

## May 1945

A man goes home, the clothes on his back the same as when he left, only worse for wear and tear, ready to be handed to a scarecrow. The hems of his tunic and pants are frayed, and there's the tell-tale shine of tired fabric on the elbows and knees. And that's exactly how he feels – tired and frayed – as he leaves behind the prisoner-of-war camp.

A soldier, then, is going home, one French soldier among the hundreds of thousands haemorrhaging from Germany's Stalags. Loaded onto army trucks and battered busses, they are driven through ravaged towns and cities to the nearest ruined station, where they fill train after train to return them to the homeland. Their fight had been short, humiliatingly short – forty-six days. Their captivity had been long, unbearably long – five years.

Five years, and Corporal Henri Fournier finally gets to go home. Despite the blanket and the greatcoat strapped across the top, and the battered mess kit and canteen dangling from the sides, his backpack barely weighs a thing. Five years have slipped by with nothing to show for, except for the half dozen toys he's carved out of scrap wood pilfered from the sawmill where he was forced to work. Toys for his boy, though he realises the boy's no longer twelve. The boy's seventeen now, almost a man, a man he might not recognise. But it might still be alright, the toys, because his boy was not like other boys.

A father, then, is going home.

**CRAYONS**  
**1939 – 1940**

## No admittance for dogs and Poles

It's a good day for silence. A beautiful day in June – sunny, the air dry and still, and a blue sky with not a cloud in sight. It's the sort of languid silence people seek and crave, but for the two young men seated on the bench underneath the plane trees it's the quiet before a storm; the awkward silence between lovers before they part; the hush that settles in the courtroom before the verdict.

A silence so oppressive it brings no solace but only discomfort.

A silence no one wants.

A silence aching to break.

That's how it goes with a fomenting storm, the end of a relationship, or a final verdict.

And a question breaks the silence.

'You've been avoiding me for weeks, Heinrich. Are you embarrassed to be seen in public with me?'

A bird on a limb above flaps its wings in feeble protest at the question, and when no answer follows, the bird settles again to brood. There's no need to take flight. It was only a minor disturbance. The two young men on the park bench continue to stare, Hanusz at the pea gravel at his feet on which his question was lost, Heinrich at an empty bench across the lane.

At the end of the tree-lined lane, behind its closed cast-iron gates, stands the stately red-brick mansion that houses the Danzig Technische Hochschule, its corridors and grounds purged of students and academics. Summer recess has started. Until September, the school's wooden clock-tower will track time for no one in particular, except for the groundskeeper and the caretaker. Nor will it chime the hour again for Heinrich Graff and Hanusz Michalsky.

Less than a week ago, Heinrich Graff had graduated – *cum laude*, though he'd aimed for

*magna* – and he was now the proud owner of a degree in civil engineering. It was time to move on and leave school benches and lecture halls behind.

As for Hanusz Michalsky, there had been no *laude* whatsoever. Last February, he got kicked off campus, literally, and he too was ready to move on. The bench they were sitting on, the tree-lined avenue, the red-brick buildings, and all those who walked the Hochschule's halls, Hanusz Michalsky was done with them. And *they* had let him know very clearly that *they* were done with him.

*NO ADMITTANCE FOR DOGS AND POLES*, the sign in the window of the café had read. Any other café in Danzig and the sign might have gone unnoticed, but not at this one, the Hochschule students' favourite haunt. Because of the sign, tempers had flared, the school's small group of Polish students had protested and taken their outrage to the press, and twelve days later, backed by uniformed NSDAP-fighting squads, wielding truncheons and bats, the German students had had their revenge and ran every single Pole off the campus.

Heinrich and Hanusz haven't spoken since.

Then last week, Hanusz sent a short letter to his friend, announcing he was leaving Danzig to continue his studies in Poland, and if they could meet before he left. A note from Heinrich came back: "Meet Thursday. Entrance Hochschule – two o'clock."

Hanusz looks up at the clock-tower – too far – then checks his watch – quarter past two – and turns to stare at his friend's stubborn, stony profile, the only sign of shared discomfort in Heinrich's face the subtle twitching of jaw and cheekbone. With his swarthy complexion and jet-black curly hair, the shade of his beard prominent despite the closest of shaves, Heinrich is a far cry from the Aryan ideal promoted in the racial science classes the NSDAP had introduced last year. Though biology was not part of his machine engineering studies, Hanusz had been curious enough to attend a few of these lectures and he'd walked away disgusted.

If you agreed with these crackpot theories, then Hanusz with his straw-blond hair and

generous sprinkling of freckles was more German than Heinrich.

Mechanics, now that was a science, exact and methodical. This race-stuff was nothing but ill-disguised Nazi propaganda written up by a bunch of lunatic quacks. And blast all Aryan ideals, dark-haired Heinrich was a beautiful man.

‘Heinrich? I asked you a question,’ Hanusz quietly insists.

‘What!?’ Heinrich snaps.

There is a rustle of leaves as the startled bird above them finally takes flight.

‘You heard me. You’ve been avoiding me.’

‘So have you,’ Heinrich sulks.

‘With reason, since you’ve started wearing that shit-coloured uniform of the NSDAP.

What happened, Heinrich? Why did you join that goddamn rabble?’

‘We’re not rabble.’

‘Sure. I suppose my three broken ribs and dislocated shoulder last February were courtesy of a group of overzealous choir boys?’

‘I wasn’t part of that, and you know it.’

‘But you condoned it. You never spoke out against it. And now you joined them.’

‘Leave off, Hanusz. Don’t make this personal, it’s politics.’

‘But it is personal, Heinrich, it is very personal. I’m Polish, remember?’ Hanusz hesitates, considers whether to force home his point, lay out his case against Nazi racist doctrine, but then shakes his head and sighs. ‘I don’t like what these politics are doing to you, Heinrich. You’ve changed.’

‘Have I? Speak for yourself. *We* have changed, Hanusz, the world around us has changed! Look, the NSDAP is a legitimate party with legitimate claims, and it has done great things for Germany. They created employment, got the economy back on the rails, gave us back our pride ... Germany will be a great nation once again. And Danzig is German; always has been,

always will be.’

‘Just listen to yourself. You’re starting to sound like that goddamn Führer of yours. Can’t you see? Danzig is just an excuse for that land grabbing son of a bitch. I was born and raised here, just like you, a citizen of Danzig. We grew up together here, went to school together, played together, and being German or Polish was never an issue. We, our generation, and the Free City of Danzig should’ve been an example to the world but since the NSDAP took power in Danzig, they’re turning it into a bone of contention! Danzig is neither German nor Polish; it’s a free city under the League of Nations, do you understand that? Free?’

‘The League of Nations? You expect us to bow to the League of Nations? You’ve got to be kidding! A league of self-serving crooks is what they are. Whatever countries that matter on this planet either never joined or walked out, leaving a croaking French frog and a toothless English bulldog to run the show.’

Hanusz doesn’t reply. The conversation is going nowhere and the silence returns, heavier than before. Yes, it’s a good day for silence – sunny, the air dry and still and a blue sky with not a cloud in sight. Hanusz looks up into the foliage but the bird he’d heard earlier is nowhere to be seen.

Heinrich finally speaks again, his voice conciliatory and hesitant after his acrimonious outburst. ‘The note you sent me? You wrote you were leaving. I can’t make you reconsider?’

‘No. I need to finish my studies and I can’t do it here.’ Thanks to you and your friends, Hanusz feels like adding but bites back the reproach.

Heinrich nods. ‘Where will you go?’

‘Warsaw. Military Academy. Fastest and cheapest way to my degree.’

‘When?’

‘Day after tomorrow.’

Heinrich nods again. That’s it then, there’s nothing more to say.

The year is 1939, the month is June, and the day? The day doesn't matter.

Two friends go their separate ways, in a silence that reigns supreme.

## **Mobilised**

Her head comes up above the bracken and her ears twitch and turn and she points her nose up in the air and I can see her nostrils flare and I know she catches my smell on the air and now she's watching me.

I don't mind her watching me and I don't look away and I don't know why because that's what I always do when people look at me because then I look away but I don't do it when a deer or a horse looks at me. That's because they don't have faces like people with lips that move all the time and grin or scowl and eyebrows going up and down and all and it's all distraction to stop you from seeing the eyes that really speak and I don't understand why.

I don't understand the why of many things.

If there's too many things I don't understand and too many things that change all of a sudden I get upset and then I turn a little left and a little right and I rock back and forth and if I can I run to the forest where it's quiet and I can stop rocking and I can think about things.

Like now.

