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Number: 071213004T

András Petöcz

STRANGERS

Thirty minutes before the war

(novel)

translated by
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First published in Hungarian as ***Petöcz András: Idegenek*** by Palatinus Publishing House, Budapest, in 2007

A Borbala Madrelle,
en souvenir de ses huit ans.

Peut-être à cause des ombres sur son visage,
il avait l'air de rire.
(Camus)

A glass of water.

He puts it down on a stone beside some yellow flower. A chrysanthemum perhaps.

It could be a chrysanthemum. I don't know.

I am not familiar with flowers. I know violets and snowdrops. And I know chrysanthemums are yellow. That's why I think this must be a chrysanthemum. Not that it matters. White flowers, yellow flowers, mauve flowers. One is much like another. Some are small, some large. That's the only difference.

He puts the glass of water down on the stone. Then he starts putting things in order.

He does some weeding.

The sun is shining. It's hot.

Summer, the end of August.

'If they wake up at night, they are always thirsty. I have to have something ready for them,' he explains. 'A little water or fruit juice, something like that. They particularly like orange juice. They are always glad of that. They wake up, crawl out from under the earth and look for their drinks. So it's a good thing if there is something there. They don't eat. It's just that they are always thirsty. They are forever thirsty. That's how they are. Perhaps it's their memories that make them so thirsty. I don't know. Who can say? No one can say. In any case, you have to be careful

with them. Be careful if you happen to be passing this way and want to help. I mean it. It would be as well for you to be aware of this. If we don't do what they ask, they can get very angry. Otherwise, *otherwise* they don't give me any trouble. They get along all right.'

He fiddles with an obstinate clump of grass. He pulls at it and digs at its roots with his fingernails.

He is indignant.

'It's all in vain. I have to clean up around them over and over again. It can get very boring, believe me. Everything is always so untidy. You have to watch the cracks between the stones and concrete slabs. The weeds take root very quickly, don't they?'

I nod in agreement.

Then I help him pull up a clump of grass.

'The most important thing is order. Everything must be tidy. That's what they like. If everything is tidy, they leave you alone. But if things are untidy they won't let you sleep. They come in at night and wake me up, talk to me. They have their fun with me. They can do that because they know what I'm like. They know exactly what my weak points are, how they can get me going. It's easy for them. They talk to me as they used to long ago. Once, long ago, at school. When we were together every day. But they only talk like that, they only annoy me, if things get untidy or if there's nothing for them to drink. If something is bothering them. That's why I do it. So I can finally get some peace. For my own peace of mind. That's why. Besides, someone has to do this job. Don't they?'

I listen to him talking.

Like the majority of people in this town, he speaks the official language of the state not the local language. Perfectly, without an accent. There is not one wrong note,

not one wrong emphasis.

Like my mother. Exactly like my mother. He speaks like my mother.

With the same precision.

I suddenly feel uncertain. I wonder if I sound like someone who doesn't belong here?

Can anyone ever tell?

This is what my mother was always most careful about. No one should be able to tell.

She always said:

'The wrong use of a word, a wrong emphasis and that's the end of you. We have to disappear in the crowd. That's the most important thing.'

But that was a long time ago. When my mother said that to me.

About fifteen years ago.

It is August now.

I look at the glass of water. I am thirsty.

I listen to him as he carries on explaining in the official language of the state, without an accent.

We go on working like this for about two hours. Together. As if we had always done so. We clear the weeds, set out drinks in glasses.

We don't talk. He talks. He doesn't even mind if I am listening or not.

He works sitting or lying on the ground. When he finishes working round one of the stone slabs, he looks for something to hang on to, clambers to his feet, grabs his crutch under his arm and carries on.

He is quite sprightly. Still in good shape.

I don't know if he recognized me.

My long, flowery skirt is splattered with mud, at which point I am suddenly bored with gardening. I don't

want to say goodbye to him. I don't feel like it.

I am not in the mood for goodbyes.

I simply set off. Out of the cemetery. It's a good half hour's walk from here to the town centre.

This really is a small town. People go to bed early.

They go to bed with the cattle, as they say.

I must hurry. I'm afraid darkness will fall.

1.

Lying is something my mother taught me.

We are packing.

We put the clothes, the bedclothes, the duvet, the blankets into trunks and suitcases. We fill one bag with pots and pans and cutlery.

We are moving.

We never stay in one place for more than six months.

This is how my mother ensures my safety.

Even while we pack, she keeps explaining:

'It's not enough to lie and be conscious of it,' she says. 'You have to know how to lie instinctively. Instantly. Believably. That's the only way to stay alive.'

I have a little backpack. I am taking my doll and *Bongo* the dog in it. They are moving with me too. They belong to me. I look after them.

My mother pulls the trunk, the suitcase, the bags and the carrier bags towards the railway station on a handcart. There are masses of people in the streets around the station. Men, women and children.

And dogs.

The dogs are dangerous. Some are far too hungry by now.

People are trying to get to the station, some without luggage, others weighed down with trunks and bags. Some have little handcarts like ours.

My mother says we have to go through the crowd so we can get to the station. She warns me I must hang on to

the cart so I don’t get swept away by the crowd.

Just before we set out, my mother said:

‘If we get separated we might never ever see each other again. Try to understand that. We have to leave here, so we are going, whatever it takes. I’m taking you to a place where you will be safe for a while. Perhaps even for years if we are lucky. But if I am to take you, we must get out to the station. There will be a lot of people. Don’t ever let me out of your sight.’

I hate crowds. People elbow their way, we can hardly move forward.

Everyone is jumpy.

My mother is also irritably trying to find a way through for herself and the cart and shouts at everyone who doesn’t get out of the way immediately.

You can hear music coming out of the station loudspeakers from a long way away.

Suddenly the music stops, there is an announcement in the official, state language.

I still don’t understand the official language perfectly, I am only fluent in the local language. My mother has been very angry with me for some time because of this. She is nervous. She says I should study the official language every day. She also says that I am still a child, I can learn languages easily, there is still a good chance I can learn the state language perfectly.

That’s what she says.

Now my mother stops and listens anxiously to the loudspeaker. Then she puts even more energy into pulling the cart. She shouts at an old woman walking in front of her to step aside.

As she pushes her way through, tugging at the cart, she keeps talking.

She goes on dinning things into me without stopping:

‘You answer if someone asks a question, but you never tell the truth. Is that clear? If a soldier asks you something, pretend to be stupid or make something up that isn’t true. Do you understand?’

I ask:

‘Why?’

‘Just because. It doesn’t matter. You don’t say your father is dead. That’s the most important thing. You say he’s alive. You don’t say who we are, you say we are tourists, we are travelling. We are on an excursion. Say anything. Talk nonsense. Say we are peasants, your mother too, and your father grows vegetables. After all that’s what we live on, isn’t it, taking vegetables to market? Say we are refugees, from across the border, we’ve come a long way. Just never tell anyone the truth, do you hear? Never!’

It’s not easy to get to the station. My mother said everything will be all right once we get to the station, there won’t be many people on the train.

She also said that we might have to spend a whole day on the train.

We are going a long way.

My mother knows where.

Waiting for us somewhere is a room or a flat or something my mother has organized for us and reserved in advance.

Or she has at least arranged for someone to take us in.

She has made these arrangements, as she usually does, on the telephone.

I know, because she has been doing it for years. And she is always very good at it.

At last we get to the station, there are armed guards

at the entrance. In front of the armed guards, a barrier of iron bars.

The guards look at people's papers and send almost everyone away. Only a few can get into the station.

My mother pulls the cart right up to the iron bars, then shouts to one of the guards:

'Pavel! Paolo! Here we are!'

The soldier sees us, goes over to another soldier, whispers something to him. The other soldier listens, then appears to be asking him something.

They laugh out loud.

The soldier my mother called Pavel or Paolo steps up to the iron bars, shouts at the people standing there and opens the barrier.

My mother calls to me in a fluster. I don't understand what she is saying because of the terrible din. Everyone around us is jabbering.

My mother pulls the cart through the barrier. I follow obediently.

Paolo goes up to my mother, whispers in her ear, then slaps her on the behind.

He laughs.

We are inside the station. The guards take no notice of us anymore.

The station is almost completely empty. There is only one train standing on one of the tracks. My mother pulls the cart to the platform beside the track, stops at a carriage door and says this is the train we are taking.

She says the train will leave in about half an hour.

I climb up to reserve two seats.

Nearly all the compartments are full.

I find two empty seats. I lean out, beckoning to my mother to bring the cart over.

My mother drags the parcels up one by one, the trunk, the suitcase and the rest.

She leaves the cart on the platform. Someone will come for it.

She says to me:

‘Stay here, I am going to buy something to eat and drink. Look after everything. If anyone dares touch anything, yell as loud as you can.’

I know what to do. It’s not the first time I have had to look after luggage.

I stare out of the window waiting for my mother.

I’m a little anxious for her to come back. I’m afraid she will forget me one day and I will be left on my own.

I think about how my mother will certainly leave me alone one day.

There are three people in the compartment besides myself. A man in a suit and tie reading a newspaper, a young woman in a miniskirt gazing at a postcard and a boy with glasses, a schoolboy perhaps, in jeans and a tee-shirt, who is asleep.

A fat woman opens the door to the compartment. She is wearing a flowery dress.

She is sweating.

She says to me:

‘Hello, little girl. There’s a free seat in here, isn’t there?’

She doesn’t wait for an answer, but comes in and sits down.

She is out of breath. Panting.

‘It’s terribly hot,’ she says, just like that, to herself.

Her hair is dyed red and set in waves. Her face is red

too, from the heat. Her dress is cut low in front, you can see her breasts, large and wrinkly.

I turn away, waiting for my mother. I look out of the window.

The man in the suit reads his paper, his face expressionless. The woman in a miniskirt doesn't look at the fat woman either, she keeps staring at her postcard as if she were deaf.

The boy is asleep.

The fat woman goes on talking to me:

'Are you travelling alone, little girl? Don't you have any parents? Where's your mummy?'

I suddenly feel sad, I feel like crying.

I'm afraid my mother won't come.

The fat woman goes on talking:

'Oh, dear, little girls can't travel alone on trains, it's against the rules. Tell me, little one, do you go to school? Didn't they teach you to answer politely? I will tell the conductor or the police to do something with you, it's not right that such a young girl should be here alone on the train, it shouldn't be allowed. Maybe you are an orphan and you've run away from the orphanage? How did you manage to get into the station? Did the soldiers let you in? Or did you sneak in? Well? And this luggage? Is it all yours?'

I look at the woman. I don't know what could have been in that look, but she stops talking. I get up and go over to the largest of my mother's bags.

This bag contains the kitchen equipment, the saucepans, cooking pots, cutlery.

Inside is my mother's meat cleaver, used to cut up the raw meat when there was a pig killing.

The meat cleaver is heavy, I try to lift it with both hands. I can hardly manage. You have to be careful with it,

it’s sharp.

I use both hands to lift it out of my mother’s bag. I turn towards the fat woman.

I take two steps forward.

Then I accidentally drop the cleaver. It comes down with a bang, blade first.

It slams into the synthetic floor at the fat woman’s feet.

The woman screams hysterically. The man in the suit stares me in the face, the woman in a miniskirt jumps up from her seat, terrified.

The boy is still asleep.

Suddenly the door to the compartment opens.

It’s my mother.

I began by saying that it was my mother who taught me to lie. But I must tell you that this story is not about lying. My mother taught me to lie so that I could stay alive. That’s all. In itself, this is not very interesting.

I don’t know why I had to stay alive. Everything would be much simpler if I had ended up like Amélie. Then I wouldn’t have to tell this story now.

Just as I don’t know if I stayed alive because I really do know how to lie.

And I don’t know whether I lied at all. Obviously I lied. Everyone lies. Adults do it too. With their words, their gestures, their behaviour. Any way they can. Because everyone always wants to survive. Survive something. I wish I knew why.

The way I remember it, when Amélie died she didn’t suffer at all. We suffered. We who saw her death.

Hers and all the others’.

Anyway my mother was very good at lying. The way she lied was so genuine, so honest, it was as if every single word was the gospel truth.

When she told her lies, over and over, her eyes always sparkled. You could see she enjoyed a chance to lie.

That she considered it something very clever.

Of all the people I have known up to now, she really was the best at doing it.

At lying, I mean.

But this story is not about lying. I just wrote down this lying thing here.

Because it was so typical of my mother.

Besides, I never knew my father. I never even knew his name.

I never asked my mother to tell me my father's name.

And now I never will.

We wandered around until I was eight years old.

I was eight years old when, after a train journey that took a whole day, we arrived in the little town which I still consider my real home today.

We were lucky.

The parish-priest took us in. He needed a housekeeper.

My mother took the job.

The priest didn't ask where we were from.

He didn't ask for our papers either.

'You will have to register at the soviet in any case,' he said. 'Besides, everything is supervised by the 3rd army corps temporarily stationed here. Talk to them.'

I didn’t understand any of what he said.

But my mother just shrugged her shoulders and didn’t get alarmed:

‘I will deal with it.’

The priest nodded.

We are going to visit the soldiers. The barracks is right next door to the school.

My mother is selling potatoes, carrots, tomatoes, celery, parsley.

She takes them from the rectory garden.

She is a beautiful young woman, my mother.

She says:

‘You will look bravely into the soldiers’ eyes and you will not be afraid of them. Do you understand? I am going in to see the commander, you stay in the guardroom.’

I ask:

‘Why?’

‘Because. It doesn’t matter. You will stay there and that’s that. Wait for me. I will hurry. You can play or something. Don’t ask unnecessary questions.’

The barracks is right next door to the school.

We carry the vegetables, we go into the barracks. My mother strokes my hair and smiles:

‘Don’t be afraid, they won’t hurt you.’

I am afraid.

My mother waves to the guard. The guard opens the gate.

We go in. We cross the whole of the barracks yard. We don’t see anyone.

Low buildings in a circle round the yard. I notice people standing at one of the windows.

They are watching us.

My mother seems to know the way. She walks confidently towards one of the low buildings. A soldier with a machine gun stands at the entrance.

There is a sign on the building, I can't read it.

I already know how to read, but these letters are not familiar to me.

Up to now, my mother has been teaching me to read.

I couldn't go to school when we were travelling around. My mother didn't want me to.

My mother said everything would be different now. I would be able to go to school.

We stop in front of the building.

My mother says:

'You understand, don't you? I am going in to see the commander and you are going to wait for me in the guardroom. You will behave sensibly, you won't be afraid, there won't be any trouble. Do you hear?'

I nod.

There are three soldiers in the guardroom. They are playing cards. They are noisy and laugh a lot.

One of the soldiers sits me down on a chair, saying something in a foreign language that I don't understand.

He doesn't speak the official language of the state, but some language I have never heard.

He says something in the foreign language to the other two, they have a good laugh, one of them even slaps his thigh.

There is very tall one, he talks the most. He appears to be the commander here.

He talks and talks.

Then he turns to me:

'Littel gurl, comink hir. Siting unkel knie.'

I just look at him.

The soldier speaks the state language in broken sentences.

‘Come now, comink hir, no problem, littel gurl.’

I go over to him. He grabs my arm, lifts me by my waist and puts me on his lap.

‘Biing gud, littel gurl.’

He bends down to my ear to speak. He whispers, but I no longer understand what he is saying. He is speaking in the foreign language again, his breath unpleasant, smelly and warm.

The other two soldiers look at him.

The tall one, whose knee I am sitting on, goes on holding me round my waist. I can feel his sweaty palm and worry that it will stain my yellow summer dress.

My mother will tell me off.

I am not wearing tights, it is September and still warm. My dress rides up at the waist, it will get creased.

Fortunately, I am wearing knickers. I rarely do, my mother says they are expensive, it’s not worth it, they don’t protect you against anything anyway.

She gave me a pair to wear today, because we were coming to see the soldiers. That was the only reason. Actually, this is my only pair. Nice and white without a pattern.

They are still quite new.

Before we set out, my mother said:

‘You are going to put on your best knickers today.’

I sit on the tall soldier’s knee and I am glad that I am not completely naked.

I don’t know why, but I’m glad.

One of the soldiers at the table gets up, comes over to us and says something to the tall one.

Then he grins and smacks my bare thigh.

The whole thing feels uncomfortable, I would like to get away, I feel like I'm going to cry any minute.

The tall soldier pushes up my skirt and prods my white knickers with his finger:

'Nice!'

He fiddles with my knickers as if he wants to pull them off. I squeeze my legs together and won't let him.

I won't give him my best knickers.

I suddenly have the urge to pee.

I don't think I can hold on.

The tall soldier is holding me tight, I am struggling. I would like to go to the toilet.

All of a sudden I let go, wetting my knickers in seconds.

The tall soldier throws me roughly to the ground, swearing.

There is a stain on his trousers.

The other two stranger soldiers roar with laughter.

I run out of the door into the yard. I catch sight of my mother accompanied by a short, bald soldier.

The guard in front of the guardroom stands stiffly to attention for the bald soldier.

My mother looks at my dress. She doesn't say anything.

We are going home to the rectory.

I like walking hand in hand with my mother. The sun is shining, the street almost empty.

I was fond of this town from the first day. I was glad there were only a few people in it. There were always a great many people where we came from. And I was always

afraid I would lose my mother in the crowd.

The houses there were very, very tall. Tall houses and masses of concrete. But it was mostly the crowd. I hated that.

Everything is different here.

One or two storey houses everywhere. Most of them have a tiny front garden with tall iron railings.

And the streets are completely deserted.

We are approaching the rectory.

We walk slowly like people with nothing to do. We often stop in front of one of the houses, my mother says something about the facade, the windows or the decoration around the entrance. At times she is enthusiastic, saying one or other of the houses is very beautiful and I can tell she would be pleased if I too liked the things that appealed to her.

I am not listening to my mother.

I can't keep my mind off the tall soldier. His stinking, warm breath.

My mother stops and says:

'Can you hear?'

I can't hear anything for a moment. I can only see my mother, her tense concentration and a sort of pleasure and seriousness on her face.

Then I hear it.

Music is coming out of a window. The sound streams out, gentle and playful, some kind of very lively and agreeable music.

Now the music stops for a moment, then the same melody suddenly starts up again.

My mother whispers:

'Someone is playing the piano. Can you hear?'

The sound of the piano gets faster, we can hear some

very high notes too, then the first theme returns.

My mother goes on whispering. As if she were telling me a secret:

‘That is Für Elise, you know.’

The music stops again, then suddenly the same melody I first heard starts up again.

It is all so comforting somehow. I stand there with my mother, the sun is shining, the street deserted.

We listen to the music.

My mother says:

‘You know, I could play the piano at one time too. I even played Für Elise. When I was a child.’

Over and over again, we hear the same melody coming from the window of the two-storey house.

I can still hear it when my mother is making supper for me and the priest in the evening.

I close my eyes and I can hear the gentle, playful sounds of the piano in my head.

When it comes down to it, I don’t know if these were the words my mother used. I am not sure if this was exactly the way she put it, when she said what she said, when we first heard the pianist playing.

But it was Für Elise we heard, of that I am sure.

It may be that my mother didn’t say anything, that we just stood there, under the window, in front of some iron railings.

She must have mentioned the title of the piano piece, but perhaps that was only later.

What I am quite sure I do remember is the music and the iron railings.

And my mother.

I remember that I could tell she was happy. That back then, for a moment, she really was happy.

The short, bald soldier comes to see us regularly at the rectory.

On these occasions, I go next door to play.

I don’t like going next door. A girl with a sad face lives there. She is the same age as I am, but a foot shorter.

She is forever clutching her doll, a one-eyed porcelain doll, not letting it go for a second.

She lives with her grandmother.

I go over to the neighbour’s. It is nine o’clock on Sunday morning.

That’s how early the soldier comes to see us.

The grandmother meets me at the door:

‘What do you want?’

‘Is Amélie at home? I came over to play.’

‘Is the soldier at your place again?’

I lower my head and answer apologetically:

‘He is my father’s best friend. He brings messages from my father. Last time my father sent a message saying he would be arriving soon and would bring me a lot of money and toys. My father is a rich man, he can buy me anything I want. He has a car, a house, everything. We are going to live with him and then my mother won’t have to do any work. My father is on good terms with the soldiers.’

‘Is that stranger soldier your father’s friend?’

‘Yes. He looks after my mother and me, because my father still has work to do.’

‘What is your father’s job?’

‘He is an engineer. He builds houses. Big, tall houses. Not only houses, but hotels too. Hospitals. Everything that

is good. That is good for people.'

Amélie appears at the door.

She is clutching her doll. She looks at me, then at her doll.

She is afraid I will take it away from her.

'Come on, let's go in the garden and play,' I say to her.

The neighbours have a big garden that is good to play in. There is even a swing and a sand pit, though I don't much like playing in the sand anymore.

I want to play ball, but Amélie doesn't like to. She always loses.

'Come down to the cellar,' she says.

The neighbours have a large cellar, large and empty.

At one time they kept wine in it, but now there are hardly any barrels down there and even they are empty.

Amélie lives alone with her grandmother. Her parents died long ago.

We go down into the cellar. It is in semi-darkness, there is only one light bulb on at the entrance as we go in.

There are many different directions to go in, many paths leading who knows where.

Everything is musty. It is better not to touch the wall. It is damp and slimy.

'Are you afraid?' asks Amélie. She appears to be very brave, but she hangs on to her porcelain doll.

We can hear some kind of clattering from one of the side passages of the cellar. As though someone were walking there.

We stand fixed to the spot.

A shrill, high-pitched sound. Like a baby crying out. Clattering, scuttling.

'Those are the rats,' says Amélie. 'There are loads of

rats here, they like the place. But there are other animals too. Granny said all sorts of animals hide here, especially in winter. The cellar stretches a long way right under the hill. Once even the stranger soldiers came here to have a look around.'

'From the barracks?'

'Yes, they told Granny, I heard them, that there might be secret underground passages here. They also said that these passages might even lead beyond the hill, as far as the valley. And they said we must be careful and report to them if we notice anything strange. In fact they said they would come and blow up the passages sometime. So that the strangers or the barbarians can't come across along the underground paths. But they didn't come. Granny is very frightened of the barbarians. She says they are worse than the soldiers.'

'Who are these barbarians?'

'I don't know. I have never seen one. They go around in sort of strange long dresses. At least that's what Granny says. And Granny also says we would do well to be afraid of them.'

Amélie sets out along one of the passages in the cellar.

She walks ahead while she can still see. Then she turns back:

'We need some kind of lamp so we can go a bit further. Otherwise it's impossible.'

It is chilly. I am cold. I turn my back to Amélie and go towards the door.

I don't feel like playing in the cellar.

I keep myself amused by roaming the neighbouring

streets and exploring the territory.

I tell my mother I am going to play, but that isn't true. I just wander around because I am curious and because I feel lonely.

I go towards the barracks and the school, glancing into the gardens, running my hand along the thick bars of the iron railings.

When I reach the barracks, I turn into a very narrow little street so I can come back on the road where the pianist lives.

The streets are still empty, I haven't met anyone yet.

Once or twice a military truck happens to go past me. When a truck like that passes you, there are always clouds of dust afterwards, it's difficult to breathe.

I am walking along the pianist's street. I am barefoot because it feels good treading on the soft, warm earth with my bare feet.

I stop in front of the pianist's house and listen to the music. I have the feeling the sound is coming from me: I hum the tune of Für Elise together with the piano.

I stand in front of the two-storey house and imagine that I too can play the piano.

I have never seen a real piano. My mother showed me once. In a book. What a real piano looks like.

It was lovely and black in the book, on the photograph.

Now I imagine that I am sitting at the piano playing Für Elise in a big hall. Elegant ladies and gentlemen listen to me playing.

