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## After the Alcazar

S G Collins

Ben declares that man is mortal.

"Man is mortal," he says.

The man in the other bed moves his foot.

"Heh?"

Ben doesn't feel like saying anything else. He nearly goes back to sleep. The other man turns.

"I thought you were dead. Your bed was empty. They told me you passed away."

"I disagree."

Ben lifts his head and looks around. Something's different. There used to be more people in the room, and the picture on the wall was a seascape with an old cog ship. Now there's a lovable little brown-eyed cocker spaniel. Ben hates puppies. He detests all things cute.

The other man has found his eyeglasses.

"Wait a minute. Who the hell are you?"

"Why is there a puppy?" Ben asks him.

The other man frowns at him for a few seconds, then turns away.

One reason Ben doesn't like to talk much is because people don't understand. It's hardly worth the effort.

Much as a crew of men laboring for a week out on the windy Ijsselmeer might eventually raise a sunken cruise boat, the other man raises himself to his feet. His aluminum walker goes *click* with every step. Then he farts, and a lovely young woman walks in. Ben turns to marvel at the apparition.

"Morning gentlemen."

She sets down her clipboard, *clack*, and grabs Ben's wrist and looks at her watch. He turns to stare at her bosom. She has an orange rectangular badge with the name BETTY and a company logo. He's never seen her before.

"So Ben, I see you've already met Jakko."

"Jakko."

"What?"

The other man is shuffling past the puppy picture on his way to the toilet.

"How do you like your new room?" she asks Ben. "Better than that six-bed ward upstairs, uh? Your daughter wanted you in a semiprivate. Took us time to find a space."

Ben thinks it over and shakes his head. "I don't like puppies. Have them send the ship down for me, would you?"

Betty suppresses a smile, but from the look in her eye it's clear she's helplessly in love with him.

"I see you got me a cucumber for a roommate," Jakko growls and slams the door to the toilet.

Ben's doesn't see his daughter much. She lives in Amersfoort now, with her husband and the baby. The baby's name is Marloes. Come to think of it, Marloes has an optician's practice and three kids of her own. His daughter's name momentarily eludes him. It starts with an E. The guy in the other bed is Jakko.

He wonders how the newspaper got into his hands. *Het Parool* comes in tabloid format now, not so easy on the eyes. He remembers when it used to be bigger. He also remembers when it was much smaller and smelled of mimeograph fluid. There was a lot of illegal paper blowing around Amsterdam back then. In Ben's opinion, over the years *Parool* has grown distressingly conservative. Then again so has he. He's supposed to be a lifelong socialist. He's laughing out loud.

"What's so funny, cauliflower?"

"The new metro line will cost 92 million euro more than expected."

"Ninety-two million what?" Jakko is squinting.

"E-u-ro. The new money."

Jakko blinks. "What new money? What happened to gulden?"

Ben shakes his head.

"You're demented," Jakko addresses him in the familiar, then turns away, then looks back again. "What are you reading anyway? Jesus, that explains it. Left-wing garbage mashed your brain."

Ben just nods and turns the page.

There was a time when it meant something to be alive at all. Now, bread turns moldy even before it goes stale.

"Things are different now," he tells Jakko.

Evening comes. It doesn't seem possible that this young woman could wiggle her rear-end so ferociously without injuring herself. And she's just one of many on TV. Sometimes there's a glimpse of an angry black man reciting incomprehensible rhymes in what might be English. But mostly it's a prolonged flickering of female limbs, torsos, buttocks, scantily covered bosoms and glazed apathetic stares. Ben squints at the little gadget in his hand, and finds the button for the next channel. Now they're selling a fitness machine. Dutch subtitles over twangy American voices and pictures of even more insanely trim bellies and thighs. The next channel is just snow. The next one has the American president talking about how those pictures horrified him too. A smiling young woman is pointing toward the blurry private parts of a man wearing only a hood. Ben turns off the TV.

Since the last time he felt vaguely relevant, the women of the earth have evolved into an alien species, with pants falling off their insufficient haunches, bra straps at odds with their sleeveless tops, a look in the eye like a whore's dare. Even just thirty years ago he still knew how to treat a woman. Now they confound him. The last time he offered to buy a drink for a young lady, she just turned on her barstool and glared at him. *What do you want?* And that was a decade ago, when he still had a lot of teeth.

"Women are different now," he declares.

"You got that right, eggplant."

Ben picks up the sea-green plastic carafe from the sea-green plastic tray, and pours himself some water without spilling a drop. Funny how his hands don't shake so bad when he's using them. When they're just lying there they quiver all the time.

"You remember real women? I do."

Ben takes a sip, and turns to look at the old man sitting on the edge of his bed, all slumped over himself, with hair growing out of his ears, an overgrown nose, a big mole right in the middle of his forehead, pyjama pants riding up as wrinkly as his face.

"Well say something, lettucehead."

Ben feels like burping, but instead exhales a bit of Rigoletto into the air.

*"La donna è mobile ... qual piuma al vento ... muta d'accento ..."*

Jakko's eyes have widened..

"Well now you sound like you have a pulse. Sit down, I'm gonna tell you about a real woman. What did we have for lunch today?"

Ben shakes his head.

"Me either. But I remember this like it was two minutes ago."

Ben eases down into one of the visitor's chairs.

"Some girls you don't ever forget. This cocktail waitress I knew. Did I tell you I used to play trombone? I was a professional jazz trombonist for years and years. I had a good run with Dick Willebrandt's band, then after the war I was with the Blue Stars and the Skymasters and a few other guys till I got married and ended up settling down with the VARA radio orchestra. But early on, one weekend they asked me to play a gig with the house band at a place called the Café-Cabaret Alcazar. I wasn't too busy, I said okay. And they had this cocktail waitress working there."

"Alcazar," Ben says, without meaning to say anything.

"Yeah, right off Rembrandtplein in Thorbecke. It's long gone now. This was early on in the war, before everything went to the balls. I'm in Heck's one day, remember Heck's Lunchroom, with the big balcony? And I bump into this little clarinet player I know from around the circuit. Says you working? I look at him — whatcha got? He says do me a favor, come by the Alcazar tonight and bring that trombone of yours. This was February, there was a bad flu going around, the regular trombone player was dead sick. Normally I wouldn't be caught dead playing a club like that. House band for a variety show? And that place had a bad reputation too. But they were desperate. Well I can play anything you set in front of me. Okay I'll be there. I lived right around the corner at the time, I had a little place three-high in the Halvemaansteeg."

"Police station."

Jakko nods. "Right across from there, a few doors down. That whole street's all faggots and hashish now, and the police station's turned into a bar. Back then you could live there. People only complained about the Jews."

He stops.

"And now I forget what my point was."

Jakko reaches out to the bedside table, as if he's expecting a pack of smokes to be lying there. Nothing's there, so he just taps the spot with his fingers.

"Waitress," Ben says.

"Right. So I walk in to the Alcazar Friday night and what's the first thing I see? Milena." Jakko draws an hourglass in the air. "She had this emerald green satin dress on, maybe not real satin. You shoulda seen her. Little gap in her front teeth. Slim, not too slim. Reddish hair, not too red. The thing about her hair, see, it had a mind of its own. She kept poking at it and tucking it and fixing it up, but it kept going its own way. There was something about that. You just knew she'd be an animal in the sack. I was wiped clear off the map, man. I had to have this girl. What was her name now. Milena, Miranda, something like that. Minerva."

"Clara," Ben says.

"No, something with an M."

Their eyes meet for a second. Jakko lies back and drags up his feet, and turns his attention to the ceiling tiles as if his dream girl will appear there.

"Man oh man, I wonder how many bad notes I played that night. I'm trying to keep my eyes on the music with this, this *venus* moving back and forth taking drink orders. I mean, when she was coming at you, that was real fine. But when she turned around and walked away? Heart attack. All the angels in heaven were singing out to me from under that green satin. I don't think she did it on purpose, but still. Now that, my friend, was a real woman. You got any idea what I'm talking about?"

Ben nods.

"I tried to chat her up at the intermission, but she made like she was busy. I figured I'd catch her when the night was over, but she got away while I was packing my tooter. Damn. I look up and see her glipping out through the blackout drapes with her coat over her arm, like she's in a hurry to get somewhere at that hour. I turn around and this little clarinet player's staring at the door too. I lean over and look him in the eye. Your girl? He says nope. I says you're damn right she's not. Hands off."

Jakko laughs at himself. Ben smiles.

"And you know what he said?"

"A pure heart is always victorious," Ben says.

Jakko laughs harder. "That's *exactly* what he said. I'd never heard that expression. Pure heart. What an idiot. Excuse me, I have to piss."

Some time passes, but not in the usual direction.

He hates the darkening. Something is deeply wrong here. Nightlife should be headlights and neon, blobs of hot color streaking down the rainy pavement, bright doorways snapping open to let off gusts of jazz and laughter — a fist thrown against the dark, not this shamed acquiescence. War comes, and the blackout comes, even to a place like Rembrandtplein. The only electric signs now are deep cobalt blue. Car and bicycle lamps reduced to slits. No streetlights at all. The going-out life turns surreal, a long funeral with surreptitious swing. It's worse in winter, when the day is mostly night.

He thinks of Clara walking alone in the blackout. He knows that velvet absence, the fear, long walks in too much starlight, searching for a line of rooftops where the stars are not, navigating by the echo of your footsteps, listening for ripples of canal water, never being sure where the edge is, hoping not to find out. Coming to know the different bells of the Munt tower, the South Church and the West. And hardest of all, fending off illusions in the black. With nothing to see, your mind will grow to fill the space with ghosts.

"It's not like we're lovers," she tells him with a tender touch.

He has no excuse to worry so much about her. Maybe that's what love is, that inexcusability. He would walk her home. He'd give her his arm like a gentleman and accompany her to her door, or to wherever she goes at night. But by the time he finishes his gig at the Broadway, she's already left the Alcazar. It twists his nerves, lying alone conjuring predators for her. Not just the Germans, the curfew patrols, the *Sicherheitsdienst* or their informers. Any drunk will do. Any one of those poor smitten bastards who know her only as Miranda.

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

"Miranda," she smiles, revealing a tiny space between her front teeth, tearing a gash in their hearts that Ben knows will never heal.

Clara has a third name too, one he's never heard, the name she goes by in her "other work."

It's a mid-December Saturday when his life turns inside out.