I don't understand why dad had to go away with so many of the other men in the village and the men in the villages around us and in the towns around us. The grownups use a word for it I don't understand called mobilisation which sounds like it would have to do with automobiles but dad didn't leave with no automobile because we have no automobile. He walked. He put on special clothes I have never seen him wear before and which he called his uniform and he said it's the French uniform every mobilised man has to wear and then he walked to the town which has the market and many shops and which is a long walk away much longer than my walk into the forest which isn't very far.

Maybe they gave him an automobile in the town so he's now mobilised.



I don't know.

Now it's just me and grandpa in the house with dad in mobilised French uniform and gone and I hope dad comes home soon before the forest and the fields change colours from green to yellow and red and golden brown. Maybe he will come home with an automobile and that would be nice.

The wind has shifted and I can smell her now and she's still watching me and her eyes say she's not afraid only curious and my eyes say I'm not afraid only upset and thinking. I know this deer because of the nasty scar on her back leg that makes her limp the way grandpa limps.

Grandpa also must have a nasty scar.

## Heim ins Reich

He met him.

And he heard him.

Loud and clear.

*“DANZIG WAS GERMAN, DANZIG STAYED GERMAN AND AS FROM THIS  
MOMENT ONWARD DANZIG WILL BE GERMAN!”*

His Führer’s words had thundered across the Langer Market, whipping the gathered crowd into a roar of approval and joy. It was done. Danzig was German again. Celebrations. Streets lined with flags – the Swastika and the Danzig crown and crosses, all on fields of deepest, bloody red, so much red – and evergreen garlands and banners strung across the streets welcoming Hitler.

This was why he’d joined the SS Heimwehr Danzig.

This was why he’d endured two months of intense physical and military training at the hands of the Schutzstaffel officers and had excelled at both.

This was why he’d risked his life fighting the Polish terrorists at the Danzig post office and then the Polish garrison at the Westerplatte fortifications.

All this, to see and hear his Führer speak those fateful words, the return of Danzig to the fatherland.

Heim ins Reich.

And wasn’t that enough?

Heinrich Graff looks up at the night sky and shakes his head – it wasn’t enough.

All summer long, there had been the daily lectures – *Weltanschauliches Unterricht* – conducted by the political officers at the SS training facility. They had explained, taught, insisted, and above all, demonstrated, how Germany’s enemies were everywhere, inside and outside the Reich, in uniform and out of uniform, young and old, man and woman. For this battle too they had been prepared, because liberating Danzig would not be enough. Danzig, and its surrounding areas, Pomerania and the former Polish Corridor that separated the city from Germany, needed to be sanitised of all their hidden enemies.

Operation Fumigate – that’s what the men jokingly called it. And officially? *Intelligenzaktion* – Operation Intelligentsia. At least, that was what Heinrich Graff had heard some of the SS-officers call it.

Intelligent. And therefore dangerous.

Were they? Teachers, doctors, lawyers?

Jaw clenched and defiant, Heinrich banishes his petty doubts – of course they were dangerous – and looks out across the exercise yard at the row of idle trucks looming in the dark. Soon, their engines would rumble to life and bark and cough their own ominous “not enough” before the men leaped onto the truck beds. For the fourth day in a row they would be riding out at the crack of dawn, hyped up on strong coffee and an excessive amount of schnapps to ward off the chill, each squad leader armed with a list of names and addresses.

Herding cattle.

Whoever had prepared their lists was more than meticulous. The addresses were never very far apart, names and occupations clearly stated, ethnicity where applicable, allowing for a quick swoop in the early morning hours to clean out the designated sectors while people were still asleep, and be back at the edge of the forest by nine.

And what happened in the forest was not his concern. What went on in the forest, stayed in the forest. His task was only to round up and deliver as instructed.

Except for yesterday. Yesterday he'd failed. Failed his hard-earned stripes as Rottenführer of his squad. Yesterday, one man had slipped out the back of his house as they were breaking down the front door. By the time they were inside the man had scaled the garden wall and after a short chase they had given up. They were sure the man would turn himself in. They had his wife and two young children, and just to make sure, they had shot his dog and pinned a message to the cadaver: *This time the dog, next time your wife and children. Turn yourself in at the nearest police station.*

Because of the incident they had arrived later than usual at the forest rendezvous and their SS superior had stopped them as soon as they rolled in, demanding an explanation for their tardiness. Heinrich told him, and then, in full view of the other Kommandos standing by their trucks already emptied of their morning's catch, the man had flown into a rage, shouting for all to hear.

'You did what? You shot the dog? How could you? Poor animal. We have no quarrel with dogs, you idiot! Next time you want to leave a message, shoot the Polish bitch and her brood and don't waste your bullets on innocent pets! Understood? Now go and offload your cargo!'

Embarrassed, not so much by the reprimand's inherent order to murder, but by the simple shame of its public delivery, Heinrich had saluted the officer and as he clambered back into the truck's cabin next to the driver, a mockery of dog-like howling and yapping from the other units had made his humiliation complete.

And humiliation knows but one consequence, breeds but one sentiment: hatred.

Heinrich looks up again at the night sky. Long streaks of watery grey were now bleeding into the horizon as if some giant water-logged brush were swatting at the sky's jet-black canvas. When was the last time he'd sat down behind his easel, relaxing in a field, by a river, the edge of a wood, sketching the landscape, then daubing his brushes at the double row of aquarelle cakes in his painter's kit? He couldn't remember.

Then again, he wasn't cut out to be an artist. His mother was.

Was.

She taught him, and then she died.

Grunts and coughs, snorts and the scraping of throats – the boorish sounds of waking men – filters through the barrack's thin wooden walls and Heinrich turns away from the gloomy sky's canvas and goes inside. Minutes later, the SS officer enters and everyone jumps to attention. The Sturmbannführer calls forward the squad leaders one by one, handing each a single sheet with not a word spoken. Heinrich is called last and the room goes eerily silent, and just as he'd feared, the handover of his list isn't wordless.

'Rottenführer Graff, here's your new list. When you get back, the only thing I want to see in the back of your truck is a dog – alive! Understood?'

Heinrich understands.

The thing he has ignored for the past few days has finally come out of the forest and caught up with him. And this time, no one yaps, no one howls in derision. The men file out of the barracks and swarm out to the trucks of their respective units in silence. Engines growl, exhausts belch smoke, gears crunch and on the horizon the painter's water-logged brush continues swatting at the receding dark.

Two hours later, with dawn complete, Heinrich is down to the last man on his list, a young Polish composer who has studied in Leningrad. Nine men are already in the back of the open truck: two teachers, an engineer, a retired police officer, two union leaders from the docks, all Polish, and two Jewish shopkeepers and a banker.

No women or children.

After four days of continuous arrests their targets had grown wise and sent their spouses and offspring to safer pastures. Some of them even awaited their arrest with their suitcases ready packed.

Heinrich involuntarily shrugs as the truck hits a bump in the road. That's right, he thinks, that's all these inferior people are, bumps in the road to a greater German Nation.

In front of a drab, non-descript three-storey house flanked by more and identical drabness, the truck lurches to a stop. Heinrich blinks away his thoughts and looks out the window of the cab, checks the house number and nods at the driver who switches off the engine.

As he opens his door and slips out of his seat, Heinrich checks his watch – seven twenty-three – and looks up at the building's first-floor windows where according to the list the composer lives. The curtains are still drawn; there's no movement. He walks to the back of the truck where his men are waiting, four of them already standing in the street, two left in the bed of the truck with their rifles trained on the prisoners.

'Rieder, Koch, first floor,' he motions with a flick of the head. 'Go quietly, wait for me at the door.'

The two men nod and saunter away from the truck and into the building.

'The rest of you, get that scum off the truck, quietly, and line them up against the wall across the street, face to the wall!'

As the men lower the tailgate he turns and follows Rieder and Koch into the house. The first door to his right opens and a sour-looking old crone in black peeks out. She doesn't speak, just bobs her head towards the staircase, holds up a bony finger – first floor – and rolls her malicious beady eyes. She knows who they're here for. Good riddance. She's done her part and she quietly closes her door.

Heinrich continues up the stairs and finds Rieder and Koch waiting by the musician's door. He knocks and listens, hears the scraping of a chair, slippered feet approaching the door, and then nothing.

Finally, a hesitant voice calls out 'Who is it?' and Heinrich takes a step back and signals Rieder. The door is no match for the heavy man's hobnailed boot and on the third kick the

wood around the doorknob and lock splinters and the door flies open. The musician is still stumbling back in shock towards the table in the middle of the room when Heinrich walks in and coldly asks, ‘Janek Bronski? Composer?’

The man, still in his pyjamas, straightens up, glowers at Heinrich and nods.

