

THESIS

The Stories we Carry

Part I: A Novel

Seabirds of Jutland

Part II: Exegesis

Family Archives, the Writing of Absence and the Second World War in Europe.

A thesis submitted towards the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics at Newcastle University.

Author: Elizabeth Anne Bostock

Date: February 2018

Abstract

This thesis is engaged with a critical exploration of and creative response to family archives. Presented in two parts, the thesis is first a work of fiction, a novel, which was initially inspired by my own Danish family history during the Second World War, but soon found a life of its own. Set in a small provincial town in Jutland, the novel explores themes of loss and connection, as well as those of loneliness and compromise. The second part is an interrogation of the stories we carry: stories from history, stories from the family archive and stories conjured up from the imagination alone. In the Holmboe family archive, I discovered forty-two volumes of Christian Holmboe's journals and among them the list of the dead in the family's home town of Horsens in early September 1943. Ebbe Holmboe, my great-uncle, was murdered at the age of twenty-three in a Nazi concentration camp. Signs in this Danish archive led me to a diverse selection of accounts written across Europe during and after the Second World War and included the archival research, journals and creative responses of Élisabeth Gille (the daughter of Irene Némirovsky), Georges Perec and Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar among others. Their unique works of memoir, documentary journal and imagined biography confront the annihilation of family during war and seek to articulate the aftermath that endures far beyond the events themselves. The thesis ends with a reflection on the prose fiction of W.G. Sebald and Anne Michaels, two novelists who show how imagined stories can fill the silences left by history and create new memories.

For my family,
the living and the dead.

Acknowledgements

I would like to offer my warmest thanks to my supervisors, William Fiennes and Linda Anderson, for their patient guidance during the years of this project. In addition, my gratitude goes to my mother, Jette Evans, as well as to my uncle, Lars Holmboe, and others in my extended Danish family who have shared their memories and thoughtful observations throughout. With limited Danish, I was appreciative of the help and advice given by Danish family members in translating documents from the Holmboe archive. I am also grateful to Dr. Nathaniel Hong, an American academic, who sent me photographs of several hundred pages of Christian Holmboe's *dagbøger* and, most generously, many of his own notes and English translations. His book, *Occupied, Denmark's Adaptation and Resistance to German Occupation 1940–1945*, also formed an important part of my background research.

In the novel, *Seabirds of Jutland*, I have quoted from *The Moon is Down* by John Steinbeck and *Treasure Island* by Robert Louis Stevenson. The story about the mythical seal-women is based on the Faroese folk tale about 'selkies', seals who shed their skins and came onto land as human women. The list of human values is closely based on a list made by Christian Holmboe in 1937. Arne Sejr's 'ten commandments' are taken from the original, which was widely circulated in Jutland at the start of the occupation, and was translated with the help of Jette Evans. Although the idea for the novel found its origin in Holmboe family history, the characters in the novel are products of my imagination and any perceived resemblance is coincidental.

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Part I: A Novel. Seabirds of Jutland

A shadow falls from every life into other lives, and the heavy are bound to the light as they are to air and earth.

Swansong 1945, Walter Kempowski¹

¹ Walter Kempowski, *Swansong 1945*, p. 396.

March 1947

Shall I start now?

(Silence)

Jesper?

If you're ready.

So how are you going to do this?

I'll ask questions. You answer them.

What do you want to know?

(Pause)

I want to know about the boy who was shot.

You mean Søren Juhl?

Far said you might not want to talk about it.

What do you want to know?

(Pause)

What did he look like?

Don't you remember him? He used to come to your Far's butchery.

No.

He was tall. Pale face. Pale hair. Pigeon-toed. Long legs. He could run. I told you that, didn't I? I used to watch him out there on the beach. He liked to run right at the water's edge, where the sand was the hardest.

(Silence)

Is it true that his Far tied him to a bed for two days?

Yes, when he was very young.

Left him with nothing to drink, nothing to eat?

So it seems.

*

They called it the white hour, when the sea fret had transformed overnight into fog. At sunrise, it covered the fjord, enveloping everything in a layer of cloud. It advanced inland in rolling drifts, engulfing first the beach and then the dunes and the collection of wooden summerhouses that ran along the Jutland coast. All sound was muted and the wind stilled, even the gulls were silent. On a day like this the only thing that could be heard was the muffled rumbling of the sea, unseen somewhere out in the whiteness.

Ellen Pedersen stood in the doorway of the summerhouse known as *Søvindhuset*, House of the Sea Wind. She blinked several times as if to clear the fog, then closed her eyes, relishing the damp caress of the air. It was strangely consoling to be back, she thought. A little unexpected. But what exactly had she expected?

The small summerhouse stood apart from the others towards the tip of land called Swan Point that marked the end of the fjord and the beginning of the Kattegat Sea. A blanket hung loosely from Ellen's shoulders. She wore no shoes, just the thick socks that she'd found stuffed into an old pair of clogs at the back of the house. Had they belonged to Per, the man who'd once been her lover, or to the boy, Søren Vitus Juhl, her sea-urchin boy?

As she walked around the side of the house, a memory of summer three years earlier returned, luminous and sharp. Per and Søren sitting with their backs against the sun-warmed wall, raspberries in their mouths. They watched the seabirds as they gathered restlessly on the shoreline. And voices came back to her too. Per's earnest talk about his work at the paint factory, his experiments into viscosity, the effect of temperature on pigments, drying times. He had been a man obsessed with his work. And Søren, the sea urchin boy with hair of white clouds, who spoke each word as if it were a gift, naming the seabirds as he lifted his hands to follow their flight. They had been her makeshift family. The traces of them remained in this place, like the pulse of the tideline bleeding into the beach.

Many years earlier her father told her how a Norse goddess and guardian of the graves took only a part of those who have died. The shifting forms that remained would roam forever among the living. He'd told her this to comfort her, a ten-year-old child grieving for her mother. They'd been walking along the beach at Skagen, the most northerly tip of Jutland. He, with his worn geologist's boots with measured stride, prodded the sand in front of him with his stick as he talked. Now, as a grown woman, Ellen was happy to imagine the story of the goddess to be true and that here, close to the fjord, the spirits of Per and Søren still floated over the sand dunes and through the pines.

She picked out a stick from the collection gathered in the porch and walked towards the water's edge, jabbing at the sand. She missed them. Mor, Far, Søren, Per. Had she been unlucky to have lost so many people she loved? Doktor Frandsen thought as much. Unlucky. What a word. It didn't seem to be a question of luck to her. For Per and Søren at least it was just the consequence of the times they'd lived through. *We live in difficult times*, that was what everyone said. Peering into the whiteness, she tried to make out the form of Alrø in the fjord. She had a fondness for the dark island with its abandoned lime-washed church and shallow marshy inlets, passed by pods of seals that pulsed through the seaway in muscular bursts, searching out mackerel, sand eel, flat fish. She walked further along the beach, waiting for the fog to lift.

Ellen had arrived the previous night taking the last train from Copenhagen. Better to arrive quietly. Better not to draw attention to herself. At least not yet. She collected a cargo bicycle that she'd arranged to have left for her at the station. Henning Bornholm had dropped it off. The kindest of men despite his rough appearance, always thinking of others. He'd been the foreman at the Larsen paintworks, devoted his whole life to the company and to Per Larsen, its young owner. Ellen caught the shock in Henning's voice when she'd telephoned him to tell him she was coming. He'd assumed that she wouldn't come back. Understandable after what had happened. There'd been such a tremor in his voice that a spike of a tear came to her eye in response. The fear from that darkened time echoed on. She told Henning about the letter from the Horsens police. They might have found the boy's body, it said. A human bone, possibly a thigh bone, had been discovered in the woods at Skæring Heath. The site was being protected and they wanted to let the next of kin know before they started the exhumation. Next of kin? The words pierced her. Søren wasn't her son.

She'd found the cargo bicycle leaning against a side wall outside the station. The front box contained a few items: coffee, bread, a small bottle of milk, a piece of butter in greased paper and some cherry jam. Henning again. She'd strapped her case to the top of the box and set off out of town along the coast road. In the darkness, the shaking pool of yellow light from the headlamp was just strong enough to illuminate the way. After two or three kilometres, she cut off from the tarmac road onto the familiar sandy track that sloped down towards the shore. Her eyes became more accustomed to the dark. She felt a twinge of anxiety. Would anyone be there? Someone could have taken it over, seeing it empty. She dismissed the thought. Henning would have said something. An owl swooped along the hedge in front of her and let

out a low call. As she neared the beach, she felt the wheels sink into the softer sand and she had to push hard on the pedals to make headway. By the time she arrived at *Søvindhuset* she was breathing heavily. The place looked deserted. It felt like a relief.

The key lay where it'd always been, hidden under a green pot at the base of the steps. She took out her wind-up torch to illuminate the door. The blue paint had blistered and flaked to reveal the flesh of the wood beneath. Everything went to ruin with no one to live in a place, she thought. She paused with the key in the lock, it stuck a little and she twisted it in the way she remembered. *Click, click*. Home. As if the house knew her. Inside the wooden frame of the building and the rooms all somehow smaller than before. Could she call this borrowed house home anymore? She dragged some blankets from the cupboard and, with no energy to light the stove, wrapped them around herself and fell onto the bed, enveloped in the faint aroma of dust, of bodies, of them. She slept lightly for a few hours, waking when a milky light began to fill the room.

Standing on the shoreline now, she tried to focus on the point where Alrø should be. Once, she had stood hand in hand in the same spot with Per. He'd said that the island reminded him of the upturned hull of a Greenland whaler, but Ellen felt it to be something more animate, like the sleek arch of the whale itself as it turned to dive into the deep. Under the white dome of fog, it could be that the island did not exist at all, that somehow it had been erased. Obliterated.

How had it started? With the smallest of things. Just a name on a page.

Back inside, Ellen ran her fingers over the knots on the window frame, thinking perhaps that she remembered each one and that they contained all the days of her past life. She let her head rest against the glass pane and felt the tremble of the wind and sea beyond. Not so long ago she believed her time in this place had expired. She'd never have come back if not for the boy. Søren Vitus Juhl. The boy with the philosopher's name, that's what she liked to tell him. It wasn't a surprise to discover that now he mattered more than anything else. She hadn't been able to save his life, but now perhaps she could rescue some part of her own.

She dressed and unpacked the remainder of her suitcase, a meagre collection of clothes, books and mementoes, then peddled slowly into town to buy more provisions. She wore a hat and scarf as much a half-hearted attempt at a disguise as to keep the chill out of the spring wind. It'd be better not to be noticed just yet, wouldn't it? She didn't feel ready to talk

to anyone or be the subject of other people's conversations. Word would get around soon enough. She'd give it another day. She cycled past Grete's Patisserie and caught sight of Grete standing behind the counter in her white tunic serving a queue of customers. A flare of shame flushed through her.

On her return, she laid her groceries out on the table: cheese, sugar, eggs and a few onions and potatoes. Enough to keep her going for a while. Søren's collection of stones lay on the window sill, covered in a fine film of dust. Untouched for all these months. She picked them up and cleaned them in turn: one a perfect oval with a brown streak at its waist, another shaped like a birdwing. She set a sea urchin fossil, one that her father had given to her, in the centre of the collection. One rainy afternoon she'd given the fossil to Søren, along with his nickname, sea urchin boy. *Why d'you call me that? Because you're sharp on the outside, soft on the inside. Not. Are. Not.* In the end, the fossil wasn't with him for very long at all.

That afternoon she pinned a map to the wall. A statement of intent? She wasn't exactly sure why, but she needed to mark the places. The map showed the coast line of the fjord in fine detail from Horsens out to Snavtun. The low inland undulations were shaded light brown and loose black thread lines marked the shipping channels. At the entrance to the fjord lay the two ragged island shapes of Alrø and Hjarnø. She marked points with brass pins: *Søvindhuset*, Nilsson's bookshop, the Larsen paintworks, Alrø. Then with a soft pencil she drew a line from point to point and made the irregular shape that contained all the tipping points of her life. She pulled the table up to the window, made herself a pot of coffee and sipped it slowly as she looked out over the flat expanse of the fjord. Was it the right decision to come back? She'd know soon enough. Her teeth clenched and caught her cheek, the metallic taste of blood filling her mouth.

More than an hour must have passed. She became aware of a darkening in the sky. Her head had filled with memories of Søren at *Søvindhuset*: how he would skim stones at the water's edge, how he remained fearless in his night runs across the town defying the curfew. And then the end out there in the woods. Had he been alone with only the company of those soldiers, feral smelling and weary for home? *Feuer auf mein commando!* She clasped her fingers around the cup. Outside the spit of land where the Kattegat met the inlet glinted under a white sun. It was a place where water, land and sky were as close to being one as it was possible to be. The transitions between each were barely discernible, just the smallest shift in

tone. Ellen studied the horizon as though there might be something concealed there, some detail that would explain all that had happened. The only landmarks were the oystercatchers tiptoeing over the wet sand like pale guttering flames and above the percussive calls of the terns echoing over the flat land. *Keeyar, keeyar!* A landscape without people. She delayed the moment to light the lamps, welcoming the sensation of darkness as it began to drift in over her.

When the knock came, it was almost dark. So soon? Ellen pulled herself to her feet and opened the door. A man stood in the doorway, his dark eyes shining. A returning ghost. ‘You came back,’ the man said. Ellen almost stumbled at the sound of his voice. It seemed to hold all those who had gone. ‘Hello, Ravn,’ she said and stepped back to let him in. He was as tall and as wide-shouldered as she remembered. Everything would be alright, she told herself. He stooped to avoid the frame of the door. He carried a worn leather briefcase in one hand which he dropped to the floor, the contents shifting gently as it landed. ‘I wasn’t sure if you ever would,’ he said.

‘Well, here I am,’ said Ellen, forcing a smile. She took a match and lit the kerosene lamp. Under the greasy yellow light, she could see his face more clearly. In three years, he seemed to have aged ten. Deep creases cut across his brow. His once dark hair was now flecked with silver and cropped close to his head. She picked out the smell of roasted chestnuts on his coat. Something made her want to put her arms around him, but she held back.

Ravn stood in the middle of the room and looked around, his large butcher’s hands hanging limp at his sides. ‘No one’s been here since you left,’ he said, ‘Henning kept an eye on the place.’ Ravn had been a man of strong emotions, but Ellen remembered that he often struggled to express them.

‘Henning’s been kind. Did he tell you I was here?’ she said.

‘Was it a secret?’ Ravn said, his eyes flickering.

‘No, of course not.’ She didn’t want to sound defensive.

‘He was worried about you. He asked me to come out, see if you were alright,’ said Ravn.

‘I like the solitude for now,’ Ellen said, lifting the kettle from the stove. ‘Coffee? It’s real,’ she said. He smiled shyly. They were dancing around each other.

‘Thank you,’ said Ravn as he pulled out a chair. He sat down heavily. ‘It’s strange but I quite miss the old stuff.’ Ellen laughed, remembering the bitter concoctions they used to drink made from acorns, dandelion, even beech nuts. She made the coffee, cut up bread and filled a small dish with honey. ‘If they’ve found the boy’s body, then I wanted to be here,’ she said, sitting down. Ravn pulled a packet of envelopes bound with an elastic band from his briefcase. slipped the top one out and dropped it onto the table. ‘The police wrote to me when they were looking for you,’ he said spreading the letter out on the table.

‘I wondered about his father,’ Ellen said, thinking of Ole Juhl and his wretched battle with the world.

‘Alcohol did for him in the end.’ Ravn sighed and took a piece of the bread, dipped it in the honey and leaned over the table to avoid it dripping onto his clothes. He wiped his hands on a handkerchief. ‘You were the closest of all of us to family.’

9 April 1940

It was a day as had never been before, nor, most likely, would ever be again. For the town of Horsens, it was over by lunchtime. At first light grey planes flew low, crawling above the rooftops. The rumbling brought people to the windows and into their gardens. Many of the planes had gliders in tow. They drifted behind on looping threads. By eight o'clock the telephone lines had been cut. After the planes came the long convoys of gleaming Mercedes Benz trucks and motor cycles with sidecars. A light rain began to fall. Droplets of water sparkled on the new paintwork as the soldiers drove slowly through the town. Diesel fumes filled the air. Drawn young faces looked out from the back of the trucks. People followed the convoys on bicycles stopping at the edge of town to watch them disappear into the distance. The broadcast came from Copenhagen at lunchtime. *Let them through.* Or words to that effect. The Government has signed an agreement to save the country from an even worse fate, they said. A new word was in circulation, Protectorate. Danish citizens should continue as usual and do what was asked of them.

Later that day more planes appeared dropping leaflets over the town. *Opro! Denmark is now a Protectorate of Germany.* The leaflets fell from the pale expanse of the sky like dying birds. People gathered them and looked back up at the empty sky with questions on their faces. And then, for a few hours, it was almost as if the planes and the convoys had never been there, that they could have just imagined it. The inhabitants carried on with their lives, listened to their radios and waited for news. But in the evening more soldiers arrived and the spell was broken again. This time they came on foot, marching over the cobbles, the tails of their grey coats snapping in the wind. They came in on the coast road, past the fishing boats tied up in the harbour, then up the hill to Nørregade, past Ravn's butchery, Ejnar Mønsted's jewellery shop and Inge Nilsson's bookshop.

This theft of freedom happened in such an orderly way, Ellen Pederson thought on the days that followed. It was almost as if nothing had happened. She tidied the bookshop shelves, updated the ledger, filled out the form for new orders, just as she had always done. It wasn't surprising that so many people had thought, well, one might as well just adjust and make the best of it. For most this feeling continued until something snagged. A knock at the door or an unexpected letter at the post office. The snag came for Ellen when one morning a soldier arrived at the bookshop with an order for the barracks. Without a word being spoken

the customers parted to let him come forward to the front of the queue. At that moment she realised that everything had changed.

By the spring of 1943, she'd almost forgotten what life had been like before the occupation. All colour seemed to have leached out of the little coastal town. Horsens became monochrome. People moved about in its smoky shadows. They barely looked at one another. For most, survival was the only thing on their minds. Of course, some people saw an opportunity to profit and negotiated their deals in the narrow alleys down by the harbour, at the back doors of the airy villas that stretched along the coast road and behind the closed doors in company offices. But a few resisted right from the start. Within hours of the invasion a seventeen-year-old schoolboy from Jutland called Arne Sejr wrote an anti-Nazi leaflet. He made copies and dropped them through the letterboxes of prominent people in his home town of Slagelse. They picked them up, the still-wet ink smearing over their hands and contemplated the schoolboy's words. Soon copies began to appear all over Jutland.

1. *You shall not go to work in Germany or Norway*
 2. *You shall do a bad job for the Germans*
 3. *You shall work slowly for the Germans*
 4. *You shall destroy important machines and tools*
 5. *You shall destroy everything that may be of benefit to the Germans*
 6. *You shall delay all transport*
 7. *You shall boycott German and Italian films and newspapers*
 8. *You shall not buy from Nazi shops*
 9. *You shall treat traitors for what they are worth*
 10. *You shall protect anyone being chased by the Germans*
- Join the struggle for the freedom of Denmark!*

Some said he was just a boy. What did he know about it? The country was too small to take on Germany. Remember the massacres of 1865? Such folly! No. Safety had to come first. Only thirteen Danish soldiers had been killed near the border on 9 April. A great loss, but couldn't it have been so much worse? Just think how many lives had been saved. Hundreds quite probably. They repeated this to themselves as they checked their store cupboards and wondered what the future would hold.

March 1947

The day after Ravn's visit to *Søvindhuset*, Ellen rose early, walked unsteadily to the sink and splashed cold water over her face with quick movements. It had surprised her that the meeting hadn't been that difficult. Perhaps it was because the strange tenderness between the two of them had endured. The last three years seemed to have passed slowly. Ellen looked in the mirror and the hazel eyes staring back at her. What had he been thinking? She hadn't been able to sense Ravn's feelings and never liked to push him. He'd always been a difficult man to read. Reserved, private, intense. They'd agreed to meet again. Ellen would contact him once she knew more about the exhumation. The official letter had been brief, no details beyond the basic facts. *A body has been found. We believe it to be that of Søren Vitus Juhl. We are notifying you as next of kin.* Why did they think it was him? Had they found something else? Questions swirled around in her head. When she'd first read the police letter, she sat frozen in Fru Winther's sitting room in Copenhagen, reading the words again and again until they blurred into smeary lines. The idea of a body horrified her. After three years, what would be its condition?

She stood in the middle of the small bedroom, which lay at the rear of *Søvindhuset*, pulled off her nightdress and ran her hands over the low-slung curve of her stomach. Whoever said there are no such things as miracles was wrong.

'Twelve weeks,' Doktor Frandsen told her. Impossible. She'd recounted the story of her miscarriage at seventeen and the botched procedure afterwards. The doctor spoke to her kindly. 'You're going to be a mother, Ellen.' She must have registered Ellen's shock, because she put her arms around her and allowed Ellen to sink her weight into the hollow of her shoulder. Motherhood, after all.

Since fleeing Jutland for Sweden on that freezing night in the winter of 1943, Ellen had been with only one man. A travelling salesman, a stocky Norwegian called Niels. He drove around Denmark in a black Chevrolet with suitcases filled with haberdashery, hairpins, pencils and paper. He, like Ellen, was struggling to find his bearings again after the war. For many people, Ellen thought, the initial euphoria had soon turned to anxiety as they tried to resume old lives or start new ones, tried to forget what they'd seen, what they'd done. The small betrayals. The bigger crimes. It didn't seem to matter which end of the spectrum you found yourself on. No one was immune. A few months earlier Niels had rented a room in the guesthouse where Ellen lived. She'd sensed his loneliness straight away. No doubt he'd felt hers as well. Sometimes they'd talk after dinner in the drab little sitting room reserved for

residents, she with her journal on her lap and he writing up his accounts for the day. One evening, his hand brushed her arm and she grasped it and pulled him towards her, gripped by an impulse. They slipped into her room. The sex had been swift, intense, almost silent, both anxious not to alert Fru Winther.

Afterwards they lay hip to hip in her narrow bed. 'Let's not share our stories,' he'd said and she'd agreed, relieved not to have to talk. He left the next day, pressing a kiss onto her shoulder and giving her a large notebook with a green cover and a packet of new pencils. 'For your writing,' he said. Sometimes she thought about him and wondered what he was doing. He'd rescued her that night, brought her back to the surface to breathe again, as if she'd been living underwater for all those months.

'Sometimes the body just needs a lot of time to heal itself,' Doktor Frandsen told her. Was it even possible? Ellen asked herself again and again. For several days, she remained shocked by the idea of it, even a little disbelieving, as if she didn't deserve this chance of motherhood. The word frightened her. Would she be any good? What did she have to offer a child? She'd made no contact with anyone since she'd left Horsens. Not Inge, not Annalise or Ravn. She'd felt so exhausted. Who didn't after all those years of war? She'd wanted only solitude and work and a place away from the past. But now this. A child growing inside her. Standing in the cool of the bedroom, she wondered whether the pregnancy might have had something to do with her decision to come back to Horsens, back to *Søvindhuset* where she had, despite everything, been happy.

At *Søvindhuset* Ellen took out the notebook Niels had given her and pressed open a fresh page. During the occupation, she used to stick cuttings from the local newspapers into her journals: articles about sabotage attacks and shootings, copies of posters issuing instructions to the population. *Doctors must report to the police station by the end of the week. Radios must be handed in by noon on Thursday.* These things had constituted the ordinary events of her day. She'd become almost obsessive about keeping a record, annotating the articles, making her own comments. She wrote in lists. Lists of the missing and lists of the dead. She wrote down their names, ages, addresses and occupations. The cigarette maker, the apprentice engineer, the pastor. Three years on, her journals had taken on a different form. She took delight in noting the passing of the seasons, the first snowdrops of spring, the sight of an injured dog by the station being cared for by the station master, the purchase of a second-hand book. She continued with this habit of writing in lists. She liked their precision. They helped to order her thoughts.

Ravn.

Roasted chestnuts.

Letters.

The conversation we need to have.

When we are ready.

When she'd finished, she slid the notebook back into the desk drawer. She pulled on her boots, grabbed her hat and coat and headed into town on her bicycle. The wind was steady behind her, pushing her forwards. Time to make her presence known.

Grete's Patisserie was empty apart from Grete, who stood at the counter cutting up a tray of apple cake. She wore a pair of tortoiseshell glasses, one of the arms repaired with brown tape. Her hair was pulled back under a blue and white cap. Ellen breathed in the smell of warm apple and cinnamon. She could have chosen another café, bided her time for a bit longer, but that was the fear talking. She didn't want to cause a scene and yet she felt compelled to return to the place where she'd been a part of something terrible. Ellen's throat tightened. Poor Agneta.

Ellen ordered coffee and rolls and went to sit down, her heart quickening under her ribs. If Grete recognised her, she didn't show any sign of it. Wouldn't she know her? She must, she supposed, look a little different to three years ago. Her pregnancy wasn't yet showing, but she'd put on weight and her hair had been cropped short with a high curved fringe. She'd dyed it too, a reddish-brown colour, almost an afterthought, rubbing in a paste of henna and oil one evening just before she left Copenhagen. She sipped her coffee. The patisserie looked unchanged with its the polished counters and the tiled floors shining under the lamps. Three years before she'd thought they were right to act as they had. *You shall treat traitors for what they are worth.* Now the shame she felt confused her.

She kept her hat on and tipped her face to let the weak heat of the spring sun fall over her. Agneta had betrayed them. Like the other *Tüske piger*, she deserved to be punished. The singing and dancing with the soldiers, the beach picnics, the careless taking of their gifts. Lipstick, stockings, even dresses. Ellen had been so sure of it all then, but now?

Shortly after the resistance group had been compromised, Ravn had arranged for Ellen to escape to Sweden. Horsens wasn't safe anymore, at least not for anyone connected with the Resistance. They would all have to leave the country or go into hiding. When the war ended,

she returned by ship to Copenhagen. As she approached the city, its slate roofs and green domes glinting in the sunshine, she decided to stay in Copenhagen, to delay, perhaps forever, her return to Jutland. After all, what was there to go back for? The Museum of Geology where her father used to work was not far from the port and, not knowing where else to go, she walked there with her small canvas suitcase as soon as she disembarked.

Did they have any work? As it happened, they said, a vacancy had come up for a junior assistant in the museum archives. The previous incumbent had disappeared during the war. Where to, or why, they had no idea. One of so many mysteries that might never be solved, wasn't it? They'd kept his position open for some months, but it seemed unlikely that he was coming back.

She was interviewed the same day by the chief librarian, Ove Holm, a very old and short-sighted man who wore thick glasses that made his eyes look overly large and who spoke with the remains of a stutter. He remembered her father. 'Wasn't he writing a book about the fossils on the island of Fur?' he said. Something twisted in her throat at the memory of Far bent over his work, twisting the barrel of his pen between his fingers as he considered his next sentence. She used to imagine that his thoughts hummed around the room like invisible bees. Suppressing a tear, she told Ove Holm that her father had died before he managed to finish the book.

'Too bad,' said the old librarian, blinking rapidly, 'Do you have the manuscript?'

'I might have,' she said, thinking perhaps that it lay in her father's bureau, which was stored in the attic above her childhood home on Laksegade. Would it still be there after all that had happened?

'Perhaps someone should retrieve it?' Ove Holm suggested tentatively 'Perhaps even finish it?'

He offered her the job with one month's salary in advance. Had he taken pity on her? Offered her the job because he'd liked her father? It didn't matter. She liked the connection that this job made with Far and, since she need money, she accepted. She found a room a few streets away on Delfingade. Fru Winther, the landlady, outlined the rules as they climbed the stairs. No overnight guests, no music, no alcohol, no parties. Rent payable one month in advance. Ellen warmed to Fru Winther straight away. Her matter of fact approach, her starched apron and polished brown shoes, felt comforting. She had a large oval face and frizzy greying hair that she tried unsuccessfully to tame into a single plait wound around her head. Ellen also liked the simplicity of the room, its white-washed walls and the alcove window from which she could just see the tops of the ship masts in the harbour. The shared

kitchen and bathroom didn't trouble her, she said. She needed to be close to the museum and this was perfect. But, most importantly as far as Ellen was concerned, the rent was only twenty kroner a week. The room was simply furnished, a brass bed, a chest of drawers and an oval mirror, mottled with age. With what was left of her advance after paying her rent, she bought a threadbare Persian rug from the flea market and arranged her few possessions around the room; an *Encyclopaedia of Natural History*, a battered copy of *Treasure Island*, Andersen's fairy tales, a photograph of her parents squinting into the sun on a boat before she was born and the sea urchin fossil that she'd once given to the boy. The last thing she took out of her bag was a worn metal tin. Inside the woven green shawl, heavily frayed at the edges that had once belonged to her mother, a broken string of amber beads, a small enamelled compact, the power inside cracked, the sweet chalkiness of it whenever she opened it could make her weep. A few days later she started work.

Her journal in the evenings, the short walk to the museum, her quiet work in the basement, these elements formed the pattern of her life for three years. Each year, as the anniversaries of the dark events of the occupation approached, Ellen slipped into a light depression that lingered through the winter months. She'd lie awake at night thinking about Per and Søren and feeling a terrible guilt that she'd somehow failed them. She should have been more aware of the dangers, shouldn't she? Only with the arrival of the cranes on the chimney pots in the spring did she feel the darkness begin to shift.

'Ellen.' A voice lifted Ellen from her thoughts. Grete came closer and bent down to peer at her. 'It is you. You look so different,' she said. 'Are you back for good?' Was Grete being unfriendly or merely neutral? Ellen scanned the woman's face.

'I'm here for a few weeks,' said Ellen.

'You've changed your hair,' said Grete. The words seemed to hang between them. Ellen pictured the chair in the centre of the room, the blinds pulled down, the silence apart from the rasp of the razor on the girl's skin. She took a long breath. 'How is Agneta?' Ellen said.

'She's married now. Moved to Aarhus. She's a teacher. Her husband's a chef in one of the big hotels. I'd say she's happy.'

'I'm glad,' Ellen said as gently as she could.

'So am I,' said Greta. They were both silent for a moment. 'Let me know if you need anything else,' she added before walking back to her counter to serve a new customer.

Was this how it would be? There was so much more that could be said about what they all did, about how they treated each other. Collaborate or resist? Action or inaction? The choices they'd had to make every day, every hour, sometimes minute by minute. Ellen drank the last of her coffee.

Just as Ellen stood up to leave, Grete called to her. 'Does Ravn know that you're here?' Ellen nodded. Grete raised an eyebrow, whether in judgement or surprise, Ellen couldn't be sure.

'He told you about Annalise?' she asked. Ellen shook her head. Annalise was Ravn's wife, a hard woman who seemed to be raging with some unspoken inner bitterness. Annalise lowered her voice. 'She left Horsens last year, took the boy with her. A sad business. Jesper comes back to see his father in the school holidays. I think he's here now.'

After Ellen left the patisserie, she bought a few more supplies: soap, a small tin of salt, a second-hand radio. As she pedalled back to *Søvindhuset*, the breeze in her face, she wondered why Ravn hadn't told her about his family. She remembered how he used to teach his son at the butchery, laying out animal bones on the cutting board. 'What is this, Jesper? Scapula or humerus? Tibia or fibula?' Ravn tested the boy's knowledge, pulling animal bones from the pocket of his apron like a magician: a pig's vertebra or a chicken's foot. 'Jesper, learn this. Remember this.'

At *Søvindhuset* Ellen found a large grey and white tomcat sleeping in a patch of sun on the wooden boards. She gave him a bowl of bread soaked in milk. He purred loudly as he ate. Rasmus, she thought. She would call him Rasmus after the Inuit guide who accompanied Hans Wegener on his great expedition to the South Pole. She'd recently read about him in the Geology Museum's library. In the early hours of the next morning Rasmus pawed at the window and Ellen let him in and he slept on her bed, pressing himself into a tight curl behind the crook of her knee.

April 1943

The boy was there again, pressing his forehead against the window of Nilsson's bookshop at no. 24 Nørregade. Ellen watched him from the back of the shop. It was late afternoon. He'd made a peak with one hand to protect his eyes from the flash of the low sun. He stared intently at the open book displayed as the centre piece. She couldn't see his eyes; they were hidden by a strip of dark shadow, but his whole body seemed to be held under some invisible tension, his face taut with concentration. He was tall, high-boned and very fair. His school clothes looked worn and dirty.

The book that had caught his attention was a new edition from a natural history series that Inge Nilsson, the bookshop's owner, had recently brought back from Copenhagen. The open page showed the cormorants, reptilian birds of the land, sea and sky. Ellen had a fondness for those ragged survivors of evolution. She'd spotted them out on the islands in the fjord for the first time that year. Over the centuries they'd adapted to their changing environment, became the best of the fish hunters. Such resilience. She could learn from that. The local fishermen feared them, called them *den sorte død*, the black death. Before the war, people would shoot them. Now, they kept their guns hidden in the back of wardrobes or slipped under their beds. *We live in difficult times*. Because of the shortage of paper, little was being published and yet, somehow *Seabirds of Jutland* with its flimsy onion-skin pages, the book that had so caught the boy's attention, had found its way into Nilsson's bookshop.

Every morning Ellen chose a new book for display. A ritual that assumed increasing importance as the weeks and months of the occupation passed. She would run her hands along the spines on the shelves, hesitating from time to time, drawing one out and reading the first page or the last. Often it was the best moment of her day. In recent weeks Inge had sometimes changed it for another book, always the same one, a second-hand volume with a shabby green cover about barometers and the weather. When Ellen looked at her questioning, Inge would raise a hand in reply as if to say, don't ask. And so, Ellen remained silent and wondered what secret she was being excluded from. The book had something to do with Ravn, the local butcher, she guessed that much. He came into the shop from time to time and talked quietly with Inge at the back of the shop, but never so much as glanced at a book.

Outside the boy pressed the flats of his palms against the window so that they became almost translucent. His breath formed opaque blooms on the glass, which expanded and faded

with each exhalation. A furrow deepened between his eyebrows. Was he trying to read the text? Ellen moved forward thinking that she might beckon him to come in, but at that moment, he took a step back from the window and was gone.

She'd started to notice him a few weeks earlier as he passed the bookshop on the way back from school. He would stand on the pavement, keeping his distance, shuffling between his feet. He had a peculiar way of looking at the books displayed in the window, indirect as if from the corner of his eyes, somehow hesitant and uncertain. Sometimes he'd bend down to tie his shoelaces or drop pencils or coins, gathering them up with deliberate slow motion movements, and throw sly glances at the window.

It wasn't until Ellen saw a group of his class-mates push past him, shouting out 'ghost boy', that she realised how unusually pale he was. He always wore a cap pulled right down so that it covered most of his hair, apart from a few escaped strands, which were the colour of bleached straw. When Ellen looked more closely she saw that his eyes were a delicate pink, like the insides of shells.

'He never comes in,' said Ellen to Inge one day as she watched him. 'He wants to, but I think he's afraid.' Inge glanced up from her ledger, slipping the glasses from her face. 'That's Ole Juhl's boy. He won't have an øre to spend.'

'He's interested in books,' said Ellen.

'A harbour boy usually means trouble.'

A few days later in town Inge had pointed out the father to Ellen. A lank haired, down-bent man who exuded silent misery. He sat slumped on a bench outside the post office. He was barefoot and clutched one of his worn boots to his chest as if it were an infant.

'What about the boy's mother?' Ellen had asked.

'Some women are just no good at motherhood.' Inge sighed as she spoke. Inge had no children of her own.

Ellen didn't see the boy for several days. He troubled her. Was it the frustration that seemed to emanate from him? Or his hesitant curiosity? Whatever it was, something about him touched a tender spot inside her. She found herself looking out for him at the end of the school day, standing by the window dusting the shelves half-heartedly. She could help a boy like that, couldn't she? With so little around to inspire her, the lack of new books, the rationing, a general diminishing of life, she could do something good for once. So when he re-appeared at the window one afternoon, Ellen found herself running to the door. 'Would you like to come in?' she said. The boy stared at her with his strange sea-shell eyes. She sensed that his thoughts were hurtling around in his head like trapped moths. His lips opened as if he

was going to say something, but no sound emerged. Ellen noticed the wide gap between his two front teeth, his small delicate ears and pointed chin. He was fourteen, perhaps fifteen years old, with an elfin look about him.

‘I’ve got fresh rolls in the back,’ she said.

At the end of the street, a pair of schoolboys appeared around the corner, kicking stones up the street towards them. The furrow between the boy’s eyebrows appeared again and, without a word, he slipped inside. He moved with a slight sway, loose-limbed and supple. Ellen noticed his long narrow feet. A fast runner, light on his toes.

‘Go on. In there,’ she said pointing to the little room at the back of the shop that served as office, store room and kitchenette. He entered ducking his head below the door lintel and headed towards the small cast iron stove that they kept going all day to keep the damp from the sea air at bay. He held his hands over it as if in benediction.

‘Hungry?’ Ellen asked. The boy shrugged looking up at the walls which were stacked high with books; old stock that Erik Nilsson, Inge’s husband, had purchased before he died. Erik had been a lover of Greek translations: Aristotle, Plato, Homer. They hadn’t sold. Since his death the books had languished in limbo and Ellen realised that Inge didn’t seem to have the heart to move them. The boy moved close to the stacks frowning and ran his fingers over the spines. Ellen picked up a block of peat, quickly opening the stove door and throwing it in. A soft hiss followed by a crackle. The thick scent of rotten vegetation filled the room.

‘Ah, the stench of this stuff. I dream of coal,’ she said. ‘Do you have coal at home?’ A kind of snort came from the boy and he turned to look straight at her. His eyes glimmered. Was there the hint of a smile? It’d been a stupid question. She reached out a hand. ‘I’m Ellen Pedersen.’ The boy took her hand thoughtfully in his.

‘Søren Vitus Juhl.’

‘Like the philosopher,’ Ellen said. Puzzlement passed across his face.

‘Søren Kierkegaard was a writer in the nineteenth century,’ she began to explain. ‘He once said, “Life is lived forwards but can only be understood backwards”. My father told me that and I’ve always liked it.’ Ellen paused. The boy was watching her closely, frowning. Was it curiosity or bewilderment? It was hard to tell. ‘Well, Søren Vitus Juhl,’ she said, ‘you might as well sit down.’ Ellen gestured to the small table and two chairs in the middle of the room. The boy dropped onto the seat. When he turned half-profile, Ellen saw that that the bridge of his nose was long and straight, like a Greek statue. She spread a cloth on the table, found a candle and melted wax from the base with a lighted match on to a plate, an old habit that had stayed with her from childhood. She lit the candle. He seemed bemused by what she was

doing, but waited patiently with his hands folded in his lap. She handed him two rolls on a plate. He tore off small handfuls and started pushing them into his mouth.

‘We could look at some books,’ Ellen said.

‘No money,’ the boy said, a jumble of crumbs spilling from his mouth. Even so, he looked extraordinarily beautiful. A princeling, an artist’s muse, a boy somehow beyond the usual rules.

‘We can look together,’ she said. He nodded, chewing noisily. No manners, but she could forgive him that. The boy seemed ravenous.

‘Do you like reading?’ she said and waited for a reply. Silence in the room. From the outside came nothing but the faint rattle of the sea wind on the glass window as it pushed gently, relentlessly, inland from the fjord.

‘I don’t understand life backwards,’ he said without looking at her. ‘There’s lots of things I don’t understand, so I don’t agree with your philosopher.’

Why your father walks barefoot around the town, Ellen thought. Why your mother left you. He stared directly at her, his eyes a diluted green now. Something dropped from his face. Was he waiting for her to react? She didn’t respond.

‘The one in the window with the cormorants,’ he said and his defensiveness vanished. Ellen felt a rush of protectiveness towards him.

‘But first,’ the boy said, fixing his eyes on the flame of the candle, a soft flush rising in his cheeks, ‘you’ll have to teach me to read.’

March 1947

In the days after her visit to Grete's Patisserie, Ellen stayed at *Søvindhuset*. She took long walks along the fjord out to Swan Point. Rasmus often followed her, mewling softly in her wake. In the evenings, she listened to the radio: Sibelius, Chopin, Bartók. When a piece of jazz music came on she rose quickly to turn the radio off. It reminded her too much of Per and she didn't want to think about him. Questions still smouldered. Had he crossed the line? Betrayed his friends? Betrayed her?

One evening she walked to the bridge over the stream that led to a series of inland lakes. She sat on the wooden planks, her legs dangling over the edge. The low sun spun its light between the pines. Rasmus weaved against her back purring loudly. The sound of footsteps. A figure emerged from the woods, a boy of twelve or thirteen years old, a fishing rod slung over his shoulders.

'Oh,' said the boy.

'Hello,' said Ellen.

'What are you doing here?'

'Thinking,' she said, pulling herself to her feet and smiled. The boy had thick dark hair falling over one eye. She recognised him now. Taller after three years, but there was no doubt as to the family resemblance. A long straight nose delicately flared at the tip like fine sculpture.

'You're Ravn's boy, aren't you?'

'You know Far?'

'Do you remember me? I'm Ellen Pedersen. I used to work at the bookshop.'

'No.' He frowned at her. 'I'm Jesper,' he said, staring at her, arms akimbo. 'I'm here for pike. Do you want to watch?'

'Alright.' Ellen followed the boy to a spot, about half way along the lake. The sun was sinking, flies skimmed over the water. Jesper chattered about the old pike. The local fishermen had been trying to catch it for months. A monster, they said, the biggest one ever seen in the lake. Teeth that could cut through a man's arm. Jesper turned towards her.

'Have you seen the body?' His question took Ellen by surprise.

'You know about that?'

'A bit.'

'They've only found a bone.'

'What sort of bone?'

‘Part of leg, possibly.’

‘Tibia or fibula?’ said Jesper.

‘It might not be Søren,’ said Ellen.

‘Far won’t tell me anything. What happened to him?’

‘He was shot.’

‘Why?’

‘For sabotage.’ Ellen paused, aware of the curiosity on the boy’s face. ‘Did you know your Far called him *Perlen Ugle*, Pearl Owl.’

‘Why?’

‘Because of his white hair, because he was as fast as the east wind and could cover the ground without a sound.’

‘Did he catch Germans?’ The boy had moved close to Ellen.

‘He helped the Resistance,’ said Ellen

‘By running?’ said Jesper, running a circle around her.

‘He delivered the illegal newspapers, hid things.’

‘What things?’

‘It’s a long story. I’ll tell you another time,’ Ellen said.

‘I’ll come on Saturday.’

‘Alright,’ she said, wondering whether she was doing the right thing. She hoped Ravn wouldn’t mind.

Jesper skipped back to where he’d laid out his fishing tackle. Ellen sat down and pressed her back against the trunk of a pine tree. Rasmus had disappeared back into the woods. In the crepuscular light the lake spread out in front of her. Jesper organised the rods, threaded his lines, pressed bait onto the hooks. He was absorbed in what he was doing, so easy in his movement. She envied him. He seemed as free as the fireflies that flitted in the air around him. He had so little of the past to carry.

‘It’s better if the bait is alive, but this one seems to have died,’ said Jesper, crinkling up his eyes and bringing his head close to inspect the tiny fish in his palm. He licked his lips, then moved closer to the edge. His wading boots, too large for him, flapped around his thighs as he stepped into the open plane of dark water, a large net tucked down the back of his trousers. She watched him as he chose his spot, settled himself, his line sunk into the deep water, framed as if in a painting in the evening light.

Back at *Søvindhuset* Ellen propelled herself into action over the following days, buoyed by the prospect of Jesper's visit. She dragged the old mattress outside and beat out the dust before letting it warm in the sun. Every window open, she let the sea wind blow through, sweet and cool. Why hadn't she done this before? It felt cathartic. She pulled out the books from the bookshelves, emptied and rearranged cupboards, dusted and wiped every surface. The next morning, she got up early, made a salad of potatoes and chives, sliced cucumbers and baked a tray of almond biscuits.

Jesper appeared in the afternoon, hair brushed, sporting a clean shirt. Had that been Ravn's doing? He carried a heavy-looking wooden box. 'I brought you a present,' he said.

'So I see. What is it?'

'Something left behind, so it's not really a present.'

'By the Germans?' said Ellen.

'Far says it belonged to the German officer who stayed with Henning. He was called Nagel. His name means "nail". Isn't that funny?'

'I remember him,' she said. It was a long time since she'd heard the German's name.

'I found it among the stores at the paintworks,' said Jesper lifting the box onto the table. A gramophone. The lid clicked open to reveal the smooth black disc in the centre and the chrome hinges that held the needle arm in place. He inserted a wooden handle and began to turn it rhythmically. The machine hummed into life. He pulled a record from its sleeve.

'Does your Far know you're here?' she said.

'No.' A light crackle, pulsing intermittently, then the lilting tone of a single saxophone. The boy tilted his head. 'Do you like it?' he said.

'I do.' The familiar rasp caught in her chest as she spoke. She remembered the long evenings at *Søvindhuset* with Per and the boy, jazz on the radio inside and the persistent rush of wind outside.

April 1943

Above the bookshop Ellen lay on her narrow bed. Søren was on her mind. Such a strange one, that boy. Hands always on the move, so much so that she'd wanted to put out her own to calm his restless fingers. A kind of defiance burned in his eyes that said *Don't come close to me*. In one corner of the room where the wall joined the ceiling, a spider shuttled back and forth, making its web. She turned on the light and the spider stopped moving, pulling its legs underneath its body. Why do you seek out the quiet corners, my friend? Do you feel safer curled up like that?

Ellen's bedroom was located right at the top of the building. The window looked out towards the harbour, the sea not quite in sight. She liked the feeling of being high up, of being able to observe the comings and goings of the miniature people three storeys below. It was about four in the morning and she'd been woken by the sound of waves rolling inland on the wind. Was there the whistle of a shell too? She couldn't be sure. Sometimes the Germans practised firing out in the fjord. She gave up on sleep, slid out of bed and opened the windows to let the salt air push into the small room. She stayed there, shivering despite the blanket she'd wrapped around herself and waited for the sky to pale. Even though she couldn't see the sea, she felt its presence beyond the red brick houses and pointed roofs, beyond the bicycles at the station and the piles of sandbags along the harbour walls. A murmur vibrated through the air. The sea's distant song always helped to lead her away from the feelings of loneliness that sometimes gripped her. She thought of her boat *Musling*, tucked away in its tarpaulin coat between the fishing boats in the harbour. How she missed going out on the fjord, feeling the pulse of the waves teeming below the keel. Since the start of the occupation she hadn't ventured out, not even once.

She closed the window and picked up the *Encyclopaedia of Natural History*, a birthday gift from her father when she was a teenager. She must have been about the same age as Søren was now. With a flick of her fingers she opened a page at random and found a drawing of a species of seaweed. The long strings, peppered with air bladders, were instantly recognisable. They were often swept onto the beaches that lined the fjord. She read the text, pacing around the small rectangle of space between the chest of drawers and the bed, her finger running beneath each line:

Fucus vesiculosus is known by the common name of bladder wrack and found on the coasts of the North Sea and the western Baltic Sea. It is also known as sea oak, black

tang, rockweed. The species is common on sheltered shores and provides a canopy for tube worms, herbivorous isopods and surface grazing snails, such as *littorina obtusata*.

She loved the names, she loved the sound of them rolling over her tongue. Whenever she read out loud, time would thicken and slow and the walls of her attic room dissolve to nothing, leaving the gentle voice of her father singing in her head. *See Ellen, we've so many questions to ask of nature, so many secrets to uncover.*

As dawn broke Ellen walked down to the harbour. A German frigate had docked during the night. As soon as she arrived she sensed the tense mood among the fishermen on the quayside. Sullen faced, their arms wrapped across chests, they watched the soldiers unload the crates. The chains hanging from the crane creaked in the wind. What was inside? Guns, ammunition for Norway? For here? Two soldiers walked past her, chatting and laughing, their guns slung casually over their shoulders like fishing rods. They looked at ease. Were they so oblivious to the resentment around them. She'd heard the council speeches. They said that the town needed to set a good example, keep the peace. After all, there was so much that the Danes had in common with the Germans, their history, their culture. But she'd also heard the rumours of Government resignations and the possible introduction of martial law. She felt that people were at a tipping point, that they'd had enough of keeping their peace.

The war, as far as she experienced it, lay concealed here on the quayside amid the orderly unloading of crates. The other, darker war she discovered from the daily radio broadcasts that she listened to with Inge in the evenings. Through the static, a stiff Danish voice from London would talk evenly of progress in the war away from Denmark, of the latest incursions and fronts in Italy, Morocco, Libya. They'd summarise pronouncements by Hitler and Churchill and hint at atrocities in the East. At the end of the broadcast came the public services announcements, read out by another voice, deeper and more sonorous than the first. They made Ellen stop whatever she was doing to listen: *Fru Garner seeks news of her husband, Ebbe, who disappeared in France on 6 February. Ingrid and Arthur Jacobsen seek news of their daughter, Eva, last seen heading East on a train from Berlin.* Across Europe ordinary people were getting lost. They were fleeing their homes or hiding themselves wherever they could. She imagined them stitching the family gems - amethyst, emerald, diamond - into the hems of their clothes, slipping banknotes in tight spirals into the spines of book or burying their documents in vegetable plots. All this because they understood that they might have to leave in an instant. But the tiny kingdom of Denmark, with its myriad islands, had barely been touched. They remained safe under the heavy shadow of the German eagle.

When Ellen arrived for work at the bookshop, she found a crumpled envelope lying on the door mat, the front unmarked. For an instant, she froze where she stood with the unexpectedness of it. Shouldn't she be wary of anonymous notes? These days informers and blackmailers lurked in every corner of the town. The place was crackling with the petty exchanges of information for money. Sometimes a promise. Sometimes a threat. But curiosity won. She opened the envelope carefully and found a thin slip of paper inside. On it the loose sketch of a cormorant, its wings spread in ragged arches, the breast bone exposed and beak partly open. Ellen smoothed out the paper on the counter and stood back to admire it. The drawing was exquisite, delicately drawn. The artist had captured the creature's pre-historic grace, its dark hunter's eyes. Søren Vitus Juhl. The boy had a talent, she could see that.

She hadn't mentioned the boy's visit to Inge, nor the idea to teach him to read, worried that Inge mightn't agree to have a harbour boy in the shop every day. But since Ellen often taught the twin daughters of Ejnar Mønsted, the jeweller, after school, she wondered what difference it would make. Søren could join them, despite the age gap. She'd have to pick her moment. As it was, Inge barely tolerated the presence of school children in the shop. Ellen imagined it was because Inge had never borne any herself, or perhaps she didn't like the careless way in which they handled the books.

Søren reappeared just after three o'clock that afternoon. Ellen was relieved that Inge was out and wasn't expected back until later. Pink-cheeked and wet from the rain, he looked as if he'd spent the day outside rather than behind a school desk. His fingers were clamped around the strap of a canvas bag slung across his chest. He stamped his feet on the mat by the door, sending droplets through the air.

'Been walking in this?' Ellen said.

'I like the rain.' He gave Ellen a half smile and headed straight for the storeroom and grabbed one of the rolls that she had set out for him.

'Doesn't that father of yours ever feed you?'

'What's it to you?' he said.

'I was just asking.'

'Don't.'

The boy's wall came up so easily. Ellen wondered about his life at home. She sat on her stool and set out an upturned wooden crate for Søren. Be patient, that was the thing. 'Thank you for the drawing. It's very good,' she said. The boy shrugged. 'It's nothing,' he said tearing the bread into two.

'I didn't think it was nothing,' she said. Ellen noticed a flicker pass through his eyes.

That afternoon she made him sit over the book. Progress was slow, painful.

S-t-i-g.

Stig t-a-k-e-s.

Stig takes h-i-s-d-o-g.

Stig takes his dog V-i-g-g-o.

Stig takes his dog Viggo t-o- t-h-e - b-e-a-c-h.

He had a basic grasp of the letters, but couldn't concentrate for more than a few minutes at a time. He tapped the floor with his spindly leg. When he became frustrated he pushed the book away and Ellen would gently bring it back towards him. And again, shell-eyed boy. 'Enough, for the first time?' she said after a while. The boy let out a sigh, which sounded like more a kind of hiss. 'I'm bad, aren't I?' he said.

'You'll get better.'

'Are we friends?'

'If you like.'

'Can I look at the bird book now?' His face opened and again Ellen saw the other boy. The quick-witted boy who wanted to learn. She decided then that she would teach him, whatever Inge said. She handed Søren *Seabirds of Jutland*. He slipped down onto the floor and leant against the counter. He opened the book. She knew it well. The illustrations were minutely detailed, colour-washed with blues, greys and yellows. The boy touched the pages, tracing a trio of sea terns caught as they dipped and arched in flight. He turned the page to the oystercatchers dancing on the shore, picking at the sand with the crimson spike of their beaks, one gazing from the page with an amber eye, round and bright as a harvest moon. After a time he moved into the space under the counter, drawing his long legs in beneath him.

Ellen returned to her work. A few customers came and went. Someone wanted a birthday gift for a niece, another ordered a volume of poetry, another haggled over the price of a second-hand book about bee-keeping. At closing time, Ellen sat down close to the boy. He shifted his body to make space for her and she crawled in beside him. He was looking at an illustration of a crane with drooping tail feathers and long grey neck.

'I saw a pair of cranes at the edge of Sommer Skov last summer,' she said.

'Will you show me?' the boy said.

'I've not seen them this year. They might not come back again.'

'Perhaps the Germans killed them.'

‘I don’t think so.’

‘I heard that they catch birds, pluck them alive and then cut out their hearts,’ he said.

‘Who told you that?’ Ellen said, frowning. Søren jerked his head up. ‘I heard they went to Poland, killed all the boys and made the girls have babies.’

‘Where are you getting all this from, Søren?’

‘People. In Odder’s Bar.’

‘You shouldn’t believe everything you hear.’ The boy shrugged as Ellen stood up. ‘Come on. I have to close the shop,’ she said. Søren looked at her glumly then unwound himself from under the desk and strode towards the door. For the first time, she noticed that he had a slight limp. She wanted to talk to him for longer, and perhaps he hoped so too because she saw him hesitate.

‘Will you come tomorrow?’ she said.

‘It all depends,’ he said as he disappeared through the rectangle of the doorway. Ellen watched him go before she took the book of seabirds and placed it back in the window, open on the page with the common crane.

To Ellen’s surprise Inge agreed to the lessons. It’d be good to show some community spirit, Inge had said. Ellen was relieved. She didn’t know what she’d have done if Inge had refused. She hated confrontations. After that a rhythm quickly took its shape. For an hour at a time after school Ellen would sit with Søren at the back of the shop while Inge took care of the customers. Every day he read out words for the first time. *Forest. Castle. Ogre.* Inge began to warm to him, sometimes ruffling a hand through the fine cloud of hair that billowed from the top of his head. She even gave him one of Erik’s old woollen coats to replace the threadbare jacket that was too small for him. After the lesson, Søren would help Ellen return books to their correct places, straightening them on the shelves. They settled into this new routine and, after a while, it seemed to Ellen as if the boy had always been there.

Spring took hold in the town’s gardens. The marguerite daisies bloomed and buds swelled on the rose bushes. Ellen guessed that Søren spent much of his day down by the harbour because he often arrived smelling of herring and sea salt. She didn’t care. He had come to the shop, he had come to her, and she couldn’t help but wonder at the way the boy drew in new words.

‘Maybe I’ll work in a bookshop,’ he said one day.

‘What sort of books would you sell?’

‘All the bird books in the world.’

When they were joined by the Mønsted twins, who were called Claudia and Misse, he became shy at first, but slowly his confidence grew. The girls loved the Hans Christian Anderson stories: the one about the little mermaid who swam much closer to the shore than the others and the one about the emperor’s new clothes. ‘Your turn’, the girls would say and Søren would take the book with a flourish. They wore matching dresses, with ribbons threaded through their short plaits; red for Claudia, blue for Misse. The ribbons were often the only way Ellen could tell them apart. They seemed to have new dresses every month. Mønsted must have a contact in the trade, she thought. She managed with just three dresses, one yellow, one blue, one green and she rotated them from week to week.

March 1947

Søren liked to come to *Søvindhuset*.

Why do you call it that?

Because you can always hear the sea wind when you're inside. Listen.

(Pause)

Can you hear it?

It's very faint.

You need to really listen.

That's what my teacher says. She says sometimes the most important stories are told very quietly.

That might very well be true.

(Pause)

Far says the name of a house can't be changed. He says it's bad luck.

That's an old Jutland story.

Is it true?

I gave the house back its old name. It was Erik Nilsson who changed it to Nilssonhus. I don't think he was very superstitious.

Do you believe in ghosts?

(Pause)

I think I might stop now.

What do you mean?

I haven't spoken about any of this before now.

Have you thought about it?

I think about it most of the time.

August 1943

The summer weeks rolled on, one into the next. One night in the middle of August, Ellen had a vivid dream. Mother, mother. Orphan child. She found herself barefoot running through pine woods, her skin laced with rainwater. Underfoot a layer of blackened pine needles swelled like a bed of sea anemones moving with the current. She scratched her hands across the bark as she darted between the trees, pushing on, the air around her thick with sap. Ahead something flickered between the lines of the trees. A child, streaked green in the half-light. The girl stopped in a small clearing and turned slowly towards her in the gloom. Ellen caught the child's gaze and saw there the pearly disc of a complete moon reflected in each of her eyes.

The following morning Ellen emerged through layers of sleep, wondering for a moment where she was. She couldn't feel the weight of her body on the mattress and had the strange sensation that she was floating a few millimetres above it. Above the bed the map of cracks seemed to be advancing across the ceiling. Her skin prickled, wet and hot with sweat. She lay there and allowed the pounding under her ribs to steady and felt the weight of her body sinking back onto the bed. She felt drained, as if she had not slept and had been screaming. The dream was the familiar one, the one she'd had ever since the time ten years ago when she might have become a mother.

She'd told Inge about it one morning, as they drank dandelion coffee under the cherry trees in the courtyard behind the bookshop. She told her how she lost first the father and then the child. They'd met at school in Copenhagen. They planned to marry, then he went with the ambulances to Finland. A training accident, they said. He'd fallen under the wheels of a truck. Perhaps the shock made her lose the baby. They operated afterwards. It had been a difficult procedure, but no one explained anything to her. Perhaps it was all for the best. She'd been so young.

'Erik and I never had children,' Inge said, 'I always felt too busy with the books. Then it was too late.' Inge placed a hand on Ellen's shoulder. 'For me it's the greatest of regrets.'

'I speak to her in my head sometimes,' said Ellen, 'I imagine her to be a dark-haired girl. I make lists of books to read to her, the same stories that my mother used to read to me. *The Elves and the Shoemaker*, *The Little Match Girl*. Does that seem strange to you?'

'Don't leave it too late.' Inge's voice had been a whisper.

It was the only time that they spoke of it, but Ellen often thought back to the conversation and her impossible dream. Someday a daughter. Or a son.

Outside the church bell started to ring. Sunday morning. She'd almost forgotten that it was her day off. Lulled by the familiar rhythm, she let the last fragments of the dream slip away from her. She swung her legs out of bed and sat up, stretching her arms above her head and yawned. Looking into the mirror, she pressed a finger to the livid birthmark that spread from just behind her ear down onto her neck. The shape of a teardrop. She pulled down a few strands of hair to cover it. It would fade as she got older she'd always been told, but it never had. She still felt a prick of self-consciousness when others stared. Most people did. Only the boy seemed not to have noticed. She looked down at the two bulbs of hip bones, the contours of her ribs. The war consumed everything in its path, even the flesh on her body.

As the day was warm Ellen decided to walk out along the fjord, take a swim and find a place to read in the dunes. She dressed quickly, slipping a yellow cotton dress over her head and pulling on her stockings taking care not to stretch the areas that had almost worn through at the knees and heels. She brushed out her hair and tied it a loose bun at the back of her head. She could hear Inge moving about in the apartment below, her heels clicking over the wooden floors as she prepared for church.

Since Erik's death, Inge attended the eight o'clock service at St Jacob's church every Sunday morning, always dressed in the same brown woollen coat with its rabbit fur trim at the collar, and a green felt hat that she wore even in summer. The church visits had surprised Ellen, since Inge was often contemptuous of the town's church-goers whom she referred to as 'the pious brigade'. 'It's not that I believe,' she'd said to Ellen one day. 'It's just that I find the ritual a comfort now that Erik has gone.'

A thud echoed in the stairwell below as Inge closed the door to her apartment and Ellen heard footsteps echo on the stone steps. Ellen went to the window and watched Inge walk along Nørregade. A brown leather handbag swung from her crooked arm and she tilted her head to the side, alert as a farmyard hen.

