



Ralf Rothmann
To Die in Spring
Novel

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The band played *Das kann doch einen Seemann erschüttern*, and the trumpeter sang. Walter wedged past the dancers toward the kitchen door with the bull's eye window, and already had the knob in his hand when someone slapped him on the back. His face flushed, his lips chapped, Klaas Thamling was there in his leather coat with the party insignia on the lapel. "Heehee, no deserters here," he said, and slicked back his sparse hair. The imprint of his motorcycle goggles was still visible under his tear ducts. "Where are you off to? Everything all right?"

Walter nodded. "Nothing special. We're low on petrol and salt licks. And it looks like Blanke may calve soon. You can already see the water bag poking out."

The older man loosened his tie. "Well, it's as good a time as any. Schnitzel for the grand finale. And what about the milk?"

"Just shy of six hundred liters. Most of it's already been picked up, without an invoice. Did you get the tractor back?"

The foreman shook his head and tapped his swastika pin. It had belonged to Van Cleef, who owned the estate, and had died at the outset of the war; Thamling, who hadn't joined the party, sometimes put it on when he had to deal with the authorities. "The candy didn't bring in anything. They'd probably even do away with the Führer. They're trying to give us horses, some kind of Polish nags from the cavalry's leftovers. We'd be better off mowing with a scythe." He fished out his etui. "So it goes. I'm going to smoke another cigarette and go kiss up to the farmers from around here, gab about fat percentages and so on. Keep your eye on your companions here and don't go to bed too late, you hear? I want to see light in the stalls by four-thirty AM at the latest. They're picking the animals up for slaughter at seven."

"Consider it done," Walter said, and opened the door. The Jahnsons had fish traps lying all over and there were always a couple of eel or flatfish in the pan, and when he walked past the kitchen, it smelled of frying ham. Inside, twenty or more men in uniform were standing around and eating potato salad off their plates. Rifles were leaned against the wall, some with bayonets attached, and an officer was sitting on a stool in front of the pass-through.

He stirred his cup, a red ribbon with an iron cross in his buttonhole, and Walter raised his arm in the German salute, a little crookedly on account of the tight quarters. Then he peeked through the window, laid a coin on the counter, and said, "Sybil, give me a fish sandwich? I still haven't had dinner."

In the meeting room, the music fell silent, tables and chairs shifted about, and the troops' leader, whose armband bore the word *Fruntsberg*, the name of his division, looked Walter over from head to toe. He sipped his drink, licked his lips, and said, "Well,

if this isn't a fine specimen for the *Leibstandarte*. Do I know you, comrade? Maybe we've met on another occasion?"

Nearby someone seemed to be giving a speech, strident words were ringing out, and Walter shrugged his shoulders. "Dunno..." he replied. "Maybe sometime in the taproom. I work on the farm here, I milk the cows."

With his teaspoon, the man pushed the black plastic bill of his cap out of his eyes. "I beg your pardon? You do what? Who's going to fight for your fatherland, then?"

Walter grinned and took the sandwich the owner passed over to him along with his change. It was a double-decker, with thick layers of smoked eel, and he bit straight into it, chewing as he responded: "I'm only seventeen. We're important to the war effort here."

Next door they heard applause, and the man burst out laughing and undid a button on his right wrist. With his teeth, he pulled the glove from his fingers, and once he'd lit his cigarette, he let the match fall burning to the floor. Walter didn't dare trample the tiny flame.

"Important to the war effort..." the officer grunted. "Urgent, let me tell you. Young and healthy and laying low on his milking stool. Don't you have women to take care of that?" He took another sip of tea and waved the boy off. "Go sit down in the meeting room, my friend, and you'll get a taste of what the war effort is really all about."

Walter nodded, bit back down on his sandwich, and walked silently toward the door. The silver piping and death's heads on the soldiers' caps gave off a dull glare, and even though hardly one of them was bigger or stronger than he, they seemed to look

down on him, and stepped aside for him hesitantly. He bumped against holsters and ammunition pouches and even stepped on a few toes; the lighting was bad.