He glances up at the statue as he passes. Poor Thorbecke has bird shit dripping down his forehead. The trees above are naked, the sky is dishwater, an early dusk is falling. His shoulders clench in the chill. He tries to relax, and switches the clarinet case to his other hand. He passes Café Trip, and something makes him turn. There's a little sign in the window. JODEN NIET GEWENSCHT. Ben stops cold — and doubles over in laughter. Trip is a well-known NSB locale, what Jew would ever set foot there? But then he sees the same sign again at the Palace, then the Imperial. All the places where a Jew wouldn't feel welcome are now making it official. He reaches the corner of Rembrandtplein. He can feel it, the physical darkness in the square deepening to a soul-murdering spiritual gloom. It's eight months since the Germans came. Food prices are going up, wages are flat. It's too cold and there isn't much coal coming in from Limburg. Gas and light will be rationed starting this week. People have grim faces and little patience. And now here are the messengers of worse-to-come, two dozen laughing WA militia in their black costumes and boots, straggling across the square from the direction of Heck's. They've come to bring us leaflets, songs and random fistfights. The uniforms confuse people. Who are these Dutchmen acting like *moffen*? They have no authority, plenty of arrogance. A law was repealed and now they can dress up again in public. But you know they were always here among us. This will be their revenge. This will be their comfort.

Even now he sees a policeman unthinkingly step aside to let them pass.

Putting on his best pleasantly dazed expression, Ben takes a deep breath and continues straight ahead. The fascists flow around him like dark surf. Nothing happens. Two automobiles blur by. He crosses the north side of the square. Another cop standing at the curb outside Heck's Lumchroom gives Ben a glance, and meeting his eyes looks right away again.

Ben walks in under the broad awning, and takes off his hat. At his left, scattered over the balcony stairs are chunks of what used to be a soup bowl. He steps forward into the huge downstairs cafeteria. Something isn't right. The usual roar of voices and clattering silverware is subdued, underwater. He checks his watch, it's only twenty to four. Some people are still eating, mostly in the back, away from the entrance. Two waiters are setting right an overturned table. There's a rhythm of glass and china tumbling, here and there someone with a broom. Ahead of him, a big man

with a bald spot on his head is swinging a mop back and forth across the aisle by the kitchen. Ben recognizes him as the manager. He steps forward, then stops again. He's been standing in a puddle of coffee, now there's a piece of paper stuck to his shoe. He curses and tips his foot. The paper comes off in his hand. JODEN NIET GEWENSCHT.

"What the hell," Ben says. "Are you still open or not?"

The manager turns. His cheeks are oddly flushed, his brow shiny with sweat, and there's a nasty scratch down his cheek near the ear. He grips the mop handle like he's strangling a chicken.

"It's been a bad day," the manager says, and turns back to his mopping.

Ben isn't hungry.

It's getting dark out, and now it's starting to snow. Rembrandt van Rijn, tall and bronze in the middle of the square, has splotches of white on his beret. Ben decides to go to work early, and turns left toward the Broadway Theater. Someone cries out his name, and he stops.

It's that tall kid with the wart on his forehead, flashing a smile and slapping Ben on the shoulder like an old pal.

"Hey, the Bennie. How-is-it-ie? Still giggling?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well I figure a gozer like you knows what's to do. You hear of anything?"

Ben's eyes are adrift. He hasn't a clue what the kid is talking about.

"For trombone I mean. I'm available."

Ben shifts his clarinet case into the other hand, and looks up at the tall kid. He saw him sit in with the Moochers once at the Casablanca. Smiles too much, drinks too much, talks too much, doesn't work too much. Nobody can stand the guy.

"You could try the Tuschinsky, I heard they're letting go all their Jews."

"It's the Tivoli now," the kid shakes his head. "I tried there."

"Well nobody tells me much."

Ben upturns his hands and starts to back away. The kid looks a little stung, but flicks on one more smile.

"Okay Ben. If you hear anything you know where I'm at, hey?" And points absurdly in the direction of the police station.

"Sure," Ben lies, and turns away. *You know where I'm at?* Ben can't even remember the kid's name.

He continues past the luxurious Café de Kroon, past the Ufa cinema with its ugly new square facade, past the little joint on the corner with the dance school upstairs. He crosses the street, walks by the Golden Head and the Brewer's Shield, crosses again, takes off his hat and steps up to greet the doorman at the Broadway. The doorman gives him an envelope.

"What's this?"

"Your pay. You've been dismissed."

"Sorry?"

"New rules. Only *Arbeidsfront* members in the orchestra. The boss sends his apologies."

Ben offers a cooperative chuckle. "But seriously, whats — what's — "

The eyes of this outsmacker have gone dull. Ben squints at him.

"*Excuse me?*"

The man's clearly lost his mind. From now on, only card-carrying fascist laborers can play in the orchestra. Right, and only plumbers are allowed to deliver babies. Ben peers at him for a long second, then instinctively moves for the door. He has to find somebody with a shred of sense left, clear this madness up. The doorman places a thick hand on Ben's chest.

"Ben, I'm sorry. You're not allowed in."

He backs away slowly. There's a rumble of laughter behind him, from the doorway of the Brewer's Shield bar.

He puts his hat back on.

"Just like that," he tells Clara, who doesn't seem too surprised to find him drinking at the Alcazar. It's illegal to pour whisky after seven, but she sneaks him one in a coffee cup. He's physically trying to shake the absurdity out of his head.

"*Arbeidsfront*. They've got to be kidding. I didn't even know they *had* musicians in the *Arbeidsfront*."

"You think that's funny, try having 'em for neighbors."

"How do you mean?"

She gestures to the wall. "They publish their little newspaper right next door. Death Bell, I think they call it. Real cheery bunch. They're pressuring my boss too. He just smiles and invites them to take a nice walk to the moon."

"What can they be thinking? Pure Aryan jazz, is that what they want?"

"Oh, they'll probably outlaw jazz too, one of these days."

He laughs. She's not laughing. She dries another beer glass and sets it down, and glances at his clarinet case.

"You any good with that thing?"

"Reasonably."

"Talk to Lex," she tips her head. "His clarinetist just took a better paying job over at the Broadway."

Ben looks at her, turns to survey the little orchestra. She's right. They're trying to do "Pennsylvania 6-5000" with no clarinet. He looks back at her. Now she is laughing.

By closing time he is employed again, if somewhat less gainfully so.

That night, for once, and with the emphatic proviso that he not entertain any misplaced ideas, Ben finally does walk her home. He's sporting a second-hand "pinch cat" torch he picked up at the Waterloo market on his last Monday off. Its little hand-powered dynamo gives off just enough light to see a patch of sidewalk — and a godawful meowing noise that makes Clara laugh out loud.

"Scares the rats away too," he tells her.

It turns out to be a short walk. Clara's flat is one-high in a house near the foot of the Zuider Kerk, overlooking the corner of two small canals. It's an unpretentious building with no proper gable, but the neighborhood feels a little bourgeois to his Jordaan-ripened sensibilities. Especially since the poorer Jewish district is only a couple blocks away.

He instinctively lowers his voice.

"Hmm. You can afford to live here on a bar-maid's wages?"

"Nope," she smirks, and leaves it there.

"That was uncivilized of me wasn't it."

"Yep."

"Something tells me you're not Jewish."

"Nope, I'm an atheist. And a red."

A ferocious Stravinskian rest interrupts the notes of his heartbeat. Her blunt magnificent recklessness, here in the open air, makes her seem invincible. And then he finds himself suddenly, inexcusably at her doorstep.

"Uhm."

She giggles.

"Why don't you keep this thing." He offers her the pinch cat.

"No, Ben."

"Please, I insist."

"But you have much further to go. And besides, I *like* to be dark and invisible."

"Please. I'm standing here desperately trying to give a stupid little gift to the woman who doesn't love me. You may not refuse."

She's quiet for a moment.

"Clara. I worry about you out there in the dark. With no light."

"And now I'll always have the light."

She takes it from his hand. She squeezes and squeezes it, raising a throb of golden torchlight, turns the glow toward her own smile, and thanks him, and when the light fades again she kisses him just a bit more than fondly.

"I have work to do. Good night, Ben."

He has to rush home before the evening-bell. The slight tingle in his mind lurches into a tide of euphoria, sweeps him along like a matchstick. He's a teenager again. Crossing one of the iron bridges over the Voorburgwal he slips on the ice, falls on his ass and doesn't even feel it.

He's been with the Alcazar house orchestra for about six weeks when he runs into the tall kid again, on a Friday afternoon at Heck's. The kid is sitting alone with a half cup of coffee he seems to have been nursing for an hour. In response to a curt *hoe gaat het*, Ben is treated to a meandering tale of impenetrable cliques, disloyal friends and general woe. Ben gets it now. This kid with the wart is one of the sweating eternal blameless, whose every misfortune is somebody else's wicked doing. It just ain't right, he deserves better *enzovoorts enzovoorts*. The sheer greed of his misery makes Ben want to strangle him, but he doesn't.

"Everybody's got it rough these days," he assures him.

"Ben. I haven't eaten. Somebody has to help me."

"Why?"

That stops him. The kid just scowls.

Ben sits down on a chair across from him, without pulling the chair back in.

"What's your name again?"

"Jakko."

I'm not doing this, Ben tells himself. I'm not going to do this.

"The Alcazar trombonist is down with a flu. Talk to Lex."

The tall kid seems to have just been sentenced to death by firing squad.

"Alcazar?" he croaks.

"Where was I."

The old man crashes down into the other visitor's chair right beside Ben, and pours himself a cup of water. He gives Ben a paternal wink.

"I'm gonna pretend this is a bottle of gin. Maybe if I pretend real hard I can finish ruining my liver by sheer force of will. Then all my troubles will be over."

He has amused himself again, and his gust of laughter segues into a coughing fit. Ben reaches for the box of tissues and passes him one. Jakko recovers his power of speech.

"So I got some competition from this pure heart, see. On Saturday I show up early just to have a coffee and get a good look at this girl. What'll it be sir? Just a coffee, princess, thanks. This was back when you could still get real coffee. Twenty cents and I give her a quarter, I figure that's a good tip right? The club's almost deserted. Looks like trouble out there, I tell her. Cops everywhere, people marching in the streets. Might be a *coup d'etat* coming, who knows. Maybe you better get somebody to walk you home tonight. Maybe so, she says. Sounds promising huh. And who comes strolling in just in time to screw it up? Damn clarinet player. She brings him a coffee without him even asking. He gives her a quarter. And then, deliberately, like he's making a show of it, he passes her one extra penny."

Jakko's eyes widen in shock.

"Well you'd think he just gave her a diamond ring the way she lights up. One lousy penny and she wants to bear his children? Now I'm getting a little irritated with —"

"It's not the penny," Ben says.

"Huh? Yeah, that's what he said too. Something about the new sales tax, and if you round up the old way the staff is paying your tax out of the tip jar. Well the clarinet player knows this, so he gets the big smile and I get the little one. Jesus if I'd have known that trick I woulda tipped her two pennies."