Erik Nilsson, Inge's husband, had been dead for several months by the time Ellen moved into her room in Inge's apartment. Erik's death had been a shock for everyone: a heart attack whilst swimming in the fjord. He swam there almost every day of his life, but one day he floated into a bloom of firemen, the venomous jellyfish that floated into the inlet each summer. Ellen often saw them when she swam, their translucent domes and long red tendrils drifting beneath them. Erik's body was found later, washed up with the sea wrack, his torso, legs and arms covered with crimson welts. The first *strandvaskeren* of the year, the town's

fishermen had said, the first body washed up from the sea. Since then there'd been more. Mostly young men, stripped naked by the sea. The unidentifiable, anonymous casualties of war.

As soon as Ellen had moved in, she became aware that Inge had refused to give her husband up to the grave. The apartment remained exactly as it had been when he was alive. A mahogany desk stood beneath the tall windows in the study with a neat square of blotting paper, a tortoiseshell fountain pen and black ink laid out ready for its owner to return. Inge continued to launder his shirt collars and polish his shoes each week. Sometimes, when the weather was fine, the small yard at the back of the house would be festooned with jackets and shirts on old wooden hangers, their arms flapping in the breeze as if this wild improvised dance might bring him back among the living.

Ellen watched as Inge disappeared around the corner at the end of the street. Down below Mønsted's jewellery shop was closed, the heavy metal shutters pulled down to the cobbles and fastened with large padlocks. Just visible further down the street was the large building that housed the Larsen paintworks. A few people walked along the pavements, wrapped in their dark coats and hats despite the bright weather. An ordinary Sunday, but Ellen knew that people felt increasingly unsettled, that despite the waving and the handshakes, they were all falling ever further towards the shadows.

Ellen cleared her breakfast plate and tidied her bed clothes before leaving. As she passed the door to Inge's apartment, she caught a light trace of sweet tobacco. Erik had been an incessant smoker, never without a pipe or a cigar. He'd stand at the shop counter, a slim cigar gripped between his teeth as he filled out the order book in his meticulous script. The still bulk of his body tilted forwards, a thick cloud of smoke collecting above his head. Inge missed the tobacco so much that, despite the rationing, she managed to find a supply of his favourite cigars to burn in the grate. The smell was strongest in the evenings when the smoke found its way through the bricks in the wall and up into Ellen's room. She imagined Inge alone in her neat sitting room, bright-eyed and defiant, as she polished her dead husband's shoes until they shone like mirrors.

Ellen took the coastal road that ran east along the edge of the fjord. A flock of starlings passed overhead. She reached the edge of town and passed the check-point. No sign of any soldiers. Two heavy barricades cut the road in two, leaving a narrow dog-leg for vehicles to pass. She walked between them. Later, she was passed by a military truck. The

men, their faces pale as coins, waved at her from the inside. She made no acknowledgement, turning instead towards the streaked horizon and the sea.

Half an hour from the town, she left the road and headed down a narrow path between a wheat field and pine wood towards the sea. She found a sheltered hollow among the dunes and lay on her back with her book held above her head. The book was *Treasure Island*, a favourite from her childhood that she was planning to read to Søren and the twins. She began to read. 'Seaward ho! Hang the treasure! It's the glory of the sea that has turned my head.'

The beach lay deserted. After an hour or so Ellen undressed and folded her clothes into a neat pile and ran naked across the narrow strip of hard sand and into the sea. The cold rippled up over her shins, to her hip and shoulders, taking the air from her lungs. She kicked hard for several minutes, turning her head on every third stroke as her father had taught her. *Seek out the rhythm, little squirrel, that's the secret.* After a while she stopped to catch her breath, blinking the salt from her eyes. It was a relief to be separated from the land. Below the surface of the water, she watched her limbs move like the pale branches of a tree. She looked back at the strand, the low rise of the dunes and the straggle of summerhouses that led out towards Swan Point. From this distance, the land seemed vulnerable. It would take so little for it to be overwhelmed by the sea. The only sign of the war, the distant outline of a German battleship lying at the entrance to the fjord.

After her swim, she sat on her clothes and waited for the sun to dry her skin. She pressed her mouth to her arm, tasting the salt with the flat of her tongue, and remembered how, as a teenager, she'd practised kissing that place. Later there had been the first kisses with the cheerful boy who'd left school to become a soldier. His hot breath in her mouth. Then the shock of his child in her belly, the shock of his death. She hadn't been surprised when the tiny form slipped from her. She'd glimpsed something for the barest of moments, a crimson peach. The women who lived in their apartment block had rallied around. Her father had wept, holding her hand. 'At a time like this, a girl needs a mother,' he said again and again. And once more Ellen had felt the compressed weight of her father's unassuageable grief, so great that it crushed her own.

By now the sun was high in the sky. Ellen felt her skin tightening in the heat. She dragged an arm across the sand, lay flat on her side and sniffed at the damp ground. Shell, salt, the trace of ancient vegetation. She drew up her knees, hugging her nakedness. The feeling of want tugged at her again. Did a childless future await her, just like Inge? The thought filled her with sadness.

A drift of voices caught on the breeze passed above her. Ellen lifted her head to the level of the dune and heard laughter coming from the beach. At the water's edge a group of soldiers stripped off their uniforms, flinging them onto the sand before running into the silver water. Dark heads, long backs, the flash of pale feet. A football bobbed about in the surf. Three girls paddled with their skirts lifted to their thighs. She heard a joyful shriek and the sound of a tenor voice singing in German. The refrain sounded familiar, an operetta she'd heard on the radio in Inge's sitting room one evening. The group must have walked from the town along the beach, avoiding the road. She watched as the men swam, the smooth domes of their heads disappearing and then breaking the surface of the sea. They'd dragged a wheelbarrow with them from which they'd pulled out rugs, a gramophone and a basket of food. One of them had stuck a large black umbrella in the sand as a kind of parasol. The swimmers emerged from the sea, opened bottles of Tuborg and lit cigarettes, cupping their hands and turning their backs to the breeze. A man with light-coloured hair grabbed the hand of a girl and they began walking towards the dunes. The girl's skirts billowed out. The man clutched a towel around his waist. Ellen noticed the tan lines around his neck and arms, the sharp protrusion of his ribcage. It might have been the casual way he slung an arm over the girl's shoulder and turned his face into her neck or the way she took his hand and brought the back of it to her lips. Whatever it was, Ellen felt the sting of envy. Were they lovers already? The Danish girl was taking a risk of being seen with a soldier, but she looked as if she didn't care. The couple suddenly changed direction and started coming towards her. Ellen ducked down and dressed quickly, stuffing her stockings in her bag, and slipped on her shoes.

She ran back to the road through the pine woods. By the time she arrived back at no. 24 Nørregade, the skin on her heels had rubbed away, leaving two raw pink circles. Why had she run away? Ellen washed at the sink in the kitchen trying to clear her thoughts and then came down the steps to sit in the courtyard. Inge appeared with iodine. Ellen winced as Inge dabbed at her heels with it. The sunlight fell through the cherry tree over them in bright patches. The image of the pale limbed man stayed with her like a trace of something once precious to her. 'Danish girls were there,' said Ellen. 'I recognised them. They work at Grete's Patisserie.'

'Those *Tüske piger* will get their punishment. Afterwards, or sooner,' said Inge, dropping Ellen's foot to the ground. 'Keep those heels of yours in the air.'

'They made me feel angry. They seemed to have forgotten the occupation,' Ellen said. She began to cut apples into slices. Who was she fooling? It was envy, pure and simple. To imagine for an hour or two that the trouble didn't exist, that some carefree happiness was

permissible, that their enemies could be friends, even if it were a pretence. She began to arrange the apple slices into the shape of a fan.

‘Forgetting is dangerous,’ said Inge. Ellen sprinkled a few grains of sugar over the sliced apple. She handed the plate to Inge. ‘That’s the last of the sugar,’ she said.

March 1947

Is it alright to start again?

I feel better now.

You made him a necklace.

Out of a shell and piece of leather. He kept it with him all the time.

August 1943

The occupation made another mark. A visitor appeared one humid afternoon in August while Ellen sat at the counter with Inge and the two Mønsted girls. Søren hadn't been seen for a few days. She'd become used to his disappearances, as well as his nonchalant reappearances. He'd offer no explanations and she'd learnt not to pry. The girls coloured in picture books, while Ellen sharpened their pencils with a small paring knife, collecting the fine shavings in a paper bag. The visitor, a German soldier, walked into the book shop with a slim package tucked under his arm. The twins, dressed in blue pinafores with white collars embroidered with daisies, lifted their heads, pencils in hand. Ellen guessed the man to be about thirty, with fair close-cropped hair and a mesh of freckles over his nose and cheeks. He looked like an officer but seemed uncomfortable in his uniform, as if he were an accomplice in some undesirable activity. There'd been a rainstorm and his glasses glistened with water. He brought with him the scent of late summer which was completely at odds with his face. Uncertainty poured from him. Soldiers sometimes came into the shop to ask about German books, but Ellen didn't recognise this one. Before he'd even come halfway inside, Inge walked up to him and stood with hands on her hips. The top of her head barely reached the level of the pocket on his chest. 'What are you?' Inge demanded looking up at him. The officer took a step back as if he'd received a slap with an open hand. Customers turned to look. The twins stared, round-eyed, silent.

'I'm a chemist,' he said. Inge snorted, lifting her thin arms into the space between them.

'You don't look much like one,' she said and fixed him with her grey eyes.

'I was a chemist, I mean, in Berlin. Before this.' The officer stumbled over his words. He dropped his hands. He used the past tense. They were all something else before, Ellen thought.

'Well, if you are what you say you are, why are you here?' said Inge.

'My name is Leutnant Heinrich Nagel.' He glanced down at his notebook. 'You are Inge Nilsson, I believe? My orders are to deliver this to you.' He held out the package, trying to regain his composure.

'Do you always follow orders, Hr Kemiker?' Inge's eyes were bright.

'I'm a soldier. It's my duty and, please, my name is Leutnant Nagel.'

'Well, since you seem to know my name, you'd better tell me what's in this envelope,' Inge said, turning the package over with the tips of her fingers as if it might burn them.

‘It’s a catalogue,’ he said.

‘I have plenty of those already.’

‘A list of the writers. Writers who are seen to be damaging or ...’ he hesitated, searching for, or perhaps not wanting to say, the word. ‘Or undesirable.’ He spoke with a low voice. ‘Any works by these writers must be removed by the end of the week. Naturally, we will inspect.’

Inge pulled the catalogue from the envelope and beckoned Ellen over. They leafed through the pages together. The Mønsted girls watched from their stools, motionless as statues.

‘Walter Benjamin, Sigmund Freud, Ernest Hemingway, Marcel Proust.’ Inge read the names out, her voice rising in a crescendo. At the end of the list, she paused, perhaps for effect, but by now the customers had quietly made their way out of the shop. Inge glanced at Ellen, expectant.

‘This is absurd,’ Ellen said. She watched the officer as he shifted his weight from one foot to the other. She sensed his discomfort and, at her side, she felt Inge’s approving gaze. Emboldened, Ellen stepped towards him. ‘Have you read any of these writers?’ she asked.

‘One or two,’ he said, ‘At university back home in Berlin, we were encouraged to read beyond our subject.’ For the first time she became aware of his eyes behind the glasses. Dulled like sea glass, full of weariness.

‘Well that’s something,’ Inge said, eyeing him carefully.

‘What have you read?’ Ellen asked.

‘Proust,’ he said quietly, ‘At least I have tried to read Proust.’ The trace of a smile passed over his lips.

‘*À la recherche du temps perdu*?’ Inge said, her French smooth and fluent.

‘I read it in translation, but even so, I found it difficult. All that introspection. I’m more of a practical person.’

‘Better suited to the practical business of confiscating books, I suppose,’ said Inge. The Leutnant blushed.

‘My husband Erik used to say that it was impossible to translate French into German. Too much would be lost, you see. The German language is such a blunt instrument. Do you have an opinion on the matter?’ Inge paused for a moment. ‘No, well, perhaps not. The same could be said of Danish, perhaps, but not as much. Our language offers a little flexibility. In any event, the book is about what has been lost in time and what can be found again through memory and art.’ Inge dropped the catalogue onto the counter. ‘I think you should persevere

with Proust, Leutnant. You might learn something about the nature of loss.’ The officer took in Inge’s speech, but said nothing.

‘So, Leutnant Nagel, what am I supposed to do with the books, if I have any of them?’ said Inge.

‘We’ll dispose of them for you.’

‘And how will you do that?’

‘The normal procedure is to burn them.’ His voice dropped to a murmur. Inge gave another loud snort. ‘Combustion? Well, you should have all the required skills for that, Hr Kemiker.’ Inge drew very close to the Leutnant, keeping her arms folded tightly across her narrow chest. ‘And if I refuse?’ Inge said. Ellen marvelled at her employer’s force of personality.

‘I hope that you can co-operate, Fru Nilsson. For your own benefit and that of your assistant.’ The Leutnant looked directly at Ellen, perhaps hoping for some support.

It was disconcerting to watch him deliver his warning, as half-hearted as it seemed. Ellen kept her face as blank as she could, wondering if he was one of the long-backed men on the beach.

‘The police arrested a bookseller in Copenhagen last week,’ he continued. ‘They sent him to Frøslev. Not a place either of you’d want to be.’ Ellen had heard of the camp at Frøslev. It had a grim reputation.

‘You can go now,’ Inge said, suddenly impatient.

‘I’ll come back on Friday to make my inspection. The police will be with me, of course.’ The Leutnant turned back as he went through the doorway, ‘I’m sorry for this inconvenience.’ Then he disappeared into the light rain.

‘Not a philistine. Just following a philistine’s orders,’ said Inge, ‘So what does that make him? A hypocrite? A coward?’

‘Just an enemy,’ said Ellen, wondering what it was like for him. A scientist unable to work in his chosen field and sent to another country to make it bend to the will of his own. Perhaps his life felt as blighted as her own.

That evening after they’d closed the shop, Inge and Ellen gathered together works by the writers Inge named ‘our lovely undesirables’ and placed them into towers according to type: philosophers, historians, novelists, poets, travel writers. Isak Dineson, Hans Scherfig, Vercors, Freud. Ellen counted them up. One hundred and thirteen.

‘We’ll hide most of them,’ said Inge looking at the little stacks, ‘I’m not letting those philistines get their hands on them. Just think, burning books – it’s like something the Norsemen used to do with pagan poetry. Come, Ellen, I have something to show you.’ Inge led Ellen to the back of the shop, where a steep, narrow staircase led up to the apartment above, turning at two half landings. ‘Like our friend the Leutnant, my husband was also a practical man,’ said Inge, smiling as she bent down and started to unclip the carpet rods. Ellen helped her. After they’d lifted six or so, they rolled up the carpet. Each step had a small hole drilled at the front. Inge hooked a finger into one of the holes and pulled. The front panel of the stair clicked out to reveal a space and the blond wood behind. Ellen could smell the fresh pine.

‘Thanks to Erik we have hidden bookshelves. They go right the way to the top. Ingenious, don’t you think?’ said Inge.

‘When did he do it?’ asked Ellen.

‘At the beginning of the occupation. He’d always had a good sense of premonition.’ Inge gave out a wry laugh. ‘He finished the work just before he died. Then his premonition failed him.’ Ellen wanted to ask more questions about Erik, but she caught sight of Inge’s face lost in contemplation. Another time.

That night the house filled with the tramping of their feet on the stairs. They stacked the books alphabetically by author, eighteen to each step, filling five before carefully replacing the carpet. By the time they had finished, a single pile was left on the counter.

‘Enough to keep him happy,’ said Inge. ‘I’ve included the Proust. Just in case he’s tempted to try it again. His Danish seems to be good enough.’ She held the book aloft. ‘Proust, you may yet be saved.’

Early on Friday morning the Leutnant arrived as promised. He was accompanied by two bored-looking Danish policemen. Inge and Ellen sat behind the counter on their stools, the stack of books set in front of them like a bulwark.

‘Our undesirables,’ said Inge.

‘I was expecting more.’ The Leutnant frowned.

‘So were we,’ said Ellen, ‘but we must have sold more than we thought. Perhaps people wanted to stock up on the good stuff. What do you think?’

‘If you are found to have concealed illegal books, the consequences will be severe. The matter will be out of my hands. My advice to you is to co-operate fully and not risk...’

‘We’re fully aware of the situation, Leutnant,’ Ellen interrupted. ‘These are the books for your bonfire.’ She pushed the pile towards him.

‘We’ll need to search the building. Just to be sure,’ he said.

‘Is that really necessary?’ said Inge. Suddenly Ellen thought Inge looked tired, exposed.

‘The apartment too.’ The Leutnant’s statement jabbed at the air.

‘I’ll take them,’ said Ellen. ‘It’ll be alright,’ she added, touching Inge’s elbow gently.

Ellen led the two policemen through the shop to the stairs. The bulbs in the stairwell had blown and, since new ones were in such short supply, she’d become used to climbing up to the apartment in darkness, trailing her fingers along the wall. Behind her the laboured breathing of the men and the sound of their boots filled the stairwell. Under the boards, Inge’s undesirables absorbed every vibration. A small victory. That was something, Ellen thought. She opened the door to the apartment and she was in the light once more. The silence that wrapped the apartment quickly ruptured as the policemen began opening the cupboards and drawers. Without the least sign of self-consciousness, they lifted the lace cloths and embroidered cushions from the chairs, inspected under Inge’s collection of porcelain birds. They rolled back the carpet in the large reception room and shook out the heavy drapes, looked under the green baize cloth that covered the dining table and poked their heads into the cold cabinet and the linen store, dragging out eiderdowns and blankets. Ellen followed them from room to room. They went into Erik’s study and rifled through his collection of antiquarian books. The younger of the two picked out one book and waved it around as if it were a missile. Music scores spilled from the narrow drawers in the piano stool. They missed nothing. Ellen followed them, glowering, and returned things to their place. They had so little respect. And Danes too. Thank goodness Inge didn’t have to witness the whole thing. Eventually the men seemed satisfied and they returned downstairs. The clump of their boots stamping over Dineson, Vercors, Freud. Ellen allowed herself a smile.

Downstairs Inge and the Leutnant were talking quietly together.

‘It seems that our Leutnant here is to be billeted with Henning,’ said Inge, catching sight of Ellen coming back into the shop.

Henning Bornholm was the foreman at Larsen’s paintworks. Ellen had seen him around the town. He always had a pipe hanging from his mouth, a woollen cap on his head and was followed everywhere by a three-legged white terrier called Otto.

‘I take it you have a strong stomach? That place stinks. Chemicals, smoke, God knows what else. There’ll be no escaping that over there,’ said Ellen.

‘I’ll be glad to move,’ the Leutnant said. ‘The people I’m with now are very hostile. They refuse to speak to me.’

‘Can you blame them?’ Ellen said.

‘They put damp sheets on the bed. They add too much salt to my meals. They even instruct their children never to look at me.’ He looked up, ‘I don’t expect friendship. But it wouldn’t be too hard to be civil.’

‘So you find yourself on the wrong side, do you?’ said Inge, her voice sharpened. The Leutnant blushed. Inge continued. ‘I suppose your former interest in chemistry means you’ll like being near the paintworks. It might take your mind off things.’

‘I’m still a chemist,’ the Leutnant said and pressed a hand to his ribs, ‘I’ll go back to it one day. I’d be interested to know about Larsen’s work. If, that is, he is willing to talk to me about it.’

‘Unlikely.’ Inge’s grey eyes held those of the Leutnant.

‘They didn’t find anything upstairs,’ said Ellen.

‘I don’t suppose they did,’ he said, finally relinquishing Inge’s gaze before turning to look at the two policemen. One of them had begun to scan the shelves, head turned at ninety degrees.

‘And I imagine they won’t find anything down here either?’ he said. Ellen nodded.

‘We’ve been very thorough,’ she said.

During the night a combination of a high tide and full moon churned up the sand, shifting it all directions. Ellen took her early morning walk, still thinking about the Leutnant’s visit. It was possible that he was a decent kind of person. Under different circumstances they might even have been friends. It was an uncomfortable idea to accommodate. *You shall do a bad job for the Germans.* Silence, at the very least.

The receded sea revealed a collection of black stumps that protruded from the sand. An ancient forest or a boat, its ribs stripped bare? Whatever it was, it echoed the old history. Her father would have told her. He’d have run out to it to inspect it closely. The familiar rough grief jagged at her. She remembered his bureau. It contained Jutland’s geology in miniature: a collection of fossils and rocks wrapped in tissue paper and carefully labelled. Shrimp, leaf split layers of moler from the cliffs at Limforden. He kept the large fossil of a sea urchin cast in flint on the top of the bureau and used it as a paperweight. The fossil, which he’d found on the island of Fur, was the shape of a perfect heart-shaped dome, its five ridges led out from a central point, the surface dotted with holes where the sharp needle-like spines

had once been attached many millennia ago. Ellen remembered her father pacing around the study cradling it in the palm of one hand, as if it were a talisman. She ran her hand along the side of the bureau. It was as if his grief were still trapped in the patina of old varnish. She could never bring herself to open it again. The drawers remained shut, the bureau leaf hooked up, his papers untouched inside. She kept the urchin heart on the top, as if to seal her father's work. When she moved out of the apartment, her neighbours had helped her to move the bureau up to the attics for storage. The only thing she took with her was the sea urchin fossil.

Ellen walked on and found Søren sitting on the end of the jetty setting out his crab lines, his bare feet dangling over the side. 'So, this is where you've been hiding?' she said. The boy squinted up at her. A red bruise bloomed on his temple.

'What's it to you?' he said. The boy's wall was up again.

'I thought you might have come for a lesson today,' she said.

'I didn't feel like it. Does it matter?' he said. What's been happening to you, Sea Urchin? Ellen took a step towards the boy. 'I was just wondering,' she said gently. 'You missed some excitement. The bookshop was searched.'

Søren pulled the line from the water. A grey crab clung to the clump of fish heads that had been stuffed into a piece of netting. 'So?' he said, loosening the crab, its pincers opening wide as he pulled, and dropped it into the bucket. 'I need to go now,' he said standing up and gathering his fishing kit together.

'Come tomorrow if you feel like it,' she said, 'I've a book you might like.'

'Maybe,' he said. Was there a glimmer of interest in his eyes? It was difficult to tell. He picked up his shoes, they were scuffed and worn down at the heel.

'Anyway I've got a job now. Sweeping up at the paintworks,' he added. She watched him walk away. 'The book's called *Treasure Island*,' she called to his back, but he didn't turn around. 'You'll like it,' she added too quietly for him to hear. She watched him disappear into the shadow of the alley with his uneven gait and shock of white-blond hair. He reminded her of the pale feathered cranes that stood on the chimney tops in Copenhagen, suddenly rising from their nests with a languorous beat of their wings.

August 1943

The day after the search, a wooden crate appeared at the entrance to the Nilsson's bookshop. No soldiers. No message. As if it had been dropped from the skies. Stamped all over with black eagles with downturned wings, the crate remained undisturbed all morning. A light rain rinsed through the sky and left the pale wood spattered with dark smears. Customers skirted their way around it to get inside. They questioned Inge. What happened during the search? What did they take? Your apartment too? Hold firm, one of the braver ones said to Inge, Erik would be proud of you.

'I don't want to touch it,' said Inge.

'We can't leave it there,' said Ellen.

'It's an intrusion.'

'I'll deal with it.'

After lunch Ellen prised the crate open with a screwdriver. Inside she found a collection of books approved by the Reich and an order typed on thick paper with instructions to display a selection of German texts in the window. Ellen picked the books out one by one. Most were by German writers she'd never heard of: Werner Bumelburg, Agnes Miegel, Brudolf Binding. Who were these people? What did they write that made them so favoured? It was a relief to find some familiar works, translations of foreign novels, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Gulliver's Travels*, even a few works by de Cervantes. Ellen put *Gulliver's Travels* in the window, carried the rest into the store room and covered them with a blanket. Easier to forget about that way. She dragged the empty crate through the shop into the courtyard behind and went back to her counter. A series of Agatha Christie's newly translated detective stories had been delivered and Ellen began to ring the people who had ordered copies.

At lunchtime a man entered the shop. He came through the doorway as if propelled by an unseen force. He wore a blue jacket fastened with horn buttons. His white calico trousers were touched with dabs of paint, his boots too. A worker at the Larsen paintworks at the end of the street? He headed towards the counter where Ellen was wrapping *Death on the Nile* in brown paper. He stopped abruptly and planted the palms of both hands onto the wooden surface. The man's stillness held no suggestion of calm, as if within him some slow burning fire smouldered away.

'Can I help?' Ellen asked.

The young man stared back at her, his hands dropping from the counter to his sides. Ellen noticed that the tips of his fingers were stained yellow and that a fine dust coated his

eyelashes and forehead. A quick lopsided smile crossed his face. A nerve flickered involuntarily below her diaphragm.

‘Perhaps,’ he said, ‘At least I hope so.’ His voice was quiet, cracked. ‘I’m looking for a book by Antonio Garavelli. *Experiments in paint and varnish*.’

Ellen found she could hardly bear to hold his gaze. ‘You’ll have to order it, I should think. Not exactly popular reading,’ she said. He smiled at her again, this time more fully. At that moment Inge emerged from the stockroom and extended both her hands out towards him. ‘Per, how good to see you. It’s about time you paid me a visit,’ she said. ‘I see you’ve met Ellen.’

‘Ellen,’ he repeated and held out a hand. Ellen noticed the crescent shape of his eyes, the long face. But it was his voice that touched her. Did the feeling show on her face? She felt sure it must. Smiling she took his hand, felt the rough skin and slim fingers. She noticed the curve of his forearm, the fine hairs there, a pale patch under his wrist. The nerve flickered again.

‘I’ll check the catalogue for you.’ Ellen spoke with a steadiness she didn’t feel. ‘We have problems getting books from foreign publishers these days.’ She slid the catalogue out from its place on the shelf and began to look through the index. Was he watching her? She scanned the list carefully. ‘There’s no one called Garavelli listed in here.’ She looked up, turning the catalogue towards him. He leant over to see the list. She caught the faint trace of linseed oil. He placed the tip of a yellowed finger on the page. It left a pale smear when he moved it away.

‘Ochre,’ he said. ‘The pigment stains everything. A hazard of my occupation I’m afraid.’ He held her gaze. For a second neither of them blinked.

Inge took the catalogue from Per. ‘We might be able to get the book from one of our wholesalers in Copenhagen. I’ll write to them,’ said Inge. ‘Ellen, perhaps you can make the trip up there for me this time?’

Ellen noticed the two of them exchange a glance. Had something passed between them? She hadn’t been back to Copenhagen for several years, not since the death of her father. The opportunity to go back to the city filled her with a bitter-sweet excitement. She could visit the Museum of Geology where her father had worked and where she’d spent so many happy hours among the fossils and the maps. Once her father took her to see a special Cabinet of Curiosities, stored in the basement of the museum. The cabinet had been bequeathed to the museum by a Danish explorer. It contained dozens of tiny drawers filled with specimens: aquamarine from Pakistan, cryolite crystal from Greenland, zeolites from

Iceland. The collection had enchanted her and she'd invented stories about how the specimens had been collected and brought to Denmark on hazardous journeys through deserts and forests, across rivers and seas.

If she went back to Copenhagen the first thing she'd do would be to climb the helix tower of Vor Frelzers Kirke. From the top she could take in the whole panorama of the city and its water. If she turned to the west she'd find the pointed roof of her childhood home on Laksegade, close to the Frederiksholm Canal and the airy apartment where her mother used to sew through the night, where later she watched her father fold inwards into his grief. *Far, perhaps you should go out? The Tivoli Gardens are full of tulips. Not today, little squirrel, I have reading to do. You go. Tell me about them later.*

Per's eyes were back on her. 'The book is important.' He spoke with an urgency of someone in a hurry. 'I'm developing a new kind of paint, one that dries much more quickly than the ones we have now. Garavelli has been working in this area for many years.' She barely took in his words. She was aware only of the shape of his mouth, his particular way of speaking.

'We'll do our best,' Ellen found herself saying as she wrote down the title. She watched Per leave, contemplating the line of his back, the easy roll of his hips. After all this time, could it be that she felt desire again? She thought she'd locked herself away from all that. A few minutes earlier she'd have thought her feelings impossible. Just another day. Then this man, full of intensity, had appeared and made her heart clatter beneath her ribs.

A few days later it emerged that Inge had invited Per for dinner together with Ravn and Annalise and Henning and his wife, Mathilda. Ravn delivered a shoulder of pork which Inge roasted with apples and dried juniper berries. Ellen helped Inge to set the table, Inge insisting on using old porcelain dishes hand painted with flowers that hadn't been brought out since Erik had died.

'Let's make an occasion of it for once,' she said.

Ellen hummed as she worked, thoughts of Per Larsen spiralling in her head. The soft places between his fingers, the smooth undulation of his cheek bones and his lopsided smile.

'Before the war,' Inge said as she peeled potatoes over the sink, 'Erik and I held parties here. He liked to gather all sorts of people around him: artisans, business people, musicians. Especially musicians. He adored music of all kinds: jazz, Brahms, Chopin. In the summer, we'd cook crayfish that he'd caught up in the freshwater lakes. In those days, we

often gave beds to travelling musicians on their way to perform at the concert hall in Aarhus. There was a violinist from Salzburg with one leg. He used to take off his false leg in the middle of dinner and slam it onto the table when he wanted to make a point.’ She sighed. ‘So much laughter! I miss that very much.’

The sight of Inge, so thin these days and battling each day against the ferocious grief that burned within her, touched Ellen. The difference from her own father. His grief had smothered him.

After dark, with the black-out curtains pulled down, the guests arrived one by one. Per handed Ellen a bunch of cornflowers tied with twine. His hands had been scrubbed. ‘I picked them from the roadside,’ he said, ‘They won’t last long, but the blue is so vivid, don’t you think?’ Once again, the skittering in her chest when he spoke.

‘They’re beautiful,’ Ellen said. The flowers glowed in the shadow, a deep cobalt blue.

‘A little like the colour of lapis lazuli,’ he said. ‘A pigment that’s almost impossible to get hold of these days. We’ll have to manage with this as a substitute.’

Ellen dropped the flowers in a vase and set them on the mantelpiece. Before dinner, they gathered by the radio in Erik’s old study to hear the evening broadcast from London. Inge turned the dial to find the frequency and the room suddenly filled with the familiar male voice, a strong Copenhagen accent. Ellen imagined the voice as an ancient seabird flying low to meet them, across the North Sea, up the fjord and over the sand dunes, through the streets and walls. It spoke of Hitler’s progress in Russia, the recent elections, the possibility of change. Then began the series of coded greetings. Ellen listened intently. *Sylvie sends Edgar her urgent and best wishes for his birthday.* She’d heard the message before. Who was it meant for? Why the terrible urgency? The broadcast ended with the rallying call. *Danish citizens! Keep strong and true.* Then silence.

Henning opened a bottle of schnapps and poured everyone a glass. ‘A toast to Denmark! And to friends,’ he said. As they raised their glasses, the power to the building was cut. They clinked their glasses in the darkness. Ellen felt her way to the sideboard and found candles. Per followed her around the room and lit them one by one. She walked slowly, aware of the slow journey of his body behind her.

They ate under the candlelight. Beer soup thickened with rye bread, followed by Ravn’s slow-roasted pork with boiled potatoes and preserved cherries. Long shadows flickered over the heavy curtains and parquet floor. All was yellow, orange and black. Only the cornflowers stood out in contrast. The room filled with the sweet smell of Erik’s tobacco that Inge burned slowly in the grate. The flickering light of the candles bathed the room in a

warm glow which made their faces shimmer. It seemed almost magical. Ellen watched Per, his eyes were limpid and clear. He talked about the Larsen paint business. How his grandfather had started the firm after losing his arm in a sailing accident and could no longer work as a painter. Per had taken over the business before the war and built it up so that now they sold varnishes, glues and wallpapers, as well as paint. He studied as a chemist and wanted to develop paints that were easier to use, but the occupation was making the supply of materials problematic. It was endlessly frustrating. There was so much he wanted to do, but could not.

Perhaps it was the way Per spoke, as if measuring each word before releasing it. He seemed to be poised for some intense release of energy at any moment. Ellen was so aware of his physical presence, she found she had to stop herself from looking at him until the faint trembling under her ribs subsided.

It was a warm night so after dinner they sat outside in the courtyard. Inge brought down dandelion coffee and some sweet almonds. Ellen lit a candle in a hurricane lamp, the flame guttering against the glass like a pulse. They sat together under the cherry tree, the clusters of ripening cherries turned yellow by the tallow light of moon.

‘This is the thing,’ Ravn said turning a spoon between his fingers, ‘nothing changed at the beginning. Do you remember? We simply carried on. I heard the announcement on the radio in the butchery. Someone said, “So, they’ve come then.” We carried on with the pigs. The Pastor came into the shop at twelve and said the first of them would be arriving in the town soon. We washed down the floors and locked up the shop. And suddenly they were here, like a storm flashing up from the fjord. I stood on a bench by the harbour. That was already three years ago.’ Ravn placed the spoon down on the table. When he looked up he had tears in his eyes and for a moment, they all sat in silence.

‘For a long time nothing happens,’ said Per. ‘But then the tension increases and the pressure become too great. Something must give. Resistance is growing, Ravn. All of us can do something more,’ he turned to Ellen, ‘and now we have you too.’ She felt the flush on her neck. They were all looking at her. She took in their expressions. How stupid of her not to realise how involved in the resistance they all were. Not just at the edges, but at the heart of it.

‘So, Ellen,’ Inge said as she poured out the last of the dandelion coffee, ‘will you help us?’

‘Yes.’ Her voice sounded faint.

‘The trip to Copenhagen I talked about earlier,’ said Inge. ‘There’s a bit more to it than I’ve suggested. Not much more, but important nevertheless. It’s not just a visit to the

wholesaler. There's something else. Other books that need to be collected.' All three of them were watching her now.

'What sort of books?' she said.

'Illegally published ones,' said Inge. 'In particular, copies of a novel by John Steinbeck. It's been translated by some Danish students. It's called *Maanen er Gaaet Ned*, The Moon is Down.'

'Why is it illegal?'

'It happens to be about an imaginary country under occupation,' Inge said.

'You want me to bring the books here?' she asked.

'Exactly,' said Inge.

Soon after they all got up to leave. As Per passed Ellen, he kissed her lightly on the cheek. Just a slight caress of his lips across her skin. It sent a jolt of desire through her. For his body. For his hands on her.

That night she slept restlessly under the cambric sheets, the scent of dried chamomile and cedar wood in her nostrils. After midnight she dragged off the sheet and lay spread-eagled on the bed. Despite the window being open, the room held the accumulated heat of the day. Meeting Per had made her feel excited. She felt ready to embrace the future. She would collect the illegal books, she would help the resistance. Perhaps she would become Per's lover too.

March 1947

A week after Ravn's visit, Ellen visited Inge Nilsson. The Horsens Home for the Elderly was set just out of town, close to the old railway line. The low-level building consisted of a series of rooms linked by corridors to a large central area where residents sat and shared their meals. Ellen had been putting off her visit. A feeling of guilt about leaving rumbled away. What would she say to her? Apologise? Ask for forgiveness? Ravn had said that her health had deteriorated soon after Ellen left for Sweden. The burning of her books had affected her deeply. She'd quickly become frail, unable to climb the stairs to the apartment above the bookshop. He'd found her sleeping in the storeroom, wrapped in Erik's old coat. She hadn't eaten for days. Ravn and Annalise had taken her in.

Inge sat in an upright chair, wrapped in a green woollen shawl. She reached out her hands. Ellen took in her face, its loyalty to grief still etched in every line.

'Who is it?' said Inge.

'It's me, Ellen.' She approached the chair, remembering that she should speak out loud before touching her. Inge lifted her arms, opening her fingers. 'Ah, my little bird. Is it really you?' Inge's eyes, grey and milky, filled with tears.

'Yes, I'm here.' Ellen came to her and they embraced. Ellen perched on the side of the bed.

'So, how do you like my new residence?' Inge gestured towards the tall doors at the end of the room led to a small balcony lined with a few pots of marguerite daisies and a bird table.

'It seems lovely. Do you like it?'

'They fuss,' she said in a low whisper. 'I couldn't go on with the shop. After everything, you know...' her voice trailed off. 'And now my eyes are giving up on me.'

'I should have stayed. I could have helped you.'

'No, Ellen, my dear, there was nothing to be done. I've sold the shop. I'm told they're reopening next month.' Inge pulled herself up from her chair and carefully manoeuvred herself, a palm pressed to the wall, towards the bookcase. She picked up a magnifying glass. 'I still get the publishers' catalogues. Silly really, as I can hardly see the pages now. Will you read to me?'

Ellen made tea and she spent an hour reading out details of the new publications. Inge had lost none of her curiosity or strong opinions: she loved a new collection of poetry by Axel

Juel, found merit in a history of Canute and the Vikings, was dismissive of a series about the architecture of Danish churches. When she grew tired, she leant back in her chair to doze for a few minutes. Ellen cleared away the cups, drying them carefully and putting them back onto the shelf.

‘I’d like to go to the beach, perhaps visit the summerhouse,’ Inge said waking suddenly. ‘Will you take me?’

‘I thought you hated the sea.’

‘I think it’s about time I put that particular ghost to rest.’

28 August 1943

It had been expected. Nevertheless, the resignation of the Danish Government sent a tremor through the town. On 28 August 1943 newly printed notices appeared on every lamp post under the insignia of the black eagle.

OPROP!

Public assembly of people banned

Strikes outlawed

Daily curfew

All guns to be handed in

Censorship to be conducted with German assistance

New special German military courts

The death penalty in cases of sabotage

By Order of the Commandant

September 1943

Someone started a rumour. It threaded its way through the cramped cottages in the harbour alleyways, along Nørregade over the trays of pearls that nestled in Ejnar Mønsted's safe, around the lines of books hidden under the stairs at Nilsson's bookshop. It made its way out of the town, brushed through the draughty villas on the coast road. The Gestapo were coming to Horsens. Because of the arson attack on the Olsen factory, because of the damage to Fugholm Bridge, because of the rat baked into a loaf and delivered to the Commandant. At the *Folkeskole* a group of boys kicked around a football. The Gestapo would hang every baker in the town from the lamp posts, they said. They'd take their children hostages and pull out their fingernails. How long before they found the boy who'd scratched the Commandant's limousine? Don't take liquorice sweets from them, a girl whispered to her friends as they built sand castles in the playground, they might be poisoned. Gestapo blood was black, she said. There was an empty space where their hearts should be.

In the event, the Gestapo arrived on Rosenkrantzvej without ceremony one grey afternoon at the beginning of September. They moved into an empty office block close to the *Folkeskole* and pulled down the blinds. From the other side of the street the school children watched from their classrooms. These men were different, older and quieter. Why didn't they drape the red and black flag from the window ledge or march in formation down the street like the others? The children were unsettled as they watched the men slide into the building leaving two guards, flashes of green on their epaulettes, at the entrance. Later, a police officer arrived from the town hall carrying a heavy box of files. One, two, three trips.

'Back to work, children,' the headmaster said, 'there's algebra still to be learnt.'

'Will they come over here?'

'They have no reason to.'

'But if they do?'

'We'll carry on as usual.'

Across the street, long after the school children had gone home and the headmaster had wiped the blackboard clean, a kerosene lamp behind the black-out blinds burned long into the night.

Ellen wanted to collect the Steinbeck books from Copenhagen as planned and ignore the new arrivals on Rosenkrantzvej. Why give them the pleasure? But Inge was concerned. She should delay, wait until they knew more about what was happening. Ellen found herself standing firm. They were only interested in saboteurs, not book smugglers. And anyway she'd decided that she wanted to go back to see the city of her childhood again, visit the old family apartment, check on her father's possessions. The old bureau, his collection of fossils, his old books, all stored in the attics of 29 Laksegade since his death. She remembered the week she left, a few months before the start of the war. The painstaking packing of boxes, the compression of her father's life into small spaces, the neighbours who helped to lift everything into the attic. At the end she wandered around the empty rooms aware of the clicking of her shoes on bare floors. She had wept as she closed the doors one by one. And she had wept later too as she sat in the taxi and drove away with everything she owned packed in two suitcases in the boot.

The evening before Ellen was due to leave Inge fussed around her. Wear this coat, those shoes. A hat would be sensible. Have you got your papers safe? Søren arrived and they sat around the walnut table and ate meatballs with rowanberry sauce. Inge bustled in and out of the kitchen unable to relax. Afterwards, Ellen read another of Andersen's tales to Søren. The boy lay on his back, eyes wide, his pale lips pressed shut.

'At evening, in the narrow streets of the great city, when the sun went down and the cloud shone like gold among the chimneys, there was frequently heard, sometimes by one, and sometimes by another, a strange tone, like the sound of a church bell...'. She stopped mid-sentence. 'What is it, Sea Urchin?' she said. The boy sat up, his face watchful, cautious.

'You're definitely going?'

'Not for long.'

'When?'

'I'll take the first train tomorrow.'

'Who'll read to me?'

'Inge is here,' Ellen said, 'Or you could try for yourself.' The boy leant over his knees, cradling them in both arms. The wind rattled at the windows. Out in the fjord the night tide was streaming in, a late summer storm brewing in its wake.

'Not for long?' said Søren.

'A day or two.'

'I could come with you.'

‘No.’

‘You might need a runner.’

‘It’s better that you stay here,’ she said. The wind hummed in the chimney above the stove. Ellen heard Inge murmuring softly as she swept the kitchen floor for the second time. Søren became sullen. He rolled onto his stomach, stretched out his feline body, and began to pick at the rug with his fingers. He was too young to get involved, wasn’t he? He’d only get into trouble, he always did, and then what would she do?

As Ellen watched the boy lying on the floor, his pale lashes resting on his cheeks, it occurred to her that she knew so little about him. What she knew of his home life, she knew only by inference. The details remained hidden. There was the scar around his ankle, the trace of a limp on the same leg, the refusal to sleep on a bed. He preferred the floor, he said, but she’d caught the acute fear in his eyes when one night when Inge offered him the brass framed bed in the spare room. She knew the rumours about his father’s uncontrolled drinking. She understood the difficulties a father might face in coping with a young child on his own. Not everyone could be a good parent.

March 1947

Did he draw those pictures?

Do you like them?

They don't look finished.

They're sketches, Jesper, that's why.

Why did he like drawing?

I think he found it peaceful.

Why didn't he draw people?

He preferred seabirds.

Didn't he like people?

He liked some of them.

Not his Far though.

Not always.

What about his Mor?

He loved his Mor.

Even though she left him?

Yes, even though she left him.

September 1943

Rain had threatened all night and just as Ellen caught the early morning train to Copenhagen the clouds burst. The second-class carriages were packed with travellers, but she found a seat in the last compartment and hoisted the half empty suitcase up onto the luggage rack. Her luggage might be searched, so she'd laid out undergarments on the top. Inge's idea. A man might feel embarrassed about going through a young woman's intimate clothing so publicly. A pale pink silk chemise, suspenders with lace trim, a corset in ivory satin. Beneath them a false base with space for the books. The suitcase had been adapted by Erik, cleverly constructed, like the bookshelves under the stairs.

Ellen dropped down into her seat, shoulder to shoulder between a rosy faced woman and young man in a crumpled velvet jacket. Opposite, a man and his wife spoke to each other in low voices about their pigs. An older man dozed in the corner. Ellen heard the slam of the carriage doors as they were shut one by one by the guard. Outside, the rain beat down on the platform, splashing up from the lustrous surface in spikes. The thunderstorm that had been brewing had finally broken. The guard's whistle trilled and the train rolled slowly out of the station, its lumbering weight coming slowly to life. The engine made a grinding sound, metal on metal, its momentum building steadily. Steam mingled with rain as the train followed the coast south. They rattled over the truss bridge to cross the Lillebælt strait. Ellen watched the terns as they slashed their taut bodies against the surface of the sea, sending flares of white spray into the air. The wind knocked at the windows. The storm from the Kattegat filled the air, sucking light from the horizon.

Ellen ran over her cover story. It seemed incredible, even a little unnecessary to her. Her name was Bénédicte. Just a niece visiting her aunt in Copenhagen. The map Inge had drawn lay in her pocket, sandwiched between two slices of bread. Ellen's cheeks had flushed red and a thin sheen of perspiration had formed on her forehead, Inge's last words echoing through her mind. *Behave as usual. Aunt Sylvie is a professional. You'll be safe with her.*

'Do you mind if I open a window,' Ellen said standing up. The other passengers looked up at her, but said nothing. She pushed out the small pane of glass as far as it would go and felt a damp flurry of air on her face. She sucked in a deep breath. Behind her the pig man started up a conversation with the young man in the velvet jacket.

The brakes whined as the train slowed to a stop at Frederica. The carriage fell silent and everyone seemed relieved at the break in conversation, the traces of their words left floating between them like feathers.

As the train approached the bridge on Funen, the rain lessened and Ellen caught a glimpse of a figure in the distance. She strained to see. What was someone doing there out on the bridge in this weather? Then she saw a second figure facing the first with an arm raised. A muffled thud, then another. The first figure fell backwards from the bridge, his right arm groping for the sky, the star of his body dropping towards the sea below. Ellen inhaled a sharp breath, suddenly awake. She glanced around the carriage. Had anyone else seen it? As the train hurtled across the bridge, she caught sight of the second man flashing by, one hand pressed inside the lapel of his coat. What was it? An execution? In broad daylight? She sat back in her seat and stared half-seeing out of the window as the countryside flickered by.

The rain fell steadily as she left the train at Copenhagen. She relished being outside, free from the tension in the compartment, but disturbed by the event she'd just witnessed. She walked fast, but soon stopped to stand with her back against the platform wall, the image of the falling man blooming in her head. She gathered herself. Everything would be alright. The falling man had nothing to do with her. The station clock, with its familiar white dial and blue hands, gleamed above her. She felt the bitter-sweet tremor of return as she remembered the weekend trips out of the city with her father. The rush for the train to Roskilde, Charlottenlund, Helsingør. Don't forget your coat, Far! Sandwiches, shall I make sandwiches? And relentlessly, underneath the day to day, like the wash of the sea, the aching want for her mother.

The rain stopped. She checked herself and took out Inge's map. Focus on the essential. She tucked away her umbrella and set off amid the wave of passengers, allowing herself to be swept along Marionsgade. The street was filled with people, dozens of German soldiers in *feldgrau* coats with long boots, their steel helmets gleaming. She passed the Hotel Angleterre, its tall glass windows filled with people drinking and smoking. Some of the men were in military uniform, others in dark suits, their hats and coats hanging like ghosts on the walls behind. The men looked comfortable, at home. Why wouldn't they? Three years before they'd been invited in, hadn't they? Now the sham was over and they were in charge. She stopped to look at the women, their hair curled into elaborate pleats, faces smoothed with make-up, lips shimmering dark crimson, pale pink. Every smile a betrayal. *Tüske piger*. And the falling man. Who was he? She stared at the shining faces, heard the chatter spilling in the fug from

the open doorway. A feeling of nausea rose in her, pressing up into her solar plexus. Hatred spun through her body. Resist and when the time came, do whatever more was asked of her.

She'd crushed the paper with Inge's map on into a small ball and stopped in a doorway to uncurl it. Not far now. She walked towards Gammelholm and began to recognise the streets and waterways. They came back to her like a childhood song that she could recite from memory. Børs Briske, Holmens Kanal, Dronningensgade. She found the house on Holberggade as she turned the corner. Number three. The rain had started again and was falling steadily and by the time she arrived at the apartment, she could feel the wet skin on the back of her legs. What if Aunt Sylvie wasn't there? What if someone else answered the door? She resisted the urge to keep on walking. On and on, away from it all. She stopped and looked up at the apartment. The red brick building overlooked a narrow canal, one of many built by Dutch engineers in the seventeenth century. Each building had a hoist protruding from the top, decorated with a stag, a ship or horse. Above number three, the pointed prow of a ship. On the other side of the canal, a swan circled nervously around a half-submerged nest lodged in a broken-down fishing boat. Ellen's thoughts drifted back to her childhood bedroom that overlooked a canal much like this one. She'd spent hours daydreaming looking out over the rooftops imagining she could fly with the cranes from one chimney stack to the next and make her way towards the sea. Ellen pressed the bell and heard the trill echo inside.

After a time, she heard footsteps, quick and light. A pause before a woman's voice came from the other side of the door. 'Who's there?'

'Bénédicte,' Ellen said, the words sounding awkward with the unfamiliar name. The door clicked open. Through the darkness in the hallway, Ellen could make out a tall woman, with an elongated face and thinning fair hair. The woman pulled the door wide and gestured with her long wristed hand for Ellen to enter. She looked as if she'd just woken up. 'Please follow me.' The woman's tone was business-like, efficient. She led Ellen up the unlit stairs. 'No electricity today.' Their footsteps echoed on the hard stone, intensifying the building's atmosphere of abandonment. They arrived at the third floor. Ellen peered down at the cavern of the hall below. What a forsaken place. Where was everybody? The woman took a large key from her pocket and unlocked the door, which was heavy and painted black. The rooms inside the apartment were sparsely furnished. A large rose-coloured carpet covered the wooden floor and an elaborate statue of a horse and rider, yellowing and somehow out of place, rested on a table in front of the window. The *kakkelovne* in the corner of the room emitted a weak heat. The place smelt of months of accumulated dust and of some unnamed sadness. The conversation continued slowly. She decided not to mention the falling man. The train journey

has passed without incident, the walk from the station too. Yes, an umbrella came in useful. A pause. Ellen remembered her line and delivered it carefully. 'I've brought a new book for you,' she said. Then she stooped to open her case and pulled out the book, a well-thumbed romance that Inge had chosen from her store of second hand books. She held it out. The woman showed no reaction, then glanced at the underwear in the case. Ellen blushed.

'Something to cheer the dark nights,' Aunt Sylvie said. Was she referring to the book or making a joke? Aunt Sylvie's expression was hard to decipher. She took the book with a bony hand threaded with veins. The connection was made. The woman eyed Ellen thoughtfully. 'Have we met before?' she said.

'I don't think so,' said Ellen. She didn't recognise her. No doubt she'd once been a striking woman, but now her cheeks, where her dreams had perhaps once lived, had become hollow and sunken.

'A long time ago. Before all this.' The woman waved a hand towards the corner of the room and her voice trailed away, as if it were gathering there. 'Perhaps it's best not to think about it.' She lifted her chin and drew in a short breath through parted lips. This was an effort for her. Ellen wondered about her real name and her story. The woman spoke quickly, in the manner of someone repeating familiar words. 'I've put a cold plate in your room. Some bread and cheese. No butter, sorry. The less we talk, the better. Tomorrow morning you must go to the seed store on Gamlevej. Ask for Sylvie's order, but speak only to the owner. He's known as the Elk. You can't miss him. A Greenlander, a giant of a man, with black hair. He has the books. If he thinks he's being watched, or is compromised, he'll chew on a matchstick. In which case, leave immediately and go home. Whatever happens, don't come back here.'

That night, long past midnight, Ellen listened to the rain drumming on the windows with Sylvie's words still in her head. The mattress pressed uncomfortably into her back. When would this incessant water stop? She lay still, moored under the heavy blankets. Who else had slept in this room? A doubt shaped in her mind. All this subterfuge for what? A few books. It seemed such a trivial task. Then she remembered the serious faces of Inge and Ravn and wondered if she was being tested in some way.

In the unfamiliar room, she realised that her return to the city had been a disappointment. She didn't like the feeling of confinement. Copenhagen under occupation felt hemmed in and she found that she hadn't the enthusiasm to climb Vor Frelzers Kirke after all. The city of her childhood had been a place of space and light. She knew the cobbled streets of the old town, she knew Pistolstræde with its half-timbered houses and Børsen with its long,

narrow tower woven with four dragon tails. She knew Tivoli with its painted minarets, lakes and pagodas, its evening dances, folk singing and musical performances at the Promenade Pavilion, all magically lit with white lights. But now the once-bright city lay defeated. Dank water flowed along its canals, grey battle ships choked the harbour. It seemed to her that Copenhagen was moribund. She missed Jutland and its wide skies. She missed Søren. And she missed Per.

In the morning, Ellen dressed in the semi-darkness and came to sit at the kitchen table. She sipped the weak tea that Aunt Sylvie had made for her. In the intimate silence between them the only sound was that of her host inhaling on a cigarette from a meerschaum holder.

‘Good luck, Bénédicte,’ Aunt Sylvie said eventually, ‘and be careful.’ She hugged Ellen tightly, before kissing her on both cheeks. Ellen felt the warmth of the woman’s narrow body and caught the faint smell of unwashed skin under a thick lavender perfume.

‘Things are getting more dangerous,’ Aunt Sylvie said, her voice almost a whisper in Ellen’s ear. ‘And not just here. In Jutland, too. Remember, someone is always watching.’

‘What do you mean?’ said Ellen. Aunt Sylvie seemed to hesitate, her eyes flickering up towards the ceiling. She straightened her body. ‘I hear the rumours. Informers scuttle about everywhere. In Aarhus, Vejle, Horsens too. Just be on your guard.’

Ellen collected the suitcase from her room. As she passed the door to the sitting room, she glimpsed Aunt Sylvie lying on a chaise longue, looking up at the ceiling, smoke trailing from the cigarette she held in one hand. Ellen felt a sting of pity for her in her half-submerged existence, taking strangers into her apartment and risking arrest each time. Ellen left the apartment, closing the door quietly behind her.

On the way to the seed store, Ellen walked to Laksegade to see her childhood home. She followed Christianshavn Kanal and turned the corner to find the small street of red brick buildings. The house stood half way along, the morning sun illuminating the façade. She stood outside and looked up at the tall windows on the third floor, the steeply pointed roof above. The memories spilled over her. Her father at his desk writing with an ink pen. Scratch, scratch, scratch, then minutes of silence. She’d sit on a cushion on the floor, her back against the bookcase. *Tell me about the fossils, Far? Later. I need to work.* And after a while he’d show her his samples, a collection of glossy ammonites, the flat grey shard of a leaf fossil, a polished quartz geode. *In these small things, little squirrel, you’ll find all the mysteries of life.*

Ellen pressed the caretaker’s bell. Hr. Møller. The name by their old apartment still read ‘Pedersen’, written in her father’s hand. How strange that the new tenants hadn’t

changed it. The bell rang hollow far inside the building. She waited. No one in or not answering? She composed a rushed note. Could Hr. Møller write and confirm that her father's belongings remained in the attic? She planned to reclaim them soon. She wrote the address of the bookshop at the bottom and slipped the piece of paper under the door.

From Laksegade it took twenty minutes to reach the seed store. She had no problems in identifying the Elk. The giant Greenlander stood behind a large oak counter, solid as an anvil, his broad face framed by a mass of black hair and deep set eyes, the colour of wet coal. Ellen dropped her case. 'I've come for Sylvie's order,' she said as lightly as she could. The man's eyes widened in surprise.

'You're a lot younger than I expected.' He grinned at her. 'Come with me.' Ellen followed him into a storeroom. Wooden casks and sacks filled with seeds filled the floor space. The Elk closed the door and picked his way to the back of the room. 'Any trouble?' he said as he began to prise open the lid of a barrel with a metal bar. It popped off revealing a circle of yellow sawdust.

'None,' said Ellen.

'The woman who usually comes, is she well?'

'She's well.'

'As valiant as they come, that one. I knew her husband too, of course. A sorry story.'

'Inge ...,' Ellen paused, realising her mistake. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to say her name. A terrible accident.'

'Is that what she told you?' he said and shook his head. Ellen waited for him to go on, but all he did was tell her to open her case. The Elk plunged his vast hands into the sawdust. Within a few minutes, he'd retrieved all the books. Twenty volumes, bound with thin hardboard covers. Ellen shook off the wood dust and flicked through a volume. The text had been printed onto thin duplicating paper.

'This edition's been translated by students. We just can't get enough copies,' the Elk said. Ellen opened a copy and read.

The days and the weeks dragged on, and the months dragged on... The people of the conquered country settled in a slow, silent, waiting revenge.

'Is it about us?' she said.

'An imagined country, Steinbeck says.' The Elk gave out a dry laugh and they finished packing the books into the case in silence.

‘I think a little ritual is appropriate for these troubled times, don’t you?’ he said at last. He went to a cupboard and took out a bottle and two small glasses. ‘A toast to Denmark.’ Ellen took a glass. The Elk pressed his glass to hers. ‘And to Erik,’ he added. Ellen swallowed the schnapps in one gulp and felt the rush of heat expanding in her mouth and throat. ‘Was he killed?’ she said, emboldened by the effect of the schnapps. ‘By the Germans?’

‘Let’s just say that nobody dies of being stung by jelly fish.’ He filled their glasses again and added in a whisper, ‘She never liked a drama that one.’

By the time Ellen reached the platform to catch the five o’clock train, she was sweating under her thick coat. The case banged painfully against her calves and the sockets of her arms ached. On the train, a man had helped her to lift her case onto the rack. *What you got in here, lady? A dead body?* Ellen smiled back at him. *Two, at least.* Keep it light, she told herself. A cursory ticket examination. No searches. She fell back into her seat. Exhaustion and relief washed over her. Nearly home.

As she left the train at Horsens station, a familiar face, glossy and bulbous, loomed into view. The eyes were luminous, one of them almost covered by a heavy sweeping fringe. Ejnar Mønsted, the jeweller. Had he travelled on the same train? For a moment her eyes locked onto his, but his gaze quickly slid away.

When she awoke the next morning, she struggled out of bed, rubbing her shoulders which ached painfully and inspected the bruises on the sides of her legs. She splashed cold water over her face and got dressed. Her sleep had been haunted by the falling man, by Aunt Sylvie and by Mønsted’s perspiring face. She felt drained. Downstairs she opened the shop and began to wind up the shutters, the thick cables creaking with each turn of the handle. The sky was a clear blue, almost cloudless. Across the street the jeweller’s blinds remained down.

Inside she sat on her stool and dropped her head into her hands. She’d learnt to cope with the shortages, the queuing for butter and bread. But the casual violence of the falling man’s death clawed at her and had unearthed some hard thing inside her, some kind of defiance. Ellen started at the sound of a soft click.

‘What are you doing sitting here like a ghost?’ said Inge.

‘I’m alright,’ Ellen said. Inge approached her and looked in to Ellen’s face with concern. ‘Have I put too much on you?’ she said.

‘It’s not that,’ Ellen said and looked at her feet. She needed to tell someone. ‘I saw something from the train. A man being shot on the Lillebælt bridge. His body fell into the sea.’ Inge tutted and pulled her cardigan tighter across her ribs. ‘It’s started then. New orders were issued last week. A reprisal if any German soldier is killed.’ She sighed softly. ‘Did you manage to get the books?’

‘I’ve hidden them under the stairs. ‘S’ for Steinbeck,’ said Ellen. Inge grasped her by the shoulders, the force of her grip sent her back on her heels. ‘So, my girl, we carry on. This is what we do. We get the books, we hide the books, we give them to whoever wants them. It’s something at least.’

October 1943

Curfews, demonstrations, arrests throughout September and into October. Late night arrivals at the Gestapo building on Rosenkrantzvej. A dressmaker, a mason, a jeweller. Some arrived on foot, others were bundled from cars. Some disappeared upstairs, others downstairs.

Resistance, saboteur, informer.

In the afternoons Ellen continued to teach Søren and the twins. They took turns to read out loud. Anderson's tales. The Flying Trunk, the Tinder Box, the Nightingale. While the girls read, Søren made charcoal sketches - cormorants, gulls, terns – that spiralled across the page. Sometimes, after the bookshop had closed, Ellen cycled with him out of town to Swan Point. Ellen swam while the boy sketched again, a myriad of liquid lines, soft smudges, sharp cuts. One sketchbook filled and then another. When there were no more sketchbooks to be had in the whole of Horsens, he began to make them out of lining paper, off-cuts of printed wallpaper from the Larsen print works. He punched holes at one side and bound them with string. An artist. Could he make a living that way one day? She made enquiries at the art school in Aarhus, borrowed a selection of his drawings and sent them to the school. Yes, perhaps a place could be found for him. When? We cannot say. No scholarships at the current time. The war, you see.