The musicians had set their instruments aside. The guests sat at tables or on benches along the wall. Gulping down the last bite, he pulled the kitchen door closed. Elisabeth was twirling a white paper flower between her fingers and seemed, like everyone else there, engrossed in the words of the speaker, an officer with scars over half his face and one of his arms in a sling. But when he went to sit with her, the muscles around her stern lips slackened, making them look lush and elegant. At least until a broad-shouldered SS-man with a ceremonial dagger on his belt stepped between them and said, “Keep walking, comrade. You’d best just keep on walking.”

The boy he’d given this order to squinted amid the smoke. On the lamps made of deer antlers, there still hung a few streamers from New Year’s Eve, and only now, while he grasped after the soldier’s hand, did he notice the division of the crowd: watched over by old Thamling, who took the beer that Ortrud passed him over the bar, all the men from the surrounding area sat or stood: the old ones too, the wounded grunts home on furlough, and the apprentices from the neighboring farms, and in the front of the room was the white-haired Reich Peasant Leader. Walter wiped his brow on his sleeve and edged over to Fiete on the bench. His friend held his bottle out for Walter.

“... But we have held our ground!” said the officer on the stage, and hushed the people who were chatting here and there. “We have held our ground, we have defended our territory, and more: we have confirmed the calling of the SS, to act as a fire brigade at the front, in a most exemplary fashion. Where we are, is victory, and everybody knows it. And why is it we are so strong? Why do we not scatter beneath the volleys of grenades?”

He pounded his hand against his breast. “Because we have composure, we have honor, and those are not just empty words, and you are not listening to the blathering of some yellow-bellied moralizer shouting down to you from the pulpit. If this word falls from our lips, if we say *honor*, then men, we mean something palpable, something that is there for each and all of us and that every one of us can lay claim to.” His brown buckskin gloves were worn to a sheen at the fingertips, and he pointed to the round buckle on his belt: “Here it stands, cast in metal. *My honor is loyalty*. And that means loyalty to the Führer, to the race, to the fatherland, to the division. Loyalty to your comrades, no matter what straits they’re in. And loyalty to your unbreakable faith in victory!”

For a moment, it was quiet. Hands crossed in his lap, the back of his head against the wall, Fiete had his eyes closed and was snoring loudly. “Believe me. I know whereof I speak. I was nearly killed,” the officer continued. “The enemy’s bullets had scattered us like autumn leaves. I was lying there under a burning Panzer with shrapnel in my shoulder, and believe me, I could have despaired. But I wasn’t afraid. I knew I could count on my comrades’ loyalty and that if worst came to worst, they would go through hell to save me. So it was, my men, and so it shall ever be: they got me out of there. We remembered the barbarian hordes, the Bolshevik danger, and our innocent children, and we shook the dirt off our shoulders and stormed onward — to victory, you damn well better believe it!”

He stamped his heel at these last words and raised his healthy arm in the air, and the Reich Peasant Leader and a number of women in the room responded with a loud *Heil!* The applause was timid, but some of the soldiers along the wall were clapping

energetically, and finally guests began to stomp their feet. The speaker, sweat dripping from his chin, shot a glance at Fiete's motionless hands.

He took a sip of water, and Mark Hunstein came to the stage. The stairs creaked under his weight. His jacket was unbuttoned, and his belly bulged ponderously over his waistband beneath the flared tails of his vest. He had a golden party emblem on his collar, and when he smiled, he bared his teeth and narrowed his eyes until his iris was no longer visible. As he shook the officer's hand, he whispered something into his charred, crablike ear, and at last turned his attention to the public.

"Thank you!" he shouted, and dug his fingers in behind his necktie, as if he were gasping for air. "Thank you for the great honor your visit brings us, my dear Frick, and thank you for your breathtaking stories! Certainly no one here will forget them. A bearer of the iron cross, ladies and gentlemen. No one can fail to be filled with admiration at your exploits, and we can only hope that our own contributions have added to your men's fighting strength. For as my old friend Thamling always says, there's no war without milk!" Winking, he patted his own belly. "For that matter, a shot of *Kümmel* doesn't hurt, either."