Jakko smiles and shakes his head. Ben wants to explain that there are some things you can't buy even for two pennies. But he can't quite put words to that song. Then Jakko's eyes grow somber, and his hand reaches out again for the cigarettes that aren't there.

"No matter, I got her in the end. I got her real good."

Ben stares at the mole in the middle of the old man's forehead. There's something burning in his stomach.

"Whatsamatter, cauliflower? You seen a ghost?"

"Here you go, sweetie." Clara brings his coffee. He gives her the usual quarter, and a penny for the tax. She smiles him a dear smile, the smile that says *darling you know I would if only I could*. And tucking a length of wayward hair back behind her ear, she turns away to the cash register.

The young trombone player tips an eyebrow at him. "I guess a penny goes a long way in this place."

"It's not the penny, it's the thought behind the penny."

"Is that so?"

There are police sirens in the street.

"Now what?" Mr Vreeswijk grumbles, over by the windows.

The sirens are closer. The boss has just finished drawing all the satinet blackout drapes across the big plate glass. Now he pulls back an edge and peeks out.

"Jesus, not again," somebody moans behind them.

"It'll all be over soon," the young trombonist confides in Ben. "There's gonna be a *putsch*."

"A what?"

He swallows another sip of coffee before answering. "Look, Benny, you see how the WA don't take any grief from the cops. They know pretty soon they're gonna *be* the cops. Mussert's already meeting with Hitler. Things'll be different soon."

"Things are different already," Ben stares him down.

The kid must be daft, talking that way in here of all places. Yesterday he's crying starvation and today he's preening like he's too good for the Alcazar. Ben is possessed by a sudden urge to kick his teeth in. Instead he turns his back.

"Looks like de Kroon again," Vreeswijk says, and lets the curtain fall shut. Just last night a splinter gang of drunken boy Nazis invaded Café de Kroon and smashed the big mirrors in the downstairs foyer. De Kroon is one of three places left in the square that are still refusing to hang the sign — at least until the government passes a law saying so. The second one is Heck's. The third is Café Alcazar.

There's some ominous stomping on the steps up from the entrance.

The black velour curtain parts and Henk comes in, followed by their own little toplofty diva, Juliette. The singer has her hand to her face, and without a word stomps off toward the ladies' toilets. Henk takes off his hat, sets down his trumpet case, starts to shrug out of his overcoat — and realizes they're all watching him. He smiles. His voice is violently cheerful.

"Yes, well it's quite a party over there at de Kroon. NSB and Wehrmacht and Green Police and Gemeente Police and managers and waiters and busboys and nobody can quite make up their minds who's in charge. Juliette and I were cordially invited to leave the premises. She's feeling a little insulted. Somebody told her she looks too Jewish. That's not something you say to a lady of her stature."

An irresistible cackling rushes the room like a pack of fugitive rats. Everyone knows it's not funny but nobody can help it. His smile still frozen, Henk takes a look around the interior of the club. Maybe he's trying to memorize the way it looks. He hasn't been working here that long either, he lost his job with the Tuschinsky about the same time Ben was let go from the Broadway. This may be the last gig in town for us, Ben thinks. Where are we supposed to go from here?

"Jesus Christ," Vreeswijk exhales into the silence.

Henk goes to hang up his coat.

"Looks like we're next," Clara says, a bit too calmly, and Vreeswijk snaps her a look. She puts down the dishcloth and leaves the bar to go find Juliette.

Mr Vreeswijk crosses the room slowly, one hand squeezing his forehead like he's trying to milk something out of it. The floor boards creak under his feet. The only other sound is a roar of male voices echoing in the square, the kind you normally hear

coming and going from an Ajax game. Vreeswijk stops by the gold swag curtain where the light switches are. He turns the rheostat knob to brighten the chandelier, and stares for a moment at all the round tables between him and the little stage, with their little candles waiting to be lit. Then he lowers the light again, and turns to the people at the bar. The thick black rims of his glasses make his eyes darker. His hair seems more gray than yesterday. He briefly pinches one wing of his bow tie, the way he does when he's about to address the staff.

"I can't ask you people to stay here," he says. "Not if you feel in danger."

A voice booms from behind them. "Of course we're staying."

The black drape opens again. It's Lex, the band director, taking off his hat and brushing one hand through his tall, wild white hair.

"Of course we're staying. You want we should miss all the excitement? Somebody get me a drink."

Ben turns his eyes back to the trombonist, who glances away.

"Of course I'm staying," the kid says.

The predicted excitement doesn't come that Saturday evening. There is a different kind. The crowd is surprisingly thick. They sit straighter in their chairs than usual, and the applause for every act is deafening. And yet it feels as if the entertainment is beside the point. The public have come as a show of defiance. Here together in this room they can be deliriously brave, in a way they won't be tomorrow on the sidewalk. At the end of the evening, Lex swings into that Ernst van 't Hoff arrangement of "In the Mood," and the house is explosive. They're dancing on the chairs. Even the substitute trombonist plays his featured bits flawlessly, and sits back with a mad grin on his face.

Then it's over. Clara waves good night and sinks into the black.

The trombonist catches Ben staring at the door after her.

"So tell me about the thought behind the penny," the kid says.

Clara. Clara. A refrain murmuring in his head. Clara. If the worst that could become of you were that you blister your palms on the crank of that baby blue Gestetner stencil machine. That your eyes shrink from typing too much too fast in the too too dark. If the worst were only that stress should wrinkle you too young, that you grow old before me. But the worst is not knowing how bad it did get for you, and

knowing I can never know. I want to think they just shot you in the dunes, that you slept while you bled into the sand, before it even hurt. But how do I deserve the luxury of believing that?

*Shut up idiot, you're talking to the dead again.*

"Man is mortal," he mumbles to himself, and dribbles some pearly liquid soap on his hands to wash them in the little pink sink. This bathroom is much nicer than the one in the other ward, the colors are restful and the light subdued. Is he even authorized to pee in here? The counter is neatly arranged with supplies of sterile pads, cotton swabs, antiseptic, a box of latex gloves, two spare plastic trash-can liners in translucent gray, and a stack of paper towels. He grabs three towels, meaning to have taken one, and tries to dry his hands. He catches sight of himself in the mirror. They can't be serious, is that supposed to be him? A hideous caricature. He doesn't approve.

"I don't approve," he says.

He opens the door and is confronted by a puppy on the wall. It gazes back at him, the surface innocence scarcely masking its sinister delight in seeing Ben in this desolation. He wants to stomp on its cute little nose. Instead he returns to sit with the old man who names him after vegetables.

In the dream she is driven to refuge here by an airraid warning. Too many searchlights and street patrols. She can't afford to get nabbed for curfew violation and have her bag searched, that would be the end. So Ben's buzzer rings, he yanks the rope along the railing to unlock the downstairs door, and suddenly his heart's desire is breathlessly ascending toward him. He apologizes for the scant hospitality. Nothing to drink in the house. He can't even turn on the light because he has no blackout in the front room. And there's only one warm blanket. *That's fine, I'll just sleep with you* — like deciding to share a taxi. And when somewhere in time she covers him with herself, he knows he hasn't felt this human heat in too long. One kiss to the neck unlocks them and they spill into the blackness of only touch, and he doesn't see a thing until the bird. Somewhere in time he has her by those magnificent hips, profoundly pounding her from afterwards, when he glimpses a fluttering of brown feathers out the corner of his eye. Something huge is perched right outside his fragile windowglass. An eagle, he thinks, here in the Jordaan? But when it turns to gaze in

at him, he sees the eyes of an owl. An owl the size of an adult sheep. The unsettling incongruity of the beast makes him suspect he may be dreaming, and pre-empts his consummation. *What's wrong, my love?* And he wakes, and indeed the bed is warmer than normal.

What's wrong. My love. Her last words butter his ears, he hears them so urgently he can taste them. There's an urge to masturbate. He defies it, for once. Then comes the insistent yapping of a lone water-hen from the icy canal, in what may be the real world. It's raining out there, the wind in the cracks is voicing an endless series of disappointments.

He climbs out from under the quilt, feels a bit dizzy, pulls on his sweater and scarf, lights up the kachel just enough to take the edge off the chill, sets the kettle on for tea, visits the toilet and melts a film of ice with his piss. And conjures one more candlelit breakfast of yesterday's rolls and a dab of strawberry jam.

There are hints now of possible but begrudging daylight. The day will come and go, another brief blue nudity between darkneses. What day is it? Sunday. Ninth of February. He has to play a matinee this afternoon. The water boils and he makes his tea.

The gas rationing has made it useless to heat both rooms. When he wants to read the paper, he puts on two sweaters and uses the lamp in the back bedroom where his windows are properly sealed with blackout paper. He practices with his instrument by the front window during what daylight there is, looking out on the icy Bloemgracht. No complaints about the sound. His upstairs neighbor is deaf and the downstairs one's in prison. Lately Ben's been sleeping on the couch in the front room, under an old dark gray quilt that used to be forest green. It smells too much like him. In the dream he was worried about that.

Sitting in the rear car of the number 14 crosstown tram, he entertains the wild thought that something has really happened. That she's gone. That his dream was her soul's farewell to his. It's nonsense, but he feels feverish, and nonsense clings better when you're dizzy. One night when he was four, he became convinced that the spirit of the Prophet Isaiah was hiding in his bedroom closet, and he screamed in fear for his dad. Dad came and patiently opened the closet door, revealing nothing — apart from his own ignorance of how spirits can hide.

Without Clara the world would no longer matter so much, and all his choices would be simpler.

The sun makes a brief show, and a million raindrops on the grimy glass turn to momentary jewels. He becomes conscious of stillness, that this tram hasn't moved now for several minutes. It's crept up to a halt just behind the palace. He looks at his wristwatch but fails to notice the time. The tram conductor shouts something he can't quite make out. People are starting to step off and walk. He gets up to follow them, and almost forgets his clarinet case.

Moments later he's standing in the Dam, trapped on the wrong side of a parade.

There must be hundreds or even a thousand of them streaming through the square, from the Damrak into the Rokin, in their black caps and coats and belts and shined-up boots. Marching right down the middle of the tram tracks too, just so everyone knows they don't care whose way they get in. Some of the pedestrians taunt them with rude gestures. Some are cheering. Most are pretending to ignore them. A contingent of Amsterdam police flutters along their flank, eyes betraying a whisp of doubt as to what they're here for. But the marchers have no doubt. Keeping time with their boots, the men are singing about a storm. *Rain showers scrub the streets, flushing land and cities wet. The dirt and dust of the democrats has had its last chance. Forward like the north wind, storm forward, storm-soldier. Forward like the north wind, storm through folk and state. Till the fog clears again from the germanic horizon, till the sun shall even shine again, and bathe our land in the light. Forward like the north wind, storm forward, storm soldier.*

Go ahead good Nederlanders, storm *godverdomme* forward already, he thinks. Preferably sooner than later. He turns his back and fixes his eyes on the rain-darkened dome of the palace, and waits for it all to pass.