Early in October Søren disappeared. Several days passed and he didn't come to the bookshop. No one had seen him. Not at school, not at the print works. Ellen grew concerned. Where was he? The twins asked for him every day. They made up stories. He'd flown away on a magic carpet, danced his way across the Kattegat in magic boots, sailed to Persia to paint the portrait of a great Sultana. Ellen worried. He'd left his sketchbook behind. He always carried it in his satchel, always handled it as if it were the most precious thing he owned. It seemed impossible that he'd go anywhere without it. Something must be wrong. On the fourth day Ellen opened his sketchbook looking for clues. Inside she found hundreds of his drawings of seabirds, whole birds or parts of them. Gull feathers, the bones of a guillemot's wing, the half cusp of a broken curlew's egg. A whole section had been devoted to arctic terns. He had a gift for catching their transient forms in flight. On land they tipped about gingerly as if walking on broken glass, but in the air they were supremely agile, their tail and wing feathers fanning in and out as they responded to the lift and stream of the wind. During the summer the birds flickered about the sky in loose threads, delicate and light, as if they were made of paper. Origami birds, Søren called them. The boy's sketches had a freshness

about them as if he'd just lifted his pen from the page. Between the sketches, his writing practice was set out in methodical lines. *The tail of the sea swallow is longer than its body.* She turned a page and felt the breath leave her body. Before her, a sketch of her own face, serious eyes, upturned at the outer edges. The long narrow nose, a partly open mouth and the delicate shadow of her birthmark on her neck. And next to her face, that of the boy, tilted towards her with an impish sideways glance, high cheekbones and pointed chin. The sketches were in pencil, but he'd painted the eyes with water colour. Hers pale blue, and his grey-green, the left darker than the right. The colour wash gave the sketches a luminous intensity. She closed the sketch book and put it back where she had found it. Sea Urchin, you've something there, some rare talent to be nurtured.

It was the end of the week before she decided to seek out Søren's father. Perhaps the boy was holed up at home? Søren hated being there, but Juhl might know where his son was. She rehearsed her words, her concern about some of the boys at school. She'd seen them on the street taunting him. Was he aware of his son's gift? Did he know about the art school in Aarhus? She wanted to help. He would probably accuse of her of being a busy-body, but concern for the boy's well-being made her leave the bookshop. What harm could it do? And hope perhaps that the father might feel relief, that someone had come to him with an offer of support. A widower trying to bring up a child on his own. It can't have been easy for him, she knew that. She thought of her own father, how he had struggled after the death of her mother. He'd tried so hard, but at times his own grief overwhelmed him to such an extent that he seemed to be barely present. In their apartment he became a restless ghost, moving from room to room with a book in hand or a sheet of paper. In the evenings, he sat at his desk and made fire starters from old newspapers, pleating the pages into long strips, then folding the strips at right angles in the centre, across and across to make the tight blocks. He did this each day, the pile of blocks growing larger and larger. But he never lit the fire. It fell to Ellen to do that.

Another memory flashed in. On the morning that she woke to discover her first bleed, she ran to his room thinking that she was dying. Her father, turning white in an instant, rushed to find their neighbour, Fru Jorgensen, who sat with her, patted her hand and gently revealed the mysteries of womanhood. Later, after a muttered conversation in the hallway, her father had come to her and apologised, his cheeks reddened, before vanishing into his study where once again she heard the soft sounds of the folding of paper.

Ellen headed towards the harbour at a brisk pace. The morning sky hung low and grey, heavy with the promise of rain. Juhl worked at the saw mill that lay a kilometre or two out of town. She cycled through the iron gates, beyond the stacks of logs ready for cutting. A high-

pitched whirr of the saws came from the sheds. The air filled with sap, wood dust and machine oil. She worked away at what she would say in her head. She'd explain that she understood how hard it must be for him and for Søren too. She would tread gently.

An old dog, greying around the muzzle, trotted over to greet her, pressing his nose against her knees.

'Hello, old boy,' she said, rubbing his head. Behind the dog, a tall man emerged from a building and came towards her in battered knee-length boots. 'Can I help?' he said. His eyes were red-rimmed and swollen from the wood dust. The long handle of an axe hung from a large, heavily scarred hand.

'I'm looking for Ole Juhl,' Ellen said.

'He's somewhere, probably behind the sheds over there. When you see him, perhaps you could remind him that I don't like paying him to nurse his hangover.' She thanked him and walked away, the dog following her before being whistled back.

'Don't keep him too long,' the man called after her.

Juhl sat on a pile of logs, the stub of a rolled cigarette hanging from his lip. Surely he shouldn't be smoking in a place like this? She recognised the son in the face of the father, the pointed chin and long limbs. Curls of wood shavings, creamy white, and a broom lay at his feet. He squinted up at her through heavy rimmed glasses stretched across his face. Stiff grey hair had been slicked back with grease, his face gaunt. She could smell him, something sour, masculine. 'I'm Ellen Pedersen,' she said extending her hand towards him. He didn't take it. She continued to speak. 'Søren comes to the bookshop. I'm helping him with his reading.' She let her hand fall.

'I know about you,' he said, dropping his cigarette to the ground and grinding it down with his heel. 'What do you want? I'm busy.' He didn't look her in the eyes. He had the look of a defeated man.

'Do you know where he is?'

'I'm not his keeper.'

'He hasn't been at school for more than a week.' Ellen moved closer to Juhl, trying to make eye contact. 'Things have happened there,' she added. Juhl scratched his face as he stood up. He was shorter than she had expected.

'Worried, are you?' he said.

'A little.'

'The boy needs to work. You're wasting your time with the teaching. He's no good with words.'

‘He’s making progress. He has a real gift for drawing.’

‘Drawing birds isn’t going to earn him a living,’ said Juhl, a guttural grunt coming from his belly. They stood in silence for a moment.

‘I noticed bruises on his face,’ Ellen said. Juhl looked at her with dull eyes.

‘Schoolboy battles. He’s learning to be a man,’ he said as he picked up his broom and began to drag it idly along the ground.

‘I thought perhaps someone should talk to the headmaster. I could come with you if you’d like,’ said Ellen.

‘Miss Pedersen, thank you for your concern. The boy’s difficult. Always has been since his mother left.’ The words hung between them. ‘He gets angry sometimes,’ Juhl added. Was there a hint of despair beneath the man’s belligerence?

‘I’d like to help,’ she said.

‘Leave him alone. Leave us alone.’ Juhl threw out a hand and grabbed her by the arm. ‘I mean it.’ Ellen froze to the spot and she felt him tighten his grip. Her skin burned.

‘I won’t send him away if he comes,’ she said, holding his gaze before he released her arm and she could turn away, her heart clattering in her chest.

Back at Nilsson’s, Ellen asked Inge about Søren’s mother.

‘Marguerite? She was a painter, mainly of seascapes. She was always down at Swan Point wrapped in rabbit furs with her box of paints. One day she just disappeared,’ said Inge.

‘What happened to her?’

‘We looked for her. Half the town came out. It was bitterly cold that winter. Parts of the fjord had frozen over and the sea underneath had crushed the ice into vast stacks all along the coast. They searched for days among those stacks. It was dangerous work. People were extraordinarily brave. Rumours circulated that the marriage was unhappy and she was peculiar, you know. Her mind wasn’t right. She’d disappeared before and been found with her easel standing waist deep in the fjord. Eventually they stopped the search. There are many reasons that a woman can disappear.’

‘But to leave a child like that?’

‘Perhaps she slipped in the sea. The current can be strong down there. Perhaps she just wasn’t a good mother. I don’t know.’

A rag-edged memory of her own mother brushed through Ellen. The lilt of her voice singing *I Skovens Dybe Stille Ro*, the flutter of a hand around the neck of the cello. And later

the drumming of sodden earth as it fell on her white coffin. This was how her mother came back to her, in fragments, painful as a shard of glass piercing flesh. She could see her mother on her knees by the open window pinning up a hem of a dress on the tailor's dummy. She could see her in the kitchen, her cheeks glowing pink in a cloud of steam as she pressed the wool fabric of a skirt she was altering, or in the evening, her long fingers flicking through the pile of sheet music that she kept on top of the bookcase. Which one today? Bach, Dvorak, Saint-Saëns? She'd say this in a singing voice. Cinnamon, cotton thread, marguerites, the left-behind remnants of her mother resurfacing time after time.

'I've been thinking,' Inge said to Ellen later that evening as they sipped potato soup upstairs in the apartment. 'Our summerhouse lies on the coast out near Swan Point. Not far from here, a cycle ride. Erik and I used to go there every Sunday. It's been in Erik's family for years. We used to swim, plant vegetables, walk along the beach. Such happy times. I never go there now. Ever since he died, I can't bear to be near the sea.' Inge paused and looked directly into Ellen's eyes. 'The place has been standing empty for months. I'd like you to have it. It would give me such pleasure. I've no one else to give it to.'

March 1947

When did the shootings start?

In October 1943. They killed them in the woods, on the streets. Sometimes in their own homes.

Who killed them?

They called them the Schalburg Corps.

How many people did they kill in Horsens?

I used to write down their names in a journal.

Yes, but how many?

I didn't count them.

Was Søren one of them?

Yes

And Per?

(Silence)

What about Per?

October 1943

‘Isn’t it too dangerous?’ Ellen stood behind Inge in the doorway of the bookshop.

‘It’s a private gathering,’ said Inge.

‘Perhaps we shouldn’t be taking such risks, not now.’

‘If they come, we’re just a group of friends having a sing-song. Only public meetings have been banned.’

The meeting was to take place in the paintworks at six. They left the shop at dusk, the sky already darkening to grey. Ellen felt agitated. Søren was still missing. No one had seen him. She sank her left hand into the pocket of her jacket and felt the smooth contour of a large pebble she’d picked from the beach a few days earlier; its secret weight felt like a comfort. The tense atmosphere in the town had increased since the Government’s resignation. Even though it was long before the curfew, the streets were quiet. The wind of the day had died away. Smoke from a peat fire that burnt somewhere nearby hung between the buildings, the putrid smell of rot filled Ellen’s nostrils. Across the street Mønsted the jeweller was washing his windows for the second time that day. Ellen remembered his dropped gaze at the station. He turned and raised a hand in greeting.

‘I don’t like him,’ said Ellen, as she stepped onto the cobbles with Inge.

‘We think he’s an informer,’ said Inge, pocketing the key.

‘You didn’t tell me.’

‘We have no proof,’ said Inge. ‘Perhaps you can help us to get some?’ She didn’t turn to look at Ellen. It all made sense, the twin’s new dresses, the coloured ribbons, Fru Mønsted’s ladder-free stockings.

‘The girls. You could find a way,’ said Inge.

‘Involve them?’ The idea caused an involuntary tightening in her throat, a tremor of fear running through her like water.

‘Or perhaps you should stop reading with them.’

‘It’s not their fault,’ said Ellen. Inge swung around, a clenched fist catching Ellen in the ribs. A feather punch. Hardly a punch at all.

‘There’re always difficult choices to be made.’ The words whistled out of Inge’s mouth. Ellen, startled by Inge’s anger, fell silent and quickened her pace. She thought of the girls, their smiling faces, their excitement for the stories, their unguarded sweetness. Søren liked them being there too. They gave him confidence. Without them, he wouldn’t have made

so much progress. Perhaps she could find something out about Mønsted from the girls? It would only take a few questions. Did he go out? Did he have visitors?

Ellen became aware of Inge's unyielding body next to hers and the light clip of her heels. A thought entered her head that Inge thought she wasn't up to it. Inge was so assured about her role, a worker ant in her formicary. But what about Ellen's own part in all of it? She felt uncertain as to what it might be. Was Inge's suggestion that she should move out to the summerhouse part of another plan? How would she know what to do for the best? Be a part of the resistance, yes, but Inge had now asked the question: how far would she be prepared to go?

On the way down the hill, a knot of uniformed Germans came into sight. They were being shouted at by an officer, a square block of a man with a protruding stomach and a brown paper bag in one hand. Ellen thought he looked as if he relished his power over the men. On the other side of the street a door slammed shut. As she approached, she saw that the soldiers were barely men at all, but young boys, probably dragged down from family farms to serve the Fatherland. They stood to attention, but looked out of place in their newly issued uniforms, their heavy belts pulled tight around their slim waists. Did they long for their old lives, long for their mothers? Did they miss the open space of the uplands, the clear air and the soft breath of their oxen? If she thought about it too much it became difficult to hate them. As Ellen and Inge came closer, the officer swivelled round, lifted his hat and greeted them with an ostentatious stiffening of his body. The women moved in unison, turning their faces away, acting out the familiar charade. As they passed Ellen flicked her eyes towards the officer and caught sight of his dropped shoulders and a brown paper bag swinging from his hand.

Minutes later they arrived outside the paint factory and slipped in through the archway and into an airy building where the bulk of vast mixing machines filled most of the space. A set of shelves at one end contained glass jars with labels: Verdigris, lead-tin-yellow, Prussian Blue. In one corner lay a pile of neatly stacked sacks. Inge stopped at the entrance, removed one glove then picked off the other, and faced Ellen, eye-to-eye. 'I know it's not easy, but make your choice soon and commit to it wholeheartedly.' She pressed a hand to Ellen's arm, turned and walked away.

Ravn stood in a corner. He was dressed in a grey suit with a black waistcoat. He looked tired; purplish crescents spread under his eyes. His hair was combed back with ointment which shone under the light of a bare bulb. He paced along the length of the wall,

deep in his own thoughts, seemingly oblivious to those around him. A bluish, melancholic light fell from the skylights. Ellen recognised Ravn's two young apprentices as they hovered nervously by the door. Per was talking to Ole Rasmussen, a local mason. There were several others whom she didn't know. A cheerful looking woman with grey eyes, whom Ellen later discovered to be one of Henning's sisters, poured imitation coffee into tin mugs. Ellen took a sip. The bitter liquid caught in her throat and she abandoned the cup on the table. The door closed softly and Ravn started to speak, his steady voice reverberating up through the rafters. 'The Gestapo have been recruiting informers and seem to have found fertile ground in Horsens. They have a lot of money to shell out. We need to be vigilant,' he said, 'But the good news is that our group is also growing. I'd like to welcome one new member today.' Ellen felt herself redden as everyone turned to look at her.

'She will be known as Bénédicté,' Ravn continued. 'As some of you may know, she works at the Nilsson bookshop. In an emergency, messages for me can be left there.' This surprising news made the flush on Ellen's neck deepen. Inge tapped her gently on the arm as if sensing her discomfort. Ellen shied from her, still stinging from their words earlier. Ravn continued with news from the underground operation in Aarhus and of the plans for Horsens. The time had come for an escalation. They were to target anyone helping the Germans. Inconvenience. Sabotage. Explosions. More safe houses were needed for weapons and for SOE operatives arriving from England. More distributors for the underground newspapers. Tasks were allocated. Ellen would join Per Larsen in the copying of the underground newspaper and help with the distribution. Inge would continue to act as a conduit for messages at the bookshop. Several people had been arrested during the last week, including Arne Jacobsen, a well-known local poet. They were being held for questioning in the cells of the police station in the old town. No one knew what they were being held for, apart from the poet who had apparently caused offence by naming his pig Hitler and publishing a poem on the subject. The room echoed with laughter as Ravn read out the poem and announced that all pigs in Horsens would now be called Hitler as a mark of respect for the poet. After that the singing started, old folk songs that everyone knew. Ravn's wife Annalise appeared with a tray of small glasses filled with schnapps and everyone toasted a free Denmark. The temperature in the room rose. Ellen watched the faces. These days everyone laughed more intensely, sang more intensely. And increasingly, Ellen imagined, they were beginning to hate more intensely too.

A shout for quiet. Silence dropped over the room like a sudden fall of snow. Someone was outside. Soldiers? Ellen held her breath. Seconds passed. Eventually she drew in a long

breath through her nose. It seemed impossibly loud. A voice in the courtyard below called for Per. Per gestured to the room to stay quiet and to move away from the door. The group moved as if one towards the edge of the room. Per left and quickly closed it behind him, the metal studs on his boots clanging against the metal steps as he descended. An exchange of voices. Laughter. Ellen recognised the other voice, high-pitched, almost fragile. Leutnant Heinrich Nagel. Ten minutes later Per returned. There was, he said, nothing to worry about. Just the officer billeted with Henning, wondering what all the noise was about, reminding him about the new rules about gatherings. A friendly warning that was all. The group shifted restlessly. Perhaps everyone should leave. One at a time.

Per came back and stood beside Ellen.

‘Will he tell?’ she asked.

‘He won’t tell.’

‘You seem very sure,’ she said. Per’s certainty concerned her.

‘He doesn’t want to get me into trouble. Our evenings in the laboratory are the only things keeping him sane.’

One by one everyone left, including Inge who said her head ached and needed to get to her bed.

‘Stay,’ Per said as Ellen started to make for the door. He handed her another glass of schnapps. ‘For a toast to Bénédicte, the blessed one,’ he smiled and tilted his glass towards hers. ‘Do you like your name?’

‘I’ll get used to it,’ she said and took a sip. The warmth of the schnapps surged through her. ‘Do you have a name too?’

‘Odin, the god with the power to change destinies,’ said Per smiling, ‘Ravn’s idea.’

‘I hope you live up to it.’

‘I’ll do my best.’ He came close to her so that they were standing almost toe to toe. ‘You’re official now. Let’s drink to that.’ The same smell of linseed oil and wood smoke on his clothes, his skin. Desire flooded through her.

‘Inge tells me you’re teaching the Juhl boy,’ Per said.

‘His name is Søren.’

‘Yes, of course.’ Per rubbed his hairline to the roots, embarrassed. She felt that she was entering into battle. Why didn’t she make it easy for him?

‘Quite a handful. He’s been coming to sweep up at the paintworks, that is when he bothers to turn up,’ he said, smiling again. She felt herself submit to an energy beyond her control. ‘Have you seen him?’ she said. ‘He’s missing.’

‘He’ll be out and about upsetting the Germans somewhere.’

‘I think something bad happened when he was younger.’

‘None of the harbour boys has an easy life. Goes with the territory.’

‘More than that.’ Ellen said. She was about to go on, but decided not to mention the ankle scar, or the thought that had been circling in her head that some kind of rope had once been tied there so tightly that it had cut into his skin.

‘Don’t get too attached. Boys like that have a habit of letting people down. After all you’re not his mother.’ Per nudged her with his elbow. Ellen felt the bulb of a tear forming and the rise of a familiar pain. She pressed her lips together hoping the tear wouldn’t spill from her eye. ‘A test of patience, his as well as mine,’ she said, gathering herself.

‘He’s not used to so much attention,’ said Per. ‘But I meant what I said, be careful about getting close. The father’s a bad one. Involved in all sorts of dubious business.’

‘Black market?’

‘That’s the least of it. He’s probably an informer of some kind,’ Per said.

‘A *stikker*?’

‘A test for the boy,’ Per said simply.

‘I’m going to take Søren up to *Søvindhuset*,’ she said. ‘He loves seabirds, he draws them beautifully. Inge won’t go there anymore. She wants me to take it on.’

‘She told me,’ he said. ‘I’ll show you where it is if you like.’ Not for the first time Ellen wondered whether Inge had a plan for her all along.

*

In the weeks since the Protectorate collapsed, German vehicles had flooded into the town. They arrived day and night, filled with officers, soldiers, administrators. There were new insignias, new uniforms. Workers went on strike, first at the machinery factory, then at the saw mill and the abattoir. One Friday morning twenty-eight people were arrested. They disappeared into the prison cells and no one heard a word. Sunday arrived and there seemed to be a lull in activity. No strikes or arrests, as if the last few days had exhausted everyone and they all needed to recover. And no changes were made to the books displayed in the window of Nilsson's bookshop.

Ellen prepared to meet Per for her visit to *Søvindhuset*. She put on a yellow dress and a green cardigan and slipped the key Inge had given her into the pocket. She'd arranged to meet him at eleven o'clock outside Saint Jacob's church. As she approached, the clock began to strike. The church loomed over her, its sheer red brick walls, its black spire, a symbol of Lutheran solidity, piercing the sky.

She saw his back first, the set of his shoulders and the curl of dark hair at the nape of his neck. He sat on a bench, in a blue shirt and light woollen jacket reading a book. The proximity of his body once again triggered something inside her. Her father had once said that you were only ever given a few people to love, perhaps only one. When that love came you had to stick yourself to it like a limpet. You had to hang on and then be forever powerless to break free.

'A good book?' Ellen said, not daring to come too close for fear he would sense the emotion surging inside her.

'I like reading outside. Under the clouds,' Per said. He waved the book upwards. She glimpsed the pale skin under his wrist.

'Stefan Zweig,' he said, pressing the book covered in an old sheet of newspaper between his palms.

'It's illegal,' said Ellen. She remained rooted to the spot.

'Ah, so I'm told, but honestly I can't see how anyone could object to this.' He spoke gently, a half-withheld smile on his face as he tucked the book into his pocket.

'I thought you were only interested in science books,' said Ellen.

'We all need a change sometimes.' He looked directly at her for the first time. She took in his slow smile.

The bells chimed as they walked side by side in the sunshine towards the sea. The harbour lay quiet. A single fisherman sat on a wooden box repairing his nets, a pipe hanging loosely from the side of his mouth. The oily water, green-thick and iridescent, slapped against the harbour walls. She looked out towards the horizon, the sea and sky separated by a narrow strip of grey. Everything in the town existed only in response to the question of the sea. The people, the words they spoke, the songs they sang, even the position of the buildings. Everything

They passed a group of off duty soldiers sitting on a low wall. The men were smoking and laughing together, a few gulls pecking around their feet. 'Hey, beauty,' one of them called out as they passed.

'Frit Danmark!' Ellen flashed back.

'Careful what you say,' the soldier called back a little sadly. Per took Ellen's elbow with his hand and increased his pace. 'Are you always this provocative?' he said.

'Sometimes I hate them.'

'We all feel like that, Ellen. Most of them are just homesick boys. Heinrich told me that before coming here they were all told that they would be welcomed, admired even. It's been a shock for them to find that this is not the case.' They walked on not speaking for a while.

'How is your friend, the Leutnant?' Ellen asked coldly.

'Heinrich's a chemist. We've a lot in common. He comes to the laboratory after work, we drink tea. I show him my experiments. He has many ideas.'

'He's our enemy,' Ellen said, stopping in the middle of the path, her hands clasped in front of her. Anger washed through her, but was quickly gone. And yet it troubled her that he was so free with his friendship.

'Outside the paintworks that is true. Inside, we choose a different story. The war is such a waste of good things. I think he's lonely,' said Per.

'What does Henning say?' said Ellen.

'He has a wife and children to think about. Like you, he worries, but really he shouldn't and neither should you.' Per stopped and turned to Ellen, eyes shining, 'I'm against them being here, against them taking over everything. But what I do with Heinrich in the laboratory is different. We affirm ourselves in there when so little in the way we live now can be said to do that. You're being unfair, accusing me of something I would never do.'

'I'm not accusing you,' Ellen said, suddenly defensive.

They walked on in silence, passing the last of the houses on the coast road. Perhaps she was accusing him, but of what? Some kind of ill-defined betrayal, but she felt unsure of herself. Was he in fact showing some courage, confident in the integrity of his actions? They turned down a rough track that ran parallel to the sea. Wave after wave folded onto the shore. Soon she caught sight of the small wood-framed building, the last of the summerhouses on the strand, set a little apart from the rest. The house itself was raised a half metre from the ground supported by solid wooden posts. A name was inscribed above the door, *Nilssonhus*. Below it in faded black paint, another name that had been partially scratched out: *Søvindhuset*. Inge told her that it had belonged to Erik's father who re-named it and carved the family name into the wood above the door. In so doing he'd ignored the tradition that once a house had been given a name, it should never be changed or it would bring bad luck. Inge said that in winter when the wind whipped up in the fjord, the house would sway and creak and anyone inside would feel as if they were at sea. Immediately Ellen decided that she'd take back the old name, restore the connection with its past and perhaps set a new course for herself as well.

Ellen climbed the steps onto the wooden veranda on the front and put the key in the lock. The windows were flecked with dried salt. When she opened the door she could smell spent wood ash. The place had been empty for months. She drew back the thin curtains, faded to a pale yellow by the sun.

They sat together inside, warm in the shelter of the old wooden walls. Per explained to her in detail about the printing of the underground newspaper. Five hundred copies every two weeks. She was to come to the printworks every Monday night, a night when Leutnant Nagel wouldn't be in the laboratory. There was something else too. Once she moved in to *Søvindhuset*, it'd be a case of hiding things there from time to time. For a single night, perhaps longer.

'What sort of things?' said Ellen.

'A radio transmitter, perhaps a gun or a person.'

'What sort of person?' she asked. Per looked at her steadily. An Englishman would be arriving soon, dropped by parachute from one of the English Mosquito planes that made regular runs across the North Sea. A specialist in communications.

'When?'

'I haven't been told.'

'What will he do?'

'I don't know.'

Ellen lit the stove and heated some water. She found to her surprise that her hands were trembling. Per brought in some sage leaves that he'd found growing at the back of the summerhouse. She poured the hot water over the leaves and watched as the liquid turned a pale green. They sat drinking opposite each other over the table. Per took off his jacket and rolled his sleeves up above the elbow. Ellen took in the bony contours of his shoulders and the lean weight of his arms. It was a long time since she had been alone and close to a man. She wanted to reach out a hand and touch him, but instead she looked down at her cup and fished out the floating leaves with a spoon.

‘Are you afraid?’ said Per.

‘No,’ she lied. ‘But I worry about Inge, about whether I should leave her alone. She misses Erik so much.’

‘They married very young, you know. She was barely seventeen and he was in his mid-thirties. She wants to carry on with the work they started together.’

‘I know.’

‘Erik believed in the power of literature. He really thought that over time German morale would be eroded by the written word.’ Per leant forward to rest his hand over hers, pressing the tips of his fingers onto her wrist. ‘He was an idealist, Ellen. A dreamer, really. We need deeds now.’

Later that night as she lay in her bed above the bookshop at no. 24 Nørregade, she ran her fingertips over the place where Per's hand had been, remembering the softness of his skin on hers. His voice, his face, the warmth of his particular crooked smile.

God morgen. Dette er Danmark. The low voice spiralled from the radio as Ellen came into the kitchen. Inge stood at the sink, absent-mindedly washing a plate. The kitchen in the apartment was tidy, a place of orderliness and calm. In the street below a line of military trucks rumbled by. The announcer began to read out sparse coded messages. *Julia thanks Erik for his generous gift. Mathilda wishes her parents a safe journey.* Ellen listened closely. She thought of the hundreds, thousands, of lives being lived in shadow, lives that billowed with uncertainty and fear. 'I'm going to look for Søren,' Ellen said,

'He'll turn up when he's ready,' Inge said, stacking the plate into the cupboard. 'Boys like that can look after themselves. You worry too much.'

'It's never been this long,' Ellen said. Inge dropped her head and sighed.

'Go and see Ravn. He might know something.'

As Ellen left, she caught a word from the radio announcer. *Strandvaskeren.* The body of a man had been found near Vejle. How old? The voice didn't say.

Ellen walked for an hour through the narrow streets. A light sea wind moaned between the buildings. She passed the Gestapo office opposite where she noticed that a letterbox, newly painted in black gloss, had been fitted by the front door. She knew what it was for: petty acts of revenge, denouncements, betrayals. Anything was possible now. She looked up at the windows on the first floor. The blinds were pulled down. Was there movement? A flicker at the side of one of the blinds? She passed on quickly, anxiety rising in her chest. She knew Søren lived in one of the alleys that ran from the main street down to the harbour. There were several of them, each densely packed with shops and small houses with low archways leading to courtyards behind. She peered into one of the courtyards and saw a group of young children playing jacks with *hønseringe*, the tiny coloured marking rings for birds. *En, to, tre, hurra!* Their voices rose, eager and light. She passed the dairy. A battered sign in chalk advertised slabs of ice for cold boxes. *Beat the power cuts*, it read. At every house she passed, she read the names by the doorbells: Jorgensen, Lund, Arsen. Finally, Juhl. She peered through a broken pane of glass into a downstairs room. Inside a table and a single chair, the remains of a half-eaten meal. No sign of the boy. No sign of anyone. Where was he? She walked down to the harbour and sat on one of the cast iron mooring bollards and listened to the clank and creak of metal and wood. The fishing boats were all in, huddled together at one

end of the harbour. A tangled spiral of barbed wire had been laid out against the harbour wall. Was that to keep people out or in? A group of men mended baskets on the quayside. She approached a bearded fisherman with large scarred hands. Had he seen a fair headed boy, tall and slim, perhaps wearing a green jumper?

‘People disappear all the time these days, don’t they Miss?’ the man said darkly. His companions shrugged. No luck. She took the long way to Ravn’s butchery, stopping to buy some butter with the last of her ration coupons and a newspaper.

Ravn stood behind the counter in his white apron, knife in hand. His apprentices hovered, attentive, at his side.

‘I’m looking for Søren,’ said Ellen. Ravn carefully lowered the knife. From somewhere up above came the sullen drone of an aeroplane.

‘Come with me,’ Ravn said, leaving the young apprentices to mind the shop. He led Ellen through the butchery and out into the courtyard behind. She followed him, aware of the masculine bulk of him.

‘It’s better to talk out here,’ he said.

‘Where is he?’

‘He’s been doing some work in Aarhus,’ said Ravn.

Aarhus was twenty kilometres away. What on earth was he doing there? ‘What kind of work?’ she said, a choking sensation rising in her chest.

‘Running a few errands.’ Ravn spoke very quietly. Ellen waited for him to say more, but he remained silent. Surely Ravn hadn’t involved the boy in the Resistance? But what else could it be? The black market?

‘When will he be back?’ she asked.

‘In a few days. There’s nothing to worry about, Ellen.’ Ravn’s tone was cool, polite. Ellen could tell he wanted to finish the conversation.

Back at the bookshop, Ellen buttered slices of rye bread and ate them in the back room. She went over Ravn’s words. The boy would be back in a few days. That was something. The pain that she felt at his absence struck her. She’d grown so fond of him, difficult as he was, so different from the docile and affectionate twins.

She could hear Inge serving customers in the shop. An elderly couple had travelled in by horse and cart from Bjerre to pick up some art books. They took their time to leave, complaining to Inge about the shortages. Inge sent them away with a coupon for butter.

Afterwards a father and son came in looking for a cookery book with recipes for rabbit. They'd caught a pair in their traps and had no idea how to cook them. Inge wrote out her own recipe for them, saying the only book she had was by a French cook and wouldn't be of any use. It occurred to Ellen that the bookshop had become a place where advice was sought and given. Inge and she had become quite expert in finding answers to questions: how to fix a cistern, treat hens for yellow lice, find out the best type of straw to fill bicycle tyres once the rubber inner tubes became beyond repair.

Ellen flicked through the newspaper. Towards the back she found the article about the *strandvaskeren*. The body of a man had been found washed up on Nørrestrand, to the north of Vejle. Investigations were underway to determine his identity. Anyone with information, should contact the police. She cut out the article and stuck it into her journal and wrote by it: *is this the man who fell from the bridge at Lillebaelt?*

She wasn't quite sure why she'd adopted this new habit of cutting out articles. It started simply as something to do in the evenings, but quickly developed into a larger project that absorbed all her attention. She selected news stories about local people. An elderly woman had been arrested for selling butter on the black market, a stockman thrown into Horsens prison for firing a hunting rifle from his farmhouse window, a group of young men shot when they sabotaged a carpet factory. She wrote lists of questions. *Who? What? How? Why?* The questions shaped a kind of resistance. She knew that if the apartment was searched again, which it could be at any time, the journal might be found, so she hid it every night, slipping it under the carpet on the landing outside her room.

In the days that followed there was still no sign of Søren. Ellen waited, always anxious. Was this how a parent would feel? Inge remained unperturbed and was now more consumed than ever with her mission to save as many books as possible. Ravn had given her a copy of *Die Bucherei*, the official Nazi journal for libraries in Germany and its occupied lands.

'This,' Inge told her one morning, brandishing the booklet in Ellen's face, 'is what our work is about. The Commandant in Horsens is using these guidelines to conduct his own round of what he calls "purification", to obliterate so-called "Asphalt literature". That is,' Inge held up the journal and read: "Any books written for the urban resident, which was seen as propagating liberal decay and detaching him from his environment and from his Volk." What utter rubbish.'

Word had spread that Inge would store illegal books and people began to turn up with them, wrapped in old newsprint or folded cardboard. The shelves under the stairs filled

quickly. They needed more space. Per offered the attics at the paintworks and soon a regular transport of books from the shop to the attics began. Ellen loaded them into a cargo bicycle, covered them with a selection of legal books and took them up to the attic. The floorboards were lifted and the space below filled. Dostoevsky, Proust, Zweig. Ellen felt glad to be doing something for the country and for herself even more.

But over the coming days, a gathering awareness took shape. A presence on the other side of the street, silent and still. A pair of eyes, two pools of darkness, behind the gleaming windows. Ellen tried to settle her mind, but her thoughts coiled tighter. She imagined the jeweller inside, writing with the sharpened spike of a pencil: *date, time, who, what, where. Questions. Speculation.* Later she imagined the soft thud of a note landing in the base of the gloss-black letterbox on the other side of town.

March 1947

Ellen arrived by taxi to collect Inge from the Horsens Home for the Elderly and take her to the beach. She gave the driver instructions to return an hour later. Inge leant on Ellen's arm and carried a stick in her other hand. Despite the stick, Inge moved with the quiet grace that Ellen remembered. They walked slowly down the path towards *Søvindhuset*. Ellen brought out two chairs, a selection of blankets and old cushions. In the shelter of the wind they talked. Ellen described the view, the seals dipping and diving between the waves, the light drift of high clouds.

'I've been afraid of the sea for so long,' Inge said, 'Thank you for bringing me here.'

'Why did you want to come after all this time?' said Ellen.

'I wanted to see if I still felt the same.'

'And do you?'

'Old age has brought other fears. Greater ones.' Inge let out a sigh. 'I never once thought that I might lose my sight.'

'The Elk hinted at something when I was in Copenhagen,' said Ellen. 'He said that Erik's death might not have been an accident.' Ellen saw a flicker pass across of Inge's face.

'Erik swam from here every day. He was a beautiful swimmer. Very powerful, a real athlete. He used to go right out into the fjord and I loved to watch him. When he died, no one wanted to believe that he'd just run into those jelly fish and was so badly stung that he couldn't get back to shore. They didn't want to believe that it was just a terrible accident. Ravn made him into a hero. He wanted to give the others something tangible to fight for. Revenge can be a powerful force. I decided quite early on not to argue with them about it.'

'So it's not true,' said Ellen, 'He wasn't killed by Germans?'

'No.'

'He didn't sail out to collect illegal books from the buoy?'

'Well, that part, at least, is true,' said Inge. The sun came out from behind a cloud. Inge squeezed Ellen's arm. 'Why don't you go in?'

The sea was flat, unusually still. At the tide-line a ripple of waves pulsed gently. Ellen walked steadily into the sea, feeling the foamy surf wash up her body. As soon as the water reached her waist she dived below the surface. When she emerged, she swam in strong, long strokes. She thought about Inge. What calm courage she had. Such resilience. Did Inge really believe that Erik's death had just been an accident? Ellen wasn't convinced, but she somehow

admired the way Inge had chosen the story she wanted to believe. She dipped again and the water closed over her head, an ache spreading across her forehead as the cold took hold. She kicked hard then stopped, letting a sense of release flood her body as her head broke the surface. If only she could find the same courage in her own life. Thirty strokes out towards the horizon. Thirty strokes back. *One, two, three, breathe. One, two, three, breathe.* She came out and dried herself off, her skin prickling. Inge took the towel and rubbed Ellen's hair. 'Do you remember how I did this for you the first winter you came to Horsens?' Inge said. 'You came back from the beach half-frozen and sat by the stove in the storeroom at the bookshop, wrapped in an eiderdown. I dried your hair. Just like this.' For a moment Inge's hands hovered over Ellen's head and Ellen imagined a protective spirit rushing over her. It took her back to a place of pure happiness that she'd known long ago as a very young child. A picnic on a beach with both her parents. A sandcastle pressed with shells, the smooth dip of a moat around it. The sinking sun as the sea flowed in. The castle crumbling, sand in her hands, apple dumpling in her mouth. A towel enveloping her whole body. *There are so few people we are given to love.*

'I remember,' said Ellen, lifting her hand to touch Inge's arm.

As they made their way slowly back up the track towards the waiting taxi, Ellen helped Inge into the car, realising in that moment that she needed a parent even now.

November 1943

On a cool November day Ellen moved into *Søvindhuset*. Søren had been gone a month.

‘Are you sure you don’t mind me leaving you?’ Ellen said, worried how Inge would manage on her own in the evenings.

‘Of course not,’ Inge said sharply. ‘I want you to bring some life back to the place.’

An early winter storm came one night after she’d been there for a week. Ellen woke in the early hours and watched from the window as grey spears of rain pierced the fjord. Rain hammered onto the roof and foaming wash spilled high up the beach. She loved being inside with the sound of wind pushing at the walls, roaring in the chimney. *Søvindhuset* lived up to its name, every wooden board moaning with the sound of the sea.

As soon as it was light she went down to the beach. The sea was calm again and a clear, rain-washed light spread across the horizon. Debris from the storm lay strewn along the beach. Thick branches, blackened by sea water, the twisted skeins of fishermen’s nets, a boat hook, rust-green and covered with barnacles. She stood for a while at the water’s edge. The surface of the sea seemed to be stretched taut by some invisible force. A white sun hovered just above the horizon. She thought of Inge’s words and that it might be the place that would bring her back to life rather than the other way round. She picked up a length of rope and the boat hook and started to walk back.

A figure appeared in front of her, wrapped in a long coat like a pilgrim. The lace of one boot was missing. Søren. She reached out a hand towards him. ‘There you are, sea urchin,’ she said. The boy stopped, keeping his hands sealed in his pockets. ‘Why did you go and see Far? You shouldn’t have,’ he said. He had a scarf pulled up across his nose and cheeks and his voice sounded muffled. Ellen caught sight of a flash of deep red. His left eye was completely closed, a blister of hot blood blown up just below the wet lashes.

‘Did he do that?’ she said, suddenly angry. The boy didn’t answer, but dropped his head and let her lead him back to *Søvindhuset*. Inside, she threw a driftwood log into the stove and the room began to warm. That man had a lot to answer for. She put some milk onto the hot plate, sprinkled the top with cinnamon. A cure for most things, her mother used to say. While the milk was heating, Søren allowed her to unwind the scarf from his head. Over yellowing bruises the new injury, a crimson swollen lump, had almost closed his eye. She dipped a piece of flannel in warm water and dabbed gently at the cut. ‘Not too bad. It’ll heal in no time,’ she spoke quietly, aware of the softening in the boy’s body as she touched his face.

‘He doesn’t mean to.’ Søren’s voice was so small it was barely audible. She poured the milk into a tin cup. ‘Here, take it,’ she said. He looked at her through his one open eye. ‘Sometimes he sees her,’ he said.

‘Your Mor?’ she said, her breath pooling in her chest. The boy examined the floor, then looked directly at her. ‘When Far looks at me he sees her,’ he said.

‘Did she look like you?’

‘I can’t remember her face. Far burnt the photographs. When I try, all I can see is an outline and blond hair, but the inside isn’t filled in.’ Søren sipped his drink. The surf rang in Ellen’s ears. You and me, Søren Vitus Juhl, we’re both like flotsam from the sea.

‘You can stay here,’ she said. Søren came and knelt at her side, dropping his head in her lap. ‘I miss her,’ he said, his voice a whisper. She stroked his hair lightly and they both stayed there for a time, each abandoned to their own thoughts.

Later when he fell asleep on the old couch, she sang to him, *den lille Ole*, and she watched as his eyes quivered under translucent lids. The next morning, long before the boy had woken, Ellen went onto the shore to collect more driftwood for the stove. She found a tangle of birch wood branches that had rattled down from the trees in the storm and were strewn at the edge of the wood. She dragged as much as she could back to the summerhouse on a large canvas sheet and spread it out to dry. Among the branches she found a battered tin mug and a rusty hammer. At the end of the beach, she had spotted a large piece of wood. The beautiful curved trunk of an oak, brindled brown and black, not long in the sea.

When Søren woke, he helped her to drag the oak back with ropes. The trunk was long and arched. If they could fix it on its side, it would make a seat for two people. They began to dig a shallow trench close to the side of the house. As they worked they talked intermittently. Søren about his work as a courier in Aarhus. Had he been in danger? He said that perhaps he was, but only a little. Ravn had given him a code name, Pearl Owl, for his silent night running. Ellen could see his pride in it and took her chance to broach the subject she’d been turning over in her mind. How did he feel about coming to live at *Søvindhuset*? Finish school, perhaps go on to study art.

The boy listened, spade in hand. ‘You and me here?’ he said looking out at the beach. ‘I might.’

*

Ellen entered the courtyard at Larsen's for the night printing. She'd been coming for several weeks. She and Per worked together quietly. She in an increasing tangle of desire; he, she though, absorbed entirely in the work. Usually the whole courtyard was dark but tonight a yellow light flickered up in the laboratory windows. What was Per thinking of? With patrols passing on the street, any one of them might wander through the archway. And what about the Leutnant? Was he sitting in his armchair in the small attic room above Henning's flat? Mightn't he decide to take a stroll outside? Ellen crossed the yard, passing the buildings that housed the cauldrons for the oil. They were suspended in the air, dense bulbs of black against the grey of the walls behind. Beneath them lay two furnaces sunk into the ground. To the side was a bucket filled with twisted pieces of cloth that would be soaked in paraffin in the morning to light the furnaces. She could smell the residue of the day's work: linseed, peat, charcoal. Above her a vast hook and chain hung down from the winch. She skirted around it and climbed the iron staircase that led to the laboratory, trying to keep down the sound of her heavy heeled shoes against the steps. Aware of her own breathing, she waited by the door before knocking and listened to the rhythmic sound coming from inside; a slow whoosh followed by a soft click. She turned the handle and pushed open the door. Per was stooped over the printing press, one hand on the wheel. He wore a clean apron over his paint splattered overalls. He looked up and smiled. 'You found me,' he said.

'It wasn't very difficult,' said Ellen. 'Are you trying to draw attention to yourself?'

'They won't come into the courtyard.' Per turned the wheel. 'Henning's done a great job on this machine.'

'The gates are wide open.' Didn't he care? Since the end of August patrols ran through the night. She looked at the clock, black hands at half past one. Why was he taking such risks?

'It works like a dream,' he said, smoothing his hands over the curve of the wheel. 'The man's a genius.'

'Ten men were arrested yesterday in Copenhagen. How long before it all starts over here?' Ellen said.

'I'll close the gates next time if it makes you feel better,' he said, handing her the newsletter. Four pages in dense type with a heading in capital letters: *Freedom - act now!*

'I've done the first hundred, four hundred to go.'

'I'm going to cover the windows,' Ellen said.

‘It’s not necessary, I told you.’

‘All the same, I’d feel better. It’s not just you at risk.’ The tone of her own voice surprised her.

‘Alright, what the lady of the books wants, the lady of the books shall have.’ He made an elaborate bow as he spoke, then came close to her and took her in his arms. ‘Don’t you trust me?’

‘It’s not a question of trust. Just a sensible precaution,’ she said. His face drew close to hers. She could feel his breath on her skin. He lifted his hand towards her forehead and swept a stray strand of hair back behind her ear. ‘You’re right, of course,’ he said, quietly, and stepped back from her. Ellen felt the hardness slide from her throat, the look in his eyes seemed to tear her open.

She spent the next half an hour pulling down the blinds, taping the edges to the frames. Per continued to print out copies. ‘I’ll just have to take it all off tomorrow unless I want to work in semi-darkness all day. I never bother with the blinds when Heinrich comes,’ said Per as he turned the handle. A sheet curled out at the other end.

Heinrich, always Heinrich, Ellen thought as she caught the sheet and clipped it to one of the drying wires strung across the laboratory. For a time, they worked in silence, their shadows flying dark bands across the walls as if they too were moving parts of the machine.

‘You don’t have to come here and do this. Ravn could assign you something else,’ Per said after a while.

‘I want to,’ she said. ‘I like spending time with you.’ He stared at her as if absorbing this confession. The beat of her heart quickened under his gaze.

‘And I with you,’ he said. She turned from him, blushing, and lifted her arms to add a sheet to the line. He was quick to move behind her, wrapping his arms around her body, his head turned into her neck. She remained still for a moment, her arm still raised before turning into him. She took in his inquisitive gaze. They kissed. Once. Twice. A kind of relief washed through her.

‘We need to finish this,’ she said smiling.

‘Yes, duty first.’

It took a little over two hours to make the rest of the copies. When it was all done, Per lifted the floorboards at the top of the stairs to hide the press, while Ellen stacked the dried sheets into bundles of fifty and put each one into old sacks once used to store salt. Ellen’s hands were covered in fine powder residue. ‘That’s the last of the paper. We’re going to need to find more for the next issue,’ she said.

‘I’ll get some,’ said Per.

‘No one has any anywhere. We’re doing the bookshop accounts on tissue paper.’

‘Heinrich will get some.’

‘Won’t he ask what you want it for, why you need so much?’

‘I’ll think of something.’ He came towards her then and held her. She pressed her head to his chest, felt the rush of his blood under his ribcage. Her body hesitated and a strange sensation washed through her. Even as this was the beginning of something, it seemed strangely it was already slipping away. ‘It’ll be light soon, I’d better get back,’ she said. He dropped his arms from her as she drew herself away from his body, a wave of exhaustion brushing through her as if all her energy was leaching from her.

‘I’m sorry to see you go,’ Per said, as she left. At the bottom of the stairs she turned to see him silhouetted in the doorway, his head and shoulder resting against the frame. For a moment, she thought about turning back but decided against it.

She started walking back to *Søvindhuset*. The patrols had finished for the night. The clouds were just visible, a mass of bruises skimming the rooftops, silhouetted against the lightening sky. It began to rain. Huge, heavy drops clung to the thick wool of her coat. The downpour erupted, curtains of droplets stinging her eyes. She found herself smiling into the night. Was this a beginning? She began to run, allowing an unfamiliar feeling of happiness to tumble through her.

The rain continued through the night and into the following day. The bookshop was filled with people seeking shelter from the weather. The supply of electricity became erratic. Light bulbs flickered, plunging the shop into semi-darkness before flashing back to life. Ellen stood at the counter and observed her customers as they navigated their paths under the intermittent light. She divided them into those who touched and those who looked. The touchers would feel their way around the shelves, flicking through pages or trailing a finger along the spines. The lookers, on the other hand, stood a little way back from the shelves, poised for the moment of decision. Mr Jorgensen, who had come in as soon as the shop opened that morning, was an agitated leafer, with a bad habit of licking his fingers. Two elderly sisters, who came into town with their horse and cart every week from Juelsminde, stood in the literature section. Ellen classed them as petters. They passed the books between them, caressing the covers with their age-speckled hands and whispered conspiratorially to each other.

Later that morning Ellen noticed Ejnar Mønsted, the jeweller, standing towards the back of the shop. His third visit in a fortnight. She'd never taken him for a book-lover. He loitered half way between the history and travel sections a little way back from the stack. His head was tilted, his hands clasped neatly behind his back. He was up to something, she knew that much. She watched as he fished out a handwritten card from between the pages of the book he'd selected. These postcards offered Inge's personal review of the book in question. When Ellen had first started work at Nilsson's, she told Inge that her father had published a geology book, *Jutland: Stories of Sea and Coast*. Inge ordered it immediately and read it on the day it arrived. Ellen had been touched by the attention Inge had paid to her father's work. The postcard read: 'This slim volume reveals the world under our feet. How, for example, does a ripple of water become stone? How does a creature or a delicate frond of fern inscribe itself into rock? Such secrets are unearthed in this strangely tender little book.' Strangely tender. The words had stayed with Ellen. They might have described her father. He'd been a sensitive man, too sensitive perhaps, ill-equipped for the loss that was to come his way. He took an intense, almost painful, care over his work. He wrote slowly, paying scrupulous attention to the selection of each word. Ellen had seen the drafts of his book. Page after page filled with neat writing and crossings out. He made additions in a tiny script that ran vertically up margins or were squeezed above the existing lines. Ever since childhood she associated the

language of geology with her father: fissure, floe, melt water. He would work at a small oak bureau in the study at the back of their apartment. His territory. A place of intense silence.

In the bookshop Mønsted had not moved.

‘Can I help you, Hr. Mønsted?’ said Ellen.

‘No, thank you, Miss Pedersen. I was just doing some research.’ He gestured towards the book in his hand. Ellen felt the blood sink from her head. *Barometers – an illustrated history*. Mønsted eyed her carefully.

‘Well, if I can be of any assistance, please ask.’ She forced a smile, straining with the effort of not returning her gaze to the book.

‘I will indeed.’ His eyes did not shift from hers. Her smile held and she managed a nod of her head. As soon as she could she turned from him and carried herself into the storeroom. She flicked the switch. Nothing. She needed light. She ran to the sink and splashed water onto her face. She closed her eyes and grasped the edge of the table and listened to her breath shaking under her ribs. Words streamed through her mind. *He knew. He knew. He knew.*

March 1947

Søren loved stories.

What sort of stories?

The old stories.

Which was his favourite?

He had many, Jesper.

Tell me one.

He loved the story from the Faroe Islands about the seal-women.

Will you tell it to me now?

Well, in the town of Mikladalur on the island of Kalsoy, seals would leave the sea and come on to the shore at night. They would shed their skins so they could dance as humans along the beach. One day a seal-woman was captured by a human man, a seal-hunter, and he locked her skin in a chest so she couldn't go back to the sea or to her seal-husband and seal-children. She became the man's human wife and had children with him. But one day, he forgot to take the key to the chest with him when he went hunting. She found her seal-skin and returned to the sea. Later she came back to her human husband in a dream and warned him not to go on the seal-hunt or try to kill her seal-husband or seal-children. He ignored her. Her seal-family was killed and her revenge was terrible. Over a period of years all the men of the village fell from the cliffs into the sea and were drowned.

Did you want to take revenge?

What do you mean, Jesper?

Because of the boy.

November 1943

Ellen hadn't seen Per since the night printing session. Ravn had come into the bookshop and told them that Per had taken to sleeping in the laboratory at night. He was struggling to meet the paint order for the Germans. He was exhausted and close to collapse.

It was exactly six weeks after the Government resignation and Ellen was sorting through a box of newly arrived books. Søren was sitting with his sketch book under the counter. Ellen made neat piles: Nordic history, poetry, transport. There was a new translation of the Icelandic sagas and of Camus' *The Plague*, a book about bridge building and one about the building of Versailles. The new collection had arrived that morning on the early train from Copenhagen. As she opened the box, she caught the familiar, dry trace of ink, bookbinder's glue and new paper. She took a deep breath and cradled the box almost as she would a child. The arrival of the new books filled her with pleasure, but also a sense of defiance. It felt like a kind of resistance, a barrier against everything that was happening.

Just before closing time, Ellen grabbed her coat. 'You're in charge Søren, I won't be long!' There was no reply from the cave beneath the counter, but she glimpsed a white hand, which waved briefly and withdrew back into the shadow. Ellen ran along the cobbles as fast as she could. She'd almost forgotten her promise to pick up Inge's winter coat from Poulina Lund, the seamstress. The old lining was being replaced with new silk that Inge had bought on the black market on Graven. Deep lilac. The colour seemed an exotic choice, but Inge often surprised her.

On her return, she found Søren dragging the book ladder towards the back of the shop where much of the travel stock was kept. The wooden legs had left two scratches on the polished floorboards.

'Søren!' she said, 'what are you doing?' Inge would be furious. She dropped Inge's coat onto a stool and crouched to run her finger over the marks.

'Just a minute,' he replied. He swung himself up onto the ladder and reached the top in two strides. Ellen grasped the base of the ladder to steady it as it tipped to the side with his weight.

The boy reached for a book on the top shelf, stretching out a leg to balance himself. She waited as he tipped a small volume forward with his index finger and caught the spine in his open hand. The book was no bigger than a postcard, thick with a heavy spine and no dustcover. It had an old-fashioned kind of binding with grey canvas fabric covering the

boards. Why such an inconspicuous book would interest Søren, Ellen had no idea. He jumped down triumphantly and set it down on the counter. The front was entirely blank except for an embossed crest: a small house, an anchor tilted against it and a tree. 'This,' he said, 'is a special book.' The crest looked familiar, then Ellen remembered where she'd seen it. It was painted on the sign hanging above Ravn's butchery.

'Aha!' Søren said, opening the book. A deep square had been cut through the pages and a piece of folded paper pushed neatly into the space. Søren pulled the sheet out, smoothing it open. The page had been torn from a book of blank receipts, the columns and lines ruled out in red. Ellen recognised the handwriting, the same dense script used for the butcher's bill that was delivered to Inge each month. Ravn. At the top a few words, each letter pressed hard into the paper and underlined twice: *So that afterwards it is known*. Søren read out the words slowly. Below there was a table marked out in three columns. He pushed the list towards her. Names were listed down the left-hand side: Ravn, Inge, Per, Henning, the apprentices, the collection of others she'd seen at the meetings and, near the bottom, her own. Every member of the resistance group had been included as far as Ellen could see. Next to theirs name, a codename and to the right a note of any weapons held. Henning had ten M1917 Enfield rifles, Ravn two Sten guns and Inge one Krag-Jørgensen bolt action rifle. A feeling of unease washed through her. 'We should put it back,' she said.

'Ravn came in while you were out.'

'Now.'

'Inge showed him where to put it,' the boy said, not moving. 'They didn't see me, I was under the counter.' He laughed.

'It isn't funny. We shouldn't have seen this.' Ellen felt a flutter in her throat, as if the skin of her neck had been pierced. Søren took a pen and started to write. Ellen moved her hand to try to stop him.

'I should be on the list too,' he said, turning from her and protecting the sheet with the crook of his elbow. 'I've done things.' His lips were pressed together as he wrote in awkward letters: *Søren V. Juhl, Perle Ugle*.

'You're too young. Ravn won't like it.'

'How do you know?' He finished writing, blew softly on the ink and folded the sheet in half. On the back of the paper, another list. A shorter one.

STIKKER:

Ejnar Mønsted

O. J.?

They stared at the page. A question mark? Ellen wanted to tear the book from the boy's hands, as if it would keep the thoughts away. Søren carefully returned the sheet to its place, closing the cover and solemnly rested his hand on top like a seminarian.

'It might not be him,' she said.

'I know.'

'It could be someone else. There must be other people in the town with the same initials.'

'I know.' There was a tremor in the boy's voice. 'I've chosen my side,' Søren said and looked at her with clear unblinking eyes. 'I'll do everything I can to disrupt them. To disrupt him.' Ellen sensed Ravn's influence. Late night words around the table at the back of the butchery, the air thick with tobacco smoke, men's sweat and the odour of animal carcasses. But there was something about the boy's tone unsettled her, as if he'd already accepted a long-imagined catastrophe.

'My name stays on the list and I'll keep reading,' he said, his face brightening, and he held out a hand. 'I'll go to school every day, I promise.' Ellen remained silent, weighing up what she could do. 'You mustn't tell anyone about the list,' she said.

'Our secret,' he said, his gaze steady, his cheeks flushing lightly. Ellen took his hand, felt its heat fill her palm. He smiled, his face opening like a flower.

Søren became a model student. He went back to school, just as he'd promised. His reading improved so much that he could read to the twins – tales of fairies, trolls and islands. The girls would curl up on cushions arranged side by side, huddled around the stove like cats. Søren read to them from the chair. The nightingale sang. The east wind blew. The emperor had new clothes. At the end, Ellen would walk the girls back across the road. How was their mother, their father? Had they had any visitors? They'd skip around her. Why did nothing exciting ever happen to them, they said.

There was a change in Søren's painting. He became obsessed with auks, filling his sketch book with drawings of these muscular birds as they dived for fish. Ellen noticed that when the boy was drawing his whole body became relaxed, even the shape of his face softened, changing from a diamond to an oval. These transformations had been imperceptible at first, but now as the weeks passed Ellen could see how complete a change there had been.

On Sunday Ellen and Søren cycled up to *Søvindhuset*. Per had given Søren an old cargo bicycle from the paintworks. It was heavy to ride, but the boy was overjoyed. He spent several days taking it apart and repairing it with Henning's help.

Ellen took her father's book with her. She thought the boy might enjoy the detail about the natural world. They sat out of the wind, their backs pressed against the wooden side of the summerhouse. Søren read clearly, only stumbling over the longer words. Ellen sat at his shoulder, prompting softly:

Denmark's landscape is the result of millennia of melting ice on the move. In fact, the whole of Jutland lies at a slight tilt, tipping down towards the south-west.

They made a new routine. Søren read a sentence or two, then he chose a word, any word that caught his imagination. He would write it several times and finally he would draw it. In this way, each lesson took on a rhythm of its own. The same word expressed and repeated in overlapping ways. Piece by piece. Layer by layer. A boy building his language around him.

t-i-p

of a pen

of a gull's feather

of the land as it slides into sea

He wrote the word then drew a pen nib, a narrow feather shaded grey at the tips, lastly a long sandy spit of land, the tip disappearing to a vanishing point in the sea.

Ellen prepared a meal. Søren took his sketchbook and sat at the table inside to draw a pair of oystercatchers. 'They should have left for the south by now,' he said. 'They didn't go with the others. Don't they realise winter is coming? They won't survive if they stay here.' Ellen watched the boy's pencil skimming the surface of the paper, the furrow in his brow deepening. From time to time, he sharpened the pencil with his penknife blowing the shavings into his hand. When he'd finished, he dropped the sketchbook to his side and lay his head on the table and looked out to the fjord as if trying to read the future.

'I made you something,' Ellen said, picking a leather thong with a shell attached from the pocket of her apron. He looked at it slyly before taking it from her hand.

'Thank you,' he said.

'For good luck.' She smiled at him.

'I might need it sooner than you think.' He rolled the shell between his fingers and then slid the necklace over his head.

'What do you mean?'

'I've been given a job,' Søren said. Ellen felt a jolt run through her. 'What kind of job?' she said.

'Ravn told me not to tell anyone,' the boy said, turning the shell in his fingers. Why was he telling her, she wondered? He'd decided to trust her, which must be a good thing.

'I've got to hide something on Alrø.'

Ellen took in the information. *A radio transmitter, a gun, perhaps a person.* Alrø was the smaller of the two islands out in the fjord. It piqued her that Ravn had given the task to Søren and not to her. 'You shouldn't be telling me this,' she said after a while.

'That's true,' he said, a full grin splitting his elfin face, 'but you're the only person I know with a boat.'

Ellen waited for Per and Søren to arrive. They'd planned a meal to celebrate Søren's sixteenth birthday. The boy arrived first by bicycle, a silver-skinned cod sliding about in the box strapped to the handlebars. The temperature had dropped by several degrees and Ellen could see his breath in the air.

'Dinner,' he said dropping the fish onto the table as he came inside. The bell at Saint Jakob's church chimed in the far distance. Ellen set to work on the cod, while Søren watched. She turned the fish onto its back and pressed the tip of the knife to the pearly skin at the top of the belly. The knife slipped in. The body opened, crimson blood flashing against the blade and the guts spilling out onto the newspaper. At the base of the body, she released the sack of roe from its bed pressing firmly down on the knife. She moved carefully, laid the glistening roe, the colour of pale coral, into a pan, ready for poaching. Søren hovered close by, watching her.

'What is it, Søren?'

'I remembered something.'

'Yes?'

'Mor doing what you're doing,' he said. The boy closed his eyes. 'I remember her hair, just washed, tied with ribbon at the back. A shawl with a fringe. Camomile.' He smiled at her, turned and skipped out of the house. Ellen remained still, watching him. Something of that distant world had seeped back to him, its precious beads pressing up through the cracks. Ellen rinsed the fish, set it on the enamel tray and put it into the stove. From the vegetable plot at the back of the house she plucked the last potatoes from the ground and carried them back inside in the scoop of her apron.

There was still time for a swim in the fjord. The early evening was the best time, even in winter. Often the surface of the sea had calmed, gently drawn by the pull of the moon. She changed and headed down to the beach. Perhaps the boy would come with her? She saw him sitting on the dry sand at the back of the beach. She called to him. He waved a hand in response.

'Come for a swim,' she shouted. He said something in reply which she couldn't hear and turned over onto his side, his back to her. Another time, she thought. Swimming was such a pleasure to her, a gift from her father. She used to go swimming with him at weekends. They'd cycle out of the city past the sleepy villas on the coast road and end up in the little fishing hamlet of Tåbæk. When she'd been very young, she swam in the small lagoon that

was fed by the salt water of the Sound and protected from the waves by a sea wall. Later, as she became stronger, she swam out into the Sound itself and felt the complete power of the sea shuddering around her body. She would follow the path of her father's head dipping under the waves. From time to time he'd shout out, 'Stay close.' After the death of her mother, her father began to swim out beyond where she felt safe to go and she had to stop and tread water for as long as she could before turning back to the shore alone. Wrapped in a towel, she'd watch him out in the dark waters, as he dived beneath the surface. He would disappear for a long time and she would feel a panic gathering in her chest before he bobbed up again in another place. When he staggered back to shore, like a shipwrecked sailor, she saw the red-rimmed eyes and the tears that were not quite hidden in the streams of sea water that ran down his face.

Ellen entered the sea with an involuntarily intake of breath from the kick of the cold. She carved her way across the furrowed surface, making a long arc. Three strokes, one breath. One side and then the other. The beat of her heart steadied. When she was some distance from the shore, she turned in a slow arc back towards the beach where the shape of Søren skimming stones at the water's edge could just be made out.