‘Good, you come with us. You’re needed for a concert,’ Heinrich taunts and waits for the musician to react, to protest, to struggle or beg. He waits for a word or a movement that would justify a slap in the face, a punch in the stomach, anything to rid himself of yesterday’s lingering humiliation and to vent his growing hatred.

But the man stays quiet and dignified.

‘Take him down,’ Heinrich orders, and as his men push the musician past him and out of the room, he looks around, sees the piano and goes to it for a closer look. It’s a Schimmel upright, good quality, its ebony finish polished to a shine. Instinctively his hand goes out to touch the keys but he stops, grabs the piano stool instead and goes downstairs and into the street.

‘Rieder!’ he calls out as he crosses to the wall where his men have lined up the prisoners. ‘Take four of those mules and bring down the piano.’

Waiting for the men to come down with the piano, Heinrich pulls the musician away from the wall, takes him aside and puts down the stool on the sidewalk.

‘Sit, Bronski! You owe me a recital.’

The composer quietly obeys. Heinrich takes out a pack of cigarettes, lights one and holds it out to Bronski who shakes his head.

When Heinrich hears the men come out of the building with the piano he turns and yells, ‘Careful with that piano, goddammit! Bring it here!’

Struggling under its weight, the four prisoners bring up the piano and Heinrich orders them to set it down in front of the musician so he will have his back to the line-up as he plays.

Rieder pushes the four men back against the wall and steps back.

‘Now play for your fellow Untermensch,’ Heinrich hisses at the pianist and draws his pistol from its holster.

Bronski is breathing hard and his hands are shaking. When he brings them down onto the keyboard and tries to play, the piano protests in total discord.

‘Hear that men! That’s what Polish music sounds like! I bet even their children sing their nursery rhymes out of tune,’ Heinrich laughs and his men follow suit.

‘Try again, Bronski,’ Heinrich leans in close to the pianist and whispers, ‘show me you can play as well as any German.’

Bronski grits his teeth, takes a deep breath, strikes the keys ... and Chopin’s Nocturne, opus nine, no. 1, resounds in the empty street and Bronski makes it well past the opening bars before Heinrich clobbers him over the head with his pistol, yelling, ‘Not that fucking Polish bastard, you piece of shit! Play us something livelier, something German. Wagner! Piano Sonata in B flat, opus 1! Now!’

Reeling from the blow to his head, Bronski tries to control his trembling hands, starts the Wagner sonata and fails, starts again and finally whirls into the Wagnerian rhythm.

‘Good,’ Heinrich whispers and turns to his men waiting for his signal. He had talked this through with them before they left this morning. The Sturmbannführer’s order had been clear – no prisoners today. If one man had to get his hands dirty, all of them would get their hands dirty, Heinrich had decided, and each man in the Kommando would execute at least one prisoner.

Heinrich looks at his men. ‘Rieder, you first,’ he nods at the big man. Rieder grins, steps up behind the first man in line, levels his rifle and shoots the Jewish banker in the head. The music stops abruptly and Heinrich whirls around and shouts at the pianist, ‘Continue! Don’t stop again!’



Wagner resounds again and Heinrich signals his men to continue. One by one, they shoot the men facing the wall, and when the last shot rings out Bronski stops playing and looks over his shoulder at Heinrich, defiance shining through the tears welling up in his eyes. Then he turns again to the keyboard, closes his eyes, lets the tears roll, and strikes the first notes of the Polish national anthem before Heinrich's bullet shatters the back of his head.

Heinrich holsters his pistol, looks up and down the street at the windows of the dismal row of houses – here and there a grimy curtain falls back into place but no one has come to their door – and then he heads for the truck.

‘Let's go!’ he calls to his men. ‘Leave the bodies where they are. We're done here.’

As he opens the door to the cabin he cringes when he hears the cacophony of the piano crashing against the cobblestones. Two of his men found it necessary to topple the instrument as a final statement. He lets it pass and climbs into the cab. Koller, the driver, is already in his seat and gives Heinrich a curious look as he turns the engine.

‘Gosh, Kamerad Rottenführer Graff!’ Koller exclaims in feigned adulation and grins, ‘None of us knew you were such an expert when it comes to music. Opus this, sonata that –’

‘Shut up and drive, Koller!’ Heinrich snaps. ‘We still have a dog to find.’

About an hour later, the truck is headed for the rendezvous point at the edge of the forest. In the cabin, on the seat between Heinrich and Koller, lies an emaciated dog, a dark grey mut with splashes of dirty white across the chest and down the legs, the spiky hair on its snout and face all pepper-and-salt like an old man's unkempt beard.

A mongrel, not quite a Schnauzer, not quite a Shepherd.

Heinrich looks down at the beast and regrets having taken it into the cabin. They would have to disinfect the cabin, certainly de-lice their clothes, even though it was less than an hour to the forest.

When they arrive, the Sturmbannführer is waiting.

Koller stops the truck, the passenger side of the cabin level with the SS officer who silently glares at Heinrich before he heads to the back of the vehicle.

In the side mirror, Heinrich watches the officer disappear behind the truck and then listens to the rattle and clang of the tailgate being dropped. Seconds later, the SS man reappears in the mirror and stands next to the truck, chest puffed out, gloved hands behind his back, feet planted firm apart, chin up in challenge and a mean scowl on his face.

Heinrich finally clambers out of the cabin, holds the door and coaxes out the weakened dog. The Sturmbannführer's chin goes down, the scowl disappears and he lets out a guttural laugh full of disdain.

‘Verdammt, Graff, that’s one hell of an ugly dog!’

Heinrich’s men, standing in the truck bed, leaning out so as not to miss a thing, chime in with a burst of raucous laughter.

‘But fine, well done, all of you men. Now get yourselves back to barracks and you,’ the officer points at Heinrich, ‘you take care of that dog now; that’s an order!’

‘Certainly, Kamerad Sturmbannführer!’ Heinrich stands to attention and duly clicks his heels.

‘Has he got a name?’

‘Chopin, Kamerad Sturmbannführer.’

## Intellektuelle

Hanusz Michalsky stands in the second row of the line-up, trying to steady the drunken reeling of his body. Though no longer entirely deaf, a persistent high-pitched buzz still impairs his hearing and despite the early hour, he finds the day's first subdued light unbearable, forcing him to keep his eyes closed to minimise the throbbing headache.

The last clear memory he has of the previous days is how they had waited for the first German tank to rumble onto the bridge before they blew everything up – tank, bridge and all – and then retreated to the safety of their bunkers.

That was on Thursday and today was ... was what?

He had no idea. Once inside the bunker, exhausted and numbed by the Germans' relentless shelling followed by infantry charges, he had lost all sense of time. At some point during the battle the German panzers had finally made it across the river, rendering the Polish rifles and machineguns useless, and under cover of the armoured vehicles, German infantry and engineer units had quickly closed in on the bunkers.

When the first grenade tumbled through the machinegun sight and clunked to the floor of his bunker, he'd flung himself into a corner and covered his head. The clatter of several more grenades had followed in quick succession before the first had even detonated and then a bright flash had lit up the gloomy bunker and for a split second there had been a deafening roar and then nothing, as if someone had quickly swivelled the volume-knob of a radio to full blast and back to mute, leaving nothing but total silence and a deep, black void.

When he came too, he was no longer in the bunker. He was lying in an open field in a pool of his own blood-laced vomit. Somehow, the incessant screeching and pounding of the previous days' mortar shells and grenades had seeped and settled deep inside his brain. From

his ears down, along his temples to his nose and lips, he could feel the crusty tug of coagulated blood, and from somewhere above his right eye had come the distinct burning sensation of separated skin and flesh. Sitting next to him had been a fellow Polish soldier who had nodded and moved his lips, mouthing words as if in some dumb-show, and he had realised he was stone deaf.

Next, he had been lifted to his feet by two other comrades and together with the rest of the hapless, shell-shocked group of about twenty survivors they had been marched, pushed and shoved to a nearby farm and locked into a barn for the night.

At the break of dawn, the Germans had pummelled them out of the barn and into the courtyard where they had stood lined up for what seemed an eternity until finally an officer and an interpreter had arrived and started questioning the prisoners one by one.

Standing with his eyes closed, fighting the urge to vomit, Hanusz carefully listens now for every word spoken in German that isn't translated. But you didn't need to understand German to realise they were separating the officers from the men.

As the German officer's voice gets closer, Hanusz finally opens his eyes and sees the row of men in front of him has been reduced to three officers while the other men have been led away to a truck waiting at the courtyard gate. Already, the German officer is advancing down the second line, his line, closing in, methodically asking the same set of questions again and again – name, rank, profession in civilian life.