It passes.

Maybe half an hour later he's tilting dizzy over the slick paving stones of Rembrandtplein. The word CABARET in big fat letters looms above him in the drizzle. Under the Alcazar's little crown awning he nods to the two big doormen stationed where there's normally just one. Vreeswijk must be expecting trouble.

Vreeswijk himself is alone behind the bar, trying to take drink orders from an already packed house. He doesn't look happy.

"You're late," he says.

Slipping out of his coat. "Where's Clara?"

"She's late too. And so's that friend of yours."

Friend?

Ben is in his chair putting his instrument together as quick as he can. The others are ready and waiting, except for the missing trombonist. Lex gives him a look as if he's somehow responsible for the guy. Ben ignores him and sets about fitting his reed, but with shaky cold hands. Max the Sax is watching him with eyebrows raised. In a moment they will be leading off "*Liefje ga je mee*" together in a tight harmony. Just as Ben is tightening the ligature he glances toward the bar.

Clara has just come rushing in — with Jakko right behind her. She tells Vreeswijk something. Then Vreeswijk is giving instructions to his two doormen, one of whom trundles back down the steps.

Lex is rolling his eyes, deciding to wait for Jakko now that he's here.

Juliette is hovering by the dressing room door, waiting to make her entrance. She rolls her eyes too.

"What's going on?" someone asks as Jakko approaches the orchestra.

"You fellas might wanna be ready to clear out," he says, just a bit louder than decorum might suggest. "We're gonna get hit."

"We play," says Lex. "Soon, I hope."

"Your call, Lex."

"I just called it, mister." He taps the wand against his stand.

Still fitting his slide, Jakko takes his seat. He doesn't come in until around seventeen on this.

"A one, a two. A one two three."

Ben and Max are at it, bouncing along through the intro to this boppy bit of ice cream. Nothing to challenge the sensibilities, just your standard crowd-pleaser. He glances over toward the bar and tries to find Clara's face. There she is, looking right back at him.

At which moment a bicycle comes crashing through the plate glass.

Screaming.

The mouthpiece has slipped from Ben's lips.

Lex turns, one furious white eyebrow raised.

The music dives into mud. People at the café tables are twisting to look, some rising from their chairs. There is a rhythmic pounding against the front door. They're trying to break the lock. Vreeswijk is livid, trying to get out from behind the bar through the crush of patrons. The second doorman is rushing down the aisle on the far side, waving a big ring of keys. He's telling the clientele something about the rear exit, but Ben can't quite hear him. The public are up now and anxiously funnelling toward the back alley, not fast enough for some. Someone is weeping.

"Calmly, people, very calmly now, take your time," Vreeswijk is calling from the front. But the revolver in his hand isn't helping instill calm.

Ben is maniacally twisting his clarinet apart and tossing the pieces back in their blue velvet seatings. No time to do this right. Hope for the best and smear out of here before somebody out there tosses a firebomb.

He glances up, hoping to see Clara moving to the back door. Instead he sees Jakko wading through the crowd, holding his trombone overhead like a trophy. He seems to be searching, getting frustrated, shoving people out of his way.

The relentless slow pounding on the outer door now gets louder — more men must be hurling their flesh against it. The voices chanting in the street now sound more resolute than angry. And Ben becomes aware that strapped right across this cacophony, a cute bouncy tune he was just playing a minute ago is still jangling around grotesquely in his head. He can't shake the damn thing. Now even the lyrics are molesting him. *Darling come along, to a nice cafe. Just be nice and and don't say no.*

I am staying calm, he declares to himself. I will find her and. And. And there will be an *and*.

And a tire iron hacks into the bottom of a second window. The glass shears and splinters into daggers against the sheer curtains inside. Something smashes through the top — a paving brick? — and now the whole thing crashes down like a waterfall. More screams. But some of the male clientele have stopped moving. Have turned. Maybe they're thinking of standing their ground. *We'll find a little corner for ourselves, cozy side by side, where no one can disturb us. Then you'll be just for me.*

Ben, with his overcoat in one hand and clarinet case in the other, is pushing and squirming the wrong way through a flood of humans, trying to get to Clara. He insists that there will be a time after this. A next moment. He insists on it.

But he's lost sight of her. She's gone.

*Darling come along. To a nice café.*

A creaking wrenching snapping *crack* explodes at the bottom of the entry steps. The crack of the door inside echoes back from outdoors, from the far side of Thorbeckeplein. The roaring cheer outside becomes a cheering inside.

They're coming in.

The sheers over the windows are billowing outward in the breeze.

Clara pops up behind the bar, finds his eyes, beckons him to come quick.

A gunshot cracks the air. She ducks.

"Oh, hohhh!" a unanimous throb of glee from the doorway, as if to say *so it's gonna be like that, is it?*

Vreeswijk fires two more shots at the door, then glances back to check on the exodus he means to defend. At which instant one of the customers grabs his wrist and nearly snaps it, and takes his gun away. The customer screams something at him in German, something Ben can't make out, except for the word *Judenfreund*. The customer aims the gun barrel squarely at the crotch of Mr Vreeswijk's eyeglasses. Clutching his wrist, Vreeswijk backs away from the man. The customer re-aims the gun and send three bullets into the molded tin ceiling, presumably just for fun.

It's this noise that propels Ben across the top of the bar.

He slips down painfully across the sink, and crouches next to Clara.

Whistles and two-toned police sirens outside now. The WA men are stomping up into the joint, and starting to wreck whatever they can reach. How many are there? Sounds like everyone on the outside wants in. Somebody smashes something. Somebody smashes something else. More laughter, more hooting. They sound drunk, but maybe not from drink.

He's not sure what Clara is doing down there on the floor. She's trying to lift something, but whatever it is, he's standing on it. She pushes him back.

"Jakko!" he hears a shout. "Nice of you to show up! Hey look fellas, it's the vanguard of the people's will!"

A hailstorm of laughter.

Ben looks up and finds the eyes of Jakko in the crowd. Jakko looks right back at him for almost one second, his mouth open and eyes wide in abject terror. Then in a

wink the light drops out of his eyes, and he turns, swinging his trombone with full force.

Smash. He wipes out one of the hanging lamps.

An icy howl rises shrill in the air, a screaming of hellbound souls in love with hell. The men rage forward at the fleeing customers, tangling joyously with any who fight back. All except Jakko.

Jakko swings again, squinting, takes out another lamp, the shattering glass scratches his own face, catches in his shirt. He's looks almost like he's weeping. He swings twice more, hammering into a stack of beer glasses beside the taps. He swings again, and loses his grip, and his bent instrument splashes the mirror beside the pantry door.

There is silence in Ben's head now. The music is gone.

Something is pulling at his left wrist.

"Down here! Come on!"

Clara's got the trap door open to the cellar.

Blackness, cold cobwebs under the crashing, booming and muted screaming. Faint smell of leaking sewage. Skull cracking hard against an unseen pipe. The cursing. Wasting time. *Take my hand.* Turn. Dizziness. A rectangle of dusk ahead. *Help me get this loose.* Scraping his knuckles to lift the bar from a bulkhead door. Pushing. A steel bang. Blue air. Instrument case shoved ahead onto the paving stones. Clambering up onto his knees in an alley so small it shouldn't have a name, but probably does.

Breathe.

"You're bleeding."

He feels his head, realizes he's lost his hat.

"Let's get out of this."

"My place," Clara grunts and lurches into a run.

He gets to his feet and staggers after her. It would be nice to seep into the stream of the uninvolved, the margin of civilians trying to stay out of it. But today there is no such thing — no spectators, only dancers. His mad dash with Clara will be a litter of involvements, dartings and swervings and near-collisions. But the only way out of it is through. Another Duvelhoek alley, Dwarsstraat to Breestraat, then they watch for

a moment. It's getting dark now. To their left the bells of the Munt tower are just chiming six. A torrent of humanity rushes senselessly toward it, but crosses another wave sweeping back toward the square. Ben squints. On the far side, over by Populair, the city cops appear to be retreating, disarmed, into their stationhouse on the corner. The cadre of uniformed *Ordnungspolizei* who drove them back now victoriously turn their attention elsewhere. They are shielding the WA men from every possible interference. But on whose orders?

Nevermind. Now is their chance to make a run for the corner of the Half Moon Alley. They start across — and nearly get trampled in a stampede of horses.

Who's this now, joining the fray? *Marechausee*, looks like, mounted Dutch military police swooping in with batons already swinging. The Orpo return and engage. At once the last traces of polarity — of lines drawn, front driving against front — evanesce into foam. Orpo and Wehrmacht and Marechausee and WA militia are boiling together in a soup of civilians with mixed loyalties, and everyone is striking at everybody.

The light is failing. Men are falling.

Ben looks around, his gaze sweeps many eyes, every eye insane.

He's lost sight of her.

Something crashes into him, he's sent reeling, passing within the breath of a jubilant militiaman shaking a trophy overhead, a stolen police billyclub.

"They're shooting at us!" somebody yells.

"Who?" another calls back.

"The Jews are shooting at us in the Jodenhoek. Get some men, let's go!"

Ben finds Clara's hand again and won't let go this time. Just as they turn the corner he sees the armored vehicles rumbling in from the Amstelstraat. And sees Jakko's face in the crowd. And Jakko sees him. And then he's gone.

The darkness gets darker. Skulking along the Kloveniers he and Clara are met and caressed by a fog. Thank you, he's thinking. Walk quietly, pray for invisibility.

A few uncertain hoofbeats to their left. The horse on the bridge is confused. It doesn't know which way to turn, or even who its rider is. Looking deeper into the purpling shadow, Ben can just make out the silhouette, the overcoat, the Wehrmacht-issue helmet. An Orpo man has stolen a horse, gotten as far as the Staalstraat bridge, and somehow lost his impulse. Now he sits like the dead, staring down the canal

toward the distant weighing house in the mist. Silence. The breathing of the horse in the cold.

They keep moving. The effort is draining him now. It feels like waltzing along the bottom of a lake. Something is throbbing just behind his left eye. It's getting worse.

"Are you all right?" she whispers.

"I'll make it."

"You're out of breath."

"What were you doing with him today?"

She hesitates. "With who?"

"That kid. The trombone player."

"I wasn't with him," she says.

"But you came in together."

"Yes."

"Well."

"We came in together. I was late. All that parading around in the streets. I got to the club and he was running up to tell me we were about to get hit."