Back at *Søvindhuset* she lit a candle in the window and added a block of peat to the stove. Søren was still outside. She took out the cod and placed it into the *høkasse*, the wooden box filled with straw, to finish cooking. A sun, pale and weak, had dropped close to the sea. A violet light spilled through the open door. She heard footsteps.

'Tomorrow night,' Søren said.

'What about it?'

'Alrø.' The boy's gaze was limpid.

'I haven't agreed to anything.'

'We need to go tomorrow. I'll let you know what time to meet.' He waved his book at her. Ellen took it in her hands. On the open page the drawing was simple, exquisite. A few strong lines, an evanescent smudge at the edge of the face. Søren's mother.

'This is beautiful,' said Ellen.

'Her name was Marguerite.' Søren took back the sketchbook and sat at the table. He picked up a pen and began to cover the pencil lines with blue ink. His hand moved slowly. Ellen felt a rush of tenderness. Søren's head remained tilted, his eyes fixed on the rectangle of page, with his bird-sketch smile. 'I have to finish this,' he murmured, so quietly that she could barely hear him.

Ellen pared the zest from a small, hard lemon. She cut it in half, and sliced three thin circles from one half and squeezed the remaining juice into the milk sauce in the pan. She thought about the things that she and Søren had in common. For one thing, and it was a big thing, they had both grown up with fathers who'd lost their way on home ground. The potatoes simmered, their pale skins nudging each other.

'Before Mor disappeared,' Søren said and then paused. Ellen stirred the milk, hardly daring to breath. 'She would walk. Sometimes she'd get lost. Far would go and find her, and bring her back. Her body would be covered in sand and her hair all wild. She loved the sea, called it her "crazy friend".' The boy sank back in his chair and examined his sketch with a frown. 'Far would kill me if he saw this. Really, he would. She destroyed his life, that's what he says. As far as he's concerned, she never existed. He says that I should forget about her.' Ellen came towards the boy and pressed a hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her. 'Do you like it?' he said.

'Very much.'

A dark blur passed the window and the door opened. Per arrived from the paintworks, exhaustion on his face. Too many nights without sleep. He was making himself ill, Ellen thought. He pulled Ellen towards him and kissed her, then dropped a hand onto Søren's shoulder. Ellen noticed that the boy shrunk back.

They ate together around the small table. Thick pieces of cod, slices of black bread and a round of cheese.

'Tomorrow is delivery day for the newsletter,' Per said. 'Søren, you can do the coast road on account of your long legs.' The boy nodded.

'And don't get caught,' Per added.

'You don't have to worry about me,' the boy said, 'I'm like smoke. That's what Far says. No one will notice me.'

'Don't tell your Far what you are up to either,' Per said. Søren shot him a look. 'He doesn't care what I do,' he said and bent his head back over his plate.

'Drink can make people loose-tongued, that's all I'm saying, so it's best not to tell him.'

'Do you think I'm an idiot or something.' Søren jerked his plate away and stood up. 'I'm going home.' He stalked from the house, slamming the door behind him.

'You touched a nerve,' said Ellen. Per shrugged. 'I only told him what he already knows,' he said.

Later Per sat by the stove, chiselling a piece of wood. He seemed happier, whistling a tune, the episode with Søren forgotten.

‘What are you so pleased about?’ she said.

‘Our friend Heinrich is back from his leave,’ Per said. Ellen couldn’t tell whether there was any irony in his voice or not.

‘He’s no friend of mine,’ she said. Per frowned at her and stuck the penknife into the wood. ‘Alright, Ellen, my friend,’ he said. ‘He came back from leave with lapis lazuli. I can hardly believe it. He had to visit every artist’s shop in Berlin to find it. The artists up at Skagen will be delighted. They’ve been painting without blue for months now. Can you imagine trying to paint the landscape up there without blue?’ He took a brown envelope from his pocket and dipped his hand inside and pulled out a jagged piece of stone, an intense chalky blue. ‘I bought a piece to show you.’

‘He got that for you?’ she said, stiffening.

‘Lazurite. Lime turned to marble over millennia. Look, there’s a little pyrite in this piece.’ He turned the lapis over in his hands, a fine blue film covering his fingertips. Ellen saw the fine metallic threads.

‘It looks like gold, but it’s caused by iron. Amazing, don’t you think?’ he said.

‘It’s just a rock,’ she said, her irritation mounting. Why was he persisting with such a dangerous friendship? Per put the lazurite back into his pocket. ‘I know what I’m doing,’ he said, seeming to read her thoughts. ‘Heinrich’s a good person.’

Per didn’t leave that night. He dropped his hands onto her shoulders and pulled her towards him. Ellen began to unbutton his shirt from the neck to his waist, the fabric parting to show a long V of skin and fine hair. He pushed her back gently to look at her, his gaze direct, asking permission. She slipped her arms under his shirt and felt the broad arc of his back, his skin warm, the rough circle of a mole on the ridge of his spine. She pushed the length of her body against him, felt the heaviness of his erection against her abdomen. They stayed still for a moment, eye to eye. Something released in him and they began to move together, dropping clothes, all the while keeping a hand on each other, both needing the connection between them to hold. He lowered her onto the bed, gently moving himself over her body. ‘Alright?’ he said, his voice hoarse. They shifted, searching tenderly for the fit. She felt that it might have been a long time since he’d been with someone. She lifted her knees in response, felt herself yield as he pushed deeper. She mumbled encouragement, their hips shifting. He pulled her over so she was on top. She pushed herself upwards, arched her back, used her thighs to

rock over his pelvis. He lifted his head, pulled one nipple then the other into his mouth. Her orgasm was intense, flaring down her thighs. Afterwards a brief, strangely painful, ache in her uterus. She dropped to her side and pulled him over her, keeping him inside her. His breathing was heavy. He came with a series of soft groans, then dropped his body onto hers. She allowed the air from her lungs to release under the weight of his chest. For a moment, she couldn't move. He lifted himself from her, his chest slicked with sweat, a damp curl of his blond hair looped across his forehead. He lay on his side, his head propped up on one hand and dropped his other arm over her stomach. She clasped his hand and they lay, both quiet for a while, their ribcages rising and falling.

‘Love,’ she said, wanting to put a word into the space between them.

‘I’ve wanted to be with you for a long time. Since that first day in the bookshop,’ he said. She turned to smile at him. He smiled back and took her fingers to his mouth to kiss them. ‘I want to remember this moment, Ellen,’ he said, ‘You and me. At the beginning.’

Later they lay in the narrow bed, their naked bodies entwined in the shape of a strange statue. Per fell asleep, but Ellen remained awake, tracing her fingers along his wrist, mapping out his veins by touch. Was this the beginning? She rested her cheek in the hollow of his collar bone, breathed in the traces of his day’s work – umber, linseed oil, charcoal. The materials seemed to be inscribed into his skin. Per shifted in his sleep. His mouth opened a little, a flutter of his tongue at his lips. She hoped he knew what he was doing with the German. That he wasn’t being wilful about the dangers. She moved closer to him. What would it be like to never let someone go?

They woke early. A flurry of snow had fallen during the night leaving a thin coating on the ground. A white sun hung in the sky. Ellen sat on the bench outside the summerhouse and watched Per return from his swim, his legs turning the stems of the marram grass green as he brushed past. At that moment, Ellen imagined the day when the occupation was over, when they could live together. Untroubled. But the feeling didn’t last long. The reality of what was happening soon forced its way into the quiet spaces. Horsens lay out of sight, but in it all manner of human darkness was barely held back, like a delayed tide waiting to flow into the inlet, breach the sand dunes. Cover everything.

‘I have something for you,’ Per said putting her into his shadow, his sea skin like glitter against the sky. The stillness, the wooden boarded house, the flat land around them; these things etched into her like a branding. Per held an arm behind his back. She looked up, squinting, and lifted the thick weight of hair from her neck and balanced it on her head. ‘What have you got for me?’ she said and Per drew out an eel from behind his back and held the

dripping body up in front of her. 'Anguilla, Anguilla,' he said. The eel hung there, a sleek greenish rope, its underbelly feathered with white. The globe of its eye pulsed gently. 'Caught in the fyke net,' he said, 'Must have made its way down the channel last night. A good one for the smoker. It's a shame Søren isn't here. I could show him how to prepare it. There's quite a knack to gutting it right.' Per dropped the eel to the ground and landed a strike to its head with a piece of wood. He crouched down and dropped the eel into a box and began dousing the its slimy skin with salt.

'I know,' Ellen said. 'I'm an island girl too, remember?' Per laughed. She'd told him about the excursions she'd made as a child with her father. How, after her mother had died, he'd take her at weekends by train and boat to visit the small islands off the Jutland coast. They caught crayfish and crab, cooked them on the beach. He would tell her about how the islands, rifted seaways and sandstone reservoirs had been formed. How Denmark's continental plate had once existed far to the south of the equator and had drifted northwards. Ellen had always been in awe of this journey of imperceptible daily shifts over five hundred million years and more than twelve thousand miles. She'd told Per too about her father's unspoken reluctance to return to the unlit apartment at the end of the day. Of how they lingered at the station café, her with her head pressed into the hollow of his shoulder and he reading with his free hand until there was nothing more to do but go home and face the renewed embrace of her mother's brutal absence.

'I hope Søren comes back this morning. You two need to make up,' she said at last.

'You're very fond of him,' Per looked up at her.

'I want to help him.'

'Don't let him get you into trouble. He can be very persuasive.'

'Søren told me that he came home last week and found his father, half clothed, trying to cook cod on a skillet. The fish was too big for the pan and, in his drunken state, he tried to cut it in half with a wood saw. His eyes were popping from his head and he was grunting, half insane with the effort. When he saw Søren, he flew into a rage and sawed across his own hand. The boy tried to staunch the blood with newspaper. If it wasn't for their neighbours, who helped to drag him to the doctor's clinic, the man could have bled to death.'

'Juhl is a man to be avoided, take it from me,' said Per.

'You know him?' said Ellen. Per stared back at her without blinking.

'He's been seen with that new Gestapo man. You know, the one who Ravn calls the slug. It doesn't look good.' Per gave the eel box a vigorous shake. 'All I'm saying is that you shouldn't interfere in another family's business. Not in times like these.' Ellen felt unbalanced

by Per's reaction. He had the look of a person caught off guard. She was beginning to know his face so well, but felt disconcerted that she couldn't place the expression that had passed over it.

Later that morning Ellen collected her sack from the butchery and made her deliveries during the afternoon, slipping one under each door in the apartment blocks on Nørregade. She walked fast, her eyes alert, a basket hooked over her arm. She left the remaining leaflets at random on the harbour benches, slipped between samples in the fabric shop and dropped onto the wide window sill outside the diary. Written on the front of each copy. *Giv det videre!* Pass it on!

Easier than she'd imagined, she thought. Almost exhilarating. Ravn had told her to deliver during the daylight hours. If questioned she would say that she was on the way to a customer's house to deliver an order: the latest romance or a book on sea navigation instruments. Surprising what people are interested in, she'd say, the imaginary conversations playing out in her head.

Things hadn't run so smoothly for Søren. The boy had almost been caught. He'd dropped a newsletter over the garden wall of one of the villas along the coast road. A German soldier had seen him from an upstairs window and shouted at him, a red-haired girl at his shoulder. Søren ran back to Larsen's, hurling the last of the newsletters over a fence.

'Do you think he recognised you?' asked Ellen.

'I don't think so. I had my cap on.'

'And the girl?'

'I don't think she was really looking. But I know her. It's Agneta. She works at Grete's Patisserie.'

March 1947

Down by the lake a cry close by brought Ellen back to herself. By now it was almost dark, the sliver of an opal moon was just visible. Ellen had walked up to watch Jesper make another attempt at catching the pike. Over recent days he'd tried a series of tactics: different baits, different positions on the lake. He'd consulted the fisherman at the harbour, the station master, even the pastor. Jesper's line was stretched out and he was struggling to hold onto the rod which arched down steeply towards the dark surface of water. Ellen rushed to help. She held onto the base of the rod, while Jesper wound his line in as fast as he could.

'It's him. Definitely him,' the boy said, using his spare hand to grab the net and swing it out over the water.

'How can you be sure?' she said.

'Sometimes you just know.'

The two of them struggled for twenty minutes, reeling the fish in, then letting the line run out until the creature began to weaken. Finally, the silver head and ugly pointed jaw emerged from the water. It took all their strength to haul the pike into the net and drag it to the shore. Jesper picked up a rock and smashed it down on the head. The white of its eye turned crimson with blood. The tail flapped twice and then was still.

'We got him. We really got him,' Jesper shouted and fizzed with excitement as they carried the pike back to *Søvindhuset*.

'Here take this, she said, handing him her basket. They wrapped the fish in newspaper before Jesper set off, the basket almost touching the ground. The boy's laughter and chatter lingered in the air long after he'd gone. She thought of Søren then. His moving hands, his elusive smile. He would have been nineteen years old.

November 1943

‘Can we meet at Musling tonight? 2am.’ Søren whispered the words in her ear just before he left the bookshop after his reading lesson. His voice was soft and light and he spoke almost as if he were singing. Before she had a chance to respond, he had vanished. Then she began to worry. She thought about the burning fishing boat she’d seen in the fjord. This had happened because she let herself get too involved. Per was right. The sea urchin boy had thrown out a lure and she’d been caught.

She was still worrying when she slipped from *Søvindhuset* dressed in dark clothes and cycled down to the harbour, passing the blank squares of windows in the houses. All was still. The harbour appeared deserted. *Musling* was moored in the middle of the jetty, squeezed between two small fishing vessels. Despite everything she felt a sting of joy at the sight of her boat. She hadn’t taken it out all year and she realised how much she had missed sailing and the sense of wild freedom it gave her. The boat appeared empty until she glimpsed a slight movement under the canvas stretched across the hull. A pale head emerged, then a hand which beckoned her over. She locked up her bicycle outside the harbour master’s office, filled a metal canister with fresh water from the tap - who knew how long they would be? - and headed towards the boat. The sea pressed against the harbour walls. The white moon hung high in the sky, spilling light across the sea. Søren had chosen a bad night. She lowered herself under the canvas. Inside, in the darkness, she was enveloped with the odour of damp canvas and encrusted salt.

‘I knew you’d come,’ Søren whispered.

‘We’re taking a big risk,’ Ellen said.

‘You want to do something too.’ Another flash of the lure.

Søren slipped the ropes and, taking an oar each, they rowed out of the harbour. They moved in unison, keeping themselves covered with the tarpaulin as best they could. They rowed in silence, listening to the slap of the water against the hull and the taut pluck of the stays against the mast above them. Once clear of the harbour walls, the little boat began to rock as it forged its way into rougher seas. Søren hoisted the mainsail. Ellen swung the tiller to the right to catch the breeze and the boat steadied. In the distance the dark mound of the island loomed like the body of a sleeping giant. The bulb of the moon seemed to fluoresce more brightly. Anyone on the coast might see them moving under the cloudless sky. Ellen turned the prow to catch more of the wind and the boat increased speed, slipping through the

water, the tide slack, just held on the turn. Away from the shore, she relaxed and felt the old pleasure of sailing take hold with the cold breeze on her skin and the tension on the rudder running up her arm and into her body. Søren sat motionless on the gunwale, the jib sheet loose in one hand. In the moonlight, Ellen glimpsed new bruising over Søren's eye and cheek.

‘Trouble at home again?’

‘It's nothing.’ Søren lifted his collar and turned his head from her. Please yourself, Sea Urchin, Ellen thought. The island neared, mineral black against the night sky.

‘Where's the best place to bring her ashore?’ said Ellen. Søren pointed to the shoreline to the right. ‘See the beach over there?’ he said. She could just make out a pale crescent of land. As soon as they were close, Ellen dropped the jib and let the boat float in on half the mainsail, lowering it as *Musling* drifted in. The water became shallow and she lifted the centre board. Søren dropped out of the boat with the tie line and pulled the boat up onto the stony beach.

He collected the package, a large square box which he'd kept in the bottom of the boat wrapped in sacking. They dragged several pieces of old driftwood to clear a path, and then scrambled up a steep crumbling bank onto the shallow slope that led up to the whitewashed church. Under the white moon the church walls glowed with a pale opalescence. They walked past a collection of neglected graves divided by a lattice of box hedges that had been left to grow wild. When they reached the church they found the door locked.

‘No key?’ Ellen said. Søren scowled at her. They walked around to one side which had a few windows which were all locked shut. They rounded to the back where a small glass-paned window was set high in the wall. Above it the church bell was suspended under its wooden canopy, a long rope hung down and was tied to a rusted hook on the wall. Søren picked up a stone and threw it at the glass, which shattered instantly. A heron lifted lazily from the grasses, its long legs drifting below its body.

‘Someone might hear us,’ said Ellen.

‘Only the guillemots,’ Søren said. The boy was so calm.

‘Are you sure?’ Ellen looked around into the darkness. These days she often felt that she was being watched. The grassland stretched inland and beyond the silhouette of a few trees and bushes. Anyone could be out there. She lifted the boy up, holding his bare foot in her cupped hands while he smashed out the last of the glass with his boot. He was strangely light for someone of his height. She could feel the long bones of his foot and the thick welt of the scar that ran around the boy's left ankle. Whatever had been tied there must have cut deep into the skin. What has happened to you?

With the glass cleared, Søren managed to pull himself up using the bell rope for balance and squeeze through the window. Ellen leant against the wall and smoked a cigarette, cupping the glowing ember with her hand to hide it. Søren was right, it felt good to be doing something. The boy returned after a several minutes, dropping to the ground beside her with barely a sound.

‘All done?’ she said.

‘I put it under the box where the old pastor used to stand to give his sermons. It’s all ready for the Englishman.’ They gathered the broken glass and buried it under one of the overgrown hedges. They walked back to the boat and sat on the rocks for a while watching the town in the distance. A few stars twinkled above their heads like luminous dust. Horsens seemed to be pressed up against the edge of the fjord, hunkered at one end like a child, fearful of the future.

‘Your scar,’ Ellen said tentatively. She sensed the boy’s body tensing next to her.

‘What about it?’

‘When your father ...’ she began, but the boy cut in.

‘I don’t even remember,’ he said. The water in the fjord stirred, the underlying tension of the current shifting to the ebb. ‘We should go,’ he said.

They pushed the boat out into the Alrø Sound. Ellen climbed in first, dropping the heavy centreboard as soon as the water became deep enough. Søren moved the boat out, the water pressing around his knees before jumping in. They sailed in silence, their last conversation still between them. Ellen sailed back to the jetty near to *Søvindhuset*, which was closer than the town harbour and minimised the risk of being noticed. Back in the summerhouse, with Søren asleep on the sofa, Ellen went to her room and slept lightly, a picture of the smooth welt of the scar around the boy’s ankle drifting in and out of her dreams.

*

‘Tell me about your childhood,’ Per said to Ellen some days later. They were lying on the small bed with the windows pulled wide open, the light breath of the sea washing over them. ‘I can’t imagine you in Copenhagen. You seem at home here on Jutland.’

She told him then about the family apartment on the top floor of an old merchant’s house. It looked out over one of Copenhagen’s narrow canals. Mor grew white marguerites on the balcony and took in sewing. Ellen always remembered her in the evenings with fabric stretched over the kitchen table, a tape measure around her neck, a tin of pins and reel of thread to one side. She loved to watch her mother at work, the precision of her movements as she smoothed out lengths of fabric, chalked in cutting lines or flew a needle up and down a seam. To an eight-year-old, it seemed like a kind of magic. Far cycled to work every day and Ellen would blow kisses to him from the balcony. When Mor fell ill and died, everything changed. She and her father didn’t know how to live without her. No one watered the marguerites, so they wilted and died. As Ellen spoke she felt the familiar tug of loss pulled at her throat. She’d not spoken about her mother’s death for a long time. Per pulled her hand up to his chest.

‘I realise now that the worst of it was bearing witness every day to my father’s grief,’ she said.

‘My poor bird,’ Per whispered into her neck. They made love, more gently than the first time, both at ease. Afterwards they talked softly about their childhoods and watched the pale sky darkening until they fell asleep. Ellen woke early feeling the damp chill of the night air on her face. She got up, a little unsteadily, felt the dampness of the semen between her legs, and closed the windows. Overnight grey clouds had drifted in and hung low over the sea. She took a flannel and washed herself. She went back to bed and after a while she dozed off again. A dream sang through her. She was in Copenhagen, back in the apartment where she padded around in socked feet across the polished parquet tiles. Back where she would glimpse her father at work in his study in the evening, the door left half open. Back under the kitchen table while her mother cooked *frikkadella* and apple sauce. She used to move about the corridors and landings, watching, always thinking herself unseen. Sometimes she would crawl into the small cupboard in the hallway with her objects and stay there for hours. Inside the cupboard, with her books, stones and fossils around her, she felt suspended in time, until she remerged, happy and hungry, into the wind-rush of the day.

‘I know you are there,’ her father would sometimes say without lifting his head from his book. And she would slide away silently. It became a kind of game between them all.

‘I don’t know,’ her father said one evening over dinner, ‘but I think we have a ghost in the apartment. A very small one that only wears socks and may have long dark hair. Any ideas, Misse?’

‘It’s funny that you mention it,’ her mother said with a smile. ‘Today I was sure there was someone under the kitchen table. But when I looked there was no one, just an apple core and pile of stones.’

‘Ellen, what do you think?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about. I was busy elsewhere.’

‘Well isn’t that strange? Someone must be playing tricks on us,’ said her mother.

Ellen awoke with a start and pulled herself up to sit on the edge of the bed. She wiped away the tear that had slid from one eye. Per still slept in the tangle of white sheets, one arm flung above his head. The smooth curve of his collar bone stretching the skin, the tender dip just above it. She dropped her face to it and pressed a kiss in the dark hollow. The hand above his head twitched, then fell into stillness again. She wondered if this was real, if her happiness were real. *You and me. At the beginning.*

After breakfast, Per sat by the open door at the summerhouse and watched the fishing boats head out along the fjord towards the sea. ‘I should go,’ he said, not moving. The air was heavy with a cold rain that mingled with the scent of sea wrack and the trace of old mint that grew in raggedy bushes along one wall.

‘Just a little longer.’ Ellen stood behind Per and settled her hands on his shoulders, his hand rested on hers. Their fingers, still warm with the embers of desire, were gently entwined. Was it happiness she felt? She wore a dress the colour of cherry blossom, a heavy woollen cardigan, her feet in thick socks; he in his cambric jacket with frayed sleeves, the cuffs hanging loose. When the downpour came, Per shifted his chair back and they stayed there, he sitting, she with her hands on his shoulders, watching the rain fall in sheets until the wooden planks of the terrace turned black and her dress started to become transparent from the splatter of the rain. She shivered as her skin tightened, but was reluctant to move.

‘I need to get back,’ Per said with a sigh.

‘I thought the order was finished.’

‘They want more. Always more.’ He bit his lip. ‘What choice to I have?’ He stood up, suddenly distracted and began to gather up his things. ‘I must go.’

After Per left, Ellen sat by the window and read. She couldn't manage more than a few pages. It disturbed her how quickly Per's mood had changed. He'd been so relaxed then, quite suddenly, he seemed to fill with anxiety. More than that, he seemed to be afraid.

In the middle of the afternoon something flashed out in the fjord. An arc of brilliant white. A fishing boat had burst into flames. The sea was calm and the fire burnt yellow then dark red long into the night. The next day a fragile plume of grey smoke lingered on the horizon. What could have happened? An accident, a mine, a bomb fallen from one of the Junkers Ju planes that trailed through the sky. In the evening debris had floated in with the tide: wooden crates, apples, a leather boot. A few days later she heard that a naked body, wrapped in sea kelp flecked with dead crabs, was washed up on the beach at Næsset. There was nothing on the body to identify the dead man and so the pastor had buried him at the back of the churchyard with a wooden cross bearing only the date and place where he was found. Another *strandvaskeren*.

March 1947

Ellen stood alone in the Horsens Records Office, waiting for the clerk, a young man with wide bony shoulders and moth-coloured eyes, to return. He said he'd made the necessary enquires on her behalf. She paced the room. It had been over half an hour since he'd disappeared to find the letter.

When he returned, he apologised and said that at least good records were kept about the executions and the disposal of the bodies afterwards. Disposal. The word troubled her. Some care would have been taken, wouldn't it? A burial? Or had her sea urchin boy been dumped into the peat bog or out at sea to be churned by the tides like the falling man and the burning fisherman? The clerk, whom she discovered was called Lasse Toft, held a large envelope in his hands. He pulled out a sheet and handed it to her. 'There you are,' he said. She took the sheet from him. Words in a dense type, an error later corrected with black ink. A series of heavy full stops between each line.

.....
Søren Vitus Juhl

.....
Arrested 7 February 1944 on suspicion of sabotage and membership of an illegal organisation.

.....
Tried at Aarhus 8 February 1944.

.....
Found guilty of a train derailment on the Horsens to Aarhus railway line. Guilty of being a member of Horsens resistance.

.....
Executed 0600h 10 February 1944, by order of the Commandant.
.....

The stamp of a black eagle. Illegible initials at the bottom.

'I know all this,' Ellen said. The young man drew another sheet from the same envelope. 'They also sent this,' he said. She looked down, the same tallow coloured paper, the same heavy type. The page was headed 'Prisoner List, Venstre Prison'. Below, names, dates, places. Lists, always lists, she thought.

'Half way down,' Lasse said and tapped the margin with his pen. She saw the boy's name. A date. A grid reference. Eastern boundary, Skæring Heath.

‘Is that where the bone was found?’ she said. Lasse nodded.

‘So it must be him?’

‘They need to exhume the body to be sure,’ he said.

‘When will they do that?’

‘Whenever you’re ready.’

December 1943

Ravn received instructions from resistance leaders in Aarhus to increase sabotage activity in the town. The group undertook projects intended to irritate the Germans. Some of the younger members of the group, including Søren and Ravn's apprentices, went out at night to deface the official information notices by marking them with the letter 'V' in blue paint. The faster the posters were replaced the faster they were daubed with blue. It became a kind of game. Groups of cyclists began to ride in blocks to hinder the progress of German vehicles trying to get through the town. The Commandant had to replace his car twice, when sugar was poured into the fuel tank. *Seabirds of Jutland*, the book they now used for signalling meetings, began to appear in the window more often. Ravn came by most afternoons as the shop was closing. He and Inge would sit in the back room, their heads close together deep in conversation. Sometimes he'd arrive with pig's liver or chops, which Inge would cook on the stove in the apartment upstairs. Sometimes they'd invite Ellen to join them and share from a single plate, the warm smell of butter and fennel seeds filling the whole building.

Once Ellen saw them standing in an embrace in the storeroom. They made an odd picture, there were thirty years between them. They didn't see her and remained quite motionless for a long time, Inge's head resting on his chest and her fingers spread over his shoulders pressing him to her. The simple intimacy, their stillness, made Ellen want to weep. Eventually, Ravn looked up and caught Ellen's gaze. He smiled at her, and stepped back. 'Do you remember Aunt Sylvie?' he said.

'Of course,' said Ellen.

'She's been arrested,' he said. Ellen pictured the woman, her fine bones, her thin body. She couldn't imagine Aunt Sylvie beyond the confinement of that silent apartment. 'What will happen to her?' she said.

'Interrogation, trial, prison, execution perhaps,' Ravn said.

'Why was she arrested?'

'The usual story. Informers.' He walked to the front of the shop and Ellen followed.

'Ellen,' Ravn said quietly as they reached the door. 'I know about you and Per.' A look of sadness seemed to pass across his face. 'Be careful.' She lifted a hand to the birthmark on her neck which she knew would have flushed deep red. Be careful of what exactly?

Christmas came and went. The temperature dropped to below zero and stayed there. The fjord froze, the ice thickening to more than a shin bone deep. People moved about on skis and skates, their faces covered with scarves against the bitter cold. Goods were delivered on sledges instead of bicycles. The roof-tops, covered in long-settled snow that had turned grey, took on the appearance of stone.

Just before the new year a Sterling bomber was shot down in Vrønding, west of Horsens. Two of the crew had died, two were believed to have survived. A search began to find them before they were caught by the Germans. Ravn sent Søren and Ellen to search the deserted carpet factory by the railway line. Ravn was right, Ellen thought, Søren was like smoke. He seemed to have a gift for getting in and out of places without being seen. She stood outside the building keeping watch and waited for him to return. In a moment he appeared at her side. Nothing.

On New Year's Day an *al gang* started from St Jacob's church an hour before sunrise. It was a ritual that took place all over Denmark. Ellen had taken part many times since childhood. One of her earliest memories was of her mother waking her, the room in darkness, just a whisper of her voice close to her ear. She would dress quickly, her limbs heavy from sleep and follow her parents out into the dark city streets where many of the town's residents were gathering.

In Horsens Pastor Gregory, the young churchman who'd buried the young *strandvaskeren*, led the way. People joined the group in drifts as it headed out of the town towards the fjord. The small headland was known as Swan Land, although swans were rarely seen there. People came with flasks of coffee, baked rolls and apple dumplings. The group stretched out in a long line along the path that ran to the end of the headland. The tip of the headland itself marked the point where the Kattegat sea began. Ellen was late and had to run to catch up, trusting herself not to trip in the darkness. The sound of singing floated back in the night air, a gentle hymn of thanksgiving. Some talked quietly, their voices instinctively lowered in the darkness. But most walked in silence, as if still caught halfway between sleep and waking, just as the pastor arrived at the spit, she caught up with the tail of the group. She saw Juhl walking slowly, hunched and looking at the ground. She did not greet him. Mønsted the jeweller, walked ahead with his wife and twin daughters, both girls dressed in identical red coats and woollen hats. When she came alongside, the girls ran to her, chattering with excitement. They'd been to the beach. They'd had ice-cream. Mama was cross with Papa and there'd been a big argument. 'What was the argument about?' she heard herself asking.

'Papa keeps going out in the evening. It makes Mama so cross, her face turns purple.'

‘Where does he go?’ Ellen asked. The girls didn’t move. Claudia opened her eyes wide. ‘Perhaps he sees a lady?’ she whispered. Her sister Misse nudged her in the ribs. ‘It’s not a lady. It’s his work.’

‘He always takes his briefcase and comes back with presents,’ said Claudia. ‘He gave Mama perfume that came all the way from Paris, but Mama refused to wear it and poured it down the sink.’

The crowd became tighter and Claudia and Misse were called back by their mother. Ellen said goodbye and watched Fru Mønsted gather the girls around her. Then she made her way through the throng, pushing away the uncomfortable feeling about using the children. But at least she had something to tell Ravn. *We live in difficult times*. Around her, people had stopped, many of them drawing their arms around themselves to keep out the chill of sea air, and waited for the sun to rise. She saw Ravn with Inge and Per and headed towards them.

Out at sea, the sky above the horizon glowed before a curved sliver of gold appeared and grew upwards. Slowly the sky shed its darkness, softly as a leaf falls from a tree. Singing started again from the front of the crowd.

Per came to stand behind her. He put his arms around her shoulders and she felt the warmth of his body against her back. She wanted to turn to him, but the weight of his arms kept her still. She noticed Ravn looking at them, his eyes black. Could he be jealous? His look confused her.

‘What will the new year hold?’ Per said.

‘Something better,’ she said.

‘Let’s hope so.’

‘Will you stay at the summerhouse tonight?’ Ellen asked, emboldened by the darkness. She felt Per’s mouth close to her ear.

‘I can’t.’ He picked a strand of her hair that had fallen across her face and gently hooked it behind her ear. ‘Work to do. Maybe tomorrow.’ She was about to remonstrate, but knew it to be pointless. She longed for ordinariness.

Ahead of her, a commotion erupted. ‘Watch out, boy!’ a voice shouted. Ellen knew the voice. Ejnar Mønsted, the jeweller. Then a furious yell could be heard rising above the others. Søren? Per let his arms drop and Ellen freed herself and they both ran forward to find the jeweller sprawled over the boy with his hands pressed around his neck. Søren was trying to spit out words that Ellen couldn’t make out. She placed the tips of her fingers on Mønsted’s arm, he turned to look at her. His eyes were small and dark, his mouth twisted into a jagged cut. Ellen caught the staleness of his breath. His hands relaxed a little.

‘Traitor,’ Søren managed to choke out the word. The jeweller lent over the boy. ‘The police will be very interested to hear about your assault on me, you little runt. Useless, just like your father.’ Spittle sprayed from his mouth as he spoke. Ellen was too late to stop Søren from swinging out his arm and smashing his fist into the side of the jeweller’s face. Mønsted’s grip loosened and he fell onto his side. Søren leapt on him pushing him to the ground, his arms flailing. Per rushed forward to pull the boy away. ‘That’s enough,’ he said softly, ‘This isn’t the way to deal with it.’ He led the boy away from the gathered crowd. Søren, cupping his jaw with his hand, began to sob violently. Ellen bent to help Mønsted to his feet. He began to brush the snow from his coat. He had the look of a wounded animal. ‘That boy needs teaching a lesson,’ he said, wiping a trickle of blood from his cheek with his sleeve.

‘It might be you that needs teaching a lesson.’ Ellen kept her voice low. He stared back at her in surprise. She saw something pass across his face. Was it alarm? Or fear? She moved closer to his face and whispered into his ear. ‘We know what you’re up to and you’re not going to get away with it.’ She handed him his hat and walked away, holding her hands together. The savage world. She was part of it now.

*

Fourteen bright nights. A new year and sabotage attacks mushroomed all over Jutland. A roofing felt factory in Sondrup was set alight, the fire burning for days afterwards. A week later a group of saboteurs from Aarhus broke through the security fence at a gravel pit and smashed up the sorting machines and conveyers with large hammers. Ravn came to see Inge and Ellen with news of plans to disrupt railway lines all over Jutland. Per, Ellen and Søren's task was to make a simple break in the track at a place just outside Horsens close to Krage Skov. Ravn, Henning and the others would be doing the same on another line going south toward Lillebro.

Winter continued to grip the town. Ice on the streets, ice in the sea. The night delivery runs took their toll. Søren arrived at the bookshop one evening, his face wet with sweat. 'I can't breathe,' he said, his words barely audible. Ellen put her hand to his brow and whistled through her teeth. 'Like a furnace. Come in,' she said. Inge made up a bed for him in the upstairs sitting room. When Ellen laid a cold flannel on Søren's forehead and felt the heat sear through the fabric. She washed his hands and feet with cool water as he tried to sleep. He twisted and turned, wrapping and unwrapping the sheets around his body, his limbs restless. At times his breathing dissolved into tides of coughing. Ellen held a cloth to his mouth, watched as the deep hollow at the centre of his chest rose and sank. Inge went to bed. Ellen promised to wake her if he became any worse. His breathing remained laboured for most of the night, the sound from his mouth like the sea around the rocks. After two in the morning, the shivers began. Twice she had to strip the sheets, heavy with sweat. His body, stretched spear-like along the mattress, was clammy. She dried him with a towel before she covered him with dry sheets. At times he seemed barely conscious.

In the morning Inge called the doctor. He told them that a severe croup was aggravating his condition. It was probably something he'd suffered from since early childhood, but something must have triggered it. The doctor suggested that the boy be put into a room filled with steam. The three of them boiled pans of water in the kitchen and moved Søren there. He sat shivering on a chair, wrapped in blankets. They closed the door. The room soon filled with steam and his breathing eased, although he was still feverish. After the doctor left, Inge went to open the shop and Ellen stayed with him, red faced and sweating in the hot room for another hour before moving him back up to his bed. He managed a weak smile. She covered him with a fresh sheet. His feet and ankles exposed. Ellen laid a hand on the scar on his ankle and ran her finger along its ridge without thinking.

‘He wasn’t used to looking after me.’ The boy’s voice was faint. Ellen lifted her hand from his leg, left it hanging in the air as if frozen.

‘He used to go out drinking at night,’ the boy continued. ‘He was worried I’d come out the house and fall into the harbour. The first time he tied me to the bed frame when I was asleep. After that I fought him. Once he didn’t come back for two days. I tried to get myself free, but that only made things worse. Eventually one of our neighbours heard my screams and found me. He stopped tying me up after that.’

‘The rope cut into your skin?’ said Ellen.

‘I can’t remember any pain. I only remember the anger.’

‘Your Far was wrong to do what he did.’

‘I wasn’t angry with Far,’ he said. ‘It was Mor. If she hadn’t left ...’

A few sessions in the steam room improved his condition and after two days Søren was strong enough to sit up in bed. Ellen fed him broth with a spoon. She sat with him during the afternoon, listening to the gulls as they quietened into evening. He sipped at the soup, weakly at first, lying back exhausted after a spoonful or two. During that time Ellen wondered what would make a mother leave a child like that. After four days he asked for his sketch book and Ellen knew he was getting better. Colour came back into his cheeks and he became restless. Inge weighed him each day. He had lost several kilos and she decided he couldn’t leave until he had started to put weight on again. Ellen read with him between her shifts in the shop. It was a strange thing, but the bout of illness seemed to have increased his clarity of mind and he made rapid progress.

Per arrived one afternoon and pulled a bar of chocolate from his pocket. ‘You have no idea how much I had to pay for this,’ he said.

The following weekend, Søren moved into the summerhouse. Ellen made a bed for him in the small room at the back. The first evening he stood at the water’s edge drawing the gulls with his hands, his palms flashing pale against the darkening sky. He followed their movements, finger splayed, arching his wrists as he shaped invisible lines. After that they began to take these walks each evening, right to the edge of the spit, the furthest point of the fjord. The sand was still caked with ice, heavy slabs of it creaked in the sea. Sometimes the two of them talked, but often they were content to walk in silence, Søren’s hands dancing all around as they followed the flight of passing birds.

Ellen read him some of the old Norse myths. They sat in the summerhouse wrapped in blankets while she spun the tales, created a world in which she and Søren became the characters. Ægir, the god of the sea, who was feared by sailors because he would steal their cargo and sink their ships. Or stories of his wife Ràn and their nine daughters called the waves who dragged unfortunate seafarers down to a magnificent hall beneath the seabed.

Per arrived in the evenings, sometimes staying, sometimes returning to the paintworks. Ellen went back to work at the bookshop and Søren returned to school. Ellen was relieved that Ravn hadn't appeared. They heard nothing more about the train sabotage and for a few days they forgot about their resistance work. Instead Søren helped to salt the eels caught in the fyke net and chop the wood. Several days, easy and light, passed in this way. They became a unit of three, an irregular tangle, and Ellen felt as happy as she had ever been.

March 1947

If it's him, what will you do?

Bury him properly.

Where?

On Alrø.

Can I come?

Ask your Far, Jesper.

He might not let me.

That's up to him. He's your Far.

Will you ask him?

What difference would that make?

He likes you.

January 1944

A terse letter arrived from the wholesaler in Copenhagen. the book by Garavelli could not be obtained from Italy, due to 'the problems about which they were no doubt aware.' Ellen had almost forgotten ordering the book all those weeks ago. At lunchtime she took the letter to Per at the paintworks. As she cycled into the yard she felt the atmosphere change. Inside the courtyard the air was warmer, oily. The vapours from the vats and grinders lingered between the buildings. She could smell turpentine, machine oil and something gritty beneath that she could taste in her mouth. Per was bent double at the top of a ladder peering into one of the vats. At the bottom stood a man dressed in blue overalls with his foot pressed on the bottom rung. The man turned as she approached. Leutnant Heinrich Nagel.

'Miss Pedersen, good morning,' the Leutnant said, straightening himself while keeping his foot hooked on the ladder. He smiled, his eyes, by contrast, remained heavy.

'A bit of moonlighting?' Ellen said.

'Just helping out a neighbour,' he said as the upper part of Per's body emerged from the vat.

'Ellen!' Per said and leapt down from the ladder in two strides and started wiping his hands on a cloth. He came up to her and pressed a kiss to her cheek. His lips felt like embers against her skin. Ellen stepped back, irritated. Why was Per still spending time with this man? It made no sense to her. 'I see you have a new assistant,' Ellen said sharply. Per tilted his head and frowned. 'Heinrich has been kind enough to help me,' he said.

'I can see that,' Ellen said. Per dropped his hands to his sides.

'Perhaps I should leave now,' said the Leutnant, 'I'll see you later, Per.' With that he turned, nodded at Ellen and left the courtyard.

'Was that really necessary, Ellen?' said Per.

'You see him in the daytime as well now, do you? What about the resistance meetings?'

'Heinrich,' Per hesitated. 'Leutnant Nagel and I hold much in common. He's a scientist who has been forced to do this army job. His heart's not in it. This has nothing to do with the meetings. After the war...'

'I'm not talking about after the war.'

'Heinrich is far more knowledgeable than I am. He knows about everything, the effect of temperature and trace elements. He helps with my calculations, my experiments. Do you

know what that means? He's saving me months of work.' He came close to her. 'And there's something else. He might be helpful one day, if we need him. A kind of insurance policy.' Per stopped speaking and ran his hand through his hair. Ellen felt herself soften. Her gut instinct had been to berate him for allowing any sort of friendship. But perhaps he was right. If things did go wrong, an ally in a uniform might help. Then she remembered the letter. 'This arrived from Copenhagen,' she said, holding it out to him. He glanced at it.

'Ah, the book. Heinrich got hold of a copy it in Germany and had it sent over.'

Another tie between them, she thought. 'Fine,' she said, 'I needn't have taken the trouble.'

'Ellen.' Per's voice was pleading, his mouth ugly for the first time. Ellen turned back to her bicycle without saying a word. She pedalled home, feeling furious. She passed a group of girls playing with a barrel hoop. They were being chased by a duo of boys with rolled up paper cones from which they blew out small stones at the girls. She shouted at the boys to stop, the anger inside her spilling out. A flower seller watched on with a bucket of bedraggled marguerites and an old dog at his feet. An old woman sat on the sea wall picking through a large bag turned to stare, then threw her a lonely wave. Ellen rode on. It had become clear to her. Per and Heinrich's friendship was beyond her, bigger than her. That was all.

The dark thoughts remained curled up inside her for the rest of the day. Back at *Søvindhuset* in the evening she allowed them to unwind. Could it be that Per had given the Leutnant something else? Something beyond the friendship and the intense evenings of experiments in the laboratory? An exchange of some kind. Garavelli's book, alizarin crimson, zinc chromate for something else? She felt sick. There was only one thing of value these days, the currency of occupied towns all over Europe. Information. But Per wasn't like that, was he? And even the Leutnant seemed decent enough. Neither of them wanted to be part of the dirty war. What could make that change? Had something changed? Had there been pressure from somewhere else, from someone else? The evening wound out in front of her, silent and flat and she thought of the black letterbox and the gaping slit of its mouth.

*

Fresh snow covered the streets and from early morning people came out to clear the paths. The talk was of the war being at a tipping point. For the first time in three years, people began to imagine a free Denmark again. Inge had decided that she would throw a party at the Jorgensen Hotel to celebrate her birthday. She summoned up a group of music students from Aarhus, violinists in the main, who were keen to play in exchange for one of Ravn's black market hams. Ellen took a faded red dress from her wardrobe. It had been her mother's. Some of the threads were loose and she spent an evening repairing it. Inge helped her to steam out the creases and gave her some stockings.

‘From your Parisian supply?’ Ellen said smiling. ‘Thank you.’

‘They say that youth is stolen in wartime,’ said Inge. ‘You need to seize the good things when you can.’ She went to her jewellery box and handed Ellen a pair of amber earrings. ‘To go with your mother's necklace. Keep them. Have some fun. Make the life you want.’

‘You make it sound simple.’

‘It is simple.’

‘I wonder sometimes if I'll ever have a family.’

‘That might need patience and a little imagination.’

At the party Ellen danced, relishing the freedom the music inspired in her limbs. She threw her head back and turned in circles. She knew some of the men were watching her. Where was Per? She felt the beads of sweat on her neck, dampening her hair. She had drunk several glasses of cold schnapps and the alcohol burned in her belly. The music filled her. She felt the weight of the amber earrings and necklace swinging in the yellow lamp light.

It was Ravn who came over and took her by her hands and began to twirl her in a circle. Round and round. They came closer together, palm against palm, eyes wide open and she clasped her hands around his neck. He held her waist. The breath going from her. Several people had made a circle around the two of them, they were clapping and cheering. Where was Per? Could he see her? She tried to search for him as she danced. She finally caught a glimpse of his back, turned away towards the wall, talking with someone. With each turn, she caught sight of his shoulders and the vulnerable hollow at the back of his neck just below the hairline. By the end of the dance he had gone. And in that moment, seeing the space where Per had been, Ellen let her head lean against Ravn's chest.

A new fall of snow had been threatening all day. Even inside, the air was heavy with it. Henning stood on the table and began to sing the ballad of Ebbe Skammelsøn, an old folksong. The guests interlocked arms and joined in the singing. Inge wept. Someone ran by and knocked a warning at the window that soldiers were coming. Someone put out the lights. Henning kept singing in the darkness and everyone held hands in a circle around him. *Ebbe Skammelsøn is an outlaw*. When the soldiers came in, they stopped blank-faced in the doorway, unsure what to do. The singing seemed to hold them back. Henning's words filled the room. Eventually an officer came in and shouted for him to stop, but everybody kept Henning protected in a close circle and then slowly, they walked out into the street. The soldiers kept their distance following the crowd to the town square where more soldiers waited. The snow storm came. A wind picked up and veered between the buildings, pushed up from the sea. People dissolved away still singing.

Ellen sheltered under an umbrella with Ravn. They had slipped from the crowd unnoticed before the singing had finished. Ellen found herself on the coast road, on the track to *Søvindhuset*, Ravn at her side. She led him to her bedroom, went into the bathroom and took off her dress. When she walked back into the room, Ravn was sitting where she had left him on the side of the bed, his forearms resting on his knees.

He looked up and she thought he was about to speak. She lifted the necklace over her head, it caught on a clip in her hair, and the old thread snapped sending the amber beads clattering over the floorboards. She walked towards him, pushing the beads away with her feet as she went and sat down next to him. The rough fabric of his trousers brushed against the skin of her bare thigh. That was all.

He got up, stared at her naked body, a look of astonishment on his face. He pressed a hand onto her shoulder, muttered something about being sorry and left.

Afterwards she imagined his hand falling to her breast and two bodies, one clothed one naked, on the bed. She imagined wrapping herself around him, leg around leg, arm entwined with arm, so tightly that he might have to ask her to loosen her grip. She got out of the bed and gathered up the amber beads. With care she laid them out in a line with the largest at the centre. A single bead was missing.

A week later she forced herself to visit Mønsted and ask him to restring the necklace. She couldn't bear the thought of leaving it broken. She had so little to remember her mother by.

'Your mother's was it?' Mønsted said. 'These days it's as well to keep precious things close to us.'

Early evening. Per and Søren were due at *Søvindhuset* to prepare to sabotage the railway track. Ellen hadn't seen Per since the party. The day for the attack had arrived so quickly. The snow thawed over a few days, but the temperature swiftly dropped again. The town endured a week of military raids and random questionings. Everyone was on edge. Ellen cleaned the summerhouse, sweeping out the sand and dust and wiping the wood down with a damp cloth. She moved as if in slow motion. Anxiety about what they were about to do flickering beneath her ribs. Per was on her mind. She prepared food: a plate of cooked pork, salt, slabs of rye bread and the last of the sour cherry jam and set it out on the table by the window. She opened the jam, dipping her finger in to taste it. Some summers before she and Inge had made it together using a late crop of cherries. The copper pan bubbled in Inge's kitchen, filling the building with a sugary warmth that lingered for days afterwards. It had been one of those late summer days when there was no wind and the air felt impossibly heavy. She'd just started working for Erik and Inge. That day now seemed very distant, almost a different place, another life. She could see the three of them, sitting behind piles of books at the back of the bookshop and eating the still-warm jam on fresh rolls and looking through the catalogues, discussing Blixen, Munk, Rørdam. Erik, sitting between the two of them, smoking his Partagas cigar and cursing over his search for forgotten writers.

The sound of bicycle tyres on the wet track brought her back from her thoughts. Søren. Otto, Henning's dog, skittered along beside him. The boy looked gaunt, almost feral. He dropped three bottles of Tuborg down onto the table. 'There are things that you wouldn't do, right?' he said, his face solemn. What was he talking about? He continued to stare at her.

'Why do you ask?' she said.

'Some German came to see Far today. Told me to keep out of trouble.' He cracked the top off one of the bottles with his teeth and handed it to her. 'Maybe he knows something.'

'Gestapo?'

'He wasn't in uniform. He stunk out the house with his disgusting sweet pomade. Peaches or something.'

Per arrived half an hour later. Ellen avoided his eyes, feelings of anger mixed with guilt swimming about in her head. Søren told Per about the visit.

'What's your Far been up to?' Per said.

'Nothing.'

‘Do you think they know something about us?’ said Per.

‘I don’t know, they kicked me out of the room,’ he said.

‘Perhaps you shouldn’t go on this one, Søren,’ said Ellen.

‘I’m coming. You can’t stop me.’ The boy glowered at them both. The silence that followed seemed to settle the matter. They didn’t light the oil lamps, not wanting to alert anyone who might be passing to their presence, and ate in the gathering darkness.

‘I’m sorry about the book. Do you forgive me?’ Per said, taking Ellen to one side.

‘It’s not about forgiveness.’

‘If it’s any consolation, I haven’t seen Leutnant Nagel since then. He might have made the decision for me.’ Per didn’t mention the party. Or the dance with Ravn. Perhaps he hadn’t even noticed. She sensed the shift between them. The closeness drawing away. Ever so slightly.

Ellen shared out dried cherries from a tin. They tasted sweet but held a faint hint of the sea. They spoke little. Ellen tried to focus on the night ahead. Just get on with the work. After the meal, they shared a rolled cigarette outside, covering the glowing end with their hands. Per put the radio on very softly, jazz from New Orleans and the summerhouse filled with lazy curls of clarinets, sounds from a faraway place. In the half darkness, listening to the music, Ellen found herself imagining that what had happened and what was about to happen didn’t matter. That she could be separated from it all and the three of them could stay here by the fjord, undisturbed in the calm eye of the storm. Wishful thinking.

Søren sat with his head resting on his arms and looked out at the sea. *Seabirds of Jutland* lay unopened on his knees. Per cleared away the meal and came and lay down on the bed, his head resting on Ellen’s lap. ‘Aha!’ he said and bent down towards the floor. He held up an amber bead between his thumb and forefinger. ‘Look at that colour,’ he said. Ellen brought her hand to her bare neck. ‘Can I keep it?’ he asked.

‘I suppose,’ she said faintly. He dropped the bead into a sea shell he carried it in his pocket. Before she might have thought, how could she not love a man who carried a shell in his pocket. ‘To remind me of you,’ he said. ‘Our sea bell,’ he said and rattled it in her ear. He smiled at her and she smiled back, the sullen tinge of her own betrayal pressing at the base of her skull.

He closed his eyes. Ellen ran her hand through his hair and over the blond stubble on his chin. She drew along the length of his long nose with her finger. He pulled her face down towards his, kissing her lightly. His mouth tasted bitter, almost good. Perhaps he was more honest than her?

She turned up the radio, *Stranger on the Shore* filled the room. Per started to go through the plan. She barely listened, only catching the edges of words: the twenty-third rail, timing, separation. Time ached by. A full hour passed. Then another. Søren became restless. He began a sketch in his book, then abandoned it. He stood up and began to pace up and down, his hands pushed into his pockets. At just after one o'clock, Per announced that it was time to move.

It was a relief to be outside and breathe in the cold air. Ellen took a long look at the sea and the path shot across it by the moon's light. A single fishing boat was setting out for the night's work, the prow splitting the silvered skin of the sea.

The three of them picked their way across the beach to the coast road, through a hay field and into the woods. They needed to cover a few kilometres. Per had already marked out the path through the woods with a splash of white paint where the path divided. It would be easy to lose their way in the dark, he said. Each of them had a bag slung across their shoulders. Søren held his to his side to prevent the heavy spanners inside from clanking against each other. Ellen walked behind, treading as lightly as she could. Ahead a group of crows flew up, their wings sending a shudder through the tangle of branches above their heads. Shards of moonlight cut through into the clearings where trees had been felled and onto the black circles of the marshy lakes that were scattered through the wood. They passed close to one of these lakes, their bodies making shadows that fanned out to form giant figures, slanting across the cold expanse of water. Per picked up speed and Ellen had to break into a run from time to time to keep up. Even so, she lost ground, only catching up with the others when they paused where the track divided. After more than an hour, they emerged from the wood and skirted along the side of a field. The half-frozen stubble cracked under their feet. Frost caught in their hair, their eyebrows. An owl swooped low out of the woods, hooted softly, and then circled back into the darkness. At the end of the field, they climbed the fence and saw, down below, the railway track. They scrambled down the bank and began to walk between the rails. Their footsteps rang out as their boots hit the wooden sleepers. Ellen was relieved when Per slowed his pace. They moved onto the bank on one side. The ground was rutted with rabbit holes and small rocks. Ellen stumbled, once going over hard on her ankle. She pushed herself on, trying to ignore the arc of pain shooting through her shin bone. Her face and hands ached with cold.

'This is the place,' whispered Per. Ellen could see the black arch of the tunnel up ahead. Her ankle throbbed. Ravn had told them that a goods train would pass through the tunnel at ten past three. It was loaded with weapons destined for German troops in Norway.

Their task was to stop the train by derailing it. Others were hiding in the vicinity and would take the weapons. Per began to unpack his bag carefully: the explosives wrapped in brown paper, fuses, a detonator and heavy roll of wire. He laid everything out carefully onto a piece of sack cloth. Ellen watched with a realisation that someone might be killed that night. She pressed her nails into the palm of her hand at the thought.

A light whistle. Ellen turned to see Søren beckoning her. She followed him along the track toward the tunnel. A dank smell of rotting vegetation hung in the entrance. They turned and began to count the wooden slats. At the twenty third, Søren pulled the spanner from his bag and squeezed it onto the nut that held the rail down onto the sleeper. It was stiff. Ellen poured a little oil onto the frozen metal and rubbed the rim with her fingers. The chill of the metal felt like a burn. They placed their hands on the spanner and started to pull. Nothing moved and their hands kept slipping. Finally, Søren stood up and kicked the handle with force and the nut shifted a fraction. It was enough to get things started. Five minutes later the nut came loose and they started on the next. Up ahead, Per crouched by the rail to place the first of the explosives. He came towards them trailing the wire along the track. Ellen and Søren had managed to pull one end of the rail free and now tried to push it upwards and outwards so the train would be sent off its tracks. Per arrived and set the last of the explosive. It then took the three of them to move the rail a fraction further from its line. They wedged it in place with a piece of rock. A slight shift upwards in the angle, that's all that would be needed.

Just before three o'clock they withdrew into the woods and crouched twenty metres apart. All Ellen had to do now was to watch what happened to the train and then return to the summerhouse. The next day she would go to the bookshop as usual and report what had happened to Inge. She sat down on a pile of logs, rubbing her leg. It was just a sprain but she could feel the tender swelling around her ankle bone.

At the party, Ravn had asked Ellen to keep an eye on Søren. He was impetuous and there'd been enough accidents recently. Ellen knew he was alluding to a local farm boy from Sondrup, Anker Brandt. He'd taken his father's hunting rifle and shot at a soldier guarding the Horsens prison. It had been midday, bright sunshine, but he'd missed completely. Anker was found later hiding in a barn, curled up by his pigs. Later he was sent to the new camp at Hellerup in the south of Jutland. Ellen had seen his tearful mother putting together a box of supplies for him at the Red Cross office in the town square. They would make sure he received it, the volunteers had said. But at the last moment the woman had seemed reluctant to part with the parcel. She had stared down at the strange address: Prisoner 142, Hellerup Camp and had pulled the parcel back across the table. She wrote her son's name, pressing

each letter deep into the brown paper and then clasped the parcel tightly to her chest as if she could reach him through the ink and paper. 'I don't like the number. His name is Anker Brandt,' she'd said as she handed the parcel back.

The rails started to moan. Gently at first, but it soon grew to a low rumbling down the track. Ellen watched the tunnel. Two pin-pricks of light. They expanded into bright discs. Then a thundering noise as the engine erupted out of the tunnel. The white flash of the first explosion then a second, smaller this time, and the screech of metal. Ellen covered her ears with her hands, but she kept her eyes on the train. The driver's carriage remained on the track, but the second fell onto its side, uncoupling as it turned over. The carriages behind pushed up against it and sent the front wheels up onto the grassy bank. Clods of mud and grass flew up amid the sparks into the night sky. She heard the crack of wood splitting. She inhaled the smoke, acrid and grainy, which began to burn in her lungs.

The carriages slowed and settled on their sides, still creaking. It was time for her to leave. She disappeared into the woods, coughing to rid her lungs of the smoke. Two shots rang out behind her. Who had fired? Did Per or Søren have a gun? The soldiers? She broke into a limping trot and didn't look back, trying to keep weight off her ankle.

Soon after Ellen stood on the step of the summerhouse and felt the wind blowing into her face. She watched for a change in the sky and waited for Søren to come back. It had been two hours since she slipped out of the wood. She'd washed her hands and face and changed her clothes, which were streaked with brown oil. It had taken some time before the trembling in her hands stopped. She bundled her clothes into a bag; they held the residue of acrid smoke. During the night the wind had picked up. The fjord was streaked white and the wind thrashed in the wood behind the summerhouse, dragging the pine tops this way and that. She went back inside and waited. It was dawn before Søren arrived. He flung himself down on the bed, his voice hoarse from the smoke. 'Otto, where's Otto?' he said.

'He hasn't come back.'

'There weren't any weapons. Not a single one. Only bicycles – hundreds of bicycles.'

'I heard shots,' Ellen said.

'The guards fired into the woods.'

'You were supposed to come straight back. I was worried.' Søren didn't reply, but turned onto his side.

The little dog still hadn't appeared by the next morning. When Ellen and Søren cycled into town, they were faced with a peculiar sight. The street was filled with people riding the

new bicycles. The black enamelled frames glinted in the morning sun. News of the train's cargo had slipped quickly into the town. People rushed to the embankment and to help themselves. That morning the Commandant had given orders to retrieve the stolen bicycles and throughout the day German soldiers tried to get them back, their irritated faces appearing around every street corner. They soon gave up. Henning had put up a sign for free paint in J. P. Larsen & Sons shop window and brushes and pots of coloured paint were left in the archway. By the evening, many of the bicycles had been brightly painted, some tauntingly with the blue, red and white roundels of the British RAF. The cobbles under the archway were left splattered with coloured paint. It was the first time for a long time that Ellen had seen people smiling, some clapping hands as they passed each other as if they were part of some exotic cycling troupe.

March 1947

Can people change their skins?

What do you mean, Jesper?

Like a chameleon.

I don't see what you're getting at.

Become someone else.

Of course not.

A Norwegian, an Englishman, a German?

Change your nationality, you mean?

Far says it can happen without the person even realising it. Then, pouf! Like magic, they're someone else and no one else ever knew.

You mean, abracadabra?

Exactly.

January 1944

Mid-afternoon, the lamps not yet lit. Ellen, Per and Ravn sat in the dining room at Ravn's house, the carcass of a half-eaten chicken between them on the table. Ravn picked at it with his fingers. This was the first time that Ellen had seen him since the party. Neither of them had spoken about what had happened. What was there to say? He'd touched her at the elbow when she arrived. That was all. Per tapped his foot under the table. He seemed sulky, distant, as if thinking about other things.

They discussed the repercussions of the train sabotage. Henning had been arrested for leaving paint pots on a public street. He was released with a ridiculous fine and went home to find Otto's bloody body dumped in a sack outside his apartment.

'Bastards,' Per said. 'He really loved that dog.'

'I take it as a sign that they're getting frustrated. They've been confiscating the bicycles, but people keep breaking in and stealing them back again,' said Ravn. 'A small victory, I suppose. But the train's been removed and they've repaired the track, so it was all for nothing.'

'We should have used more explosives,' said Per.

'There's a shortage,' said Ravn.

'There's always a shortage. Of everything.'

'We'll just have to be patient.'

'I've just about run out of patience,' said Per, dropping his head on his chest.

Outside, the garden was covered in a fine layer of new snow which reflected a blueish winter light back into the room. Ravn's collection of barometers and series of photographs of old men lined the walls. Ellen recognized Groucho Marx and Charlie Chaplin, but not the others? Tall men in hats with rigid backs. Figures of authority. Were they his ancestors? Annalise, more sullen and pale than ever, came in and wordlessly served them tea before leaving.

'She's upset with me,' said Ravn, casting a glance at Ellen. 'Says I'm always staying out too late and leaving her with the children.'

'What does she expect?' Per said. 'This is resistance.'

'Yes, well, she doesn't seem to want to hear that.' He wiped his hands on a napkin and shifted in his chair. 'Back to business. There's something that needs to be done.' Ravn took off his glasses and rubbed his nose. 'Do you know Grete's Patisserie on Grønlandsvej?'