Only three more soldiers now separate him from the German. Hanusz recognises the soldier being questioned as the radio operator of his regiment, the 136<sup>th</sup> Engineers, and as expected, the radio operator, though only a corporal, is told to stay in line.

Next is a private from 135<sup>th</sup> Infantry, 8<sup>th</sup> Company, a cobbler by trade it appears as the man duly answers the German's last question. He is taken out of the line and hustled to the waiting truck. Next is another private and Hanusz is expecting him to be taken out of the line

also, until the soldier answers the last question with ‘Teacher’ and the interpreter turns to the German officer and mumbles ‘Intellektuelle’ and the soldier is ordered to stay in line.

Now it’s his turn and his mind is racing like mad as he suddenly realises the Germans are not only holding back the officers, but also those with some sort of higher education. Of course, he was only a private, no stripes, which meant the truck; but at the end of August he had also obtained his degree as an engineer at the military academy. When the last question comes he realises he has a choice – the truck or the line – though he has no idea what difference it makes, and then his eyes settle on the odd, parallel thunderbolt-like insignia on the German officer’s collar, insignia he hadn’t seen on any of the men he’d been fighting, and instinctively, without flinching, he answers ‘Mechanic’ and is taken out of the line.

By the time the German officer with the funny insignia has finished screening the lined-up soldiers, there are about a dozen men still standing in the courtyard. The others stand packed shoulder to shoulder on the flatbed of the truck. An order is shouted, the driver starts the engine, grinds into gear and the vehicle slowly shudders out of the yard while the remaining Polish officers and men are herded towards the back of the farmhouse by the Germans.

The truck has trundled along the pocked dirt road for about five hundred yards when a burst of machine gun fire rises from behind the farm. Some of the men on the flatbed turn to look at the dwindling buildings; others stare ahead. Some take off their caps, others quietly curse.

To his left, Hanusz can hear the soldier-cobbler pray as the truck turns around the corner of a panzer-mangled corn field and picks up speed.

Hanusz thinks of his father, a ship engineer – *Intellektuelle* – and his mother, a teacher – *Intellektuelle* – and his two sisters and little brother, all of them in Danzig, the city now surely in the hands of the Germans, and he can’t find the words to pray.

## **The washing on the line**

A full change of colours happened and many red and yellow leaves had already been blown out of the trees and fallen to the ground before dad came home and I was disappointed because he didn't have an automobile but he's still mobilised and still in his special clothes.

Dad only stayed for six sleeps and then he had to go again being mobile and all and that's because of what the big people call the funny war.

The schoolmaster explained to us about war but I'm still confused because first he says war is when two or more countries fight and then he says our country is at war but there's no fight so it's a funny war and I thought a funny war would be like in the circus where there are big people they call clowns all dressed up and their faces painted and wearing big red noses and clothes in all sorts of colours and then they argue and fight and it's very funny because all the people and children make faces and loud sounds called laughter.

But I don't.

I never laugh because I don't change faces and I don't make sound but I know what's funny and I'll rock a little left and a little right.

The schoolmaster didn't talk about the circus.

He showed us about the funny war on one of the big drawings he sometimes pulls down over the blackboard and which has all sorts of different coloured patches big and small separated by thick and crooked and twisting black lines. He calls it a map and the patches he calls countries.

Our country where we live is a large patch and it's pink and it's called France and the country we're not fighting but have a funny war with is also a big patch and it's yellow and it's called Germany.

The schoolmaster says the yellow country wants to take parts of our pink country but we won't let them. We have a line called the Maginot Line to stop them and they have a line across from ours called the Siegfried Line and there's this new song everybody's singing saying we will go hang our washing out to dry on the Siegfried Line.

I don't understand.

Why would we want to dry our linen on their line when we have a line of our own?

But Grandpa also sings the song and he says we've hung our linen on their line before. That was when we won the great war which was many changes of colour ago and in a great war you fight and that's where grandpa hurt his leg and in a funny war you don't fight.

I don't want dad to hurt his leg fighting like grandpa so I suppose it's good we're only having a funny war.

## Ever-greens

Every morning since dad went mobile I stand at the little wooden gate at the end of the garden path to watch the ever-greens wave at me in the park of the big-house across the road. Grandpa and dad call them pain-trees. I like ever-green better.

Since I started standing at the little wooden gate I noticed sometimes the ever-greens don't wave but when they do they never seem to tire and sometimes they wave for days and days. There can't be pain if they do it for days and days so pain-tree is not a good word. Sometimes they wave so hard it's almost as if they bow to me. Also, other trees change colours and when they do they change smell. Not so for ever-greens. They always smell the same. When the other trees change colours it tells you you're growing old.

Three sleeps ago I became forty-eight changes of colours old. Grandpa and dad say that's twelve, but that's just a number. I do know my numbers, but when it comes to age, I prefer colours.

Dad wasn't there to celebrate my forty-eight changes of colours.

When I'm done looking at the ever-greens I look down the road to the side that leads to the village at the bottom of the hill which is my weak-arm side. That's where dad will be coming from when he's done with the funny war. It's been almost an entire change of colours again since the last time I watched dad come up the hill. Then there were still some leaves on the trees but now they're all on the ground except for the tiny prickly ones of the ever-greens.

Soon the trees that're not ever-greens will get leaves again.

When I'm done looking for dad I look the other way which is my strong-arm side to see the forest. It's a big forest and it goes as far as you can see but it only has a few ever-green trees here and there. All the other trees in the forest change colours and change their smell



from dark and musty to fresh and green and lose their leaves and then get them back again like my hair after dad cuts it very short.

The trees in the forest change and they tell you you're growing like they are only much faster than they are so you can see how you grow but you will never grow as tall as the trees.

I don't like change but I still like the forest because the way the forest changes is always always the same and slow and that doesn't upset me.

I suppose the way I change is also slow enough so I don't need to be upset with myself. Even the way the rabbits and chickens change much faster than I do from small to large is slow enough and doesn't upset me. But the day I came home from school and the kitchen table was gone and there was a new kitchen table and the kitchen cupboard had moved to the other wall I was very upset.

I don't like that kind of change.

It took many sleeps before I decided to sit at the new table.

It wasn't the same.

It didn't have the scratches I'd made with my knife and it didn't have all the sticky bits underneath that had come from my nose.

I scratched the new table and dad was very upset only he doesn't rock back and forth like I do but folds his face into angry.

I don't know how to fold my face.

I make sure dad and grandpa don't see me stick my nose-boogers underneath the table.

I'm done standing at the gate now. I feel dad won't be coming today and I won't be rocking back and forth like last time and dad saying hush hush it's okay it's me I'm home now.

But he's not home now.

I wish the funny war would stop.

## Water in a bucket

Every day now I see people I don't know pass our house coming from the village on my weak-arm side and from beyond the forest on my strong-arm side and they look tired and scared and I think they must all be mobilised like dad because some have automobiles with mattresses and suitcases piled on top and half a kitchen and others don't have automobiles but only bicycles or horse-drawn carts or push-carts and they walk but none wear the special clothes dad wears so I'm not sure they're mobilised the same way dad is.

There are old people and children and also babies that can't walk.

There's a boy coming to our gate and he's holding a big bucket and now he's asking for water and I look away and turn a little left and a little right but I don't rock back and forth because he's only a boy like me and I'm not afraid and grandpa comes to the gate and takes the bucket and fills it with water for the boy.

Grandpa asks the boy where are you from and the boy answers but I've never heard of the place and grandpa shakes his head and says that's a long way to come and then an older man who's maybe the boy's dad or grandpa and who's holding a horse attached to a wagon says you should go the krauts will be here any day and grandpa answers let them come I didn't run from them in fourteen and I won't be running now.

When the boy and the man and the horse and the cart are gone I start to walk to the forest because I'm getting very confused and I feel like rocking back and forth after all but grandpa stops me and I really start rocking because I don't like to be touched but grandpa won't let go and he folds his face into very serious and says you're not allowed to go to the forest alone anymore do you hear.

I hear.

I go into the house and I go to my room where I sit on the bed and rock back and forth.

I hear.

I hear.

I hear.

But I don't understand.

## Paradise

Chopin suddenly sits up next to Heinrich and lets out a low growl, his pointy ears locked into some unheard sound, the hairs in his neck bristling. Heinrich looks at the dog, then down the road and across the fields, and then he hears it too, above the din of the rattling half-track and the deep burr of its heavy diesel engine – rifle and machinegun fire, somewhere in the distance up ahead, dense and sustained, clearly not some half-hearted skirmish dealing with a few British or French stragglers.

Heinrich grabs the top of the half-track's windshield, stands up and raises his hand and the two other half-tracks following behind come to a halt but keep their engines running. One wave of the same hand and a motorcycle with sidecar appears next to Heinrich's half-track.

