow is mooing as well. I unwrap our alarm clock (it's really the widow's, but I now consider myself part of the household) – just to be safe we keep it wrapped in a terry cloth towel, far back in the chest. We never look at it unless we're completely alone and safe. We don't want to lose it to some Ivan.

It is five o'clock. I can't sleep any more. I get up and smooth out the bed, shove the crates and chairs back against the rear door with its broken lock, clear the empty bottles the men have left behind and check to see whether we still have our burgundy in the kitchen cupboard, hidden in the old bucket. Thank God they didn't find that.

A reddish-grey light shining through the window means the war is still on outside. A distant rumble and hum. The front is now rolling into the centre of town. I get dressed, wash myself as best I can, and listen carefully to the morning quiet of the stairwell. Nothing but silence and emptiness. If only I knew where the widow had sneaked off to! I don't dare knock on any doors, don't want to frighten anyone.

The next time I prick up my ears, I hear voices. I run up, they're already coming my way, a whole group of women, with the widow in the lead, sobbing lamentably. 'Don't be angry with me!' (As of yesterday we've been calling each other by the familiar 'du'.) A number of women around her are sobbing as well. I just laugh in the face of all the lamentation: 'What's the matter, I'm alive, aren't I? Life goes on!'

As we head up to the next floor, to the booksellers', the widow whispers in my ear about how she knocked on several doors and asked people to take us in and give us shelter for the night. In vain. No one opened. At the postmaster's they hissed through the chained door: 'The girl? That would be asking for trouble. No, we don't want to be luring them this way! After that it was pitch-dark when some Russian came up and

grabbed her, threw her on the floorboards . . . A mere child, she whispers, no beard at all, smooth-skinned and inexperienced – a smile breaks through her face, so swollen with sobbing. I don't know her age exactly. I'm not even sure she would tell me. Probably between forty and fifty; she dyes her hair. But for them any woman will do, when they're grabbing in the dark.

Some fifteen people have holed up at the booksellers', bringing their bedclothes and spreading out on the sofas, the floor, wherever there's room. The doors of the apartment has patent deadbolts and extra reinforcements anchored in the floor. On top of that the front door has a metal backing on the inside.

We sit around the unfamiliar kitchen table, all of us hollow-eyed, greenish pale, worn out for lack of sleep. We speak in whispers, our breathing is forced, we gulp down the hot malt coffee (which the bookseller cooked on the stove over a fire of Nazi literature, as he tells us).

We keep staring at the back door, locked and barricaded, hoping it will hold. Hungry. I stuff myself with someone else's bread. We hear steps coming up the back stairs, then those unfamiliar sounds, to our ears so coarse and animal-like. The table freezes, falls silent. We stop chewing, hold our breath. Hands clenched over hearts. Eyes flickering wildly. Then silence once again as the steps fade away. Someone whispers, 'If things go on like this . . .'

No one answers. The refugee girl from Königsberg throws herself across the table, crying out: 'I can't take any more! I'm going to end it all!' She'd been through it several times in the night, up under the roof, where she had fled an entire troop of pursuers. Her hair in tangles, covering her face, she refuses to eat or drink.

We sit, wait, listen as the missiles pipe away overhead like an

organ. Shots whip through our street. It's seven o'clock by the time I creep down to our apartment, together with the widow, carefully checking to see the stair landings are secure. We stop to listen outside our door, which I left ajar – when suddenly it opens from inside.

A uniform. Shock. The widow clutches my arm. Then a sigh of relief – it's only Petka.

The widow listens to our conversation without saying a word. A minute later I, too, am standing there speechless. Petka is beaming at me, his small blue eyes glittering. He shakes my hands, assuring me that he missed me while he was away, that he hurried over as fast as he could after guard duty, that he searched the entire apartment for me, that he's happy, so happy to see me again. And he presses and squeezes my fingers with his lumberjack paws, so hard I have to pull them away. I stand there like an idiot, in the face of these unambiguous symptoms, listen to this Petka-Romeo babble on, until he finally, finally disappears – promising he'll be back soon, very soon, just as soon as he can.

I'm rooted in place, open-mouthed. The widow didn't understand a word Petka was saying, but she could read his face perfectly, she knew what was up. She shakes her head. 'Well . . .' Both of us are completely stunned.

And now I'm sitting here at our kitchen table. I've just refilled my pen with ink and am writing, writing, writing all this confusion out of my head and heart. Where will this end? What will become of us? I feel so dirty, I don't want to touch anything, least of all my own skin. What I'd give for a bath or at least some decent soap and plenty of water. That's it – enough of these fantasies.

I remember the strange vision I had this morning, something like a daydream, while I was trying in vain to fall asleep after Petka left. It was as if I were flat on my bed and seeing

myself lying there when a luminous white being rose from my body, a kind of angel, but without wings, that floated high into the air. Even now as I'm writing this I can still feel that sense of rising up and floating. Of course, it's just a fantasy, a pipe dream, a means of escape – my true self simply leaving my body behind, my poor, besmirched, abused body. Breaking away and floating off, unblemished, into a white beyond. It can't be me that this is happening to, so I'm expelling it all from me. Could I be raving? But my head feels cool at the moment, my hands heavy and calm.