‘Yes,’ said Ellen. ‘I go there to buy *drømmekage* for Inge. She has a weakness for it.’ Ravn didn’t seem to acknowledge what Ellen said. He went on. ‘One of the women who works there has been seen cavorting around the town with a German. Her name’s Agneta.’ Ravn spoke quietly, his voice dropping with each word. He pushed his teacup away wearily, got up and walked over to a drinks tray in the corner of the room. ‘How do you both feel about that?’

‘She made her choice, I suppose,’ Ellen said. She wondered if Agneta was the guileless girl she’d seen on the beach.

‘But if it’s the wrong choice?’ He lifted a glass decanter from the tray. ‘I’m tired of tea. Join me in a brandy? Cognac aux prunes, the real thing from France.’

‘No. Thank you,’ said Ellen. Per shook his head. Ellen wondered what it was that Ravn wanted them to do.

‘Curaçao?’ said Ravn.

‘No,’ said Ellen.

‘Agneta chose badly and now she needs to pay the price. Per agrees, don’t you?’ said Ravn, filling a large glass with cognac. Ellen looked at Per. He shrugged.

‘Price?’ said Ellen.

‘She need to be taught a lesson, so that the others learn too,’ said Per.

‘I don’t know. She’s very young,’ Ellen hesitated. She remembered the Chopin on the gramophone, the sleek headed men in the sea, the girls’ unfettered laughter. ‘It’s not as if she’s done any real harm, is it?’

‘She’s undermining what we are fighting for,’ Ravn said, turning the glass in his hands. ‘If you don’t want to help, Per will do it on his own.’ Ravn wasn’t in the mood for discussion, she could see that.

‘Do what exactly?’ she said.

‘Tell her to stop seeing the German.’

‘I can do that,’ she said cautiously, aware that more was to come, but wanting to show herself to be strong. She’d seen the huddled groups in the dark alleyways. The drawn female faces sitting on stools, their skin pale against the crowd of men in dark coats around them.

‘Per will shave her head,’ Ravn said. ‘He’s done it before.’ A bitter taste caught in Ellen’s throat. Had he really? Per had never told her. She looked across at him. His face was almost impassive. Or was there a hint of some darker cruelty? The low sun flashed and she saw an image of Per standing over a wide-eyed girl, a handful of dark hair twisted around his wrist.

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‘I won’t be coming anymore.’ The voice was high-pitched, full of emotion. Ellen turned to see a figure silhouetted in the doorway of the paintworks. Leutnant Nagel. Her first thought was to rush over and cover the pile of printed newsletters, but she stopped herself. She let the handle of the press drop and stood upright. If she could just keep calm, it would all be alright. The German was in full uniform: cap, belt, boots, grey jacket. He seemed agitated and his face was wet with sweat. He fingered his belt buckle, *Gott mit uns* inscribed in ugly italics around the edge. He began muttering under his breath. What was wrong with him? Was he sick? The rims of the Leutnant’s eyes were the colour of fresh blood, the rest of his face pallid. His eyes flashed wildly around the room. ‘Where’s Per?’ he screamed.

‘He’s out.’

‘I need to see him.’

‘Are you alright?’ Ellen said without moving. A sob, raw, almost primeval, erupted from Nagel’s body. He staggered into the laboratory and collapsed onto a stool, a piece of paper clasped in his fist. ‘This,’ he said, his voice barely under control, ‘is the war now. This ...’ He threw the paper across the floor. Ellen crouched to pick it up. A telegram?

‘Dead.’ Nagel’s voice more animal than human.

‘Who’s dead?’ she said. She moved slowly towards the pile of newsletters and draped her jacket over them. Nagel, his head dropped into his hands, didn’t seem to notice. ‘Hilda. My Hilda,’ the Leutnant moaned. Wild-eyed, he drew himself up and lifted his hands in a wide arc ‘Boom!’ he said.

Ellen picked up the piece of crumbled paper and began to smooth it. The type had smeared badly and she could barely make out the words. The Leutnant began to speak again. ‘Berlin burns. Right now, at this very moment. Do you see? It is a furnace of brick and steel, bone and blood. The streets, the docks, the people. Do you hear me? Everybody is on fire, running for their lives.’ He let his cap drop from his head and began to tug at his hair. ‘Hilda has vanished. Her parents can’t find her. She’s probably lying there right now, crushed under her own home, burning, burning, burning.’ Heinrich himself pulled upright and zig-zagged his way back through the doorway. ‘Tell Per, it’s over. It’s all over,’ he said before slamming the door behind him.

Silence sealed itself in the laboratory. Ellen took a moment to take in the scene she’d just witnessed. Heinrich, usually so in command of himself, was mad with grief. Was Hilda his wife? She couldn’t stop the image forming, the hem of a skirt, the pink arc of a foot just

visible under a smoking pile of rubble. Out there beyond the pinewoods with its dark lakes, across the borders, across the burnished sea to the burning city where Hilda had lived.

The next morning the bedroom at Nørregade felt claustrophobic. Ellen had woken with sweat-drenched sheets, her woodland daughter, pale skulled, still bright in her mind from her dream. And now a new ghost at her side. A young woman standing among the ruins of a burning building. Ellen rose from her bed and rushed to the bathroom. A splash of cold water on her face calmed her. Today she would go to Grete's Patisserie. A wave of nausea passed through her. Would Agneta fight back? What would she do if she did?

She entered the patisserie a few minutes before closing time in a state of almost perfect fear. Per came with her. He was in a truculent mood. She'd told him about Nagel's outburst. Per had looked alarmed at first, then pensive. Then he asked several times whether she was sure about what the Leutnant had said. Did he really say it was over? What did Ellen think he meant by that? Eventually Ellen became irritated and told Per to be quiet. In response, he became sulky and silent.

She needed to focus. Under the glass of the cabinet a few unsold almond cakes and coconut whirls remained on a metal tray. The bread baskets lay empty. No customers. She watched Per shut the door and turn the sign to closed. As Ellen began to pull down the blinds in the windows, a young woman emerged from the back of the shop. A narrow face, slight hips, long brown hair tied in a pony-tail. Agneta. 'What are you doing?' she said. 'Leave those blinds alone.' Her eyes were a striking dark blue colour, turned up at the sides. Ellen turned to face her, her heart pounding. 'We're here because of the company you keep,' she said. The woman's shoulders dropped slightly. 'I don't see why that has anything to do with you,' she said and began to back away. Per moved quickly to stand behind her. 'Stay there,' he said. 'Where's Grete?'

'At the bank,' said Agneta.

'Do you know why we're here?' said Per.

'I can tell you don't want to buy cakes.' Agneta lifted her fingers to the fine silver chain around her neck and began to rub it gently. Ellen sensed that the girl had some strength in her.

'Some members of the Horsens resistance group decided that you need to be sent a message about your behaviour. You've been seen cavorting around town with a German soldier once too often,' Ellen said. She used Ravn's word. She should have found a better one. Nevertheless, her words seemed to affect Agneta, whose face paled.

‘One of us is going to shave your head and you’re going to let us,’ Per said flatly. The girl gasped and pressed a palm over her mouth. ‘Please, no. Mor will kill me,’ she said and moved her hand towards her hair.

‘It can happen in here or out there,’ Ellen said, as calmly as she could and gestured to the street. The thud of a headache had started above her left eye. Standing in the room, she wondered how she found herself in this position. This was not the sort of thing that she ever dreamed she would be a part of. Yet, here she was, a part of it. Had the occupation had tainted her, just like it had tainted everybody else? She wasn’t any different.

‘Why me?’ Agneta said. ‘I’m not the only one.’ It was a question Ellen couldn’t answer.

‘Because you’re the one we know about,’ Per said. The girl stared at Per and then back at Ellen. She rushed over to the door and made a grab for the handle, but Per spun round and wedged his foot against the foot of the door. ‘I’m afraid not, Agneta,’ he said.

Ellen took a deep breath and approached the girl. ‘Listen, this is going to happen.’ She spoke as gently as she could. ‘You’ve seen the girls out there in the streets with those mauls of men around them. Do you want that? Think yourself lucky that you’re in here at least.’ Ellen said. The girl’s body relaxed a fraction. Was she finally resigning herself to the situation?

‘The key, please?’ said Ellen. The girl hesitated, then slipped her hand into her pocket and handed the key to Ellen.

‘I’ll get the water,’ Per said and headed towards the kitchen. A few minutes later he returned with bowl of warm water and a chair. He let the chair drop onto the floor with a clatter. ‘Here, if you please,’ he said.

Agneta sat down, her face had turned to the colour of white clay. ‘I’m not like those girls down at the Jorgensen’s Hotel,’ she said, seeming to compose herself. ‘I’ve done nothing to be ashamed of. Franz is his name, if you’re interested. A decent man. There are quite a few of them around, if you bother to look. Even Danish ones.’ She managed a soft laugh. Ellen felt a prick of admiration at the girl’s courage.

‘After the war, I might even marry him,’ Agneta said, smoothing out the folds of her dress before dropping her hands into her lap. ‘Cut it all off if it makes you feel better. It makes no difference to me.’ The girl pushed her chin forwards, a look of defiance in her eyes. Per stepped forward.

‘No,’ she said with some force. ‘I want her to do it.’ Agneta pointed to Ellen. Per hesitated, then waved his hand.

‘Of course,’ he said. Ellen felt her feet move slowly. A pair of scissors dropped into her hand. Was she shaking? Steady now, she thought. She would do this not because the girl deserved it, but because she needed to prove something to Per and Ravn. Perhaps to herself as well.

The first touch of Agneta’s hair shocked her. It was thick and unexpectedly warm. The first clumps fell to the floor in long curls. Ellen felt the girl’s neck stiffen as she cut close to her skull. She made big cuts in a slow rhythm. How many years would it to grow back, three? Even more? When all the hair was cut short, she dampened Agneta’s head with water and added soap. She drew out the Gillette Extra-Blue razor that Ravn had given her. ‘Keep quite still. I’ll try not to nick you,’ Ellen said.

She worked slowly and carefully, scraping off the hair to reveal the skin underneath. The girl remained still, her body tense. Her scalp looked oddly grey, the whorl of her ears, small and perfect as a shell. Ellen had heard that sometimes the ears were sliced away by men full of anger and some frustrated sexual need. She stopped. A thread of crimson blood rolled down her forehead. She had nicked the skin above the girl’s ear. Ellen steadied her hand. ‘Sorry,’ she said, wiping the blood away with her sleeve.

‘Why do you feel so entitled to do this to me?’ Agneta asked.

‘Perhaps I’ve not compromised myself,’ Ellen said. She regretted the words as soon as they came out of her mouth. Too judgemental.

‘There’s not a person in this town who hasn’t compromised themselves in some way,’ Agneta said. ‘You work in Nilsson bookshop, right?’

‘Yes,’ said Ellen.

‘I suppose you’ve refused to sell books to the enemy, have you?’ Agneta put a heavy stress on the word enemy. Ellen didn’t answer. Instead she leant closer to shave the remaining patch of hair on the crown of her head.

‘Well, have you?’ Agneta said and let out a dry laugh and tipped back her head, forcing Ellen to lift the blade from the girl’s scalp. Ellen breathed deeply and allowed the adrenalin in her body to slip away. ‘I sell to them, but I’ve always avoided friendship.’ Ellen glanced up at Per who caught her gaze. Agneta noticed the exchange between them.

‘Ah, so what about you then?’ Agneta said. ‘have you strayed from the path? The angel of judgement here looks less than pleased.’ Per stayed silent. He looked unnerved.

‘I’m finished,’ Ellen said. She felt an urgent need to get out of the patisserie and back to the solitude of Søvindhus.

Agneta stood up and, brushed the hair from her dress. She ran a hand over her head, then wiped her face with her sleeve. 'It's my birthday today. Nineteen,' the girl said quietly. Ellen looked down and noticed a gentle swelling in the girl's belly. Agneta grasped Ellen's hand and pressed the palm against her dress. Ellen felt the firm shell of the girl's swollen womb. A pang of envy, or was it grief, passed through her. The girl held Ellen's gaze.

'One more thing,' Per said, approaching Agneta, a bottle of iodine in his hand.

'What are you doing with that?' Agneta said.

'A gesture,' he said. He crouched down in front of Agneta and lifted the girl's skirt.

'No,' she said, trying to push down her skirt. Ellen saw the strip of pale skin above the top of the girl's stocking. Agneta's gaze fell on her and felt her skin flare red.

'That is enough, Per.' Ellen almost shouted. What was he doing?

'Ravn's instructions were clear. Paint a swastika on her to show what a whore she is. Or do you want me to do it on her head?' said Per.

'It's too much,' said Ellen, pushing him away. He slipped and fell onto his side, a look of fury on his face and dropped the brush.

As they left, Ellen heard Agneta's hard little sobs coming from the kitchen. Per turned and hurled the bottle of iodine at the window. The glass bottle bounced back and skittered into the gutter.

'You didn't need to try to paint a swastika on her', she said. A siren sounded and a police car turned onto the street.

'Go,' said Per. They ran off, separating as they reached the end of the street. Ellen headed for the harbour wall where she'd left her bicycle and cycled as fast as she could out of town and along the coast road. Her head thumped and she could feel her pulse running thick in her throat, the events of the last hour turning in her head. Once back inside *Søvindhuset*, she stood, hands against the wall, and waited until her breathing eased. The empty house felt like a relief. Inside the patisserie she'd crossed a line. But Per's callousness had shocked her. She went outside, sat on the step and looked out at the grey expanse of the fjord as if searching for an answer to a question.

March 1947

The thing is ... it wasn't black and white for everyone. It was complicated.

Resistance or collaborator. One or the other, that's what Far says.

There's a space in-between.

What about Søren?

There was no in-between for him.

So, which was he? The black or the white?

The white, I suppose.

Like the pearl owl.

Just like the pearl owl.

January 1944

Monday. Grey afternoon light. Tiredness washed through Ellen as she rearranged the shelves. Someone had mixed everything up on the poetry shelf. Since the events in Greta's Patisserie, she hadn't slept well and, for once, she was relieved that the bookshop had few customers. She hadn't seen Per since the attack. He'd returned to his frenetic hours of work. Since the sabotage attack, the town had felt the brunt of German retaliation. Travel permits were cancelled, people were arrested in the early hours of the morning before being released without charge days later. Soldiers had even been seen puncturing tyres on any bicycles they believed had come from the derailed train.

That day she was in no mood to talk to anyone. A lone customer, a regular, Hr. Jacobsen in his heavy tweed jacket, browsed in the detective and crime section. She came back into the shop from the storeroom, a box of matches in hand. She bent to light the nub of a candle pressed into a glass jar. The thud of boots reached her first. Fast, rhythmic. She turned to see them, three soldiers coming through the doorway, the damp notes of winter clinging to the wool of their uniforms. If she'd imagined the fear, as when she'd once been lost on the fjord in a winter storm or almost crushed as a child between the hull of a fishing boat and the harbour wall, it was not like this. This was terror, sharp tipped and visceral. Would she be arrested? She imagined Agneta's boyfriend demanding something be done or perhaps they already knew about her involvement with the train.

One of the soldiers pushed a wheelbarrow in front of him, forcing Hr. Jacobsen to move back against the shelves. The wheels cut wet trails across the floor. An officer followed, tall and flat-faced. Leutnant Heinrich Nagel. He held a stoop in his shoulders as if he carried a heavy weight, the shadow of a beard just visible on his face. Above his nose sat a pair of wire-rimmed glasses. He looked different. Deathly pale, a sheen of perspiration on his upper lip. A gold signet ring shone on his left hand. He spoke in Danish with barely a trace of an accent. He'd even picked up the Jutland burr. 'Miss Pederson,' he said softly and extended his long, tapered fingers towards her. From the corner of her eye, Ellen noticed Hr. Jacobsen heading for the door, abandoning a detective novel on the counter. He shrugged an apology in Ellen's direction as he left.

'We're here to make a search, Miss Pederson,' said Nagel. Bile inched up her throat. Ravn's list? Could he know about it? The Leutnant's hand remained extended, floating in the space between them. 'You prefer silence. Understandable, of course,' he said. Did she catch

the trace of a sigh? He drew so close to her that she could smell his breath over his cologne, the remnants of cooked meat of some kind, pungent, almost fetid. A dense map of blue veins was just visible beneath his skin under his eyes. 'Perhaps I'd be the same if I were in your situation. However, you could save us both a great deal of trouble by simply giving me what I want,' he said. Ellen held his gaze. What *did* he want? It might not be the list. It might be the illegal books? Nagel broke eye contact first, looking vaguely into the middle distance, where his eyes seemed to lose focus. His eyes held a dullness in them that suggested a profound emptiness. Had he had news of Hilda? Yet Ellen felt there was something more, something darker that resonated from him and it frightened her.

'As you wish,' Leutnant Nagel said, a hint of a smile playing around his lips, as if someone had just told him a mildly entertaining joke. He slipped a hand into the open cuff of her shirt sleeve. The skin on her forearm tightened as he dragged his fingertips down across the top of her hand, before encasing her hand in his. Her body became rigid.

'You remind me very much of someone,' he said, lifting his broad face up to hers. 'It would be easier if we could be friends.'

'An impossibility,' Ellen said.

'Ah, the little match girl has some spark.' He let out a dry laugh and smoothed his hands over his coat pockets. 'Clear the shelves,' he said more loudly. She felt a fine spray of spittle land on her lower lip. She saw him then, over her, the red flare of his tongue flashing from his mouth. Her body began to shake. Nagel uncurled her fingers from the box of matches and took them from her. 'Do you mind if I smoke?' he said. She didn't move. It seemed a long time before she could speak. 'What are you looking for?' She forced out the words. 'We gave you the books.'

'It's not that,' Leutnant Nagel said. Her throat became dry. Don't give anything away.

The two soldiers who had accompanied the Leutnant were patient workers. They began by the entrance. Ellen calculated how long it would take to reach Ravn's book. With two of them, half an hour? An hour at most. She dreaded that Inge would return soon to find this chaos. The men worked methodically, checking the title of each book, cracking open the spines and shaking out the pages. Did they know what they were looking for? It was hard to tell. One of them, a corporal with a narrow head and tightly curled hair, clambered up the ladder to clear the top shelf. He began dropping the books down one by one. A series about engineering designs from around the world that hadn't sold well. The hardboards landed on the floor with a crack.

Ellen focussed on the shop doorway, keeping her eyes away from the top shelf at the back where Ravn's little book sat among a collection of local history books. She was aware of the Leutnant sitting on her stool, watching her thoughtfully. Each puff of his cigarette made the end glow red like a hot coal. She tried to keep her face as blank as possible. After a time, he ground the butt of the cigarette against a glass jar on the counter, his narrow wrists rolling about inside the heavy woollen sleeves. The first barrow had been filled and the corporal pushed it outside, dumping the contents onto the street. She caught a glimpse of marbled endpapers streaked brown and red flashed in the sunshine and imagined Ibsen plays tumbled out over fishing books, travels in Asia and the philosophies of Kierkegaard. Dread tightened in her belly. The list would be found. And then what?

Leutnant Nagel picked up the detective story, licking his finger as he turned a page. A slow reader, Ellen thought. If he was reading at all.

'Would you mind making some coffee, Miss Pederson?' the Leutnant said. He looked up at Ellen, before sweeping his gaze over her body.

'We don't have any,' she said.

'Ersatz will do.'

'Does Per know you are here?' she said. The Leutnant looked at her sharply. 'The coffee, please,' he said.

Ellen moved into the back room, relieved to be out of the Leutnant's line of sight and exhaled several long breaths. Thoughts hurtled about in her head. The people on the list. Per, Ravn, herself and Søren. Why had she been so stupid to let the boy write his name? Why hadn't she scribbled it out later? Her hands shook as she measured out the coffee grounds. Should she just tell the Leutnant now? Give him the list and save the damage to the books? She stood at the back of the room, the winter light outside barely reaching her through the window. A pair of gulls chattered among the bare branches of the cherry tree. She stared at the window, then tapped the pane sending them away.

A presence behind her. Cologne, putrid undertones. The Leutnant moved silently like a heavy fall of snow at night. He wrapped long arms around her ribs pressing the air from her lungs. She let out a gasp.

'Shhh,' he whispered into her ear. He started to unpin her hair, drawing out a thick length of it and pulling it through his fingers. Her mouth filled with saliva. His hot breath tangled in her hair. She tried to twist away but he tightened his arm around her forcing her forwards. He pushed a skein of her hair into her mouth with his fingers.

Did he say something? Hilda? Ellen felt him lift her skirt, the thin fabric tearing apart at the seams. She tried to shout out, but the dry knot of hair caught in her throat. He dragged her skirt upwards. Blood pooled in her head. Her surroundings slipped out of focus, became a blurred landscape of shadows. A flash of dark water, the underbelly of the fishing boat. Was he going to hurt her? She held her breath. Quite suddenly the Leutnant's movement ceased, as if he were frozen. For heavy seconds, she waited. For the clink of his belt buckle. For something. But there was nothing, only his breathing, rapid and shallow. Slowly she felt the weight of his forehead press down against her shoulder blade, a slackening in the crook of his elbow. A whimpering sound that followed.

When he let go, her legs gave way and she fell to the floor. She spat the hair from her mouth and retched. Lying quite still in the rectangle of pale sunlight, she sucked in long breaths. Behind her, she heard the Leutnant move away and the door click softly shut.

His voice outside, thick-tongued and low, instructed the soldiers to hurry up. The coffee pot lay at her feet; the dark stain of water had turned the yellow fabric of her skirt to black. She felt tethered to the floor, unable to move. A few minutes later - was it longer? - Inge's voice cut through the fog in Ellen's head. She forced herself up, stumbling against the sink. She shook out her skirt, the seam had torn. Cupping her hand under the tap, she gulped in the cool water, and then pressed her hands to the sides of her face. Outside, a sea fret had risen, blowing white through the trees and scattering the gulls. She started to move, first soaking up the water from the floor with a cloth, then scraping up the dandelion grounds returning them to the pot. She observed her own hands, strange ponderous fragments seemingly separate from her body. She set a cup onto the tray. Beyond the doorway she could hear Inge shouting that it was a crime to burn books, an act of pointless spite. She would visit the town's Commandant. There would be consequences.

A burning book had a particular smell. Almost sweet, like buckthorn. Perhaps it was something in the ink or the bookbinder's glue? A little unsteadily Ellen walked back into the bookshop with the tray in her hands, a gnawing feeling of anger and fear circling in her chest. Leutnant Nagel looked out onto the street, his back to her. Orange flames streaked high almost to the top the door frames. Through the flames, she glimpsed the faces of the passers-by who had stopped to watch. The fire hissed like the wind over the fjord. Ellen set down the tray, poured coffee into the cup, spilling over into the saucer. Why had he stopped? Was it Hilda? She imagined Leutnant Nagel then, a burning tower. His eyes turning black, smoke streaming from the sockets. The soft hiss of skin splitting over his skull. The brief

illuminating effect of exposed bone before it turned to ash. She left the cup on the tray and walked out into the street.

By now the crowd had grown and was becoming agitated. A young couple tried to remonstrate with the soldiers. The soldiers ignored them and continued to pile books onto the pyre. Inge clasped her hands into a tight ball under her chin and wept quietly. Hr. Jacobsen, who had been witnessed the soldiers' arrival, rested an arm around Inge's narrow shoulders. When Inge saw Ellen, she stretched out her hands towards her. Flakes of white ash clung to her grey hair like petals. 'Tragedy, tragedy,' was all Ellen heard her whisper.

Shortly after four o'clock the soldiers found Ravn's book. Its discovery was announced by a little shriek from the curly haired corporal who leapt down from the ladder in a single bound. Leutnant Nagel took the folded paper from the book and shook it out. He read it, turned the page over and frowned. 'That will do,' the Leutnant said and tucked the list into his pocket, keeping the hollowed-out book clasped in one hand. The soldiers tipped the remaining books in their barrows onto the floor and left the shop. As the Leutnant reached the doorway, he turned back towards Ellen. 'They wouldn't let me go home. To find Hilda. Can you imagine being under a building that has burnt for three days?' A dark crimson blush spread up his neck. 'This occupation teaches us nothing except about our own shame.' He hesitated at the doorway and tapped his pocket. 'I'll hand this in to the Gestapo office. You have twenty-four hours.'

That night Ellen stayed in her old room in Inge's apartment. It had taken an hour to damp down the fire with buckets of water. As she washed the ash from her body, she tried to gauge the depth of her own emptiness compared to that of Nagel. The grey streaked water ran from her thighs, from her hair, pooling at her feet. She scrubbed at her skin, then poured bowl after bowl of cold water over her head. The water left her shivering, her skin blotched red. She took two clean towels, wrapped her hair in one and drew the other one around her body. In the mirror the pale oval of her face was reflected back at her. She wouldn't tell anyone about what had happened. It was something and nothing. Had she simply been a witness to a man's grief? She didn't know why, but she felt ashamed.

Back in her bedroom she turned out the lamp, drew up the blinds and opened the window. It was quiet outside, almost soundless. The cold night air enveloped her like liquid over her skin. She pulled on her clothes. By her watch it was after two. All that remained of the fire was a black circle and a low mound of scorched books. One book lay untouched on

the top of the pile, its pages, creamy and felt-thick, shimmering in the moonlight. Earlier Ellen had called Ravn to warn him. She told him about Søren's name on the list. He'd take the boy to *Søvindhuset* with Per. *You have twenty-four hours*. They were safe for that night at least. But after that? Inge said she would never leave the bookshop. The remnants of the fire loomed up at her. Nothing could be undone. She slipped down the stairs and left the house by the back gate. At *Søvindhuset* she found Per and Søren asleep on the bed. She fell into the chair, drew her knees into her chest and waited for sleep.

March 1947

Over coffee in Grete's newly painted patisserie Ravn ran a hand through his greying hair and made Ellen an offer. Why didn't she come and live with him and the boys in town? The house was large enough. They had more than enough space. She could have a room of her own. With the baby coming in a few months, wouldn't it be better to have the support of other people? How would she manage in Copenhagen on her own with a baby? The bookshop would be re-opening soon. When the baby born and she was ready, she might be able to go back to work there.

Ravn's suggestion was a practical one. Ellen really had no idea how she would cope with a new born baby in Copenhagen. She had few friends in the city and Fru Winkler, she was certain, wouldn't countenance an unmarried mother and child in the house. Ravn had taken care with his words. Some people might disapprove, he said, but Ellen felt strangely unworried about the prospect. She could tolerate it, after everything that had happened. Her instinct was that most people just wanted to get on with making new lives after the suffocating years of occupation.

But, afterwards, Ellen had sensed there was more to Ravn's speech. Had he glimpsed a future, one that Ellen dared not imagine herself? The two of them taking a tentative foothold towards some brighter place.

January 1944

When they came for them, thick snowflakes were falling onto the already white landscape. Ellen didn't hear the truck. Bass voices snatched at her through sleep. Men filled the summerhouse, silvered faces like turning leaves. The small space teemed with unfamiliar odours of greasy wool, engine oil, stale sweat. Soldiers. She opened her eyes to see giant hands on the boy's shoulders. A high rumbling overhead, a hard hammering under her ribs before blackness spilled across her vision. Then nothing. Had someone struck her? Afterwards she wasn't sure. She pulled herself up from the floor, the room a blur, and put on her glasses. She examined her face and body carefully, but found no marks. The only sign that anything had happened was an upturned chair, one of its legs splintered and lying at an awkward angle. And Per and Søren were gone.

Outside the snow drifted down from a white sky. Thousands of tiny crystals, light as gossamer, settled silently on the dunes, the pines, the track. She listened to the distant creak of the ice in the fjord, the gulls careening forlornly above her. What should she do? She fumbled for the radio and turned it on. The Allies continued to make daylight bombing raids on Berlin. The Russians had advanced on the Belorussian front. Even with all this news of war, the sound of a calm human voice reassured her. A trio of bombers flew low up the fjord making the walls of *Søvindhuset* quake. Ellen imagined the airmen inside, peering down onto the white terrain below. Were they watching for movement? Spotting their targets? Fear rolled in the pit of her stomach. She stayed inside feeling trammelled, weighed down by inaction. Why hadn't they taken her? Was it a trick?

Ravn arrived at dusk. The soldiers had questioned him and his apprentices, he told Ellen, but had arrested no one. It seemed that only Per and Søren had been taken. The two of them sat facing each other across the table. Ellen had never seen his face look so gaunt. He said she should get away from *Søvindhuset*. He suggested the attics above the Larsen paint factory. She could hide there for a few days. It would be best to keep away in case the soldiers came back. Ravn would find out where they were being held. Inge would carry on at the bookshop.

'We were all on the list too,' said Ellen.

'You saw it?' said Ravn. 'You let him write his name?'

Later Ellen cycled up to Larsen's in the dark, a small suitcase strapped to the handlebars. Ravn told her he'd return in a few days. He left her with a hurricane lamp, a radio, blankets, a basket of food and two buckets – one for water, the other to use as a lavatory.

Ellen stood in the centre of the attic, the only place where she could stand upright. For a few days her existence would be reduced to this triangular space with its rolls of paper and discarded objects. It was very cold. In one corner a stack of old fishing rods and crabbing nets loomed from the shadows. The floor was covered with a fine layer of dust and old seeds from the sycamore tree from the neighbouring property. She made herself a bed in the corner and wrapped herself in the blankets. The next morning when she opened her eyes it took her a moment to realise where she was. Dust motes danced through the light where it fell from the circular window at the gable end. Narrow shelves contained samples of wall paper designs, flowers, stripes, abstract patterns, the pages yellowed and brittle at the edges. What was happening to Per and Søren now? Were they still in Horsens? She got up, washed and opened a can of apples, fishing the pieces out with her fingers and drinking the thick syrupy juice from the tin. She explored the attic. In a small trunk she found old accounts, orders and receipts from the early days of the Larsen business. She flicked through a series of notebooks, bound in small stacks of four or five. They contained hundreds of experiments by Per's father and grandfather. She began to go through them but soon became restless. On the second night, she lowered the ladder and crept down from the attic into the pigment house. She moved slowly, taking in the peeling white-washed walls and clusters of cobwebs hanging in powdery clumps. She found a geranium plant, straggly with a few green leaves among the brown. She picked out the dead leaves, watered it and took it up to the attic. When Ravn came two nights later to tell her it was safe to return to *Søvinthuset* she took the geranium with her.

*

A tap at the door made Ellen start from her light sleep. Ravn. He looked worn down, his skin sallow. Two hollows had appeared under his cheek bones. He stared at the clothes strewn on the floor and the dirty plates and cups. Ellen pulled herself upright in the chair.

‘Are you alright?’ he said. Ellen nodded, seeing for the first time the neglect around her. She realised she’d been living in a kind of limbo for days. A smell of Germolene ointment and tobacco permeated the room. The look on Ravn’s face made her feel as if she’d been burned. ‘Today is the first time that I have prayed in twenty years,’ he said. Ellen sat up, alert. ‘What is it?’ she said. Ravn slumped against the door post. His body seemed to compress down, fold in on itself. ‘Per’s been released,’ he said, his voice so quiet that she could barely hear it. She waited for him to go on. Ravn closed his eyes, his whole body straining to hold something at bay.

‘And Søren?’ Ellen said.

‘I’ve been to the police. They claimed not to know anything. I went to the barracks, the prison, finally the Gestapo office. They kept me waiting for an hour, said they had to make some calls to find out.’ Ravn paused, drew his fingers through his beard. ‘The trial lasted less than ten minutes. Guilty. They shot him, Ellen. An execution.’ Ellen pulled herself to her feet, felt the blood rush from her head. Ellen dropped back into the chair, feeling the weight of her head fall towards her knees. ‘No, they can’t.’ She drew the blanket dragging it around her as if it could protect her from Ravn’s words. She needed to see Per, to ask him what happened. Why hadn’t he helped Søren? ‘Where’s Per?’ she said.

Ravn was crying now, sobs being forced from this throat. Ellen took off her glasses and began to polish them with the sleeve of her cardigan. Outside the naked beach looked more desolate than ever. She got up to collect the dirty plates from the table and put them in the sink. The sound of the water from the taps seemed almost deafening. She began to wash each plate vigorously. Ravn came and stood beside her, towel in hand, drawing in noisy breathes and sniffing. They worked without speaking.

Their silence was broken by the sound of a plane above the fjord. The sound grew, sending a raw trembling through the wooden walls. Ravn went to the door and looked up. ‘German. A Junkers Ju. Heading for the airfield at Aalborg. Still, they come.’ He sighed, as if relieved to have contained his emotions for the time being. ‘Ellen, do you have enough food here? You don’t look as if you are eating properly.’

‘I manage.’

‘I’ll get some food sent up to you.’

‘I want to see Søren.’

‘I don’t think that will be possible, Ellen.’

‘I need to see his body.’ She began to stack the plates back onto the shelf. The place was a mess. A plate slipped from her hand and smashed to the floor. They both stared at white fragments.

‘Listen, I don’t know where his body is. I don’t know what’s going on,’ said Ravn, ‘but any one of us could be arrested. It’s best if you stay here until we can organise a better hiding place for you. Or transport to Sweden. They might want to question you too. Don’t go out. Have some things packed. I’ll come for you soon. Now I have to get back.’ He took a long stride towards Ellen as if to take her in his arms. Pieces of china cracked under his weight. She shrank from him. He looked at her sadly, then paused in the doorway, deliberating. ‘Per’s on Alrø,’ he said without looking at her. ‘In the church. He leaves the day after tomorrow.’

After Ravn left, Ellen collected up the broken china. She laid them out on the table. There’d be no point in trying to repair it. And yet she carried on. It was a way to distract herself at least. Her fingers moved the pieces around until the shape of a plate returned. She would like some respite, a chance not to think about Per on the island, or about Søren wherever he might be. But that was impossible.

Minutes later she picked up all the pieces and threw them in the dustbin. She hadn’t told Ravn about Per’s friendship with Nagel. The question as to why squatted stubbornly in her thoughts. She lay on the bed and looked out through the open door towards the entrance to the fjord, her hand resting on the sea urchin fossil. All those resistance people being arrested. Hundreds now, perhaps thousands. Some would have been taken to Copenhagen for questioning. To the sixth floor of Shellhus, the new Gestapo headquarters. It was what they’d all feared the most. Being too weak. Betraying their friends in a moment. There’d been stories about the Gestapo using dentist drills on the prisoners’ gums, piercing the soft tissue until they struck the jaw bone. In those places the margins of their lives became ever narrower. In the end it would come to only one thing: to remain silent for as long as you could. Everyone had a breaking point.

The next night was very dark. Ellen had only the light of the low crescent of a moon to sail by. *Musling* tipped hard in the wind. The little boat sped over the waves, foam washing over the bows. Ellen ran to the church, turned the handle, heard the rusty scrape of iron against iron. She entered and eased the door shut behind her with the dull clunk of the latch. Would he still be there? The heavy shadows absorbed her body. She became like dusk. A faint silvered light fell onto the pews from an arched window high above. On the limestone flagstones an irregular pattern of shadows spread like bruises. She pressed her hands together to stop them from trembling. The questions burned. Why had Søren been shot? Why had Per been released? And what did Per's friendship with Nagel have to do with it all?

Slowly Ellen walked to the crypt at back of the church. Everyone knew the story of the great storm that had hit the island in the nineteenth century, flooding the crypt. The sea water washed in, smashing the old coffins against the walls, some of the bones had been hurled out to sea, but many were left scattered over the floor once the waters had subsided. All that remained were silty piles of bones, thighs, ribs, skulls, as if a massacre had taken place. Ellen peered down. The odour of the long dead, mildewed and damp, rose from the walls below. The air down at the bottom of the crypt appeared grey, as if water remained there. In the darkness, she listened for him.

Ten feet below the mouldering skulls seemed to speak to her. She suddenly needed to get outside and breathe fresh air. She ran out, bent over her knees and wretched. After a time she went back inside and sat on the wooden pew, letting her head rest against the stone wall. She must have dozed because she woke after some time. An hour? Longer perhaps. She'd lost track of time. A noise outside, low and blunt. Then something at the rear of the church. 'Per?' she called out. She turned to look to behind her. She could just make out a silhouette. The figure of a man. He moved towards her. Unsteady on his feet. 'You're here,' Per whispered. She looked up, rubbing her stiff neck with one hand. 'I am,' she said.

'How long?'

'A while, a few hours.' He sat down beside her and laid a hand on her arm. The weight of it felt almost overwhelming. 'You're cold.' His voice was hoarse.

'A little,' she said. Per put his arms around her, she breathed him in. He smelled of damp stone and sea. Something else too, sour and unwholesome. Through the cloth of his jacket she felt the rough edges of a bandage around his forearm. 'Are you hurt?'

‘A scuffle during the arrest. It’s nothing,’ Per paused. ‘Søren.’ Per saying his name made Ellen lift her fist to her mouth to hold down the sob that pushed up from below her solar plexus.

‘I didn’t know they would execute him. He shouldn’t have been there. He was too young,’ he said. Ellen dropped her head to her chest. She looked up. ‘Couldn’t you stop them?’

‘There was no time, Ellen. It all happened so quickly.’ The conversation stopped there. Ellen wondered if there was any more to be said.

Per led her to the small vestry at the back of the church. ‘This is where I have been sleeping. Lie here with me for a while. Before you go.’ She climbed onto the stone shelf with him, tucking the blanket around them both. He had his back to her and she slipped her arms under his shirt, felt the bones of his ribs, the fine hair on his chest. She pressed her cheek against his back and wrapped her feet over his feet, her arms over his arms. She listened to the sound of him, everything alive inside of him: lungs, heart, blood. She closed her body over his, as if to seal him to her skin.

They lay like that, behind the wind beaten walls of the Alrø church, like two gulls in a nest. In the distance, the relentless boom of the sea, the drumbeat to all their lives.

‘Why not you?’ She had said the words. She felt his back stiffen next to her.

‘I don’t know,’ Per said. Ellen stood up and went to the lectern at the front of the church. Per called after her. ‘Ellen?’ His voice, anxious. It didn’t take her long to find it. It was where Søren had hidden it under the oak plinth. She held the sleek object in her hand. Was it even loaded? Per came up behind her.

‘You told him something, didn’t you,’ said Ellen.

‘I didn’t tell anyone anything.’

‘You’re not listening. Not them. You told Nagel something.’ Her voice had lowered almost to a hiss. Per seemed to sink back on his heels. ‘Heinrich? We had an arrangement. I told him nothing of importance. Nothing that he couldn’t have worked out for himself,’ he said. She wanted to believe him.

‘I’m going away,’ he said. She turned to him, the gun laid flat in her palm. ‘You might need this,’ she said. Per stared at the gun. ‘Take it back to Ravn. Tell him to use it as he sees fit.’

March 1947

Lasse Toft, the clerk at the Records Office, arranged for Ellen to visit the site where the exhumation would take place. He offered to drive her there and she accepted.

‘Søren was a close friend of yours?’ the young man said as they sat in the car.

‘I taught him to read.’

‘Your pupil?’

‘Yes,’ she said, aware of the crack in her voice. She sat silent for the rest of the journey and watched the green-black shift of the countryside flew past. He’d be eighteen by now, she thought, not much younger than Lasse.

An official looking woman met them. She had red in her cheeks, wore thick wide legged trousers and had tied her fair hair into a dense bun. The rough track they followed wound its way into the heart of the wood. ‘This was the area used for executions after 28 August 1943.’ The woman spoke with a clipped voice. She seemed nervous. ‘We keep the clearing open. People put flowers here sometimes. The posts were over there.’ The woman pointed to the far end of the clearing.

‘Posts?’ asked Ellen.

‘There were three execution posts here, didn’t anyone tell you?’ the woman said.

‘No.’

‘There was some talk of putting them back up as a memorial, but I don’t know. Perhaps the place is best left as it is,’ the woman said. Ellen and Lasse followed her.

‘The burial area you are interested in is this way.’ The woman raised a gloved hand.

As Ellen walked, an image of soldiers carrying a body flickered in her head. She wondered where the soldiers were now, if they still thought about what had happened here? Did they remember the weight of a body in their arms? They must have noticed Søren, his pale colouring, his youth, his delicate beauty. Lasse slid alongside her. ‘Are you alright, Miss Pedersen?’ he said.

‘I might stay here for a moment.’

‘Of course.’ He laid a hand on her arm before backing away. He muttered a few words to the woman and Ellen heard their footsteps quietening behind her. Colours closed in around her: green, brown, ochre. Splashes of birdsong above. A peaceful place and yet she felt the vibration of a submerged sound resonating in the dark earth and the slender tail of the past weaving between the trees. Gunshots, the lifting of a body, the heavy drop of earth into the

pit. She took a long detour to walk back to the car, moving slowly, half in dream, listening to the larks high above the trees, the sibilant brush of the leaves against each other.

The exhumations were to take place in early May by a local pathologist, Doktor Åstergaard, and his team. Ellen was invited to attend. From behind the rope cordon, she watched the team of people arrive. A large van, several cars, people in grey overalls wearing heavy duty gloves that came up to their elbows. It took some time before they started digging. But once they did, the ground opened up quickly, as if it had been waiting for them. A pile of earth, loamy and wet, grew around the pit. They found tree roots and had to hack through them with saws. Ellen was reminded of the fossil hunting days with her father. The shapes of people crouched over the ground, scraping and brushing around the hard shapes in the earth. From time to time, one of them would stand, brush earth from knees, press hands into the small of a back. This, the slow ritual of unburial.

Just after lunch they found a piece of clothing. The discovery halted work for a period. The pit emptied. The team poured coffee from flasks and talked in muted voices, perhaps bracing themselves for the task to come. What would his body be like after all this time? They began again, this time using smaller trowels, then hands and fingers. Throughout the cool afternoon the remains of a body were brought out and laid out onto tarpaulin and covered with blue plastic cloth. That was it, Ellen thought, contemplating the small mound. All that was left of the boy whom she had taught to read and write, whom she had fed and loved.

The leader of the exhumation group, Doktor Åstergaard, a heavily built man of about forty with a large triangular face and a little pouch of a belly, beckoned to Ellen to approach.

‘Is it him?’ she said.

‘We can’t know for certain yet, but it’s likely,’ the doctor said. ‘The Germans perhaps imagined this day because each body we have unearthed over these months has a glass bottle buried next to it. Look.’ Doktor Åstergaard bent to pick up a dark object resting on the tarpaulin. ‘They put the person’s effects inside.’ He lifted the bottle and wiped the mud from the sides with a gloved hand. Inside, Ellen could see a twisted black knot of string. The doctor turned the bottle on its side and shook it gently. A dark oval lump hung from the string. ‘The peat turns everything black,’ he said, ‘even through the glass.’

‘The necklace I made for him,’ said Ellen. She looked down at the roughly human shape below the cover and imagined what lay beneath, the tangle of clothes, skin, ribs, pelvis, femur, the small bones of the feet and toes. Lost was the loose energy of his limbs, the warm

grey-green eyes, the upturned corners of his mouth. She dropped a hand to her stomach, felt the shadow of the child flicker inside.

‘There’s a small round hole to one side of the skull,’ the doctor said. ‘Just above the right eye socket. No more than three millimetres in diameter.’

‘A single shot?’ she asked.

‘Yes,’ the doctor said gently.

When she was ten years old, Ellen had gone to the pre-historic remains of a woman in a museum with her father. The woman had been discovered in a peat bog in northern Jutland in 1859. The remains consisted only of her head. Her plaited hair was wound up to form an elaborate knot. They called her *Stidsholtmose Kvinde*, the Stidsholtmose Woman. The woman’s hair had been dyed red by the mix of chemicals in the bog and her skin, which had been folded into fine layers, had turned a shiny brown-black colour. The features of her face were indistinguishable, but the intricate weaving of the hair seemed as if it had been recently plaited. Ellen remembered being fascinated by the woman’s story. The scientists thought she may have been a human sacrifice. The rest of her body was never found. It always made Ellen sad that she was only given the name of the place where she was found, she was offered no name of her own.

Ellen looked down at the meagre mound on the ground. At least the same would not happen to Søren. He wasn’t going to be discovered years later to be known only as the Skæring Heath man with a bullet hole in his skull. She would take him away, bury him on Alrø, mark the place with a stone and a name.

Later, back at *Søvindehuset*, Ellen drew a small circle on a piece of paper, pressing her pencil until it broke through. She held the sheet up to the light of the window, put her eye to the small jagged space the size of a bullet hole. It was just large enough to spy a clear circle of beach through it. And a boy running over the dark sand, wet-footed, full of the sea.

January 1944

In the days after Ellen had seen Per on Alrø, *Søvindhuset* seemed emptier than ever. Ellen lay awake trying to remember everything she could about the boy. He appeared in fragments. The frayed sleeves of his grey woollen coat. His worn-out boots. The collection of paintbrushes, clean as washed shells, still sitting in the smeary glass jar on the shelf. A pile of sketchbooks. *Seabirds of Jutland*, the shell necklace. The boy had so few possessions.

Ellen slept fitfully and awoke with a start to the sound of rain on the wooden deck outside, her mouth dry. She got up and pulled on a white shirt and trousers, both damp from the sea air, drank two glasses of water in hard gulps. Her stomach tensed with the shock of the cold. *I told him nothing of importance*. She pulled on her coat and walked down to the shoreline, Per's words rumbling under her skin. The snow and ice had all but disappeared. At the dark horizon, the sky blurred into the line of sea, dark citrine and graphite. Only the sand close to her had definition, a patch around her bare feet pitted with rain. Per. She spoke his name out loud. Once he told her that he felt like a better person when he worked with Heinrich Nagel. During those long hours did he avoid or perhaps forget the struggles of his conscience? Was it compassion as much as anything else that led him to give up half-secrets under the dim light of the laboratory. Or thoughtlessness. He must have understood how one thing led to another. A number first perhaps. Then a name. It was the way of science as much as of life. The energy that broiled away inside him had made him careless about his future. Not just his, but everyone else's too.

Ellen walked towards the sea. When a night rain fell on sand, a particular scent would be released. It contained something of the ancient dryness of crushed shells and vegetation. Sand had always been one of her father's favourite subjects. Sitting on the beach at Tåbæk or Juelsminde, he'd lift a handful of it in the air and let it fall over her hands or her feet. 'Look Ellen,' he said, 'these grains are all that are left of millions of creatures who were once alive. We all become sand in the end.' His words made her think of her mother in her white box, being lowered into the wet earth. She thought of Søren. How long would it be before they too became dry, warm sand.

Ellen stood with her feet in the sea, the water foaming around her ankles, splashing on her shins. Her presence had disturbed a pair of oystercatchers in the dunes. They moved onto the beach taking hesitant steps here and there, bobbing their heads up and down. A light rain

began again, releasing its ionic scent, metallic and unforgiving. The darkness magnified everything. She allowed her grip on her little collection of dreams to loosen and with the lapping of the waves at her feet she felt them leave her. Close by she thought she heard a sound, high pitched and eerie. Just the wind? Or a night bird nestling in the woods? She realised with surprise that the sound came from her own throat. A whimper, barely human. She opened her mouth and waited for more to come. Nothing.

As the sun began to seep above the horizon, she wheeled her bicycle past the summerhouse and set off down the track. The decision about what to do had fallen into her like a stone into a lake.

Ravn and Annalise's house lay beyond the town, on the coast road that sliced northwards toward Aarhus. A large villa, with high ceilings and long shuttered windows and a sloping lawn that tended towards the sea. It took her half an hour to reach it, the rain chasing after her with swift light showers. She hovered by the gate shivering with cold, tiny droplets of water clinging to her hair. A vague fear clutched at her. Was this another betrayal? Like the one before when she'd sat naked on the bed next to Ravn. Her primal need, his tender rejection as he stood in the light of the hall.

The sound of a car engine idling at the head of the road broke into her thoughts. She leant heavily on the bell and waited. After a while Ravn opened the door a look of surprise on his face. A brown heavy dressing gown hung from his shoulders, a twisted cord tied around the waist. 'Ellen, what is it?' he said, ushering her inside. He led into the dining room. A barometer lay in pieces on a newspaper spread out on the table. She lowered herself into a chair slowly as if injured.

'Are you unwell?' said Ravn. He folded a rug around her shoulders, collected a glass of water from the kitchen and put it by her side. Ellen held herself still for a moment looking down at her hands in her lap, then at the circle of water. The words brushed around in her head. When she spoke she could not look at him. 'Leutnant Heinrich Nagel is a chemist,' she said. Ravn leaned closer in towards her. 'What do you mean?' he said.

'He's been working with Per at the laboratory in the evenings. They're planning to start a business together after the war.'

'Per never told me,' he said. 'You never told me.' Ellen carried on, afraid that she would falter if she stopped. 'The Leutnant got hold of things for Per. Things he was desperate for. Books, chemicals, pigments. The things he needed to progress his work.'

'Why are you telling me this, Ellen?'

‘I didn’t like their friendship. I told Per as much. Recently I’ve been worrying about whether it was one-way traffic.’ Ravn’s face darkened. He slid the inkwell on his desk between one hand and the other. Ellen continued to speak staring at the wall in front of her. ‘I keep asking myself why Per was released, why Søren wasn’t. Do you know?’ Ravn shook his head. He came towards her and bent down to put his arm around her, his back twisted. She let her head rest against the rough wool of his jacket.

‘It started with the lapis lazuli. He bought some to show me at Inge’s dinner,’ she said. Ravn moved back to look at her. His brown eyes, tender under the dark creases of his brow.

‘He managed to get hold of all that paper for the printing,’ Ellen said. Ravn pulled his seat closer to hers. ‘Tell me,’ he said.

‘The whole thing was odd. I’ve been going over it in my head and there is only one possible reason.’ She bit her lip. ‘Per might have told Leutnant Nagel things about us.’

‘Me and you?’ Ravn’s voice stuttered a little.

‘About all of us in the resistance group,’ she said.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Per knew about the list, didn’t he?’

‘He needed to know where the weapons were being kept.’

‘I’m certain Leutnant Nagel was looking for more than books that day,’ said Ellen.

For the next hour Ravn asked her the same questions again and again. Each time she repeated herself, she became surer of her words. She could articulate the details that had remained so undefined before. Her first inklings. When she’d found him printing, the brazen light at the window, and so confident he wouldn’t be visited. Then, when the paper had been so easily acquired. She’d not understood then, only that night, just a few hours ago, when all at once everything had become visible.

Annalise, Ravn’s wife, appeared in the doorway in a white dressing gown. ‘The pair of you look like you’ve seen ghosts.’

‘It’s nothing Annalise,’ Ravn said. ‘But I need to talk to Ellen for a little while longer and in private.’ Ellen saw Annalise stiffen. Ellen wanted to say something, then caught herself.

‘I’ll be upstairs if you need me. Keep your voices down. The boys are still sleeping,’ Annalise said, staring hard at Ellen. She ran her hand over Ravn’s shoulders before she left the room. Ellen heard her moving about upstairs and turned to stare out of the window. A sudden heavy shower had drenched the garden outside.

‘What happens now?’ Ellen said. Ravn took her hands gently in his. ‘You must say nothing to anyone, do nothing. Go back to *Søvindhuset*. I’ll come and see you when we’ve worked out what to do.’ Ellen nodded. She almost felt relief.

‘You’ve done the right thing, Ellen.’ Just before she left, Ellen took Søren’s gun from her bag. ‘I believe this is yours,’ she said.

‘How?’ Ravn said. Ellen saw the incomprehension in his face. She pressed the gun into his hand. ‘Søren hid it in the Alrø church,’ she said.

‘He told you?’

‘I sailed to the island with him,’ said Ellen. Ravn placed the gun on the table. ‘I wanted to give him something important to do,’ he said.

‘He was only a boy. Why not someone else?’

Ravn leant forward in his chair, reached for a tin box and took out a clump of tobacco. He lit his pipe and closed his eyes. He didn’t answer. Like Per there was a ruthlessness about him. When she left the room, the nub of tobacco glowed red in the hollow of his pipe as he drew heavily on it.

Halfway out of town Ellen stopped, filled with uneasiness, and turned back. She would go to Inge. She couldn’t face another day alone at *Søvindhuset*. The coast road was mauve, glossy in the morning light. She cycled hard, the rain light and mineral, buffeting against her face. She wondered where Per was now. Still out on the island? Waiting for a boat to take him to safety? She saw a group of soldiers and slipped into a side road to avoid passing close to them. She left her bicycle at the red brick Abbey church and entered it. She needed time to gather her thoughts. Inside she made towards the monks’ seat, a narrow wooden bench where she and Per sometimes sat together. Per had become dark water. All that was left was the cloud shadow of him on her skin, in the cleft between her fingers, in the crook of the back of her knee where he’d lain close to her.

When Ellen entered the bookshop, Inge ran towards her, her face taut with worry. ‘Ravn rang me,’ she said. ‘You’re supposed to stay up at *Søvindhuset*.’ Ellen let out a choking sob. ‘What will happen to Per?’ she said.

‘Maybe nothing will happen.’ Inge touched Ellen gently on her shoulders. She hunched in response. ‘Do you know something?’ Ellen said scanning Inge’s face. The lines around the older woman’s mouth and eyes, a tangle of dense grooves. Inge turned from her. Ellen caught her by one arm. She felt the stretch of the tendon beneath Inge’s thin, creased

skin. Inge lifted a hand to loosen Ellen's grip and took her in her arms. Ellen sank to her knees and Inge followed. She didn't lift her head, just watched the heavy drip of her tears as they splashed onto the wooden floor. She clawed away at the memory of him, the crescent eyes, the scents of wood smoke and linseed, the long ride of his back. How could he do that to his friends, to her? 'They're going to kill him, aren't they?' Ellen said and looked up at Inge. The question floated between them.

'I don't know.' Inge's blue eyes blinked several times. 'Perhaps.'

That afternoon, Ellen stayed with Inge in the storeroom trying to help with the accounts. She couldn't concentrate but forced herself to sit over the ledger, sluggishly filling out the columns. Later she moved back and forth to the shelves clutching the new books, leafing through the receipt copies. There was little comfort in the work, sorting through the orders for crime stories, romances, poetry. Her anxiety subsided a fraction and was replaced by a quiet pain that pooled in her belly. The rain stopped and the sun came out.

When the telephone rang, Ellen started. Inge answered, looking directly at her as she listened. After a few seconds, she said goodbye and put down the receiver. She looked down at her hand and paused.

'Where?' said Ellen.

'The harbour.'

Ellen ran from the shop out into the sunlit street and down the hill. The cobblestones, now dry, gleamed. A hum rose from the huddle of people by the quayside. It happened so quickly, they told her. A man had drawn a pistol from his coat. A single shot. The other man had fallen to the ground. A woman in a green headscarf had screamed and a bearded man had turned towards the sound, mouth agape. A groan. There'd been a second shot. Perhaps a third? No. Just the two shots, they thought. And then in lowered tones they muttered the word 'liquidation'. It happens all the time now, said one.

Ellen pushed through the crowd and crouched by Per's body. A dark red spot glistened below his eye. And from under his head a jagged line of dark blood stuttered between the cobbles. She laid her head on his chest, caught the smell of warm blood mingled with old stone.

'What happened?' someone asked from a passing car.

'*Stikker*,' said the bearded man.

'Good riddance to him.' Ellen turned and saw it was the woman in the green scarf who spoke. The bearded man touched Ellen's shoulder. 'It might be best if you move away,' he

said. 'The police will be here soon.' Ellen stood and walked slowly down to the harbour wall, drawing in air in painful gulps. The grey water moved like silk, disturbed only by a group of gulls squabbling over a wooden crate which was floating close to the harbour wall. She sat on a bench until the shock had subsided. Afterwards, only a weariness, numbing and profound, remained.

March 1947

The pathologist confirmed Søren's identity and Ellen signed the papers which released his body to her. She asked Ravn to sail with her to Alrø. She saw that he was touched by her request. He arrived early in the morning, clean shaven with glossy brown boots, smelling of shaving soap and leather.

Three things surprised her about Søren's coffin. First how light it was. Second that it had been painted pale blue and covered with drawings of seabirds that seemed to be in Søren's hand. And thirdly that it was Ravn who had arranged for the painting to be done.

'I got the art students at Aarhus to do it,' he said. 'The principal remembered the drawings you sent her and the students copied them.'

'Søren would love this,' she said as they lowered it gently into *Musling's* prow and fastened it with ropes to the mast. What a strange sight they must have made, Ellen thought. Two figures, the pale coffin reflecting the sky above. Ellen took the helm as they crossed the short stretch of water in silence, the coffin shifting gently with each tug of the wind.

Once ashore, Ellen set off to find a suitable patch of ground for the burial. Ravn waited on the shoreline, the painted coffin at his side. She walked around the island and found some soft and marshy land in a dip just below the high point. She returned to Ravn and they carried the coffin up the slope to the place she had found. They took turns to dig, stopping to rest after an hour. At least a metre underground, Doktor Åstergaard had told her, to be sure that it would not be dug up by animals or birds. The first part was easy but then the earth became harder, stony. Brown peaty water began to fill up the hole as quickly as they tried to scoop it out.

When the hole was deep enough they lowered the coffin down, a pale rectangle against the black of the peat. Ellen dropped down into the watery earth herself to pack soil and stones around it, before too much water flooded back in. Afterwards, she heaped one spadeful of soil after another back into the hole until finally she had a small circular mound which she patted smooth with the back of the spade. She dropped to her haunches, her body hot from all the effort. Everywhere on the small island, she found herself so close to the swell of the sea. She could sense the press of the wind and the strangeness of the night light on the water. It was almost magical. A circle of gulls whirled in the sky above.

A splinter of memory of her mother's funeral. The long black mound of earth had seemed to her to be grotesquely high. Her father had given her a matter-of-fact explanation

that the earth would settle, flatten out with the force of gravity over time as the air was expelled. She never liked to think of the pressing down of earth over her mother's coffin, getting heavier and heavier, denser and darker. Gravity squeezing down, crushing the coffin. The images had given her nightmares when she was a child and made her wake in the night, gasping for air. Her father never understood. He was reassured by scientific explanations of the natural world. 'It is how fossils are formed,' he'd said. 'It's the most natural thing in the world.'

She walked down to the cove and picked up some flat white pebbles, picking ones of varying sizes. Ravn helped her collect the stones, then watched her as she made a circle of the smaller stones at the centre of the mound, then a much larger circle around it. She traced five curved lines from the centre over the dome of earth to the outer circle, filling each with more pebbles, smallest first.

'Aristotle's lantern?' said Ravn.

'Sea urchin,' she said, thinking that she might come back later and make something more permanent. But this seemed right for now. She took the nub of candle from her pocket, shielded it with her hand and lit it and placed it a glass jar. The flame flickered as she set it in the centre. They sat by the grave.

'This seems to be a good place as any to talk about Per,' Ravn said. She suddenly felt tired. The past, she realised, could never be left behind. It followed the living, hovered restlessly on the shadow side of everything. It could not be stopped or erased. Ravn frowned, trying perhaps to find the right words. 'There were two options as far as I could see. I discussed it with Henning. Do nothing and risk more arrests and executions. Or put a stop to it.'

'Per wouldn't have given anything more away,' Ellen said quietly.

'We didn't know that for certain. I had my two apprentices to think about. I had, Annalise, Inge, the boys. And you. Especially you,' said Ravn. 'After Inge's party, I didn't know what to make of what happened. You and Per seemed to be as before. I had a hope that...' Ravn paused mid-sentence and looked down at his boots.

'You were a married man. I should never have thrown myself at you like that. I wasn't in a good state of mind.'

'Afterwards I couldn't stop thinking about you.' Ravn's hair fell over his forehead in thick locks. 'About you and Per together.'

'You were jealous?' Ellen said, the realisation slowly dawning.

‘I’d never felt a feeling like it and I never want to again.’ The silence hung thickly between them for a few seconds before Ravn spoke again. ‘Leutnant Nagel came to see me.’ Ellen felt her heartbeat pulse in her inner ear. Nagel. She scuffed a foot over the earth and felt her throat tighten. ‘When?’ she said.

‘A few months ago. He’d been sending me letters. Lots of them from Hamburg.’

‘What did he want?’

‘What we all want, Ellen. Redemption,’ Ravn said, squatting down and pressing one of the white stones deeper into the mound. ‘He was sorry about what happened with you. You never told me.’ There had been weeks passing when she hadn’t given Heinrich Nagel a second thought. But something could always bring the moment back.

‘You redeemed him on my behalf, did you?’ said Ellen. She was thinking of her anger now. Of how it could flood in like the tide. Ravn stood up. ‘There was an exchange,’ he said and turned to walk away. Ellen wondered if their conversation might end there. She followed him back down to the boat. They loaded the spades and pushed off in silence.

‘He said Per wasn’t a collaborator. I got it wrong,’ said Ravn.

‘You believe him?’

‘Yes,’ he said. Ellen pushed the tiller and made a sharp tack. Ravn ducked as the boom skimmed just above his head. The boat settled again.

‘It was Nagel’s idea,’ said Ravn. ‘Make a deal with the Commandant to supply information and you, Ellen, wouldn’t be arrested. Per thought he could give you some time to get away. And he did, didn’t he?’