'Go check what's going on up ahead. Report back immediately,' he shouts down at the two scouts over the noise of his vehicle's idling engine and the motorcycle speeds away throwing up dust and pebbles.

'Good boy,' he mutters and ruffles the dog's head and ears as he watches the motorcycle go. It wasn't the first time the animal had given him early warning these past few months – announcing the approach of a stranger a full thirty seconds before there was even as much as a knock at the door of the barracks; hunkering down hours ahead of a phenomenal thunderstorm; tensing at the unheard approach of a vehicle during field exercises – and Heinrich had learned to read and heed the dog's instincts.

In fact, about a week ago, when the British and French had mounted their desperate counter-attack, Heinrich's artillery unit would've been blindsided on the road south of Arras by three Matilda tanks approaching unseen from beyond a bluff to their right. There too, the dog had suddenly started growling, hackles up, baring his teeth, his nose pointing back

towards the crest of the hill they had just skirted and Heinrich had stopped the column and ordered the engines cut to listen.

There was no mistaking the laborious and stringent clangour of the advancing tanks and within seconds the crews had dismounted, detached the 88mm Flak guns they towed behind the half-tracks and put them in position, pointing at the hill crest.

When the first Matilda II rolled into sight, it never knew what hit it. The two other tanks briefly appeared on the hill next to their crumpled, burning comrade to assess the opposition. One of them fired, but its shell went whistling high above Heinrich's men, and as their Flak guns opened fire again and knocked the second tank's turret out of sink, the two tanks quickly withdrew.

'That's right, you pigs!' one of Heinrich's men had shouted at the retreating tanks. 'If you can't send any of your planes for us to knock out of the sky, then send us your bloody tanks! Our Flak shoots high AND low, you fucking cowards!'

But had it not been for Chopin, the tanks would've appeared in their rear and they would've been sitting ducks, unprepared, which reminds Heinrich, they're sitting ducks right now.

Again, he turns to the vehicles behind him and points them in the direction of a coppice left of the road where the motorcycle scouts have disappeared around a bend. From there they can deploy their 88mm Flak guns under some measure of cover.

The crew knows the drill and the half-tracks trundle off, keeping a safe distance from one another. Next, Heinrich turns to his driver and barks 'Helmet!' and Koller looks up, grins, and puts on his helmet.

'Let's get going,' Heinrich points to the bend in the road from where he hopes to get a view of what is going on further ahead.

'Drop me off in the bend, then set up in the woods.'

The half-track jolts forward, almost knocking Heinrich back into his seat and Koller laughs.

Good old Koller, still at the wheel, ever since their Heimwehr days, and still the prankster, whatever the occasion, whatever the situation. But their Heimwehr days were over.

Back in October, the Heimwehr Danzig had been integrated into the Waffen SS Division Totenkopf under the command of Theodore Eicke – “Papa Eicke”, “Ironfist Eicke” – and Koller was the only one left of Heinrich’s original little squad; the others had been transferred into other Totenkopf units.

Oaths were sworn, and seven months of intense, disciplined military training and political lecturing had followed, and now, here he was, artillery Hauptscharführer Graff – platoon leader – and this was the Division’s true baptism of fire, starting in Belgium on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May, rushing south, south-west, into Northern France, relentlessly pushing forward into the Allied forces’ lines, cutting off entire armies, racing for the coast.

They had been on the move for thirteen days now with hardly a moment’s rest, battling fatigue with massive amounts of caffeine and a daily ration of Pervitin – the fabled *Stuka-tabletten* of the Luftwaffe pilots – and it was starting to show. The men looked haggard and were permanently on edge, trigger-happy. The slightest sign of resistance was met with ever more brutal retaliation as the number of casualties in their ranks grew by the day at an alarming rate.

Face it, no matter how often you’d been told you were Germany’s invincible elite, it wouldn’t stop a bullet.

Just before the bend in the road, Koller slows down and Heinrich jumps clear of the vehicle into the road, followed by Chopin. The half-track swerves for the cover of the coppice and Heinrich runs for the hedge at the right side of the bend. Past the bend, the road continues down in a gentle zig-zag between wheat and rapeseed fields towards a small village

in a secluded vale.

In the village itself, things seem quiet enough but left of it sits a large farmstead with several barns, stables and a farmhouse forming a u-pattern around the central yard. One of the barns is on fire and muzzle-flashes can be seen bursting from a good dozen of positions inside the farmhouse and one of the stables. Heinrich raises his Zeiss binoculars and sweeps along the road into the village where nothing seems to move, then left along a dirt road towards the farm.

A mangled German Kübelwagen comes into focus, tilting at an awkward angle in a ditch opposite the farmyard gates, the driver and his passenger dead in their seats, a third man face-down in the road. Left and right of the vehicle, strung along in the ditch, Heinrich spots several men pinned down by heavy machinegun fire from the farm – Germans, infantry, two or three squads at a quick count, their Opel Blitz trucks a little further to the left but too far away for more detailed identification.

Next, he notices two men peel away from the troops in the ditch and dash through the rapeseed field away from the farm and towards the road leading into the village – his scouts, heading for their motorcycle. Just a few minutes now and he'd know more.

Heinrich lowers his binoculars and turns to shout instructions at the gun crews. There was no need to shout. The crews' spotters had already identified the farm and stood waiting for his orders, ready to train the guns on the target.

'Bearings on the farm and get them right! Not a single shell on our own men! Standby to fire! We're waiting for the scouts!' he calls out and the men set to work. By the time the motorcycle slides to a halt by his side, Heinrich's men are ready to rain devastation onto the distant buildings.

'And?' Heinrich turns to the scouts. 'Who do we have down there?'

'Men from 14<sup>th</sup> Company, Kamerad Graff.'

‘Enemy?’

‘French. Twenty, maybe more.’

‘German officer in command?’

‘Hauptsturmführer Koch-something.’

Outranked, Heinrich realises. Seriously outranked.

‘Orders?’

‘Hauptsturmführer Koch...’

‘Knöchlein,’ Heinrich corrects. He’s heard of the man, and of his reputation. There were rumours. Summary executions, of North Africans, *Schwarze*, but also British prisoners of war, sixty, maybe seventy some said, ninety according to others, at a place called Le Paradis, Geneva Convention be damned. They were Waffen SS. They lived and died by one convention only, and one covenant only, written and signed by their one and only Führer, Adolf Hitler.

‘Yes, Knöchlein,’ the scout nods, finally realising who he’d spoken to down below, ‘he requests you do whatever it takes to silence the enemy fire from the farmhouse and the barns, then take out the church tower and fire at will into the village.’

‘The village? What for?’

‘Hauptsturmführer Knöchlein suspects there to be snipers, possibly more enemy troops.’

*Knöchlein suspects* – meaning, Knöchlein doesn’t know, and hell, he doesn’t care.

*Knöchlein requests* – he’s not the kind of man to request.

Heinrich curses under his breath and sighs. ‘You need to go back down there,’ Heinrich sighed, ‘tell Knöchlein his troops need to fall back, find cover or dig in before we shoot.

Have any flares left?’

‘Got flares,’ the scout sitting in the sidecar points at the saddlebags.

‘Alright then. Send up a flare when Knöchlein’s men are ready. We’ll commence firing



after the signal.’

Heinrich watches the scouts speed back down the road and then walks up to his gunners who don't bat an eyelid when he informs them of their targets. Waiting for the flare, he wishes he had the guts to send at least one shell with Knöchlein's name on it into the bloody ditch in front of the farm.

Geneva or no Geneva, there were limits.

One Paradise turned into Hell was enough.

Then the flare goes up, he gives the order to fire, and five minutes later, the farmhouse, the stables, the church steeple and a handful of houses in the village are nothing but smoking rubble. He raises his binoculars and watches as the SS-men from 14<sup>th</sup> Company storm the battered farm. Then he swings to the village.

Nothing moves apart from a dog limping down the main street.

‘All right, pack up, lets go down,’ he tells his men.

With swift and practiced moves the crews put the deadly mouths to rest, hook the guns to the half-tracks, and one by one they pull out of the woods and back onto the road.

They trundle into the village and as they turn into the narrow street leading to the farm, Koller hits the brakes hard to avoid crashing into an old man and a boy being pushed from a house into the alley by two SS-men. A third SS emerges from the doorway, throws Heinrich and Koller a blank look and then lets fly his rage as he smashes an old, double barrel hunting rifle at the feet of the frightened gaffer. Next, he roughly shoves the boy and the old man up against the wall and motions Koller to continue his way.