I imagine getting up when I have finished playing and bowing.

And everyone claps a lot.

My mother once said that clapping makes a *humming*

sound. We weren't living in this town yet at the time, but in another one.

I remember we were going past a tall house with its windows open. You could hear the sound of clapping coming out of them.

My mother said:

'How that clapping *hums!*'

We were going past the tall house, it was summer, the soles of our shoes almost stuck to the asphalt pavement. I looked at my mother then and burst out laughing.

I was laughing so much I could hardly get the question out:

'*Hums?*'

'Of course,' said my mother. 'Clapping hums. It makes a *humming* sound. Can't you hear?'

Then, at that moment, everything was very good. Even better than now.

Though it is good here too. In this town.

I stand in front of the pianist's house and think of myself laughing back then.

I'm not unhappy now either, but still everything is completely different somehow.

The piano stops playing for a moment. Silence. Then the same melody starts up again, for the umpteenth time, who knows how many.

My mother always said the soldiers would look after us. She always said it was safe for me to trust the soldiers even if they were unfriendly.

There are masses of soldiers here in this town.

For the moment, we only know soldiers. My mother likes their uniforms, she thinks they look handsome and

strong.

Yet I can see that my mother is afraid. Every night she wakes up with a start at around three in the morning. When we should be asleep.

I am always asleep then, but I know she wakes up with a start. Every morning my mother tells me how she slept and I know she is not lying. She always tells me what she does at about three in the morning.

Usually she just stares into space thinking about her fate. That's the word she uses.

Her fate.

Then she gets up, goes to see if the door is locked. Sometimes she even prays.

She always prays to the Virgin Mary. She has a little rosary and she keeps counting her beads.

She says at night it is easier for her to list the sins she has committed and what they were. She says she just mutters her sins into the darkness.

Apparently this helps.

It helps her to go back to sleep.

Apart from the soldiers, I only know the parish-priest and I know where the pianist lives. But I have never seen the pianist.

Besides them, I also know the Thin Girl. She lives opposite us.

Or rather opposite the rectory.

I call her the Thin Girl because she is very thin.

There is an adobe house right opposite the rectory.

That's where she lives.

There are black curtains at the windows of the adobe house, you can't see in. It looks uninhabited.

Not a sound to be heard.

My mother and the priest think the adobe house opposite really is uninhabited.

But I know that isn't true.

I am hot and thirsty. I am sitting on the pavement in front of the rectory gate.

I am bored.

I draw all sorts of pictures in the dust with my finger.

I am waiting for my mother who has gone to the barracks to see the bald soldier to organize our papers.

At least that's the reason my mother gave for going to the barracks.

I am not worried. I am used to having to wait.

I go on doodling in the dust and meanwhile I look up at the house opposite. That's my model.

I am trying to draw it.

I can see the black curtain moving at the window.

A face appears, a skinny face with two big eyes staring out of it.

A girl's face.

She presses her forehead to the glass. She looks at me, her mouth moves.

She is talking to me.

I look at her, but I can't tell what she is saying.

She has skinny hands. Now she points to her mouth with her thin fingers.

A woman appears behind her, looks at me for a while, then puts her hand on the girl's shoulder.

The woman appears very calm, very gentle.

The Thin Girl lowers her head and turns away.

Someone draws the black curtain at the window.

Now I can only see the house again with the black curtain at the window. Not a sound.

My mother arrives, the wind blowing her light, summer skirt.

She is in a good mood.

By the time she reaches me, I have just finished my drawing.

In front of the rectory gate in the dust, there is the adobe house opposite. The skull of a young girl with big eyes stares out of the window.

I show the drawing to my mother.

She knows I draw well. I like drawing and I draw a lot. Whenever I can, I draw. I need paper, a pencil, a pen, things like that.

It's expensive.

That's why my mother doesn't like me to draw.

My mother asks:

'What have you been drawing?'

'The girl in the house opposite. The Thin Girl. That's what I call her. She lives there in that house.' I point. 'She is always hungry. I know. Because she spoke to me.'

In the evening, my mother asks the priest:

'Who lives opposite in that adobe house?'

'Nobody,' says the priest. 'It has been empty for years.'

'But I saw them,' I interrupt. 'There was a girl and a woman with her. And the girl spoke to me. Honestly.'

'I don't know,' said the priest. 'I will look into it. Perhaps all this was just a dream, my girl.'

I no longer remember the parish priest's face. He didn't have a beard or a moustache, of that much I am sure.

His face was more oblong than round. I can’t say any more about him than that. He always wore a grey priest’s robe, perhaps once I may have seen him in trousers. I remember that, but that’s all I can remember. I don’t know what kind of man he was, whether he was brave or simply just lucky. The parish priest was our only friend in the town, that’s a fact. He took us in. So we owe him everything. That we had somewhere to live, that our papers were in order. I know we had great faith in him. My mother did and I did. We had no alternative. As to what has become of him since then, I don’t know. People say all sorts of things. They say he left just in time. I don’t know. It’s even possible that he is still alive somewhere.

The barracks is right next to the school.

Every morning when I go to school, I look at the stranger soldiers. Through the fence I can see into the barracks yard that is already familiar to me.

The tall soldier is there too, I can see he is there, but I never look at him, because I don’t want him to speak to me.

It's morning, I am going to school. There are two guards in front of the barracks, one of them the tall soldier.

He sees me approaching and says to me:

‘Gud mornink, littel gurl. Rememberink Ivan? Not biing afred. Ivan not hurtink nobudy. Me callink Ivan or Johnny, the sem, how you like.’

I stand looking at him.

‘Not hurtink nobudy Ivan. Me hafing littel gurl like you. At home. Not hir. Far avey. Very far. Vife, children. Children cryink Johnny far avey.’

And with a wave of his hand he shows how far.

He reaches into his pocket and takes out some chocolate. He holds it out to me.

I pretend I am going to take it, then I suddenly knock it out of his hand and run away.

The chocolate falls on the ground.

I run into school.

My mother and I share a room in the rectory.

The toilet is in the courtyard. We can bathe in the kitchen, my mother boils water, pours it into a tub, that's how we wash ourselves.

The bald soldier gave my mother some soap. There's no other way to get any and we don't have money for such things.

The bald soldier comes over regularly, always bringing something.

If he brings me something, I have to take it.

My mother told me to accept everything the soldier gives me.

The soldier brings a coat. It is a child's coat, I don't know who it belonged to before, but now it's mine. It is a red jacket. It is still a little too big.

The soldier smiles. He sees how well the coat suits me.

He slaps my bottom and laughs.

'Ana beautiful gurl. Coat sittink vell. Boys lookink her in school!'

He is pleased with himself. He is happy.

I notice he calls me Anna. That is something my mother arranged too.

We have new names in this new place.

The bald soldier also helped us to get our papers.

My mother said we had had everything stolen.

The bald soldier didn't ask any questions.

'The papers! Many peepel vantink real papers! Ve lookink person not paper!'

That was in the first few days. Two days after my mother first looked up the bald soldier.

That's how I started a new life, in a new place, with a new name. I was eight years old at the time.

I don't remember my previous life. Very little of it anyway.

Amélie is my classmate, we share a desk.

She wanted us to.

And she doesn't have her porcelain doll with her at school anymore. I am beginning to make friends with her.

I feel we are similar in many ways.

The first day the teacher writes everyone's name in the class register.

He asks me too:

'What's your name?'

I just look at him. I don't answer.

The teacher is patient:

'Your name is Anna, isn't it? You live at the rectory with your mother, don't you?'

I look at the teacher. He is a man of about thirty with a thin face and glasses.

He gets around skilfully on his crutch.

He only has one leg.

'You must answer if I ask you a question. You understand the question, don't you?'

I put my head down on the school desk.

I wait.

The teacher comes closer, leans on his crutch, so that both his hands are free.

He makes to stroke my hair.

At the exact same moment, I jump to my feet. As I run out I kick his crutch, he loses his balance and falls to the ground.

I look back from the door at the teacher lying on the ground:

‘Don’t ever touch me,’ I shout.

I step out of the school door.

Brilliant, midday sunlight. I enjoy it shining on my face.

Actually, I don’t know why I don’t trust anyone. My mother says I can trust the teacher and I can take anything the soldiers give me.

There is some bitterness inside me, that is true. My mother says it’s her fault. The fact that I am distrustful of people. And that this is because I don’t have a father.

Obviously if I had a father then I would be more self-confident, that’s what my mother says, and that the anxiety brings out a pointless *aggression* in me.

That’s the word my mother generally uses. She says I am abnormally *aggressive*, though I have no reason to be. It could only be that I don’t have a father and that we have had to do a lot of moving around up to now, because in the past we always had to run away from somewhere.

Actually, I don’t even know why we always had to run away. But my mother says that’s all over now, there is peace and quiet here, we have a good place to live and she has a job.

She also says that she has made friends with the

soldiers, they will always help her, the priest is kind too. In short, we will be much better off here.

Another thing my mother says is would I please not be so *aggressive*.

My mother likes this word very much.

I go over to Amélie's to play nearly every day.

We decide to explore the cellar. I take her all sorts of things that might be useful.

I find rope, an axe and a spade in the shed at the rectory. I also find a paraffin lamp, which the priest only uses if there is a power failure.

Amélie is satisfied.

We go down to the cellar and set out along one of the passages.

Chosen at random.

The paraffin lamp shows the way.

We proceed slowly, giving the rats time to flee.

Patchy, grey rats are to be seen scurrying next to the wall, they are fairly large.

We go a long way, I can't tell how far. All at once the path ends, we reach a slimy, dank heap of stones, we can't go any further.

There is a small opening under the heap of stones where the rats escape.

I am wearing a pair of trousers I got from the priest. They were his and my mother hasn't altered them yet. I have tied them at the waist with string.

Amélie hits the heap of stones with a rock. She beats it furiously. As though she were angry that we can't go on.

Hearing the noise, one of the smaller rats gets confused and afraid, perhaps that it can't go through the

opening under the stones because of us. In a panic, it runs along my foot, up my trousers and even clambers up my thigh.

I thrash my trousers hysterically, I feel the cold body of the rat on my thigh, I scream, dropping the paraffin lamp, which falls to the ground and goes out.

In the pitch-darkness we feel our way along the dank wall, we are running out as fast as we can, falling over again and again. Amélie constantly shouts my name.

I fall over. I feel rats running all over my body. Some climb on my head, one gets tangled in my hair.

It cries like a baby.

I have long, straight, red hair.

I get up, groping my way and suddenly feel Amélie is right there beside me. We cling to each other and stumble along in the dark.

We see a yellowish glow. It’s the light at the entrance.

As we come out in the sunlight, I see there are bite marks on Amélie’s face and hands.

I touch my face and feel something moist. My hand is covered in blood.

In the morning my mother wakes me with the news that a whole convoy of unknown people has arrived in town, I should hurry out into the street. I run out to the front of the rectory eagerly to have a look at the strangers.

They have come in carts covered in canvas, the women in brightly coloured dresses driving the horses. I look at the convoy. It consists of women and children.

My mother says that the children, even the 4 and 5 year olds, sit out in the main square, making music and

singing.

I ask my mother if these are the barbarians. She just looks at me, not understanding the question.

‘What barbarians?’

‘Something Amélie’s grandmother said,’ I reply, almost apologetic.

It is Sunday.

I go next door, but Amélie’s grandmother won’t let me in.

She looks at me and says:

‘Amélie is ill. She has a temperature. She can’t go out to play today.’

I lower my head. I am about to turn back at the gate when she calls after me:

‘I am locking the cellar with a padlock. You can’t go there anymore.’

She suddenly grabs my arm, gripping it, forcing me to look her in the eyes:

‘You look a sight too, you little red devil! Bite marks on your face, eh? They’ll be there for a while yet!’

I jerk my arm free.

‘It’s you who are the devil, not me!’

I run crying towards the barracks.

The barracks is right next to the school, in the street that opens off the main square.

The musicians are there in the main square.

The general store is in the main square, so is the butcher’s shop and the community centre, where Amélie told me they once used to show films.

The musicians, all of them children, sit on the ground in front of the community centre.

One of them is a boy. A little older than I am. I look at him as he plays the fiddle.

He notices me looking at him. He adds even more flourishes to his playing, his bow almost dancing over the strings on its own.

He is the leader of the band. The others accompany him. A couple of the girls start dancing in cheerful mood.

They wear colourful, flower-patterned dresses. Mauve, green, red, shawls round their shoulders.

One of the girls, tall and thin, she looks about fifteen years old, undoes her blouse as she dances. Her firm, large, brown breasts move on their own, almost independently of the girl. Her nipples must be the size of the palm of my hands.

Everyone looks at her.

The others clap to the rhythm of the music and sing. They form a circle round the girl who, intoxicated by the dancing, first throws her blouse down in the dust, then unfastens her skirt too and lets it slide to the ground.

She goes on dancing, naked as the day she was born, her body is brown, there is no hair between her legs, she is shaved completely bare not like my mother.

The lips between her legs are wide, full, rounded.

My mother says this is a girl's *front bottom*, but I know from Amélie that grown-ups around here call it a *pussy*.

Last time I was at her house and we were playing at the end of the garden, that's when Amélie told me this.

She lifted her skirt, squatted down and said:

'I am peeing with my tiny little pussy.'

Then we went on playing.

When I needed to pee, I just said:

'My tiny little pussy wants to pee.'

Now I watch this girl swaying from the hips. Her nudity compels you to look at her.

Some tiny jewel flashes between the lips of her pussy.

A silver ring has been inserted between the girl's legs, right under the uppermost meeting point of the lips. There is a sky-blue stone set in the ring.

The boy plays his fiddle with more and more energy and abandon.

Beads of sweat on his forehead.

I watch the girl, I watch the fiddler. I stare at them for a long time, feeling envious. Their yellow-brown skin glistens in the sunshine.

Then I turn my back on them and slowly set out for home.

I think of my mother. She said she would come out to the main square too to see the musicians, but she hasn't come.

I have almost reached the barracks when the fiddler boy catches up with me.

He is panting.

'We are moving on tomorrow,' he says. He speaks the official language of the state perfectly, without an accent.

'Moving on?' I ask.

'Yes. We never stay for even a week in one place. We make music, sell all sorts of things, then we pack everything on the cart and move on.'

'Where to?'

'It doesn't matter where. Another town. Somewhere else. So we are not always in the same place. Sometimes we even go across the border.'

I look at him. I don't say anything.

He asks me:

‘What did you do to your face?’

‘Rats,’ I say. ‘The rats in the cellar,’ I add by way of explanation.

He whistles in admiration.

‘Cool.’

Then he says:

‘You have beautiful hair. Beautiful red hair.’

I notice the tall soldier, Johnny or Ivan, in the barracks yard. He is watching us.

The boy suddenly puts his hand to his neck and tears off a thin leather strap. There is a tiny carved wooden elephant hanging from the end of it.

He holds it out to me:

‘I want you to have it. Please take it. Because you have beautiful hair.’

As I take the carved wooden elephant, he suddenly bends down and kisses my hand.

Then he laughs and runs back to the main square.

I watch him go. As he runs the earth turns into clouds of dust under his bare feet.

The next day Amélie doesn’t come to school. I sit alone at the desk, I look at the teacher as he holds forth.

The teacher doesn’t look at me.

There are about forty of us in the room, first, second and third years together.

Some have just turned six and some are already nine years old.

At the desk behind me is a girl who was there in the main square. She danced and sang with the wandering musicians.

She is a tall girl, she seems older than me.

She comes over to me in the break and looks at the thin leather strap round my neck.

She doesn't say anything.

Neither do I.

The girl is in the third year. Her name is Sára. When school finishes, we walk home together.

We don’t talk.

I stop at the rectory. She has to go further out, almost to the end of the town. She lives in an adobe house on the outskirts.

By way of goodbye she says:

‘I can play the fiddle too. If you want, I can teach you. But only if you want me to. We all play the fiddle. We are always very cheerful. We make music together and sing. Like that beautiful girl who danced in the square. She was happy to be able to dance. It wasn’t only her audience. I know her well. She is my cousin. Her name is Judit. She is always laughing. I envy her for that. We don’t like to be sad. Well, do you want to play the fiddle?’

‘All right,’ I say. ‘I’d like to learn to play the fiddle. I’ll come over to your house tomorrow afternoon.’

Sára smiles. She has such a beautiful smile, I would like to stroke her face.

She holds out her hand. She has big brown hands.

Her palm feels rough.

I walk over to the pianist’s street every day.

I usually go in the evening, to be precise in the late afternoon.

My mother doesn’t like me to wander around on my own in the late afternoon. She is afraid for me. She says she

doesn’t have time to come with me, so she can’t look after me. And on my own I might get into trouble.

I stop in front of the two-storey house, in front of the musician’s house, I listen to the familiar melody.

It is still warm, the window is open. The pianist is diligently practising Für Elise.

I sit down in front of the house. I doodle in the dust. Almost unconsciously I hum the melody of Für Elise.

A military truck approaches. Very slowly, not throwing up much dust.

There is a machine gun on top of the truck. Soldiers stand behind it.

The soldiers wave as they drive past me. They even shout. In a foreign language. I don’t understand what they are shouting.

Then they laugh.

Their laughter bothers me a bit.

I go to the edge of the town, to Sára’s house to play the fiddle.

She smiles happily when she sees me. The courtyard is untidy, clothes and coloured rags hang on a line.

She says:

‘Come to the shed at the back. We will have plenty of room there.’

She has a violin and a bow under her arm.

We go to the end of the garden, to the wood-shed.

Sára opens the shed door, it is spacious inside, two stools and a little table in front of a stack of wood.

‘I usually study in here and draw,’ says Sára. She smiles again, then she laughs. Her yellowish-brown face gleams.

Her eyes are black.

I learn to play the fiddle. Sára shows me how to hold the instrument, how to hold down the strings, how to use the bow.

I draw the bow across the strings, the violin squeaks.

Sára is patient.

She shows me how to hold down the strings, how the bow should be placed on the strings and how to draw it across. She shows me the various notes.

I try to play, but I don't manage very well. The violin just squeaks.

She plays too. When she plays, the sound is beautifully even and clear.

Sára laughs all the time. She holds my hand, stands close behind me and we play the fiddle together. Then we laugh again.

I don't think she is much older than me, but she is taller and stronger. Through her dress, I can feel she has breasts.

A tall, fat woman comes into the shed. Her dress is undone, her left breast bare. She is holding a baby wrapped in yellow and mauve shawls.

She is breast-feeding.

She says:

'Sára, the dog has been missing for three days. Could you look for her. It wandered off in the woods and doesn't even come home to eat. Perhaps it is stuck in the wooden house.'

Sára and I set out for the woods. She knows the way to a little clearing. That's where the wooden house is.

On the way, she tells me:

'That was my mother, you know. My little brother was born just two months ago. I helped at the birth too,

they needed some help, though my mother is very good. She could have managed on her own. I will be like that one day.'

She goes over to the wooden house.

'This where I come with Bagira. That's my dog's name. Look at that, the door is stuck. It often happens. We leave it open, the dogs and animals go in and out, then the wind bangs the door shut and it gets stuck because of the humidity. Then, if Bagira happens to be inside, she can't come out of course, she just scratches the door from inside. She is a good dog, but she is on heat at the moment. When she is on heat, she goes mad. You can't do a thing with her. I am not surprised. It's natural. Bitches are like that. We will be like that too,' she looks at me and laughs. 'We will have to drown the puppies we can't give away. There are enough stray dogs as it is.'

It is difficult to open the door of the wooden house.

We hear whining, scratching from inside. At last, Sára wrenches the door open and immediately a shaggy Hungarian sheepdog and an Alsatian crossbreed come out.

We find another three dogs inside.

I see a big, black dog, she looks at us while she wearily puts up with a hefty, long-haired, white guard dog that is clinging to it from behind.

Sára digs me in the ribs.

'Look at that,' she says, pointing to a third sturdy dog.

I can see a red rod rearing up under it.

'He's waiting his turn. See how stiff he's got,' whispers Sára. 'Look at his tail!'

I look at his tail, I can't see anything.

'Not that tail,' Sára laughs. 'The other one. The one under his stomach. Don't you know that a male prick is

called a tail?'

Meanwhile she goes over to the black dog and starts pulling it by the scruff of the neck.

'Come on Bagira. We're going home.'

I hardly dare move. I'm afraid of the dogs.

Sára laughs.

'Don't be afraid. They are very tame at times like this. Their brains are completely overwhelmed by love. We are completely safe. They are only thinking of their tails.'

She leads her dog home. The rest come obediently after us.

They see us home.

On Sunday I go to mass.

Before mass I go to confession. I go into the confessional, I see the priest through the bars.

He waits, his head bowed.

I tell him about the dogs. I talk about Sára too, about all the things she already knows, though she is not much older than I am.

Then I tell him my name is not Anna and that I often tell lies.

He doesn't ask me my real name. He hands out my penance and absolves me.

I feel a special affection for the priest during the sermon. I would dearly love to run over to him and kiss his hand.

Then I think of my father. Whom I don't even know. I sit in the church and cry.

Without making a sound.

It feels good to cry.

I feel relieved after mass. I am in a good mood, I am

cheerful.

I leave the church. I feel chilly and huddle up in the coat the bald soldier gave me. My mother says autumn has arrived early this year, the winter will be a long one.

I run to the shed.

My mother is just chopping firewood, preparing for the cold days. She will have to heat the whole rectory.

I go over to her and hug her tight.

She reaches for my chin and looks at my face. She can see I have been crying.

She doesn't ask any questions.

Perhaps I should have told my mother everything. The dogs, school, the teacher, *everything*. Of course, she never asked me any questions either. So I didn't have much chance to tell her about things.

About everything that has happened to me.

Perhaps this was a lie too. I mean that we both kept quiet about things instead of talking to each other.

I stop in front of the gate to the rectory yard, opposite the adobe house. The black curtain is there at the window.

Motionless.

The house is quiet too.

The priest said he enquired, there is nobody living there.

It is evening and it is dark.

At this time of year, it gets dark early.

My mother is carrying wood to the fireplace in the rectory kitchen, she has to make supper for the priest and for us.

I am hungry. I stayed at school in the afternoon as well. I haven't eaten all day.

The first early snow has arrived. It falls in large, thick flakes.

I hold my hand out in the snow. I watch the snowflakes melting on the palm of my hand.

Suddenly the black curtain in the window of the adobe house opposite appears to move.

It is evening, the only light is moonlight, I can't see very clearly.

Still, as I look at the window of the adobe house, it occurs to me automatically that I was not mistaken, *I know* the Thin Girl lives there and nobody has ever seen her except me.

Even if they say the house is uninhabited, she still lives there.

And I also know that the Thin Girl has nothing to eat, that's why she lies on her bed for days on end, she hardly has the strength to breathe anymore.

I peel my eyes, I look at the window.

There is a full moon. The moonlight shines on the white wall of the house. Someone pulls the curtain aside.

The Thin Girl looks out of the window. She presses her forehead to the glass, she watches me.

Her eyes are bigger than they were. But her head is very small.

She looks at me as if she were angry.

Or like someone who is very sad.

I wave to her, but she doesn't wave back. She just stares out. She is looking in my direction, but it seems as if she doesn't see me.

Her eyes are blank.

After supper I go out in the street in secret, I go over

to the Thin Girl's house, I put some bread and a saucepan of milk in the door.

By morning the bread has disappeared together with the saucepan.

My mother washes, cooks, cleans, keeps the rectory tidy, heats it if necessary. She also does the gardening, grows vegetables, tends the animals such as they are, for the rectory has a few rabbits, some chickens and a pig.

The parish-priest is satisfied with her and says we can stay all year if we want to.

My mother is pleased.