"How did he know that?"

"He's one of them, darling. Or hadn't you noticed."

He thinks about it. Of course he's noticed. *But.*

"But if he is one of them, why would he bother to tip us off?"

"He said he was just over at the Brouwerswapen and he heard everything. First they'd march on Heck's again, then the Alcazar. I guess he thought we had more time."

"But why —"

"Shh."

The roaring of the mob now seems fugitive, vaguely ahead of them but diffuse, fractured by echoing among canals and banks of mute housefronts. The menace is closer, further, more from the right or left, depending on reflections and wind.

Clara stops and looks back.

"What is it?" He can hardly see her face.

"Is someone following us?"

He stares into the dark with her.

He feels her shrug.

"Let's go."

The Zuider Kerk jangles out a senseless tune, and they turn the corner toward it. He hears the housekeys in her hand.

He's swaying when he helps her fit three sheets of black cardboard into her tall front windows. What's wrong with him, she wants to know. He thinks he's coming down with something fast. Oh splendid, now he'll get her sick, just when she can least afford it. He wonders what she means. He's about to slip the last sheet into place, and pauses to look out. The window faces along another canal intersecting this one. Its waters cling to the last hope of gray-blue twilight — betraying what could just possibly be the shape of a man, a tall man, standing at the crest of the single-arch bridge across the way. Watching. Or is he just seeing things?

The figure is gone then, and with it the last light of Sunday. Ben pushes the blackout snug into place, and drags the drape across for good measure.

A wood match. She's lighting candles, one here, one there, one there. He watches her move. The light reveals a room just as wildly unkempt as her hair.

"Have a seat, Ben. Forgive the mess, I've been busy."

He forgives her and finds the sofa. She picks up two dirty coffee cups and brings them over to a kitchen sink already piled with pots and dishes. The floor is littered with books and scrawled notes in different hands. He's curious to know who's been spending time here with her, but it would be uncouth to ask.

She's lifting a full liter of what looks like prewar Irish whiskey. Opened for the first time. Two glasses. He must look surprised.

"Liberated from our capitalist oppressor," she smiles bleakly. "Drink, maybe it'll ward off what's ailing you."

Prost.

Smashing window glass and screaming in the distance. A roar of men.

"So we've got the night off," she says. "And maybe the rest of the year."

He listens to the calm in her voice.

She's telling him this is all a calculated provocation. The *moffen* are transparently behind this, they're just being sly about it. They'll use the local militiamen to keep pushing until one day the Jews and the Left push back. All they need is a reaction,

one pretty little chunk of criminality. Something they can dress up as a wave of Jewish terror against *our* society. And then they'll make their move.

"Make their move. You mean it gets worse than this?"

Clara looks at him like he's a kid who's too old to believe in Sinterklaas. She glances at her shoes and shakes her head. She starts to tell him things that sound pretty far-fetched. How does she know all this, who's she been talking to, what has she been reading? He almost believes her. But it's making his head swim. Just beyond the sound of her voice, the church tower looming above them offers a different tune, a song for the hour — and then the darker, older bell answers with a slow series of gongs. The children summon the father for a periodic judgment. Old Lot's girls rouse him from his wine-induced slumber to seduce him in the cave. *Snap out of it*. Ben tries to count the hour but loses track. Time is either slowing or speeding up, he can't tell which.

"Do you get used to this?"

"To what."

"The bells." But she's already answered the question.

He's sealed into a tomb with her. They drink more whiskey and listen to a garble of malevolent song ghosting about in the world, blurring, swarming from the small streets behind the churchyard to the dancehall over in Waterlooplein and back again, punctuated at quarter hours by absurdly cheerful churchbells. Somewhere in time she takes a good look at his face. She pulls a chain to turn on the kitchen light, and summons him. With a moist cloth she dabs away dried blood from his temple, his cheek, his throat, and he can smell her skin and count her pores and almost taste her lips, and it's unbearable.

"Don't get me wrong," she says. "If the people I'm helping ever come to power, I'll hate them too. Trust me."

"You're a communist with a small *c* then."

"Communist with a small *a*," she says into his right ear.

He frowns. He wonders what she means. Her hand is on his forehead.

"You're absolutely burning up, my friend. Let's put you to bed. I have work to do."

She leans to pull back the red-checked curtain under the sink, and reaches in among cleaning brushes and detergent bottles. Grunt, she drags out a little black suitcase. Or no — a portable typewriter.

"Excuse me."

He's in her way.

At some point the churchbells fall silent, and even the rioting crowd recedes into his interior surf. The tapping of her typewriter continues through the night, waxing and waning, now a dozen hesitant strokes, now a hammering fury. The bed is much too soft. Too hot. It will smother him. But now he's plunged away again into another unexplained crisis. What is it this time? Oh yes, something about shapes. Yes. Too many polygons falling toward him, desperately needing to be fit into just the right gaps in the high wall. Trapezoids, isoceles, pentagons. He knows the consequences of getting this wrong: the right man's prayer will be wrongly answered, and instead of his child's recovery from tuberculosis he will receive a useless bag of gold. It's a nerve-wracking task, and Ben is continually distracted by Prokofiev tugging on his right arm. He can't see him and doesn't know the voice, but he's sure it's Prokofiev. He protests. First of all, can't you see he's busy here? And no, damn you, the sonata in question wasn't even written for clarinet.

*So what? Neither was Clara written for you.*

There's no arguing with Prokofiev. And meanwhile Ben's been missing some of these stupid prayer-polygons. They're snowing by, eluding his grasp, and for the first time he realizes they're actually three-dimensional, not flat at all. Sudden panic, this is the key to the whole thing. The shapes represent the twelve tones. But look, this one is triangular from the front and pentagonal from the side. So in fact they are intervals. No wait, how many sides do these things have? For the love of God — they're chords! He's been playing it by the wrong rules, how could he have been so blind? The whole game is richer and more complex than he imagined. But it's too late now. Some of the phrasings have failed to reach their allotted places in the score. The music will be unwhole and Ben will get the blame. Audiences two generations from now will still scratch their heads and wonder how such a thing could have happened — in such a civilized country no less. It's getting cold here. He keeps hearing a buzzer, two short bursts and one long, *dz-dz dzzzzt*. Again and again.

Footsteps, the opening and closing, the voices hushed and urgent in the hall. What Ben wants them to understand is that we don't really have to play the whole thing from the top, we just need to try again from where it started to go wrong. That makes sense, doesn't it? We can handle that can't we? If only they would listen to him.

"Stop. Let's take it from thirty-three again," he tells them.

He's freezing, shivering in fact.

"Stop it!"

A wedge of light unfolds across the ceiling. The tapping has stopped. She is there. She makes him drink from a cup of something warm that tastes like a garden.

"Can we pick it up from thirty-three?"

"Of course, darling," she tells him. "Thirty-three will be fine."

She covers him again with the feather comforter, and touches his head with a cold washcloth. Then she retreats, closes the door, goes back to her visitors and her typewriter. They have to get the word out tonight, of course. He understands. If nobody knows the truth, no one will lift a goddamn finger to stop the bastards.

Am I gonna die?

*Yes. The Jews are gonna die. And I'm starting with you.*

The bells chime again. There's a whisp of blue, reminding him of daylight. It's slower than lightning, but too fast to be the day. He remembers visiting the toilet, someone helping him get there. Someone feeling his head and giving him tea with real honey. A dream, then. Nobody has real honey. Honey comes from bees, and there are no bees. The bees have flown to England. They do call him occasionally with a drumbeat and lot of buzzing and crackling. *Landgenoten!* they cry in a warbling high pitch. Countrymen!

He is urged to take courage. Thank you Majesty. Somewhere not far away, his throat hurts.

*Dz-dz dzzzzt.* Two short bursts, one long, and someone is here. Long conversations in the front room. *Dz-dz dzzzzt.* Someone else is here. It has to be run off tonight. There's very little time. Talk of workplaces in the morning. They must be crazy if they still believe in morning. There's no such thing. In the darkness

between bells, he hears more shouting and shattering. It's too close. Then it fades deeper into the surf. The bells go silent, and so, finally, does he.

Only the typewriter remains. It is his pulse now, a reminder that something somewhere does exist.

All his life Ben has believed in the possibility of drowning. It seems strange that he's below the thundering waves, yet breathing so easily. There's plenty to breathe down here, you just have to relax and let it come. It's too bad about all the silt stirred up in this turbulence, he would like to see some marine life. He drifts up toward the light of the surface. The lamplight is golden. Clara is here with him again, and he's not cold any more. She says she's sent them all away. She needs a rest. She declares that she doesn't believe in nations. He assures her that nations are quite real, after all they're on the radio and in all the newspapers. But in her gentlest voice she insists to him that no, they are just an illusion, and all their evil a figment of our collective and quite burdensome dreaming. If we could just shake them loose, we'd all be fine. As if to emphasize the point, she has removed her clothes. The springs creak and she is beside him. He feels her skin, it's quite smooth to the touch. He feels the curve of her hip, and it is perfect. He dares to find her breast, and then her other breast. Amazingly she doesn't vanish, it continues on. Her nipples are just as he might wish, firm, eager to be pinched between his patient thumbs and forefingers. This is the best so far. He tells her quite frankly that he wishes this would really happen someday. In real life. She agrees. But she wants to be in a fever too. She wants to share his delirium and leave all this behind for awhile. Perhaps she can borrow some of his germs. As she speaks, her breath is alarmingly hot against his chest. Then she is kissing him. The lovemaking becomes astonishingly vivid, and queer new details keep floating up out of his ocean. The stale taste of coffee on her tongue. The unique but quite believable taste of the juice of her, as he commits pure verbal sedition against her clitoris. The pesky hairs harrying his subversion. He overcomes them, he is a revolutionary, he sabotages her balance and she comes crumbling down. Somehow he ascends and gives her what she needs from above, from behind. Then he is kissing and caressing her buttocks, he can't resist, the shape them is even more heartbreakingly lovely than they would be in real life. And he encounters still another odd detail — a little stroke on the lower curve of her right cheek. Where's this

coming from? he asks himself, tracing the line of it with his finger. Smooth, shiny like a scar. Convent school injury, she seems to say. What can that mean? He didn't know she was Catholic. She giggles, no, she's just an atheist with a small *c*. Then she's on top of him again, moving faster, her breasts becoming a free blur, and she and he are face to face, and he watches her come — watches the pain of absolute concentration pinch her eyes as she forces her soul through that pinhole of the cosmos — and then she breathes again, and he comes inside her, and she doesn't seem worried at all. And this is his revenge against all the evil in the sky. This will be his comfort. Ben has no fear whatsoever. He slips beneath the waves without even taking a deep breath first.