TUESDAY, 1 MAY 1945, 3 P.M.
LOOKING BACK ON SATURDAY

I haven't written since Saturday morning, 28 April – three days ago, three days crammed with so many frenzied images, fears and feelings that I don't know where to begin, what to say. We're deep in the muck now, very deep. Every minute of life comes at a high price. The storm is passing overhead, and we are leaves quaking in the whirlwind, with no idea where we're being blown.

An eternity has passed since then. Today is May Day, and the war is still on. I'm sitting in the armchair in the front room. The widow's tenant is here too, lying in bed – Herr Pauli, now discharged from the Volkssturm. He showed up on Saturday, without warning, carrying a sixteen-pound lump of butter wrapped in a towel. At the moment he's sick with neuralgia. The wind is whistling through the windows, tugging and rattling the scraps of cardboard tacked on so pitifully, the daylight comes flickering inside, making the room now bright, now dark. But it's always bitter cold. I've wrapped myself in a wool blanket and am writing with numb fingers while Herr Pauli sleeps and the widow wanders through the building looking for candles.

Russian sounds come bouncing in from outside. Some Ivan is talking to his horses, which they treat far better than they do us; when they talk to the animals their voices sound warm, even human. Now and then the horses' scent comes wafting in as well, and you can hear a chain clinking. Somewhere someone is playing an accordion.

I peer through the flapping curtains. The alley is empty outside, horses on the pavements, wagons, drinking pails, boxes of oats and hay, trampled horse manure, cow pats. A small fire, stoked with broken chairs is burning in the entranceway across the street. The Russians crouch around it in quilted jackets.

My hands are shaking, my feet are ice. Yesterday a German grenade broke the last panes we had. Now the apartment is completely defenceless against the east wind. Good thing it's not January.

Our walls are riddled with holes. Inside we scurry back and forth, listening anxiously to the clamour outside, gritting our teeth at every new noise. The splintered back door is open; we gave up barricading it long ago. Men are forever traipsing down the hall, through the kitchen, in and out of our two rooms. Half an hour ago a complete stranger showed up, a stubborn dog, who wanted me but was chased away. As he left he threatened. 'I'll be back.'

What does it mean – rape? When I said the word for the first time aloud, Friday evening in the basement, it sent shivers down my spine. Now I can think it and write it with an untrembling hand, say it out loud to get used to hearing it said. It sounds like the absolute worst, the end of everything – but it's not.

Saturday afternoon around three, two men banged on the front door with their fists and weapons, shouting in raw voices, kicking the wood. The widow opened. She's always worried about her lock. Two grey-haired soldiers come careening in, drunk. They thrust their automatics through one of the hall windows, shattering the last remaining pane and sending the shards clattering into the courtyard. Then they tear the blackout shades to shreds, kick the old grandfather clock.

One of them grabs hold of me and shoves me into the front

other plants himself by the front door and points his rifle at the widow, keeping her in check. He doesn't touch her.

The one shoving me is an older man with grey stubble, reeking of alcohol and horses. He carefully closes the door behind him and, not finding any key, slides the wing chair against the door. He seems not even to see his prey, so that when he strikes she is all the more startled as he knocks her onto the bedstead. Eyes closed, teeth clenched.

No sound. Only an involuntary grinding of teeth when my underclothes are ripped apart. The last untorn ones I had.

Suddenly his finger is on my mouth, stinking of horse and tobacco. I open my eyes. A stranger's hands expertly pulling apart my jaw. Eye to eye. Then with great deliberation he drops a gob of gathered spit into my mouth.

I'm numb. Not with disgust, only cold. My spine is frozen: icy, dizzy shivers around the back of my head. I feel myself gliding and falling, down, down, through the pillows and the floorboards. So that's what it means to sink into the ground.

Once more eye to eye. The stranger's lips open, yellow teeth, one in front half broken off. The corners of the mouth lift, tiny wrinkles radiate from the corners of his eyes. The man is smiling.

Before leaving he fishes something out of his trouser pocket, thumps it down on the nightstand without a word, pulls the chair aside and slams the door shut behind him. A crumpled pack of Russian cigarettes, only a few left. My pay.

I stand up - dizzy, nauseated. My ragged clothes tumble to my feet. I stagger through the hall, past the sobbing widow, into the bathroom. I throw up. My face green in the mirror, my vomit in the basin. I sit on the edge of the bathtub, without daring to flush, since I'm still gagging and there's so little water left in the bucket.

mind.

No question about it: I have to find a single wolf to keep away the pack. An officer, as high-ranking as possible, a commandant, a general, whatever I can manage. After all, what are my brains for, my little knowledge of the enemy language?