January 1944

Per's body was buried somewhere by someone, probably in the dead of night. Naked. The clothes were burnt. There'd be no paperwork. This much Ellen knew. She spent the next two weeks alone at *Søvindhuset*. She didn't want to see anyone. Not Ravn. Not Inge. The need for solitude engulfed her. Every morning she swam from the headland and again last thing at night. She loved the heaviness of the water as it slipped over her. She swam so much she began to smell of the sea. Her whole body became ingrained with it. It penetrated every pore of her skin, every strand of her hair, even the pockets and seams of her clothes. Sea kelp, tide-washed shells, seal bones.

During the day she wandered about in the same green cotton dress. She needed to change it, but each morning, the effort of finding something new seemed too great. Somehow she felt strangely reassured that each day began exactly as the one before. She needed this routine to tether her to the place. Like the small boats anchored out in the fjord, their lines tightening and slackening with the tide. Keep quiet. Stay inside. That was what Ravn had told her.

She thought about Lieutenant Nagel. The flare of violence that rushed through him, the grief that bled from him. Had he helped Per? Left the boy to his fate? Ravn said that after the execution the Lieutenant had gone back to Germany on compassionate leave.

After a few days, she began to leave *Søvindhuset* at night. She followed the same route to the same places. Swan Point, the thin slick of land that reached into the fjord, lay before her. Each night she stood at the point, before turning back inland, over the sea-hardened sand to the marram grass where the sand softened into the pine woods. A need for the sea air, for the breeze against her skin. Food began to appear on the doorstep. One day tins of sardines, the next, a few eggs, bread. Then a note in Inge's handwriting telling Ellen about Mønsted. They knew he'd been a *stikker*. How much he knew was in doubt. Inge had delivered a note to him. A piece of paper, folded into four, handed over, calmly, formally, and it was received silently in a similar manner. The same words typed in dark ink. 'Stop passing information to the Germans or you will be liquidated in ... days. Inge filled in a different number each day. Fourteen...thirteen...twelve...eleven...ten. A generous warning, didn't Ellen agree? Mønsted would have time to organise his affairs. For over a week nothing happened, then with six days to go, Fru Mønsted and the twins had left to stay with her sister at Skagen. With four to go, the shop shut early. The next day the blind stayed down and the next. He had gone.

One night after receiving the news about Mønsted, Ellen walked further into the woods and sat by an inland lake. Her arrival disturbed a few wild ducks sending them scattering between the trees. Then all was still again. The lake seemed smaller than before. She remembered the winter of 1942, the harshest for decades, when the Mønsted girls and many of the town's children skated on it after school. They skirted as close as they dared to the edges where the ice became uneven over the tree roots and reed beds. She'd taken a sledge there, erecting a makeshift sail with a stick of beech and a bed sheet that sent her speeding across the ice. She'd joined the lake children, as they darted over the surface, wind-up torches in hand like fireflies, until dusk fell and everyone began to make for home.

Now Ellen stood in the green-black light, thinking that a part of her was still with the lake children and those round-eyed twin girls. Everything around her so tender in the hour before dawn. It was as if returning over the same ground, listening to the murmur of her own footsteps, reminded her in the way of a prayer, that she was still living.

By the break of dawn Ellen was back at *Søvindhuset*. Early morning walkers began to appear on the beach. Ellen observed them from the small crack between the drawn curtains. Halfway towards Swan Point, a woman with a white-haired dog stooped to pick up a piece of driftwood and examined it closely before pocketing her find. Two older men, with eager necks, pushed into the breeze, silhouetted against the hard, grey sky. One talked to the other with animated hands. She wondered what they made of her? The unwashed hair, the down-turned face, bone pale, nocturnal. After a time, Ellen withdrew and closed the curtains tight as if to seal herself inside.

May 1947

At some time during the weeks after Søren's burial, Ellen arranged for her father's bureau and remaining possessions to be brought down to *Søvindhuset*. It took three men to unload it from the truck. Every drawer was crammed full. The front panel was locked and the key taped beneath the lock. The drawers sealed shut with thick tape.

The first time that Ellen had gone fossil hunting with her father, she'd been thirteen years old. They travelled together to the island of Fur. Her father was excited to show her the *moler*, the soft rock made from clay and the shells of tiny algae, the perfect medium for the preservation of fossils. The island lay just off the northern tip of the Salling peninsula. They'd taken a fisherman's boat from the small port of Branden. She felt sea-sick for the whole journey, the stench of herring and heavy diesel catching in her mouth, and spent the voyage leaning out over the railings, gasping at the air.

As soon as they disembarked, her father rushed her off towards the cliff, the belt around his waist swinging with his fossil tools. He cut a piece of *moler* from the cliff and crumbled it down to a fine powder, pressed it into her palms and leaving them white. 'Fifty-five million years ago,' he said, his eyes sparkling, 'These cliffs were the sea.'

At weekends the island was packed with fossil hunters, all poring over the layers of clay and volcanic ash, excitedly sharing their finds. In the evening in the little pension where they would spend a night, her father explained to her how glaciers moved the *moler*, folding it into layers, before crushing it flat.

'How flat, Far?'

'As flat as a single sheet of paper, little squirrel. We can read the past in these cliffs as if they were a newspaper,' he said, 'Every millennium or so a new edition. Our country, our little kingdom of islands, hangs together beautifully, geologically speaking.' His most prized possession was the complete head of a bird. It was perfect in every detail as if each delicate feather had been etched with a steel needle, leaving its imprint, sharp and black against the pale rock. Over the years, he'd amassed a small collection of unbroken specimens: the skeleton of a fish, its spine held in a soft curve of movement, a sprig of ash leaves, a sand crab. For each, the moment between living and dying caught and held.

Ellen liked to watch her father as he split the thin layers. His hands were covered by a network of shiny seams, scars from a fire accident many years before, but they moved with a confidence that the rest of his body had lost. He caressed the rock, feeling for the point of

entry, like a blind man reading braille. They would work together, father and daughter, like a pair of old explorers, breaking the rock apart, exposing the insides to the sea air, surrounded by the musical tap-tap of rubber hammers and chisels, the energy of rock passing between them.

At home, they danced around each other, tense and awkward, but on these trips Ellen felt comfortable in close physical proximity to her father. At the base of the cliffs, finding themselves crouched over the rock, they could grieve in each other's presence. Once, on a trip not long after her mother's death, her father had fallen back on his heels, caught by a primeval torrent of grief. Tears spilled down his cheeks and onto his hands. Then he carried on working and Ellen, who had wept in response, continued to brush the newly broken surfaces clean, the taste of wet ash filling her mouth.

Alone in *Søvindhuset* she watched the bureau for several days, taking in the dark silhouette, a closed eye, in the corner of the room. She delayed the moment of opening it because she knew that once she did, something would shift like a swift change in barometric pressure. One morning towards the middle of May, she awoke with the feeling that she was ready. She washed with the small piece of grey soap and dragged a clean dress from the suitcase. The fabric stretched taut across her belly. She folded the remainder of her clothes and put fresh sheets on the bed. She turned the dial on the radio, found a jazz station and with the volume low, let the languid guitar music seep into the room.

The key turned smoothly in the lock and she drew down the front panel, the stiff hinges resisting a little. She caught the faint smell of tobacco, dried ink, dust. She eased out the top drawer and contemplated the contents. Her father had always been a tidy worker. The neatness of it all wound a tight knot in her throat. She began to pick the specimens out one by one, turning each one over in her hand. Some were wrapped in paper, but most had been slipped into small brown envelopes, with her father's handwriting, neat and constrained, running along the lower edge: *earwig*, *leaf (birch?)*, *parasitic wasp*, *tasbacka Danica (part thereof)*.

The bureau contained several hundred fossils and geological specimens. She set to work at the table by the window, dimly aware of the changing seascape and the chatter of seabirds beyond the drawn curtains. The collection quickly spread out around her, 'our beautiful little corpses,' her father used to call them.

She took each item out of its wrapping, washing each piece carefully to remove the dust. The dust of her childhood, of occupation, and of time held up. Her father would have

said that the dust represented the smallest fraction of geological time. Yet this time, which carried its own history, belonged to her. She continued to work, lifted by an unexpected contentment in the face of this gentle unburial. 'What do you want me to do with all this?' She spoke out loud as she laid out the last of the pieces on the table. She went to her bedroom and picked up the sea urchin fossil, allowed the heft of it sink into her palm. A boy for a stone. A stone for a boy. She placed the fossil on top of the bureau. Like a parent waiting up, listening for a sound of return, but hearing only the held note of the wind running through the wooden walls. The sea urchin boy, like the children at the lake, worked on in her memory. Ellen opened the bottom drawer of the bureau. In it she found the manuscript of her father's book. Ove Holm's words came back to her. *Perhaps someone should finish it?*

An unfamiliar calm descended like a mist. That day Ellen read through her father's manuscript, making notes in her journal. From time to time she looked out at the island, its smooth shape resting solidly between the fjord and the sky. Towards evening the tide turned and the sea flowed inland under the clouds, the light scattering towards the west. A small rowing boat, moored to its stake, tipped gently as the water drew along its hull. That night she made decisions. She would stay in Horsens. She would move into Ravn's apartment when the time came for the baby to arrive. He was right. She needed people about her.

An image took shape, just a fragment. One of many that had resurfaced since her return to *Søvindhuset*. Per and Søren were sitting together in the rowing boat. Søren trailed a long leg over the side, his toes just touching the water while Per talked very fast gesticulating with his hands. They moved closer together, so that their heads were almost touching, the curve of the back of Per's head shaped like a question mark against the roundness of Søren's. They were crouched over something in the bottom of the boat. Laughter drifted across the water.

Ellen turned from the window and went to the bookcase and drew out a thin volume. The cover had yellowed a little and the lettering faded to an indistinct grey. *Seabirds of Jutland*. As she lifted it out, she saw that tucked beside it was another slimmer volume. A hope lifted in her. It was one of Søren's sketch books. A gift from the past. She wrapped both books in her jumper and pushed them deep into her rucksack and set off for the woods. In among the pine trees the air was warm and still. Insects buzzed softly around her, sparkling as they caught the last of the sunlight. The track followed a string of small freshwater lakes, their edges filled with velvet-tipped bull rushes which quivered gently. She walked fast now, aware of the rooks chattering above and the occasional light ripple of wind that had found its way between the pines. Out of the corner of her eye she glimpsed a sleeping swan, its long neck looped back, its beak tucked neatly under one wing. Up above, a crane's nest high the trees. They'd returned for another year.

Now with the evening sun falling through the trees and the sound of her footsteps on the dry pine needles, she felt less afraid of the future. She was taken with the thought that her fears might belong to someone else or perhaps to no one at all. When she came to the clearing, she dropped to the ground in a patch of sunlight. To her surprise, she felt no dread or anxiety. Her calmness remained. She took out Søren's sketchbook with its thin sheets of wartime paper and began to turn its pages. Guillemots, gulls, cormorants. The first pages were

filled with his early drawings. Some were a little awkward, heavy lined, but with each page she could see his skill growing. The sketches showing a lighter touch, the lines becoming more fluid. Then page after page of arctic terns. Origami birds. She lay down, feeling the warmth of the ground against the back of her legs, rested a hand on the swell of her belly and held a page of the sketchbook above her head. The sky was just visible through the thin paper. She began to hum. The sound rose, soft and sibilant, and she imagined the sketched birds flying up above the pines, and out over the fjord, where they shrieked and changed their shapes. A man and a boy on the shore look up, smiling and squinting into the sun. The man has his arm around the boy's shoulders. They are watching a group of terns thread their way northwards, light as paper.

Danish Glossary

<i>Æblekage</i>	Apple cake.
<i>Algang</i>	A group walk.
<i>Alsang</i>	A group sing-song.
<i>Feldgrau</i>	Field grey. The colour of German army uniforms during the Second World War.
<i>Folkeskole</i>	People's school, for 6-16-year-olds.
<i>Køleskab</i>	Cold boxes with slots for slabs of ice.
<i>Høkasse</i>	A wooden box, usually filled with straw, in which hot pans containing food were put to continue cooking without having to use electricity during the occupation and after the war.
<i>Hønseringe</i>	Coloured marking rings for birds.
<i>I Skovens Dybe Stille Ro</i>	'In the Still of the Forest'. A traditional Danish folk song.
<i>Kakkelovne</i>	A cast iron burner with a door at the front and elaborate decoration on top.
<i>Leitstelle</i>	Satellite headquarter offices for the Gestapo in occupied towns across Europe.
<i>Oprop!</i>	Proclamation!
<i>Perlen Ugle</i>	Pearl Owl.
<i>Søvindhuset</i>	House of the Sea Wind.
<i>Stikker</i>	Informer.
<i>Strandvaskeren</i>	A Jutland term for a dead body washed up on the shore.
<i>Tüske piger</i>	A name for Danish girls who gave love and comfort to German soldiers during the Second World War. Literally, 'Germans' Girls'.

Part II: Exegesis: Family Archives, the Writing of Absence and the Second World War in Europe.

All family histories, personal histories, are as sketchy and unreliable as the histories of Phoenicians, it seems to me. We should note everything down, fill in the wide gaps if we can. Which is why I'm writing this, my darlings.

Sweet Caress, William Boyd¹

Introduction

I know why we bury our dead and mark the places with a stone, with the heaviest most permanent thing we can think of: because the dead are everywhere except the ground.

Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*²

In the end it turned out to be about beginnings. Not *the beginning*, but simply *a beginning*. My encounter with the traces of the lives of my Danish forebears has been as much about finding ways into my own creative endeavour (a novel) as it has been about research into their lives. Throughout I have been interested in how to inhabit this historical world, using imaginative as well as purely academic techniques. It has been a process that included both the interrogation of historical archives and the creation of a makeshift archive of my own. I discovered stories about my grandfather, Asger Gylding Holmboe and his father Jens Christian Gylding Holmboe, in fragments, homing in on the period between 1940 and 1945 when Denmark was occupied by Germany. The stories that emerged focussed on the men of the family. Their wives, Karen and Misse, must have had stories too, but they were altogether more elusive and perhaps a project for another day. This bricolage of found fragments formed what I will call ‘my family archive’. This was not a ‘proper’ archive, as professional archivists would be quick to point out. For one thing, this archive was not held in a single place. Texts, documents, photographs and objects were scattered across two countries, Denmark and England, and a large quantity of material was stored on a laptop and memory sticks, in cardboard boxes or pinned to a cork board. Moreover, the various elements were neither indexed nor catalogued. And to make things worse (for the archivist at least), I found myself reluctant to separate the archival object from my response to it.

The creation and exploration of this family archive went beyond the physicality of the source material, as important as that had been. The significant factor was the process of gathering together, of the connections made and of the intermingling of stories from both the living and the dead and from history and the imagination. I found that I adopted a hermeneutic strategy where I relied on and relished the interpretative power of text, image, object and story. Moreover, my cognitive experiences reaching far back into childhood formed an

inextricable part of this research. For this reason, I have often written in the first person because an impersonal third person historical voice seemed inappropriate, even if it might offer more authority. But, in this endeavour, I found that I was concerned not so much with authority as with authenticity.

The archive which I have pieced together was both a place in which stories have been *found* and a place in which stories have been *made*. The construct was artificial, as all archives are, and was shaped by my own motivations and interests. It represented the starting point for my creative practice as I embarked on writing a novel for the first time.

But my wanderings in the archives have also been about something broader; they have been about memory and identity, the meaning of family and the emotional legacy of the past. For me, these have been the powerful determining motivations from the beginning. The archives, whether those accessed in the gloom of museum basements or the makeshift one created during this project, concerned my family, both the living and dead, and so it was to them that *Seabirds of Jutland*, my creative response at the end of all this reaching backwards in time, was dedicated.

The two components to this thesis have the overarching title *The Stories we Carry*. The first part was a novel, *Seabirds of Jutland*, and the second this exegesis, *Family Archives, the Writing of Absence and the Second World War in Europe*. As part of the exegesis I have touched on archive theory, a brief but necessary diversion which placed my own approach into a broader context. Then, after an exploration of the Holmboe family archive and of my forebears' lives in Denmark during the 1940s, I turned to another occupied country, France.

My starting point was the work of Irène Némirovsky, a Jewish Russian émigré and writer living in France who was deported to Auschwitz in 1942. Her novels concerned the everyday dramas in a population under occupation or on the move. In the 2010 biography of her life by Olivier Philipponnat and Patrick Lienhardt, I discovered that Némirovsky's daughter, Élisabeth Gille, was also a writer and when I first read *Le Mirador*, Gille's imagined memoir of her mother's life published in 1992, I knew that I had fallen on a seam of relevant material. Four years after writing the memoir, Gille wrote a novel fictionalising her own wartime experiences, *Un Paysage de Cendres*, translated as *Shadows of a Childhood*. Gille led me to her contemporary, George Perec who was a writer, filmmaker and the son of Polish émigrés who fled to France. In 1975 he published a dual-text novel entitled *W ou le Souvenir d'enfance* (*W or The Memory of Childhood*). The novel juxtaposed a dark fictional tale about the Olympic ideal turned to nightmare with a memoir containing the scant memories of his family and his childhood. Perec in turn led me to W.G. Sebald and his

absorbing work of prose fiction *Austerlitz* which combined fiction and memoir and explored the tension between the compulsion to remember and the very human desire to resist those dark memories with all one's strength. A chance conversation in 2015 at an archive symposium in the English Lake District brought Françoise Basch to my attention. Her personal memoir, *Ilona, ma mère et moi*, told the story of three generations of women in her Jewish family as they lived through the war in France. Basch's work was one of several witness accounts from Europe, some of which have been translated into English. In this thesis I have focussed on a small collection, working mainly from the English translations, that spanned seven decades from Joseph Kessel's 1944 account *Army of Shadows* to Walter Kempowski's *Swansong 1945* and Marceline Loridan-Ivens' *But You Did Not Come Back* and Jaqueline Mesnil-Amar's *Maman, what are we called now?*. These writers explored their feelings of loss in the aftermath of war. These children grew up to write in very different ways about history, witness, memory and absence. Sometimes they drew on family and historical archives, sometimes on their imaginations and at times on felt experience alone. Their approaches to writing, which will be explored in later chapters, formed a key part of my interrogation of the interaction between family archive and the creative imagination.

While Gille, Perec, Basch and Sebald placed their own experiences at the heart of their work, the Canadian novelist and poet, Anne Michaels, approached the subject from a deliberate distance. She explored the aftermath of wartime loss in her novel, *Fugitive Pieces*, in which a fictional Polish child, Jakob Beer, was pulled from the mud. A survivor, he was the only witness to the massacre of his parents and abduction of his sister by Nazi soldiers. Michaels wrote in her preface to the novel:

During the Second World War, countless manuscripts – diaries, memoirs, eyewitness accounts – were lost or destroyed. Some of these narratives were deliberately hidden – buried in back gardens, tucked into walls and under floors – by those who did not live to retrieve them. Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others are recovered, by circumstance alone.³

Drawing on her many years of research, Michaels wrote what she described as a kind of 'pure fiction' to tell Jakob's story.⁴ It was through this child that she seemed to speak of the many others whose stories would never be recovered.

Many of the creative works I examined in this exegesis were connected by the device of multiple narrators. In the same way as the stories we carry in our own families might be

passed on from mouth to mouth, the stories in these texts passed from one narrator to another. They might pass between an adult and child or between real and fictional narrators, for example. Whatever the nature of this transition, it was in the process and in the juxtaposition that the narratives were given deeper meaning and their stories could be re-imagined and reborn. And, of course, the readers might take their own turn and create narratives of their own. While there could be no end to the feelings of loss and grief, these writers show, each in their unique way, if not the power of writing to rescue the dead (an impossibility of course), then the power of writing to rescue some small part of the self.

The scope of this project has been limited by two main factors. Firstly, my lack of fluency in Danish. My basic working knowledge of the language when dealing with written text was due, primarily, to my German language studies at school and to the language I have picked up on family trips to Denmark over the years. However, my understanding of spoken Danish has always been weak. Consonants are swallowed and, for that reason, Danish has always been a difficult language for beginners to pick up aurally. Secondly, I was conscious that I was skirting the outer periphery of the field of ‘archival studies’. This was a deliberate choice. The brief incursion I made into this field acknowledges its importance. However, archive theory was set outside the scope of this enquiry from the beginning.

One of the justifications for this research relates to a moment in time. During this current decade, many survivors of the Second World War are approaching the ends of their lives. In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of wartime accounts published (of which a tiny selection has been examined in this thesis). This is a reflection of the urgency that old age brings. For myself, as I drift in the relative luxury of middle age, I have long been curious about the Second World War and my family’s part in it. Moreover, one question had begun to permeate my thoughts ever more frequently. *If not now, then when?* And so, I began.

This research started with my Danish family history during the Second World War. I have been interested in how I might inhabit, interpret and respond to a past world in which kin on my maternal side, the Gylding Holmboe family, experienced life under German occupation between 1940 and 1945. For me, this period of the past has retained a physical presence not only in the form of paper materials, both deliberately and randomly preserved, but also through the buildings, landscapes and seascapes associated with the family’s wartime life in Horsens, a small town on the east coast of Jutland in Denmark. However, throughout this journey, which has taken several years, I have been aware that I have barely scratched the

surface of the lives of my forebears. I have been in pursuit of a knowledge that was unattainable. There was and will be so much that I could never know.

And yet, the question remained: why go to all this trouble? At the start, it was simply a matter of curiosity about my Danish heritage. I was brought up in England but felt connected to a 'Danishness' through the traditions my mother introduced in childhood, particularly those relating to food and Christmas, and through regular childhood holidays among the sand dunes of the Jutland coast. I have never been put off by the fact that I was disconnected by language (as a child I was never taught to speak Danish beyond a few phrases learnt by heart) and by the bone-chilling expanse of the Kattegat Sea. I also had a curiosity, perhaps like many children born in the post-war period, about the Second World War. As a child, I sensed its effect on my parents and grandparents without knowing much of what they had experienced. I was always particularly aware of their careful frugality. Therefore, it was also a matter of evolution and an accumulation of questions asked over many years by the English daughter of a Danish mother:

What was it like for you as a child during the occupation?

How did the family survive?

What did your father, a resistance fighter, do during the war?

What happened after it was all over?

And over the years, many answers:

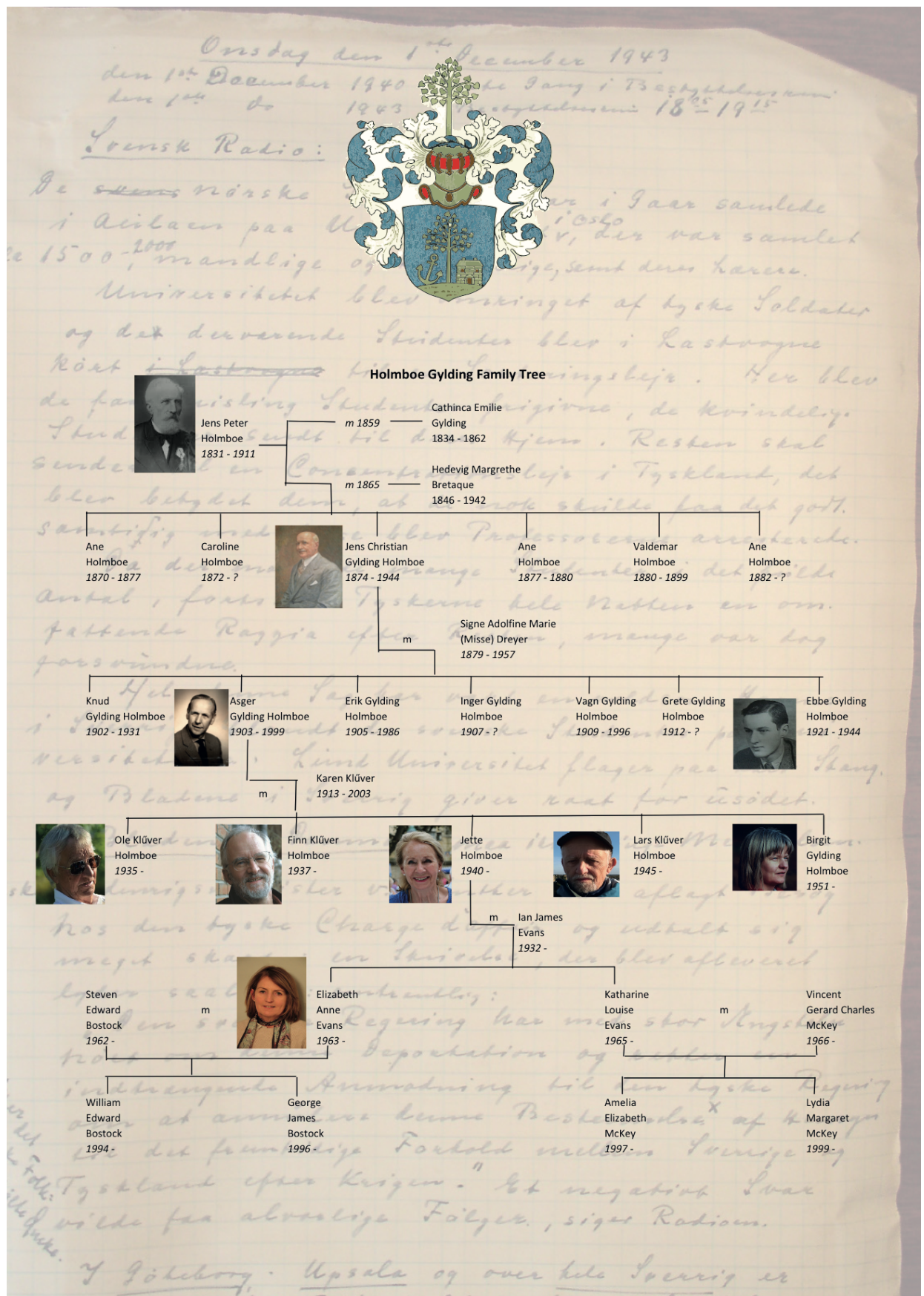
I remember this ...

You should ask my brothers, my sister ...

Of course, there are the scrapbooks and the interview ...

My first task was the compilation of a partial family tree, drawing the line from my great-grandfather, Christian Gylding Holmboe, down through five generations to me (see Figure 1). This single sheet contained many stories. In this thesis, I have concerned myself only with those connected with Christian, Asger, his five children and me. But I must make mention of the other stories that reached out from the page. The first was a tragic one, evident by simply noting the dates. Hedevig Margrethe Bretaque (1846–1942) bore three daughters. They were all named Ane. The first died at the age of three, the second at seven. It is not known how long the third girl lived. The second and third stories concerned two of my

grandfather's brothers, Knud and Vaughan. Knud Holmboe was a poet and journalist who converted to Islam and died in the Libyan desert at the age of twenty-nine. The other brother, Vaughan Holmboe, was a well-known composer and student of the Austrian music theorist and composer, Arnold Schönberg. But these stories, as I often had to remind myself, were not my concern here. They would have to wait.



¹ William Boyd, *Sweet Caress*, p.8.

² Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, p.8.

³ Ibid., from the preface (no page numbers).

⁴ Lecture by Anne Michaels, 18 February 2013, University of Victoria, Canada.

<http://www.uvic.ca/anniversary/videos/AnneMichaels> - 'The Mystery of Wood' [accessed 24 November 2016].

Chapter 1. The Holmboe Family Archive

If you place two or three or ten things next to each other that have never been next to each other before, this will produce a new question. And nothing proves the existence of the future like a question.

The Winter Vault, Anne Michaels¹

The tangible start of my research into the family archive was first the handwritten words of my great-grandfather, Christian Gylding Holmboe, held in forty-two scrapbooks filled with press cuttings and covering the period 1939–1945 and second, the distinctive voice of my grandfather, Asger Gylding Holmboe, in a recorded interview about his time in the Danish Resistance. These two items formed the start of a list of sources that grew over the months that followed:

1. Christian Holmboe's extensive scrapbook journals, known as *dagbøger*, and translations of selected pages by Jette Holmboe and Nathaniel Hong.²



Figure 2: Christian Gylding Holmboe's *dagbøger* in the basement archive of the *Besættelsesmuseet*, Aarhus, March 2013, and the author at work

2. The recorded interview by Finn Holmboe of Asger Holmboe and the translation by Jette Evans;
3. First, second and even third-hand memories, both written and oral, based on conversations with my mother, Jette, and her siblings, Finn, Ole, Lars and Birgit;

4. A list of Danish foods from my childhood that my mother sent me after we spend Christmas together in 2012;
5. A research trip in the spring of 2013 to Horsens, Aarhus and Copenhagen;
6. *J.P. Holmboe & Søn Prisliste* – a worn leather-bound catalogue of print, handwriting and calculations from the family's paint and varnish business, handed to me by my uncle, Lars Holmboe, on my visit to his summerhouse in Jutland in spring 2013 and which I have kept on my desk during this long project as a kind of talisman.

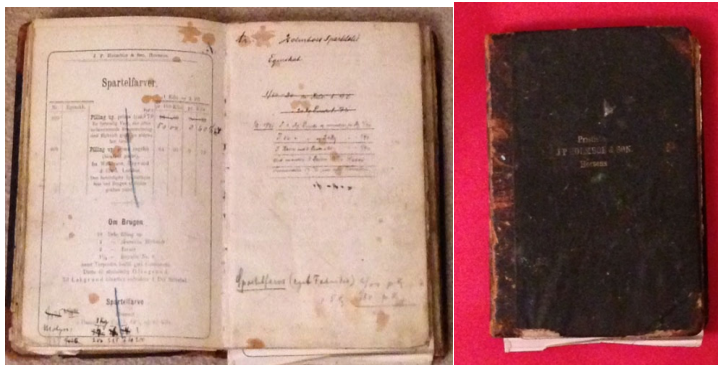


Figure 3: *J.P. Holmboe & Søn Prisliste* (J.P Holmboe & Son Price List)

7. Scanned photographs, letters and articles that emerged piecemeal from the private archives of members of the Holmboe family;
8. A portrait of Christian Holmboe hanging in my parents' home in St. Albans.



Figure 4: Portrait in oil of Christian Gylding Holmboe by Agnes Smidt³

9. Danish vocabulary from the 1940s from a book entitled *Min Barndom i 40'erne* (*My Childhood in the 1940s*), by various authors, that my mother sent me in May 2015.

As I gathered and contemplated these materials, I started a journal, noting my discoveries, my observations and my response, both creative and emotional. On my return from my research visit to Denmark I copied down a quotation from John Berger's novel, *G.*, set in Europe before the First World War, about the nature of history:

All history is contemporary history: not in the ordinary sense of the word, where contemporary history means the history of the comparatively recent past, but in the strictest sense: the consciousness of one's own activity as one actually performs it. History is thus the self-knowledge of the living mind. For even when the events which the historian studies are events that happened in the distant past, the condition of their being historically known is that they should vibrate in the historian's mind.

G., John Berger⁴

Berger's idea resonated with me in the sense that wartime events in my family history have come to 'vibrate' in my own imagination. It has been the background hum from which much of my creative practice has emerged.

My research methods, then, were not disembodied from the influences and interests of my own life. In that sense, this project was not neutral or value-free. I have drawn fully on the influences that have shaped me as a researcher and prose writer: my family background, my first degree in French and Italian completed at Cambridge University in 1986 and an MA in Creative Writing completed in 2012 at Newcastle University.

September 2013 provided a pivotal moment when the focus of my research narrowed significantly. Via my mother, Jette Evans, I received a copy of a Danish magazine article from Lars Holmboe, my uncle, about *Modstandkampens børn* (Children of the Resistance Movement).⁵ The article told the stories of three men, Morten Thing, Jørgen Kieler and Steen Klitgård Povisen, whose fathers had worked with Danish Resistance groups during the Second World War. The interviews highlighted the difficulties that these men faced as children, the effects of which they have carried into their adult lives. My uncle wrote:

What particularly moved me was the article about Morten Thing, as he was the same age as me in the fifties. At the current time there are quite a few articles in the Danish media about the occupation and this article deals with a central theme which Liz might be able to use. The fathers' involvement in the resistance had drastic consequences. For our own family that was also the case – not so much for our father (Asger) because he could cope, but I can still sense that his period 'underground' came to permeate our family from the 1950s onwards.⁶

I began to think about other children growing up during the Second World War and how their adult lives must have been shaped by what happened to their parents. I wondered what creative work had been published in adulthood by such children. My Danish language skills were too limited to allow a meaningful search in Denmark and I soon found myself turning to another country occupied by Germany during the war, France, where the language presented less of a barrier. I soon discovered that there was a tradition of literature dealing with the loss of and separation from family during the Second World War and, since many child survivors were now reaching old age, there had been a surge in newly published stories. It was a literature in which the boundaries of fiction, memoir and biography were often interwoven or blurred and one which I will explore in the chapters that follow.

The Danish journal

The journal that I wrote during this period of research was both a chronological record and a kind of scrapbook. It included accounts of events, such as my visit to the *Frihedsmuseet* in Copenhagen in March 2013, where I spent a day reading the last letters of Danish prisoners and watching videos, subtitled in English, of people remembering life and resistance during the occupation. The letters have stayed with me (I elaborate on this in Chapter 2). The journal was also the place where I noted down conversations, such as this one with my mother, Jette, in May 2013. I visited her on my return from my research trip to Denmark when I stayed with her sister, Birgit, in Copenhagen and her brother Lars on Jutland:

Today I showed Mum the photographs from my trip. We sip tea in the breakfast room in St. Albans. It is daytime but a candle burns on the kitchen table, a Danish tradition that I have adopted in my own home. She looks at the picture of ‘Gyldingshus’, her childhood home, and says: ‘I don’t want to look back, but then I don’t really want to look forward either’. We laugh, but I feel a twinge of guilt because I want to know things that only she can tell me. I wait, watching her. I am aware of her fine-boned head, her blue eyes that are strikingly pale. Neither my sister nor I have inherited any of her delicate Scandinavian features. She points out her bedroom window above the archway. ‘That room was so cold. Outside walls on three sides, you see. I had a little stove in the corner. I was given the coldest room in the house.’ She doesn’t elaborate on that statement and I don’t ask. When she sees the pictures of the buildings and courtyard behind the house where the paint and varnishes were made, she says: ‘We used to play here. We pulled each other up and down on the pulley in the large basket meant for goods to be lifted to the first storey. We skipped in the courtyard after school with all the work going on around us. There was no health and safety in those days. Some days I would be covered in pigment dust: red, blue, yellow.’

I had another conversation with her in November 2014 about a non-fiction book, *Min barndom i 40’erne* (*My Childhood in the 1940s*), that had been sent to her by her sister. In the book, various writers recalled their childhood experiences from that decade and this ignited

some of her own memories. The details of daily life she gave me offered interesting details for the novel:

- The importance of good boots. The greasing of boots to keep the leather waterproof and supple was an essential daily task during the winter, when travel was on foot over snow and ice.
- They could buy coloured chicken leg rings from the seed shop for a children's game.
- They used hay to stuff bicycle tyres because there was a shortage of rubber and new inner tubes were hard to come by.

Later she emailed me a list of words from the book. I printed out her list and stuck it in my journal.

- *Køleskab*: a primitive fridge – an icebox. We used one at Næsset in the 40s and 50s.
- *Høkasse*: a wooden box, usually filled with hay and an old pillow on top to keep heat in. The hot saucepan with the food to be cooked was put in it and finished cooking. No use of electricity. Ours was in a specially made hole in the kitchen!
- *Flueskab*: a 'meat safe' to keep the flies out. At my grandmother's house in *Strandhuse*: it was kept in a very cool cellar off the kitchen.
- *Sabovælling, vandgrød, æggegrød*: these were hot, nourishing and filling 'porridges' eaten as a starter for the evening meal. Also hot fruit soups (rhubarb, apple, plum etc. with roasted oats).
- My parents occasionally bought meat on the black market which meant that a local farmer would suddenly appear in the evening with half a pig. I don't know who cut it up.
- In 1947 the sea all around Denmark froze up completely. My parents took us to the coast to *Strandhuse*, grandmother's summerhouse, to look at the ice that had broken up to form enormous mountains.

In the January of 2013 she sent me a list of the food they used to eat, writing ‘You know this’ against some of the items: *rødgrød med fløde*, *frikadeller* and *koldskål*, the staples of childhood suppers.

- *Rødgrød med fløde*: red jelly with cream. You know this. Any fruit.
- *Frikadeller*: You know this. Meatballs, made of minced pork.
- *Flæskestej*: roast pork. National dish. Often followed by:
- *Æblekage*: apple puree with layers of toasted breadcrumbs.
- *Rødkål*: red cabbage.
- *Agurkesalat*: cucumber salad. Often used for *smørrebrød*.
- *Krebs*: crayfish (for parties in the summer).
- *Koldskål*: buttermilk with egg, sugar, lemon and sometimes cream. Served with roasted oats.
- Christmas - marzipan pigs, *brændte mandler* (burnt almonds), *kræmmerhuse* (cones filled with whipped cream).
- *Det kolde bord*: the cold table. A very elaborate meal with lots and lots of small dishes. Usually at lunchtime and you would still be eating at 18.00! Usually the day after Christmas.

As the Danish journal grew thicker, I started to write *Seabirds of Jutland*.

A response through story-making

I have used the term ‘making’ not ‘writing’ because that was what it felt like at the beginning. At first I imagined I was creating something new out of the bricolage of the family archive. In the early days of drafting *Seabirds of Jutland* there were periods of anxiety about misrepresentation and embellishment. I felt tied to the family story in a way that was constricting. For this reason, when I had already written 20,000 words of the novel with a male protagonist and several brothers running a paint factory, I stopped and considered. Firstly, I was not writing a biography of the family. A wise supervisor told me: ‘Just because it happened doesn’t mean it needs to go in.’⁷ And secondly, in an early Annual Progress Review (APR), a member of the panel noted the passive female characters. I mulled over

these issues and, over a period of weeks, I began to make changes, the most significant of which was changing the protagonist to be Ellen Pedersen, a young woman and an existing character who worked in the bookshop in the town. I kept the paint factory since the subject matter was so rich with imagery, but from that point on there was distance between the novel and the real people of the family. The characters became truly fictional characters and my anxieties fell away. This act of considered redrafting was an important period in the development of the novel. I had released myself from the Holmboe family's history and gave myself permission to explore. I ended up somewhere altogether darker.

A brief history of the Holmboe family



Figure 5: The Holmboe family crest

The Holmboe family owned a paint manufacturing business in Horsens, a small provincial town in eastern Jutland. The business, started by Jens Peter Holmboe after he lost an arm and could no longer work as a painter and decorator, had made the family relatively prosperous. His son, Jens Christian Gylding Holmboe, was a patriarchal figure who believed in hard work, family, community and God. A portrait of him can be seen in Figure 4. Both my grandfather, Asger Holmboe, and my mother, Jette, inherited his sharp blue eyes.

Gyldingshus, where Christian and his family lived and worked, had been built in 1858 by his father and founder of the family business Holmboe & Søn, Jens Peter Gylding Holmboe. The factory buildings have long since been converted into apartments. The main red-brick building where the family lived dominated Nørregade, one of the main streets in the centre of Horsens (see Figure 6). It stood four storeys high on a corner plot and bore a painted plaque at the apex of the roof that read: ‘*Gyldingshus 1906*’. Three generations of family lived in the apartments on the first, second and third floors. The ground floor contained the shop where the paint, papers, varnishes and glues were sold. An archway led to a courtyard and outbuilding behind the main building which contained the laboratory, storage rooms, chimney, the pigment grinding house and vats of linseed oil used in the manufacturing process.



Figure 6: Gyldingshus, Nørregade 1-3, Horsens, Denmark

The place of the archive

It is to burn with a passion. It is never to rest, interminably, for searching for the archive right where it slips away [...] It is to have a compulsive, repetitive, and nostalgic desire for the archive, an irrepressible desire to return to the origin, a homesickness, a nostalgia for the return to the most archaic place of absolute commencement.

Archive Fever, Jacques Derrida⁸

Where then to begin? I started in the physical place of the archive. The archive, in the traditional sense of an organised repository, began as a place where order was given to things by those who have the power to do so. It was a lawful place where documents were gathered together to be unified, classified and preserved. In *Archive Fever, A Freudian Impression*, Jacques Derrida meditated on archives and took Freud's archives held in Freud's former house and a book about Freud as his sources.⁹ Over six parts, Note, Exergue, Preamble, Foreword, Theses and Postscript, Derrida made his arguments with extended excursions along the way. Carolyn Steedman noted on the subject of *Archive Fever* in her work, *Dust*, 'There is and always will be, it seems, trouble in getting started and finished.'¹⁰ It was a trouble that I came to share as I tried to mark the beginning and end points of my own archival project.

Derrida began with the meaning of the word 'archive', examining the origin of the word itself which comes from the Greek *arkhê* (ἀρχή) which 'names at once the commencement and the commandment'.¹¹ He reminded the reader of the authority of archives as developed by Greek superior magistrates, the archons, and the domiciliation of the archive as a physical location. But he also argued that while archives appeared to have authority, physical location and consignment, ultimately an archive must 'shelter itself and, sheltered, to conceal itself' (Derrida, p. 3). In other words, before an official archive such as Freud's could even be approached, its real nature needed to be understood: an archive was a place of concealment as well as one of transparency. These two ideas resonated when I came to examine the scrapbook journals of Christian Holmboe, my *Olefar*, now kept in the archival stores of the *Besættelsesmuseet* (The Museum of Occupation) in Aarhus.¹² In them, I discovered that although much detail had been meticulously recorded, I was nevertheless left with an impression that much had been, if not concealed, then at the least deliberately omitted.

In *Archive Fever*, Derrida explained that the archive was as much about the future as it was about the past:

It is a question of the future, the question of the future itself, the question of a response, of a promise and of a responsibility for tomorrow. The archive: if we want to know what that will have meant, we will only know in times to come.¹³

The use of the future perfect tense, ‘what that will have meant’, was poignant. Situating it within the context of psychoanalysis and Freud, Derrida identified the modern archive as a locus concerned with memory, the finding of lost things and the response from the future. In the Postscript, he noted that while archives only contained traces of what happened, not the thing itself, we would always yearn to know what was lost, what burned and disappeared with the ashes. ‘Beyond every possible and necessary enquiry, we will always wonder what Freud (for example), what every “careful concealer” may have wanted to keep secret’ (Derrida, p.101).

This question of a response loomed large as I faced the expanding bricolage of my own family archive with all its secrets, omissions and random fragments. How would I respond, for example, to Christian Holmboe’s forty-two volumes of press cuttings, diary entries and marginalia? For whom or what purpose did he undertake this colossal amount of work? And what about the artefacts left behind from the family paint business: the J.P. Holmboe and Søn catalogue of which I had become the temporary custodian, or the unused label for a tin of *Holmboe’s bogbinderklister* (book binders’ glue) slipped among its pages? Then there was the photograph of Christian Holmboe hanging on the café wall at the *Industrimuseet* (Industrial Museum) in Horsens or the scribbled notes I made when my mother started to recount her wartime memories as we prepared a meal together. For a time I floundered amid this confusion of half-remembered stories and the random bricolage of arbitrary things. I only hoped that further careful examination would reveal a clearer picture.

The archive, as a physical place, is a place of dead silence once the hands that shaped it have disappeared; the objects left there remain morbidly cold. Nothing happens until another living person interrogates them. When she does, the interrogator floods them with the blood-warmth of her own experience, memory and unconscious mind, and whatever she uncovers in there cannot be other affected by that personal response. Derrida’s translator, Erik Prenovitz, wrote at the end of *Archive Fever*: ‘everyone knows that archives do not speak [...] Only the living answer’ (Derrida, translator’s note).¹⁴

From that childhood place

And at the beginning, memory blossomed in him, childhood images so strong he could describe to her in detail the objects on a shelf.

The Winter Vault, Anne Michaels¹⁵

I approached my family's history, and my grandfather's wartime story in particular, from the direction of my own childhood. It started with childhood memories of summer holidays spent in Denmark with my grandparents. I have included this diversion because my personal childhood is the context in which this project is embedded.

As children, my sister and I often spent part of our summer holiday in Denmark with our grandparents, Asger and Karen Holmboe, or *Mormor* and *Morfar* as we knew them.¹⁶ We would stay with them in their caravan at Juelsminde beach on the east coast of Jutland, while they rented their home in Bjerre to German holidaymakers. The irony of this lucrative post-war occupation was not lost on *Morfar* who always ensured that a pristine Danish *vimpel* flew from the white flagpole in the garden before he left.¹⁷ I wrote this about him and included it in a paper presented at the end of my first year of research for this thesis:

I was very fond of him, but of course I knew him only as a grandfather. He was the bow-legged man who taught me to play chess; who introduced me to the absorbing, and much misunderstood, pastime of stamp collecting and who taught me to swim in the Kattegat Sea without making a fuss, either about the freezing temperature of the water or, of more concern to me, the stinging jelly fish floating about in it (the 'firemen', he used to call them). And of course, I did not know him as a young man when during the Second World War he was a member of the local resistance group in his home town of Horsens in Jutland. I have grown up with stories, no doubt much embellished in the telling and re-telling, about his derring-do. He was the national Danish hurdling champion and this skill is said to have saved him from capture by the Gestapo as he hurdled to safety over the fences between the summerhouses that are dotted along the edge of the Horsens fjord. There were darker stories too, about how he was given the task of burying the handbag of a collaborator, a woman 'liquidated' by his resistance group at the end of the war for being an informer.

The occupation may have lasted only a few years, but its effect on him lasted for the rest of his life. Because of him, I have always been curious about what it must have been like to live during those years, when to start with (in Denmark at least) very little changed on the surface, but underneath everything had changed. I am interested not just in the events, but in the contradictions, the choices and the dilemmas that people faced in their day-to-day lives.¹⁸

And so, I found that the process of creating a family archive was rooted in the emotional core of my childhood. It was to do with how I was defined by and how I interpreted this upbringing. Moreover, I acknowledged those feelings of homesickness for that lost childhood and the pleasure I took in recasting into words the sensuousness of those first memories. Early in the project I wrote this list in my notebook:

Childhood summers at Juelsminde:

1. *Æbleskiver*, hot and sugary apple doughnuts, bought from the van at the end of Juelsminde beach.
2. Shivering sea-skin under hooded towelling robes. Blue for me. Red for my sister. The allotted colours of our childhood.
3. *Morfar's* seal-like head dipping below the water, the slow measured arm strokes far out where the light waters of the Kattegat Sea turn dark.
4. Painful barefoot flits along sandy pine-needle paths.
5. *Mormor's* obsession with hanging glass jars, sticky with the jam remnants and an inch of water, among the pines to lure wasps away from the caravan. And yet, we always seemed to have more wasps than anyone else.
6. Weak black tea served in smeary amber glass cups and saucers.
7. A postman's lunchtime naked swim, his clothes folded neatly on the handlebars of his bicycle and afterwards eating his sandwiches while drying in the sun.
8. Soaking stamps from envelopes and drying them under the soft orange light of a canvas tent.
9. Rye bread, white cheese slices, pickled herring for tea.
10. The smell of *Morfar's* cigar smoke among the pine trees.

Resistance fighter

It is not just things that carry stories with them. Stories are a kind of thing, too. Stories and objects share something, a patina. [...] Perhaps patina is a process of rubbing back so the essential is revealed, the way that a striated stone tumbled in a river feels irreducible, the way that this netsuke of a fox has become little more than a memory of a nose and a tail.

The Hare with the Amber Eyes, Edmund de Waal¹⁹

It was through family stories that I became aware that Asger Holmboe, my grandfather, had been in the Danish Resistance during the Second World War. Some of the stories were repeated so many times that they seemed to be almost mythical. They told of how, as a runner for the resistance group in Horsens, he would steal out under cover of darkness to wait for the RAF to drop containers of weapons onto makeshift landing sites. Their code, 'Sylvia', would be delivered in invented greetings broadcast by Danish radio from the BBC offices in London: 'Sylvia sends birthday wishes to Harald', for example.²⁰ These scenes were brought to life when I watched the Danish film *Hvidstengruppen*. The film was based on a true story of an innkeeper and his family who were active in the resistance.²¹ And there were other stories of how, after 28 August 1943 when German martial law came into force, Asger disappeared into hiding, staying first with a pastor from the Faroe Islands and then with an elderly artist called Agnes Smith and a factory owner in Vejle.²²

I never heard the stories from him, only from my mother, my aunt Birgit and my uncles Ole, Finn and Lars. Perhaps, like many people who have lived through war, he did not like to talk about that time and wanted to put a distance between the present and particular elements of the past.

The recorded interview

When you are in the middle of a story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, or else a boat crushed by the icebergs or swept over the rapids, and all aboard powerless to stop it. It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all. When you are telling it, to yourself or to someone else.

Alias Grace, Margaret Atwood²³

There remained, however, one autobiographical record of Asger's experiences during the occupation. At the instigation of his son Finn, Asger was interviewed in 1982. By then he was in his seventies and Finn, visiting him in his home in Bjerre, asked questions in a series of ten-minute sessions. Even though I have only a partial understanding of spoken Danish, I felt a prick of emotion when I listened to the familiar Danish burr of a man remembering events that happened decades earlier. He spoke quickly, in short bursts. My mother wrote a translation for me.

Asger began by talking about a holiday he and his wife, Karen, took with friends in the autumn of 1939. They had travelled by car down through Germany and Austria. Despite advice to return home by those they met, they carried on and reached Venice and Verona before deciding to travel home. It was only when they returned through Germany that they realised that war had broken out:

We drove further up towards the north - went into a little country inn, I remember clearly that it was quiet inside. There were no people and an old woman who served us said that all their staff were away and had gone to the front. 'Where is the front?', we said. 'It is in Poland.'

They struggled to find petrol and were helped on one occasion by a kind stranger, but otherwise they had to get official permission to buy petrol from the German council offices. They finally arrived home on the day that France joined the war.

We were not particularly concerned about what was going on, not nearly enough. We did not care. Anyway, as far as I was concerned we had experienced the war between 1914 and 1918, and we did well when there was war in the rest of the world. We had to do without so many things, but we were free from the actual horrors of war. It never entered our minds that it could affect us at that time.

Asger went on to talk about the day Denmark was invaded. Two days before the invasion, which took place on 9 April 1940, he remembered his father talking to Redaktør Christensen, the editor of the largest newspaper in Horsens, *Horsens Folkeblad*. The editor told him that there were long convoys of German soldiers south of the border, ready to invade Denmark.

Even so, it came as a surprise to hear the planes flying overhead in the early hours of that April morning:

We sprang out of bed and looked out of the window. At that time, we lived on the first floor at Nørregade 1. We saw thousands of planes, at any rate, many hundreds of planes with gliders in tow. We understood that they were on their way north, but we didn't know why. Later, we found out that they were on their way to invade Norway. In the afternoon, the German soldiers arrived. They had both combat and military vehicles with troops. I remember clearly that they installed themselves on Banegårdspladsen which at that time was quite bare. Many people went down to look at the German army. The atmosphere was gloomy but there was no fear.²⁴

Asger then started to talk about his involvement with the resistance:

The cellar in Nørregade 3 was the air-raid shelter and it was very well suited for that role. It was where the wallpaper was stored and it was warm and dry. As an air-raid warden I had certain privileges. I would go out into the street during the raid, which was not allowed, and I got a special permit. The first was issued by the Danish police and the second by the Germans which gave me permission to travel by car, bicycle and rail. That was very useful as I had already started getting involved with the resistance movement. Later, at the end of 1943, I delivered a machine gun to a saboteur. I cannot remember his name. But I know that he was involved in blowing up some cables at Bygholm (Manor House). We had been told by the English that we should blow up all electricity installations. We had discussed this and Højby and I decided that it would be ridiculous to destroy ourselves so we did it only symbolically and only destroyed a transformer mast.

In later sessions Asger talked about the darker realities of working in the resistance. He worked with a man called Sven, a detective inspector with the Danish police from Sjælland who performed 'liquidations'. The word 'liquidation' was the grim terminology of the time for the killing of *stikkere* (informers).

We had received a whole lot of information about a man. I don't know what his name was but there was so much that was compromising for him. We sent all the

information to Aarhus and we were told that he had to be liquidated. I discussed this with my second in command, Villy. Like many of the others, he too was a detective. We agreed that we should make the decision on whether to liquidate him. The war was going to end soon, and he had a wife and many children. We thought this would be pointless. We would indeed get him later. So, we did something else. We agreed with Sven that we should drag this man into the woods and give him a thrashing, and he did get it and we threatened him violently that if he did not stop he would be finished. He stopped.

Then there were two stories which shocked me and have stayed with me ever since. They highlighted the realities of how resistance groups meted out justice at a time of war:

We knew a telephone engineer who was not actually in our group but he gave us all the information that we needed. He had fitted a telephone wire up to the Gestapo office. It was something like the Gestapo information office. We got all the connections; we also wanted to find out who was working for the Germans. Amongst others, there was a master painter. At that time we also thought it was crazy and it was very late, it was just a few months before we could count on the war finishing. We agreed that although liquidation was a reasonable solution, we would not go ahead with this. We sent letters to him saying that you will be shot in eight days, you will be shot in seven days, right up until the last day and after that he ran away. After the war he was sentenced to eighteen months' imprisonment.

It did not always go that well for those who were against us. Sven who performed liquidations sat beside a girl and she discovered who he was and what he did and he was obliged to liquidate her immediately. He shot her through the head and then he disappeared. I got her handbag and there was evidence enough and I sent it on. I buried the handbag in a garden where we knew no one could find it.²⁵

During the interviews Asger revealed nothing of his emotions. He stuck close to the facts of the events. I can only imagine how he felt at the time about what was happening. The margins of his life must have grown narrower, focussing on his resistance work and his own survival and that of his family. After all, many Danes died as a result of information provided to the Nazis by Danish informers. The experience must have made him a little harder.

The execution of collaborators by members of the Danish Resistance increased during the last years of the Second World War. Bent Faurschou-Hviid (known as *Flammen* ‘The Torch’) and Jørgen Haagen Schmith (known as *Citronen*, ‘the Lemon’) carried out liquidations on behalf the Holger Danske resistance group, named after a mythical Danish warrior knight. The story of these two men, the redhead and the blond, was dramatised in the 2008 film *Flammen & Citronen*, directed by Ole Christian Madsen. Towards the end of the film, when they talked about the future, Flammen said simply:

There is no ‘afterwards’. Not here. Not for us.²⁶

The translation of her father’s interview stirred further memories for my mother. One evening over the telephone, she told me how as a five-year-old child at the end of the war she stood at the window of Nørregade and watched the *Tüsker piger*, the young Danish women who had given love and comfort to German soldiers, being paraded through the town, shaven headed and stripped down to their underwear. And how at the coffee and cake reception in the Jorgensen Hotel in Horsens after Asger’s funeral, an old man whom she did not recognise had stood and said: ‘We must remember that Asger was the first to say at the end of the war, that now we must learn to be friends with the Germans again.’²⁷

A note on translation

The translation of these interviews has highlighted the issue of distance, not only of time and place but also of language. At all levels understanding can only ever be partial. Erik Prenovitz, the translator of Derrida’s *Archive Fever*, wrote that ‘a translation maintains above all *its own fiction*, it maintains the true fiction that translation is possible’.²⁸ An example of this can be found in the translation of the title itself. *Mal d’Archives* has been translated as *Archive Fever*. The word *fever* seems too light a word. *Mal* also has much darker meanings in French: trouble, pain, malice, sin, evil, a fact also pointed out by Carolyn Steedman.²⁹ Something is lost in that translation, but the issue spreads beyond these problematic idiomatic limitations. It is to do with the impossibility of concealing the imprint of the translator and the choices he or she is forced to make. The translations included here bear the impression of the translator, in this case, my mother. And while the moment of translation may be a unique moment of archivisation in itself, its interpretation must always remain open.

***Dagbøger* - the scrapbook journals of Christian Holmboe**

Jens Christian Gylding Holmboe, who was known as Christian, created a series of scrapbook journals before and throughout the war up until his death on Whit Sunday in June 1944. My Danish relatives have always referred to them by the English word ‘scrapbooks’ or the Danish word *dagbøger*.³⁰ Forty-two of these foolscap-size volumes, each of the same design with brown hardboard covers and marbled endpapers survived the war. Each was filled with press cuttings, dotted with neatly inked marginalia and interspersed with longer passages of his own writings. I imagined Christian sitting at his desk, undertaking the near-daily ritual of writing the date, underlining it in dark blue ink and carefully clipping out articles from the newspapers. The handwriting was small and fluid, slanting to the right and filling the full width of the page. The first time I saw the scrapbooks in the archive, by which I also mean held them in my hands, I became acutely aware of their irreplaceability: the fading ink, the yellowing newspaper and glue, the smell of old paper and the dust. For all their bulk, they were fragile objects.

First, I must address the story of the scrapbooks themselves. How this archive came to be and was subsequently preserved is an important part of the context. The *dagbøger* have not travelled far since they were created at Christian’s desk in Nørregade in the centre of Horsens and in the seaside summerhouse in Næsset, just a few kilometres from the town. For a period, the *dagbøger* were stored in the attics at Nørregade before finally being moved forty kilometres from where they were written to the archives of the *Besættelsesmuseet* (Museum of Occupation) in Aarhus in the 1960s. They could have been lost, damaged, destroyed or left behind, but the family valued them enough to keep them safe for twenty years after Christian’s death.

Both my mother and my aunt remember seeing the scrapbooks as they played in the attics of Nørregade 3 after the war. (The family had moved from Nørregade 1 into Nørregade 3 after the death of Misse, Christian’s wife.) They were piled in stacks on a deep shelf amid the large rolls of wallpaper from the family business and the washing lines used for hanging out the sheets in winter. They had remained in the attic throughout the war. Under the occupation, a house search by the Gestapo was quite possible and no doubt Christian would have been aware of this, but there seemed to have been no real attempt to hide the volumes.

This brings to the fore the notion of intended and unintended readers. I cannot help but wonder who, if anyone, Christian had in mind as he sat down each day with pen in hand and turned a fresh page. He would have had no notion of his great-granddaughter over seventy

years later embarking on a PhD or of Dr. Nathaniel Hong, an American academic, painstakingly photographing page after page as part of the research for his book about the German occupation of Denmark.³¹ I never discovered Christian's motivations because the one person that I most wanted to find in the archive was the one person that I could be sure that I would never find.³²

However, several months into my research I read a passage in which Christian appeared to be addressing a future reader (see Figure 5). Unusually, he wrote his initials 'CH' at the end of the passage.

Sunday, 14 September 1941

In the preceding pages, I have tried to describe what the ordinary Danish people have thought and said about what is happening at the moment. And I have also expressed and written down what I thought, as it will not be seen by others, either friends or foes.

Nearly everyone, myself included, has nevertheless spoken and judged, but what I think, say and write is, of course, based on that which we hear and read. A whole part of that could be lies and maybe it is just that which forms the basis of our judgement. I say, what will be the judgement when everything is completely unravelled? What will the judgement of Hitler be? In thirty or forty years, what will the sober-minded and politically independent historian conclude about that which is happening and has happened in these years? CH.³³

He wrote that his words 'will not be seen by others'. The 'others' he referred to must be those living around him at that time, because his tone suggested that he was writing with a reader in mind; a reader, perhaps, who might live far in the future, 'thirty, forty' or even over seventy years in the future, and one who might be able to answer his questions. In the event, he found the answers for himself as the months went by.

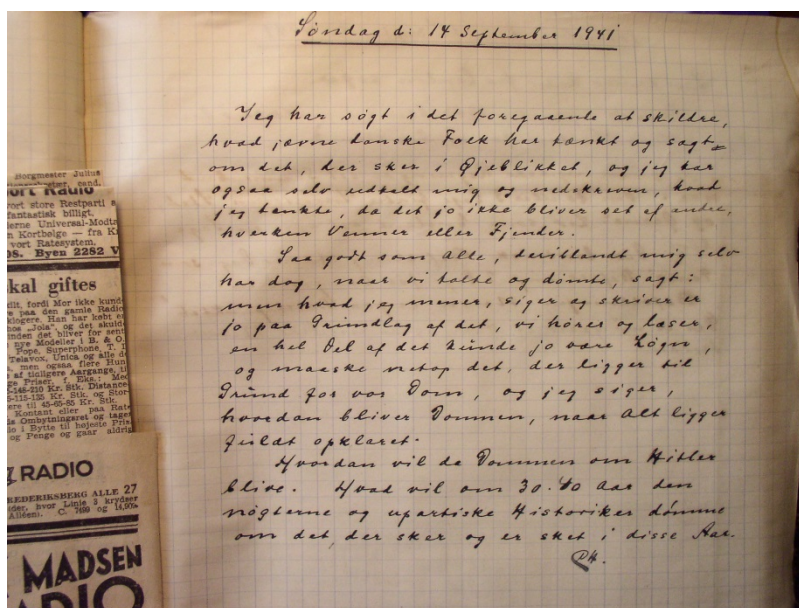


Figure 7: A page from Christian's *dagbøger*, dated Sunday, 14 September 1941

My aunt, Birgit Holmboe, recalled her mother, Karen Holmboe, having a meeting in 1965 with 'the director of the university library in Aarhus about the old scrapbooks about the war'.³⁴ Some months after this meeting, the scrapbooks were moved to the *Besættelsesmuseet*, the Museum of Occupation in the town, where they have remained ever since. The moving of these volumes from a family loft to a museum basement was the point at which the scrapbooks left the private sphere of the family and became public documents and, as such, were afforded instant official archival status. Apart from this geographical shift, the only other outward sign of this new status was brown paper. Several of the volumes were bound together in sheets of brown paper and sticky tape, the dates of the volumes contained within noted hastily on the front. The scrapbooks have become part of the museum's large collection of archival material and artefacts. The collection continues to grow as individuals donate papers and objects. News of recent arrivals is shared with interested parties on social media networks: a wind-up torch used to signal dropping zones to RAF planes and a copy of the so-called 'Cookbook', a primer in sabotage techniques, for example. The museum's archive has a narrative that extends into the future.