The bald soldier sometimes even spends the evening with us now. He arrives, sits down on the bed in our room, calls me over.

'Ana, comink hir.'

I sit down next to him, not too close.

I am wearing a sweater, a long skirt, tights. It is very cold in the evening.

The bald soldier is in a good mood. He has large hands with a thick signet-ring on his finger.

He puts the hand with the ring on my stomach.

'Tummy biink hungry? Littel Ana's tummy biink hungry?'

He slides his hand further down. He squeezes my thigh, his fingers between my legs.

'Yuri tekink care littel gurl. Becos gud man. Helpink alveys.'

My mother comes into the room, she has got hold of some wine from somewhere and offers it to the bald soldier. Yuri takes a swig, smacks his lips, drinks some more, then puts the bottle down beside him on the floor.

‘You too, comink hir,’ he says to my mother.

He slaps my mother’s behind, then grabs her by the arm and pulls her down beside him on the bed. My mother resists at first, then laughs and lies down next to the bald soldier. The soldier grins, hugs my mother from behind, puts his right hand on her breast, still squeezing my thigh with the left.

He gropes around with his fingers below my stomach, pushing my skirt in between my thighs.

‘Big gurl, littel gurl, tree is gud,’ he squeals, then let’s go of my thigh and starts unfastening his trousers.

He is wearing white underpants down to his knees, he doesn’t pull them down completely, just enough to get his swollen tail out.

His thighs are plump, white and dotted with brown moles.

His tail is red and swollen, but not stiff. It is not like the dog’s, it is not a long, stiff, red rod.

There is more skin on it.

By now it is not only Sára who has informed me what it should be like. I have discussed it with Amélie as well. One of the soldier’s showed her his, down in the cellar.

Some time ago when the stranger soldiers were checking the passages.

Yuri grabs my mother’s hair, trying to pull her head towards him. My mother obediently leans down to the bald soldier’s lap. I see her take the soldier’s tail in her mouth and start to suck it.

I can hear soft, squelching noises.

Saliva runs out of the corner of my mother’s mouth.

I feel sick. I leave the room. The door shuts behind me with a loud bang.

I start going over to Amélie's again, her grandmother isn't angry with me anymore.

It is early on Sunday morning. Amélie is at home on her own.

Her grandmother has gone shopping in the market.

Amélie is lighting a fire in the kitchen stove. They heat with wood shavings they get from the timber-yard nearby.

At the rectory we use logs.

The shavings take a while to catch light. Amélie blows on them as she has seen her grandmother doing.

She scatters paper and bacon rind in the stove to get it to light.

The shavings stand in the kitchen in sacks. Amélie pours more and more of them into the stove.

Suddenly they catch fire. The shavings burn, giving off a blinding white light.

The stove's iron cover glows bright red.

The kitchen warms up in minutes. Amélie puts some water on to boil, then pours the hot water into a tub.

She takes off her sweater, her skirt, her blouse.

She takes a bath.

I watch her bathe, then I get undressed too. It is warm.

The tub is quite big, there is room for both of us. We splash each other with water. We laugh.

Amélie bends down and fills her mouth with the bath water, holding it for a moment, then spitting it out over me.

I get out of the tub, pretending to run away. She comes after me, spitting water on my back, my bottom, my thigh.

She squeezes me into a corner of the kitchen. I have

nowhere to run anymore.

She comes right up to me, bends down and lets the water pour from her mouth onto my bottom. Her lips touch my skin.

I can feel myself getting goose pimples.

Suddenly I turn round and she gets up.

We both burst out laughing.

We dry ourselves and get dressed. We wipe the floor, pour the water out in the yard.

We throw more and more handfuls of shavings into the stove.

We wait for Amélie's grandmother to come home.

I am going to the pianist's house.

It is chilly and raining. Cold rain, almost like sleet, falls slowly. It is more of a drizzle. At times it starts raining harder.

I am not interested in the rain. I am wearing the red jacket that Yuri, the bald soldier, gave me. I pull the hood over my head.

My feet are cold.

They are bare, the street is muddy, the mud is cold, it sticks to the soles of my feet.

I can hear the mud squelching as I walk.

The nails on my feet turn blue with cold.

I stop at the pianist's house. The window is open, the cold and the rain don't bother the pianist. I hear the familiar tune.

The melody of Für Elise, over and over again. I listen and hum at the same time.

I hang on to the iron railings.

It is getting dark.

The light goes on in the pianist's window. I can see the outline of a standard lamp.

The melody stops abruptly.

The pianist appears at the window.

I have never seen the pianist, but I know it is her. A thin, elderly woman stands in the window.

Her face is thin, her hair completely white, long and straight, tied back.

In a plait like a teenager's.

The pianist is wearing some kind of man's jacket, I think I see a white blouse under it.

It is getting very dark. I am standing in front of the house beside the iron railings.

I don't think the pianist can see me.

It is quiet. All you can hear is the rain trickling down.

The pianist looks towards me, as though she can see me after all. Then she says:

'Come in, little girl, come in, don't be shy. I will play something nice for you.'

I wait.

The pianist leaves the window.

Silence.

Then I hear Für Elise again.

My feet are very cold by now. I go to the garden gate, open it and go into the garden

It takes five steps to reach the house.

I count the steps. One, two, three, four, five.

There is a carved, single door. With carved flowers on the doorframe. I run my fingers along the carved petals.

As I open the door, a yellowish light goes on in the staircase.

Wide, wooden stairs lead up to the first floor. Covered with a flower-patterned carpet.

I am ashamed of my muddy feet and that I am barefoot. There is a wet rag by the front door, I clean my feet with it, wiping my soles thoroughly too, so I don't leave footprints on the carpet. My feet are quite red by the time I have rubbed off the mud.

Even so, I go up the stairs on tiptoe. The pianist doesn't pay any attention to me. Perhaps she doesn't even know that I am on my way up. She plays the same melody over and over again.

The door upstairs is open. I stop on the threshold, I don't go in.

I listen to the pianist playing. I listen to Für Elise.

I am ashamed that my feet are bare.

The pianist smiles at me when she sees me. She looks at the music and plays.

Everything is brightly lit and spotless.

My mother says that music is very important. And she also says that if someone knows how to play music, it gives them a feeling of freedom. Or happiness. In the evening, when she can stop working, we sit together in the rectory and talk. That's when she says things like that.

I like the way we sit in the rectory on winter evenings, listening to the fire crackling in the stove, the snow falling outside, everything peaceful.

Sometimes the priest is with us too.

When the priest is there, everything is completely different of course. My mother just listens then, rather than talking much, she does some sewing or something like that.

The priest is not there very often. And we are both glad about that. After all everything is better without the priest.

I like listening to my mother telling stories. And seeing her face smoothing out and relaxing as she talks.

My mother often talks about far away countries. She says there are countries where you don’t have to be afraid of anything. My mother also says there are no soldiers in those countries. Or rather there are, says my mother, but they are there without being seen in the street all the time, they don’t have to be in the street all the time because there is no danger.

My mother also says people live well in those countries. That over there everyone lives well, they have cars, they bathe in the sea and in the evening they eat a lot.

Actually, we have enough to eat too.

And my mother says that children are safe in those countries.

Not like here.

Though we are lucky, says my mother. Here where we live, there really isn't any danger.

Thanks to the soldiers, says my mother.

She talks a lot too, about how important music was in her life.

That she learned to play the piano once and that she has been unhappy ever since she finally gave up playing.

That was fifteen years ago.

My mother says she couldn’t play a single note now, she has forgotten everything so completely.

Sometimes when we talk like this in the evening, my mother is very sad.

She keeps stroking my face. And she always says I have to survive this whole thing.

And she also says we have to be careful, we have to save money, because we are living in difficult times.

To be honest, I sometimes find it very hard to

understand my mother.

Amélie says the soldiers arrested someone last night. And there was some shooting too.

I tell Amélie I didn't hear anything.

And that I slept through the night.

Amélie also says that according to her grandmother we will have trouble getting food. And that the barbarians will come and take everything away from us.

I ask Amélie, again and again, what that means and who those barbarians might be. She says it means that the shops might be empty because there won't be any supplies and there won't be anything to eat, but as to who the barbarians are, she still doesn't know.

'And if there are no supplies or there is nothing to eat, does that mean that we will really be very poor?' I ask Amélie.

She just shrugs her shoulders:

'If you have nothing to eat, then you really are very poor.'

Actually, we didn't really know what supplies were. We didn't go shopping much either. What we had to eat was mostly grown by my mother: potatoes, tomatoes, vegetables and fruit.

There were chickens, there was poultry, the rectory smallholding provided for us. We fed the pig with all sorts of slop and we could even get milk if we needed it, from the neighbour. We gave them chickens, eggs and fruit in exchange.

We did buy bread, of course. My mother would get a

little money from the priest, which she usually had to account for. The priest had money, not much, but he always had some. The parishioners gave him some and so did the church authorities.

That's what my mother said at the time. That they gave the priest money.

There were times when I went to the shop, we called it the 'general store', to help my mother. But not often.

We didn't really need much.

The soldiers brought us all kinds of things anyway.

The bald soldier almost always brought my mother something or other, that's why she said we had to appreciate our friendship with him. He not only gave us security, but a better life.

Several times my mother told me:

'Don't resist the bald soldier when he wants something, do as he wishes. You have to realize he is the boss here, he is the most important man in the whole town. We should be grateful to him for looking after us.'

'Why does he look after us?'

'He just does. Because he is a good man and he can see that we couldn't manage on our own. Because he likes us, that's why. Don't ask unnecessary questions.'

Amélie and I are going to the cellar.

We decide we won't be afraid of the rats.

I am wearing the priest's trousers that have been altered, I have tied them round my waist with string like last time, but now I have pulled them together as much as I could at the ankles too.

I don't want a rat to crawl up my trousers again.

We have two paraffin lamps and we take a spade

with us as well.

We go along the same passage as last time. The rats run away, they scurry along the wall, scampering away from us towards the heap of stones, creeping under it through the little opening.

Amélie thinks the passage in the cellar continues behind the heap of stones. She hopes that it will take us quite a long way, even beyond the hill.

We reach the heap of stones, this is the end of the cellar, there is no way forward.

Amélie puts her lamp down on the ground, looks at the heap of stones, puts down the spade she has brought with her too.

She attacks the pile with her hands, trying to lift the topmost stone.

I put down the lamp in my hand as well, I scratch the stones with my nails, trying to get a grip on them.

The topmost stone finally moves, we both get hold of it, lift it, slowly carry it a few metres further over, put it on the ground beside the cellar wall.

We go back for the next stone.

Amélie takes out a knife, a kitchen knife with a black handle and tries to scour the gaps between the stones with it.

When she gets tired, I take the knife, scraping the earth from between the stones so they don’t stick together so much.

Amélie has a go with the spade as well.

She hits the stones with the spade handle, hoping that one or other of them will shift.

At last the second one moves, we manage to topple it from its place, both of us holding it, as we did before, carrying it a few metres, putting it down on the ground next

to the cellar wall.

We manage to shift three stones from the heap in an hour.

Amélie's hands are red, there are blisters on her palm, my nails are torn, they hurt.

I have hurt my thumb and it is bleeding.

The heap of stones is smaller, but the opening where the rats wander in and out is no bigger.

The rats got used to us a bit while we worked. They no longer run away from us, they are not afraid, they are busy doing their own thing.

As if we were not there.

They don't like it if we make a lot of noise.

They whimper if we do.

Amélie keeps on hitting the stones with the spade handle and asks:

'Can you hear? The stones are whimpering.'

'They are not whimpering,' I say, 'they are crying. Like a baby when it is hungry.'

The crying gets louder and louder. Suddenly I think of the Thin Girl. I see her watching me, her head is small and she is asking me for something to eat with her big, round eyes. I can see her pointing to her mouth with her sharp little finger.

Her mouth is moving. She is talking to me.

Amélie grabs the spade and her paraffin lamp. She is on her way out of the cellar.

'We have finished for today,' she says.

The snow is already melting. There are slushy, melting piles of snow on the streets.

I am on my way to the pianist's house.

The pianist's window is open as it has been all winter.

I stop for a moment at the railings, I listen to the music flowing out of the window.

The pianist is playing a new piece. It is no longer the familiar Für Elise melody.

The new piece is also lively, but it is solemn at the same time. There is something uplifting in it, something that suggests we could be really happy now.

I hang on to the railings and listen.

My feet are wrapped in newspaper. Over it I have pulled a pair of men's black rubber boots that my mother got from the soldiers.

I step into the garden and go into the house. I take off the boots at the bottom of the stairs.

Upstairs the door is open, as it has been each time I have been to the pianist's house.

I go over to the piano and watch the pianist as she plays.

She is wearing a dark man's jacket with a white blouse under it, just as she did before.

The room, the pianist's room, is almost completely empty.

In the middle is the black piano, the lid up, to make it sound even fuller and more beautiful.

She herself explained to me once, by the way, that this is why you have to open the piano lid.

When I used to come here on cold winter days. For the pianist loves explaining things.

Apart from the piano, there is a bookshelf in the room and three paintings on the wall opposite the window.

The paintings show the same church in different lighting. The pianist does not say there is a church on the

pictures, but a *cathedral.*

The pianist also told me who painted the pictures, but I have forgotten the painter's name.

I watch the way the pianist plays. Her fingers run along the keys, her upper body and her head move as she plays, she virtually lives and breathes with the music.

She wears her long, white hair tied back.

I look at her and as I look at her, I think to myself that the pianist must once have been a very beautiful woman.

All of a sudden, the music stops and she turns to me:

'Do you like it?' she asks. 'Do you know this piece?'

I just shrug my shoulders.

'This is the Ode to Joy,' she says. 'Originally it was not a piece for piano, but you can play it on the piano too. The composer wrote it for many instruments, we say it was part of a symphony. Many, many people have sung it in the past. I will teach you the words, if you like.'

The pianist goes out of the room and comes back a few minutes later with a sheet of paper.

There is some sort of text on it in verses of four lines.

'This is the poem that goes with the piano piece,' says the pianist. 'You know what a poem is, don't you? Read the words to yourself as I play. I am sure you will like it.'

The music starts again.

I listen to the pianist playing, but I can't read the words at the same time. Not because I can't read. I can. But somehow I can't seem to concentrate.

I would rather gaze at the pianist.

I like to watch her bending and swaying as she plays.

My mother says the pianist is one of us, she is exactly like us, but much more fortunate. My mother says fortunate people can always do whatever they like and can make a living doing something they are passionate about. My mother says that for instance artists are like that too. And that the pianist is like that. I don't know. All I know is that it was good to listen to her playing. Whenever I listened to the pianist, the music always cleared my head. I always felt much lighter, much calmer. I wonder if happiness is something like that. Like listening to piano music. I don't know. All I know is that I used to love listening to the pianist playing.

Strangers are gathering in front of the community centre in the main square.

People are saying in town, in our street too, that weird strangers have arrived, but they also say they are only passing through.

They say all sorts of things.

They say that these strangers are the kind of refugees we should help, because there is a lot of poverty where they were living up to now.

Even worse poverty than we have here.

Amélie's grandmother says these strangers are going to work, particularly the men, but they are not going to work in this town, but in another, much bigger town many, many kilometres away.

Amélie's grandmother also says that the barbarians really have arrived now. But these are not the dangerous barbarians yet.

They are just unfortunate people.

Amélie's grandmother says that these barbarians are

just having a rest here in this town, in our town, then they will continue on their way. That for the moment we need not be afraid of them.

Other people say other things. They say that these strangers are dangerous after all, some of them want to attack us, because they are angry with us.

I don’t know. For the moment I am not afraid of them, I am just curious about them.

I am going to the main square with Amélie. Sára is there too, and her mother with a small child in her arms.

There are many people there from our street.

It is a little strange. The locals, who live here in the town, stand in a group.

They watch the strangers.

There are many children with the strangers, boys and girls, the girls are beautiful.

They have brownish skin, long, straight, black hair.

They are a little like the musicians were.

And yet completely different.

You can’t see the grown-ups’ faces. They wear black dresses, they are entirely covered from head to foot. They have a kind of mesh on their faces made of closely woven black material.

You can only see their bare feet. They wear slippers. Some of them have thin, gold chains sparkling on their ankles.

They are standing in front of the community centre. A crowd of them. It all looks as if they are waiting for something.

For some reason everyone is tense. Nervous.

The stranger boys are angry that we are looking at them. They pick up pebbles from the ground and start throwing them at us.

One of them hits Sára in the face.

Her mouth is bleeding.

Sára's mother yells at them:

'Get out! We don't need you here, you scum! You black pagans! Get out of here! We don't need you!'

Suddenly soldiers run out of the barracks. Masses of stranger soldiers.

The stranger soldiers stand between us and the strangers travelling through.

They all have machine guns.

The strangers covered in black cloth and their children set out towards the edge of the town. They walk slowly. Like people who are not in a hurry.

They go along the main street in a long column. On foot. Who knows where they are going.

A few carts follow them carrying their belongings.

The soldiers look at them for a while, then they look at us then, on command, they turn round and march into the barracks.

I go out in front of the community centre. Something is sparkling in the dust.

It is a gold ankle chain. There is a little golden hand hanging from the chain.

Like someone saying *stop* with the palm of their hand.

I don't show it to anyone, not even to Amélie.

I go home holding it tight in my hand.

It is Sunday.

My mother has gone over to the church to help the priest with mass. I am alone.

All at once, the door opens and Yuri, the bald soldier,

appears.

He is drunk.

He staggers over to my mother's bed and stretches out on it.

He says:

'Ana, littel gurl, comink hir.'

I stand at the table and stay put.

'Ana, comink hir, giving shokolat for you.'

I am hungry, I didn't have any supper last night or any breakfast this morning. Sometimes the priest fasts for days.

At such times he only drinks water.

And we fast too. My mother says, it doesn't matter, a little fasting won't do any harm and anyway we haven't been able to put anything away, so we have nothing saved up. My mother says it is natural to eat less in winter.

Yuri holds out the chocolate, beckoning with his other hand, his coat and his shirt are already unbuttoned at his stomach.

He is always like this when he comes to see us.

He unbuttons his shirt on his soft, fat, hairy stomach, sometimes he even slaps it, so that the flab just sort of quivers. I am sure he thinks we find this attractive.

I look at the chocolate. I would love to have some. But I am also afraid.

Hesitating, I go a bit closer.

'Comink now, Yuri not hurtink you, comink hir.'

I put my hand out.

I want the chocolate.

Yuri sits up, grabs my arm, pulls me to him. He grips my arm very hard till it hurts. With his other hand, he shoves the chocolate in my hand.

I don't know what to do to make him let go, I shout,

but in vain. He is gripping me so hard, I am afraid he will break my arm. I stop resisting, let him pull me onto the bed. He wants me to stretch out and lie down next to him.

I obey.

My mother says I should always obey.

I stretch out with my back to Yuri. The bald soldier is not so disgusting if you turn your back to him. I start unwrapping the chocolate.

I can smell it.

Yuri holds me from behind, doesn't let me go, hugs me like he does my mother. I am wearing two skirts, a long thick one and a shorter linen petticoat.

I am not wearing knickers, I only put on the best pair on special occasions.

I can feel both skirts are riding up, but I take no notice.

I am hungry. I am enjoying the sweet chocolate melting in my mouth. As I eat it, I get even more hungry.

Yuri is close behind me. He presses me to him with one hand.

I can feel his breath, unpleasant and warm.

I can feel his other hand on my bottom. I feel his rough palm holding my bottom, stroking it, trying to find a way through between my thighs with his finger.

He starts grabbing my bottom more and more wildly, stroking the opening with his finger, trying to stick his large, rough finger up it. Meanwhile he is trying to rub my pussy in front as well. It is very unpleasant and begins to hurt.

I kick back at him and dig my elbow into his fat stomach, but in vain.

I start shouting at the top of my voice.

Suddenly I feel something thick and hot between my

thighs.

I try to escape, but Yuri is holding me tight.

I am so frightened, I hardly know what is happening. I scream in a high-pitched voice, I call my mother.

The thick, hot thing is pressing harder and harder. I know it is Yuri's tail, it moves between my thighs, faster and faster, looking for something, I don't understand what.

I suddenly feel Yuri's thick, hot tail has found its way inside me, I feel a sharp pain, the whole thing is over in a second.

I feel as if something has torn inside me. I feel a sharp pain, I yell out, I don't know myself what I am yelling.

Suddenly the door bursts open, I can vaguely see it is my mother and the parish priest.

A sharp, throbbing pain. Everything is wet inside me, around me.

A mixture of snot and tears on my face.

Yuri is panting behind me, I can feel his strong panting, while my mother tugs at him, hits him, beats him.

I can suddenly see the dogs in my mind's eye, there in the wooden house. And I can see Sára too, she seems to be laughing: *'Don't be afraid. They are very docile at times like this. Their brains are overwhelmed by love. We are completely safe. They are only thinking of their tails.'*

I can still hear Sára laughing, meanwhile it seems the priest has arrived too.

He is trying to say something. He does say something. I don't understand a word.

I can hardly move. It hurts terribly inside. I am wet, but not only from the blood. It's as though I had peed blood.

I have never peed blood, but I have heard that it

happens and I imagine it's like this.

I hear my mother's voice, I don't know what she is saying. I feel alone.

I get up off the bed, take three steps forward towards the kitchen.

I don't remember the rest.

When I come to, it's my mother I see first.

I open my eyes and see my mother's face bending over me.

Around her face is a clear blue sky.

My mother is holding my head with both hands, as she walks beside me. I am lying on a barrow, we are going towards the school.

The barrow is being pushed by the priest.

My mother says:

'You have had a very bad dream and you are ill. We are going to the hospital. They will help you, you will see, everything will be all right. A nice doctor will examine you. You have been injured a bit, but you will get better. The most important thing is not to think of the pain and the injury. That's the most important thing now. The best thing would be if you didn't think of anything.'

The priest pushes the barrow, we are going towards the school. Now and then we stop and rest.

I try not to think of anything.

Down below, under my stomach I can feel a throbbing pain. I don't cry, I just feel very empty. It is like when I am very bored.

Or even worse.

Past the school, we go along a long, wide road. There are plane trees along it. We go all the way along the road

and I look at the huge, thick trunks of the plane trees. They seem very unfamiliar here somehow.

The barrow stops in front of a tall building. The entrance is painted yellow.

It is the hospital.

My mother picks me up and starts carrying me in. I am heavy.

Two men in white coats come out of the hospital. One gets hold of me under the arms, the other holds my legs.

I feel a hospital smell coming from their white coats.

I am well looked after in the hospital, they give me medicine, everyone is very kind to me.

I stay in the hospital for four days. My mother comes every day, bringing me all kinds of things to eat as well as fruit. She tells me what's going on at home at the rectory, asks me how I am, takes care of me.

My mother says that I have had a little operation, they had to put stitches in my bottom, but it wasn't too bad, there were only two or three, that's what she says.

And she says the only unpleasant thing left will be taking the stitches out, but I will get over that too.

On the fourth day, when I go home from the hospital, my mother says:

'There is something I want you to know about. Come to the laundry room and I'll show you. A little surprise.'

There is a laundry room at the rectory, it has no window, but it's a good hiding place, we use it for all sorts of things, not just washing, sometimes we even sleep there.

Now my mother holds my hand, leads me to the laundry room, puts the light on and closes the door behind us.

She goes to the wall opposite the door. She feels around the wall a bit then, swiftly and firmly, she grabs one of the bricks and tries to pull it out.

The brick gives way and almost comes out by itself.

My mother puts the brick down on the ground and shows me that there is a hollow space in the wall behind it.

I look inside, but I can't see anything.

My mother puts her hand in and pulls out a canvas bag. It is a small bag, perhaps the size of a kilo loaf of bread.