As soon as I am able to move again, I grab a bucket and drag myself down the stairs and out onto the street. I wander up and down, peering into the courtyards, keeping my eyes open, then go back into our stairwell, very cautiously. I practise the sentences I will use to address an officer, wondering if I don't look too green and miserable to be attractive. Physically I feel a little better, though, now that I am doing something, planning something, determined to be more than mere mute booty, a spoil of war.

For half an hour there's nothing - no epaulettes with stars. I don't know their rankings and insignia, only that the officers wear stars on their caps and generally have overcoats. But all I see is a shabby mass of uniform green. I'm just about to give up for the day, am already knocking at our door, when I see a man with stars coming out of an apartment across the street (the former tenant having managed to escape just in time). Tall, dark hair, well fed. He sees me with the bucket, then laughs and says in broken German, 'Du, Frau.' I laugh back and shower him with my best Russian. He's delighted to hear his own language. We chatter away, silly, just fooling around, and I learn that he's a sub lieutenant. Finally we arrange to meet that night, at 7p.m. at the widow's. He's busy until then. His name is Anatol So-and-so - a Ukrainian.

'Will you definitely come?'

'Of course,' he says, reproachfully. 'As fast as I can.'

As it happened, another man showed up first, around 5p.m., someone I'd almost forgotten, Petka from the previous night,

with one Diona bristle and the Romeo babble. He's brought two buddies, too, whom he introduces as Grisha and Yasha. Soon all three are sitting at our round table, like a bunch of farm boys invited into a house well above their class. Petka acts as if he's at home, showing me off to the others with clear pride of possession. The three men stretch out on the armchairs; they feel good. Yasha pulls out a bottle of vodka, and Grisha produces some herring and bread wrapped in a greasy page of *Pravda* (the front page - unfortunately it's old). Petka calls for glasses as if he were master of the house. He pours the vodka, then slams his fist on the table and commands, 'Vypit' nado!' You have to drink up!

The widow and I, and even Herr Pauli, who showed up out of the blue half an hour earlier, have no choice but to sit and drink with the boys. Petka sets a slice of dark, moist bread on the table in front of each of us, then divides up the herring, right there on the polished mahogany, using his thumb to press it onto the bread, all the while beaming at us as if this were a special favour and delicacy.

The widow, appalled, runs for some plates. Grisha is the silent type with a permanent smirk; his voice has a deep rasp. He makes sure each person receives an equal portion of bread and herrings. Yasha is short, with a crew cut; he smiles and nods all around. Both are from Kharkov. Little by little I start talking to them, acting as interpreter between them and Herr Pauli. We drink one another's health. Petka from Siberia is loud and fully at ease.

I keep listening for the door and checking the dainty lady's wristwatch on Yasha's arm. Any minute I expect sub lieutenant Anatol to show up as arranged. I'm worried, because I suspect there'll be a fight. Petka is strong as an ox, of course, and clean, but he's primitive, uncouth - no protection. A sub lieutenant, on the other hand, ought to guarantee a kind of taboo,

or so I imagine. My mind is firmly made up. I'll think of something when the time comes. I grin to myself in secret, feel as if I'm performing on the stage. I couldn't care less about the lot of them! I've never been so removed from myself, so alienated. All my feelings seem dead, except for the drive to live. They shall not destroy me.

Meanwhile Grisha has let it be known that he's an 'accountant'. Then Herr Pauli, who works as an industrial salesman, makes a similar declaration. Both men have drunk a good deal, and they fall into an embrace, shouting for joy. 'Me accountant, you accountant, we accountants!' And the first kiss of German-Russian brotherhood smacks across Herr Pauli's cheek. Soon the widow's tenant is completely drunk. He calls out to us, elated, 'These guys are great, these Russians, full of vim and vigour!'

Another round. Here's to international accountancy. Now even the widow is feeling merry, for the moment having forgotten about the herring being sawn right on her polished table. (None of the boys bother with the plates.) I drink very measuredly, secretly switching glasses; I want to keep my wits about me for later. Still, the mirth at the table is tainted, especially for us two women - we want to forget what happened three hours before.

Outside, the sun is setting. Yasha and Petka sing a melancholy song, with Grisha chiming in. Herr Pauli is in a blessedly relaxed mood. It's a bit much for him; after all, only this morning he was courting death with the Volkssturm, until his troop had the sense to disband and, lacking both weapons and any orders to the contrary, dismissed themselves and went home. Suddenly he belches, falls forward and throws up on the carpet. The widow and fellow accountant Grisha immediately spirit him into the bathroom. The others shake their heads, express their sympathy. Then Herr Pauli crumples into bed in

his subconscious wants him that way. Neuralgia of the soul. Even so, his simple male presence keeps things somewhat in check. The widow swears by him and his rare pronouncements about the world situation and massages his back.

Twilight, a distant howling along the front. The widow has managed to get hold of a candle; we light it and stick it onto a saucer. A meagre pool of light on the table. Soldiers come and go – evening is when things get busy. People hammering on the front door, pushing through the back into the kitchen. But we are unafraid; nothing can happen to us as long as Petka, Grisha and Yasha are sitting at our table.