Eight bells toll and he stirs and turns over.

Nine bells rouse him. He finds the toilet.

And finds Clara asleep on the sofa in the front room. A small worn-out book, cheaply clothbound in a mustard color, lies on the carpet beside her dangling hand. *Errico Malatesta, Polemical Articles, Vol. I.*

The blackout is still up, the desk lamp still on. There's a ditto master rolled into her typewriter. More master sheets lie ready on the desk, blank but for a masthead stencilled into the waxy surface. HET LICHT, hand-drawn in fat capitals: The Light. The symbol, a jagged art deco torch against a dark field of fine lines. He's seen this before. Some left-wing splinter puts it out, very illegal. So this is what she's mixed up in. Good for her, brave soul. He turns to study the woman who doesn't love him, sprawled there across a dusty blue divan. He wonders if she's warm enough under that little blanket.

Feeling faint again, he returns to bed.

She brings him toast and a cup of tea.

"Feeling well enough to eat?"

"Thanks. How late is it?"

"Just before two."

"Uh. What day?"

"Tuesday."

He nods, and picks up a piece of toast. Pauses.

"I need to be somewhere tonight. Or no."

"No, dear."

He remembers.

"The whole inventory was destroyed," she tells him. "Every last bottle and brandy snifter, even the piano got tossed. They stopped short of burning the place to the ground — of course, the Imperial is right next door. Nobody's heard from Vreeswijk yet. There were some stab wounds and a few gunshot wounds. Two dozen city police got injured, no telling how many civilians. When the Binnengasthuis hospital was overflowing they took 'em to the Wilhelmina — or whatever they're calling it nowadays. All night the militia were dragging their wounded back to the Brewer's Shield bar. We have a friend of a friend of a friend inside there. The beer was flowing like blood. Rumor has it Böhmcker himself was sitting upstairs the whole time, taking reports and giving instructions."

"Who?"

"The Reichskommissar Deputy for Amsterdam. Turns out that's his local. It's nothing but lunatics out there, Ben. They were back here again last night, about nine o'clock, raising hell over in Waterlooplein. This time no police. How are you feeling?"

"Bloody awful. And you?"

He supposes he should be going. She wonders why and where to. He has no good answer, and feeling his forehead she supposes he should stay awhile. Ben pushes himself off the bed and onto his feet. There's a dark spot, a bit of tunnel vision. Then he's okay — or nearly so.

She's tidied up her front room. The typewriter is still on the desk, but the books, loose papers and stencil masters have been put away. The blackout cardboard is down, admitting one of the loveliest possible views of the old town. The waterlight blinds him and dances on the walls. Beyond the arched bridge, the little canal leads straight away to what must be the Amstel there in the distance. Except for the ice-floats and naked trees, it's picture-postcard Amsterdam. Must be spectacular in springtime.

Springtime. That's what we need.

Clara is opening and closing the kitchen cupboards, high and low. "There's a slight possibility of soup here," she says, and turns to see him watching her. She stares back, smiles at the awkwardness and pushes away a frond of her hair. The tiny

space between her foreteeth is just impossibly beautiful. How can it be so, how can absence *be* beauty? He feels an echo of lust rising in him, but without the urgency. Somehow he knows that dream was the best he can hope for, and maybe it was good enough.

The Zuider Kerk chimes again, and it's four o'clock. Ben is sitting on the window seat with his clarinet case open. He pulls the swab through the bore of the upper joint of his instrument, then the lower, the barrel and the bell. He wipes the keys with the polishing cloth. Things he should have done the other day, if he hadn't been rushing to escape with his life. Now he dabs a tiny bit of cork grease from the tube and rubs it into the tenon corks with his finger. He turns the upper joint in his hand, inspecting the bridge key. It looks undamaged. But haste is a terrible thing.

Well there's only one way to find out, right. He slips the latest reed out of the guard and looks it over. No cracks yet, but he'll need to start a new one soon. Too bad, this one's been good to him. He puts it on his tongue and lets it moisten while he assembles the instrument. Gently turning, fitting, coaxing. He feels like the penitent dad atoning with excess tenderness for last night's drunken beating. He pops the mouthpiece cap, loosens the ligature and fits the reed, slips the ligature back and tightens the screws. And then it's a clarinet.

He cradles it in his hands and stares at the slightly fading gold emblem, HENRI SELMER PARIS encircled in a laurel wreath. He's had it now for about seven years, come to think of it, since right before the Jordaan Uproar. He remembers walking up to a dingy three-high room across from Carel's bread factory. The bony old man with frizzy hair was openly weeping. Hard times, hence the miraculous price, a price even Ben could afford — that is, with a little help from two ugly pewter candlesticks his mother would never miss anyway, since she was in the hospital. *I had a first-chair lip, now it's gone*, the man kept saying. Now the world was going to hell. Thirty percent unemployment, no shortage of cranky Bolsheviks for neighbors, and a public seduced by barbarian jazz. The storm was coming, he assured Ben. Like nothing you've seen before. Nothing mattered now — except that he was cold, hungry, and two months behind on the rent. Ben knew it was criminal, taking his horn away like that, but the offer was just too beguiling. The old Mercadier he'd learned on was becoming an embarrassment now that he was looking for real gigs. And here in his hands lay a near-pristine Selmer B flat, a Boehm system dating from a time when so

many people still favored the Albert mechanism. Grenadilla blackwood with silver-plated nickel keys. And when he tried it out, he was suddenly greeting a forgotten friend. The combination — this horn, with this mouthpiece and a decent number 2.5 — it all just *worked* with Ben's breath, his sinuses, his tongue and the shape of his mouth. He knew he was the one missing accessory that must fit on the end of this mouthpiece. And hearing him play, the old man wept even more disconsolately. He'd purchased this clarinet from Monsieur Selmer himself, right there at the factory in Gaillon. He'd had a first-chair lip, but now it was gone.

I am a thief, Ben told himself as he set his coins and crumpled banknotes on the table — two bikes and a back-wheel, as they say. He swore to the old man that he would apply his every gift to coax a glimmer of beauty out through this narrow cylindrical bore and into the suffering universe. He shook the old man's hand. And he held the Selmer for a moment, gazing at the trademark on the barrel, just as he is doing now.

And what bloody use is it to him now?

Where can he work? The Jewish theater? How many clarinetists does one Jewish theater need nowadays?

Closing his eyes, he sees the abomination again. Young Jakko with his eyes gone dead, swinging that trombone like a sledgehammer, wiping out a stack of *vaasjes*. The man committing suicide right before his eyes. A shiver sweeps Ben's spine, cramps the muscles around his neck. He's afraid.

He opens his eyes, brings the mouthpiece to his lips, slips his thumbs under the thumb rests, and quietly blows a few scales.

His fingers are stiff and raw. He remembers scraping them on a cellar door.

His instrument is fine.

Clara is at the doorway looking.

"Sorry," he says.

"No. Play. Play something. Betty won't mind, she's a pianist."

He adjusts his posture, and wonders what she expects to hear. The first thing that comes into his head is that sonata by Prokofiev. It was written for the flute, but that hardly matters. So at least said Herr Fockmeier, the opinionated Jew from Stuttgart who once made it his mission to trawl young Ben from a timid embouchure to the shores of a possible career. *Why hinder yourself? You are artist, or — ? If you love,*

*if you can, then you do*. The French flute literature was rather well suited to clarinet, he assured Ben. Think Ravel, Debussy, Satie, Fauré. And what any of those Frenchmen had to do with Prokofiev was a question better left unasked. Herr Fockmeier is dead now. He stuck his head in the gas oven in mid-May of last year, didn't even leave a note.

There will be a next moment, Ben has promised himself. Here it is. Long notes floating and languidly twisting in the air like cigar smoke. It's a strange melody, an inscrutable melody, one he often forgets entirely. It returns to him whenever he's scraped raw, exposed to that furnace of emotion at the heart of the world. Playing it, he looks out on the waning afternoon. A single swan is dawdling silhouetted in the canal, at the ice's edge, in a rippling of indolent almost-color. Its erratic wake turns into shifting bands of was-platinum and will-be blue. Why is it alone? Don't swans usually travel in pairs for life? Maybe its partner died, but it forgot, it's just confused, and that's why it seems to be waiting here, inexplicably, under a dying sky in February 1941. Thin winter clouds catch the oblique sun and smear it like insufficient margarine, cut by a black lace chaos of branches rising over the black gables. Now and then a silent cyclist slows at the crest of the bridge and rolls away downhill. It's all silhouettes. The peace of this feels somehow wrong. This restful rippling, this aimless swan gliding, this sadness of recent magic, it's all stupidly serene. And in the time it takes to think so, it all purples to dusk again. Ben's mind has slowed to a sub-celestial pace, the sky is moving faster than thought. A moment ago this was a blaze of day, the cold sun was hunkering painfully just over the house-crowns and skidding off the canalwater to twinkle up here among the ceiling beams of this room. We were squinting then. Now our eyes are wide open.

Playing has thoroughly exhausted him.

Clara realizes that he's finished the Prokofiev. She claps her hands in perfect silence, pantomiming applause rather than breaking the spell.

The church carillon plays its half-hour song.

The door buzzer sounds. *Dz-dz dzzzt*. Two short and one long.

She's up from the sofa, out on the landing, pulling the rope in the stairwell to unlock the downstairs door. Footsteps. A man.

The man is fair-haired, gray-faced and bespectacled, maybe mid-thirties, in a suit and tie under a dishwater-gray raincoat, carrying a briefcase. He looks like someone who might work for a publishing firm. Or maybe a teacher of economics.

Setting eyes on Ben he lowers one eyebrow. Ben stands and says hello. The man just nods, and quickly turns to Clara.

"Miranda, do you believe in astrology?" he asks her softly.

"Oh yes," she says, and smiles over at Ben.

"What's your zodiac sign?"

"Oh." Looking at Ben now with an appraising eye. "Sagittarius, I'd say,"

"Sure?"

"Absolutely. And you can call me Clara."

Whatever it all means, the man now solemnly offers his hand to Ben.

"Call me Jaap."

"Call me Benjamin. I'm an Aquarian by the way."

For some reason that makes them laugh.

Ben helps put up the blackout again. The man called Jaap would love to join them for soup, but he really can't stay that long. Sitting at the little table he opens his briefcase.

"Thought you might want to see this."

"What's this now?"

He passes her a few stapled pages under the banner HET PAROOL.

"Just showed up yesterday, I've never seen it before. It might be from the Pieter 't Hoen people."

"Ha. The more the merrier I guess. You think they're reading ours?"

"Who knows? They were all reading your handbill, though, I know that. This morning in the factories. And a lot of the municipal works too. You're helping."