Koller puts the engine back into gear and edges past the boy, the old man and the soldiers, all hugging the wall to let the half-track through. The two other half-tracks and the motorcycle follow and when their little cortege has passed, two short bursts of machinegun fire ring out behind them.

Heinrich closes his eyes, his jaw stiffens. There's shouting now, wailing, a woman's voice. Two women. More shots.

'Step on it, Koller. Let's get out of here.'

Koller speeds up, but what's the use? Heinrich knows they can't outrun what crawled from the forests outside Danzig.

## Stalag

‘Poland, no longer exists! The Polish army, no longer exists! There no longer is such a thing as a Polish soldier. Therefore, you are nothing! And since you are nothing, it is time for you to earn the right to live within the Reich and to contribute to its prosperity. As from today, you will be put to work, in our factories, in our mines and quarries. If you work, you will be fed. If you refuse, you will starve. Over the next few days, you will be transferred to your new area of employment according to your skills and qualifications. Return to your barracks, pack your belongings and wait to be summoned. Heil Hitler!’

Though he has perfectly understood the German Commander’s tirade, Hanusz Michalsky masks his inner rage and stands and waits in line like all the other soldiers in the camp’s exercise yard, waiting for the Polish interpreter to finish translating.

React with the others, get angry with the others.

Nine months in the Mannschaftsstammlager, the Stalag, and his perfect command of German is still a well-kept secret and he wanted to keep it that way.

The interpreter is finished. A voice flares up behind Hanusz, and then another voice, to his left, and another, in front, like pistons of a slow, desynchronised engine popping up, here, there, the engine speeding up, the pistons popping faster and faster, the voices becoming a single growl of discontent.

And then the clubs and rifle butts of the guards start swinging, the men in the outer rows of the assembled mass bearing the brunt of the blows.

‘DISPERSE! DISPERSE! RETURN TO YOUR BARRACKS!’ and slowly the grumbling mass starts splintering under the physical and verbal abuse.

They have been reduced to slave labour, to nothing, and if they are nothing, then what are

the men segregated in the tent camp?

Polish soldiers, certainly, just like them, but Jewish, and therefore already less than nothing. Nine months with only some thin, dilapidated canvas to protect them from the elements, thirty to a tent meant for ten, no sanitation to speak of, and rations even poorer than the starvation meals the other Polish soldiers were served.

Last winter, the poor wretches had dropped like flies, from hunger, disease, or simply the cold.

But Hanusz can't let that be his problem. He has nothing against Jews, unlike some of his fellow inmates who'd happily raided the Jewish camp while the German guards stood by laughing, but this war wouldn't last forever and short of theft or murder, he would do whatever it took to survive captivity.

Besides, if the rumours were correct, the war might not last much longer. The gloating guards were bragging how the German Heer had raced through Holland, Belgium and France and annihilated the Allied forces. It had taken them a mere two months. And that's why they want the Polish out of the Stalag, Hanusz figures, to house the hundreds of thousands of POWs from the Western Front. English, French, Belgian – all better than the lowly Polish, all still more than “nothing”, still somewhere higher up the ladder of Aryan doctrine.

Goodbye, Stalag.

Nine months in the Stalag and they'd finally managed to establish some semblance of order and hierarchy, not to mention a thriving black market and a few hard-earned back channels to bribe the camp guards, and it was all for naught. God knows where they would be sent. Factories, mines, quarries ...?

Hello, labour camp.

Hanusz skips a step to the right to keep his balance. Someone is pushing him, gently, but hard enough to make it look convincing.

‘Na, los! Los, Mechaniker. Los, nach Ihre Baracke! Schnell!’

Frosch – that’s what the other guards call the bow-legged man with the bulging eyes and a mouth too large for his chinless round face. He’s pushing Hanusz with the rifle in his small hands, tiny hands, with disproportionately long, slender fingers which never seem to stop wiggling.

Frog indeed, whatever his real name was.

Pushing again now, though just for show, meaning no harm. Hanusz and the Frog had too good a business going. Frosch was in charge of Hanusz’s barracks. Inspections and head count twice a day. Months ago, Frosch had walked in with the interpreter. If there was a mechanic among them?

Hanusz had raised his hand, reluctantly, but hadn’t regretted it since.

First thing the Frog got him to repair was a DKW RT 125 motorcycle, not military issue, civilian. Then a gramophone. Frog brought it to the barracks, and when Hanusz was finished, everyone had stood around to listen to the music. One side of the record only, then Frog had walked out with the precious little piece of civilisation.

Payment for his work always came from Frog, and Hanusz imagined the sly little man made a nice earning on the side himself. Mostly, Frosch paid him in cigarettes, the camp’s hard currency, and since he didn’t smoke, Hanusz found himself a rich man.

Sometimes it was food, depending on what item needed repair and who the owner was, though he rarely met the latter. Their little set-up had even gotten him out of the camp a few times – fixing a state-of-the-art washing machine, far too conspicuous to sneak into the camp, earning him a small pack of real coffee, not the ersatz; then a tractor, even harder to conceal, and a bag of apples in return. And both times the excuse to get him past the gates and barbed wire had been the same: rubble-chore, fetching broken bricks and stones to fill the muddy ruts created by camp traffic at the gates.

But there was one repair he'd refused, when Frog walked into the barracks with a radio transmitter. He'd raised his hands, shaken his head, no-can-do, wouldn't touch it, the memory of his regiment's radio-man's summary execution still vivid in his mind.

But now – shove – all that was coming to an end – shove – and Frog is playing his part as the angry guard.

Hanusz nods and mumbles 'Ja, ja,' at the ugly little man and turns for the barracks. Striding across the exercise yard, his boots tied behind his neck and bouncing on his chest, saving them from wear and tear whenever walking barefoot was an option, Hanusz hears the laboured breathing of Bielec, the praying cobbler-soldier, trying to catch up.

Bielec ought to stop smoking.

Hanusz doesn't stop for the cobbler and continues in his stride, holding down his boots to stop them from bouncing about and he can feel the thick, new leather soles.

Come to think of it, Bielec shouldn't stop smoking.

As long as he smoked, Hanusz had what it took to barter with the cobbler.

New soles, one pack of cigarettes.

'Can they do that? Can they?' Bielec wheezes behind him. 'They can't do that, right, Hanusz? They can't, there's the Geneva Convention.'

'They just did.'

'A farm, a farm would be alright,' Bielec rattles on nervously. 'But a mine? A factory? That would have us working for their war-effort. They can't do that, they can't. The Geneva \_'

'Shut up, Bielec. You heard the man. We're nothing.'

Bielec talks too much, and prays too much.

Now was not the time for talk.

And prayer?

If only he could find the words.

## **Belching beetles**

I'm standing at the gate and there's a noise I don't know coming up the road on my strong-arm side.

That's not the side dad will be coming from.

It's a new noise and I rock a little back and forth.

There have been many new noises the past ten sleeps like faraway thunder but then without rain or flashing light coming from the sky but with flashing light coming from the ground and then orange glows and dark smoke.

Grandpa says that's bombing and that's the real war going on. So thunder without rain is real war going on and it's different from the funny war where you don't fight.

But now they're fighting.

I know about fights.

We have them at school sometimes in the courtyard and then the teacher steps in and separates the fighting boys and then they all start saying it was him started it no it was him and the teacher says he doesn't care and punishes all the ones fighting and that stops it till the next fight.

But now it's not the kids fighting. It's the big people.

I hope the big people have a good teacher to stop the fighting.

The noise gets closer and now I see them crawling along like those shiny black and green beetles in the forest but then enormous and the first one is throwing up a huge cloud of dust out of which the others crawl and they make even more dust. The forest beetles they don't make clouds of dust even if it's been real hot and dry like now because I guess they're too small.



It's been so hot and dry colours are starting to change though it's not yet time and it worries me.

It worries me.

They worry me.

Beetles.

Beetles.

Beetles.

Big black beetles and they make an awful lot of noise like belching and grunting but not like people or forest beetles.

Forest beetles don't make noise at all.

The belching and squeaking beetles are very close now and I rock a little harder because of the new loud noise the way I rocked hard when all the big black birds started appearing in the sky all the time. I never see them flap their wings so they must never get tired. Their noise is also very different from other birds and when they swoop down they let out a long angry screech and then there's the thunder without rain or bombing like grandpa calls it.

So the birds that never get tired must also be war.

War birds.

Grandpa says they go to bomb the big road that leads to the big city and to bomb the big city itself. That road is at least two times wider than the road that separates our house from the big-house with the park and the ever-greens and there must be things to peck on the road for the big birds to swoop down on it like that. Things I've not noticed before. But I don't often go to the big road which is on the other side of the forest and now grandpa surely won't let me with all the big birds around.