The *dagbøger*, however, did not contain the narrative of an individual wartime life. They held little sense of the modern 'autobiographical turn' where the self was articulated and expressed.³⁵ Christian created a chronological record of events, noting down the dates, times and content of radio broadcasts from London as well as summaries of the day's newspaper

articles, the originals of which were often cut out and stuck on the pages. He shared few intimate thoughts about himself or the family. Moreover, there was a restraint in the commentary about the cuttings. Perhaps there was simply too much information. In parts the scrapbooks formed a type of montage where, for example, the censored version of one event in the national press was juxtaposed against a different version from the underground press. Often he offered no interpretation or sometimes just a short note in the margin to make his opinion clear. For example, in the days running up to the resignation of the government on 29 August 1943, Christian made the following notes against selected press articles:

‘Naïve German propaganda’ (13 August 1943).

‘The gagged press, as usual, does not publish any reports about the many acts of sabotage that are taking place everywhere’ (16 August 1943).

‘The horror of it is covered up’ (of the British bombing of Berlin on 25 August 1943).

Then there were some deeper glimpses of Christian’s character. In an early volume, dated 1930, he wrote a list of his human values:

1. Always try to distinguish between what is essential and what is not.
2. Have a goal and work energetically to achieve it.
3. The goal must be significant and worthwhile.
4. Listen to other people, but don’t agree with anybody before you have thought it through.
5. Make haste, slowly. So, decide quickly, but first after thorough deliberation.
6. Press on, always soldier on, but don’t forget relaxation.
7. Make use of the press.
8. A setback is best dealt with by doubling the effort to overcome it.
9. Help where you can without thinking about how it can benefit you.
10. If you are fighting for a cause, then serve it and not yourself.
11. If you are fighting for a cause then leave no honest means untried to advance it.
12. Build a team [of employees].³⁶
13. Reward loyalty.
14. Face danger with courage.

15. Don't forget that something should happen every day!

On 20 June 1936, he added three more items:

16. Be wise, let your actions be dictated by your intelligence. Don't always flaunt your knowledge. Let others think that they are cleverer than you.
17. Make the most of your time.
18. Work and rest – do both with equal thoroughness.³⁷

I had just a single day with the original *dagbøger* and even with the help of my uncle, Lars Holmboe, as translator, I only make a superficial interrogation of the documents. We focussed only on the days around 28 August 1943 when martial law was introduced and the Danish Government finally resigned. The archivist later scanned the pages and emailed them to me. More fortuitously, I came across a memory stick containing photographs of most of the pages in the scrapbooks with a selection of the pages translated into English. The memory stick was sent to me by Nathaniel Hong, an American academic with a Danish heritage. He used the scrapbooks when researching his book *Occupied, Denmark's Adaptation and Resistance to German Occupation 1940–1945*. In addition, my mother also had a copy of the memory stick which, at a rate of a page a day, she continued to translate into English. For me.

As I read through the translations, I saw the changes in Christian's attitude towards the Germans. At the beginning of the war his attitude was quite positive:

Wednesday, 19 June 1940:

I attended a meeting with rug manufacturers in Aarhus. When the sun went down the Germans lowered the two flags, German and Danish, that flanked the entrance to the Royal Hotel. Under full honor guard from a half company of German soldiers, first the German, and then the Danish flag. Among all the meaningless rumors going around, most of which are characterised by humor and never with evil spirit, I have never heard anything but good about the German soldiers that have occupied Denmark. Correct, polite, also with hard, but fine faces. On train journeys I have observed many common German soldiers, who are modestly and politely reserved and helpful to the old and children.

If Hitler now lets us maintain our national and economic freedom, so that we have the same relations with Germany that we have had with the other Scandinavian countries, he would win over all the Danes. We are, of course, people from the same

descendants. If, through the horrendous earthquake that now shakes Europe, the Germanic countries still find one another, then the sacrifice would not be in vain. Would not a powerful Europe arise from the ruins? ³⁸

But by 1943 his attitude had changed. He wrote this after attending meetings of the Danish German Union:

The general tone was always friendly, low-key and cultured, well-dressed Danes and a polite and charming atmosphere. It was all so sugary and nauseating for those who were aware of the intention and understood the enticing tone. Notice how the German speakers plan their talk. They usually start by praising Danish culture, show us how clever we are, that we are of the same root. Then an appraisal of German culture and then finishing in a threatening tone, in case we had other ideas, that the root was German culture, their type of culture. Compare these charming speakers with the way they behave in the occupied countries, especially Norway – and with what we are not told in our press and radio in Denmark – and about the Danes living in the German part of Slesvig. ³⁹

Christian went on to provide specific examples. It had been reported that the Danish Press editor, E. Christiansen, had resigned from his position as editor of *Flensborg Avis*, a newspaper based in Slesvig. In fact, the authorities in Berlin had ‘requested’ his resignation. He was told that they wanted to appoint a person who would be ‘more in tune with the German national outlook’. Then the headmaster of the Danish school in Slesvig mentioned the ‘non-aggression pact’ in a letter to his wife, who was at that time in Denmark. The letter was stopped by the censor and the headmaster was called in for questioning. The case went to Berlin and nothing came of it for a while. But later the headmaster was arrested by the Gestapo and sent to a concentration camp. Since then the family had received no news. Christian finally observed:

Intelligent people in Denmark are dealt with by one German section of the Danish-German union. Another section treats Danes as described above – but the Danish public are not told anything about this.

Tensions between the Danish Government and Germany increased and violence began to spill out onto the streets. In the days before the Danish Government finally resigned, Christian made a report of events in Middelfart, a small town on the island of Fyn, just across the Lillebaelt strait from Horsens. On 25 August 1943, he wrote:

It went wild in Middelfart.

It began with a young boy who was on his way into town with the audience leaving a cinema. He threw a stone through the window of a German military bus. The Germans responded by shooting over the heads of the crowd, but a bullet went too low and killed an older man. A crowd of several hundred now assembled on the streets and a large group of young people pulled out a German's tart [a Danish girl] and cut off her hair while she screamed loudly. The crowd went to the insane asylum and forced their way in and cut off the hair of six girls, all of whom were Germans' tarts.

A total of twenty-six girls in Middelfart had their hair cut off that night. They were left with just one tuft of hair. At the same time word was sent out to all barbers and hairdressers that they had better not dare to clean up the tarts.

In Odense, a loose woman who ran a dovecote [brothel] for the Germans was attacked in her apartment and her furniture from the second floor landed on the street.

This passage reminded me of what my mother told me about the *Tüske piger* she saw from her bedroom window. Women, often the easiest targets for instant retribution, were given a particularly humiliating form of justice.

On 28 August 1943, he wrote:

The German Wehrmacht sounded a big bugle. The orchestra is marching through the streets to pacify the people. This does not show much understanding of the Danish mentality.

And, later on the same day, he wrote by an article which noted how the Danes had escaped Armageddon a thousand times more easily than they could ever have hoped:

The day after everything changed!

The Government had resigned and the Germans were now openly in charge. On Monday, 30 August 1943, he wrote:

No newspapers came out on Monday. Sunday's Danish radio reported that everyone must be indoors by 9 p.m. From the yard in Chrstrup we heard a lot of shooting at 8.15 p.m. coming from the city. Revolver shots and rifle shots. The shooting sounded quite far away, but suddenly a shot sounded very close by. We went in very quickly. I went out on Chrstrupvej. Down from the city two German soldiers came towards us with rifles at the ready, one on each side of the street.

Christian tended to focus on recording public events. There was little or no movement into the realm of the private or of the family. Did he simply feel compelled to record these events, to give them his complete attention as they happened around him? He must have spent a great deal of time each day on the project. He did not try to make any sense of it all or to interpret events beyond the questioning of the validity of the information he was receiving. It seemed to be a question of laying the materials bare perhaps for others to assess *when everything is completely unravelled*. On the other hand, the making of the *dagbøger* might have been a kind of dissociative externalising mechanism to cope with his own trauma. After all, he had already lost one of his sons in 1939 and two others ended up in prison or in hiding during those war years. While the scrapbooks have not revealed much about Christian as an individual, they have shed a cool light on those specific historical events in one country between 1940 and 1945 and how they were reported at the time.

¹ Anne Michaels, *The Winter Vault*, p. 122.

² Nathaniel Hong is an American academic who has written about the Danish illegal press during German occupation and has examined Christian Holmboe's *dagbøger* in detail.

³ When Asger Holmboe, my grandfather, was hiding from the Gestapo, he stayed in the home of the artist, Agnes Smidt, in Ribe, on the west coast of Jutland. While he was there in 1944, he heard of the death of his father, Christian Holmboe, who is shown in the photograph. Asger could not go to the funeral and so Agnes painted Christian's portrait from a photograph that Asger gave her.

⁴ John Berger, *G*, p. 54.

⁵ Peter Nicolaj Gudme Christiansen, 'Armbindets traumatiske bagside', *Information Weekend* (7–8 September 2013), pp.10–13.

⁶ Email 9 September 2013. 'Konsekvenserne af at fædrene deltog i modstandskampen fik drastiske konsekvenser. For vores egen familie var det jo også tilfældet. Ikke så meget far (Asger) for han klarede sig, men jeg kan alligevel fornemme at hans periode "under jorden" kom til at præge også vores familie i 50'erne og fremefter.'

⁷ My supervisor at the time was William Fiennes.

⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 91

⁹ *Archive Fever* is the transcript of a lecture Jacques Derrida gave in London on 5 June 1994 entitled 'The Concept of the Archive: a Freudian Impression'.

¹⁰ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, p. 7.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 1.

¹² *Olefar* means 'great-grandfather', literally 'old father'.

¹³ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 36.

¹⁴ Ibid., Translator's note. No page number.

¹⁵ Anne Michaels, *The Winter Vault*, p. 139.

¹⁶ *Mormor* – literally 'mother of my mother' and *Morfar* 'father of my father'. Other variations are *Farmor* and *Farfar*.

¹⁷ A vimpel is a long thin pennant flag. Many Danish homes have a flag pole in the garden and flag flying is very common. A vimpel is often hoisted at night when a rectangular flag has been taken down so as not to leave the pole bare.

¹⁸ 'The Hatching of a Novel', a paper presented by Elizabeth Bostock, 9 May 2013, at Breaking Boundaries, First Year PhD Conference, Newcastle University.

¹⁹ Edmund de Waal, *The Hare with the Amber Eyes*, p. 231.

²⁰ From a recorded interview with Asger Holmboe.

²¹ *Hvidstengruppen*, dir. Anne-Grethe Bjarup Riis (Regner Grasten Film, 2012). A 2012 film based on the true story of an innkeeper and his family's involvement in the resistance during the German occupation in Denmark. The innkeeper and some of his sons were executed by a Nazi firing squad before the end of the war. His daughter was spared execution.

²² These details are confirmed when I receive my mother's translation of the recorded interview with Asger Holmboe.

²³ Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*, p. 298.

²⁴ Banegårdspladsen (Station Square) in the nearby town of Aarhus.

²⁵ Translation by Jette Evans, 2013.

²⁶ Taken from the English subtitles of the film. *Flammen & Citronen*, dir. Ole Christian Madsen (Nimbus Film, 2008).

²⁷ Translation by Jette Evans, 2012.

²⁸ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 106.

²⁹ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, p. 9.

³⁰ *dagbøger* translates as 'diaries', literally 'day books'.

³¹ Nathaniel Hong, *Occupied, Denmark's Adaptation and Resistance to German Occupation 1940–1945*, (Copenhagen, Frihedsmuseets Venner Forlags Fund, 2012).

³² I paraphrase here a quote from Jennifer Douglas' chapter *Original Order, Added Value?* in *The Boundaries of the Literary Archive*, p. 55.

³³ From a translation by Nathaniel Hong.

³⁴ Conversation during the author's visit to Copenhagen in March 2013.

³⁵ Carolyn Steedman, *Dust*, p. 55.

³⁶ After considerable discussion in the family, it was agreed that the team he speaks of is to do with the workplace.

³⁷ From a translation by Nathaniel Hong (emailed to me in 2013) with minor adaptations by my mother, Jette Evans, and myself.

³⁸ From a translation by Nathaniel Hong, in private notes sent to me in June 2013. I have kept the American spelling.

³⁹ The piece is entitled: '*The Northern countries and Denmark*'. Nathaniel Hong adds the note: 'I think this is a conference title'.

Chapter 2. The Memory of Paper

In March 2013, I visited the *Frihedsmuseet* (Freedom Museum) in Copenhagen. I was the first to arrive and, for the first hour, the only visitor. At one end of the main hall, replicas of the wooden posts used by the Nazis for executions at Ryvangen had been erected. They cast thick shadows on the floor in the morning light. Close by lay two letters written by Danish prisoners of war. The letters, their creases spread flat, had been preserved under glass like pressed flowers. The first is Carl Erik Abel's letter to his friend dated 2 May 1944:

Dear friend, this night I learned that my time is up, it came as a surprise to me. [...] Good luck my friend, I'll be fine.

To the left-hand side, there was a typed letter from Aksel Jensen to his mother, dated 14 July 1944. He wrote from the green section of Vestre Prison in Copenhagen:

They beat a few obvious lies out of us for the sake of appearances. It looks better that way for everyone concerned. [...] But when all is quiet and still, all one hears are the guard's footsteps in the hallway and the patrols chatting out by the outer wall – that is the worst time when your thoughts descend on you without mercy, all of them searing like smouldering coals. Will you see Mother again? [...] Will death be the outcome? ¹

Aksel Jensen's sense of foreboding proved to be right. He was executed two weeks later, not against the posts at Ryvangen like Carl Abel, but by the roadside with ten other *modstandsfolk* (resistance fighters) at Lauringe Moor on 9 August 1944.² A month after my visit, the *Frihedsmuseet* building itself was destroyed by fire. Astonishingly, these memorials in paper, along with many other artefacts, survived.

Between the writing of these two letters, another was written on the east coast of Jutland. Christian Gylding Holmboe, my *Olefar*, was staying at the Holmboe summerhouse by the sea at Juelsminde. He wrote to his daughter and her husband. It was 21 June 1944 and Whit Sunday. It was also the day of his death. In the letter he mentioned several of his seven children, including Ebbe, the youngest. At that time Ebbe, barely eighteen, was a prisoner at

Horserød camp in the north of Sjælland. He was involved with the resistance organisations *Frit Danmark* and *Studenternes Efterretningsjeneste* and had been caught for sabotage activity in April 1944.³ In a few weeks' time he would be moved to Barkhausen concentration camp (no. 77) at Porta Westfalica in Germany where he died on 5 December 1944, six months after the death of his father. Ebbe's short biography on the *Frihedsmuseet Modstandsdatabase* (Freedom Museum Resistance database) gave me a glimpse of his character and his family:

He came from an artistically gifted family and left behind some allegorical drawings as well as the draft of a ballet and an opera. During the occupation, the family played an active part in the resistance movement where one of the brothers [my grandfather, Asger Holmboe] was founder member of the illegal resistance movement 'Horsens Home Guard'.⁴

Beyond this, very little was known about Ebbe in the family. My uncle Lars showed me his name engraved along with thirteen others onto a memorial standing stone outside *Klosterkirke* in Horsens. We stood together in silence for a few moments. I calculated the ages: twenty-three, nineteen, twenty-three and eighteen, close to the ages of my own sons. It was perhaps for that reason that Ebbe has stayed with me. With hindsight, for these things were not always obvious at the time, I believed he was the spark of inspiration for the artistic character of Søren in my novel *Seabirds of Jutland*. In the letter, Christian went on to mention another son, Asger (my *Morfar*⁵). Asger, now wanted by the Gestapo, was living *under jorden* (underground) and remained hidden somewhere in Denmark. Erik, the last to be mentioned, worked in the family paint business and was also involved in the resistance movement in the town. Christian must have been worried about his sons. He had already lost one, his eldest son. Knud Holmboe, a convert to Sufi Islam, journalist and traveller with the Bedouin tribes, had been murdered in the Libyan desert in 1931, most probably on the orders of the Italian occupiers. Despite all this, Christian's letter expressed hope for his country. The original letter was now lost with only a copy typed by Asger Holmboe remaining. The original had been, my mother told me, illustrated with the image of a shining sun and the words 'Whitsun morning in brilliant sunshine. The Whit sun is the spirit of Denmark':

Dear Grete and Poul,

This is an image of the spirit of Denmark, radiant because it is indomitable. There is not a fight between nations, but a fight for and against eternal human values, the things which make life worth living.

Do you remember what we learnt as a foundation for all Germanic-Scandinavian culture? An unbending will to keep one's promise, to be contemptuous of breach of promise, to hate abuse of power and to believe in tolerance. All this is a foundation for developing the personality of the young, that we are and can be a people of free Nordic men and women and not a flock of slaves.

The brilliant Whitsun sun tells me all this, and with that as a foundation we shall fight against all those forces which will devastate Europe.

We are on our own, mother and I, here in Juelsminde for the first time. We miss the boys, Ebbe, Erik and Asger, but they are of course men now.⁶ We also miss Inger and Hother and their large family, and especially on this blessed Whitsun morning.

I have never seen it more beautiful here. Everything is breathing the deepest peace. I am sitting here writing amongst the pines and fir trees. Around me there is a scent of pine, grass and wild flowers. From the hospital on the coast I can hear young people singing. They have gathered on the terrace to welcome the sun with humble love which will reach the heavens and, above all, sparkle with the Whitsun spirit.

Grete, the ornamental scrub sends you greetings. It has grown big and beautiful, a little stunted by the fir tree that is jealous of it because of its flowers and special scent. When Grete, Gerda and I were doing our morning exercises the scent enveloped us.

Peter, the boat and the cart greet you and the beach, the field flowers and little birds greet you too, as well as Metteli.⁷

Love from your father, Christian⁸

I know now how Christian Gylding Holmboe spent his final day; how his daughter kept the letter, a letter of love for his family, for nature and for his faith; and how the letter has been kept safe through the generations. This letter has become the memoir of his death.

pinsemorgen i strålende sol
i Elysium

pinnesolen er Aanden i Danmark

kære grete og poul

Sådan er aanden i Danmark. Strålende, fordi den er ukuelig.

Det er ikke Kamp mellem to Nationer, men det er kampen for
eller imod de evige menneskelige livsværdier..

Kan I huske, hvad vi lærte, som grundlag for al germansk- skan-
dinavisk kultur, en ubøjelig vilje til at kæmpe for ordholden-
hed, til at foragte løftebrud, til at hade magtmisbrug og til
at elske fordragelighed, til som grundlag for al ungdomsopdra-
gelse at udvikle personligheden hos de unge, så vi er og kan
blive et folk af frie nordiske mænd og kvinder og ikke en flok
af slaver.

Alt det siger den strålende pinnesol mig, og med det som grund-
lag, vil vi kæmpe mod alle de kræfter, der vil lægge europa øde

Vi er ene, mor og jeg, her i Juelsminde, for første gang. Vi sav-
ner de tre drenge, ebbe erik og asger, men de er jo mænd nu, og
vi savner poul og grete, vagn og meta og inger og hother og hele
deres store børneflokk, og netop i denne velsignede pinsemorgen.
Jeg så den aldrig skønnere.

Alt ånder den dybeste fred. Jeg sidder her midt mellem fyr og
graner og skriver og om mig dufter det af fyr og græs og markens
blomster, og fra Kysthospitalet hører jeg sangen fra alle de Unge,
der har samlet sig på terrasserne for at bringe solen deres ydmyge
tak. Og de synger om den Gud, der råder for landets sag og om Guds
miskundhed, der når til himlen og om al den glans, der står om
pinseånden.

Jeg kan hilse dig, Grete, fra din sirenbusk, den er bleven stor og
skøn, lidt kuet af fyrren, der er jaloux på den, fordi dens bløster
har en hel anden duft. Der strøg netop et pust fra den hen over
Grete, Gerda og mig, da vi tog morgengymnastikken.

Hils peter fra båden og trillevognen og peter og Metteli fra alle
blomster og små fugle fra stranden og marken, og selv være i to
kærlig hilset

fra far

skrevet 2 timer før far døde i 1944

Figure 8: Christian Holmboe's last letter, typed by Asger Holmboe

I think we are leaving today

To the south and Europe where clouds cover Christian's sun darkly. While my great-grandfather was enjoying the peace of his last hours by the Horsens fjord, others were on the move. I discovered two shadow-filled letters written between 1942 and 1944. Both were written in pencil, in tiny writing. Paper and ink were in scant supply. Unknown to one another, Mária Berger and Irène Némirovsky lived fifteen hundred kilometres apart, one in Hungary and the other in France. Both were experiencing the horror of the war at close proximity. My great-grandfather died of natural causes. By contrast, death was forced upon these women because they were Jewish.

Spanning three summers, these letters formed a loose triangle across Europe: Denmark, Hungary and France. Three individual lives, fragments of which were recorded in ink and pencil, glimmered at the fringes of war. They wrote letters of love in the face of history unfolding. Just out of reach, their voices have suggested themselves to me, murmuring from the silence of the past.

A month before Christian Holmboe let the ink dry on his last letter, Mária Berger, a Jewish Hungarian widow, wrote to her son, László. Mária was the mother of many children and the widow of a boot-maker living in the Hungarian town of Székesfehérvár. While researching his family history, Mária's great-grandson, Nick Barlay, discovered this unique letter, written with a blunt pencil. It had remained unread for sixty-five years. He wrote: 'In a box where such things are kept, there is nothing else like this letter.'⁹ I have taken the title for this chapter, *The Memory of Paper*, from his family memoir, *Scattered Ghosts*. Through archives and genealogy, and with the touch of a poet, Barlay explored the story of his Hungarian Jewish family from the Holocaust to 1956.

It was 25 May 1944. Her flat requisitioned, Mária Berger was on the move. She had been forced to relocate to one of the 'yellow star houses' (Barlay, p. 96). Barlay described the letter: 'It is more of a crackling sheet that has been folded and folded again, to fit a missing envelope' (Barlay, p. 84). It was a letter filled with the practicalities: the lack of food and money, the problem of transportation of bedding, the sewing machine and the dining table. In fear and uncertainty, she began: 'My sweet dear Laci! It has been difficult waiting for your letter. I thought they might already have taken you.' And ended: 'It's just that we're scared of being raided again' (Barlay, p.87). Between these understated terrors, she managed to congratulate László on his marriage, an ordinary family event in disordered times. But family life was surely adrift when a mother cannot be present at the marriage of a son. Her words,

like those of Aksel Jensen, were full of foreboding: ‘For weeks now we’ve been in such a state because every sign points to the G’. The ‘G’, as Barlay pointed out, meant the Ghetto. ‘The abbreviation can only stand for one thing: the fear of the unmentionable whole’ (Barlay, p. 94). He ended the chapter:

I turn behind me to where I’ve left the letter, to look again, to check one more name, a final spelling. But the letter is already retreating from the light. Seeking shadows from peeping eyes, it folds back in on itself along its fold lines (Barlay, p. 101).

Mária was murdered at Székesfehérvár on 17 June 1944, four days before the death of my great-grandfather.

Irène Némirovsky’s last letter

Two years earlier in France, it was summertime once again. A Jewish Russian émigré and French writer called Irène Némirovsky penned a brief letter to her daughters. It was the last letter that they would receive from her. She, like Mária Berger after her, was on the move and would be dead within the month. Nazi records stated that Irène Némirovsky, an asthmatic, died on 19 August 1942 from ‘flu’, concentration camp language for typhoid. She was thirty-nine.

Thursday morning. My dearest, my beloved little ones, I think we are leaving today. Courage and hope. You are all in my hearts, my dears. May God protect us all.¹⁰

Later, after her arrest, Irène Némirovsky’s letter was swept into a leather suitcase together with the manuscript of her unfinished novel *Suite Française* and a few photographs, papers and, with the poignancy of family practicality in a crisis, clean underwear for the two daughters, Denise and Élisabeth. That the suitcase and notebooks inside survived the war and the moving from place to place was not so much due to chance as to the tenacity of Denise Epstein, the elder of the two sisters. As she fled, she lost her beloved doll, *Bluette*, but held on to the suitcase and on to the hand of her five-year-old sister, whom she had to gag with a scarf to keep her quiet. Through all their clandestine, nocturnal travels, Denise held on to that suitcase as if her life depended on it. The paper manuscript survived, its writer and *Bluette* did

not. Denise would look for *Bluette* and for her mother for the rest of her life. Moreover, for many decades after the war, Denise could not wear a scarf of any kind.

As if on a raft

The pine trees all around me. I am sitting on my blue cardigan in the middle of an ocean of leaves, wet and rotting from last night's storm, as if on a raft, my legs tucked under me.

The Life of Irène Némirovsky Philipponnat and Lienhardt¹¹

Irène Némirovsky wrote these words in her journal in the days before her arrest. She could be describing her situation and that of her family, resigned to forces that were now beyond her control. Denounced by an unknown person from the village of Issy l'Évêque, Irène was arrested at home on 13 July 1942. Three months later the same scene was repeated for the rest of the family. The French police already knew the way. Irene's husband, Michel Epstein, also a Jewish Russian émigré, and his daughters, then aged thirteen and five, were arrested. On their arrival at the *préfecture* at Toulon-sur-Arroux on 9 October 1942, two events took place that would decide the fate of both Irène Némirovsky's daughters and that of her manuscript, *Suite Française*. First a German officer, taking a photograph of his own daughter from his wallet, told Julie, the children's governess, that the girls should go home and that they would come for them the next day. And second were Michel Epstein's last words to Denise: 'Never part from this suitcase, for it contains your mother's manuscript' (Philipponnat and Lienhardt, p. 384). The governess took the German officer's hint and that same night fled with the children to a convent in Bordeaux. After this terrible night, there followed a traumatic cycle of hiding, silence and fear. Worse was to come. When the war ended, Denise waited day after day outside the Gare de l'Est and Hotel Lutétia with her placard, watching the stream of survivors, still dressed in their striped clothing, return from the death camps. In an interview, Denise said of her first visit to the station: 'When I saw them arrive, I understood and I fainted.'¹²

This childhood agony was later fictionalised in an uncompromising novel written by Denise's younger sister, Élisabeth Gille. *Un Paysage de Cendres* has the translated title *Shadows of a Childhood* and was described by Denise as a 'livre si beau mais si d'ur'.¹³ In the novel Léa, a seven-year-old Jewish French girl, wanders around the Hôtel Lutétia in Paris among those repatriated from the concentration camps. She comes across an emaciated boy

whose eyes ‘burned with a dull flame whose black light turned inward, as though a vision of hell had seared and reversed the lens, leaving only the inner surface intact and capable of sight’.¹⁴ She tells him that she is looking for her parents:

There was no change in his expressionless face, but the hand that had fallen back onto the striped materials slowly rose again to trace a graceful spiral in the air, an arabesque coiling toward the window like a coil of smoke. The mouth pursed upward as though in preparation for a grotesque kiss. ‘Poof,’ it said (Gille, p. 71).

The novel unfolds in two parts. In the first, Léa, an *enfant cachée* during the occupation, is looked after by nuns, just as the writer had been. And in the second, set more than a decade later, the narrative charts Léa’s student life at the Lycée Fénelon and the Sorbonne in Paris amid the fervent post-war atmosphere of new politics and soul-searching. In the novel, Gille, who had no memory of her own mother, explores the theme of identity, or rather the lack of it. Haunting and unsettling, the narrative sometimes parallels Gille’s own life. Léa had one friend, Bénédicte, into whose family she is adopted. As they grow up together, it is Bénédicte’s mother who realises that Léa lacks any sense of identity and ‘was no more than scorched earth, a landscape of ashes, enclosed in the shifting boundaries of a human form by the magnetic force emanating from Bénédicte.’ (Gille, pp. 126, 375). Léa has no memories or mementoes - not a single document or photograph. She exists only as Bénédicte’s shadow. When Bénédicte is killed in a car accident during communist demonstrations in Paris, Léa barricades herself into her room while one of her young Algerian friends, Kaled, batters her door in search of refuge. Léa appears to disintegrate just as if she, like her parents before her, had ceased to exist: ‘the shower of beads had changed to a rain of ashes, which covered her completely in a shadowy grey blanket that finally deadened all sound’ (Gille, p. 138).

Memory and its transmission

‘À ma soeur, la mémoire douloureuse.’¹⁵ Élisabeth was only five years old when her mother disappeared. With no memories, she had only feelings of absence and loss which were brought so painfully to light in *Un Paysage de Cendres*. Denise and Élisabeth followed their paths of survival separately. Rejected by their grandmother Anna Némirovsky, the girls grew up without contact with any relatives. Élisabeth, seven years younger than Denise, was taken

in by a friend of the family.¹⁶ Denise grew up in Catholic boarding schools, spending holidays at the convent mother house or with family friends. Their education and expenses were financed by proceeds from Irène Némirovsky's work and managed by her loyal publisher, Albin Michel, and a few devoted friends. It was not until later in life, and by means of their mother's manuscripts, that the two women found a way to come together and become sisters again.

Élisabeth Gille had already had a career as an editor with several publishing houses when she started to write her first book, *Le Mirador*.¹⁷ It took the form of an imagined autobiography and included letters and citations from unpublished papers from the family archive. Denise was instrumental in helping Élisabeth with her research. And it would be to Élisabeth that Denise opened up her memories of their mother: 'My whole life has been about memory. Memory and its transmission.'¹⁸

The Mirador was written in the first person. It was as if Élisabeth Gille had picked up her mother's pen, her famous *Bel Azur*, to try and get inside her mother's head. For Élisabeth, her mother was both a stranger and an enigma. A single question stalks the book. Why didn't Irène Némirovsky leave France and make for safety with her family when she could? After all, the first raid on Jewish families by French gendarmes occurred in August 1941. Instead she moved the family from Paris, where they were being increasingly ostracised, to the quiet backwater of Issy-l'Évêque. They had applied far too late for citizenship papers. In their new home, Irène visited the post office every day, returning 'pale faced and empty handed' each time.¹⁹ She wrote frenetically and waited 'as if on a raft' for fate to take its course, telling her friend Sabatier on the subject of *Suite Française*: 'I suppose they will be posthumous books but it still makes the time go by.'²⁰ In an interview with Clémence Boulouque, Denise articulated her emotions more directly:

Did she not realise the situation? Was it her passion for writing, her total immersion in her own War and Peace? Her Russian fatalism? In moments of passing anger, we sometimes felt as if our parents had abandoned us in some way.²¹

Élisabeth said in an interview that as an adolescent she was angry with her mother for her lack of political sense, calling her 'criminally blind'.²² Perhaps Némirovsky, like the Hardelots and the Burgères in her novel *All Our Worldly Goods*, simply 'wanted tomorrow to be just like today, with soup on the table, the family all together, amusements, work, love, just a bit more time, just a few more moments'.²³

With this question of Némirovsky's 'blindness' in mind, it was perhaps ironic that Élisabeth Gille should choose *The Mirador*, a watchtower, as the title of her dreamed memoir. It seemed Némirovsky, who observed her fictional characters so convincingly, showing their snobbery and vanity, as well as their generosity and humanity, as catastrophe approached, was unable to see her own situation so clearly. She saw too late that the country she loved so much would eventually betray her. She needed to look more closely, perhaps with the aid of 'a big luminous magnifying glass' as her daughter Denise had when she began to read the contents of the notebook for the first time to see what was really before her.²⁴

Storm in June, the first part of *Suite Française*, is about exodus, flight and escape. Yet in writing it, Némirovsky remained firmly rooted to the spot. Close to the end of *Le Mirador*, Gille quoted from the last pages of her mother's journal written in June 1944 with catastrophe at her doorstep: 'My God, what is this country doing to me?'²⁵

As with *Un Paysage de Cendres*, *Le Mirador* was split into two parts: the first was set in 1939 at the height of Irène Némirovsky's fame and covered her pampered but sad childhood in Kiev and St. Petersburg. The second was set in June 1942 just before her arrest. The first-person narrative included authentic citations from Némirovsky's journals and letters and, as Gille noted later, a few of her mother's phrases that had slipped in 'comme des signes de tendresses'.²⁶ But most strikingly of all, woven like an umbilical cord amongst the first-person narratives of a mother, was a second text of her child, Élisabeth, written in the third person. These brief scenes in italic script were the childhood memories of a Jewish child during the occupation. In fact they were the articulation of Élisabeth Gille's own remembered feelings. The fragments cut through the first-person narrative like shards of glass. A cry of pain from a daughter to a mother: *why didn't you save us from all this?* At the end of the third chapter Gille wrote in her mother's voice about Irène's hatred of Anna, her adulterous mother, as she brazenly cavorted with her lovers around Paris. She elaborated on the shame Irène felt at her own 'extreme cruelty' when she deliberately hid her father's letter to Anna, 'out of jealousy and hatred'.²⁷ Then slipped in before the start of the next chapter, the child voice of Élisabeth sliced through, the sharpest of cuts:

October 1942. [...] The younger girl is proud to parade down the road in silence, like a princess being escorted to her kingdom. She would like to hold the officers' hands. She knows them: three months earlier they took her mother away on a trip. But her older sister, who walks beside her, very pale despite the beautiful yellow star sewn

onto her lapel, stares down, bites her lips, gripping her hand firmly (Gille, *The Mirador*, p. 56).

The two texts alternate whilst being inextricably bound to each other. As one viewpoint moves into focus, the memory of the other pulses through it. There are similarities in structure with Georges Perec's novel, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, in which a childhood wartime journal is interwoven with an adventure in an imagined world based on a fantasy of the Olympic ideal of excellence and competition. This world descends into a dark regime whose parallels with the war and the camps are implied. Gille may well have known this work as it was published by Éditions Denoël, where she was employed as an editor for many years. Perec, like Gille, had lost both parents in the Shoah:

For years, I sought out the traces of my history, looking up maps and directories and piles of archives. I found nothing, and it sometimes seemed as though I had dreamt, that there had been only an unforgettable nightmare.²⁸

By contrast, the one thing Elisabeth Gille had were 'piles of archives'. Her sister had scoured the Bibliothèque Nationale in search of all her mother's published articles. She described the experience as both 'douloureux et magnifique', despairing as to why her mother could have allowed some of her articles to be published in anti-Semitic publications like *Gringoire*, but delighting in finding interviews quoting her mother's own words.²⁹ And although no amount of paper could ever bring a mother back, the act of shared reading and writing brought the sisters back together after many years apart. 'The thread of memory has woven us together' Denise said in 2008 to her interviewer, Clémence Boulouque.³⁰

Élisabeth Gille was in her fifties when she started to write, publishing three works between 1992 and 1996. She wrote throughout the illness that would prove terminal and she died of cancer at the age of 59. In between *The Mirador* and *Shadows of a Childhood*, she completed *The Crab on the Back Seat* (*Le Crabe sur la Banquette Arrière*), a satirical dialogue between a sick woman (*la malade*) and her friends about how people changed their attitude when someone became terminally ill. She managed to complete *Shadows of Childhood*, but died before the publication of her mother's final work, *Suite Française*.

Like her daughter, Irène Némirovsky continued to write up to the last moment, culminating in her desperate pencilled notes from the *préfecture*. Likewise, the last thoughts of two young Danish prisoners awaiting their fate were seared to paper 'like smouldering

coals', and, many years later, spared from the fire. Christian Holmboe found hope in the White sun, despite the worry about his lost and hidden sons. Mária Berger sent wedding greetings in the face of a future full of fear. The act of putting pen or pencil to paper became an affirmation of life. The French writer Georges Perec, a survivor like Élisabeth Gille and Denise Epstein and a man who found barely a trace of his parents' existence, talked of 'the scandal of [his parents'] silence':

I write: I write because we lived together, because I was one amongst them, a shadow amongst their shadows, a body close to their bodies. I write because they left in me their indelible mark, whose trace is writing. Their memory is dead in writing; writing is the memory of their death and the assertion of my life.'³¹

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- ¹ The letters, the original and a transcript of the translation, were displayed in *Frihedsmuseet*, Copenhagen. Since the fire, the letters and other contents have been moved to a temporary location in Brede, north of Copenhagen, until the museum is rebuilt.
- ² As noted on the letter seen in *Frihedsmuseet*, Copenhagen.
- ³ From the online biography held in the Danish National Museum archive: <<http://modstand.natmus.dk>> [accessed 13 February 2015]. ‘Free Denmark’ and ‘The Student Information Service’ were resistance organisations based in Copenhagen during the occupation.
- ⁴ <<http://modstand.natmus.dk/PersonBiografi.aspx?8663>> [accessed 13 February 2015]. Translation by Jette Evans.
- ⁵ ‘Grandfather’, literally ‘mother’s father’.
- ⁶ Christian and Misse had seven children: Greta, Inger, Erik, Asger, Knud, Vaughan and Ebbe.
- ⁷ Peter and Metteli are Christian’s grandchildren.
- ⁸ Translation by Jette Evans. Original letter in Danish is held in the Holmboe family archive.
- ⁹ Nick Barlay, *Scattered Ghosts*, p. 84.
- ¹⁰ Oliver Philipponnat & Patrick Lienhardt, *The Life of Irène*, p. 5.
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 375.
- ¹² From a collection of interviews held on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website, <http://collections.ushmm.org/oh_findingaids/RG-50.030.0497_trs_en.pdf> [accessed 18 February 2015].
- ¹³ Denise Epstein, *Survivre et Vivre. Entretiens avec Clémence Boulouque*, p. 139.
- ¹⁴ Élisabeth Gille, *The Mirador, Dreamed Memories of Irène Némirovsky by her Daughter*, p. 70.
- ¹⁵ My own translation: ‘To my sister, painful memories’. This is taken from the dedication in the French edition of *Le Mirador*.
- ¹⁶ For more information about the mother of Irène Némirovsky, see Oliver Philipponnat & Patrick Lienhardt’s biography, *The Life of Irène*.
- ¹⁷ The English translation is entitled *The Mirador, Dreamed Memories of Irène Némirovsky by her Daughter*. I refer to the English translation in this chapter.
- ¹⁸ Denise Epstein, p. 122. My own translation.
- ¹⁹ Denise Epstein, p. 124. My own translation.
- ²⁰ Oliver Philipponnat & Patrick Lienhardt, p. 375.
- ²¹ Denise Epstein, p. 147. My own translation.
- ²² Élisabeth Gille, p. 236. The English edition of *The Mirador* includes the translated transcript of an interview with the author by René de Ceccatty.
- ²³ Irène Némirovsky, *All Our Worldly Goods*, p. 22.
- ²⁴ From a collection of interviews held on the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum website, <http://collections.ushmm.org/oh_findingaids/RG-50.030.0497_trs_en.pdf> [accessed 18 February 2015].
- ²⁵ Élisabeth Gille, *The Mirador, Dreamed Memories of Irène Némirovsky by her Daughter*, p. 215.
- ²⁶ Élisabeth Gille, *Le Mirador*, p. 269. Translated as: ‘like marks of love’.
- ²⁷ Élisabeth Gille, *The Mirador, Dreamed Memories of Irène Némirovsky by her Daughter*, p. 54.
- ²⁸ Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, p. 3.
- ²⁹ Denise Epstein p. 136. My own translation.
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 161. My own translation.
- ³¹ Georges Perec, p. 42.

Chapter 3. The Naming of Absence

I got up very early
I went into the woods
I picked a lily of the valley for Maman
But Maman did not come

Maman, what are we called now? Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar¹

This poem, written by a six-year-old boy, was found pinned to a playroom wall in a French orphanage at the end of the Second World War. Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar, a French writer, came across the poem in the course of her research as she campaigned for Jewish children who had been orphaned in Europe as a result of the Holocaust. During the Second World War, Mesnil-Amar spent much of her time in hiding and started a diary just as the war was coming to an end. The first entry was on 18 July 1944, three weeks after Christian Holmboe's last. In comparison to my great-grandfather's extensive journals, Mesnil-Amar's diary was a brief affair, ending on 25 August 1944, a little more than a month after she started it. But its brevity belied its intensity. She recounted her experiences during the final desperate weeks of the German occupation of Paris when everything and everybody was displaced and on the move. Her husband André had disappeared while she continued to travel from one hiding place to the next.

Following *la Libération*, Mesnil-Amar wrote many articles, outraged by the failure of ordinary Germans to prevent the horrors and by the perfidy of the French for allowing the persecution of French Jews. But she reserved most of her anger for the fate of Europe's orphaned children, the tens of thousands of them, who emerged half-starved and abandoned at the end of the war. Soon after 25 August 1944, photographs issued by the Red Cross began to appear on the walls of railway stations and other public places. Each photograph bore the simple inscription: *Qui suis-je?* Sometimes the children were too young to know their own names.

Mesnil-Amar's war diary and a selection of her articles were first published in France in 1957 by Éditions de Minuit with the title *Ceux qui ne dormaient pas* (translated as *Those who do not sleep*). But publication had come too soon. The country was not ready to look so closely at its recent history. It was not until the late sixties that younger generations began to question France's role in the war and only more recently has the issue of French collaboration

been discussed openly. Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar died in 1987 and did not live to see the second publication of the book in 2009, nor the subsequent translations into Spanish, French and finally, in 2015, into English with the poignant title: *Maman, what are we called now?*

On 23 August 1944, one of her last entries, Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar wondered about the purpose of her diary:

I'm writing this sitting by the window, at Nana's. Why do I do it? God knows. Is it my escape, like my mother's embroidery? Why have I kept up these scattered notebooks, hiding them all over the place? Some days I've just jotted down a few scribbles, other days I've covered pages, in a futile attempt to record events and how it has felt to live through them, to describe my various hiding places, my journeys, the dark hours of the dawn, the sleepless nights. What has been the point? Whom have I been doing it for? (Mesnil-Amar, p. 93)

Reading this, I am reminded of my great-grandfather's questions in 1941 as he wondered what the historians of the future would make of it all.² Christian Holmboe did not articulate any specific thoughts about who might read his scrapbooks, but their substantial board covers and carefully presented contents suggest he wanted them to last. I return once again to the scrapbooks. By 1944, the year of his own death, Holmboe wrote out a list of names with great care; they were the names of twenty-one people executed on 1 February by the Gestapo in his home town of Horsens (see Figure 9). He made columns to include their occupations, ages and addresses. I have selected four at random and translated them:

Anna Katerina Knudsen | housewife | 37 | Lundvej 40

Knud Erik Jorgensen | apprentice at Tom's printing works | 18 | Hovsmansgade 26

Eigild Fussing | Local council | office worker | 35 | Kagshalgade 1

Axel Børge Madsen | cigar maker | 33 | Bjerregade 25³

Den engelske Rades afgaer:
 90 vi, der blev arresterede, Tirsdag d. 1/2 1944
 - i Hovene af Pestapo, - 89 døde
 44 døde

CHR. HOLMBOE
HORSENS

No.	Navn	Stilling	alder	Resid.
1	Thomas Peter Knudsen, Tom	Bogtrykker	39	Sandspærgen Søndstvej 48
2	Anne Kathrine Knudsen, Tom	Hushjæ	37	do
3	Osbe Andersen		37	Hushjæ 15
4	Johannes Palle Rosenbaum	Cigararbejder	25	Skofærsgade 26
5	Knud Erik Torgensen	Læringsvej Tovs Bogtrykkeri	18	Horsensgade 26
6	Hans Osbe Torgensen		21	do
7	Torgun Elisine Leach	Typograf ^{Sted}	44	Sønderbrogade 73
8	Osbe Albert Bagermose	Arbejder	32	Fabrikvej 50
9	Verner Høj Nielsen	Kommis Købs og Løbs	20	Sønderbrogade 7
10	Niels P. Viggo Torgensen	Bagermester	51	Søndstvej 18 b
11	Anne Kristine Torgensen	Hushjæ	50	do
12	Berting Andersen	Arbejder hos Chr. Nielsen	20	Lørdagsgade 5
13	Ove Lykkeberg, Kommis	Arbejder	24	Kungade 11
14	Else Osbe Nielsen	Hushjæ Horsensvej 50	37	Horsensgade 4
15	Arvid Einar v. d. Ahe	Fachar ^{Sole}	43	Frøsgade 5
16	Eigild Færøing, Kommis	Kontorassistent	35	Kungsgade 6
17	Georg Berntsen	Bager	32	Søndstgade 12
18	Olav Nielsen f. K.H.	Bledevarer hos Baudouin	36	Allegade 12
19	Anne Pedersen		32	Tjandegade 5 - Lørdags
20	Niels Karl Hansen	Cigararbejder	28	Lundsgade 7
21	Arvid Borge Brødner	Cigararbejder	32	Bjergsgade 28

Figure 9: Christian Holmboe lists the Horsens dead, dated 1 February 1944

Perhaps for both Holmboe and Mesnil-Amar writing was an act of bearing witness and the only thing to do when surrounded by so much death and destruction.

On 24 August 1944, six months after Holmboe compiled his list, De Gaulle and his tanks swept in to liberate Paris. Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar could not celebrate. By now she was living with Nana, her grandmother, and they listened together to the church bells, the 'thin and reedy' bell of the Savoyard and 'the great bell of Notredame'.⁴ Parisians danced in the streets, but Mesnil-Amar thought only of her husband:

Why aren't you here on this unforgettable evening? [...] I have never stopped calling you (Mesnil-Amar, p. 107).

She was lucky. So was he. By midnight that night, she has heard that André had survived. He managed to jump from a train, one of the last to leave Paris for the camps, and was making his way back to Paris on foot. But, as the celebrations faded, she returned to more pressing matters - the plight of the orphans:

It's time now to think about the living, the children who are here now, the ones who escaped the massacre, like 'Moses saved from the water', the miracle children, these young Eliacins, 'in scarlet robes', a handful of boys who came back from the camps, and tens of thousands of orphans.⁵

Signals from the deep

Across the French border, Walter Kempowski was another kind of war-child, a German child. His father had been killed in the fighting and he was brought up by his mother. Almost thirty years after the war ended, Kempowski started a project that would consume much of his writing life. Over decades he gathered together the stories of those who lived through the war years in Europe. He sought out their diaries, journals, memoirs and eyewitness accounts; anything that would shed light on those dark days. The enterprise became a colossal series of ten volumes entitled *Das Echolot* ('Sonar'), culminating in *Abgesant '45*, published in an English translation in 2014 as *Swansong 1945*. As Alan Bance pointed out in the foreword of this latter work, the title *Das Echolot* suggested sonar signals sent down to the depths of the sea to detect the existence and contours of objects that remained out of sight beneath the surface. Walter Kempowski included the accounts of both the ordinary people (the archivist from Avignon, the prisoner of war in Rennes, the diplomat in Moscow) and the famous (Thomas Mann, Bertholt Brecht, Marguerite Duras). He described his task as one of 'rescuing the voices of the dead' and he wanted to explore the notion of German guilt and the complex nature of the German people's relationship with Nazism (Kempowski, pp. ix–xi). He acknowledged the inherent contractions in his work, which were due to 'the subjective character of the sources' (Kempowski, p. xiii). Because he

was writing two generations after the end of the war, he found that he returned repeatedly to the images that had been left behind: photographs of the trails of refugees, the fleeing German soldiers and the foreign workers heading home:

And I can't help thinking about the weeping child soldier resting on the limber of his shattered gun.⁶

This polyphonic composition, described by Alan Bance as a 'collage' of voices, focussed on four days in the few short weeks between Hitler's fifty-sixth birthday on 20 April 1945 and VE Day on 8 May 1945 (Kempowski, p. xii). *Swansong 1945* was a carefully curated collection of accounts from those last tumultuous days of war. One account was placed alongside the next to form, if not a conversation then an overlapping series of monologues delivered in whispers, rants and, sometimes, screams. As a German mother cut the hair of her twelve-year-old daughter and dressed her in boys' clothes in an attempt to protect her from drunken Russian soldiers, an American soldier pocketed a gilt-encrusted sword from the local museum. One account, written in Hamburg on 20 April 1945 by Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg (1879–1958), recounted the American advance on the city:

Whole big blocks of flats have been destroyed, blown around like a house of cards, except not so quietly. There must have been a huge fire, an infernal spectacle. Poor Annie Stammann, sister of Aunt Lili Siemssen, was buried under her collapsing house and only found after three days. Ninety-year-old Adele Mönckeberg died as a result of that terrible night. [...] Perhaps children and grandchildren will be interested to read this later on. It's terrible for us, and the pressure of the last 6 years weighs down terribly upon one (Kempowski, p. 61).

Like my great-grandfather, Mathilde Wolff-Mönckeberg wrote down the names of the dead. She wondered whether the next generation would be interested. The word 'perhaps' made it sound like a plea. When there was no body, no remains to speak of, writing became the archive and started with a name. *Who am I? Who was I? Who will remember me?* If the next generation could not find the stories, they could not tell them to others or to themselves. This notion of absence will be examined later in this chapter when I look at George Perec's work, *W or The Memory of Childhood*. For Perec, absence would be the story. For him, even if there was no remembering, there could be no forgetting.

Kempowski's collection ended with an entry by Leonid Voytenko of the Red Army. He wrote about the soldier Popov who kept a diary, made from newsprint that he bound himself. Popov's mouth was always marked with blue because he liked to put his pen into his mouth to moisten it. One day Popov lost the diary and told Voytenko:

It is all over. For two years I've written down every village, every meter of the roads we travelled from Stalingrad to Berlin. Now my book will be used to roll cigarettes. No I can't bear such thing. Sooner an enemy bullet (Kempowski, p. 430).

Sadly, for Popov, that bullet came all too soon, but the diary was later discovered behind the seat of his truck. I wonder if it survived the war.

But you did not come back

A swansong of a different kind was published in 2015 in France. Written by Marceline Loridan-Ivens, a French documentary film-maker, at the age of eighty-six *Et tu n'es pas revenu* was the account of her family as it was caught up in the Holocaust and its aftermath. Translated as *But you did not come back*, the book was a letter of her lifetime addressed to her father, Shloïme Rozenberg, who disappeared in the camps. The letter burned with a single question:

But you, where were you?⁷

As witnesses and survivors of the Holocaust approached the end of their lives, this book was one of several emerging from Europe in the second decade of this new century. Marceline Loridan-Ivens was arrested at the age of fifteen, at the same time as her father, but she somehow survived the camps. Her mother, her brother and her sister managed to hide in France. Despite being spared the camps, both of her siblings later committed suicide. Marceline Loridan-Ivens admitted to making two attempts herself. She later wrote: 'Surviving makes other people's tears unbearable. You might drown in them' (Loridan-Ivens, p. 25). In the thin volume, Loridan-Ivens focussed much of her attention on the note that her father managed to get to her 'back there' in the summer of 1944 (Loridan-Ivens, p. 25). 'Back there' was her prison block, number 27B at Birkenau; it was Auschwitz just 3km away where her

father was being held, and it was the ‘horrific decrescendo - Birkenau-Bergen-Belsen-Raguhn’ that represented her journey through the nightmare (Loridan-Ivens, p. 46).

She described the note as ‘a stained little scrap of paper, almost rectangular, torn on one end’ (Loridan-Ivens, p. 1). She remembered the handwriting, slanted to the right, the first line ‘My darling little girl’ and the last, his first name in Yiddish, ‘Shloime’. But of the contents, nothing:

I try to remember and I can’t. I try, but it’s like a deep hole and I don’t want to fall in
(Loridan-Ivens, p. 2).

The little note represented the last connection to her father. There would be no body, no possessions or mementos. And, tragically, she had no pencil or paper with which to answer him since ‘objects no longer existed in our lives [...] they formed mountains in the storehouses where we worked’ (Loridan-Ivens, p. 4). She was in a place where she owned nothing, where her identity was reduced to the number 78750 and where she was called a *stuck* (thing) by the camp guards (Loridan-Ivens, p. 11). The note lost, she picked away at her own memory:

Did I hide it under a seat in the steam room when we had to change our clothes? Did I lose it in Bergen-Belsen? In Theresienstadt? If I still search deep within my memory for those missing lines even though I’m sure I’ll never find them again. It’s because they’re etched somewhere in the recesses of my mind, the place where I sometimes slip away with the things I cannot bear to share, a blank page where I can still talk to you. I know all the love those lines contained. I’ve spent my entire life trying to find that love (Loridan-Ivens, p. 79).

In the camps, she wrote, ‘words had deserted us’ (Loridan-Ivens, p. 12). They lived on the brink shrouded in the smoke of the gas chambers, digging trenches for the bodies that never stopped coming. *Back there* was a place where language died. It would take her seventy years to find the words, to put them down on paper and express, at last, the finality of her father’s absence. She made several attempts over the years, but always tore everything up. ‘No one wanted my memories’ (Loridan-Ivens, p. 34) she wrote, but perhaps it was she who did not want her memories back. In those weeks, months and years before writing, she held onto the

‘blank page where I can still talk to you’. Filling that page would be the acknowledgement, final and irrevocable, of her father’s death (Loridan-Ivens, p. 80).

Seventy-five years after his death, Marceline Loridan-Ivens would still be startled to hear the word ‘Papa’, a word that had disappeared from her life ‘so early that it hurts, and I can only say it deep in my heart, never out loud. And I certainly couldn’t write it down’ (Loridan-Ivens, p. 11). At the end of the war, she found herself in Hôtel Lutetia in Paris, like the emaciated boy in Élisabeth Gille’s story, *Shadows of a Childhood*. She did not want to return home to her mother at the Château de Gourdon, where she knew she would have to confront the reality of her father’s death: ‘My return is synonymous with your absence’ (Loridan-Ivens, p. 61). When she finally arrived there, she was faced with a mother who wanted her to marry, who wanted weddings and children ‘to fill the void’ (Loridan-Ivens, p. 39). Later, in February 1948, another kind of letter arrived stating that her father was missing, presumed dead. Although it represented an official acknowledgement, the letter was headed ‘Acte de disparition’ (disappearing act) as if her father had simply been spirited away (Loridan-Ivens, p. 41). Despite everything, the letter implied that her father might still be conjured back to life.

Marceline Loridan-Ivens marries twice but had no children. In 2003 she returned to Auschwitz-Birkenau to make a documentary film, *La Petite Prairie aux Bouleaux* (The Birch-tree Meadow), which she wrote about in her memoir:

I wanted to walk through the mirror, clear a pathway, touch the imagination of everyone who hadn’t been there [...] How can we hand down something we have so much difficulty explaining to ourselves (Loridan-Ivens, p. 94)?

The question of the handing down of the story, of transmission from one generation to the next, has been threaded through this interrogation of memory and the archive. But sometimes, as for Marceline Loridan-Ivens, it has been a question of handing the story down to oneself first, the most difficult and painful of transmission of all. She became a living archive and her experiences were transmitted through her memoir and documentaries. And, of course, she was not alone in this endeavour.

Courage in the shadows

There was so much I wanted to say, and I have said so little.

Army of Shadows, Joseph Kessel⁸

While Marceline Loridan-Ivens held on to life in Birkenau, the French writer, Joseph Kessel, was at work on a contemporary account about the work of the French Resistance in Vichy France. The slim volume entitled *L'Armée des Ombres* (*Army of Shadows*) was first published in France in 1943 and, such was its importance, in an English translation a year later. Like Kempowski's *Swansong 1945*, it was a work crafted from real accounts, but the narrative was written from a single point of view, that of Philippe Gerbier, an engineer and leader in the French Resistance. To protect those involved, Kessel changed the names and the places. The book recounted acts of individual resistance, including sabotage and killings, and their consequences. The narrative began with the newly arrested Gerbier arriving at a concentration camp for forced labour in France. Early on he tried to console a young Communist called Legrain whose friend has just died:

[Resistance is] the finest word in the whole French language. You've had no chance to learn it. It came into existence while you were being destroyed in here (Kessel, p. 23).

Gerbier then escaped from the concentration camp in France and the story followed him to remote hiding places in the French maquis and finally to London. The text is presented in eight parts, some of which are divided into short scenes. For example, a sabotage involving sewer gratings in Marseille, a Gestapo search of the maquis for deserters and the smuggling into France of 'the big chief' by sea. It was Gerbier's job to co-ordinate resistance activity and gather intelligence to take to the resistance leadership in London. He struggled with the knowledge that the retaliations were a direct consequence of actions he had sanctioned. He thought of the resistance fighters who had been captured and were lost in the cells of Fresnes prison, the cellars of Vichy and in room 87 in the Hotel T where suspected De Gaullists were interrogated. In the preface, Kessel wrote:

He who would write about the French Resistance without romanticism and without even drawing upon the imagination is chained by his civic responsibilities. It is not that a novel or a poem is less true, less vivid than an account of authentic happenings.

I rather believe the contrary. But we are living in the midst of horror, surrounded by bloodshed. I have neither the right not the strength to go beyond the simplicity of the chronicle, the humility of the document (Kessel, p. 6).

The writers of the other chronicles discussed here might well have agreed with that sentiment. Christian Holmboe's daily record, Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar's intense war diary, the collaged voices of Walter Kempowski's swansong and Marceline Loridan-Ivens' long-delayed reply to her father, these works were at one level acts of witness. And that witness became a kind of archive that could be passed on to the next generation of readers. But what of the orphans who survived, those who were too young to write, too young to remember very much at all, but nevertheless bore witness to the same events? *Qui suis-je?* Mesnil-Amar's question lay at the heart of these orphans' stories.

They have been denied the poetry which springs from even the most deprived childhood, so long as it has a firm foundation, one or two solid bases, a home, however modest, and a mother, any mother (Mesnil-Amar, p. 184).

Georges Perec's *W or The Memory of Childhood*

As long as it takes snow to slip from coal piles,
a memory barely retrieved from a fire is (the past) in its hiding place

The Angel of History, Carolyn Forché ⁹

One of many children orphaned during the Second World War was the French writer Georges Perec (1936–1982). The son of Jewish immigrants from Poland, Perec was born in Paris in March 1936. His parents vanished from his life when he was a young child. His father, Icek, died in June 1940 as a result of injuries sustained while fighting with the French army. Three year later, in February 1943, his mother Cyrila (who was known in France as Cécile) died in Auschwitz. As a result, Perec was brought up, and later adopted, by his aunt and uncle. He was kept out of range of the French authorities, moving first to the village of Villard de Lans near Grenoble in the relative safety of the Unoccupied Zone.

In contrast with Élisabeth Gille, who came from a wealthy middle-class family of cultured European Jews (and whose work was examined in Chapter 2), Georges Perec's

parents were poor. They were not the sort of family to keep archives. He was not even sure whether his mother had ever learnt to read. In adulthood Perec painstakingly researched his meagre family archive and carried out a forensic interrogation of what he found there. He also questioned that other less reliable archive, his own memory. What emerged from these investigations was the strange and compelling work *W ou le Souvenir d'enfance* (henceforth *WSE*), translated in English as *W or The Memory of Childhood* (henceforth *WMC*). As so often in this project, attention needs to be drawn to translation. The 'W' in the title in French is pronounced 'double ve', not 'double-u' as in the English. It is a pun on 'double vie' or 'double life'. 'W' also suggests a missing name, perhaps of a place or of a person, which is the central notion of the text. Perec was absorbed by this type of word play and *WMC* is filled with dualities and mirrored images: memory and imagination, the child and the adult, the living and the dead.