Ben is cleaning the parts of his horn again.

"We had our own people working the Jordaan and other, yeah, bastions of antifascism let's say. CPN's on the job too. We're trying to cooperate now. The Stalinists are temporarily ignoring their disdain for Trotskyites." Smirking. "So we will have some support here tonight, curfew or no."

He passes her some loose sheets of blue handwriting.

"This is from our historian friend. He takes on that Blokzuil character point for point and tears him to shreds. Brilliant writer but uh, well as you can see his hand is a little possessed. Can you read this krabbel?"

She nods. "I can manage. What do you mean about tonight?"

"They'll be back again, we know that. They're forbidden to march in the Jodenbuurt but the bastards will be back."

She's frowning. "Are you setting up a confrontation? On purpose?"

He upturns his hands. "We didn't start this."

"You want a slaughterfield here?"

"Well we can't leave these people completely defenseless can we."

"You'll be giving them just what they want."

"I'm not sure we have a choice. Do we let people think the fascists are completely unopposed in this town?"

Clara takes a deep breath and lets it out, and shakes her head.

"We never have a choice. It just seems like everything we do plays right into their hands."

Silence. She moves to her desk and opens a drawer.

Ben snaps his instrument case. "Anything I can do?"

"Stir the soup."

They're alone again. The man called Jaap has gone off in the night with his briefcase and bicycle. She assures Ben she's no cook. But the champignon soup is lovely. At least he thinks it's champignon soup.

And shortly after the bell strikes seven, as forecast, a new rumbling rises from the market area on the far side of the Zwanenburgwal. They look toward the blackened windows. More blurry chanting, more glass shattering, more cursing and banging of crowbars and pipes. Their soup spoons tap and scrape softly against the bowls.

She asks how he's feeling. Well, his head is throbbing and the glands in his throat are swelling up, but apart from that he's fine thanks. Maybe it's time for him to be on his way. He wouldn't want to stretch his welcome into a honeymoon.

There are footsteps thundering by right outside the house. Two or maybe three, fleeing or chasing or both. One heavy drumbeat — someone's chest expelling air. A

groan. The word no. More running. Silence. Ben has half risen from his chair, his breath frozen..

Better not, she says softly.

Curfew's been rolled back to eight anyway. In his shape he won't make it, he'll just get picked up and spend the night at Warmoesstraat. Or worse.

Ben sits back and closes his eyes, and breathes in, unsteadily.

"You're shivering," she observes.

"It wouldn't do for you to catch this, whatever I have."

"Oh, I've already got it, silly. Just takes time to incubate."

He opens his eyes and looks at her. "I'm sorry."

She shakes her head, gets up and carries away the dishes to the sink.

"You should lie down and get some rest. I have work to do. If you're better in the morning I'll have a little favor you can do for me. We'll just see how you — "

She trails off.

A different sound has risen abruptly in the night's violence. What was till now staccato seems to rear up into into a prolonged chorus, with lead soloists wailing clearly, but in non-human harmonies. Something is wrong. These are chords we don't want to hear. Men with names are in pain now, in fear now. The anger goes to agony, and whatever sport was in it has bled away in two heartbeats.

The soup bowls and silverware crash hard in the sink.

He hears her sob, and rises to go find her. He's holding her in his arms, there in her kitchen.

"Evil spirits," she murmurs into his shoulder. "Something bigger than men and women. Something calls us to this madness. Everybody knows nobody wants it. We can just say no to it and life will go on as normal. But it's beyond us it's bigger than us it summons us we can't resist, we believe anything, we obey, we obey, we dive off the edge into this fucking abyss — " Her breath catches, she's silent, she curls against him like a spring.

The door buzzer sounds.

Not two short and one long. Just one long harsh gust. Clara snaps up and looks Ben in the eye. She curses, swallows hard and licks her lips.

"What is it?"

"Hide," she says.

"What? Why?"

"Get in the bedroom and be absolutely still, don't move. No matter what happens, don't cough, laugh cry or sneeze till I give you the all clear. You hear me?"

He's never seen her like this.

"Do you understand?"

Her scared eyes.

The buzzer rings again.

"Ben. *Go*. Now."

He's sitting on the floor, with his back against the door of her bedroom. He listens to her going down the stairs to open the door in person. Then nothing. Then the door closing, a thump he feels more than hears. Two sets of footsteps on the stairs. She closes the apartment door.

"Sit down there. Not on the sofa. I'll get some vodka. You're going to tell me everything."

"Okay princess." An exhausted male voice.

Ben hears her rattling around in the bathroom looking for something, finding it. She walks back into the front room — and closes the communicating hallway door.

Princess?

Relax, at least she offered the guy a drink. Whoever it is, it must be a friend.

*Princess?*

No matter how hard he listens, he can't crack their murmur.

Then the man yowls in pain.

"Hold still," she snaps at him.

She's asking him something. He's answering her, breathless, his voice is raspy. She asks him something else. Then she's just listening to him for a while. Ben can only pick up a word here and there.

How long.

Like any normal patriotic.

Excuse me.

Unlike you.

Already drunk enough. You need stitches.

Please Miranda.

Sit down you.

Mercy on me, princess.

Messing with what you don't understand.

Laughter.

Ohhh. I see now.

None of your business. Just.

No idea you were mixed up in.

Leave it.

It's okay.

Stop.

An understanding.

Be ridiculous.

Silence.

The silence lasts a long time. Ben feels himself teetering on the tip of awareness. The church carrilon plays a quarter-hour tune.

The man yells again — maybe not from pain but aggravation, as if he's lost a hand of cards.

She says something.

He tells her to get the cholera. She tells him to fall dead.

The middle door opens and the man is letting himself out.

"You'll hear from me again. Princess."

Ben gets to his feet, ready to disobey orders and step out there and confront this impudent klootzak. But the door has already slammed. He's gone. The downstairs door opens and shuts.

Ben stares at the bedroom door. At the floral print bathrobe hanging from the hook. He can't move.

The door opens. She's startled to see him right there.

"What happened?" he wants to know.

"Nothing. Nothing happened."

She's taking off her blouse. There's blood on her blouse.

"You're bleeding."

"No. He was bleeding."

"Who?"

"Your friend. Your NSB chum."

Stunned. "That was *him*?"

"He knows where I live. I guess he tailed us back here that night."

She pushes past him and continues disrobing, as if he's not even there. Her skirt is already unzipped in the back.

"Clara. What did he do to you?"

She whirls on him. "*Nothing*. Could you leave me alone for a minute?"

He surveys the front room. Drops of blood smeared with shoeprints. Blood on the washcloth next to the vodka bottle. A roll of white bandage and some scissors and tape. One of the chairs has been shoved aside and the edge of the carpet is turned back. A stencil master lies on the floor below the desk.

Nothing, she said. Nothing happened.

It's quiet out there. Just the siren of an ambulance retreating eastward.

She's in her robe. Quick embrace. She's okay. He should get some rest. She'll wake him when the time comes.

He lies in her bed and listens to the sounds of her bathing.

And then his head is clear. It's cold. He's pedaling a woman's bicycle over the Staalstraat bridge. In the castiron light, a procession of flatbed trucks and police vans rumbles along the far side of the Kloveniersburgwal. Air brakes squeal in the distance behind him as he hurtles past Hotel de L'Europe. The Muntplein is empty, the tower looks forgotten. Clear sailing. Even if someone does stop him they won't look under the tray in his clarinet case — unless they have reason to suspect him, which they won't. Everything will be fine. He clears Koningsplein and cuts left at the Spui, into the narrower streets where nobody will even see him.

He has promised to bring back some food. She's not well, the two of them have crossed in the night. She was hot and headachy, and taking it all in stride. He glances at his wristwatch. It's been seven minutes now since he last looked into her eyes. Her eyes were the way the light changes when a midsummer thunderstorm is rolling toward you across the polder, and it won't get here for another twenty minutes, and you know that, but still it feels like uncertainty. She kissed him quickly and smiled and shut the door.

He dares to consider whether perhaps, despite it all, they might end up together someday. When all this is over and forgotten. Springtime. A cute little house in Oud Sloten, flower garden in the back. The watering can. Yellow daffodils. Two kids and a kitten. He'll get old with her. He'll vote labor and she'll vote for the Reds. They'll get bored with each other. Maybe he'll tell his grandchildren about that one morning he spent as a courier for the resistance. Maybe, as grandfathers sometimes do, he will even embellish the truth just a bit. And she'll squeeze his hand and not say a word.

The man with the tweed cap is waiting just where he should be, smoking a pipe. Ben tells him he's lost, and asks the way to Vollendam. The man tells him sure, Vollendam right around the corner from here. Ben follows him into a archway leading back to a dreary little *hofje*.

Everything will be fine, he's thinking.

The exchange takes less than half a minute. No words, except for good day. Then he's back on his girly-bike and zigzagging through the morning, off to his flat above the Bloemgracht.

He quickly washes, shaves, changes clothes, grabs a few guilders from the old jam jar. He fishes all his remaining food coupons from the drawer in the bedroom. Bread, meat, vegetables.

It's shortly before ten in the morning when he returns, victorious, with saddlebags loaded with groceries. The Staalstraat drawbridge is up for some reason, so he rides to the Hoogstraat. There the bridge is blocked by a checkpoint. Two *Ordnungspolizei*, one staff car diagonally parked, one motorcycle with a side car.

Ben rides up and asks what's going on. They just wave him back. He tries to dredge up some German vocabulary.

"*Freundin, krank. Hier Essen. Ich muss. Bitte.*"

The *grüne* hefts his rifle and points it at Ben's forehead.

Ben blinks.

He turns again and cycles down as far as Nieuwmarkt. The square is crawling with soldiers, trucks, workmen setting wooden barricades and stringing barbed wire in front of the old weighing house. Someone has put up a broad white sign saying JUDENVIERTEL, JOODSCHE WIJK.

"But how am I supposed to get in there?" he asks a city policeman.

"You don't get in there. Nobody gets in or out until further notice."

"But this is crazy."

"Jewish area. Nobody in or out. It's for their own protection."

"What?"

The Zuider Kerk carillon is just tolling ten o'clock. Ben points.

"Officer. That's a Protestant church ringing over there in the middle of your Jewish area."

The cop is has exhausted his patience. "You want me to make *sense* of this?"

"But I *am* a Jew."

"Listen, Jew. I don't make the rules, right, and I don't want any more trouble than I already have. No more out of you. Just back off and keep moving. Now."

The gesture of his hand is just menacing enough, the man just big and Frisian-looking enough that Ben realizes this is over. The cop walks away.

"But I am a Jew," Ben mumbles, and no one is listening.

It will take months, but eventually he will understand that he has seen Clara for the last time.