Suddenly Anatol is standing in the room, filling the space with his masculine self. A regular soldier is trotting behind him carrying a canteen full of alcohol and a round dark loaf of bread under his arm. The men are at their best-fed, strong and strapping, their uniforms clean, practical and rugged, their movements broad, very self-assured. They spit inside the room, toss their long cigarette filters on the floor, scrape the herringbones off the table onto the carpet and plop down into the armchairs.

Anatol reports that the front has reached the Landwehrkanal, and I think of that old dreary tune 'Es liegt eine Leiche im Landwehrkanal . . .' A body floats down the Landwehr Canal. Lots of bodies at the moment. Anatol claims that 130 German generals have surrendered in the past few days. He takes a cellophane bag, pulls out a map of Berlin, shows us the progress of the front. The map, printed in Russian, is very exact. It's a strange feeling when, complying with Anatol's request, I show him where our house is located.

So . . . Saturday, 28 April 1945 . . . the front at the Landwehrkanal. As I write this, it's Tuesday, 1 May. The

planes. Long rows of Stalin Organs are stacked in the school across the street; the Russians call them by the tender name Katyusha – little Kate – the title of a popular song among the soldiers. When they are fired they howl like wolves. They don't look like much – upright balusters, made of thin tubes. But they howl and shriek and wail so loud they nearly break our eardrums as we stand in line for water not far away. And they spew bundles of fiery streaks.

They were howling overhead this morning when I stood in line for water. The sky was full of bloody clouds. Smoke and steam rising over the centre of town. The lack of water brings us out of our holes. People come creeping from all sides, miserable, dirty civilians, women with grey faces, mostly old – the young ones are kept hidden. Men with stubbly beards and white armbands to show they've surrendered stand and watch the soldiers fill bucket after bucket for their horses. Naturally the military always has priority. Still, there's never any quarrel. Quite the contrary: one time the handle broke while a civilian was using it, and a Russian nailed it right back together.

They're camped out in the garden plots, under the flowering trees. Howitzers mounted in the flowerbeds. Russians sleeping outside the sheds. Others give water to their horses which are stabled inside the sheds. We're amazed to see so many women soldiers, with field tunics, skirts, berets and insignia. They're regular infantry, no doubt about it. Most are very young – small, tough, their hair combed back smooth. They wash their things in tubs. Shirts and blouses dancing together on hastily strung clotheslines. And overhead the organs howl away, a wall of thick black smoke cutting off the sky.

This morning was like yesterday. On my way home I ran into Herr Golz, loyal Nazi to the end. Now he's adapted. He

breast, all wrapped in cellophane, and asked, 'Ribbons?' (It's the same word in Russian and German, as he informed me, not realizing how much Russian I understand.) He gave me a little notebook, a German-Russian dictionary for soldiers, assuring me he could get hold of some more. I've looked it over; it has a lot of very useful words like 'bacon', 'flour', 'salt'. Some other important words are missing, however, like 'fear' and 'basement'. Also the word for 'dead', which I never used on my travels, but which I find myself reaching for quite often in recent conversations. Instead I substitute the word 'kaput' - which works well for a lot of other things too. The dictionary also contains a number of expressions for which I have no use at all now, despite my best intentions, such as 'Hands up!' and 'Halt!' At most we might hear those words being used on us.

Getting back to Saturday evening, 28 April. Around 8p.m. Petka and his entourage left - official business of some sort. Petka mumbled something about coming-back-soon, in a low voice so the sub lieutenant wouldn't hear. Then he crushed my fingers again and tried to look me in the eye.

Incidentally, the officer's stars seem to have strangely little effect on the enlisted men. I was disappointed. No one felt any need to restrain their happy mood because of Anatol's rank, and he himself simply sat alongside the others very peacefully and laughed and carried on with them, filling up their glasses and sharing his pot of liquor. I'm worried about my taboo. Apparently the strict Prussian order of ranks we're so used to doesn't apply here. The ones with stars don't come from any special class; they're by no means superior to the others in background or education. Nor do they have any special code of honour - especially when it comes to women. Western traditions of chivalry and gallantry never made it to Russia. As far as I know they never had any jousting

tournaments, no minnesingers or troubadours, no train-carrying pages. So why should they be expected to be chivalrous? They're all peasants including Anatol. Of course, my Russian isn't good enough for me to tell from a given man's speech and vocabulary what his education or profession is. And I've scarcely been able to speak with any of them about literature and art. But I have the feeling that, deep inside, all these simple, undiscriminating men feel insecure in front of me, despite their blustering. They're children of the people.

Still, at least Anatol is a full two hundred pounds. So maybe his size will help even if his stars do not. In any case, I'm not changing my mind. He moves like a comet, with a tail of young people, boy-like soldiers, who in the meantime have found shelter in the apartment abandoned by the pudding-sisters. One of Anatol's entourage really is just a child - Vanya, sixteen years old, with a stern face and intense black eyes. The widow takes me aside and whispers that he could have been the one, back then on the stairs, his face was small and smooth, his body slender. For his part, Vanya doesn't show any sign of recognition, although that's to be expected, since he never even saw the woman he took in such a clumsy, juvenile fashion - he only felt her. Still, I have the sense he knows who she is. After all, he heard her voice, the widow told me how she sobbed and begged. In any event, Vanya follows her around like a puppy, carrying fresh glasses and washing out the dirty ones.