My mother opens the bag, I can see it contains jewellery and watches. Wrist watches. My mother shows me the jewellery: gold and silver chains, bracelets, coins and pearls. And stones. Glittering, precious stones.

My mother gets more and more excited. She is breathing fast, her face is flushed.

She says:

'It has taken me years to collect all this. The soldiers can be generous sometimes. Yuri has given me all kinds of things. Yuri gave me this chain and look, these watches too.'

She shows me the chain, a thin gold chain. She shows me the wrist watches.

Then she pulls out a white pearl necklace. She holds it up to the light a little to show me.

I look at it sparkling.

'You see, now you are getting this as a present from Yuri.'

I look at my mother. She is proud of her jewellery.

'Remember that these things are worth a lot of

money. They will help us start a new life, if we get into trouble. They are worth a great deal even over the border. I am telling you, so you know.'

I look at my mother, I don't say anything.

'Yuri gave you, gave us, this pearl necklace *because* he behaved badly towards you. He asked me to forgive him. He hurt you and he asks you not to be angry with him and to forget his mistake. In the end there was not a lot of harm done, I intervened in time. I think he can be forgiven. What do you think?'

I keep quiet, I don't know what to say.

My mother puts the bag back behind the brick.

We go out of the laundry room to the front garden of the rectory.

It is cold. I feel the chill. I pull the hood of the red jacket over my head, perhaps it will protect me from the cold. I go with my mother to see the animals in the back.

After all, the red jacket was given to me by Yuri too.

My mother is smiling now, laughing, as if it were some kind of holiday. She says we'll kill a chicken to celebrate my coming home from the hospital.

It is chilly. The air has become very cold again.

The priest says it is unusual for winter to return at the end of spring, and he also says everything will freeze because the temperature sometimes goes down below minus ten at night.

At night I wake to the sound of a motor whirring.

My mother and I go out to the courtyard together, we bundle ourselves up in warm coats, blankets and scarves. Even so, we are still cold.

I find it difficult to walk. I still feel the pain between

my legs.

There are soldiers in the street. They are shining searchlights onto the adobe house opposite.

The priest has appeared too by now.

The soldiers break down the door of the adobe house, the priest goes in with them, several of the neighbours are standing around.

I see that Amélie's grandmother is there too.

In the meantime, more soldiers arrive on the back of a truck. The tall soldier is with them, he shouts something in a foreign language, whereupon more searchlights appear. It is almost as light as day in the street.

The priest comes out of the adobe house. His face is stony. He says something to one of the stranger soldiers.

The soldiers bring stretchers.

Before he goes back into the adobe house opposite, the priest looks at me for a second.

Then at my mother.

Half an hour goes by.

We are very cold.

The soldiers come out of the house. They come out one after the other carrying three stretchers.

The stretchers are covered with white sheets.

They load the stretchers onto the truck.

There is only the third stretcher left. Johnny or Ivan, the tall soldier, is holding the front.

Ivan lifts it clumsily, the stretcher tips over, the white sheet slips off.

I see the Thin Girl's face.

Her eyes are bigger than ever before. But they are blank, she is not looking at anyone, she stares into space.

The following day at lunch the priest says to my mother:

‘She was eight years old like your daughter. And she weighed only ten kilos. She starved to death. And we didn’t know they were living here opposite us.’

My mother does not look at the priest.

As if it were her fault that the Thin Girl died.

She lowers her head and doesn’t say anything.

I think of the saucepan with the milk in it. I am afraid my mother will ask me where it is one day.

I often think I don’t like my mother, but I probably wouldn’t know what to do with myself if I were alone.

There are many things I can’t forgive her for. The Thin Girl’s death among others. I know I will *never* forgive her.

2.

It is summer and very hot.

It is not really summer yet, it is only the beginning of May, but it is as hot as in July.

You can see fluffy poplar blossom everywhere.

Amélie likes it. She calls the poplar blossom *"Maytime snow"*, she makes little piles of the flying white fluff in the garden and is quite capable of watching it for hours as the wind blows it around.

We are sitting side by side in the dust, the sun shining down on us. Together we watch the fluffy poplar blossom gathering in a pile.

It is early afternoon on a Saturday.

Amélie says:

'I went to the cellar. Imagine, I went right up to the heap of stones. It is not how we left it. Somebody has gone on pulling it apart. The opening the rats went in and out of up to now, is much bigger. There might even be room for a grown-up. We could crawl through it.'

'Did you try?'

'No. But I held the paraffin lamp to the opening and saw that there really is some kind of tunnel beyond it. The opening widens out and leads somewhere. It could be the soldiers are right and you can get right over to the other side of the hill. Across the border.'

'Speak to your grandmother. Don't you think we should tell someone?'

'I want to have a look first. Let's go down there

sometime. Together. It would be fun. We could carry on along the passage. What do you think?'

'I think it's dangerous. It would be better to tell the soldiers. Let's tell the bald one. Yuri. The one who used to come and see us. He would be sure to know what to do in a case like this. They say dangerous people might come from over the hill. People who don't like us.'

'My grandmother said it would be all over for the soldiers soon. That people will come and liberate us and our lives will be completely different from now on. That's what Granny says. And she also says that we will have money then, we will be rich and we will be able to go wherever we want. If they come to liberate us. We will be like the people who live across the border. Every single person is rich over there, says Granny. And she says everyone has a car over there. And they travel a lot. She says the people over there can even go to the seaside. And go by boat to islands far away. Once Granny said that the people who live across the border even sunbathe on the rocks in the nude, on the islands near the seashore. Imagine, men and women nude together. Granny says they are called nudists. I mean the people who live across the border and do things like that. Have you ever seen the sea?'

I don't answer. I doodle in the dust with my finger, I draw a tank with a soldier sitting on top, a combat helmet on his head, a bunch of flowers in his hand.

I show Amélie, she laughs:

'He is like your bald soldier. Yuri. He looks just like him.'

'He's not our soldier. We don't have a bald soldier. Yuri is not our soldier. He just comes to see us sometimes. He brings news of my father,' I tell Amélie.

Then I remember I haven't told her, I mean Amélie,

what Yuri, the bald soldier, did to me. I think I will have to tell her one day. At least her. At least Amélie. That he was bad. And while I think about this, I feel empty again, like I did then.

Then I say:

'You know, Yuri is my father's best friend. You will see my father one day. He is strong and tall. He has red hair like I do. He has a car too, like the people who live across the border. He has a beautiful car. The kind they say you can only see in films. And my father has seen the sea too. My father told me all about how he once went diving deep down in the water. They say wonderful creatures live down there in the sea. Honestly. Dragons for instance. Real dragons. Like the ones you hear about in stories. If Yuri goes away, then my father will come to me. He is not a soldier. He is friendly with Yuri, but he doesn't like soldiers.'

Amélie shrugs her shoulders:

'I'm not interested.'

All of a sudden, she brushes away my drawing in the dust with her foot.

'Then don't draw soldiers, if you have nothing to do with them!' she shouts.

She is angry with me, I don't know why.

She runs away, back into the garden.

Just at that moment, her grandmother steps out of the house with a plate of potato cakes in her hand. She offers me one, I can hardly hold it, it's so hot.

I am hungry.

I bite into the potato cake, the smell of it fills my nose and mouth.

I am not bothered by the odd piece of poplar fluff floating in my face.

I don’t really know why I told Amélie that Yuri was my father’s best friend. I don’t know how I can say that about my father. If I had a father, obviously he would kill Yuri. If my father came one day, if it was possible for him to come here one day, I would tell him what Yuri did to me and he would help me. I am absolutely positive about that. I would not have to do much explaining to my father, he would know immediately what I was talking about. If I had a father, I would love my father very much. And I know that he would take great care of me. He would not have left me alone, as my mother did. My mother doesn’t know just how lonely I am. If my father was here, he would hold my hand, we would walk together hand in hand in the street, out to the square, we would walk by the barracks and the school too and then everyone would see that I have a father. That I really do have a father.

I go to the soviet with my mother to have new identity papers made.

We came here last year, that’s when I got my new name and a new date of birth.

Since then my name is Anna.

Now we are at the soviet again. My mother is getting a new identity card and she is having a passport made for me.

Not that I can go over the border. But I am too young for an identity card.

That’s the reason.

My mother also says that you never know. It is even possible that we might get permission to go over the border

one day.

She says we would be warmly welcomed over there, across the border.

My mother says it won't do any harm for me to have a passport.

It is a good thing to have one even if I can't go over the border now, she says.

I imagine the border as some kind of very high wall.

A concrete wall.

I imagine that I am standing at the foot of the concrete wall looking up and it is so tall I can't see the top of it.

I don't know how one could *climb* over it.

It makes me feel very small.

At the soviet a nice lady explains how identity papers are made. She tells us that our fingerprints will be on them and that they will take a photograph of our eyes too.

She says:

'These modern identity papers contain special information. So-called *biometric* tags.'

You can see that the nice lady at the soviet is pleased with herself for knowing these things.

Then she turns to me and asks:

'Little girl, do you know, why these *biometric* tags are necessary?'

I just look at her.

She smiles. Then she continues:

'Because the new system of identification gives us all security. There's no need to be afraid of it, but it's compulsory anyway. It's the law. Do you know what the law is, little girl? The law is something everybody has to obey. These things are necessary, because this is the way we can identify our citizens. With the help of the *biometric*

tags, we can be certain that the identity card is definitely yours, nobody else can use it and it can't be forged. These new identity cards will make it much easier to locate and keep malicious people and criminals under control and so our lives will be more secure and peaceful. Those who have nothing to hide, have no reason to fear these things.'

While she speaks, the nice lady is getting things ready.

'Come here, little girl, give me your right hand, put your fingers on this machine, like this, your thumb too, that's right, keep your hand still, don't move for a second, careful, watch out, now, press your fingers down hard, that's right, very good, we are done!'

Then I have to look into a camera.

'Open your eyes wide, very good little girl, that's right, don't blink, now, finished!' says the nice lady and you can tell she is pleased.

'You know, little girl, this is new for us too, we are just learning how to do it. Look here are your fingerprints on the screen and here is the impression of the iris round your pupil, look how beautiful! We will enter them in the computer and then practically imperceptibly, put them in your passport. If you go travelling one day, wherever you go in the world, they will be able to identify you with this.'

I will get my passport in the post.

My mother's identity card will also be made like this.

My mother is very contented these days. Well-adjusted.

She is always cheerful, not like she used to be in the old days.

In those days she was forever on edge. Before we arrived in this town.

She says:

‘Things are going well for us here, aren’t they? They don’t ask where we came from, they accept us. We are on good terms with the soldiers, they look after us, they don’t do us any harm.’

We are on our way home.

I am kicking at little stones in the dust. A military truck comes towards us.

The tall soldier, Ivan or Johnny, is driving it. He blows the horn playfully when he sees us.

There are soldiers sitting in the back of the truck.

They wave and we wave back.

They are singing a foreign song in a foreign language. The melody is familiar, catchy.

I hum along with them instinctively.

I never did find out what made my mother so happy around that time. I was never interested. She smiled, her eyes sparkled, she laughed a lot. And she wasn’t afraid. Before, when I was very little, she was constantly afraid. And she cried. When she did, her face looked ugly. And then I was unhappy too. In those days, when I was still very little.

There are more and more stranger soldiers in the town.

They are good-humoured.

They sit on the back of military trucks, or on top of tanks, with machine guns in their hands.

They are kind to us children.

You can often see them on foot too. They march through the town in groups of ten or twenty. They often go

past the rectory too, marching in unison, always on command. They often sing foreign songs.

My mother likes these songs.

Yuri, the bald soldier, comes to our house, to the rectory where we live, nearly every day.

He often comes in the evening, on these occasions by mother puts me to bed in the laundry room.

I hate sleeping alone there in the laundry room because the laundry room has no window.

I am afraid in the dark, it is completely dark in the laundry room, as dark as if you were in a coffin. The light can't be left on for long, electricity is very expensive.

We can't afford it says my mother.

If I know the bald soldier is coming, I always make sure I don't have to meet him.

I don't want him to stroke me.

He likes to stroke my face, my hair. He always wants to kiss me and his mouth stinks.

My mother says it doesn't stink that much, it's just that his teeth are a bit bad and that's why his breath smells *stale*.

I don't know what *stale* is like, I just know it stinks.

The bald soldier comes over often, almost every day, sometimes he doesn't come alone, but with two or three friends who are soldiers too.

On these occasions, they drink too and laugh a lot. Sometimes they dance.

One of the soldiers has some sort of guitar, he plays it and sings at the same time.

The priest doesn't like the soldiers to come over.

He says to my mother:

'Your friends are very noisy and they will get the church a bad name. It would be better if they didn't come

here.’

My mother lowers her head and answers.

‘I know, Father, but you know very well we can’t disobey them. Even you can’t go against them. What can I do, I am alone, my husband is in the capital on a secret assignment for the state, he can’t look after me and the child. You know the soldiers are the bosses here. What can I do on my own?’

‘Well, try to be less noisy and try to arrange for them to amuse themselves elsewhere. Not at the rectory. It will all come to a bad end.’

‘Father, we have nowhere else to go.’

The priest looks at my mother for a long while, then shrugs his shoulders:

‘I didn’t say they should leave. I just said try to be less noisy.’

A few days later Yuri talks to the priest. They talk a lot and laugh too.

Then Yuri gives the priest something.

The priest looks at what Yuri has given him and puts it on his wrist.

It is a digital watch.

The priest says:

‘I will keep it with the relics. After all it is a useful thing to have. It shows the time. It even lights up if you press a button.’

Yuri laughs.

They understand each other.

I get up at dawn every day.

Before I go to school, I feed the animals, the chickens, geese and rabbits.

It is the crack of dawn at the end of May, it gets light early. I am going about my tasks as usual.

My mother has usually finished with the pig by this time, she is cleaning the rectory or busying herself at the altar in the church, getting ready for morning mass. She has to lay out the priest's robe, check that everything is in order, the priest always says mass is like a theatre performance, the props have an important role to play too.

I go to see the rabbits, I throw them grass and rotten carrots. I let the hens out too, the back yard is bare earth where they can scratch around.

I have finished for today.

I look in on my mother at the rectory, then I go to school as usual.

It is early morning, but already warm. The rectory is not much cooler either.

I hear my mother laughing beyond the kitchen door.

I go in to say goodbye.

Dazzling light comes in the window. The parish priest is sitting there in the light on a kitchen stool, with his back to me, his cassock pulled up, I can see right to the top of his thigh.

There is a tub in front of him and my mother is just washing the priest's feet.

She is wearing a white linen dress.

The bright light illuminates her from the back, the linen dress almost glows. The light looks like a halo round her head.

Her hair falls loosely forward, hiding her face. I can only see her chin and the way her mouth drops open.

I can see her tiny, white teeth and her tongue, her red tongue in the corner of her mouth.

The top of the linen dress is dripping wet. As my

mother leans forward, the dress comes away from her body, her breasts are completely exposed.

Her nipples stand up hard and pointed.

The priest leans forward too and reaches in under my mother's dress.

He touches one of the nipples with the palm of his hand. I can see him holding my mother's breast in the palm of his hand. Neither of them move for a second or two.

Then my mother suddenly looks up. She doesn't look at the priest, but at me.

Our eyes meet.

The school is right next to the barracks. I stop in front of the barracks and watch the soldiers.

They are packing.

There are a lot of them, many more than before.

The tall soldier is packing too. He is loading large, green sacks onto the back of a truck.

He notices me and comes over to the fence.

'You see, littel gurl, everysink changink. Going avey soldier. Suddenly kommand. Comink ukase, liiving. Comink uzer soldier. Soon. Uzer soldier from uzer state. Littel gurl biing kerful, soldier hopink. Me hafing littel gurl like you. Me not hurtink littel gurl. Never hurtink nobudy.'

I look at the tall soldier for a while, then I watch the preparations.

I don't answer.

The tall soldier puts out his closed fist through the iron bars. He opens his hand and I see something sparkling in it.

There is a tiny gold cross sitting on the palm of his hand.

‘Littel gurl giving muzer. Muzer heppy. Leter. Tomorro liiving militery, no siing agen Ivan. Suvenir. Teling Johnny send. Teling muzer Johnny biing gud man. Teling littel gurl, yes?’

I don’t answer.

I take the cross and go to school.

I sit down in class next to Amélie as usual. Sára sits at the desk behind us.

I like Sára. I go and see them often, I like the untidiness there. We sit in the shed and she teaches me to play the violin. The bow no longer squeaks so much when I keep trying.

Sára says I could be good at the violin, it’s just that I don’t work at it hard enough.

She would like me to go more often.

But Sára also says that actually the most important thing is not for me to learn to play the violin, but to be conscious of the violin and of music and feel how wonderful music is.

I like music too and I tell Sára so.

I have talked to her about the pianist as well.

I told her that it’s really the piano I would like to play. That I would like to be able to play Für Elise really well one day.

We agreed that I would take her to see the pianist too sometime.

Somehow, I never have taken her up to now.

But it is a great feeling that we are all together in one class.

Sára, Amélie and I.

Sára doesn’t like the teacher either. She says she is

not sure why she doesn't like him, but she doesn't and she also says that she really hates school, but she comes anyway because she doesn't want to cause her mother grief.

The teacher comes over with his crutch, he jumps around among the rows of desks. Now and then he kicks a few satchels, shopping bags and things like that out of the way on the floor.

He is edgy.

The teacher says:

'We have agreed several times that nothing is to be kept in the aisles between the desks. Please put everything on your desks or on the clothes-rack.'

He is angry and pushes a plastic shopping bag belonging to one of the girls out of the way with his crutch.

Then he gets tired and sits down at the teacher's table. He tells us to get out our reading books.

He also says that we are big enough now to be able to read properly at long last.

I already know how to read. But the rest of them still find it difficult.

Sára's brother, Arno, is there too. He is a year older than we are.

Arno hardly comes to school. Though he is very good at playing the fiddle.

But he can't really read.

The teacher says:

'It is nearly the end of the year, children. The day of reckoning has come. During the year, you had to learn to read. You know this was your most important task. I have told you many times that you must read at home too, regularly, because practising everyday makes reading easier. So that it is not a burden, but a pleasure. We

practised a lot. For practice makes perfect, as the saying goes. Now I have to punish all those who cannot read. This is my duty, I am a teacher, I have to punish and to praise the children. So listen carefully, because I am going to cane your hands if you can't read. Once. Just once. That's the punishment. I will hit your hands once, just once, so you will learn that you have to read, *you have to pick up* a book. That's what that one smack means. That you should pick up a book. So now we are going to read. Get yourselves together!'

We all read. The teacher calls us one by one, he decides who is next. Everyone reads one sentence in the reading book.

The teacher calls my name, I read the sentence with ease.

Sára comes after me, then Amélie.

A boy called Hiro comes after Amélie. He has an interesting face, not like ours.

He is a stranger too, but different from the strangers we have seen up to now and his skin is not brown, more yellow.

Hiro starts the sentence, gets stuck for a second, but finally manages to read it all.

Then the teacher says:

'Arno.'

I hear some rustling behind me. Sára bends down to the ground, whispering something to her brother, Arno.

Arno doesn't say anything.

The teacher gets up from the teacher's table, jumps over to Arno's desk with his crutch, the cane in his hand.

'Arno! Read!'

Arno looks up at the teacher, but doesn't say a word. He has both hands on the book.

‘Come on, Arno! Read!’

Arno just looks at the teacher. He doesn’t even try to read the sentence.

The teacher is tense:

‘Don’t stare at me, look at the book! Idiot! Don’t you understand? Come on, read!’

Arno doesn’t move. Both his hands are on the book. He looks at the teacher.

The teacher raises the cane and hits Arno’s right hand.

Arno keeps on looking at the teacher. He doesn’t snatch his hand away, he doesn’t shout, he doesn’t moan.

The teacher slams the cane down again.

Then again.

And again.

The teacher hits the boy ten times altogether, harder and harder, getting more and more angry.

By the tenth time, he is shouting:

‘You are not going to stare me in the face you scum! You stinking, worthless tramp! Get out of here back to your hovel!’

Both Arno’s hands are bleeding.

Both his hands are purple and swollen, he can’t move either of them.

We are going home from school. Sára supports Arno on one side and I help him on the other.

Arno’s hand is round my neck. I am wearing a wine coloured cardigan that Yuri gave me.

I console myself that the blood stains won’t show on it so much.

I find it difficult to get to sleep that night, my mother asks why I am sad, but I don't answer.

I dream all night. I even shout in my sleep, my mother wakes me up, comforts me, strokes my face and my forehead.

At dawn, when it is already getting light, I feel a little better. I sink into a deep, peaceful sleep.

I feel nothing bad can happen.

In my dream, I am in the main square in front of the community centre.

The square is completely empty, there is not a soul to be seen.

I can see black and white birds. They are everywhere in the square.

They huddle together in the dust, preening themselves. Masses of black and white birds.

The whole square is swarming with them.

They are on top of the houses too and on the trees, there is virtually nothing else to be seen besides the black and white birds.

More and more of them arrive. I couldn't tell you whether there are more of the white ones or more of the black.

Other than that, they are exactly the same. The only difference is in their colour.

One or two perch on my shoulders.

In my dream, I am not frightened of them, but they are a little unpleasant. I am afraid one of them will get tangled in my hair.

I am sad because I feel lonely. I wish my mother was here with me.

Or Amélie.

Or anyone.

I feel hot.

It must be late afternoon because my shadow goes out a long way.

I hear a sharp screech, I don't even see the explosion, the blast knocks me to the ground. By the time I come to, it is dark.

Night time.

I find it difficult to get up because my leg hurts. There are dead birds all around me.

I touch my ankle. I look at the palm of my hand, it is dripping with blood.

I start out for home, I am afraid, I am crying with pain and fear.

When I wake up, my face is still tear-stained. I feel a wetness between my legs. My thigh is bloody and so is the sheet under me.

Like when Yuri hurt me.

I run out to the yard looking for my mother. She is just coming back from the hen house.

She has finished the dawn feed.

Neither my mother nor the hospital knew, not even later, neither did the doctors, what was causing this bleeding. Clearly it all started because of Yuri. I often dreamed of blood after that, but I didn't only dream of it, I got my sheet, my thigh and my skirt all bloody. It was bad. Then it stopped. My mother said I was probably taking a long time to get better. I don't know whether that was true nor do I know whether it stopped because I did get better. But it stopped. By itself. Best forgotten.

I am walking along the pianist’s street.

I run my hand along the iron railings of the pianist’s fence as I usually do.

All is quiet.

The pianist is not practising.

I stand at the fence, military trucks speeding past me. At least fifteen military trucks one after the other.

There are firearms on the trucks and soldiers. I see firearms like the ones I have seen in the barracks yard.

You can use these to shoot at aeroplanes too.

The soldiers don’t wave.

Posters have appeared everywhere in the town, on the streets. They have been put up jointly by the local authority, the soviet, and the military command. My mother and the parish priest talk about these posters too. So does Amélie’s grandmother. Even at school, the headmaster talked about the posters. My mother says there is nothing wrong, they are informing the inhabitants about the fact that, as she says, *for domestic and foreign policy reasons*, as she says, *there will be restrictions* and that *they are informing everyone that the refugees arriving here will be placed with families.* And they ask *the residents to remain calm.* According to my mother there is nothing wrong and these are just temporary measures. But, says my mother, if there is any trouble, then sooner or later we will have to go away from this town. She just doesn’t know whereto. According to my mother there is nowhere to go from here, or rather there is only one place we could go, over the border, but you can’t just go over there, because you need a permit and a visa to cross the border. That’s what my

mother says.

Amélie and I discover the secret tunnel in the cellar.

We are quite used to the rats by now and they are used to us.