Hendrik Koot — the Utrechtsestraat corset maker who volunteered as a sergeant in the WA — dies a day later of injuries dealt him by the bloodthirsty Jews of Waterlooplein. His poor teenage son is at his side. The retaliation is swift. Hundreds of men are rounded up at random, mistreated in public, shipped off to nowhere. The citizens are furious with the Germans. At an evening rally in the Jordaan, in the marketplace in front of the Noorder Kerk, Ben is searching the crowd for Clara's face. He scrutinizes the leaflet someone hands him. STAAKT STAAKT STAAKT, the call is for a general strike. Could this be her boxy hand-printing? Did she type these words? The strike comes. He wanders through the crowd still looking for her face. She must be here somewhere. But when the gunfire starts in the Westerstraat he ducks, and keeps his head down, and holes up in his flat for awhile. The strike ends a few days later, the only consolation being that the Amsterdammers were brave enough to try such a thing at all. During the first week of March, Ben thinks he spots that gray-faced economics professor, walking toward the west entrance of the Centraal Station with his raincoat and briefcase. He addresses him as Jaap, which seems to disturb the fellow.

"Forgive me, I don't think I know you."

"Sagitarius," Ben says. "What happened to her?"

The man's eyes sink.

"Amersfoort," he says, and shakes his head.

She's gone.

Ben doesn't inquire further, doesn't move, doesn't even see the man turn away and depart from his field of vision. He's just staring into nothing. Eventually — how much later? — he realizes he's looking at a sign. The sign says HIER OVERSTEKEN. Cross here.

Cross here.

So Ben fails to respond to the notice requiring him to report his Jewishness to the city Population Register. He just disappears. He sits out history as a farmer's *knecht* in West Friesland, milking cows and shoveling shit and occasionally playing bits of Debussy under the starlight and eastbound bombers. He is very sparing with his cork grease now, and only changes reeds three times a year. In the final issue of *Jazz Wereld* he reads about how the rules of music have changed. Working artists have to register with the Chamber of Culture. Everything touching jazz idiom is expressly forbidden, from a growl in the brass to repetitive syncopation. Those corrupt Negroistical influences are to be flushed from popular music. So Clara was right about that too. He tries to remember a time when she was wrong about anything.

When the resistance people come, he helps them hide. When the SS patrols come, he hides himself — in the hay under the platform of the *bed-stee* between the sitting room and the stable. When Christmas comes, he sits with his hiding-family in church and pretends to know the words to the songs. When the hunger winter comes, he helps the farmer hide potatoes, so thousands of wandering skeletons won't take everything the family has. And when the Canadians come, he asks them for a lift to the city.

Four years have made old Amsterdam very thin and sad. He's missed the bonfires and dancing. The rubbish in the streets is stinking to high heaven. The Zuiderkerk, he's told, was pressed into service as a morgue, because the earth was too frozen for digging. The corpses have been removed. The bells do not ring. They were taken away for scrap metal in '42. Below the tower, at the corner of two canals, there is a

pile of rubble where Clara's house used to be. No explanation. No *yes I remember that beautiful girl*. Just broken stone and shards of lumber.

The rest is just bright shining postwar, in all its glorious meaninglessness. The various consolations. The woman he eventually settles down with. The children. The grandchildren. His occasional fleeting illusions of being necessary. The blame would sometimes grow fainter, recede into the background of Madeleine's new hairstyle and the phone bill and the fan-belt and new shoes for Wouter. But no one could ever take the blame away. It was one little thing he could always call his own, like a hobby, or a car you tinker with out in the garage. He thinks of his life as a series of candles stuck in the cake. He knows he will never taste the cake itself. He doesn't deserve to.

"God I loved that girl," the old man says.

The aluminum walker clicks in a steady rhythm as he crosses the room, turns, crosses back again. Ben lifts just his eyes to watch the old man's face.

"Oh yeah I loved her. I loved every perverted communist goddamn square centimeter of her. Even down to the little scar on her right butt cheek. Everything. She was everything I coulda dreamed of. She just gave it to me."

Ben stands up. He's looking him right in the eye.

"What's a matter, succotash? You're shaking like a leaf."

Ben can never say exactly what he means. Sometimes the frustration causes him physical pain. He feels his mouth hanging open. Pretty soon he'll be drooling on the front of his own pajamas. He clamps his mouth shut. He opens his mouth. By some miracle it comes out.

"Rapist."

"Excuse me?"

"You raped her."

Jakko stares back at him for a long time. He licks his lips, and glances down, then looks at him again. And slowly he shakes his head.

"No. I found out what she was up to. I saw the evidence, man. She was using me. She was squeezing me for dirt on the party so she and her friends could smear us in those illegal amateur newsletters. I got mad. I was drunk. I told her I'd make a deal with her. You treat me right I'll treat you right."

Jakko lets himself fall onto the bed. He looks tired.

"I did not rape her," he says.

But he's not protesting his innocence. In fact he sounds ashamed.

"I did not rape her. But I wanted to. I tried."

Ben takes one step away from him.

"She would have let me, too. Just to save her friends. I wanted her so bad it made me crazy. And there she was, on the floor, naked, offering me everything I wanted. And I couldn't just reach out and take it. Yeah I was son of a bitch enough. I was fucking prick bastard enough. But I wasn't ... I mean, I couldn't manage it."

Now Jakko's eyes creep up and search for Ben's.

"That girl played me like a fiddle, I'll have you know. I was broken. I was bleeding. I hated myself and I hated her even more. I wanted to kill her. I tried really hard to forget about it. But it wouldn't let me go. It never let me go, you see."

He looks away again.

"So one morning I'm walking past a phone box and I didn't even think about it, I just put a coin in the slot. I asked the operator for the *Sicherheitsdienst*. Few seconds later somebody gets on the line, I tell him about this beautiful redhead cocktail waitress I know. Rich girl. Communist agitator. I told him everything. And then I hung up the phone and kept walking."

Ben sits down.

"I just kept walking," Jakko says, and looks Ben in the eye one more time. "I'm still walking."

The pain in Ben's chest is getting worse. He needs to lie down.

Deep in the pit of night, the man who beat him up a few months ago comes for him again.

Ben's heart lurches. He struggles. He wants to shout something, but the inside of his mouth is too sticky. The man has come to finish him off. How did he get in here? The eyes look furious — as if the man blames Ben for something Ben knows he never did. He's trying to press something on him now, a little cup of something. Ben tries to fend him off but his arms are too weak.

"What's the matter, mister? Easy now."

The man's voice isn't so fierce this time, it's almost boylike. He has an orange badge on his shirt.

Ben stops struggling and just squints at him.

"Who the hell are you?"

The man smiles. "My name is Mahmoud. Who the hell are you?"

Ben squints at him real hard. Something's confused. Last time he saw this face — this close-shaved square haircut, these dark eyes, this skin tone — the man was kicking Ben in the stomach and demanding to know where he kept his money. He would have killed Ben too, if he hadn't been interrupted. Something was decided after that. Ben had to move out of his apartment and come here. But now the man is only pushing drugs on him.

"Ben," he tells the man.

"Right, that's what it says here too," the man says. "Well, Ben, it's time to take your medicine, can you deal with it?"

Ben grows docile, goes along, takes the pills one at a time, drinks the water. His mind tells him everything is fine, but his flesh is still convinced this man is poisoning him. He can't quiet his beating heart, even after the man has gone away.

Jakko has stopped snoring.

"It's no use," Jakko says. "I already complained. They let anybody work here."

Ben doesn't want to say anything. He watches the drop-ceiling tiles and tries to relax.

"They oughta ship 'em all back on a boat," Jakko goes on. "I don't care if some of 'em *were* born here. It was a mistake bringing 'em over in the first place. Goddamn liberals let 'em walk all over us. They're not Dutch, they don't want to be Dutch, they refuse to play by our rules. Always causing trouble and blaming society for everything. They want it all handed to them, like it's our fault they live here. You know where they come from, that's a desert society. In the desert there's nothing. All you can do is steal. That's what they know. Stealing and terrorizing. You see the way the streets are now, people are afraid to go out. Don't give me that look, you calabash. You know what I'm saying is true. They hate us and we hate them. Admit it."

Now Ben is sitting up on the edge of his bed, staring at the dim shape of the man in the other bed. He feels very sick, as if he's about to die. A peculiar new horror

trickles down the back of his neck. Not the horror of what Jakko has said — but the horror of agreeing with him.

Agreeing in the flesh, if not in spirit.

How long have I been like this? Ben wonders. How long have I been capable of nodding my head at what a Nazi tells me?

He looks for a way around this. Well, of course, you can agree with anybody about some things, he tells himself. He blinks his eyes. But the dilemma won't go. If he can't bring himself to blame this fascist for feeling this way now, how can he blame him for feeling that way then?

Just because back then *we* were the victims?

No. No. No. It doesn't work like that.

It's supposed to be a matter of fucking principle. Damn you.

*The Jews are gonna die. And I'm starting with you. But first I want your cash.*

If Ben remembers correctly, that's what the *moffen* were saying, if not in so many words. But it's also what the invading Berber in his living room told him, in so many words, and in flawless, unaccented Dutch.

*I am a socialist and a Jew.* He lifts his eyes again to Jakko, very much wanting to tell him exactly that, in those words. But the screaming inside Ben can't be heard in the room. There is no sound except Jakko's slow breathing. Another moment, and the snoring softly returns.

Okay, Ben thinks. Smash my identity. Destroy my sense of everything I believe in. Ruin my career. Send my one true love to her death. But do all that, and sleep?

No.

A rage rises inside him, and hovers there, perfectly still.

When he returns from the bathroom, the man is still lying there with his head slung back and his mouth gaping like a dead man's. He is snoring in slow predictable swells. It's like waiting for the next wave of the incoming tide. Ben's hands are hardly shaking at all now. He balls up the two latex gloves and jams them into the man's mouth just as he's starting to inhale. The snoring stops. With both hands Ben swiftly presses the trash bag over the man's face. Then he simply lies down across him like a spent lover. The man is stronger than Ben, but not strong enough to lift him. After a long time — how much time? Things grow still enough that Ben drifts off to sleep right there.

Then he has to pee. Getting up, he takes the trashcan liner and the two gloves with him.

On the way back to bed, he gingerly lifts the puppy picture from its hook, and sets it down facing the wall behind the door.

"Good morning, gentlemen."

Ben awakens to the vision of a beautiful woman strolling into the room. He smiles back at her. She puts her clipboard down on the meal table, and for several seconds just stands there looking at the other bed. Then she approaches, and touches the figure lying there.

She glances sharply back at Ben, as if she's suddenly worried what he might think. Ben shrugs. "Man is mortal."

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