I drank a lot that evening. I wanted to drink a lot, wanted to get drunk, and I did. That's why I only remember bits and pieces: Anatol next to me again, his weapons and things scattered around the bed... All his buttons and all his bags and everything in them... Friendly, helpful, childlike... But born in May - a Taurus, a bull... I felt like I was a doll, no sensation, shaken, shoved around, made of wood... All of a

And Anatol is yelling at him roughly, shakes his fists, and the man disappears. Or did I dream that?

Early in the morning I see Anatol standing by the window, looking outside, a reddish glow is flaming into the room, a yellow light tugs at the wallpaper. I hear the katyushas howling away as Anatol stretches his arms and says, '*Petukh paiot*' – the cock is singing. It's true – between shells you can actually hear a rooster crowing down below.

As soon as Anatol left I got up, washed myself in the bath with what water was left, scrubbed down the table, swept away the cigarette butts, herring tails and horse manure, rolled up the carpet and stowed it in the chest. I looked in the next room, where the widow had set up camp under the protection of her tenant; both were snoring away. Ice-cold air was blowing through the cardboard on the windows. I felt rested and refreshed after five hours of deep sleep. A little hungover, but nothing more. I'd made it through another night.

I figured out that it was Sunday, 29 April. But Sunday is a word for civilians, at the moment without meaning. There are no Sundays on the front.

LOOKING BACK ON SUNDAY, 29 APRIL 1945
RECORDED ON TUESDAY, 1 MAY

The first part of the day was filled with the constant, whip-like popping of rifle fire. Trucks rolling up down below, trucks driving away. Hoarse shouts, neighing, clinking of chains. The field kitchen sends its smoke right through our missing kitchen window, while our own oven, stoked with nothing but a few broken crates and pieces of lath, is smoking so much it makes us cry.

The widow asks me through the smoke, 'Aren't you scared?'
'You mean of the Russians?'

'That, too. But it's really Anatol I'm thinking of. Such a great big bull of a man.'

'I've got him eating out of my hand.'

'While he gets you with child,' the widow responds, poking at the fire.

Ah yes. She's right, that threat is looming over us all, though until now I haven't been very worried about it. Why not? I try to explain to the widow, with a saying I once heard: 'No grass grows on the well-trodden path.'

The widow disagrees; she doesn't think that logic applies here. So I continue. 'I don't know, I'm simply convinced it couldn't happen to me. As if I could lock myself up, physically shut myself off from something so unwanted.'

The widow's still not satisfied. Her husband was a pharmacist, she knows what she's talking about. Her medicine chest is well stocked, unfortunately, she doesn't have anything that would help me protect myself, as she puts it.

lying on the kitchen cabinet, fishing out her ID card and showing it to me, pointing to her date of birth, as self-conscious as if she were undressing in front of me. Sure enough, she's turning fifty this year. I had pegged her as about six years younger.

'That's at least one worry I don't have,' she says. 'Anyway, we should start thinking about whom to go to in case it does happen.' She assures me that she has connections, thanks to her late husband. 'Let me handle it. I'll figure things out. You'll be able to get rid of it, no question.' She nods as if that were that and, having finally brought the water to a boil, pours it over the coffee substitute. And I stand there, my hands on my belly, feeling stupid. But I'm still convinced that my sheer aversion can prevent such a tragedy, that I can will my body shut.

It's strange how the men always start by asking, 'Do you have a husband?' What's the best way to answer? If you say no, they start making advances right away. If you say yes, thinking they'll leave you in peace, they just go on with their grilling: 'Where is he? Did he stay in Stalingrad for good?' (Many of our troops fought at Stalingrad; they wear a special medal.) If you have a real live man around, one you can actually show them (as the widow does with Herr Pauli, even though he's her tenant and nothing more), they'll back off a bit – at first. But they don't really care; they take what they can get, married or not. However, they prefer to keep the husband out of the way for as long as needed, by sending him off somewhere or locking him up or doing something else. Not because they're afraid. They've already noticed that none of the husbands here are very likely to fly into a rage. But having one around makes them uncomfortable – unless they're completely plastered.

have married long ago if it hadn't been for the war. But once he was called up that was it, he didn't want to any more. 'Bring another war orphan into the world? Not a chance. I'm one myself, I know what it's like.' And that's the way it's been up to now. Even so, we feel just as tied to each other as if we were married. Except I haven't heard from him for over nine weeks; his last letter was posted from the Siegfried Line. I hardly know what he looks like any more. All my photos were bombed, except the one I had in my bag, and I tore that one up on account of the uniform. Even if he was just an NCO, I was afraid. The whole building got rid of anything that had to do with soldiers, anything that might upset the Russians. They all burned books, too, but at least when the books went up in smoke they provided some warmth, a little hot soup.