So first there were the big birds and now the biggest beetles ever. There are three of them and I watch them turn in at the gates to the park of the big-house. It's called a park because

it's so much larger than our garden and the big-house across the road is called a manor because it's so much larger than our house.

When the last of the big beetles has turned into the park I run after them. They aren't difficult to follow. First there is the dust. That will slowly settle. Then there is the stench they leave behind. That will slowly drift away. Then there are the deep tracks they made crawling across the grass of the big-house park. Those tracks won't disappear any time soon. The cuts in the grass are wide and deep enough for me to lay down in and that's not right and the colours on the ground now aren't right because there is brown where there should be green and the smells aren't right because it smells of fresh ploughed earth instead of spicy grass and I think of going back home.

But I want to see the monster beetles so I decide to rock back and forth later about the change of colours and smell.

I walk across the lawn.

There is no need to hurry.

I can see the beetles sitting in front of the manor house. They have stopped crawling and are basking in the sun making a steady purring noise like huge cats. I get closer and one of them turns its head pointing a huge feeler or tongue or nose towards the big-house. The big bugs take no notice of me just like the beetles in the forest never take notice of me unless I poke them.

There's more noise coming from behind me. I think more bugs and I turn and look and it's just some large trucks coming up the driveway. When it's almost upon the first of the huge beetles the first truck swerves and cuts straight across the grass to the other side where the driveway loops back to the road. It drives right past me and I can see the face of a man inside who turns to look at me and I look away.

The truck also leaves tracks in the grass like the beetles though not so wide and deep but

it still isn't right and I turn a little left and a little right and I have to do my best not to start rocking back and forth because I'm upset and I know grandpa will be upset because he is the gardener and he looks after the grass and the trees and the flowers in the park.

All of the trucks come to a stop now and dozens of men come out of the backs. That isn't right either. You put crates of apples or bales of straw or logs into the back of trucks not loads of men. I watch and the men all look the same. I like that. They all wear the same grey clothes and black boots except for a few who have large caps on their heads instead of round buckets. These have stepped out of a smaller automobile I hadn't seen before. It had been hidden between the large trucks.

There is a lot of shouting now. I don't like shouting. I never shout. And then things go quieter as they shut off all the engines. Even the beetles now stop making noise and then some men who are all in black come out of the beetles' round heads so they can't be giant beetles and they must be some kind of truck I have never seen before.

One of the men with a large cap instead of a bucket comes towards me and kneels down and looks at me. He smells. Of all sorts of things. Sweat. Dust. Boot polish and the kind of stuff dad and grandpa put on their cheeks on Sundays after they scrape off the hair with foam and a very sharp blade.

The grey-man with the cap speaks and I look away. It's not that I don't understand because he speaks like dad and grandpa and everybody else I know whereas all the grey-men from the trucks don't use any words I know and it's just noise.

But I understand what cap-man says.

I just don't speak.

It hurts when I speak like there are huge bells in my head ringing.

So I don't speak.

I don't like the pain.

People don't understand about the bells.

Cap-man keeps asking about the big-house if I live there where its people are where my parents are. Things like that. I look at the trucks. The beetles that aren't beetles. My dirty shoes. The ugly tracks in the grass that upset me and I turn a little left and a little right.

Cap-man takes off his cap and scratches his head and folds his face into wrinkles and goes away.

I think of fetching grandpa but then I remember grandpa has taken the bicycle with the big basket at the front to fetch milk and butter from the farm at the other side of the village but no eggs. We don't need eggs. We have our own chickens. Dad and grandpa like eggs. I don't eat eggs. I've seen where eggs come from. And I've seen chicks come out of them. And now there's the big birds that don't make eggs but bombs.

So I sit and watch as some of the grey-men go into the big-house although there isn't anybody there. The people from the big-house have an automobile and they mobilised seven sleeps ago. They have gone to the big road. Grandpa says they have taken the big road to the capital which is the biggest town of all. The dad of the manor house often goes to the capital because he works there and grandpa says he works with money.

I know what money is.

Grandpa gets some money every week from the big-house-dad for working in the park and then grandpa gives some of that money to other people and they give him things in return. Dad also gets money but not for working in the park. Dad works wood into useful things like chairs and cupboards and tables.

Dad also makes my toys with wood but I don't have to give him money.

But I don't understand how you can work money. You can work the park the trees the shrubs the land ... but money?

Anyhow. The big-house-dad works money in the capital and when he's there he lives in a

smaller house called a flat which is part of a very tall and very very large house larger even than the manor house where many people live and that's where the big-house-dad and the big-house-mom and the big-house-girl have gone but in the capital they become small-house or flat-house-people.

I wouldn't want to live in that kind of big-house-with-flats with too many people.

It's a long time before grandpa comes back and the big beetles that weren't beetles and the black-men that lived in them have now left and so have the trucks and their grey-men except for one truck and the small automobile and the grey-men and the big-cap-man who've gone into the big-house. So it's a long time and things have changed but not long enough for any colours to have changed because of the sun going higher or lower or disappearing altogether. Only the dark patches that leak from the house and the trees have moved a bit.

There's also a dark patch that leaks from my feet flat onto the ground like a drawing only there's no colour and it doesn't show my shirt buttons and sleeves like when I draw myself.

Dad says it's my shadow and I shouldn't be afraid of my shadow.

I'm not afraid.

Grandpa's voice is behind me now calling me Rémy-Rémy-Rémy. That's my name but it doesn't mean anything. It's never me. Sometimes I am boy-by-the-door, or boy-in-the-stables, or boy-in-the-tree. If they call me that, I know they mean me. But never when they say Rémy.

It doesn't mean anything.

Now grandpa is next to me and says son are you alright and that is about me because only dad and grandpa call me son.

I look at the tracks in the lawn expecting grandpa to see them and be upset and change faces. Grandpa doesn't look at the tracks and still his face goes through a lot of changes. He talks to me and some of it sounds like when our dog-Betsy growls at her pups and takes them

by the scruff of the neck to say she doesn't like what they're doing but all sort of gently.

I like dog-Betsy and the pups.

I understand them.

Their faces don't change all the time like people's faces. Dog-Betsy and the pups are much easier to understand.

Sometimes when dad is dog-Betsy-angry I will whine like the pups.

After changing faces a lot grandpa says stay here son and I stay and he goes to talk to talk to the big-cap-man who talked to me before. Grandpa also wears a cap but not as large and stiff as the big-cap one. His cap is soft and he takes it off when he talks and when he talks he looks straight at cap-man who didn't take off his cap.

I wish I could do that. Look at faces. But it's too confusing.

Grandpa is pointing a lot at the big-house and his body looks very busy. Cap-man stands very still with his hands behind his back. Only his head swivels from time to time. Then grandpa puts his cap back on and comes to me and says let's go home. Grandpa's face isn't going into shapes much anymore but it has gone very white and that I understand. Changing colours. We turn to go and grandpa says a very nasty word and then he doesn't talk anymore at all while we walk. His lips and jaw have gone too tight. That's what people do when they won't talk.

I never tighten my lips or jaw.

I just don't talk because the bells would ring inside and hurt my head.

## Crayons

It's been eighteen sleeps since the grey-men arrived at the big-house across the road and I've learnt a lot even though there hasn't been any school for over thirty sleeps.

School isn't always necessary to learn a lot and there hasn't been any school because there isn't a teacher anymore. The schoolmaster left when the big birds came and thunder without rain started. The schoolmaster did what many many others did and went to the big road and then he went where some of the birds go when the colours here have gone from the trees and it gets cold. Grandpa calls it south and that's where our teacher went although the birds aren't going there yet because the colours still have to change and the leaves still have to drop and it isn't cold at all yet.

The schoolmaster is not a bird so he went anyway.

But the farmers haven't gone because farmers live and work according to the colours.

When I grow up I want to be a farmer.

Grandpa says the schoolmaster isn't coming back. He's staying with his family in the south because that is now the free zone and we're in the occupied zone. That's one thing I learnt but it can't be right. If they are free then we must be un-free and not occupied.

People don't say things clearly.

They don't use the right words.

Also no one has stopped me from doing the things I do like watching the ever-greens wave at me and not show pain or watching the sun stay in the sky a little longer every day until it changes around and she goes away faster every day and the colours change.

I don't feel un-free.

I miss the schoolmaster. Not so much the school.

The school is in a house on the other side of the village and it has one big room where all the children sit except the ones that have seen more changes of colour than I have. Once you have seen forty-eight changes of colour you have to go to school in the big-town or work in the fields. I will work in the fields. It's one of three things I'm good at. The teacher told me so and that's why I miss him. He was nice to me. He wouldn't try to make me speak and he said I had three gifts.