The public laughed, someone whistled, and he raised a finger. "I know, my dear friends, you want to keep on with your dancing. You want to enjoy yourself and feel carefree again, and you've earned it, too. You should dance. Just let me say one more thing. Times are hard and full of privation, but as we've heard before: others are suffering worse, others must make do with less, and we will not hesitate to stand by them. What kind of fatherland would this be, if we could hear these tales of sacrifice and selfless grandeur and carry on the same as before?"

He swept his arm in an arc, pointing at the soldiers along the walls. “Who is willing to send these brave men back out into the night, the fire, to make the sacrifices asked of them, and then head home, as if this were just another night of dancing, an hour without import, without obligations? Oh no, dear friends, those days are over. We serve the Führer, too, we have honor and loyalty as well, and no enemy may tread them underfoot. Fight to the last bullet, the motto goes, better dead than a slave, and so...”

He came over to the edge of the stage, which was hung with a red pleated fabric, and balled up his fat hands. “And so, my friends, I say that each man at this gathering, no matter whether young or old, if he cares for his land and the life of his family, and he is capable of handling a weapon, let him enlist voluntarily this very night in the victorious Waffen-SS. It is the least we can do for our heroes at the front.”

Arms akimbo, he pulled his chin into his neck, and things stood still for a couple of heartbeats, as if the abrupt silence had crippled the crowd. Not an eyelid quivered, not a hand, only a wisp of cigarette smoke curled here and there, and the peasant leader opened his tiny eyes wide. “Whoever is against it...” he continued faintly, slicking back his hair and clicking his tongue, as if he had something between his teeth. “Whoever is against it, let him stand now.”

The officer scrutinized the men before the platform with a grin, and Walter grew nervous when Fiete’s body stiffened slightly and he looked around the room, where whispering, murmuring, and the scuffling of shoes began to be heard. A woman choked out a short and somber sob, as if she had muffled herself with her hand, and while he sat there, so close to his friend that their shoulders touched, Walter could feel Fiete quiver, hear the gurgling in his belly, and sense how he held his breath resolutely... He reached

behind Fiete's back and twisted the fabric of his pullover in his fist. At the same time he stepped on his foot, his work shoe, and hissed into his ear: "Are you crazy? Stay in your seat. The kitchen is full of SS! They'll cut you into mincemeat!"

The boy shut his eyes and sank back against the paneled wall. The officer lit a cigarette, and the Peasant Leader clapped his hands and rubbed them together. "Yes indeed. I knew there were no cowards among you. German hearts. The Reich can be proud of you. Boys and men, if you're fit to fight, step forward here to where Ernst Kobluhn is sitting and sign yourself up for tomorrow morning. Then you'll see what's what. And now, let's hear those keys banging! Even warriors have to dance. Heil Hitler!"

Only a few applauded or returned the greeting. The musicians stooped to retrieve their instruments. The one-armed trumpeter belted out *Kauf dir einen bunten Luftballon* and Walter stood up and looked toward Elisabeth. SS-men came through and pulled apart the dancing couples, unless it was just two women. They flashed the men their military IDs, sick leave slips, and furlough passes. One even grabbed hold of the pants of a limping man, lifted them up high, and examined his wooden leg with its nailed-on shoe. When his wife protested, another soldier slapped her across the mouth with his cap.

"Imbeciles!" Fiete murmured, downing the rest of his bottle, and draped his arm around his friend's neck. "Well, fuck it. Come on, let's go get ourselves killed."

Somewhere glasses crashed to the floor. At the regulars' table, with the bell on it, a group had already formed, and Thamling, in his coat, came over to Walter and nodded. "You could have expected it," he murmured. "Like the Reich Ministry of Agriculture would just buy a round of beers out of love for their fellow man... Now what? I'll run the whole show here with foreigners, I suppose. Leave the keys on the steps tomorrow after

you do the milking. The ones to the dairy, too. And don't worry about Blanke tonight, I'll look after her for you. You just look out for the girls." He ran his hand through Fiete's mop of hair and shook their hands, something he hadn't done in all those years. "If you make it back in one piece, you can always come work for me again."