We'd barely managed to drink our ersatz coffee and eat a few buttered slices of the plundered bread when Anatol's men marched in. Our place has become a kind of restaurant for them, albeit one where the guests bring their own food. This time they brought a decent man along, the best I've met so far: Andrei, a sergeant, a schoolteacher by profession. Narrow forehead, icy-blue eyes, quiet and intelligent. My first political conversation. That's not as difficult as it sounds, since all the words having to do with politics and the economy have Latin or Greek roots, so they sound similar in both languages. Andrei is an orthodox Marxist. He doesn't blame Hitler personally for the war; instead he faults capitalism, which spawns the Hitlers of the world and stockpiles war materiel. He thinks that Russia and Germany make a good economic match, that Germany can be a natural partner for Russia, once it has been built up along socialist lines. The conversation did me a lot of

good, and not so much because of the subject, which I'm not as well versed in as Andrei, but simply because one of them treated me as an equal, without once touching me, not even with his eyes. He didn't see me as a mere piece of female flesh, like all the others up to now.

People were coming and going throughout the morning, while Andrei sat on the sofa writing his report. As long as he's there we feel secure. He brought a Russian army newspaper; I deciphered the familiar names of Berlin districts. There's not much left of our city that's still German.

Other than that we feel completely at the mercy of anyone and everyone. When we're alone we jump at every noise, every step. The widow and I huddle around Herr Pauli's bed, the way we are right now as I am writing this. We linger for hours in the dark, icy room. Ivan has driven us to the very depths – even literally, in some cases; there are still a few groups on our block that haven't been discovered, families who have been living in their basements since Friday, who only send people out early in the morning for water. I think our men must feel even dirtier than we do, sullied as we women are. In the queue at the pump one woman told me how her neighbour reacted when the Russians fell on her in her basement. He simply shouted, 'Well, why don't you just go with them, you're putting all of us in danger!' A minor footnote to the Decline of the West.

I'm constantly repulsed by my own skin. I don't want to touch myself, can barely look at my body. I can't help but think about the little child I was, once upon a time, the little pink and white baby who made her parents so proud, as my mother told me over and over. And when my father had to become a soldier in 1916, when he said goodbye to my mother at the train station, he reminded her never to forget to put my lace bonnet on to protect me from the sun. So that I would

have a lily-white neck and a lily-white face. I had was the fashion of the times for girls from good homes. So much love, so much bother with sunbonnets, bath thermometers and evening prayers – and all for the filth I am now.

Back to Sunday. It's difficult to recollect everything, my mind is such a jumble. By 10a.m. all the usual guests were gathered: Andrei, Petka, Grisha, Yasha and little Vanya as well, who once again washes our dishes in the kitchen. They ate, drank and chatted away. At one point Vanya told me, his child's face turning very serious: 'We humans are all bad. Me too, I've done bad things.'

Then Anatol showed up, lugging a record player – I have no idea from where – with two of his entourage carrying the records. And what do they keep playing, over and over, at least a dozen times? After quickly sampling and rejecting records like Lohengrin and Beethoven's Ninth, Brahms and Smetana? An advertising jingle! – A record the C&A Textile Company on the Spittelmarkt used to give customers for buying a certain amount. 'Stroll on down to C&A and see what's in our store today . . .' Followed by a list of their entire collection crooned to the rhythm of a foxtrot. But that's just what Ivan wants – they started warbling along, happy as larks.

Once again the spirits are going around the table. Anatol gets the familiar glint in his eye and finally kicks everybody out under fairly obvious pretences. This particular door doesn't even have a lock; he simply shoves the wing chair against it. Meanwhile I can't stop thinking about my conversation with the widow, this morning at the oven. I make myself stiff as stone, shut my eyes, concentrate on my body's veto, my inner No.

He moves the chair back away from the door to let the widow in with the soup tureen. She and I take our places at the table. Even Herr Pauli comes hobbling in from his room,

boots, his black hair tousled. He sleeps and sleeps, gently exhaling.

For three hours he sleeps, like a baby, all alone with us three enemies. But we feel safer, even when he's sleeping; Anatol is our earthwork, our rampart. He snores away, his revolver stuck in his holster. And outside there's war, the crackle of gunfire, the centre of town all in smoke.

The widow takes out a bottle of the burgundy I looted from the police barracks and serves it to us in coffee cups – just in case of Russians. We talk very quietly, so as not to wake Anatol. It does us good to be together like this, polite and friendly. We enjoy an hour of calm, the chance to be nice to one another. Our souls recover somewhat.

Around 4p.m. Anatol wakes up and rushes out, head over heels, to attend to some duty. A little later we hear loud banging on the front door. We tremble, my heart skips a beat. Thank God it's only Andrei, the schoolteacher with the icy-blue eyes. We beam at him; the widow hugs him with relief. He smiles back.