Perec, who worked as an archivist in the neurophysiological research laboratory of a Parisian hospital, may have longed for more substantial material from his own family. He only had a handful of official certificates and a few photographs. And, like Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar's child-poet, he grew out of childhood with a barb in his heart. *But Maman did not come*. As a result *WMC* would be an exploration in writing about the nature of absence at the centre of a life. Perec, like the orphan-writers described here by Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar, broke into that place of silence:

Because, in spite of appearances, they haven't forgotten their past [...] There is a reason [...] behind the impenetrable silence concerning that part of their life, which was simply too tragic and which they have cast into oblivion ... [...] Occasionally they break this terrible silence, but almost only in their writing ...'¹⁰

Perec would lead the reader in a linguistic dance, which is without self-pity or sentimentality. 'Did you ever wonder what became of the person who gave you your name?' the mysterious Otto Apfelstahl M.D. asked Gaspard Winkler at the start of the narrative (Perec, *WMC*, p. 18). And so began Gaspard Winkler's unusual quest in search of his namesake, a shipwrecked child whose parents have drowned. Another orphan. It was a quest that was abandoned almost as soon as it had begun. Perec used this oblique analogy to approach the question of his identity, his origins and his disappeared parents, realising he may be destined for the same fate as his narrator, Gaspard Winkler 'living another illegal existence, with another fragile alibi, with another fabricated past and another identity'.¹¹

Of the years of his childhood without parents, he wrote:

What marks this period especially is the absence of landmarks: these memories are scraps of life snatched from the void. No mooring. Nothing to anchor them or hold them down (Perec, p.68).

With so little evidence and so little memory, he was left only with the intimate connection of pen on paper. Perec noted in his 1974 essay *La Page*:

I write. I inhabit my sheet of paper, I invest it, I travel across it. I incite blanks, spaces (jumps in the meaning: discontinuities, transitions, changes of key).¹²

Like Mesnil-Amar's children, he listened for the echoes of what had been lost and what, perhaps, could never truly reveal itself again:

And the children? From now on they are nothing but recording machines, echo chambers, bundles of nerves stretched to their limits, taut and sensitive to the slightest thing.¹³

WSE was first published in French in 1975 by Éditions Denoël, the same publisher that Élisabeth Gille worked for as an editor of science fiction. Did Perec know her? I have found no evidence of it, but I like to think that their paths crossed. Two orphans on the same quest: how do you approach the past and how do you write about it when your parents have been obliterated in such a terrible way? Perec took aim at his target, *pointé à blanc* as he might say, but the target was entirely absent: Cyrla, Cécile or Maman. The text was constructed around this empty space and was written as a dual narrative that interleaved a dark fantasy fiction about the barbaric island state of W with a fragmented autobiography concerning Perec's childhood. These parallel narratives, written in alternating chapters, were broken at the centre with an ellipsis placed at the centre of a blank page:

...

This mark of punctuation suggested an interruption, omission or silence. It represented that which remained so painfully unwritten: the death of the writer's mother in Auschwitz. The effect of this break, as well as those between the alternating chapters, was to return the reader's attention back to Cyrila's very 'present' absence. In the preface, Perec wrote about the transitions between the two narratives:

In this break, in this split suspending the story on an unidentifiable expectation, can be found the point of departure for the whole book: the points of suspension on which the broken threads of childhood and the web of writing are caught.¹⁴

The text of *WSE* emerged in three stages, each new layer building on the one before. First, there was the story of the island known only as W, a story which Perec first wrote at the age of thirteen. Forgotten for many years, the childish story of W was returned to, redrafted and published in nineteen instalments in 1969 and 1970 in the magazine *Le Quinzaine Littéraire*. Perec acknowledged in a later preface that W was 'if not the story of my childhood, then at least a story of my childhood' (Perec, p. 6). He returned to the tale for a third time and decided to merge this fiction and its evident parallels with the Nazi death camps, in an autobiographical essay concerning his own past. This final text was first published in 1974.

In chapter eight of this last version, Perec included a section from his journal written fifteen years earlier. He transcribed it word for word, adding twenty-six detailed footnotes at the end. The footnotes, which amounted to more than double the original journal entry, corrected his younger self with a critical and unflinching eye. The greatcoat his father was wearing in the photograph did not come very low. His grandfather was not a craftsman, but a greengrocer. He berated himself for misspelling his grandmother's maiden name and for the 'excess detail' and 'pseudo-memory' (Perec, pp. 30, 14). Sometimes he dismissed the writing altogether: 'there is no basis for any of this' (Perec, p. 33). David Bellos, Perec's biographer, who examined the original *WSE* manuscript, 'a black-bound "Eterna" ledger, 35 x 22.5cm', noted that at one point the footnotes were to form a third, separate text, described by Perec as an '*intertexte*'.¹⁵ But Perec changed his mind, deciding that it would undermine the notion of duality that ran throughout the work. All this laborious work of reinterpreting memory, so often a false friend, constantly drew attention to the tension between the evidence and the imagination with Perec, the writer, held at the fragile intersection of the two.

Despite the statement at the beginning of the autobiographical section that ‘I have no memories of childhood’, one particular memory was repeated on several occasions (Perec, *WMC*, pp. 26, 32, 54).¹⁶ It was the time in 1942 when his mother put him on a train at the Gare de Lyon. Although he did not know it, this would be the last time that he saw her. He was being sent to the country on the Red Cross convoy, with a copy of a children’s magazine and his arm in a sling; the latter a fake injury conjured up by his mother, he said, to aid his passage. Cyrla remained behind and, like Irène Némirovsky in the months before her departure, ignored advice to move into hiding. She believed her status as a war widow would protect her (Perec, *WMC*, p. 33). It did not. At the beginning of the following year, in January 1943, Cyrla was picked up, interned at Drancy and deported to Auschwitz. Perec wrote:

She saw the country of her birth again before she died. She died without understanding (Perec, p. 33).

And so it was that Perec joined the growing number of orphans across Europe who had to learn to *live* without understanding. This memory of the Gare de Lyon was *le souvenir* to which the title of the work referred, as Perec noted in an interview first published in 1979:

All that autobiographic writing is organized around a single memory which for me was deeply occluded, deeply buried and in some sense denied (Perec, p. 128).

As Perec examined the origins of his ‘memories’ with a forensic zeal that verged on mania, he attempted to differentiate the memories that were his own from those that he had embellished or appropriated from others. Later, *le souvenir*, the core memory in which he had invested so much, was undermined when he discovered that he might have mixed up the story of the sling with another: that the sling had been used at another time, in another place and was, in fact, attached to another boy. French autobiography is sometimes referred to as *autofiction*.¹⁷ It seemed an apt term to describe the autobiographical text in *WMC*, in which Perec acknowledges the imaginative tendency of memory, while also resisting it in his relentless search for evidence.

Perec talked of the memoir as a ‘gradual unravelling’ (Perec, preface), but to this reader it felt like a gradual distancing too. The text was a painful exposition of the fact that, as the appropriated memories were unmasked, he could not remember anything very much about

his mother. As Michael Sheringham said of Perec in his work on French autobiography: 'Writing is the point at which memory, biography, identity and loss coincide.'¹⁸

WMC's second text, a double narrative in itself, is a work of fiction about two people with the same name of Gaspard Winckler. The first was an eight-year-old deaf mute lost in a ship-wreck, and the second was an older man, who was given the boy's name when he was forced to change his identity. The older man was dispatched to search for the boy. He set off, whether this was out of need, obligation or simple curiosity was never made explicit. The child Perec and the man Perec seemed to be reflected here. On his way to find the boy, Winkler came across the island of W, a state whose governance was based on the rules of sport, the horror of which was only gradually revealed. Losers were starved, victors were forced to overindulge until they were sick and women were systematically raped; all taking place in a public arena where the 'participants' were jeered at by an anonymous and ever-present crowd. In contrast with the constraint of the memoir, in the fictional island story of W, Perec's imagination had free rein. He travelled far into the realms of nightmare, albeit a nightmare that paradoxically represented an allegorical truth. Winkler never returned to the story of the shipwrecked boy. The search simply stopped. The shipwreck metaphor was used explicitly by Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar when she wrote of 'the vast shipwreck that came close to taking every Jew in France'.¹⁹ The deaf and dumb boy who was sent on a voyage to be cured echoed Perec's own journey to find a cure in the past for his own 'forgetfulness', having wrapped himself for so long 'in the harmless status of the orphan, the unparented, the nobody's boy'.²⁰

As Perec acknowledged the impossibility of such a cure, *WMC* remained at heart a text concerned with the process of writing. He set 'the snares of writing' (Perec, preface) and waited to see what might be caught there.

Memories betray me, melt like sand between fingers; To write: to meticulously try to retain something, to make something survive, a trace, a mark, a few signs.²¹

It took Perec half a lifetime, as it did Marceline Loridan-Ivens, to find the narrative structure through which to write about the past. And like his contemporary Élisabeth Gille with her imagined memoir, he choose to interweave two genres. In his preface, he explained that although it might have seemed that the texts had nothing in common, they were in fact 'inextricably bound up with each other' (Perec, preface). He made several approaches from different directions, travelling across the treacherous borderlands between fiction and

autobiography. David Bellos referred to Perec's kaleidoscopic work as the 'ill-fenced "fields" of his literary farm' and this can be applied to *WMC* very particularly too.²² Perec doubted memory as a means of re-presenting the past and yet he was compelled to make the attempt anyway. He was full of contradictions, working with the cool eye of a scientist (method, observation, conclusion) but also with the wounded heart of the orphaned child 'playing hide-and-seek, who doesn't know what he fears or wants more: to stay hidden, or to be found'.²³

When the individual and the universal rubbed up against each other in *WMC*, there was only one winner. At times, Perec wrote, he cannot tell History with a capital H from memory. He noted, for example, that for a long time he mistakenly believed that his birthday, 7 March 1936, was also the date when Hitler invaded Poland. He was wrong, the invasion was later, but he added:

What is certain is that a story had already begun, a history which for me and for all my people was soon to become a matter of life and for the most part a matter of death (Perec, p. 19).

As a consequence, he was forced to live through childhood without a private realm and everything that it entailed: memories, a family and a mother. For this reason, the title was not *W and the Memory of Childhood*. Childhood cannot happen in such a place, cannot happen *back there*. And, of course, it was not only the children who were affected in this way. Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar wrote in her diary at midnight on 24 August 1944:

For a moment, Fate swept me up in her wake, a poor little actor on an oversized stage, in a vast theatre. I played my part, my ancestral role, I was one of the hunted. For an instant History carried me on her wings, and lent me her light, and my soul beat to the rhythm of Paris [...] The end is coming, the curtain is about to fall. Soon I will be thrown back on my own destiny, I must return to my own personal anguish, to my own life, my little life, inward-looking and enclosed like all lives.²⁴

The nature of Perec's archive

Even if I have the help only of yellowing snapshots, a handful of eyewitness accounts and a few paltry documents to prop up my implausible memories, I have no alternative but to conjure up what for too many years I called the irrevocable.²⁵

In a collection of essays, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, Perec referred to his family archive as the *résidus* of his parents' existence.²⁶ He examined the traces of what once was and found not only that he was the curator of his archive, but also that he was its only active participant, representing the sole living memory.

Photographs played an important role in this investigation. In one essay, Perec described the photographs of his mother and father as 'a relay, as a means of approaching a reality of which I used to declare I had no memory' (Perec, p. 128). In *WMC* Perec examined seven photographs in close detail: one of his father, five of his mother and one of a wider family group. He recorded the dates and places written on the back, the photographer's marks and the traces of age. One in particular showed him with his mother:

I have fair hair with a very pretty forelock (of all my missing memories, that is perhaps the one I most dearly wish I had: my mother doing my hair, and making that cunning curl).²⁷

As I read I expected the photographs to appear on the printed page, but the wait was in vain. I later sought them out in David Bellos' detailed biography of the writer entitled *Perec – a life in words*.²⁸ Their absence in *WMC* was a loud reminder of the absence of those in the photographs. His descriptions were strangely detached: he wrote 'the mother and the child', not *my* mother and not *me*. John Sturrock, one of his translators, described his approach as one of 'willed objectivity', Perec's reticence perhaps reflecting an understandable resistance against approaching a trauma too terrible to recall.²⁹

Raymond Barthes, one of Perec's contemporaries, explored the nature of photography in his 1980 work, *La Chambre Claire* (translated as *Camera Lucida*). He, like Perec, examined a photograph of himself with his mother that he called 'The Winter Garden'. While he acknowledged that he could summon up a memory of 'the rumpled softness of her crêpe de Chine and the perfume of her rice powder' he knew that the photograph was only a 'reality in a past state: at once the past and the real'.³⁰ It would be a different story for anyone else

looking at 'The Winter Garden'. When the photograph had no context for the viewer, he said, there was no 'punctum', no piercing of the emotions: 'But in it, for you, no wound' (Barthes, p. 73). Consequently, there could only be '*studium*', an examination, however enthusiastic, of the elements (Barthes, p.27). Ultimately the photographs could only possess 'an evidential force' of what has been (Barthes p. 89). Yet while the photographs revealed nothing and represented an empty space, they nonetheless remained treasured possessions.

Lineage reveals an identity stronger, more interesting than legal status [...] the thought of origins soothes us whereas that of the future disturbs us (Barthes, p. 105).

At this point I turned to my own origins and to the collection of photographs of my Danish 'lineage'. I pick out three and examine them closely with a magnifying glass. The first was of a dinner party in Nørregade 3 in Horsens. Christian Holmboe sits at the front left. Misse, his wife, sits at the far end of the table, a little separate from her neighbours. Asger, my grandfather, is halfway down on the right, his arm resting on the table. He seems to be deep in thought. Karen, my grandmother, barely visible, sits three seats to his left. None of them looks very happy. Nora, Asger's widowed sister-in-law, is two seats to the right of Asger, a white flower in her hair. Her story waits to be told - a future project, perhaps. I know about her husband Knud, Christian's eldest son. He was a journalist and poet, who converted first to Catholicism, then to Islam, and travelled with Bedouin caravans across Italian-occupied Libya, bringing the ill treatment of the Arabs by the Italians to light before being murdered in the desert in 1931. A bust of his head is said to stand in the University of Tripoli's main library. Who knows if it is still there now? Knud brought Nora and their daughter, Aisha, as far as Morocco then left them there while he carried on with his journey to Libya. They returned to Denmark and never saw him again.

I recognise the dinner service, a large collection of hand-painted Danish porcelain. My mother has it now. It is brought out of cupboards for Christmas and other family celebrations. Its extraction necessitates a time-consuming ritual involving ladders and careful hand-washing. The photograph was taken in late 1943. The war was raging and Denmark's Government had collapsed, but they are dressed in their dinner jackets and best dresses, fresh flowers are on the table and red wine fills the glasses. In a few months' time, Christian will write the list of those executed by the Gestapo in Horsens.

I pick out another photograph. This one is of Ebbe, Christian's youngest son and Asger's brother. He was not at the dinner table of the other photograph. By now he was

involved, as was Asger, with the Danish Resistance. He would be arrested in April 1944, dying before the end of the year in a concentration camp. Setting the photographs side by side it is somehow difficult to reconcile them, knowing their contexts. Barthes talked of photographs as being ‘anaesthetised and fastened down like butterflies’ (Barthes, p. 57). With the human subjectivity stripped out, the photographs seem entirely inadequate in expressing very much other than the passage of time.

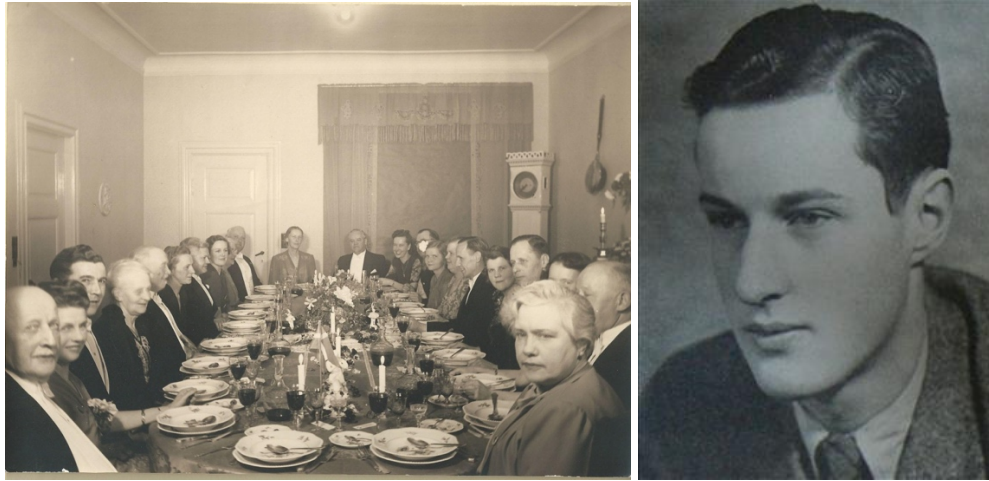


Figure 10: A Holmboe dinner party at Nørregade 3, Horsens

Figure 11: Ebbe Holmboe (1921–1944)

The last of my selection is a photograph of me with my grandfather, Asger. I cannot remember the particular moment. I must be about eighteen. We were playing chess in my childhood home in St. Albans. My grandparents used to visit England each year, bringing with them supplies of *gagøl* (strong liquorice sweets) and *gammeldansk* (a throat-burning Danish pick-me-up) and returning home with a bag of Marks and Spencer’s sweaters. *Morfar* was very patient and I never once managed to beat him. I remember that.



Figure 12: The author with her grandfather, Asger Holmboe

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- ¹ Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar, *Maman, what are we called now?*, p.182.
² Christian Holmboe's *dagbøger*, 14 September 1941. See p.221 of this thesis.
³ Ibid., 1 February 1944. A selection of the twenty-one names. Underlining is by CH.
⁴ Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar, *Maman, what are we called now?*, p.103.
⁵ Ibid., p. 181. Eliacin, according to JMA's footnotes, is a Jewish king in Racine's play, *Athalie*, and is saved twice from death at the hands of Queen Athalie.
⁶ Walter Kempowski, *Swansong 1945*, preface, p. xviii.
⁷ Marceline Lorian-Ivens, *But you did not come back*, p. 53.
⁸ Joseph Kessel, *Army of Shadows*, p. 6.
⁹ Carolyn Forché, *The Angel of History*, p. 41.
¹⁰ Mesnil-Amar, Jacqueline, *Maman, what are we called now?*, p. 187.
¹¹ Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, p. 11.
¹² Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, p. 11.
¹³ Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar, *Maman, what are we called now?*, p. 173.
¹⁴ Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, preface, no page number.
¹⁵ David Bellos, 'The "Third Dimension" of Georges Perec's *W ou le Souvenir d'enfance*', *French Studies Bulletin*, 20 (1999), 1–3 <doi: 10.1093/frebull/20.70.1> [Accessed 12 May 2015]
¹⁶ Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, p. 6.
¹⁷ Serge Dubrovsky coined the term, as noted in David Sheringham's *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires*, p. 328.
¹⁸ David Sheringham, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires*, p. 323.
¹⁹ Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar, *Maman, what are we called now?*, p. 97.
²⁰ Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, p. 1.
²¹ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, pp. 122–23.
²² David Bellos, The Old and the New: An Introduction to Georges Perec, *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, Spring 2009 vol XXIX, p. 17.
²³ Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, p. 7.
²⁴ Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar, *Maman, what are we called now?*, p. 104.
²⁵ Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, p. 12.
²⁶ Georges Perec, *Species of Spaces and Other Pieces*, p. 37.
²⁷ Georges Perec, *W or The Memory of Childhood*, p. 49.
²⁸ David Bellos, *Perec – a life in words*. The photographs can be found between pp. 322–323.
²⁹ Georges Perec, *Species and Spaces and Other Pieces*, introduction p. xiv.
³⁰ Raymond Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, pp. 65, 82.

Chapter 4. Signs

I am a history
a memory inventing itself
I am never alone
I speak with you always
you speak with me always
I move in the dark
I plant signs

East Slope, Octavio Paz¹

Novalis, the eighteenth-century philosopher, once wrote that fiction grows out of the shortcomings of history. I argue in this chapter that it is in the places where history is silent or evasive that the work of the novelist can begin. To explore this question further I have chosen two works of prose fiction: W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* and Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*. Each work leads the reader towards the revelation of a singular truth beyond historical 'fact'. First published in 2001 in German and 1997 in English, the novels take as the central character a Jewish child: Jacques Austerlitz and Jakob Beer. Both have lost a family during the Second World War in Europe. They have both escaped likely death by leaving their homes, mothers, fathers and siblings. They will never go back. The families have been killed or have simply vanished. The two children survive into adulthood and both narratives offer a gradual exposition of the nature of the loss and terror that encircles their lives. A second narrator, known simply as Ben, appears late in *Fugitive Pieces*. He is the child of Holocaust survivors, a professor of literature who carries with him a mysterious and terrible inheritance from his parents. In both works the reader takes the role of witness while something visceral, which might be named feeling or memory, tries to surface from oblivion. Their stories offer readers a delicate place where history can be 'made known'.

Vanished kin

I am like a pelican of the wilderness; I am like an owl of the desert.

Austerlitz, W.G. Sebald²

‘What was it that so darkened our world?’ asks Gwendolyn Elias, Jacques Austerlitz’s foster mother, as she lies dying in the sick room she has barely left for years (Sebald, p. 89). It is a question that pervades the whole of W.G. Sebald’s novel as the main character, Jacques Austerlitz, navigates the borderlines between the fear of knowing and the knowing itself. The multi-layered narrative takes the form of a fictionalised memoir, which concerns the question of Jacques Austerlitz’s true origins. It explores how an historical event can flow inexorably in and out of present time in the life of an individual marked by trauma. In that sense, it is an historical novel, but the work also includes a substantial amount of non-fictional documentation: maps, diagrams, photographs and lists. At times the novel reads like an academic thesis, albeit with a disturbing undertone hinting at some unspecified horror. He mentions ‘the agony of leave-taking and the fear of foreign places’ (Sebald, p. 16) and the feeling that ‘an invisible twin brother was walking beside me, the reverse of a shadow’ (Sebald, p. 76). The style is formal, understated and often painfully restrained. The reader is kept at arm’s length, as if to restrain her from touching the raw heart of it all. Yet, paradoxically, this technique has an intensifying effect.

Jacques Austerlitz, whose name is itself a layered story (of which more later), tells his life story to an unnamed narrator, who is not Sebald, but seems to be a little like him, with his scholarly and writing pursuits. Only when the novel is finished can the reader attempt to reassemble any sense of chronology. Austerlitz, it turns out, is not a Welsh boy, but a Jewish one from Czechoslovakia, as it was then known. While many Jews flee Prague, four-year-old Jacques Austerlitz is sent to England on a *Kindertransport* and is placed with a childless couple, a Calvinist preacher and his wife. He is brought up in Bala in a too-large Welsh manse, which he describes simply as ‘an unhappy house’ (Sebald, p. 61). The couple try to erase from the boy all knowledge of his past. They take away his blue rucksack, later replaced by a similar one which becomes ‘the only truly reliable thing in his life’ (Sebald, p. 55), his clothes and even his name. They call him Dafydd Elias.

I know that I often lay awake for hours in my narrow bed in the manse, trying to conjure up the faces of those whom I had left, I feared through my own fault, but not until I was numb with weariness and my eyelids sank in the darkness did I see my mother bending down to me just for a fleeting moment, or my father smiling as he put on his hat (Sebald, p. 61).

Of course, the past cannot be erased so easily, as the preacher later appears to acknowledge when he takes the boy out to the Vyrnwy reservoir under whose dark waters the preacher's own family home and the entire village of Llanwddyn had been submerged in 1888. Without knowing it at the time, the boy glimpses his own story through the prism of his foster father's and, throughout the novel, Sebald will often repeat this way of his character seeing but not knowing.

I felt for him [Austerlitz's foster father, Emyr Elias] so much that he, the righteous man, seemed to me like the only survivor of the deluge which had destroyed Llanwddyn, while I imagined all the others – his parents, his brothers and sister, his relations, their neighbours, all the other villagers – still down in the depths, sitting in their houses and walking along the road, but unable to speak and with their eyes opened far too wide (Sebald, p. 71).

At this point, an outline of the overarching geography and timespan of the novel is helpful for the purposes of orientation, a point also noted by James Wood in his preface to the tenth anniversary edition (Sebald, p. x). However, this explanation should not suggest that the novel is constructed in any linear way. The narrative resists the usual structures of time and place, reflecting Austerlitz's underlying hope 'that time will not pass away, has not passed away, that I can turn back and go behind it, and there I shall find everything as it once was' (Sebald, p. 144).

In 1967 the Sebald-like narrator has a chance meeting with the adult Jacques Austerlitz, who is taking photographs with his Ensign camera in the waiting room at the Central Station in Antwerp. Austerlitz wears a rucksack and talks long into the night about the architecture of the station. He embarks on a discursive lecture about the history of fortified buildings in Belgium and the 'marks of pain' (Sebald, p. 16) left in such places as 'the tarred black posts of the execution ground' (Sebald, p. 28). The waiting room is known, somewhat poignantly given the family story that emerges, as the *Salle des pas perdus*, the room of the lost footsteps (Sebald, p. 4). Austerlitz admires the grand mirrors, but wonders about the workers who made them, about how much lead and cyanide they must have inhaled in the fabrication process and how many of them may have died (Sebald, p. 15). Later in the novel, he observes the dead moths which remain attached to the curtains of his London house in Aldernay Street and wonders about the fear and pain they felt while lost:

I believe, said Austerlitz, that they know they have lost their way [...] they will stay where they are, never moving, until the last breath is out of their bodies (Sebald, p. 132).

Death, it becomes clear, is never far from Austerlitz's thoughts and hidden in the folds of his memory are not the deaths of the villagers of Llanwddyn, the Parisian mirror-makers or those brittle London moths but those of his own vanished parents.

Austerlitz, the narrator discovers, is a man obsessed with monumental public buildings and their architectural history. As Austerlitz looks down from the vertiginous eighteenth floor of the Bibliothèque Nationale towards the site of the new library emerging close to the marshalling yard at the Gare d'Austerlitz, he is told of the old warehouses that used to stand in the same place not three decades earlier. Those warehouses were packed with the possessions of forty thousand Parisian Jews who had been deported to Drancy: Meissen porcelain, Persian rugs and even complete libraries (Sebald, p. 402). This, like his reporting that Liverpool Street station was built on the site of Bedlam, the hospital for the insane, tells the reader what she knows by now: history cannot be covered over and much is signified by the traces. Over the following decades the two meet in cities across Europe: Brussels, Liège, Zeebrugge, London and finally at the Glacière Métro station in Paris. Each time the narrator learns a little more of Austerlitz's life.

The geographical and temporal pointers outlined here offer signals to the reader, but the narrative resists any such pinning down and, as such, echoes the character. Austerlitz is a haunted soul, disorientated and consumed by an unspecified miasmic dread as the wreckage from the past slowly gathers about him. Mysterious emotions overwhelm him at train stations: the Gare du Nord and the Gare de l'Est. This atmosphere pervades until a moment in the disused Ladies' Waiting Room at Liverpool Street station when his thoughts are punctured by the resurfacing of a memory. He sees the Welsh minister and his wife coming to the station to meet his child-self, who sits on a bench, legs dangling, a small blue rucksack on his lap. A second, more powerful, revelation occurs later as he browses in a second-hand bookshop in Bloomsbury. The radio is on. A woman talks about the *Kindertransport*, the trains that in 1939 carried Jewish children from German-occupied Prague to the ferries and safety in England. In that moment, in the midst of the old books and postcards, he acknowledges the secret that he has kept from himself for so long. He was one of those children.

A blank point without duration

Time, or rather a mistrust of time, lies at the heart of the novel. From the beginning Austerlitz is unsettled by it, as shown in this passage about the movement of the black hands of the clock at Antwerp Central Station:

Every time it jerked forwards, slicing off the next one-sixtieth of an hour from the future and coming to a halt with such a menacing quiver that one's heart almost stopped (Sebald, p. 9).

He seems to be a man adrift from both the past and the future. 'The dead are outside time', he writes, 'and so too are the dying, the sick and those with "a certain degree of misfortune"' (Sebald, p. 143). It is assumed that, with familiar restraint, he includes himself in this last category. He never owns a watch or a clock which he regards as 'a thoroughly mendacious object' (Sebald, p. 144). Once after waiting months to hear from Austerlitz, the exasperated narrator writes:

Had I realized at the time that for Austerlitz certain moments had no beginning or end, while on the other hand his whole life had sometimes seemed to him a blank point without duration, I would probably have waited more patiently (Sebald, p. 165).

At the end of the novel Jacques Austerlitz finally discovers something about his father, Maximilian Aychenwald. His mother, Agatà Austerlitzová, remains forever vanished, and the only link to her lies in her name. His father had been interned in the camp at Gurs in the foothills of the Pyrenees. It is a place to which Austerlitz must immediately travel. This piece of information confirms what he already knows, that his academic research, his travels and writing have been a futile attempt to turn away from the truth. They have sent him down blind alleys to blank walls and dead ends. Blind. Blank. Dead. The adjectives of his life.

Nachlaß

One day Austerlitz hands the narrator the key to his London house in Aldernay Street, telling him he could stay there whenever he liked 'and study the black and white photographs which, one day, would be all that was left of his life' (Sebald, p. 408). It would be all that was

left because of a crisis point reached some months earlier. In 1991, after taking early retirement, Austerlitz returns to London and his notes and begins the long-planned book about the history of European architecture. As he peruses ‘the picture of a landscape, now almost immersed in oblivion, through which my journey has taken me’ (Sebald, p. 171), he discovers that he cannot write. He experiences ‘the almost total paralysis of my linguistic facilities’ (Sebald, p. 198). In the crisis that follows he buries his notebooks and papers, his entire archive except the photographs, under a compost heap in his back garden. While black ink seeps into black earth, he cleans out and repaints the rooms of his house. He takes long nocturnal walks across London, often returning to Liverpool Street station as the realisation dawns that he has lived his entire life with a kind of homesickness without knowing what home is or was.

Sebald always wrote in German, his mother tongue, despite spending his working life in England and being fluent in English. He describes the German language as ‘eine Art von Fluß, auf dem ich sitze in diesem mir auch nicht vertraut gewordenen englischen Ausland’, translated as ‘a sort of raft on which I sit in this English foreign country that is still not yet familiar to me’.³ This reminds me again of the image of Irène Némirovsky sitting *as if on a raft* on an ocean of wet leaves as the days tick by before her arrest in Issy l’Évêque, feeling newly foreign in a country where she has lived for so many years.⁴

The German word for the archive left behind by a scholar is *Nachlaß*, *that which is left behind*. Specifically, it signifies the work unpublished at an author’s death. Ironically for the character of Austerlitz, the burial of his *Nachlaß*, is part of the process that allows him finally to unearth the secrets of his past and to see ‘the reverse of a shadow’ that he has always known was there.⁵

Lost on familiar terrain

As mentioned previously, the name Austerlitz inhabits a rich historical terrain of its own. It is the name of the famous Napoleonic battle of 1805 that took place in what is now the Czech Republic. It is the name of the monumental train station on the left bank of the Seine that commemorates that battle and it is the protagonist’s Czech family name. But the name holds echoes of another place too, a place that is never named in the work and so I decide not to name it here either. It is signalled at its every mention as that place of annihilation that is found at the end of the railway tracks across the German border in Poland. And it is the final

place to which both Austerlitz's parents, Agatá Austerlitzová and Maximilian Aychenwald, must have travelled and in which they must have died.

Impenetrable fog

The layered names, revelations and narratives make Sebald's prose difficult to assimilate. The prose feels convoluted, much like the 'impenetrable fog' that language becomes for Austerlitz when he finally has a breakdown (Sebald, p. 175). Amid this confusion of articulation, the reader tries to navigate between the signs. For example, when Austerlitz engages in conversation with Henri Lemoine, a member of staff at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and it is inferred that library readers may not be the only ones who are being excluded:

The new library building, which in both its entire layout and its near ludicrous internal regulation, seeks to exclude the reader as a potential enemy, might be described, so Lemoine thought, said Austerlitz, as the official manifestation of the increasingly importunate urge to break with everything which still has some living connection to the past (Sebald, p. 398).

Both narrator and protagonist are engaged in complex writing projects. There is an overload of language which, for Austerlitz at least, culminates in the burial of his own archive and with it the language that has failed him. How many months would it have taken for the ink to fade and for the papers to rot in the damp London earth? By contrast, the narrator, after his first encounter with Austerlitz, stays up until three in the morning writing down 'in the form of notes and disconnected sentences' everything that Austerlitz has told him (Sebald, p. 138). He is filled with a compulsion to record Austerlitz's oral narrative, to write down the memory that Austerlitz has failed to write himself. Like Denise Epstein, who gave so many interviews over the course of her life, Austerlitz can only tell the story he carries.⁶ It falls to someone else to write down the story of who he is. And, as will be discussed in the next section of this chapter in relation to Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, the person being told the story is as necessary as the teller.

Shadows of reality

The scattering of photographs throughout the work reinforces the impression that this is a work of non-fiction, as it did in Georges Perec's *W or The Memory of Childhood* (discussed in Chapter 3). The photographs, like Sebald's text, are drenched in minutiae: the entwined roots of a chestnut tree, Emyr Elias' old village before it was submerged, the dome of the new railway station at Lucerne and a page from H.G. Adler's book about the organisation of the Theresienstadt ghetto. One of the photographs, the reader is told, is of Jacques Austerlitz. It shows a young boy in a satin cape, a thick wave of white-blond hair drifting across his forehead. Of course, it cannot be Austerlitz who is a fictional character, nor is it Sebald, despite the hair being strikingly similar. It is, as James Wood writes in his preface, a photograph of an unknown boy from Stockport who carries a story of his own; one we will never know. The original photograph is housed in Sebald's literary archive at Marbach in Germany and points again to the paradox of how what we want to know, but cannot.⁷

Later, Austerlitz lays his family photographs out face down and turns them over as if he were playing a game of patience:

always with a new sense of surprise at what he saw, pushing the pictures back and forth and over each other, arranging them in an order depending on their family resemblances, or withdrawing them from the game until there was nothing left but the grey table top, or he felt exhausted by the constant effort of thinking and remembering and had to rest on the ottoman (Sebald, p. 168).

I return to the photograph of my great-uncle, Ebbe Gylding Holmboe, pinned to my noticeboard (p. 263 of this thesis). He has a serious, gentle face and the long Holmboe nose that I have inherited. The public archive contains little information about his short life as an art student, resistance fighter and eventually as a concentration camp prisoner. I have seen his name engraved on the memorial stone in Horsens and the photograph of the grand family gathering from which he is absent (p. 263 of this thesis). The entry for him in the Holmboe family tree book, a thick volume containing the details of hundreds of Holmboes living across Scandinavia and beyond, reads:

Ebbe Gylding Holmboe

Born 25 September 1921 in Horsens, Denmark. Died 5 December 1944 in Germany.

Ebbe died in the German concentration camp at Porta Westfalica after having contributed greatly to the Danish Resistance Movement. In the camp, he drew symbolic pictures on toilet paper.⁸

These few words raise questions. What was his great contribution to the resistance? What about his short life as an artist? My mother tells me that some of his pictures were sent back to the family in a matchbox 'with his ashes'. She remembers seeing them and describes them as being 'mainly of trees, rather like weeping willows, but with no leaves, rather sinister'.⁹

Lars Holmboe, my uncle, emails me a photograph of one of the pictures. There are no trees in this one, only the abyss. The picture now hangs, incongruous and poignant, in the holiday house of my aunt, Birgit Holmboe, on the tranquil island of Samsø.

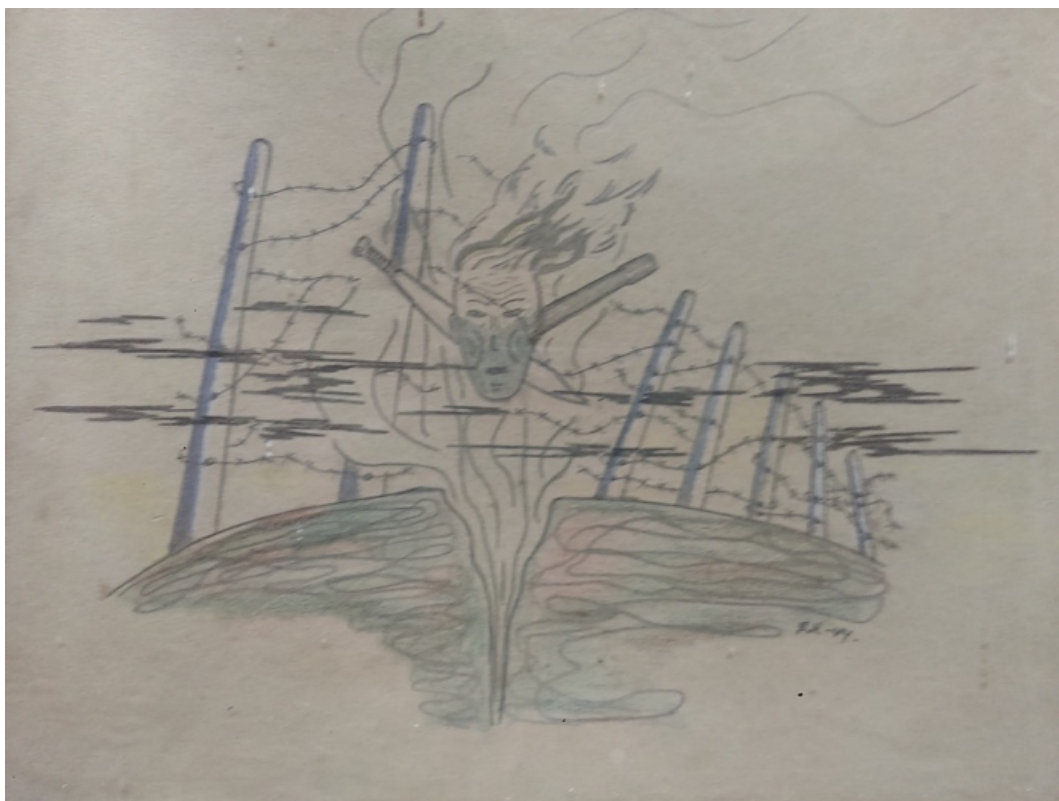


Figure 13: Sketch by Ebbe Holmboe in Porta Westfalica concentration camp, c.1944

On the reverse, the inscription by Asger Holmboe, one of Ebbe's older brothers and my grandfather, reads:

The picture was drawn by Ebbe Holmboe at some time between 1940 and 1945, shortly before he was captured by the Gestapo and taken to a concentration camp in Germany where he died in 1944.

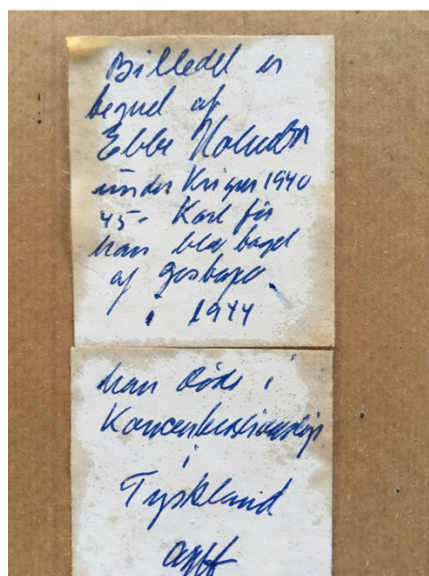


Figure 14: An inscription by Asger Holmboe on the reverse of Ebbe Holmboe's sketch

I am reminded of Sebald again.

And yet,

What would we be without memory?¹⁰

This quotation is taken from another of Sebald's novels, *The Rings of Saturn*, that features a nameless Sebald-like narrator. It is repeated, together with his portrait, in an exquisitely produced folding book of twentieth century portraits by Bernice Eisenstein and poetry by Anne Michaels. The portrait shows him with his distinctive shock of white hair, heavy moustache and dark eyes and the book is constructed in such a way that it both unfolds and enfolds in the form of an extended concertina. Eisenstein's portraits fold face-to-face on one side and Michaels' poetry offer an echo on the other. 'A layered kinship is formed, a touch across the pages', as the notes explain:

Unfold, v. tr: to reveal gradually by written or spoken explanation; make known

[...]

Enfold, v, tr: to embrace¹¹

This sign leads me to Anne Michaels' *Fugitive Pieces*, a novel about making things known, however difficult that might seem, and about the possibility of an answer.

Fugitive Pieces

No one is born once. If you're lucky, you'll emerge again in someone's arms; or unlucky, wake when the long tail of terror brushes the insides of your skull.¹²

Like Sebald's *Austerlitz*, Anne Michael's *Fugitive Pieces* is a narrative that layers one story on top of another like geological strata. Both works inhabit a space between genres: *Austerlitz* between documentary and prose fiction and *Fugitive Pieces* between poetry and the novel. In an interview in the *Guardian* newspaper in 2009 Michaels rejected any talk of a connection between either of her novels, both of which concern the Second World War, and her own family history: her Jewish father, Isaiah, left Poland for Canada during the war.¹³ 'I realise there's no such thing as pure reading,' she said, 'but I'd rather keep myself out of it as far as I can.'¹⁴

The novel took Michaels ten years to research and write. Sometimes, she noted in a lecture at the University of Victoria in Toronto in 2013, she would stare at a photograph from the Holocaust for hours and find what she saw to be so 'inexpressible' that she would have to leave her study and not write again for months.¹⁵ In two parts, the novel is narrated in the first person by two characters: firstly a poet, Jakob Beer, and secondly a Canadian academic and student of Beer's poetry, known only as Ben. The narratives echo each other with repeated chapter titles: 'The Drowned City', 'Vertical Time' and 'The Way Station'. An interesting connection to note is that these chapter titles also reverberate with motifs from *Austerlitz*, such as the submerged village of Llanwddyn, the strangeness of time and the significance of travel and stations.

Jakob Beer tells the story of the murder of his parents, the abduction of his sister by Nazi soldiers from his home in Poland in 1940 and the memories that he must then carry:

The memories we elude catch up to us, overtake us like a shadow. A truth appears suddenly in the middle of a thought, a hair on a lens.¹⁶

Ben, the second narrator, appears in the last third of the novel. He believes himself to be the only child of concentration camp survivors. 'I was born into absence', he says (Michaels, p. 233). He is also born into silence. When he discovers Jakob's poetry, Ben finds it offers a way into understanding his parents' silence. In later life, he comes across a photograph and learns that he had two siblings, Hannah and Paul, who died at the start of the war and about whom his parents never spoke. Later he discovers a line in Beer's notebook and glimpses the powerful agency that kept his mother and father, whose names are never stated in the novel, from revealing their terrible secret:

One becomes undone by a photograph, by love that closes its mouth before calling a name (Michaels, p. 284).

It is, therefore, not too surprising that he discovers that his own name, Ben, doesn't stand for Benjamin, but is simply 'ben', the Hebrew word for 'son' (Michaels, p. 253).

Biographies of longing

There's no absence, if there remains even the memory of absence. Memory dies unless it's given a use. Or as Athos might have said: if one no longer has land but has the memory of land, then one can make a map (Michaels, p. 193).

Like the character of Jacques Austerlitz, Jakob Beer is a child survivor. He describes his 'shadow past' as a 'biography of longing'.¹⁷ But, for Jakob, there will be no *Kindertransport*. After witnessing the murder of his parents and violent abduction of his older sister, Bella, seven-year-old Jakob flees into the woods near the archaeological site at Biskupin and buries himself in the mud. Days later, the boy, 'afterbirth of earth' (Michaels, p. 5), is plucked from the bog by a fifty-year-old Greek geologist and scholar, Athanasios Roussos, known as Athos. The geologist wraps the boy under his coat as if he were an artefact and smuggles him out of Poland and back to Greece. Jakob, like Georges Perec, discussed in

Chapter 3, is 'la seule mémoire vivante' of his family.¹⁸ Their stories, and the memory of their missing bodies, lie within him.

... Bella clung. We were Russian dolls. I inside Athos, Bella inside me.¹⁹

Bella will never leave Jakob even though neither he nor Athos ever manage to trace her in the camps. But Michaels keeps reminding the reader about 'the importance not of what's extant, but of what's disappeared' (Michaels, p. 222). It is only because Jakob survives that Bella has the gift of being remembered and, in fact, the novel has been written 'for all those who have no one to recall their names' (Michaels, p. 75).

The shadow past

Athos, Jakob's rescuer, carries his own story of grief for a brother dead at eighteen and a mother soon after. He brings up Jakob on the Greek island of Zakynthos. As the war continues and with Germans on the island, he hides the boy in his hilltop house high above the Ionian Sea. Food is scarce: they survive on sea peas, nasturtium pods and asphodel stems. Images from the past rise in the boy's mind 'like bruises' (Michaels, p. 19) and he lives with the constant expectation of a door bursting open or the taste of blood flushing into his mouth. Gradually, the man and the child learn to communicate through scraps of language: Athos' English and Greek; Jakob's Yiddish and Polish:

We took new words into our mouths like foreign foods; suspicious, acquired tastes (Michaels, p. 21).

They share a 'shadow past [...] shaped by everything that never happened' and a lifelong bond between the two of them is formed (Michaels, p. 17). At the end of the war, they move first to Athens then on to Toronto and a new life. Jakob hungrily learns English, but by now he knows that by doing so he is pushing something else back:

A gust of warmth spread through my body, but also panic, for with each mouthful the past was further silenced (Michaels, p. 92).

He starts to write poetry in English, 'an alphabet without memory', but then finds that he is 'thin and ugly with feeling' when he stands in the Jewish neighbourhood in Toronto, listening to 'the ardent tongue' of his childhood (Michaels, p. 101). At night Athos holds Jakob, now a teenager, through his nightmares as the memories resurface. In adulthood Jakob continues to bury the images of his parents, of Bella and his best friend Mones, beneath an avalanche of research: train schedules, camp records and methods of execution. Jacques Austerlitz would have understood. So too, my great-grandfather, Christian Holmboe, as, day after day, he obsessively summarised radio announcements and clipped cuttings from the day's newspapers, and wondered all the while about the fate of his sons: Asger in hiding and Ebbe in the hands of the Gestapo.

New languages and new countries: for Jakob much is lost in the process of translation and transit. And yet, eventually, something is found. Kostas, Athos' old friend from Athens, gives Jakob a well-worn selection of Greek poetry, 'planting rows of words in me that would grow for the rest of my life' (Michaels, p. 85).

I already knew the power of language to destroy, to omit, to obliterate. But poetry, the power of language to restore: this was what both Athos and Kostas were trying to teach me (Michaels, p. 79).

In *Fugitive Pieces* Michaels shows history passing from one person to another and from one generation to the next. It is transmitted from Jakob to Ben and from Ben's nameless parents to Ben. In *Austerlitz* Jacques tells his life story to the narrator, but in *Fugitive Pieces* the story is passed on more obliquely. The story is *made known*. The receiver takes on this knowledge, which might take the shape of a feeling like a shadow falling or that of 'an electric field' (Michaels, p. 253). Ben's parents may be 'experts in secrets' (Michaels, p. 252), but the transmission of the past is made in ways that often do not involve language. They are made through strange habits or a 'damp silence' (Michaels, p. 204). 'My parents' past is mine molecularly', Ben says to his wife, Naomi, when she thinks she can 'stop the soldier who spat in my father's mouth from spitting into my mind through my father's blood' (Michaels, p. 280).

Over time Ben comes to understand the reasons for his mother's over-protectiveness, her attachment to the family passports which she carries everywhere and the muffled talk with her brothers in the kitchen 'where all ghosts like to gather' (Michaels, p. 223). At first he cannot understand his father's rage with a son who throws away a rotten apple and who can

never play a piece of music perfectly enough. But slowly he learns about his father's suffering through the caches of food in the house, the solitary midnight meals and the attachment to well-made shoes. There are no bedtime stories for Ben, only his father's ramblings, 'a pyre of dark words' over a collection of grim postcards from Europe (Michaels, p. 217).

An exchange of vows

'You are not too young. There were hundreds of thousands younger than you' (Michaels, p. 219). So says the father to the son. As a child Ben is made to look at the photographs, at the mountains of shoes belonging to all those without a biography: 'then perhaps one could restore order by naming' (Michaels, p. 111). For Ben, the images become 'an exchange of vows' (Michaels, p. 218) between father and son, not only a promise never to forget, but, as he only realises as his father lies dying, a promise to embrace life as his father never could.

Truth grows gradually in us, like a musician who plays a piece again and again until suddenly he hears it for the first time (Michaels, p. 251).

Ben's narrative is an address to the poet, Jakob Beer. And it is a question: *how do I live knowing this?* After the death of his parents and unable to love the women who try to love him, Ben travels to Beer's house on the Greek island of Idhra to search for the dead poet's notebooks. At first he cannot find them and wonders whether Jakob buried them like the many 'letters of witness buried under the floorboards of houses in Warsaw, Łódź, Cracow' (Michaels, p. 262) or the 'letters to absent children' that were hidden in the *zudecca* (the ghetto) at the bottom of the hill in Zachynthos town (Michaels, p. 39). But Jakob knew all about the desire to salvage memory when he unearths the story about the woman in Birkenhau who carries the faces of her husband and daughter, torn from a photograph, under her tongue. (Michaels, p. 139). Ben finds the notebooks hidden in plain sight on a bookshelf.

In the end it is an image of another kind that offers Ben a clue. When Ben first sees Petra, twenty-five years his junior, at a café on the island, his 'desire a rough edge of metal that suddenly appears smooth in a glare of light', he feels her as 'a skin photograph' (Michaels, p. 275). In those days he understands at last what Jakob's lesson had been for him all along: 'I see that I must give what I most need' (Michaels, p. 294). It is ultimately what Jakob had learnt from Athos: the difficult question of 'how to make love necessary' (Michaels, p. 121).

The gradual instant

‘Just as the earth invisibly prepares its cataclysms, so history is the gradual instant’ (Michaels, p. 77).

Both novels discussed in this chapter are the creative expression of what Michaels describes as ‘the gradual instant’. ‘Nothing is sudden. It is not an explosion – planned, timed, wired carefully – not the burst door’ (Michaels, p. 77). Long after the war is over, survivors, like Jakob Beer and Austerlitz, feel the reverberations in their daily lives. They cannot make decisions, they roam in the present in a kind of fog and they find it almost impossible to love another human being again.

In her work about W.G. Sebald, Lynn Woolfe wrote that ‘Literature has the power to *create* memory based on historical knowledge that is infused with imagination’.²⁰ Both works are creative investigations that address the question of what love makes a person both capable and incapable of. But they are also about what can be found, as much as about what is often lost:

Other stories are concealed in memory, neither written nor spoken. Still others recovered by circumstance alone.²¹

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- ¹ Octavio Paz, *A Tale of Two Gardens*, p. 57. Layout as in translation.
- ² W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 66. This is a quotation taken from Psalms Chapter 11, verse 6.
- ³ Lynn L. Wolff, *W.G. Sebald's Hybrid Poetics*, p. 11.
- ⁴ See Chapter 2, p. 237.
- ⁵ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, p. 76.
- ⁶ Denise Epstein is discussed in Chapter 2 of this thesis.
- ⁷ W.G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*, preface, p. xxi.
- ⁸ Morton Kjellesvig, *Slekten Holmboe, Gjemmon 400 År, 1600–2002*, Bind II, p. 556. Translation by Jette Holmboe.
- ⁹ Email from Jette Evans, 4 November 2016.
- ¹⁰ Bernice Eisenstein, *Correspondences*, in section 'Permissions and Sources' which states 'W.G. Sebald: prose quoted from *The Rings of Saturn*, translated by Michael Hulse, New Directions Books, 1999.' The book has no page numbers.
- ¹¹ Bernice Eisenstein, *Correspondences*, in section 'Permissions and Sources'.
- ¹² Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 5.
- ¹³ Anne Michaels' other novel is *A Winter's Vault*.
- ¹⁴ Sarah Crown, *Guardian online*, <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2009/may/02/interview-anne-michaels>> [accessed 12 November 2015].
- ¹⁵ Lecture by Anne Michaels, 18 February 2013, University of Victoria, Canada. [http://www.uvic.ca/anniversary/videos/AnneMichaels - 'The Mystery of Wood'](http://www.uvic.ca/anniversary/videos/AnneMichaels-%20The%20Mystery%20of%20Wood%20.mp4) [accessed 24 November 2016].
- ¹⁶ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 213.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., p. 17. Jakob Beer describes his 'shadow past' as 'a biography of longing'.
- ¹⁸ Georges Perec, *W*, p. 10. Translated as 'the only living memory'.
- ¹⁹ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 14.
- ²⁰ Lynn L. Wolff, *W.G. Sebald's Hybrid Poetics*, p. 215.
- ²¹ Anne Michaels, *Fugitive Pieces*, p. 2.

Conclusion

Have a goal and work energetically to achieve it

The goal must be significant and worthwhile.¹

This project has been a long one and feels as if it has been ‘significant and worthwhile’, as Christian Holmboe wrote all those years ago, at least as far as this writer is concerned.

It began in the Holmboe archive with Christian Gylding Holmboe’s *dagbøger*. Those meticulous journals formed the nexus around which other family artefacts, papers and memories coalesced. *A* beginning rather than *the* beginning took shape. I examined the signs of *what has been* (Roland Barthes) and of *what has been left behind* (Nachlaß). The following question framed itself: *what will it have meant?* (Jacques Derrida). For me it meant a creative engagement with family history in the form of a novel, inspired by, rather than based on, the Holmboe story. Secondly, I embarked on a discursive exploration of the works by other writers across Europe who remembered and imagined their disappeared friends and kin after the Second World War. If they could not remember, they reminded us that there can be no forgetting. I ended by examining two works of prose fiction (W.G. Sebald and Anne Michaels), where loss (and its transmission) is explored and memory is imagined (Lynn Woolf).

Élisabeth Gille’s archival journey led her to create an imagined world in a fictionalised memoir for her mother. Joseph Kessel wrote of ‘the humility of the document’, Nick Barlay of his great-grandmother’s letter ‘retreating from the light’ and Walter Kempowski of ‘the subjective character of the sources’. These texts formed the bedrock of my investigations and allowed me to explore the notion of how paper archives offer memory up to the imagination, hinting at distant voices like the soundings picked up by sonar (Walter Kempowski). Like Nick Barlay, I have ‘a box where such things are kept’ and, in the basement of the *Besættelsesmuseet* in Jutland, I have access to ‘piles of archives’ just as Élisabeth Gille had access to those of her mother, Irène Némirovsky. But this hasn’t just been about the physical archive; it has also been about memory and its difficulties. Denise Epstein recalls the pain she felt at her sister’s lost doll *Bluette*, and the fear she developed into adulthood of wearing scarves. When Marceline Loridan-Ivens returned to Auschwitz-Birkenau, she posed the question so many of the writers I have interrogated here have asked: ‘How can we hand down something we have so much difficulty explaining to ourselves?’

These were the daughters' stories. Then followed the story of a son, Georges Perec. The scant pickings in his family archive and his forensic dissection of his own unreliable memories send him to break the 'terrible silence' and begin the painful business of naming what is, and will always be, absent. The void, the *not-there-ness* of it all, formed the space in which he must write, the blank space to which he must point. Then I travelled from the realm of non-fiction into the borderlands of prose fiction. For Sebald's character, Jacques Austerlitz, the words dried away leaving only a paralysis of language. In this thesis, I have encountered not only paralysis of language but also submersion (W.G. Sebald), silence (Perec) and annihilation (Marceline Loridan-Ivens): *I try to remember but I can't*.

Throughout there has been the problem of translation. Not only translation from one language to another but also the translation or transmission of memory from one person to another and from one generation to the next. There has been a kind of 'exchange of vows' (Michaels) between the living and dead. A mother tongue is never totally lost (Michaels, Sebald), but a mother often was. Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar committed her life to orphans returning to Paris from the camps, alone and in need of 'a mother, *any mother*'. And fathers were lost too, of course. Marceline Loridan-Ivens' life was defined by the loss of her father's note and the unavoidable connections to the horrors 'back there'. Jacqueline Mesnil-Amar fretted over her 'futile attempt to record events' in her intense month-long journal as the Nazis made their exodus from Paris and worried about her husband (*I never stopped calling you*), while Christian wondered what others would make of his efforts and how those in the future would judge the events of the time 'when everything is completely unravelled?' Nothing, of course, can ever completely unravel. As Marceline Loridan-Ivens said, a person can be driven by a need to find a pathway to 'touch the imagination' of others.

Has language rescued them? The dead of whom these writers speak cannot be saved and yet language is the only tool with which to take up this impossible task. Some of the writers discussed here write in the aftermath of a disrupted childhood and after a cataclysmic event (Michaels). Language may not have rescued them but it opens a landscape for others, and perhaps even themselves, to see a version of the past. Or, at least, it sets a vibration from that disappeared time for others to feel.

These works of memoir, both imagined and real, biography and prose fiction have been concerned with how identity and grief fuse and how connections are made across time. And they have concerned love. Grief, it turns out, is a kind of love. I have also been concerned with the notion of location, in time as well as space where writing forms a kind of

map-making, as Athos, the Greek archaeologist advises Jakob Beer in *Fugitive Pieces*. Writing offers signs that bring the past into the present.

The problem of how to translate archive material and factual evidence into a creative work has been the subject of many of the writers I have examined here, in particular Elizabeth Gille, Georges Perec, W.G. Sebald and Anne Michaels. I have explored how these writers, and sometimes their imagined characters, exploited the tensions between the archive material at their disposal and their individual narratives. Often the material was so overwhelming that, once assimilated, had to be removed or destroyed. In *Austerlitz*, for example, the protagonist was paralysed by the amount of material before him: the maps, the architectural designs, the long historical accounts and even by his own writings. In the end the material weighed him down to the point that it prevented him from discovering the truth about his own origins. He had, quite literally, to get rid of the material so that he could understand. In *Fugitive Pieces*, it was only through the poetry of Jakob Beer that Ben began to understand his own father, the Holocaust survivor. By contrast the mountains of harrowing photographs that Ben's father collected and set before his son only served to confuse and alienate.

The Holmboe archive material that I have presented in this thesis offered me a rich source of subject matter to use in the development of the novel, *Seabirds of Jutland*. The newspaper articles, photographs, drawings and family stories provided textures and details as well as a broader historical context. While I relished investigating the Holmboes, when it came to writing a work of fiction I eventually realised that I had to distance myself from the family stories that I found in the archive. At the beginning I worked so closely with the 'real' stories that they became 'stuck' to the narrative and began to hinder progress. After a time I became aware of a feeling of awkwardness and uncomfortable tension. I questioned my right to prod about in their stories and interfere with whatever 'truths' I found there. The novel was not and was never intended to be 'based on a true story'. When it came to fiction, my curiosity about my family history eventually turned a decision to steer the story away from real people and to 'unstick' the narrative from their individual stories. This turned out to be a liberation. Instead I carried into the fiction a concentrated residue of what was real. This could be called inspiration or perhaps simply an atmosphere about a time, a place and the lives of real people. The archive material which at the start had been so beneficial at setting off my imagination, became an obstacle as the novel developed. The decision to change direction and cut loose from the archive allowed me to articulate a less literal, but nonetheless powerful, kind of truth through the development of character, plot, pace, mood and dialogue. Those

ostensibly reliable external sources in the archive had to be abandoned so that I could fully inhabit my own internal landscape and allow my imagination to do its work.

This is an academic work, but it has felt like a meditation too. For me, the act of writing has been about how to frame the family stories that I found in the archive as well as the stories that those archives led me to. One sign that emerged from the recesses of the Holmboe family archive has stuck, just as a single photograph remains stuck to the pin board above my desk. It is the story of Christian Holmboe's youngest son, Ebbe. His death in the concentration camp at Porta Westfalica on 15 December 1944 occurred seventy-two years ago almost to the day as I write this. It was he who pointed me to the camps (now I think of it, where else could I have ended up when writing about the Second World War in Europe?) and to the collection of voices from France, Germany and as far away as Canada. It is true that, as Derrida's translator observed, *only the living answer*. Ebbe's story, like so many, has only been partially told and reminds me of the never-to-be-discovered world where so many untold stories are destined to remain.

This endeavour has been about a peculiar kind of homesickness for a long-vanished Danish family, but it has also been about curiosity. I have found connections with writers across Europe and beyond. I like to think that, as in Michaels' and Eisenstein's folding book, I have created here 'a layered kinship' among this diverse collection of writers and shaped 'a touch across the pages'. As I approach the conclusion, I realise I do not like endings. I prefer the beginning more. As Steedman says (see p. 24) there always seems to be trouble getting finished. I do not like the feeling of letting things slip away. I decide that this project will not end with 'a void rubbing out its own inscription' as Perec writes at the end of *La Disparition* (A Void), his lipogrammatic novel written without the letter 'e'.² I will end with the poetry of Anne Michaels partly because I like being in the company of her voice, but also because beginnings can start anywhere, even at the final moment. I return full circle to the forty-two volumes of Christian Holmboe's journals, wrapped in brown paper, sitting in the archive of the *Besættelsesmuseet* in Aarhus. The Holmboe family *Nachlaß* presents firm terrain on which I might find a foothold. And I return to Ebbe.

The dead read backwards
As in a mirror. They gather
In the white field and look up,
Waiting for someone
To write their names.

What the Light Teaches, Anne Michaels³

¹ From Christian Holmboe's 'list of human values'. See p. 223–24 of this thesis.

² Georges Perec, *A Void*, p. 278.

³ Anne Michaels, *Poems*, p. 128.

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