A gift for growing things.

A gift for numbers.

A gift for drawing.

That's three.

I don't know who gave me these gifts.

I don't remember receiving the gifts and unwrapping them.

Maybe my mother gave them to me and I forgot but I can't ask her.

I grow things. Flowers and vegetables in the practice garden behind the school and the garden at home. Grandpa won't let me grow things yet in the big-house park. That's his responsibility and he gets money for it. But he does let me help when there's no school so I've been helping a lot instead of going to school.

I like numbers. I do very big numbers. Numbers are not a problem. They are perfect and they fit and they never change. I do them on paper and the schoolmaster is always happy with my numbers especially the big ones.

I also draw on paper everything I see and like and which is special because once I have put it on paper it won't change anymore and I have caught it and it's mine. I have a black pencil and a rubber eraser I never use and a brown box with twelve colour crayons and a metal crayon holder. On the front of the box there's a piece of paper glued to it with words which I don't read and the face of a man inside the loop of a yellow hunting horn. The man's



face is black with thick red lips and he has metal rings in his ears like a woman.

I don't understand what the face has to do with colours.

On the back of the box there's another sticker with numbers and words next to them. The numbers I can read and they go from one to forty-eight. That's exactly the number of changes of colour I have lived and there must be forty-eight colour crayons you can get.

I wish I had a box with all forty-eight.

My drawings would be much better.

When I draw the box must be at the top of the table and open. It slides open like a drawer and inside I have the twelve crayons all lined up from white to black. They must be like that and I'm always careful to put them back that way otherwise I get my colours on the paper wrong. My black pencil which I use first must be right next to the box when I don't use it anymore together with the rubber eraser I never use.

I have drawn the monster beetles. From the side and the front and the back including their letters and numbers and the black and white crosses on their sides and back. The crosses remind me of the spiders we have in the garden. They have crosses on their backs too. But the monster beetles aren't insects because I saw people come out. I learnt from grandpa that they are called tanks. They are like automobiles and trucks but without any windows and entirely protected and almost impossible to destroy.

When you step outside our garden and turn down the road on the side of your strong arm you go to the forest but if you turn to the side of your weak arm you go down the hill to the village and then you will see there's a place up on another hill above the fields where there are also a lot of crosses like the ones on the tanks. Some of those crosses are wood and some are stone.

The place on that hill is called the semi-terry.

The tanks have crosses and people come out of the tanks and the church in the village has

crosses and people go in and out all the time. And then the semi-terry has crosses and sometimes people go in in boxes but they never come out.

They stay underneath the crosses.

I don't understand what makes the semi-terry crosses different.

Dad told me it's because people are dead.

Mama has a cross there.

I don't like the semi-terry.

Sometimes dad will go there with flowers from the garden and take me along but I never go in. I stay outside the gate and wait. Dad knows not to try and take me inside because I will howl and scamper like the dog-Betsy pups when they're scared.

Drawing the monster beetles was fun and I have also drawn the grey-men. They have funny patches on their clothes and caps and some have glinting medals and necklaces. Two of the grey-men with the big caps wear a cross around their neck. I make sure I don't forget any of these in my drawings. When I draw a grey-man I also add at the bottom of the page how many of them look exactly like that. The more patches on their sleeves and medals and necklaces they wear the fewer of them there are. So some of my drawings say twenty and others only one or two.

There are twenty grey-men in our school now because our teacher is gone and the children don't go there anymore. I don't know if they have a good teacher and I don't know if they fight in the schoolyard. What I do know is that they don't go home after school but stay and sleep there.

They must be learning a lot.

The five grey-men with the big caps that sleep in the big-house across the road must already know a lot because they don't often go to the school.

I suppose I am now un-free to go to my school so kids in the free zone must be free to go

to school.

But I'm not un-free to learn.

You can go to school and not learn.

Free and un-free are now starting to confuse me and I don't like that.

I've learnt a lot about the grey-men and war mostly from grandpa but also from the other men that come visit and drink grandpa's coffee and the fire-drink he makes from apples. It's called calvados but I call it fire-drink because I tried it once and it burnt my throat and stomach.

Here's what I learnt about the grey-men.

There are seven things and that's a lot to learn but I learn quickly.

One. They are soldiers which means their work is to fight. Kids at school also fight but they're not soldiers. That's because it's not their job and kids fight without being told to. Soldiers only fight when they are told to do so. And kids fight for themselves and soldiers fight for their country.

Two. The soldiers are German and they come from a country called Germany and I remember that's the big yellow patch next to the big pink patch which is our country on the schoolmaster's map.

Three. Because they are soldiers from another country and they fight against the soldiers of our country they are also called the enemy and grandpa says they have been the enemy before and that was the great war and I already know about that because of grandpa's bad leg and what the schoolmaster told us before he went south.

Four. When the men come and drink coffee with grandpa they use several names for the enemy-grey-men and that's very confusing because the names don't mean anything. They are Fritz and Boche and Chleuh.

See what I mean?

One of the coffee-men told me never to call the enemy-grey-men by any of these names. They do not like it. They react to it but not in a nice way.

I will use the name Boche because it sounds like the grey-men's boots when they march. Boche – boche – boche – boche. They do it all the time. In the schoolyard. On the village roads. All in neat rows raising one foot all at the same time and then the next. I like that much better than the schoolkids running everywhere and nowhere yelling and laughing in the schoolyard during break which is a mess. The grey-men are not a mess. But I'll be careful not to call them Boches.

Five. Many soldiers together make an army and our soldiers-army lost the fight with the enemy-grey-men-army and now there's an army-steese. Steese must mean you don't fight anymore but grandpa says it's humiliating and I don't know what that is and he says it's not the end of the war. He says there is still thunder without rain which he calls bombing because men elsewhere are still fighting.

Six. The grey-men and their creepy-crawly beetles and screeching birds have destroyed most of the big-town which is almost half-a-change-of-sun-walk away from our house and there were many people dead and also children.

The big-town semi-terry will be getting a lot of new wooden and stone crosses.

Seven. The grey-men have now decided to stay and eat our food and use our roads and live in our houses because they have won. They also tell us when we are allowed and not allowed to use our own roads and how much we are allowed to eat of our own food so grandpa has built more cages behind the house so we can have more rabbits and chickens and he's dug up all of the grass in our small garden so we can plant and grow more and I'm helping grandpa because it's one of the things I'm good at.

There's one more thing I learnt but I'm not putting it with the things I learnt about the grey-men because it was confusing and I don't know if it was about learning.

Two sleeps ago some of the Boches from the school brought four men to the big-house park and I knew they were soldiers because they all wore the same clothes called a uniform and it wasn't at all like the Boches uniforms but very much like the uniform dad wore when he went mobile. So these four men must've been soldiers from our army that had lost the fight. But I was also very surprised because two of the soldiers had a black face like the face on my box of crayons and that got me excited because they might have boxes with the thirty-six other colour crayons.

So I slipped out of the garden and crossed the road into the big-house park through a hole in the hedge I've seen dog-Betsy use. Then I sat in a bush from where you can see the front of the big-house and I watched and waited.

One of the big-cap Boches came out of the house and spoke to the two white-face soldiers except their faces were dirty and they hadn't scraped the hair off their cheeks in a while. The big-cap Boche didn't speak at all with the black-face-men. After big-cap finished using words the two white-face soldiers were taken away by another Boche. Then big-cap gave words to the other Boches and they pushed the two men who had their picture on my crayon box to their knees.

Then big-cap shot them in the head like I saw the animal-doctor do this winter at one of the farms with a horse that had a broken leg.

But the black-face-soldiers didn't have broken legs so I don't understand.

I watched a little longer from the bush wondering if the black-face-men had the same surprised look on their faces as the horse after it was shot. Then I went home the way I came through the dog-Betsy hole in the hedge.

In the afternoon the men from the village came to have more of grandpa's coffee and calvados and most of their words were for the black-face-men they called sinnygalese and their faces were very busy going from surprise to anger and back. They also used other new

words I don't know like geneaver convention and illeagel but I did understand crime and murder and army-steese and that the men were all very upset despite the coffee and calvados.

I have drawn the sinnygalese standing next to the big-cap Boche and his animal-doctor pistol and then also lying down in a puddle of their blood and big-cap who I'm sure is not an animal-doctor pointing his pistol.

I've put the drawings with my drawing of the dead horse with the surprised look.

I guess I will have to continue with just twelve colour crayons now.

But twelve is enough to also make a drawing of dad in his uniform.

Grandpa says he will be home soon because of the army-steese so I need to make sure I stand at the garden gate every day.