He took his leather cap from his pocket and pulled the door open. Cold, almost icy air drifted in, and Ernst Kobluhn, now in a pair of round wire spectacles secured behind his head by a band, waved at another old man and then smirked as Walter and Fiete walked to the table's edge. "Well now, who would have thought it! Ata and Imi are finally headed to the front!" he said. "Tell the enemy to watch out! But first you'll get your training in lovely Hamburg Langenhorn. After that, who knows... Maybe Ivan's bayonet will go up your ass right away and you can go sleep it off down in the field hospital. Tomorrow morning at the lumberyard, sturdy shoes, pack light."

He stamped two enlistment notices and Walter looked at the bar. Ortrud's mother was sewing a button on an officer while another perused the *Völkischer Beobachter*. The guards at the door were eyeing up the dancers. Walter leaned forward and tapped his finger on the list with the names and addresses. "You don't have to sign us up, Ernst. What's the point?" he said softly. "The Tommies are in Cleves, the Russians outside of Berlin. The whole damn thing'll be over soon. We're friends, right? What's the point of shedding blood now?"

But Fiete shoved him aside. "It's not up for discussion!" he babbled, grasping a coat rack to hold himself up. The helmets on the hooks clanged against one another. "Don't pay attention to this cow rustler. He's soft as butter. I want to fight. I'm a deadly

weapon, the bullets'll bounce right off me. Put me down for general, there, brother-in-law!"

He bent over and burped in the man's face, and Kobluhn pulled back abruptly. With pearls of sweat gathering on his nose, his lips a thin crease, he unscrewed his green Pelikan pen, the same one he'd used in school, and when Walter walked back over to the table to plead with him, he shook his head and spoke through his teeth: "Easy now, Urban. Calm down..."

In the reflection of the lamplight, his eyes flickered a moment behind his lenses, and quicker than the ink that flowed through the fountain pen, he signed off on the papers and waved them off. "Seven o' clock sharp. Failure to appear will be considered desertion. Heil Hitler!"

Walter let his shoulders sink. But Fiete saluted, murmured "Three liters!" and turned on his heels.

There was hooting and clapping— a dance was just coming to an end — and the crowd pleaded rhythmically for more music. The drummer assented and the flute player joined in as the first beats of the Königgräzer March began. Ortrud swayed through the guests, carrying a tray full of glass shards. Her flaxen hair was loose, tears ran down her cheeks, and her hands shook as she tugged at the tie on her apron. Later she tried to smile, she kissed and hugged her friends, and then she saw Walter and said, "You'll look out for him, right? He's such a dumb boy."

"I'll try," he answered. "Don't worry. Probably it'll all be over before we're even through training."

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The ashtray overflowed beneath the table lamp, and if the clacking of the typewriter paused for a moment, you could hear the swift steps of the nurses and the groans of the wounded in the hall of mirrors. The Hauptsturmführer's aide-de-camp pulled a few little green flags from the wall map to replace them a bit further to the west, looking at him from the corner of his eyes. "Why are you standing here at ease, soldier? What is it you want?"

Walter straightened his spine. He turned his head to the double doors with the colored glass panels that led into the commandant's office. The knob was a fish made of ivory with scales that looked like filthy fingernails. "I would like to speak to Hauptsturmführer Greiff, please. Concerning a personal matter."

"Oho!" said Troche, a junior squad leader himself, scraggly with a scarred face. "Personal matter... Now you've got my attention. What could it be this time? A tour through the mountains? A spa vacation on the Adriatic?" He tore open the agenda, skipped to the final pages, crossed something out, and grumbled, "You've got it damn good, man! I need you to beat it, head to Győr and fetch the rest of the medicine from the field hospital, they'll get an invoice for it. In two hours I want to see you back here, dead or alive. Now step off!"

He spit a chewed up matchstick on the floor and turned the crank on the telephone, but Walter stayed put. He gazed over, crossed his hands behind his back, and insisted: "Please, I want to speak to the Hauptsturmführer. It's urgent. I helped his son

once, and he assured me that I could turn to him anytime. It's about a comrade, not about me!"