The opening under the heap of stones is big enough for us to climb through easily.

Then the path widens. We continue on our way holding hands.

There is something especially good about this.

Walking underground towards the unknown. We are afraid, but we feel brave as well.

After about twenty metres, the tunnel becomes very wide.

Fortunately, we both have paraffin lamps. We drift apart a bit and light this section we have just reached quite well.

The path has widened out into a chamber.

There are boxes standing next to the damp, mouldy walls. I count them, eight wooden boxes, not all the same size, some even big enough for me to fit inside.

Amélie goes over to one of them and tries to open it. I hold the light up for her so she can see better.

The box refuses to open. There are iron straps round it with padlocks.

Amélie says:

‘Perhaps there is treasure inside. Gold and jewellery. Whatever is inside is ours. My grandmother’s and mine because the path comes from our cellar. And yours too, of course, because we found it together.’

‘We should take them up to the house,’ I suggest. ‘It would be easy to open them and have a look what’s inside.’

‘No, that would be dangerous. Anyway, this is a real secret. Our secret. Swear you won’t tell the soldiers or anyone. Not even your mother. Not ever. Swear!’

I lift my left hand and place my right hand over my heart on my chest. That’s how I swear I will keep the secret.

Then we try to lift the smallest of the boxes together, but we can’t do it. We pull it this way and that, our hands and our faces get covered in dust and dirt.

The rats react nervously as we move around, they run around all over the place.

We decide we will leave the boxes here for now.

The tunnel divides into two branches. There have been stone-slides in both directions, the stones are mouldy and wet. As I lift my lamp, I see a cap lying on the ground in one of the forks.

A fur cap. Of the kind people only wear in winter.

‘Yuri had one like this in winter,’ says Amélie.

She puts the fur cap on.

She laughs.

We start back out of the tunnel. We keep glancing back as we go.

We have the feeling someone is following us.

But it is only the rats: they scurry along the wall and cry out every now and then like babies.

There are strangers in the main square of the town again.

The new strangers are beautiful to look at, their skin very, very dark brown, almost black and they are mostly wearing lovely, coloured, yellow, blue, purple and red patterned dresses. Their hair is very curly. Some of the

strangers have threaded coloured beads into their curly, wiry hair.

They are fat, large breasted women, with smiling faces and full, thick lips.

I am standing in the main square with Amélie and Sára, we watch as the nice lady from the soviet, who made my passport out not so long ago, sits behind a table and registers the strangers' details, giving papers and money to those she has already questioned and who have given suitable answers.

Sára says:

'These people really have escaped from very far away. My mother told me. They have come from a country where there is even worse poverty than here. It is always hot there, they don't have to heat their houses, says my mother. But they have come here because they have nothing to eat over there. And they don't know our language at all. They have nowhere to live and they have no money either. My mother says we must help them now. But it isn't us who will help, but the government of the country. They will help. Well, naturally. They will give them work. My mother also said she thinks there are more and more strangers. And that we will get poorer and poorer. And she also said, my mother, that soon we won't have anything to eat either. And my mother also said that we shouldn't always look after the strangers. We should look after ourselves for a change.'

The nice lady sits in the main square behind the table, records details, hands out money.

Everyone has to sign for the money they are given.

Around twenty-five soldiers with machine guns have come out of the barracks on a truck.

They just sit on the back of the truck, watching the nice lady from the soviet as she works.

There are no men among the refugees.

There are many women, but even more children. A few of the boys are almost completely naked, the most they have on is a little loin-cloth tied round their waists.

It is hot.

Sára, Amélie and I stand in the shade in front of the general store.

We look on as the sun blazes down on the refugees.

The sunshine doesn't bother them.

Their dark brown skin glistens in the glaring midday sun.

Many people say that everything keeps getting worse. Security is not what it used to be. Even the parish-priest says so. They also say that now everyone is afraid. Amélie's grandmother said once, I remember, we were sitting at Amélie's house, in the kitchen eating potato cakes, that's when her grandmother said it was no longer the soldiers who were the masters, or the strangers, but the fear inside us. Amélie said she was afraid too. That she sometimes woke up with a start at night. Amélie also said that according to her grandmother, the barbarians are everywhere now. That according to her, I mean her grandmother, the barbarians have completely inundated the town. Amélie also said that sooner or later those who are strangers here will take everything away from us. Of course Amélie always says what her grandmother says. But I once tried to explain to Amélie that I am a stranger too, so is my mother, but she just laughed. She says we are not strangers, we just came from far away and that is not the same thing. According to her grandmother, says Amélie, the soldiers are just as much strangers as the people they are afraid of. That

now the situation here is that strangers are pursuing strangers, at least according to her grandmother, that the strangers won't leave us in peace, even when they are defending us, or when people ask them for help. Because the strangers, the soldiers and the refugees, are all trying to kill us. That's what Amélie says.

I don't know.

She could be right.

I am in the pianist's street again.

I am walking along the pianist's street, I arrive at her house, the window is open, but I can't hear any music this time either.

The street is deserted, silent.

It is hot. The warm earth feels good under my bare feet.

I step inside the garden gate, go up to the carved, single door of the house. There are flowers carved out of wood on the doorframe. I run my fingers along the carved petals.

I put my hand on the door handle.

But I don't open it after all. I turn back towards the garden gate and step out into the street.

As I leave the pianist's house behind, I hear the silence more and more intensely.

Somehow I am very quiet too when I meet my mother at the rectory.

My mother asks:

'What's wrong with you?'

I just shrug my shoulders. This gesture could also mean that there is nothing wrong.

That night I dream of the pianist.

I dream that she is playing the Ode to Joy when strangers go into her house, straight up to the first floor.

In my dream I can't see the strangers' faces. They are wearing black masks.

I see the masked strangers going up the stairs in my dream, they are very noisy, their muddy boots bang heavily on the steps.

But the pianist doesn't hear them. She practises the Ode to Joy over and again.

The masked men go up the stairs and they get more and more noisy. Now it is not only their boots banging away, but they keep raising their voices as they talk to each other.

The masked men speak an unfamiliar language, they almost shout.

They are unbearably noisy.

I want to warn the pianist that she should stop playing and run.

I do my best, but I can't get a sound out.

The masked strangers soon reach the first floor. They are about to get to her.

The pianist just goes on playing the piano.

I start shouting. I am crying in my sleep.

That's when my mother wakes me.

The barracks is right next to the school.

It is still the summer holidays, there is no teaching. I am walking by the fence in front of the barracks with Amélie, we watch the soldiers.

We don't know any of them anymore.

Yuri, the bald soldier, has disappeared too, we don't know where, he didn't even come and say goodbye to my

mother.

We have not had any news of Ivan or Johnny, the tall soldier, for a while either.

The new soldiers are not kind, they are not friendly, they take no notice of us.

They see that Amélie and I are at the fence, but they are not interested, they ignore us.

Amélie waves to one of them, but he doesn't react.

Then the door to the guardroom, where I went in the first few days, opens.

A large, fat guard with a machine gun comes out and heads straight towards us.

He stops in front of us, very close, the only thing separating us is the wrought iron fence.

He says something in a foreign language.

Whatever it is, he says it very loud and he is agitated.

We don't understand.

The foreign language is melodious, soft, as if the soldier were singing.

But this song is frightening too. We can feel the threat in it.

The soldier starts waving at us to go away.

Amélie doesn't understand or doesn't want to understand. She hangs onto the fence and starts swinging back and forth.

The soldier hits Amélie's right hand with the end of his machine gun.

Amélie's face is contorted with the sudden pain. She let's go of the fence and falls backwards.

Her head hits the ground with a thud. I can see the whites of her eyes turning upwards, then she closes her eyes. As if she were asleep. She is peaceful and motionless.

The stranger soldier moves away.

He doesn’t look at us, he doesn’t take any notice of us.

I kneel down next to Amélie, crying. I try to revive her, I tug at her hand, I speak to her, asking her to come with me, to get away from here.

I shout.

As I shout the tears stream down my face.

Amélie suddenly opens her eyes and looks at me.

She looks at me like someone who doesn’t remember a thing.

My mother wakes me at dawn.

She is anxious. She is crying.

My mother says:

‘Someone set the general store on fire in the main square last night. The cars in the square are in flames and the soldiers are out. Come quickly, we are going down to the rectory cellar. We are not safe here.’

My mother gathers a few clothes. Meanwhile I run out to the gate, I can see from here the sky lit up by the fire in the main square.

Military trucks with soldiers sitting on the back file past in the street. They don’t look at me, they stare into space, their eyes blank.

Next door, Amélie’s grandmother stands out at the garden gate, she watches the soldiers, her arms folded on her chest.

All at once, some hooded boys rush towards us, the soldiers shout to them from the trucks, but they just run towards us, towards the rectory.

I see the look in one of their eyes for a moment.

At the precise moment that he hurls his flaming petrol

bomb.

The bottle hits the church window, fragments of glass fly in all directions.

I run to the door. The parish priest and my mother are already there.

The bottle has just crashed down onto the altar and exploded.

My mother brings a bucket. In a panic, we start putting out the flames in the church.

We can hear shots in the street.

‘They are shooting,’ says the priest. ‘Those are machine guns,’ he adds. ‘I recognize the sound.’

Sweat is pouring down his face. And mine. I notice for the first time that there is blood on my mother’s forehead.

Perhaps she was hit by a fragment of glass.

Amélie says a lot of people died last night when the strangers attacked the stranger soldiers.

‘Some of the rebels died and some soldiers too. Apparently the protesters wanted to capture the barracks. My grandmother says the barbarians revolted against the stranger soldiers and that they will even attack us one day. My grandmother says the barbarians are supported with money and firearms by people very far away who want to come here and occupy our country. That’s what Granny says. My grandmother said I shouldn’t go to school because the barbarians will attack it one day. And my grandmother also said that there will be a big war soon, in fact she also said that it could be that the big war has already started, but we just don’t know about it yet.’

Amélie and I are sitting on the ground in front of her

house watching the soldiers as they come and go in our street.

A few of them came into the rectory and spoke to the parish priest.

My mother says they assessed the damage the barbarians caused in the church.

My mother says that these soldiers are not like the ones who were here before, but we can make friends with them all the same.

I am at the pianist's house.

I stand at the fence in front of the pianist's house, I look at the open window, I wait to hear the familiar melody.

Silence.

I go up to the garden gate. I press down the handle and slowly open the gate.

I don't know why, but I'm afraid.

A car appears at the end of the street. It approaches fast with a huge cloud of dust behind it.

I look at the car instinctively. It goes by me very fast.

The front of the car was damaged, one of the headlights was missing. There were five strangers in it, all men.

I can remember that.

I counted how many people were in it as it sped past.

One of the men, I saw this clearly, was holding a machine gun in his hand.

I wait a little then I go over to the front door.

I listen at the door.

I feel there is someone moving inside. I knock at the door, then I listen again.

I don't try the door handle, I don't go into the house.

I just wait.

I can see soldiers coming into view at the end of the street. Three stranger soldiers with machine guns.

I leave the garden and start back towards the rectory.

After a few steps, I look back at the pianist's house one last time.

I stop and look at the open window.

I listen to the silence floating out of the window.

It is like someone playing some kind of very sad music.

The monotonous, sad music floats out of the window.

I am going to school, it is early September.

There are six stranger soldiers in front of the rectory gate, they are examining people's papers.

I step out of the gate, they take no notice of me.

My mother taught me I should always be cheerful, then nothing can go wrong.

I smile at the stranger soldiers, but they don't smile back.

One of the soldiers is just forcing a stranger, covered from head to foot in black cloth, to show her face.

The stranger obeys reluctantly, removing the black, mesh-like material from her face.

For a moment, you can see the frightened face of a young woman with light brown skin.

I look at her inquisitively, suddenly our eyes lock.

The soldier says something to his companion.

They laugh.

At the time, I did not yet know what it must be like to

go along the street completely covered. Now I know. I hide behind the black material woven like mesh. I feel strong, in good spirits. I am special. I can see them, but they can't see me. They can't see my face, they don't know who I am. I feel nothing bad can happen to me. The black veil gives me a feeling of security.

The barracks next to the school has changed.

You can't approach the fence, the soldiers have placed concrete barriers a few metres from it, with sandbags on top of the concrete slabs.

Armed soldiers stand behind the sandbags.

The barrel of an automatic machine gun looks out from amongst the sandbags. The barrel happens to be pointing at our street.

My mother says this is also part of the restrictions and safety measures.

I mean the fact that the soldiers are defending the town with concrete barriers.

In the morning when I go to school, I look steadily into the barrel of the machine gun.

I know the soldier behind the sandbag is watching me. I imagine myself flickering in the crosshairs of his gun sight.

If he pulls the trigger, I will fall to the ground: that's the game I play in my imagination.

I don't go to school today, I carry on towards the main square.

There is a military tank in front of the community centre in the main square. There are soldiers in the square. Doing their drill.

Someone who looks like a commander shouts

continuously in a foreign language.

I can see the soldiers throw themselves to the ground on command, pulling at the locks of their machine guns, as if they were doing battle with someone.

There are no civilians around.

I am going to Amélie's house.

Her grandmother is waiting at the door.

She says:

'A new world is about to start. It's all over for the soldiers. They are very frightened.'

'What are they frightened of?'

'You will see. They are already doing terrible things and later they will do even more terrible things. But it will soon be over for them. I know it. I am sure of it.'

I go into the house to see Amélie, she has a bandage on her right hand, her fingers still hurt where the stranger soldier hit her.

I ask her:

'Have you seen? There are armed soldiers everywhere in the main square. In the streets too, everywhere you look. Masses of stranger soldiers. Your grandmother says they are afraid. What would they be afraid of?'

'Of us,' says Amélie. 'My grandmother says they are afraid of us. But it could be that they are afraid of the strangers. Of the barbarians. My grandmother says the barbarians don't like the soldiers and that one lot is worse than the other. Granny says the trouble is *neither of them is us*. That's what Granny says. That that's the main problem.'

All at once, she gets up like someone who has come to a sudden decision.

‘Come on, I want to show you something.’

Briskly she gets herself ready, puts on a pair of torn trousers, picks up a sharp knife, a paraffin lamp, without a word and with an unusually stony face.

We go down to the cellar.

We take no notice at all of the rats anymore.

We both have lamps in our hands, the light makes the rats run away, terrified.

Masses of black rats with grey patches.

We start out on the usual path, the one leading to the heap of stones.

We reach the heap of stones, the opening is even bigger than it was last time, we don’t even need to bend down to carry on.

We are in the part where the tunnel widens out into a chamber, where we found the boxes last time. In one of the forks someone has cleared away the stone-slide.

Last time we counted eight wooden boxes in the ‘chamber’.

Now there are many more.

Masses of wooden boxes, big enough for a child to fit easily into each one.

Amélie goes up to one of them, the one that is nearest to us.

She approaches it calmly, self-confidently.

She struggles a little with it then, with a sudden jerk, she manages to open the lid.

I go closer and hold up the lamp.

In the box I can see egg-shaped metal objects, a little larger than a chicken’s egg, placed on top of oily rags. Lots and lots of them next to each other.

Amélie says:

‘Egg-grenades. That’s what they’re called here. You

throw them and they explode on impact. They can kill several people in one go. I know. My grandmother told me.'

I look at the grenades. I think to myself how beautiful they are.

And I say so too:

'Actually, they are beautiful.'

'You see theses wooden boxes? There are exactly 45 such boxes down here in the cellar. I counted. There are various weapons in each one, rifles, explosives, bombs, ammunition, revolvers, grenades, machine guns, anything you like. Somebody is bringing them here. I don't know who, I don't know where from. But my grandmother might know. Maybe she knows where the tunnel leads as well. And maybe all this is to fight against the soldiers. Maybe the strangers brought this stuff here. *The barbarians.* But one thing I know for sure is that my grandmother doesn't like them either. The barbarians I mean.'

We make our way out of the cellar.

Amélie has taken a machine gun out of one of the boxes and a whole magazine, I take a fancy to a revolver, it is just like a toy.

We are on our way out, the revolver is in my right hand, the lamp in my left.

I have filled the revolver with cartridges.

One of the rats gets confused when it hears us approaching, instead of running away, it turns to face me and stops.

It is like the rat that clambered up my thigh.

That's what I think to myself.

I am a metre away from the rat, I can see it sniffing, its jaws moving nervously.

All I feel is hatred. Emptiness and hatred. I feel *I just*

hate this one rat.

I lift the revolver and pull the trigger.

Three loud bangs in quick succession. Amélie screams.

The shots hit the rat in the stomach. It lies on the ground with its guts spilling out.

Its legs twitch.

Amélie's grandmother is not at home.

We go into the kitchen. There is a small larder off it.

Amélie goes to the larder floor and lifts up one of the floorboards. She puts the machine gun and the magazine in the hole under the floorboard.

She puts out her hand for the revolver.

I give it to her. I watch as she skilfully takes the remaining cartridges out of the revolver. As if this was something she had always done.

She looks for a plastic bag in the kitchen and puts the revolver in it together with the cartridges.

That's how she gives them back to me.

I go home to the rectory excited.

I go to the laundry room. I remove the brick with the hollow space behind it, where the little jewellery bag is kept.

There is still enough room for what I want.

So I remove the brick, put the plastic bag containing the revolver and the cartridges in the cavity.

I replace the brick.

I wait for my mother. I am hungry.

Since Yuri, the bald soldier, has gone, my mother is

very tense.

She says:

‘I am afraid. I don’t know what’s the matter with me, but I have the feeling something bad is going to happen. We should leave and go to another town, because there’s going to be trouble here. There are too many stranger soldiers and too many stranger civilians. Nobody will help us, you will see. We are strangers everywhere, even if we speak the language of the locals here.’

I don’t like what my mother says. I don’t want to travel anymore to yet another place.

I just look at my mother without saying anything. I don’t say anything, because I don’t know what to say.

I keep quiet.

My mother suddenly gets nervous, she grabs my arm and almost shouts in my face.

‘What’s the matter? Can’t you say something? Can’t you see? Can’t you see that everything is getting worse? Aren’t you afraid?’

I just look at her.

I don’t answer.

My mother is a little pale. But her skirt suits her and her blouse shows off her breasts.

Silence.

‘We’ll manage somehow,’ I say at last, looking into her eyes for long while.

Then I look away.

My mother suddenly stands up straight, lifting up her head.

Like someone who doesn’t give in so easily.

That night I dream that I am in the main square again

in front of the community centre.

I am completely alone, there are no soldiers or tanks in the main square, nothing.

There are only birds.

Dead birds.

You can see dead black and white birds everywhere. They are there everywhere, all over the square.

They lie in the dust.

It is hot. The sun is blazing. My feet are bare.

I am looking at the masses of black and white birds, most of them have their beaks open and their eyes too.

They stare into space.

I walk terrified amongst the dead birds. A bit further over, there is one still moving.

It flaps its wings.

I bend down and lift it up. It doesn't seem to be injured.

I just hold it in my hand. It is hot, very hot. I can hardly breathe.

A military truck arrives with people wearing white protective clothing and gas masks. They jump down from the back of the truck and run towards me.

In my dream I know they want the bird. They want to take away my bird. They make signs to me to give it to them.

And they shout too.

I should run away, but I can't. I would like to run, but I can't move my legs.

The bird in my hand flaps its wings, terrified. It is unable to fly away.

It is sick.

I call my mother for help.

Someone grabs my shoulder.

That’s what wakes me up. My mother is gripping my shoulder and speaking to me.

She says:

‘Come on, wake up, calm down, there is nothing wrong. Come on, little one, we must get away from here.’

I am going to the embassy of a foreign country with my mother. My mother says it is a free country, there is no repression there, there are no soldiers and there is no need to be afraid of strangers. My mother says we can ask for an entry permit to that country because my grandparents live there.

When I ask my mother what grandparents, she just flicks her hand.

We have to go to the embassy of the foreign country by bus. The bus is crowded, we can hardly get on.

My mother says we are going a long way, it will take at least one and a half hours.

I tell her I had no idea this town was so big.

My mother says where we are going is another town and we are lucky the foreign country has a consulate there in that town.

That’s what she says.

The bus stops often, but the passengers don’t get any fewer, in fact there are more and more of them.

The crowd is unbearable, my mother and I stand side by side pressed up against each other.

We travel like this for at least half an hour, when suddenly the bus stops, a few people get off and we hear a lot of shouting from the front of the bus.

More and more passengers get off, then more shouting. Then suddenly my mother starts tugging at my

arm saying we must get off immediately because something has happened.

The other passengers are jumpy too.

Only when I get off do I see that the bus is surrounded by strangers with machine guns. They are shouting, but you can't understand them.

Scarves cover the strangers' faces.

Everyone has got off the bus except the bus driver, who stands by the driver's compartment and tries to explain something to the strangers in the official, state language.

One of the armed men gets bored.

He turns his gun abruptly towards the bus driver.

I hear several loud bangs, the bus driver looks at the armed man dumbfounded, then collapses.

Somewhere far away the sound of a siren. The strangers with machine guns hurl a petrol bomb into the bus.

All I can remember is holding my mother's hand and running.

Looking back as I run, I see the bus in flames behind us.

The strangers with machine guns take flight on motorbikes and bicycles. By the time the military truck with the siren reaches the burning bus, there is not a single armed man at the scene.

My mother's face is sooty, sweat pours down her face. We start out for home on foot.

We walk for a good two hours before the tower of the rectory appears on the horizon.

That's the way home.

Everything happened very fast in those days. From

one day to the next. The whole thing was so strange. As if years were passing by in weeks. My mother said at the time that this was all because we were going through great changes. And we could see many new faces around us. That this was one of the reasons we felt less and less secure. And in those days my mother was right about that. Home for me at the time was the rectory. Somehow or other I still felt all right there. Because I felt safe.

Everything is changing at school too.

Lots of new children arrive in the course of a few days.

I still get on well with Amélie and Sára but the new children bother me.

One girl, Fatima, always sits there in a headscarf. Even during lessons she wears a scarf on her head, in case we catch a glimpse of her hair.

At least that's what she says, that we mustn't see her hair.

She wears her scarf to gym too, in fact she doesn't even want to wear gym shoes, she runs in slippers and plays ball games in slippers.

The teacher allows her to do all this.

She is very clumsy anyway.

Fatima is not alone. She has friends who protect her. And who won't let us take the scarf off her head.

Though we would like to see her hair.

Sára goes over to Fatima and asks her:

'Why don't you take off your headscarf? It is not that cold. Or are you afraid we will see your messy hair? I'm sure there is nothing much to see.'

Fatima bends her head and doesn't answer. She tries

to move away, but Sára won't let her.

'You know, if you live here, you have to behave like the rest of us. We don't walk around in headscarves, do we?'

One of the stranger boys called Rachid has been sitting around quietly up to now at the other end of the classroom. Now he gets up, goes over and stands between Sára and Fatima. Fatima steps in front of him facing Sára, she doesn't say a word.

Then suddenly she pushes Sára backwards with both hands so that she falls over flat on her back.

By that time Arno is there too. He clutches a sharp knife in his hand.

He says:

'You louse! You've had it now!'

Rachid instinctively raises his hands to protect himself.

That's his good fortune. Arno stabs him with such force that the knife slips on the hand held up in defence and pierces his shoulder.

That's when the teacher arrives. He leans on his crutch with one hand and grabs Arno's wrist with the other.

Arno's face flinches and he drops the knife.

At the rectory I tell my mother what happened at school. She shrugs her shoulders:

'Sára was wrong,' she says. 'everyone can dress as they please.'

I don't say anything.

Then I ask my mother:

'And when are we leaving to go to my grandparents?'

My mother is just doing the washing up in the kitchen. She doesn't look at me, but she says:

'We might never go. After all you like living here, don't you?'