We have a good conversation, this time about humanity, not politics. He lectures, about himself, about how he sees women as comrades and not mere female bodies, how he disapproves of 'that kind of thing' – and here he looks past me, awkward and embarrassed. Andrei is a fanatic, his eyes are far away as he says this. He is convinced that his dogma is infallible.

There are times now when I have to wonder whether my knowing some Russian is a good thing or a bad thing. On the one hand it gives me a degree of assurance the others don't have. What they consider animal grunting and screaming is for me a real human tongue – the richly nuanced, melodious

afraid, afraid (though a little bit less because of Anatol), but at least I speak with them as one person to another, at least I can tell who's truly evil from who is bearable, can picture them as separate human beings, distinguish them as individuals. For the first time I also have a sense of being a witness. There probably aren't many in this city who can talk to them, who've seen their birch trees and their villages and the peasants in their bast sandals and all the new, hastily constructed buildings they're so proud of – and that are now, like me, nothing more than filth beneath their boots. By the same token it's also easier for those who don't understand a word of Russian. For them the Russians are more alien; they can talk themselves into the idea that these men aren't people but savages, mere animals. They can bury their feelings deeper. I can't do that. I know they're people, just like we are – less highly developed, perhaps, as it seems to me, and younger as a nation, but closer to their roots. This is probably how the Teutons acted when they sacked Rome, snatching the perfumed Roman ladies, with their pedicures and manicures and artificial curls. Being conquered means having salt rubbed in your wounds.

Around 6p.m. there was a sudden shouting in the stairwell. A knock at the door, the prearranged dactyl. 'They've looted the basement!' Andrei, who's sitting on our sofa, nods. He tells us that he's known about it for hours, advises us to go right away and see to our things.

Absolute chaos below: wooden partitions battered down, locks torn off, trunks slit open and trampled. We stumble over things that don't belong to us, tread on laundry that's still clean and crisply creased. We hold up a candle stump to light our corner, salvage this and that a few towels, a side of bacon on the string. The widow complains that the big trunk with all

her best clothes is missing. In the corridor she dumps out someone else's suitcase that's been slit open and starts filling it with the few things she has left, using her hands to shovel flour that's spilled on the floor, as if she's lost her mind. Left and right the neighbours rummage about by flickering candle-light. Shriill cries and wailing. Eider down whirls through the air, the place reeks of spilled wine and excrement.

We drag our things upstairs. Andrei is clearly embarrassed about the looting. He consoles us by saying that he's sure they were only looking for alcohol, and that even though everything else has been turned upside down there shouldn't be anything missing. Then, half in Russian, half in German, Vanya the Child, who has shown up in the meantime as well, promises the widow with a serious expression in his black eyes, that he'll go with us in the morning when it's daylight and stay by our side until we've found everything that belongs to us.

The widow cries, sobbing afresh each time she recalls a specific item from her trunk - her good suit, her knitted dress, her well-made shoes. I, too, am despondent. We have no rights; we're nothing but booty, dirt. We unload our rage on Adolf. Anxiously we ask where the front is, when there will be peace.

While we whisper among ourselves at Herr Pauli's bed, where he retreated once again after eating his midday meal, Andrei holds a war council with his comrades at the mahogany table. Suddenly all the window casements fly open, pieces of cardboard whiz through the room, an explosion throws me against the opposite wall. Something crunching, grinding, then a cloud of dust in the room . . . and a wall comes crashing down somewhere outside. As we learn from a neighbour half an hour later, a German mortar shell hit the house next door, wounding several Russians and killing a

horse. We find the animal in the courtyard the next morning - the meat neatly removed and lying on a bloody sheet, the fatty entrails coiled on the wet red earth beside it.

Exactly how the evening passed escapes me at the moment. Presumably alcohol, bread, herring, canned meat, coitus, Anatol. Now I have it: a whole tableful of Russians, known and unknown. They keep pulling out their watches, comparing the time, the Moscow time they brought with them, which is an hour ahead of ours. One of the men has a thick old turnip of a watch, an East Prussian brand, with a shiny yellow, highly concave dial. Why are they so fixated on watches? It's not because of the monetary value; they don't ogle rings and earrings and bracelets the same way at all. They'll overlook them if they can lay their hands on another watch. It's probably because in their country watches aren't available for just anyone and haven't been for a long time. You have to really be somebody before you can get a wristwatch, that is, before the state allots you something so coveted. And now they're springing up like radishes ripe for the picking, in undreamt-of abundance. With every new watch, the owner feels an increase in power. With every watch he can present or give away back home, his status rises. That must be it. Because they can't distinguish a cheap watch from an expensive one. They prefer the ones with bells and whistles - stopwatches, or a revolving face beneath a metal case. A gaudy picture on the dial also attracts them.

I look at the men's hands resting on our table, and felt a sudden twinge of disgust at their bald show of strength. What is clinging to those hands? I chase the feeling down with some brandy. They shout, '*Yypit' nado!*' whenever I put the glass to my lips and celebrate each swallow as if it were a deed worthy of distinction. This time there's red wine in addition to the spirits, probably from the basement. A candle fixed to a saucer

provides a flickering light, casting the Slavic profiles on the wall.