The officer motioned for him to be quiet. He moved two red flags, gave a couple of coordinates, and shouted an answer over the cannon fire, howls, and crackles that came from the receiver. His secretary, oversleeves atop his uniform jacket, looked up and pointed to the text he was typing. "Good old Greiff got blown sky high yesterday," he said. "Him and the last bridge. Go rummage around the on the bank, maybe you'll find something, a heel or maybe an ear. Then you can pick it up and whisper all your worries to it."

His mouth twisted into a caustic grin, and Walter turned back to look into the hall of the field hospital, where a nurse was kneeling on the floor and removing the dressings from a dead man, only to reuse them for one who was still alive. He balked, stared a minute at the toes of his boots, earth still clinging to the hobnails, and eventually took a deep breath and grabbed the ivory handle. After knocking and walking in at the same time, he found himself standing in the commandant's office.

There was wine red fabric wallpaper and pale frescoes on the ceiling, and the two colors of wood in the pinwheel parquet gave the room a deceptive feeling of depth. There was a kind of sofa with just one backrest, a large old globe, shelves full of rolls of charts and files, and a desk. The interior shutters, painted with garlands, were closed, and the officer, seated in the lamplight, did not raise his head. He was leafing through a book and murmured: "Everything set to go?"

He wore braided epaulettes on his shoulders, his collar was hemmed with silver thread, and one of his four stars was new: he was a *Sturmbannführer*, this chubby man

with light blond hair and horn-rimmed glasses who looked up just as Walter clicked his heels together and saluted. His broad lips were slack, and his brows, which met over the bridge of his nose, cast a dark shadow over his eyes. “Well! Who do we have here then?” he said. His name was Domberg, according to the plaque on the desk. When he shook his head, his badly shaved double chin jiggled. “Are you from my company? Or are you here to shoot me?”

He sounded strange, tenuous, even defensive; but in fact his voice was that of a man used to others paying close attention to his soft utterances. Walter had to laugh. “Shoot? What do you mean? I don’t even got a weapon.” Then he cleared his throat, called out his name, rank, and unit number, and said: “I’m here because of a comrade. He’s sitting down in the root cellar.”

From outside, wounded moans were audible as the man nodded and flipped through his book, a large, leather-bound Bible full of illuminated letters and golden halos painted by hand. “Don’t even *have*,” he said quietly, feeling around in the drawer for a cigarette and then lighting it. “You don’t even *have* a weapon. What’s your level of education?”

He set down his Triplex lighter, and Walter, who forgot himself for a moment, shrugged his shoulders. “Who, me? You know, the usual,” he answered. “Horst Wessel public school in Essen Borbreck. I’m here about Fiete Caroli, sir. Friedrich Caroli, I mean. He’s supposed to be executed tomorrow, and I would like to beg you, most respectfully...”

The officer raised his hand. The pale blue smoke that gathered over the desk smelled like perfume for a moment, sweet and acrid. “Public school, that’s something...”

he said. “For lots of people that’s fine... But it isn’t enough, young man. Just listen to yourself: most respectfully! No one talks that way nowadays. You’re respectful, and that’s that. Especially if you’re a soldier. You either have respect or you don’t — there’s no in-between. You can be more alive than your fellow man, it’s true, but once you’ve been shot, you can’t be more dead than anyone else. Understand?”

Walter nodded shyly and said, “Yes, sir. My apologies. I just wanted to ask you...”

“No!” his superior shouted, and twisted the lid on a dented tin thermos. “You will *respectfully* stick to the subject, soldier! How can you be in my company when you can barely manage to conjugate your verbs! Does that even mean anything to you, conjugate? Or might it be conjure? Or copulate?” Smirking, he stuck out his chin; grey eyes, dark pupils. “So? May I expect an answer?”

Walter was getting hot and felt the urge to swallow. “Well, it’s a verb form,” he said hoarsely, and wiped off his neck. “Don’t got... Don’t have, I mean, that’s first person singular, I don’t have, you don’t have, he doesn’t have, and so on.”

Domberg poured coffee into a cup painted with roses — real coffee, by the looks of it — and spooned in some sugar. “Indeed. Then Germany is not yet lost. And what is it good for, this conjugation? What is the use of such a thing?”