I am going to the pianist's house.

The street is empty. I open the garden gate and go up to the front door.

I make up my mind and try the door handle.

The door is stuck and difficult to open. It seems as if nobody has been there for a very long time.

Semi-darkness in the staircase, I grope for the light switch, not finding it at first. I fumble around with my fingers along the wall, then I suddenly feel it in the palm of my hand. I turn the switch on but in vain, there is no electricity.

I go up the stairs to the first floor.

The door to the room is open, I can see there is someone inside.

I feel some very strong smell. A nauseating stench.

It is the pianist. Her head droops on the music-rest, she sits motionless.

I go over to her, somehow the whole situation is so unnatural.

I touch her shoulder.

I only touch her shoulder for a second, pushing her just a little.

The pianist slumps to the floor sweeping the music for the Ode to Joy off the music-rest.

Her head hits the floor. I jump back horrified.

I hear a shrill whining.

A rat.

It climbs out of the pianist's mouth. I can see it pushing its pointed little nose out of the pianist's twisted mouth, then it slowly crawls out.

I can see its tiny eyes, its whiskers, as it moves.

I don't remember the rest. I only have confused memories of the whole thing. I vaguely remember rushing down the stairs screaming and crying, a few rats going wild because I am shouting and I seem to remember them scurrying down the stairs with me.

As if someone or something had disturbed their quiet feast.

I can see myself running crying along the street towards the rectory.

People come towards me, perhaps as many as several hundred of them, strangers, the women with black headscarves on their heads.

The children watch, terrified, as I run crying towards them.

One of the armed soldiers accompanying the strangers speaks to me, but I take no notice of him.

I race home to my mother, to the rectory.

I can no longer remember exactly how it all happened. I mean in what order. It is even possible that I went to pianist's house earlier. That the sequence of events was completely different. That I discovered the pianist's body before my mother and I tried to go to the consulate of the foreign country to seek asylum. It could be. It could be that I am confusing the times different things happened. It could be that the fight at school took place later too. Long after the pianist's death. I can't recall the exact order of events. I can just see in my mind's eye how it all happened.

I can’t see it as a continuous story, but as situations I found myself in. I can see myself fleeing from the first floor of the pianist’s house and the rats rushing down the stairs with me. I am sure of that much. I don’t think I need bother with the order too much. Only with what happened. The thing I remember most about the time I discovered the pianist’s body is the running part. Racing home to my mother, to the rectory.

At home, at the rectory, three stranger soldiers are talking to my mother. My mother is showing them papers.

She doesn’t look at me when I come in.

I go into the laundry room, go over to the secret hiding place, lift out the brick, reach in, take out the plastic bag containing the revolver and the cartridges.

I wrap the bag in a rag and go over to my mother.

‘I am going over to Amélie’s,’ I say to her.

I don’t even look at the soldiers.

For some reason, my mother is very disturbed. She seems relieved when she says:

‘All right. Don’t stay long.’

I go to Amélie’s.

In the end, I didn’t tell my mother what happened to the pianist.

I didn’t tell anyone.

The only person I told was Amélie, but only in the last few days, at school, after the school-opening ceremony. When we were sitting on the ground in the gym, very frightened.

Only then did I tell her.

Amélie cried a lot. She cried without making a sound, the tears ran down her face.

She wept for the pianist.

We drank tears too, during those few days, so we wouldn't die of thirst.

Not that tears are any good if you are thirsty.

They are no good for anything.

Amélie's grandmother is not at home. Amélie sits in the kitchen eating potato latkes.

She stuffs herself with potato latkes and talks with her mouth full:

'My grandmother says that it really is all over for us, because the barbarians have moved into our street too. My grandmother also says that it's like the plague, you can't protect yourself against it, all you can do is run away from it. My grandmother also said that if she were younger, she would certainly go away from here, to a country where there is peace and quiet, where there are no barbarians or stranger soldiers either. Granny also says that no one will help us anymore. That it would be better to die than to *witness* all this. That's what she said. *Witness.* I don't know what that word means. And Granny also said that everything would get worse and worse. That now there really is no way out anymore. Yes, that's what she said. And she also said that soon many, many people would die. She said there is only suffering, sickness and death. And that there is nothing good in life. She is in a very bad mood these days, my grandmother.'

I listen to what Amélie is saying.

I don't know if her grandmother is right.

The parish priest tells my mother that the whole situation is not the strangers' fault.

And that they are suffering just as we are.

By the way, the situation is that a family of five strangers really has moved into the adobe house opposite, where the Thin Girl used to live.

In the evening, at home in the rectory, I tell my mother what Amélie said.

I don't talk about the pianist.

My mother tries to reassure me:

'The fact that the 'barbarians', as you call them, are a little different to us, is not a bad thing in itself. Don't let it bother you. We are strangers here, so are they. They don't speak the local language or the official state language, but they will learn. They have their own way of dressing too, but it doesn't matter. You mustn't take any notice of such things. Be kind to them and they will be kind to you. Don't let it bother you that they dress in a different way. Our lives are no better than theirs. And theirs is no better than ours. We live here in the rectory, whereas they don't go to church. They go to another church. They pray in a different way. I don't know. I don't understand it either. In any case the priest said we should take no notice of them and then there won't be any trouble. We are living in difficult times. We should be glad that nothing bad has happened yet here in this town.'

The next day my mother gathers potatoes, tomatoes, green peppers, carrots, parsley, also eggs and goat cheese and goes over to the house opposite.

I watch her as she stops in front of the door to the Thin Girl's house.

She waits a little, then knocks, finally she pushes down the door handle.

She disappears behind the door.

A good half an hour goes by till the door of the house opposite finally opens again, I can see my mother saying

goodbye, she is even laughing, a stranger woman's voice says something, I don't understand what.

When my mother comes back, she looks a little sad.

At bedtime she just says:

'You know, little one, they are just human too, made of the same stuff we are. We all want the same thing. To live as well as we can.'

To live, to live, to live! According to Amélie the reason it is difficult to live is because we don't know what we are supposed to live for. She used to say things like that in those days. And things like: if there is only sadness, then we don't feel it is worth being alive. But she only said this in the last few days. I think Amélie liked being alive. That's what I think.

It is Sunday, the midday bells are ringing. Mass is over.

My mother gives the priest his lunch. That's all she has to do today, then she has half a day's rest.

There is vegetable soup followed by pasta with curd cheese and sour cream.

My mother laughs, she is in a good mood. While she serves the food, she says to the priest:

'In spite of everything, Father, we live well. We have a really good life, we have no reason to complain.'

After lunch, I go to Amélie's.

I take a paraffin lamp, a spade and some rope, as usual.

I say to her:

'I would like to go down to the cellar. I want to

check on the weapons. To see if they are still there.'

We go to the cellar, the rats are unusually jumpy.

They run around all over the place, hardly noticing our presence.

Crawling through the opening in the heap of stones, we smell something strange.

As we get closer to the 'chamber', the smell becomes stronger and stronger. It is the same stench I came across at the pianist's house.

We reach the boxes. There are more rats than usual.

There is a body beside one of the boxes. Its clothing must once have been white. A long white robe. Now it has several black patches of coagulated blood on it.

Its face is unrecognizable by now. It is like the pianist's.

The robe moves. A nervous rat noses its way out from under the robe, somewhere around the stomach of the corpse. Its mouth is gnawing away.

It stares at us with its tiny eyes.

We don't rush out, just draw back slowly, cautiously.

As we watch the rat's eyes.

As we back away, Amélie holds my hand. I can feel her sweaty palm in mine.

We crawl through the opening under the heap of stones and run. We hear our feet beating down on the cellar floor.

It is like some kind of threat.

At night I snuggle up to my mother. I can't go to sleep.

I cry for a long time. My mother rocks me, strokes my head, she doesn't ask what's wrong.

When I finally go to sleep, I see the pianist's head in a dream.

Her face is full of green, mauve and yellow patches.

She has no forehead, the sharp nose of a rat creeps out of her mouth.

The rat's nose and mouth are moving. It sniffs and nibbles something at the same time.

It fixes its red eyes on me.

It watches me and meanwhile it seems to get larger and larger.

The rat grows, I can feel its stinking breath.

Its pointed nose is very close to my mouth.

Amélie says everything is getting darker and darker around us. The people in black robes walk in the street, their faces gloomy, forever in a bad temper. Everyone is sad. She also says that her grandmother is still in a bad temper all the time. In the old days, her grandmother used to laugh a lot, says Amélie and sometimes even sang to her, but nowadays she just keeps quiet. Amélie says her grandmother's constant silence is very depressing.

The school is right next to the barracks. I am going to school with Amélie. We meet quite a few stranger military patrols on our way, one of them stops us and asks where we are going.

They look in Amélie's bag, then let us go on.

Amélie tells me:

'I went down to the cellar again last night. I went with my grandmother, because I told her everything, about the boxes, the dead man, the rats, the weapons and I also

told her that you shot the rat and took the revolver with you. I showed my grandmother the machine gun I hid. Granny said what we did was dangerous, but she is not angry. She said that perhaps it is a good thing we have some weapons and that you never know when we might need them. But she said that the barbarians probably put those boxes there, not the stranger soldiers, because, this is what Granny said, the stranger soldiers don't need underground passages, they have their barracks and buildings and cars, they have places to keep their firearms. But according to her, to Granny I mean, the barbarians are getting the firearms from somewhere in secret, obviously from over the border, and Granny also said that that means that it is now absolutely certain that the tunnel from our cellar leads abroad, to free countries where people are rich.'

At school the one-legged teacher explains that there is only one homeland and that everyone should love the country they live in.

Then he asks the children where each of them was born, everyone has to say where they come from, who their parents are.

The teacher asks Sára who says that when she was little, they were always wandering around, playing music to earn their living, only when it was time for her to start school did her mother decide they would stay here in this town.

The teacher keeps questioning the children one by one. Everyone answers honestly.

Hiro says he came from very far away, on an aeroplane and he doesn't know exactly why his parents came here but, says Hiro, his Daddy told him that their home country sent them here, they were going to start some

kind of factory and they would only leave when the factory was well established. And according to Hiro, if his Daddy said that, then obviously they really did come here because of that, so that the factory actually would get under way.

And Hiro also says that he would very much like to go home now, because he feels much more relaxed at home than here where there are so many soldiers.

After Hiro, it is Fatima's turn then Arno's.

Then Amélie's.

Amélie says she was born in the house where she still lives with her grandmother. And that she never had a Mummy. She says that too.

Then the teacher turns to me:

'And you Anna, where did you come from? What does your father do? Is he still alive?'

I look at the teacher without saying anything.

'Well, what is it? Are you dumb? Can't you answer a question?'

I stand up at the desk and take two steps forward towards the teacher.

The teacher looks at me, goes pale, clutches the teacher's table with one hand.

I take another step towards him.

Whereupon he lifts his crutch:

'Don't come any closer, you bastard child, because I swear I will do something I might regret!'

I step very close to the teacher and speak to him, whispering, right into his face:

'I was born here at the rectory, my father is the local Catholic priest. My mother has been his lover since she was a little girl. This is a real, enormous secret, but I can tell you because you are a good man. You don't hurt the children, but make them wiser, so that when they grow up

they can hold their own in the world. Incidentally, my mother said she was your lover too many, many years ago and it could be that you are the one who is my father. Because you are like that. You make passes at the little girls at school. Everyone knows that. So if you jump around a lot, I will tell everyone that you tried to pull my knickers down in the toilet last time and I will also tell them that you took out your tail and tried to put it in my mouth. So be careful with me, Mister teacher, because you might regret it. You know, you can't tell me much that I don't know, I have already seen so much.'

The teacher just looks at me.

He doesn't answer.

The class listens uneasily. I walk slowly towards the door.

I am calm and self-confident.

Just as I go out through the school door, a military truck goes by.

On top of it a soldier with a machine gun, wearing a helmet.

The soldiers now post guards in front of all the most important buildings.

In the main square is the community centre where they used to show films in the old days.

The new military commander has given permission, as my mother puts it, for weekly film shows to be held once more.

Of course, we can only watch films the military commander has approved in advance.

At least that's what my mother says.

We are going to the community centre together. There

is a long queue at the cash desk.

My mother says:

‘Stand in the queue, I’ll go and ask how much the tickets are. If they are very expensive, we won’t go to the film. I don’t care how much you grumble, we don’t have the money for entertainment.’

I stand in the queue. There are quite a few people we know. I wave to some of them.

Everyone is pleased that there is going to be a film show.

There are strangers in the queue too. Fat women in coloured dresses.

There are even one or two strangers covered in black headscarves in the queue.

They are chatting to each other, in an unfamiliar language.

My mother comes back. She says:

‘The tickets are not expensive. But there are only a few. We probably won’t get in. They say there will be another film show next week.’

I stand in the queue. Amélie and her grandmother are in front of me.

The queue advances slowly. A lot of people are already inside the community centre where you can buy pretzels and drinks.

Amélie says:

‘Some people have already seen the film somewhere else, in another town. They say this film is about people who live over the border. You can see beautiful cars in the film and everyone is very rich. They say there are even lovers in the film. Kissing. And that all the women are beautiful, beautifully dressed in beautiful, long dresses. And the men are elegant too. They are all in suits and ties. And

you can even see the sea. Do you know how beautiful the sea is when the waves roll? The people who told me have already seen the film. Really.'

The queue moves forward slowly, very slowly. I close my eyes.

I imagine myself inside the cinema or the community centre watching the film.

I can see the sea. I can see a very flat seashore covered in sand, the sea is a very dark blue.

It is almost black.

Blinding sunshine.

There is a sunshade on the beach. A half-naked woman lies on her stomach under the sunshade, next to her an athletic, muscular man.

He is just applying sun oil to the woman's back.

A bit further over in the water, a boat. It seems to be floating on the water without an owner.

The sea is almost completely smooth.

A ship appears in the distance.

A steamship.

When he sees it, the man runs right to the edge of the water and waves to the steamship in the distance.

The woman shouts something to the man.

I can't hear what it is. I can't hear anything, I can just see that she is shouting.

The whole scene is like a silent film.

The ship is very far from the shore. The passengers probably didn't notice the man waving.

You can see the ship going further into the distance and slowly disappearing on the horizon.

The man is disappointed and punches the air with his

fist. As if he were boxing.

The woman says something to the man again.

I can't hear what she is saying this time either, but I can see her mouth moving.

I would read her lips and see what she is trying to say, but she is speaking a foreign language.

I don't understand.

We see the woman's mouth very close up. Her lips are painted red, we can see her tongue as she speaks.

Her strong, white teeth flash in the sunlight.

The flashing of her teeth is almost blinding.

I open my eyes. A lot of people have already gone into the community centre, but we are still at least ten metres from the cash-desk.

Amélie is in front of me with her grandmother.

She is just explaining to her grandmother that there are actors in films who stand in for the real actors.

Amélie says these actors are called stunt men and they are people who can do the kind of dangerous things that the real actors would not be able to do.

Amélie is saying that there are women who do stunts in films too and that when she grows up and lives somewhere else, not here where she lives now, then she would like to be such a stunt woman.

Amélie says:

'You know, Granny, sometimes a stunt woman has to get undressed instead of the actress. This is a good thing because the stunt woman has a beautiful body, but we don't see her face, and the actress who perhaps doesn't have such a beautiful body, doesn't have to show it, so everyone is happy.'

First I see the bright light.

Then I hear the bang.

The light is terribly strong. For a fraction of a second I see the windows of the community centre flying out of the building.

The sound of the explosion is even stronger than the light. A sharp pain splits my ears.

Then I lose consciousness.

When I come to, I am lying on a stretcher.

I am covered with a white sheet, I can't move my legs.

The sheet is bloody.

People are rushing around everywhere.

A soldier bends over me, he asks me something, but I can't hear what it is.

I can only see his gaping mouth.

There is complete silence around me.

Amélie is lying on the ground next to me on a blanket. She doesn't have a sheet covering her, but her dress is creased and dirty, speckled with blood stains.

She speaks to me too. I can't hear what she says.

I lift my head up a little.

One of the walls of the community centre has collapsed. Glass fragments, rubble, plaster and pieces of brick on the ground.

And blood.

Human remains and body parts everywhere. A leg lies not far from me, a little further over someone's hand.

And shoes. I don't know why, but masses of shoes lie all over the place.

And pieces of clothing.

As if those who had gone into the community centre had cheerfully thrown off their clothes.

As if they wanted to watch the film in the nude.

Soldiers and civilians run up and down all around me. Everyone is very tense. And yet it is as though everyone were rushing so *slowly.*

As if everything had slowed down.

As for hearing, I can't hear a thing.

A red-haired woman in a white coat comes up to me.

She is calm.

She strokes my face, says something, asks me something, then waves to two soldiers.

They put me on a military truck together with the stretcher. The truck is going to the town hospital.

I recognize the way.

I can see the sky through the tops of the poplar trees, everything is so calm and beautiful.

The yellow entrance to the hospital is familiar.

The cotton wool soaked in disinfectant is cool. I shiver as it touches my skin.

I am given an injection by a girl in a green dress.

She motions with her hands that the injection will make me go to sleep.

She puts her palms together and puts her head on her hands to show me how I am going to sleep.

She makes an effort to amuse me and clowns around.

I try to smile, but I am not sure I manage.

Meanwhile I think how nice it would be if my mother were here with me now.

3.

I have a favourite doctor.

I don’t have a problem with doctors, they are really kind.

But my favourite one is different.

He sits down beside me on the bed, tells me stories, strokes my face.

Sometimes, if he thinks I look sad for some reason, he clowns around and makes funny faces.

He is a short, plump man, my favourite doctor. He has round glasses.

He says he is 45 years old.

He talks a lot.

He tells me what kind of life he has had up to this point. He tells me he had a wife, but she died some time ago, somewhere far away, in another town.

He says his wife died in some kind of attack.

I like listening to my favourite doctor’s stories.

My favourite doctor also says it is a miracle that I can hear again.

It is true that I am deaf in one ear and that I can only hear with the other one because they put some foreign hearing aid in it which magnifies sound, but my favourite doctor says that even this is quite something.

Because the moment the explosion happened, I was standing at an angle which turned out to be harmful for my hearing ducts.

The fact is that I don’t mind having a hearing aid in

my ear.

That’s the way things are for the moment.

I have a hearing aid, but I can hear.

The doctors and nurses say I mustn’t be sad, because that will stop me getting better.

Luckily they give me medicines that stop me being sad.

My favourite doctor checks every morning:

‘Hello, Anna. Tell me, have you taken your happy pills?’

I take the happy pills every morning. They give me tea, bread, a slice of cheese or a little jam, it depends, and the medicines.

I get the medicines in a little pot, a yellow capsule, a white one and a red one.

I swallow them with the tea, that’s how I start the day. Then I have the bread and the rest.

I like the cheese and the jam.

Together.

My favourite doctor sits down on the edge of my bed and asks how I am and he also says I have beautiful, red hair.

He doesn’t speak very loud, he doesn’t shout or anything like that, yet I can understand every word.

That’s how the day begins.

Nothing happens during the day.

Sometimes they take me for tests, less and less often. They say I am going to have an operation, but it will only be a routine one. That’s what they say.

There are twenty-five of us in the ward.

Children.

We don’t really talk to each other. Everyone sleeps a lot, even during the day.

We are not down in the dumps, but we are none too cheerful either. Somehow nobody makes a noise or runs around.

Everybody is quiet.

We are ill.

My favourite doctor comes to see me in the evening too. He asks me how my day went and wishes me good night.

He always says I have to rest. That I must sleep as much as possible.

He says I have been through a lot.

And he tells me not to forget to take my medicines.

Every evening he is very persuasive about a small, oblong capsule. Because it will make me sleep well.

I take the capsule and wait patiently to fall asleep.

I feel very calm.

I like to sleep and I sleep deeply. I don't have dreams. I like to feel my body relaxing. Everything is so peaceful and calm.

Before I go to sleep, I don't think about my mother at all anymore.

My mother was buried together with the remains of the other victims of the explosion, on the plot of land behind the rectory. The town authorities opened a new cemetery because they wanted the 198 people who died in the attack on the community centre, to rest in peace together in one place.

That is how my favourite doctor tells it.

These are his words. I couldn't express myself like he does.

Actually, we never used the land behind the rectory,

that’s why I didn’t mention it earlier. My mother only ever grew things in the rectory garden and fed the animals. That kept her busy enough.

Forever running around looking after the parish-priest.

So she had enough to do anyway without having to look after the land behind the rectory as well. She wasn’t interested in that land.

And now she is there.

Now she is near the rectory. According to my favourite doctor, there is a nice, little wooden cross on her grave. Because I haven’t seen my mother’s grave yet.

Actually, I slept through the funeral too.

Or rather I was still very ill then. They operated on my ear and they had to treat my leg as well.

I am feeling better now.

My favourite doctor says my mother had a beautiful funeral. The governor of the town and the president of the local soviet spoke and the local military commander. Of course they didn’t only talk about my mother, but about everyone who died.

My favourite doctor says that the explosion was an act of stupidity of huge proportions and nobody understands why those that caused it did such a thing.

It’s impossible to explain something like that, says my favourite doctor.

Now 198 people are resting there, sleeping and dreaming their eternal dreams. That’s what everyone says. The nurses say so too. I asked them.

By the way, last time my favourite doctor also said it might not be that long before I can see my mother’s grave.

In a little while.

When I can walk again.

I can’t walk yet because of my spine.

Actually, this is the operation I am waiting for.

My favourite doctor says that I will be able to feel my legs when a nerve next to my spine is working again.

He also says that in order for this to happen, I have to have an operation on my spine and they are going to do it soon, but I am not to worry, because nowadays this is not such a big operation and he knows for certain that I will be able to walk again soon.

A nerve near my spine was damaged, that’s why I have trouble with my legs, says my favourite doctor.

Because a fragment of a shell damaged a nerve by my spine. It is lucky it did not do more harm, says my favourite doctor.

He also says if all goes well they will do the operation next week.

I like to listen to my favourite doctor explaining things. Everything is so peaceful then. I don’t have to worry about anything. I feel I am secure and nothing bad can happen to me.

According to my doctor I will feel both my legs again after the operation and then, when I can feel my legs, I will learn to walk again nice and slowly.

My doctor says that it might take months for me to learn to walk, because the nerve will mend very slowly, but he also says he is sure I will be able to walk again because I am young and my body can still *regenerate*.

That’s what he says.

In fact, I am waiting impatiently for all this to happen. To be able to walk again I mean.

It is no good lying in bed all the time.

It is morning. I am waiting for my tea and my medicine. One of the nurses comes, the same one who comes nearly every morning and she says:

‘You won’t get any breakfast this morning, only a little water. Because you are going to have your operation today. They will send you to sleep. We will take you soon and prepare you. It will be over very quickly, you will see. The most important thing is not to worry. Everything will be all right.’

A boy dressed in a green overall arrives. He is pushing a bed on wheels.

He pushes it next to my bed.

The boy smiles, he is kind, but he doesn’t say much. He says I should stay lying down, he will see to everything.

He lifts the upper half of my body, pulling me onto the bed on wheels so that my bottom just slides over too. Then he lifts my legs and pulls them over as well.

While he works on me, he asks:

‘Can you really not feel me touching your legs?’

‘No, I can’t,’ I say. ‘But the doctors say I will get better.’

‘I am sure you will,’ says the boy in the green overall. ‘Another girl was in this state and they were able to help her. Though they had to cut off one of her legs. But she can walk on the other one now. She walks up and down the corridor using a crutch. She is here in the hospital, one floor down. I will introduce you to her, if you like. They are going to let her go home soon. They say she might get an artificial leg later on. There are very good artificial legs these days. They make such wonderful artificial legs far away in rich countries that, at first glance, you can’t even

tell they are not real legs. Seriously!'