For the first time we have a real discussion, with at least three highly talented debaters: Andrei with the icy-blue eyes, schoolteacher and chess player, composed and quiet as always. Then a man from the Caucasus, with a hook nose and a fiery gaze. ('I'm not Jewish, I'm from Georgia,' was how he introduced himself to me.) He's amazingly well read, able to quote fluently both verse and prose, very eloquent and as adroit as a fencing master. The third intellectual is also here for the first time – a lieutenant, extremely young, wounded this evening by some shrapnel. He has a makeshift bandage on his shin and limps around with a German hiking pole, decorated with all sorts of badges from well-known destinations in the Harz mountains. He is pale blond and has an ominous look and a nasty way of speaking. He starts to say, 'As an intelligent person, I—' whereupon the Georgian interrupts him.

'There are other intelligent people here too – the *n'emka*, for example,' (meaning me).

We talk about how the war started; they see the root cause in Fascism, in a system driven towards conquest. Shaking their heads, they explain that there was absolutely no reason for Germany to go to war at all – such a wealthy country, so cultured, so well tended, even now, despite the destruction. For a while the discussion turns to the stunted form of early capitalism that was inherited by the October Revolution, and to the later stage that is evident in Germany – where capitalist society is more advanced, in wealth as well as decadence. Suddenly cautious, they put forward tentative arguments for why their country is on the verge of a great development, and therefore should be considered, critiqued and compared only from the perspective of the future.

One of the men points to the nineteenth-century style

furniture in the room as an example of a superior culture. Finally they come to the subject of 'degeneration' and argue whether we Germans are degenerate or not. They enjoy the gamesmanship, the lively back and forth of the debate. Andrei guides the conversation with a gentle rein and a quiet voice.

Every now and then the wounded lieutenant directs a vicious outburst against me personally. Scorn and ridicule for Germany's plans of conquest, for its defeat. The others, displaying a sense of tact more becoming to a victor, refuse to follow suit, quickly changing the subject, and telling him to watch his language.

Then in the middle of all this talk Anatol comes bursting in, yawning, exhausted from work. He sits down a while, but soon gets bored. He can't keep up with the others. He's from the countryside, from the kolkhoz – he's told me that he was in charge of milk, a kind of dairy manager.

'How interesting,' I said.

'It's all right, you know, but milk, all the time, nothing but milk . . . ' And he sighed.

Half an hour later he goes, leaving the others to debate.

Herr Pauli is sleeping in the next room. Once again the widow has set up her improvised bed close to him. Otherwise the situation is clear: the apartment is open to a few friends of the house, if that's what they can be called, as well as to the men Anatol brings from his platoon and no one else. But only their chief, only Anatol, has the right to spend the night. It seems that I really am taboo, at least for today. But who can say about tomorrow? Anatol comes back around midnight, whereupon the debaters disperse on their own. The last one out is the blond lieutenant, who limps away with his hiking pole, sizing me up with evil eyes.

Now there are holes in my memory. Once again I drank a great deal, can't recall the details. The next thing I remember

is Monday morning, the grey light of dawn, a conversation with Anatol that led to a minor misunderstanding. I said to him, 'You are a bear.' (I know the word well - *m'edv'ed* - which was also the name of a well-known Russian restaurant on Tauentzienstrasse.)

Anatol, however, thought I was getting my words mixed up, so he corrected me, very patiently, the way you'd speak to a child: 'No, that's wrong. A *m'edv'ed* is an animal. A brown animal, in the forest. It's big and roars. I am a *chelav'ek* - a person.'

LOOKING BACK ON MONDAY, 30 APRIL 1945
RECORDED ON TUESDAY, 1 MAY

The day breaks grey and pink. The cold blows through the empty window sockets, filling our mouths with the taste of smoke. Once again the roosters. I have this early hour all to myself. I wipe everything down, sweep away cigarette butts, breadcrumbs, fish bones, rub out the rings from the tabletop. Then a frugal wash in the tub, with two cups of water. This is my happiest time, between five and seven in the morning, while the widow and Herr Pauli are still asleep - if 'happy' is the right word. It's a relative happiness. I do some mending and then soap up my extra shirt. We know from experience that no Russians come at this early hour.

But from 8a.m. on the back door is open to the usual traffic. Unknown men of all descriptions. Two or three burst in out of the blue, start pestering the widow and me, randy as goats, try to grab hold of us. But now it's the custom for one of our recent acquaintances to come and help us shake them off. I heard Grisha mentioning Anatol by name, affirming the taboo. And I'm very proud I actually managed to tame one of the wolves - most likely the strongest in the pack, too - to keep away the others.

Around 10a.m. we climb up to the booksellers', where a dozen of the local tenants are still being sheltered, behind the excellent security locks. We give the special knock, the door opens, we join the other residents for the arranged meeting.

A jostle of men and women. It takes me a while to recognize individual cave dwellers; some of them look unbelievably