He stirred while he studied Walter, and took another pull on his cigarette, blowing the smoke slowly from his nose. The glass tears hanging from the lampshade clinked softly as a Panzer or bulldozer drove through the courtyard. “For nothing!” he said finally, and grinned. “There’s no use whatsoever, language is just as clear without it.

Why even use the verb? Whether you write down ‘my friend’s a coward’ or you say, like a caveman, ‘my friend deserter,’ it’s all the same, right? We both know what it means.”

He lifted a finger, arched his brows. “And yet, and yet... It does do something for us, this grammar. It changes our attitude. Can’t you hear it, the distinction of a properly formed phrase?” He pressed his finger into the tip of his thumb. “It refines our soul, young man, it teaches us the meaning of spiritual nobility. The willingness not to slip, and not to always take the easiest path. That is what grammar is. Understood?”

Walter nodded, and the officer bent over the table and leafed through the notebook that lay near his cap. “Now then, what is your comrade’s name? Caroli? Friedrich Caroli? Nice name, no? Peaceful, like a Christmas carol. North German, kept verses in his bag. I remember.” His eyes narrow, he looked up at the ceiling and for a moment, he moved his lips soundlessly. Then he raised one arm, waved his hand through the smoke, and recited: “God has repose / for others, there is daily toil / the sad wind blows / in grief, beneath its feet I coil. // And when the age-old vine / yields its dusty black fruit, warm / I think of God divine / who leaves me not, who calms my storm.”

He smiled askance, revealing an eyetooth. “Oscar Loerke. Not bad. Your comrade has taste. But what’s there to do, he signed his own death warrant. It’s out of my hands, I’m afraid. There’s really nothing I can do about it.” With a cough, he pushed the notebook closed, stubbed out the half-smoked cigarette, and crossed his fingers over his belly. “Our Führer said it best: a soldier *can* die, but a deserter *must* die. So go get a visitor’s card and say your goodbyes. Soon he will know more than all of us.”

He pointed to the door, took a drink, and paged once more through the illustrated volume. The gilt edge glimmered like a blade. But Walter didn’t budge, and when

Domberg lifted the very thin paper that protected an image of the Madonna and asked, in a strangely muffled tone, as if talking through his teeth, what else there was, he even took a step toward the table, removed his cap, and said, “Please, Sturmbannführer — Fiete wasn’t trying to desert, not at all. I know him, we live under the same roof, we work together, up on Kaiser Wilhelm Canal. He’s a clown, he doesn’t think before he acts, and when he came to us, he didn’t know a rake from a pitchfork. But the animals like him, the calves lick his hands, and that has to mean something. I mean, he’s a great guy, a brave soldier, he hardly ever gave up in basic training and he could shoot better than lots of guys, better than me, too. He’s gentle, but he’s no chicken, the opposite, in fact; he’s never skipped out on the dirty work...”

Only with difficulty could the officer conceal a yawn; his chin rippled, and he crossed his arms over his chest and laid one leg over the other. His boots gleamed black behind the desk. “What work, exactly? What did you do?”

Walter swallowed. “We milk cows. I mean, that’s what I do, I just finished my apprenticeship. Fiete’s still learning. He was in school before. We work on Major General Van Cleef’s farm close to Sehestedt and...”

“You milk cows?” the superior interrupted him. “What a lovely and honorable profession that is. I come from the country myself, from around Königsberg. Three hundred hectares. Mostly wheat, but dairy cows as well. Our milkers were always dumb country kids with dark tans and big biceps. You could throw a knife at them and it would bounce right off. The girls had their fun with them, rolling in the hay, with all the curds those boys used to eat.” He grinned and rubbed his chin. “But let’s be honest: will anyone

need milkers in the future? Isn't that already a job from yesterday? Soon machines will be doing that, don't you think?"

He leaned to the side, and with a quick, greedy movement, ate a spoonful of sugar from the jar; relieved by his civil tone, Walter shook his head. "No, that won't happen, Sturmbannführer. I don't believe that. It takes three solid years to learn, and to know how to grab onto an udder right, you don't need just strength, but also the right touch. Otherwise there's milk left over in the teats and everything gets all inflamed. Each cow has to be milked differently, and one wrong move and you can knock the bucket over. And you have to know more than just that: you've got to lead the bull to the heifer and watch out he doesn't break her back, you have to help with the delivery and you have to know how to recognize and treat the different diseases. And then there's the culling and knowing how to cut the dead calves out of their mothers. There's no machine that can do that."