Meanwhile, he is pushing me along the corridor. He pushes me into a lift and we go right down to the basement. That's where the operating theatres are.

They say the dead are kept down here on this floor too.

The boy in green pushes me into a very brightly lit room.

At least five people come over to me. They are all wearing white masks.

They push some kind of equipment over my head. I can smell strange smells.

Then I don't feel anything.

I wake up to find someone is slapping me.

It's my favourite doctor.

'Well, you really are a lucky girl,' he says. 'We haven't had such a successful operation for a long time.'

I can hardly understand what he is saying. Everything around me is very hazy. I can't even see his face clearly.

My favourite doctor carries on talking:

'Now listen to me very carefully, Anna, because I am going to start tapping your legs a little. We want to know if you can feel anything.'

I am still very tired. I can hardly keep my eyes open.

My favourite doctor slaps me again and tells me to drink some liquid. Water.

It is only now I realize there are at least five people standing around me looking at my face.

One of the nurses helps me sit up and makes me drink a little water.

In the meantime, my favourite doctor uncovers my

legs and starts tapping the soles of my feet.

He lifts my leg then drops it on the bed.

He lifts it again and drops it again.

He keeps tapping the sole of my foot. I can't feel anything.

I tell him so:

'I can't feel anything. It's just like yesterday.'

The doctor doesn't give up. He smiles and taps my sole harder and harder.

I feel something strange. As though the sole of my foot had gone numb.

It feels bad.

My sole is tingling, as if ants were crawling over it.

I tell them so:

'It feels bad. As if the sole of my foot had gone to sleep.'

Everyone starts laughing. The nurse strokes my face.

My favourite doctor hits my sole and drops my leg back on the bed.

He says:

'Rub your sole a bit with your hand. It's all right for it to feel numb. You will be running in a couple of months.'

I am still limping.

I walk with a stick, but everyone says I will soon be able to stop using it. They also say I have a lot to thank the doctors for.

I don't know. I only know I am glad to be home at last.

Home at the rectory.

The priest says I can stay with him, it's only natural, now that my mother is dead he will not put me on the

street. I will help him with the housekeeping eventually, that's how I will pay for my keep living here.

With him at the rectory.

The priest also says he liked my mother very much, that we are living in a terrifying world, there is destruction everywhere and many people dying.

For the moment my back and my leg hurt a lot, but the doctors say, my favourite doctor too, that this is natural. And my favourite doctor also says that I should be careful not to do any heavy physical work.

I talk things over with the priest. I will feed the animals in the morning, let the chickens out so they can scratch around and look after the vegetable beds.

I am living where I used to live with my mother. I keep the kitchen tidy, just like my mother used to do.

I can cook a little now too.

One evening I roll out some home-made pasta, cook it and surprise the priest with a dish of pasta with curd cheese and sour cream. I know it's his favourite.

He had often mentioned it to my mother.

We sit at the table in the twilight. As we used to long ago. Only my mother is missing.

The priest says:

'We will be all right. I will help.'

'I will do my best, Father.'

'I thought I might employ a woman to help. But I can see there is no need.'

We hadn't had such a peaceful evening for a long time.

As we sit there, the two of us, I think how happy my mother would be to see me now.

Then I think that, in the end, I owe this feeling of tranquillity to my mother too.

And then I think that for some reason I will never believe that my mother is really dead.

Because I haven't seen her body.

Later on, I would much rather believe that she had simply just left me here.

My favourite doctor visits me.

He has come to see me at the rectory. He arrives, sits down in the kitchen and smiles.

He says:

'It is good to see you, Anna.'

It is strange to see him again.

It is strange and it is good at the same time.

I was in the hospital for a long time and I miss everything there.

I even miss the tests.

I miss the hospital and the nurses. I missed my favourite doctor too and now I am happy to see him again.

I even miss the operations and the rehab. In a word, I had got used to being in the hospital.

It is different here. Out here. I have to make my own way. With whatever strength I have.

I tell my favourite doctor:

'I have to manage on my own now with whatever strength I have. I have to go on living, I have to eat. I have to work for all this.'

My doctor says:

'I wanted to see you. To find out how you are. I wanted to see for myself. It is a miracle that you can walk and it is a miracle that you can hear. I must tell you this now in retrospect.'

We just sit there hardly talking.

‘You are strong, you will get back on your feet,’ says my doctor. ‘Don’t let events just sweep you along. Go back to school and have the will to grow up. This is what your mother would ask of you too.’

I shrug my shoulders uncertainly.

I don’t know what my mother would ask of me.

Other people said so, the priest said so at the time, even Amélie’s grandmother said so. They feel slightly that I simply let things happen to me. That I don’t put up enough of a struggle. Looking back, I don’t understand why, to what end, I should have put up a struggle. And why they said all this. I didn’t understand anything very well back then and I didn’t really know what to do with myself. I was always wondering what my mother would do in my place now. I always felt that she wouldn’t know what to do either anymore. Somehow, things just happened. And I didn’t really know what I could do for them not to happen the way they did. After all, my mother was no longer alive. By now I was even pleased that, in his own clumsy way, the priest looked after me. I felt at the time that I had to earn this, I had to do something in return. And that’s all I wanted. To work for the priest because he let me go on living with him.

Sometimes, very rarely, I go over to see Amélie.

She has changed too of course.

Most of the time we just talk, we don’t play like we used to.

It’s as if we had got a little older.

We sit down outside the kitchen and talk like old women.

Sometimes I peel the vegetables for the soup while we talk.

Many months have gone by since the attack. I am not going to school now.

I am skipping a year.

I got permission to do so.

Amélie tells me what is going on at school, how the teacher is getting on, what they learned while I was ill.

We talk a lot about the attack.

Amélie tells me that according to her grandmother the barbarians were responsible for the attack.

Amélie also says that her grandmother thinks it makes no difference that some of the victims agreed with the barbarians or were barbarians themselves.

Amélie even says that the barbarians did this, that is what her grandmother says, because according to their faith they will go to heaven immediately if they blow themselves up with non-barbarians.

I tell Amélie that I don't understand any of this and it doesn't interest me.

I would like peace, I tell Amélie.

And I also tell her I can't quite believe that people would blow themselves up together with other people, because they think they will go to heaven immediately by doing this.

And that I really don't understand it at all. To my mind, this could not be true, I tell her.

Amélie replies that she doesn't understand it either, but she thinks we don't necessarily have to understand everything that goes on in the world.

That's what she says.

I don't know. Perhaps she is right. We don't necessarily have to understand everything.

Looking back, I would say that everything was still all right then. Of course nothing was all right anymore, but we still felt at the time that everything might turn out all right. We both felt that. And it was a good thing for instance that Amélie had never asked about my father since the attack. She didn't ask why my father didn't come and fetch me, why he didn't take me away from here, now that my mother was dead. And this was a good thing. She didn't ask. She didn't ask a lot of questions about things like that.

I am going next door to Amélie's house.

It is hot. It is summer. The end of August.

A long time has gone by since the attack. Since my mother died.

I say to Amélie:

'I am going to go to school again in September. I discussed it with the priest. I will go to school in the morning and help with the housekeeping at the rectory first thing and later in the afternoon.'

Amélie says:

'There are lots of new children. You will see. Quite a few are strangers.'

Amélie's face has changed recently. It is always sad.

Amélie's grandmother arrives, bringing potato latkes.

We sit on the ground in the dust as we used to long ago, eating the potato latkes.

Amélie's grandmother says:

'This month of August is very quiet. It is peaceful nowadays.'

'Perhaps it will always be like this from now on.

Perhaps nothing bad will happen anymore,' says Amélie.

A military helicopter flies past in the sky above us.

'Luckily the soldiers are always on guard duty, watching everything. So the barbarians can't do anything to us,' says Amélie.

She really hates the barbarians.

It is a muggy August day. I think only about the fact that I can walk again and my back doesn't hurt so much either.

Then I suddenly think of the pianist.

I will go past there tomorrow and see what's happened to her house.

I will stop by the railings, I think to myself, it will be like the old days when I used to listen to her practising.

It will be good to hang onto the iron railings again.

It will be good to feel the cool touch of the iron railings in my hands.

I am on my way to the main square.

It's impossible to get close to the barracks. The soldiers watch menacingly from behind the concrete barricades and sandbags.

They ask to see my papers twice before I reach the main square.

These are routine checks, obviously they are not interested in me.

They look at my passport, the one that nice lady filled out at the soviet, then they wave me on.

I can see four or five strangers guarded by a group of armed soldiers, then a truck moving up to them and the strangers having to clamber on.

I see that all the strangers are handcuffed.

Two women in black veils go up to one of the armed soldiers, a stranger, and say something to him. The armed soldier is surprisingly helpful, pointing to the barracks and explaining something.

As I go towards the main square, a tank thunders past.

Dust and more dust everywhere.

The main square has completely changed.

Both the sooty, burnt out general store and the butcher's shop are closed and the community centre is in ruins.

There are military guards and a barrier in front of the community centre.

You can't get near it.

I can see weapons being unloaded from a truck. I am familiar with these weapons by now, they are like machine guns only bigger.

I saw some at the barracks and also earlier on one or two trucks.

In the old days Yuri used to say they could even be used against aeroplanes.

The soldiers are unloading weapons like this in the square, in front of the community centre.

The community centre is still in ruins, though there would have been plenty of time to put it in order since the attack.

Still, nothing has changed.

The square hasn't changed either, the street is exactly the same as it was.

The priest says this is a state of war. There is no money for anything. And that everyone is afraid. Terrified.

That’s why they don’t put anything in order.

In other words, nothing has changed.

Of course, this isn’t true, because everyone being much sadder than before is also a change.

And another change is the fact that I am alone now.

There is nobody close to me that I can rely on.

Another change is that everything is much worse, people are poorer than before the attack.

Everyone says so.

The parish-priest says so. He has less money too. Even the faithful are not making donations anymore.

I look at the community centre in ruins. Then I imagine what the film would have been like, if I had seen it.

Then I turn my back on the ruins of the community centre. I shrug my shoulders.

I am not interested.

When it comes down to it, I am not interested in the community centre. It was stupid of us to come here. It was my fault. If I hadn’t wanted to see that film at the time, my mother would still be alive today. And then I would not feel so alone.

And then everything would be different. Perhaps I would finally even go across the border, with my mother.

Across the border, to a place *where I would not be here.*

I set out away from the square, towards the pianist’s house.

I don’t really know why I am going that way. Perhaps because of the iron railings. Perhaps it really is only the sensation of touching them that I miss.

Some strangers come towards me. Women in black veils. I can see their faces, only their heads are covered.

Bearded men follow them.

Otherwise the street is empty.

I stop at the pianist's house and cling to the iron railings.

The door is closed.

I see there is some kind of paper ribbon on the door. The ribbon is sealed.

I open the garden door. I go up to the front door.

Exactly five steps. *This hasn't changed either.*

I look at the seal on the ribbon. It says: "3rd military command".

Suddenly someone grabs my shoulder. I look round. It is a soldier I haven't seen before.

He has a machine gun.

He asks me something in a foreign language.

I don't understand. He is not speaking the local language or the official language of the state.

He repeats the question and points to the pianist's house.

I still don't understand. I think he is asking me if I knew the pianist.

I nod uncertainly.

The soldier, who is a stranger, addresses me again. He is explaining something. Then he just looks at me with a look that wonders whether I understand what he is saying.

I don't.

Now he opens the door to the house. The paper ribbon tears.

He is not bothered.

He grabs my arm and we go into the pianist's house.

Everything is as it used to be long ago. We go up the stairs.

I am crying now.

The soldier doesn't let me go. He is hurting me, the

way he grips my arm. He drags me up the stairs, forcing me to go with him into the pianist's room.

The piano is there and the pictures.

Only the pianist is nowhere to be seen.

There are chalk circles and diagrams on the floor. And a chalk outline of a human figure on top of the piano.

The soldier let's go of my arm and starts explaining something again.

I don't understand what he is saying.

The soldier points to his throat. He pulls his hand across his throat.

Than he hits the piano angrily.

In his anger, he sweeps the sheet music to the ground. I pick up a page.

It is the music for Für Elise.

I make a gesture asking the soldier if I can take it with me.

The soldier waves his hand.

I go down the stairs. The soldier doesn't follow me.

I hear the piano. Just a few notes at first, as if someone were preparing to play the piano, but has not quite decided what to play.

Then I hear an unfamiliar piece for piano.

I stop at the bottom of the stairs and wait. I don't go out through the door.

I listen to the soldier playing.

The music is like some military march. It is dynamic and loud.

The tune is catchy.

The soldier plays well. There is energy and vigour in the way he plays. I remember the pianist once saying that it is not enough to play a piece correctly. It needs vigour and energy to be good.

And passion.

The performer has to want to put something across.

So that we feel the music being played has something to say.

That's what the pianist once said.

I listen to the soldier playing. I am grateful to him for playing the piano.

It's as though he were saying that from now on everything would be all right.

I open the door and step out into the open. I stop in front of the pianist's house and listen to the music as I used to long ago.

Then I start out for the rectory and home. There is no one on the street.

Only a military truck passes me.

I go on humming the march I just heard to myself.

Instinctively I start walking more resolutely, briskly, like soldiers do when they march.

Sometime in the past, when I was with my mother once, I saw this was how soldiers marched.

I remember seeing them in the courtyard of the barracks where we went so often when Yuri, the bald soldier, was still my mother's friend.

When you think about it, everything was still going well at the time.

I think a lot about what my favourite doctor said. And also the priest and Amélie's grandmother. That I shouldn't allow myself to be swept along by events. I should try to do something to make things turn out better for me. I just don't know what it is I am supposed to do. What they were thinking of. When they said this. Amélie's grandmother, the

priest and my favourite doctor.

I am going to Amélie's house.

I am taking everything just as I used to. A paraffin lamp, some rope, a knife.

Amélie's grandmother is not at home.

I am tired as I usually am nowadays. My back hurts and so does my leg. I am limping a little. I don't know why.

Amélie says:

'The soldiers were here again. Of course, these are different soldiers, not the ones who used to go to see you at the rectory. Well, they went down into the cellar. They found everything. While you were in hospital they brought the boxes up, even the remains of the dead body.'

'Did they ask any questions?'

'No. They spoke to my grandmother, they had an interpreter with them. They said they would blow up the tunnel in the cellar. And they also said it was dangerous.'

'But they haven't blown it up yet?'

'No,' says Amélie.

Then she takes one of the paraffin lamps and goes towards the entrance to the cellar.

I go after her without thinking.

At first, it seems nothing in the cellar has changed. When they see us the rats scurry around, terrified.

We set out along the corridor towards the heap of stones.

Most of it has been pulled down. We hardly have to bend down before we carry on.

Amélie walks ahead briskly.

We walk twenty metres to where the tunnel widens.

We are here again, in the *chamber* where the boxes

used to be.

It is empty now, the soldiers have taken everything.

We reach the crossroads. In one of the forks there is no trace left of the stones falling in.

Amélie goes in that direction.

I follow her.

We don't need to bend down, we walk forward easily, our backs straight.

There are rats around our feet. The path bears a little to the left as if there were a bend. We carry on for about a hundred metres and reach another chamber.

By the light of the paraffin lamp, clearly visible in the dust, are the traces of boxes that were standing here too a few days ago.

The path continues. Amélie goes forward a few steps. I follow her lagging behind a bit.

My leg hurts, I am limping.

I am at least ten metres behind Amélie and I am afraid.

I would love to turn back.

Amélie calls out.

'Look at this! Come quickly!'

My leg hurts, I can't hurry.

Amélie stands there, waiting patiently. She holds her lamp up high and points to the wall.

There is a board on the wall. A large, square, light-coloured metal board with a sign written in dark, perhaps dark red, letters.

The sign is bi-lingual. I can read one of the languages, but not the other.

'THE BORDER IS 12 KILOMETRES FROM HERE. THE TUNNEL IS PASSABLE ALL THE WAY THROUGH,' I read on the board. Underneath probably the

same text in an unfamiliar, foreign language.

I remember when we first went to the barracks with my mother to see the soldiers.

That's when I first saw letters like the letters on this board.

Amélie doesn't say anything, she just sets out along the tunnel, back the way we came.

I am not afraid of the rats at all anymore. I am almost glad they are there.

I don't feel so alone.

They say that the soldiers are checking on the barbarians, searching their houses.

They are looking for firearms.

They also say that the strangers or the barbarians will have to go away.

That a big register will be taken and those who are strangers will sooner or later have to leave the town and even the country.

They say the strangers or the barbarians will be *expelled*.

There are still strangers like this living opposite us in the Thin Girl's house. The same ones my mother once visited.

It is evening. We are having supper.

I have made potato soup for the priest, there is a little cheese and bread.

That's what we are having today.

The priest says:

'It is not up to us to hurt others. People different from ourselves are not necessarily bad. The soldiers are strangers just as the barbarians living here are too. We get on well

with all of them. If they don't cause explosions, if they don't hurt us, then we don't hurt them either, do we?'

'Is it true that the barbarians have weapons hidden in their houses? That they want to attack us?'

'I don't know what is true and what is not. I only know that God teaches us to accept our fate calmly. Whatever our fate, we must accept it patiently. Those who live by the sword, will die by the sword. That's what the Holy Scripture says. There are all kinds of people amongst us and amongst them. Good people and bad people. By threatening them with expulsion without any reason and blaming them for everything, they are just making the situation worse. We should leave them alone. In peace. And then they too would live in peace with us. There are no differences between people.'

At night, when I go to bed, I always think of my mother. That is bad.

Very bad.

Especially when I go to bed hungry. Then I can't go to sleep for a long time.

These are the last days of summer. It is the end of August. And it is getting cooler.

Nowadays I don't like walking around anymore. There are soldiers and trucks on the streets.

No one likes to go out on the street. There are tanks in the main square, all kinds of military check points.

Everyone is afraid. They say in town that almost every evening a few people are taken away, people they find suspicious when checking their papers, and many are never seen again.

More and more disappeared are kept on file at the

town hall. At the soviet, by the entrance to the building, there is a board where photographs of the disappeared and their details can be posted.

Children disappear as well as grown-ups.

Actually, I don't have anywhere to go. I sit in the rectory every evening, even if I have nothing to do.

Mostly I go to see my mother.

I go out to my mother on the plot behind the rectory. The many identical crosses give me the feeling I am walking around some kind of military cemetery.

I go to the cross with my mother's name written on it.

I don't know if my mother is really there.

I sit down next to the cross on the ground and just stare into space.

It is getting chilly.

The summer is over. I need a cardigan. Tomorrow is the first of September.

The school is next to the barracks.

I am going to school. There is going to be a ceremony for the first day of school. I haven't been to school for a long time.

Not since before the attack.

I am going on my own. There is no one left to go with me. The only thing the priest said was that I should hurry home, because the kitchen must be tidy for the evening.

A high-ranking officer is coming from the barracks to see the priest, we have to give him something to eat.

I am going to kill a chicken this afternoon, so I can really only stay at school till midday.

I think the ceremony will be over by then.

It is eight o’clock in the morning.

Everyone I used to like in the old days is there at school and those I didn’t like that much too.

I am glad to see Sára and Amélie, it’s good to be together again.

We have to line up in the yard. Around it is the red brick building.

In front of us the platform where the headmaster will stand to speak.

The yard is full of children and parents. Many are unfamiliar faces.

There are strangers too, women covering themselves in black scarves.

Some only have their eyes showing.

The teacher comes up to us. He hasn’t changed at all. His face is somehow thinner. His glasses are thicker. Otherwise he hasn’t changed at all.

He supports himself on his crutch.

He says:

‘There will be new classes because there are more of us, many more. Since you are still in the junior section, you will be divided according to age. Sára, you are older, you will go over to the bigger ones, there is a new teacher, go over and report to her. Your name is on her list. Anna, Amélie, you two will stay in my class. Stand in line here please and behave yourselves while the headmaster gives his speech.’

I am glad to be with Amélie and sorry to see Sára go. Meanwhile, Hiro has arrived and Arno is here too. And many others that I don’t even know.

I look around the yard, there are more and more of us.

‘Try to behave sensibly, there are at least three

hundred children here, don't let our class cause trouble,' says the teacher and skilfully jumps aside on his crutch.

It is hot. The sun is shining. I am standing next to Amélie, there are about forty of us in our class. I am getting a little bored.

I am waiting for something to happen at last.

A bearded man of about thirty is fiddling with the microphone on the stage. Next to him is another man in a suit, he isn't much older either.

'That's the new headmaster,' says Amélie.

'That one,' I ask, 'the one over there in the suit? But he is so young. Is he a headmaster already?'

'He was sent from the capital, apparently. To put the school in order,' says Amélie.

Everyone in the yard is chattering. There is quite a racket.

Now we can hear the loudspeaker. The bearded man is trying out the microphone on stage:

'Sound test, one, two, three…'

There are more and more of us in the yard. Everyone is a little excited and in a kind of festive mood.

Sára comes over to us.

She says:

'Imagine, I have a completely new teacher, she came from the capital with the headmaster too. And they say they will have it easy, because the new headmaster will get a huge amount of support from the capital, the gymnasium has been completely renovated apparently and we will even have computers in the classrooms! They say we will even be able to use the internet later on. Do you know what the internet is? It's like films, only better. And you can look at it the teacher says.'

Sára is terribly pleased and happy that she can tell us

all this.

She’s got time, the bearded man on stage is still testing the microphone.

Everyone is getting louder and louder in the yard. Some are giggling.

Everyone is very cheerful.

In the meantime, a female stranger in a black scarf goes up on stage too and says something to the headmaster in the suit as he stands next to the microphone.

The headmaster in the suit turns away from the bearded man and talks to the woman.

Or perhaps he doesn’t talk, but just looks at her.

Amélie begins to speak.

She asks anxiously:

‘Look over there! Who are they?’

And she points upwards to the school building surrounding the yard.

I can remember everything exactly. I can see myself looking up.

At precisely the same moment all this is happening, I can see Amélie’s pale face too.

Men in black hoods are standing at the windows of the building surrounding the yard.

They have guns.

Meanwhile, the woman with the black scarf pulls a gun on the headmaster.

The bearded man around thirty standing next to the headmaster suddenly hits the woman’s hand with the microphone stand.

Shots are heard.

The bearded man falls down on the platform. The headmaster in the suit is still motionless.

Silence.

Then commotion.

The children scream, some parents grab their children and try to run for the exit.

More shots.

I see Hiro collapse and fall to the ground. I can see that a woman of around forty, in a short skirt, is already lying on the ground next to Hiro and I can see blood seeping through her white blouse.

I can also see Amélie's grandmother lying on the ground.

She is lying on her back, one of her legs twisted in an awkward way, almost disappearing under her behind.

She is motionless too.

She is probably already dead.

I grab Amélie's hand. We run together towards the exit, but the strangers with machine guns are in our way.

Amélie is crying.

A hooded man with a machine gun goes up on stage.

He bends down over the microphone and says:

'Everybudy shtay calm. Nobudy will harmink. Who escepink, they vill be ded. Ve supervision buildink. Everybudy biing hostege! Understandink me?'

The yard goes quiet.

Dead bodies around the exit.

I see Fatima and Arno. They are lying on the ground.

And others too.

Children as well as grown-ups.

The gymnasium opens onto the yard.

Two hooded men open the double doors of the gymnasium and gesture for us to go in. The teachers shout nervously at the children.

Everyone panics. And yet everything is so *slow.* Everything happens so *slowly*.

Hand in hand, Amélie and I go towards the gymnasium. We follow the others.

Amélie is shaking. She is afraid.

I am afraid too.

I can feel my palms sweating. Sweat is running down my back. As if I felt very hot.