The officer drew up one corner of his mouth, where a few sugar crystals still clung, in something almost like a smile. The light lingered on the bright tortoiseshell of his glasses, circling the lenses in a reddish line; but when he took them off, his eyes looked much closer together than before, and his stare was stern and cold. Beneath them, a shower of fine wrinkles crisscrossed his skin. Walter held his breath and continued: "Fiete, Friedrich Caroli, I mean, is already wounded, Sturmbannführer. He got hit with shrapnel and he's in terrible pain, he can't sleep, that can make a person do stupid things... Probably he took all his tablets with alcohol. I'm sure he did, he never learned moderation. He was tipsy and he just wanted to breathe some fresh air, I bet. And suddenly there he is standing in front of the military police."

The other clucked and poured out a bit more coffee, and Walter lowered his eyes and pressed onward: “He just turned eighteen, Sturmbannführer. His parents were burned alive in Hamburg, in the air raids, and his girl asked for a proxy marriage, she’s having a baby... I know her, she’s a good, upstanding girl, Ortrud, she’ll whip him into shape... Please, don’t let him be shot!” He closed his eyes, wrung his cap in his hands, and continued: “I’ll even stand in for him, if you want. You can ship me off to the front, off where he was supposed to be sent. He can drive a tractor, too, so he could even manage with a Krupp or a Borgward, you wouldn’t have any breakdowns here... He’s my friend, Herr Domberg, Sturmbannführer, I mean, he’s a truly good person. He’ll make up for everything.”

Steam rose from the open thermos, and the officer stared at the Madonna draped in blue, reading in a flower meadow. As he drank, a drop of coffee ran down the side of the cup and clung to its base. “Your friend, your dear friend...” He shook his head; the wings of his nose flared. “How long do you think I can stand to go on listening to this? Get a grip on yourself! In all seriousness, are you speaking on behalf of someone who tried to leave you and your comrades high and dry? Who couldn’t care less if the Russians march into our homeland, kill our best men, rape our women, and stomp our German culture into the mud? A traitor to his fatherland? Are you standing here defending cowardice and honestly telling me this lowlife is a good person, because your calves used to lick his hands?”

The drop fell on the book the Madonna was holding in her lap. The officer didn’t notice it, and Walter tried to say something, but Domberg cut him short, pushing out his chin. He put his glasses back on, and his voice seemed to take on a sharp edge. “Listen

here, Urban! Put aside the fact that I could lock you up for partisanship. In war it doesn't matter what a person wishes, feels, or thinks, in war the only thing that counts is how a person behaves — you must have figured that out fast, right? And this man, whose belt buckle reads *My honor is loyalty*, same as yours and mine, has done the worst thing a soldier can do: he wasn't weak before the enemy, oh no! That would be understandable, in light of the circumstances. But no, he was weak before his own side! Think about that a second. If you catch a bullet tomorrow, most likely it will happen because guys like him, double-crossers like him, threw in the towel.”

He looked at the cap in Walter's fist. “And now, put that donkey's cunt¹ back on your head and shut the door on your way out! My patience has limits! You and your pals from the barracks will execute him tomorrow morning, by firing squad, as per instruction, and if you lay low or get the idea to play sick, you can go right up against the wall beside him. Is that clear?”

He waved him off with a flick of the wrist, striking the rocker blotter beside the lamp. The shadow of its handle, a small bronze eagle, cast a long shadow over the carpet, and without realizing it, Walter took another step toward the desk. His eyes burned and grew moist, and his pulse pounded so loud in his ears that he could hardly hear what he said through his clenched teeth: “Why, why...” But Domberg, who had turned the page, just shrugged his shoulders. His voice was again mild and defensive, and he lit another cigarette and sighed as the smoke streamed from his lips. “From humanity, naturally. Because you're his friend, as you say. You'll aim straight so he won't have to suffer.”

¹ A slang term for headgear among Wehrmacht soldiers.