We step into the gymnasium.

I notice for the first time that in fact the teacher with the crutch is leading our group. He is the one telling us where to go, what to do. He talks continuously. Softly, but he talks to us.

To all of us.

He tries to reassure us and says something to the effect that everything will be all right.

There are about thirty of us in the group going into the gymnasium together. The teacher, a few grown-ups and we children.

The armed, hooded men lead groups of similar sizes to ours through the gymnasium door.

Everybody tries to join a group. As if it were more dangerous to be alone.

Perhaps that is why.

We go to the back of the gymnasium, to the wall bars. There are windows above the bars, covered with thick metal netting.

The windows are open.

Some of our group sit down on the floor. Amélie and I stay standing.

The teacher says:

‘We have to stay here. This is a good place because it’s close to the windows with fresh air coming in. Everyone sit on the floor. We will see what they intend to do.’

‘I have to pee,’ says Amélie crying, ‘where can I go to the toilet?’

‘You can’t go to the toilet now,’ the teacher is still talking quietly, ‘just pee somewhere, if you can’t hold on, it doesn’t matter where.’

One of the grown-ups, someone I don’t know, a large, heavily built woman in a flower-patterned dress, takes a glass preserve jar out of her bag.

It is a nice, big jar, they use them for pickling cucumbers.

‘I was going to go to my son in law’s after the opening ceremony, he promised me a few kilos of sugar. That’s what I needed the jar for,’ she says a little embarrassed, almost apologetic.

‘You can use this for the moment, if you can manage to pee into it,’ she says, handing over the jar and she even smiles, ‘you can go a bit further away and pee, we won’t look.’

More and more groups come into the gymnasium. They are mostly children, but there are quite a few grown-ups too.

Many are new faces.

Amélie withdraws right up to the wall bars. She squats over the jar.

The others turn away.

Only I watch as the light yellow liquid collects at the bottom of the glass jar.

That wasn’t really what I was looking at. I wasn’t looking at the liquid gathering. I was looking at Amélie’s face. By that time that face was so tired. Amélie’s face was so *defeated* by then. Like the face of someone who is very

fed up. Her eyes were small, very small and her forehead had become almost completely lined. There were lines even around her eyes. I remember. I thought Amélie looked very old by then. I didn't think she looked sad, just old. *Sad too.* But above all, very old.

The gymnasium has filled up.

The hooded men have driven everyone in from the yard.

One of them goes over to the basketball backboard, stands on a stool and says:

'Everybudy sitink! Not mufing! All muvement verboten!'

A fat woman, with a girl of about six - I know them by sight, they live not far from the pianist's house, in the same street - starts shouting hysterically:

'But what do you want of us? Let us go home. We want to go home. We haven't done anything. You have no right to keep us here! Do you hear? You have no right!'

She shouts, holding the girl's hand tight all the while. The girl cries, then quite a few children start crying around her. A fat, bald man, wearing a suit and tie, goes over to the fat woman and whispers something in her ear. Obviously trying to calm her down.

The woman doesn't listen, just goes on shouting.

The hooded man standing on the stool raises his machine gun, pointing it at the fat woman:

'You vill shuttink up, you biing uglee voman!'

The fat woman goes on shouting, something like that the soldiers will come soon anyway, then these men will be done for, that everyone who is a stranger should perish, when suddenly a piercing rat-tat-tat is heard.

The machine gun.

The fat woman collapses, dragging the girl of about six to the ground with her.

The girl screams hysterically, the man in a suit jumps over to her, covers the girl's mouth with his hand, whispers something in her ear.

He holds her to him, trying at the same time to detach her hand from the dead, fat woman's.

The fat woman's blood spills all over the lino floor of the gym.

'Everybudy siting down! Now!' shouts the hooded man on the stool.

Everyone immediately sits down on the floor. There is barely enough room, there are so many of us.

We are lucky being at the back, we can lean on each other if we want to, or on the wall bars.

We have a little more room than the others.

Amélie sits next to me clutching the glass jar she peed in a few minutes ago.

The fat woman's body is at the front of the gym, in the middle. People sit around her too, because there is not enough room.

'Not mofing until boss sey,' says the hooded man beating his chest with his fist to show he is talking about himself. 'You understandink mee?'

Then he adds:

'My nem Boss! You callink mee Boss! Understandink mee?'

There is silence. The only thing to be heard, from time to time, is the quiet, stifled crying of a child.

At the front of the gym, by the door, there are another six hooded, masked men with machine guns.

The door opens and two armed men come in lugging

boxes.

Then they go out and come back again. They bring more boxes.

They go back out and come in again. More and more boxes.

The hooded man who called himself the Boss starts opening the boxes.

Two other hooded men go over and take something out of a box, slowly, carefully. Long black sticks, round metal balls.

‘Bombs,’ whispers an adult next to me to the teacher with the crutch. He is a thin-faced man in a corduroy jacket. I don’t know who he is and how he got to be here with us. ‘Dynamite and antipersonnel shells that will explode on their own if they are knocked or fall down,’ he adds.

The man in the corduroy jacket speaks very softly, but I know how to lip-read, so I can understand what he is saying very well:

‘I don’t know what they mean by this, but if they start going off then we are all done for.’

‘It’s just a question of time, it won’t take long. The soldiers will be here any minute, they’ll deal with these people,’ the teacher with the crutch whispers back.

In the meantime, two hooded men fix a few sticks of dynamite and bombs to the wall with rope. The one calling himself the Boss, goes to the basketball backboard, knots the net on the ring together tightly and places a large bomb in it.

He puts the bomb in carefully, holding onto it for a moment with his hand, then letting go of it slowly, checking that the net will take the weight.

The other two hooded men work at the walls. They

come over to where we are sitting too, the wall bars are a good place from their point of view, it is easy to tie the bombs to them.

A hooded man arrives carrying a backpack. He makes us move further away from the wall bars.

Slowly, carefully he takes hand grenades from the backpack.

The grenades are attached to each other with a thin steel wire, forming a rosary. The hooded man pulls out at least fifteen grenades like this and ties them carefully to the wall bars.

‘If not duing what I seying, this exploding for shur,’ says the hooded man to the teacher. I am quite close to him, I can see his face. It is not covered like the others.

I can see his eyes are bloodshot, his eyelids swollen. As though he had not slept for days.

His pupils are very small.

‘You die everybudy,’ the hooded man says to the teacher and suddenly hits him in the stomach.

The teacher collapses without a sound.

The hooded man kicks the teacher lying on the ground, then flicks his hand and continues on his way.

Amélie is standing there next to me. She looks at the teacher who is reeling a little from the blow and suddenly starts vomiting in a huge spurt.

Amélie doesn’t say anything.

She goes on clutching her glass jar.

At night I can’t sleep. There is no air.

It is difficult for us all to fit on the gym floor. There is not enough room for so many people.

Amélie and I lean our backs on the wall bars with the

string of grenades above our heads. We can hardly stretch out our legs, the teacher is lying there at our feet. He is feeling better now and tries to breathe courage into us.

The unknown man is lying next to the teacher.

Every now and then Amélie falls asleep.

She leans on my shoulder. I try to remain motionless so I don’t wake her.

It is very tiring to sit motionless.

In the circumstances, the gym is quiet. But a few children cry out all the time, of course. The grown-ups soothe them quietly.

Two hooded men stand by the entrance.

In front of the basketball backboard, on a little platform made of several stools pushed together, sits the hooded man who calls himself the Boss.

It is terribly hot and it stinks.

The body of the woman who was shot is in exactly the same place, the blood around here has congealed and got darker.

We can’t move much in the crowd and we are forbidden to go out to the toilet, we are only allowed to go over to one of the walls and do our business there.

There were a few glass jars and plastic bottles, but they are all full.

The piss forms a sticky puddle by the wall.

Somebody has taken a shit in a corner, there is a horrible stench, enormous bluebottles fly around the shit.

We are lucky. The wall bars are relatively far from the spot the others are using as a temporary toilet.

The hooded men take over from each other. They are lucky, they can even go out of the gym. There are changing rooms and toilets next door, perhaps that’s where they go to rest. I have counted at least 15 armed men, all wearing

black hoods, but some leave their faces uncovered.

They have machine guns and hand grenades.

The Boss also said earlier that the explosives placed around the gym can be set off at the push of a button.

The explosive device is on top of the platform made of stools. As the Boss said, it can be activated with a single movement of a hand or foot.

The Boss sits there on top of the platform with his hand on the explosive device.

He doesn’t move, just watches the people.

I can see his hand very well.

I sit in front of the wall bars, leaning my back against them, the string of grenades above my head, with Amélie next to me.

I think of my mother now too, as I do almost all the time since the attack.

When all is said and done, I am happy.

I am happy she isn’t here. That she can’t see this whole thing.

I am also happy that she is already dead.

If she were here, I am sure she would wish what I wish now, that I should die soon, as quickly and with as little pain as possible.

The Boss waves to one of his colleagues with his free hand, the latter goes and takes over from him. He gets off the platform and goes out through one of the little doors.

This is the moment one could do something, I think to myself.

When they take over from each other.

Meanwhile, Amélie wakes up.

She suddenly comes to, at first she doesn’t know where she is, then she realizes and starts crying. She cries pressing her face to my shoulder. I can feel my blouse

getting moist from her tears.

She does not so much cry as whimper.

She calls her grandmother.

In the meantime, another girl I don't know wakes up and also starts crying.

She doesn't only cry, she shouts. She keeps crying out for her mother.

The teacher at my feet explains something to her anxiously.

Amélie starts coughing as she cries. She can't breathe. She is choking.

The teacher asks:

'Does anyone have a little water?'

The unknown man, who came into the gym with the teacher, after hesitating briefly, takes hold of the glass jar containing Amélie's piss.

He hands it to Amélie.

'Drink,' he says to her, 'drink. It will do you good.'

Amélie coughs. Meanwhile, she takes the jar and drinks her piss. She sips it slowly.

She stops coughing.

She is not crying anymore.

She just stares into space.

I too drank piss during those days, but I can no longer recall the taste of it. I can't remember either whether it quenched my thirst or whether perhaps it made it worse. But maybe it didn't. I seem to remember that perhaps it helped a little. But it stung. It stung quite a lot. And that was bad. But I can't recall the taste of it at all anymore. I have completely forgotten what it tasted like.

I don’t know when I fell asleep.

When I wake up, it is already light. Bright sunlight streams into the gym.

The leader of the hooded men, the Boss, sits on top of the stools, his hand still on the exploder device.

Fresh air is coming in through the window. Cool, clean air.

It must be morning.

I have lost track of time, I don’t know what time of day it is.

The stench in the gym and the fresh air flowing in from outside merge with one another. I can feel the dreadful stink in waves. Sometimes the fresh air comes towards me, sometimes the stench.

The dead woman is still in the middle of the room.

The pool of blood is now almost black. Enormous bluebottles fly around it, hundreds of black, purple-bellied bluebottles.

Their buzzing gets on my nerves.

People mostly sit or lie on the ground. As though they were trying to sleep.

The children hardly cry. I don’t cry either. Amélie just stares into space.

She leans her head on my shoulder.

Nothing happens.

The hooded men are calmer than yesterday as well. The Boss sits on top of the stools, I feel as if he is looking at me.

Otherwise nothing has changed since yesterday.

I am thirsty.

Suddenly I feel very weak.

I don’t feel hungry, only thirsty and weak.

My mouth is chapped, my tongue is dry, I can hardly swallow.

I have a sore throat.

I start sweating. I sweat a great deal, water pouring from my forehead and my back.

As though I had a temperature.

I am tired and weak, my palms and my face are clammy.

I can't see the people around me clearly. Or rather, I can see them, but as if I were looking at them through a curtain of fog.

Everything is so far away.

Perhaps this is what it's like being drunk.

The teacher is speaking to me now, but I don't understand what he means. He says something, but I can't hear.

I am not interested either.

I wake up to feel someone keep slapping my face.

It's the unknown man with the teacher.

He says:

'Anna, are you all right? Come on, drink a little.'

Meanwhile, he keeps wiping my face with a handkerchief. I can feel it wet on my forehead, on my eyes. It feels good.

It is refreshing.

The man has a plastic bottle in his hand. There is yellow liquid in it.

He wets the handkerchief with the yellow liquid and when it is soaked through, he puts it to my mouth, dabbing my chapped lips with it so that it lets out a little fluid.

It stings.

I can taste the bitterness of the yellowish liquid, yet it feels good. I swallow the piss eagerly. I hold the bottle and drink straight from it.

I can feel the piss streaming down my chin, my neck. It runs in under my blouse. It pours onto my chest, my stomach. Into my belly button.

I take no notice.

I look at the unknown man thankfully.

Then I see him giving Amélie a drink the same way, then all the children in our group, one after the other.

There is a girl with us I didn't know before.

Her name is Jerassa.

She has been lying motionless since we came into the gym. She doesn't react to anything, it's is if she were dead.

She lies on her stomach, covering her face with her arm.

She doesn't move.

The unknown man touches her shoulder, shaking it gently.

Jerassa twitches, then stops moving. She goes on covering her face with her arm.

The teacher goes over to her too. He whispers something in her ear.

The unknown man wets a cloth with piss, slowly, carefully rubbing Jerassa's temple with it.

The girl suddenly stirs, then lets the unknown man pull her arm away from her face.

Her eyes are closed. Her whole face is covered with congealed blood.

There is an open wound between her eyes.

You can see the raw flesh.

The unknown man strokes the girl's hair and spreads a handkerchief on her face.

Jerassa continues to lie on the ground covered with the thin cloth.

Like a corpse.

I don’t know when I fell asleep.

I have completely lost track of time.

I don’t know how long I slept or how long we’ve been here in the gym.

I seem to remember three days have gone by.

I am parched.

Sometimes the unknown man gives me a little piss to drink.

Then I sleep again.

Now I wake up to see one of the armed men walking among the people lying down. Every now and then he grabs a child’s arm, tugging at it, forcing the child to get up.

He allows some of them to sit down again, but some have to go and stand at the front of the hall, by the Boss and the stools, under the basketball backboard.

He has reached us at the wall bars.

He keeps kicking at Jerassa’s leg with his boot, but she doesn’t react.

She is motionless, as if she were dead.

The armed man steps over to me.

He grabs my hair, forcing me to look him in the face.

I can’t look into his eyes, I can hardly open mine.

I can only feel his breath. It stinks.

It reminds me of the tall, stranger soldier’s breath, when he tried to pull down my knickers that first day at the barracks.

He stares me in the face for a long time, then suddenly let’s me go and grabs Amélie’s arm.

Amélie instinctively gets up.

The armed man motions to her to go to the platform of stools.

Amélie looks at me then sets out. I see her setting out. Suddenly my brain clears. I want to say something to her, but I can't manage. She looks at me, but somehow she doesn't look into my eyes.

I just see her going towards the platform. I see her back. Her shoulders.

She bends her head.

Exactly like she does at school when she has done something wrong.

As if she deserved the punishment.

I drink from the plastic bottle, I feel the taste of the bitter, pungent liquid.

Then I wash my face, my forehead.

I understand less and less what is happening around me. I am tired.

It's as though I were drunk.

Now I hear the unknown man's voice:

'They will probably execute them.'

There are ten children standing next to the basketball backboard. Amélie among them. I only know the other children by sight.

The Boss speaks:

'Toking no resoolt brinkink! Showing everybudy who are ve!'

Two hooded men lead Amélie and the others to the wall. All ten children are made to face the wall.

The children are calm. Nobody cries.

The Boss gets down from the stools. A machine gun

in his hand.

He stands behind the children. Just behind Amélie, who bends her head.

He puts the barrel of the machine gun to the back of Amélie's neck.

There is silence.

Nobody moves.

Then all I can see is Amélie's head exploding. Her body falls down like a sack.

In the next instant, I hear another horrific bang and as I turn instinctively towards the sound, I see the wall bars ripping out and one of the gym walls collapsing.

Dust and smoke everywhere.

Then I hear another bang. And another.

Then I can only remember running in the school yard.

I feel weak as I run and it still seems as if the whole thing were a bad dream.

And again, as if everything were so *slow.* So *slowed down.*

And yet still somehow extremely fast.

The unknown man is running next to me and others I don't know are running too.

I hear machine gun fire, the unknown man next to me falls.

Then I can only see myself running in the street, in the open air, unfamiliar children next to me, they are running with me too. Hundreds of children. Hundreds of unknown children.

I can vaguely see stranger soldiers too, as though shouting and waving to me.

Everything is so uncertain.

Meanwhile, more and more shots are heard.

And then I fall headlong on the ground. I can see

myself, as if from the outside, as I fall headlong.

And I see some people, also unknown to me, as they grab me by the arms and legs and carry on running.

That's all I can remember. That they run with me for a long time.

It's as if there would never be an end to this running.

As if I would never ever stop running.

I am in hospital again.

The doctors are kind to me. My favourite doctor is here once more.

They tell me to drink a lot. They give me sleeping pills too and often have a chat with me. The say nothing happened to me, I was not injured and they also say that this is a miracle.

A psychologist comes to see me. He comes daily. I don't like talking to my psychologist.

Then some journalists come to see me too. As though I were a famous person. They ask me what happened inside the gym.

They ask me about Amélie too. And about the other children. My classmates.

I don't know what to say.

I don't want to say anything.

Then I tell them after all, that the worst thing was the thirst. That we had no water to drink for three days. I tell them it was not fear that was the worst thing, but that fact we had nothing to drink. That we drank piss, but the was no good at all.

It didn't quench our thirst.

Someone says that everyone in the class is dead, except the teacher with the crutch. I don't know who said

this, perhaps one of the nurses. And she also said that masses of people died. Because of the explosion and the shooting. And that it's a miracle that I was not injured, that I'm alive and that I'm here again.

She also said that many more people died now than when my mother was killed in the attack on the community centre.

I don't know.

I don't think it's a miracle that I survived the school opening ceremony, but the whole thing was just an accident.

Someone had to survive.

The priest is kind as he welcomes me home when they let me out of the hospital.

He says:

'If you don't want to, you don't have to go to school from now on. You are big enough to decide if you still need to go. You have been through a lot. You must rest. You can just stay here with me and look after the housekeeping at the rectory, if you want to. I will even pay you wages.'

I don't know what he is talking about.

I don't think I am big enough not to go to school.

I still feel very young. Well, I am just a child.

And children have to go to school.

The priest continues:

'You know, I will let you in on a secret. The border is not far, sometimes I meet people coming from the other side. They say that the military are very much on the alert over there. They have been saying this for a long time, but I did not believe them up to now. I always thought they were not very bothered about us on the other side. But apparently

recent events have made them very uneasy.'

I am not really listening to the priest. I just look at his face.

He is sweating.

He seems agitated.

'On the far side of the border the newspapers write a lot about the war. World war. And about the fact that a state of war will come into force from tomorrow. From tomorrow morning. And that the homicidal terrorists, who have apparently fled from the town and are hiding in some bunker, must lay down their arms by eight o'clock in the morning at the latest, otherwise war will be declared. That's what they are saying. And then international armed forces will come. So they say. And if this is true then there will be a completely new world here. Perhaps they will even open the border. I just wanted you to know.'

I look at the priest's face. It looks as it did when the Thin Girl died.

It is as though he felt guilty for some reason. As though he had to make excuses for something.

I look at the priest's face and then I think of my mother.

I imagine what she would say to the priest now.

'Thank you, Father. Thank you for giving me the chance to stay with you, Father. Thank you for your help, thank you for everything. My poor mother would only say the same. I will stay. I just need a few days peace and quiet, then I will carry on working.'

'You have made the right decision,' says the priest. 'Of course, you must rest for as long as you like, Anna. You don't have to do anything. I can manage the housekeeping on my own. You have a right to rest. And put your mind at ease. You will see. Everything will turn out all right.'

It is dawn. This is when I should feed the animals.

I pray a little at the altar, then I take the priest's digital watch, given to him by Yuri, from the reliquary table.

I fasten it to my wrist. I might need it later on.

It says 5.20.

I go into the laundry room, go over to the wall facing the door, run my hand along it, it feels nice and cool.

Then in one rapid move, I take one of the bricks out of the wall.

I pull out the canvas bag from the cavity behind the brick. I open it and look at the jewellery inside, the gold, the coins and the pearls.

Then I pick up the gun, feeling the reassuring sensation of the cool metal in my hand.

I hang the canvas bag and the gun on a piece of string round my neck, that's how I step out of the rectory building.

The sun has risen.

The street is empty, completely deserted. A single military truck comes towards me.

I go in through Amélie's garden gate.

I close the gate quietly behind me, though I know I am alone, that there is no one at home who should be at home.

They are both dead.

I am going to the cellar, but first I go into the house to take the paraffin lamp from Amélie's room.

I know my way in the cellar by now. I set out calmly along the tunnel. I am self-confident as I go into the first, then the second *chamber*.

Everything is deserted, nothing has changed.

Only the rats move around, but they too are quiet about it. As if they were still a little sleepy.

It is early.

‘THE BORDER IS 12 KILOMETRES FROM HERE. THE TUNNEL IS PASSABLE ALL THE WAY THROUGH,’ I read on the familiar board.

I set out for the border.

I don’t know if I will meet anyone. I clutch the gun in my hand.

It is loaded. I am ready for anything.

The rats are still quiet. They don’t bother me.

The path is quite good, the tunnel fairly wide. Every five hundred metres or so I reach a new chamber, where the air is much cleaner than in the rest of the tunnel.

It seems the fresh air is coming in from the roof of the chambers. Whenever I notice this, I have the feeling I must be directly under the surface.

But it could be, of course, that the fresh air is flowing in through some secret pipe.

Some *air duct.*

I once heard the priest say they use *air ducts* in the tunnels to provide fresh air. That’s what he once said.

From time to time, I sit down on the ground in one or other of the chambers and rest.

I know the border is still far away. The other country, the free world, that we talked about so much with Amélie.

If it exists at all.

Amélie always said the free world was over the hill.

She also said that the tunnel goes all the way along under the hill and then comes out on the far side in a valley.

To be more precise, since we are talking about the far side of the hill, the tunnel reaches the surface *above* a valley.

I am having a rest. I have been in at least twenty chambers by now. It seems this underground path will never end.

There is no path leading from the present chamber. I am in one of the chambers and the tunnel does not go any further.

There is hardly any more paraffin in my lamp.

The air is good here, very clean. Much better than in the earlier resting places.

It seems I have reached the end of the road. If there is an exit, then it must be here somewhere. If there isn't, then there isn't. Then that's the end of everything.

I am tired.

I would like to find out where this clean air is coming from. So that I can get out of here.

As for the rats, there are hardly any of them now. By the light of my lamp I can see a rat coming and crawling into the earth in a corner of the *chamber*.

Maybe that is the way out, in the direction that rat went. I go over and scratch the stones and the earth with my hand.

The earth is soft. It crumbles.

My hand finds some kind of hollow. Some cavity or something.

Perhaps this place my hand has reached, perhaps this is the far side of the hill.

I don't know. Perhaps it is. Perhaps it is the surface my hand has reached.

I don't feel elated, just exhausted.

I have grown so weak that I have to sit down and rest a little.

Obviously, this will be the way to daylight. The rats know the way.

I have very little paraffin. On my arm is the priest's watch. It is a digital watch, if I press a button it lights up in the dark.

This could be useful later, if by chance I am left completely in darkness.

I press the button on the wristwatch. It lights up.

The time appears on the luminous dial: 7.30.

I have been walking for two hours here under the ground. And if what the priest said is true, then war will break out in exactly thirty minutes.

If what the priest said is true.

There is silence all around me. I am having a rest.

As I rest, I watch the rats. Where they go, I will follow.

Because that is the way to liberation.

I am completely alone.