

# FUTURE

7

*"And who knows what he will be like  
tomorrow On which roads he will walk  
What will he have in his hands, his hands  
It will move and can fly  
It will swim on a star  
You are so Beautiful  
And if it is a female it will be called Futura ... "*  
Lucio Dalla

On the cover: Communication graphics

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and the  
**Jewish girl**

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*To my grandmother Tina  
who was my biggest fan and will  
continue to be forever ...*



September 30, 1941, Warsaw.

I still remember the last few days before it happened. It had all been the same for ten years, yet it had only taken one evening to change everything.

I was able to find and report a dozen people in a couple of days, a real reason for pride for anyone, even if I wasn't sure if it was for me too.

"Heil Hitler!" Shouted the blond boy, proud of his uniform, at the door of my office. He was bold in trying to imitate the gestures of the powerful and sure of succeeding. So naive, as if it could be different in that sea of little blond fish who had worn the uniform and had entered that barracks. "Was ist lost?" I asked in a somewhat annoyed tone. I hated being disturbed while I was working. "I'm here for clandestine families, mein herr." It seemed obvious that he was there for that, no one showed up in my office to chat, with my reputation as a grumpy intolerant to any conversation.

"Here's the telegram," I absently handed him the sheet I had on the table. Four other complaints against the few Jews who remained in the city, given that the majority

some had been isolated in the ghetto. Always assuming they were very few, no one could know.

The boy took it diligently and clicked on his heels. "Heil Hitler!" I wanted to strangle him. Was there really a need to repeat the same sentence so many times? I saluted questionably and he finally left.

That afternoon came quickly. After leaving the barracks, I walked towards the center of the city, where the arrest of the people we had reported was presumably taking place. I wanted to go home and that's it, without having to become a spectator of that macabre work. But the commander had almost made me transfer the last time I didn't attend, so it was better not to risk it, even if those things made me nauseous.

Ever since they put the uniform on me, I knew that I would become a monster, a machine made of iron and cables intersected only to do harm. I was a heartbroken kid, too young to bear all the weight they had put on me, but I still didn't realize that. I was aware of what I was doing and I did it anyway, like everyone else, feeling a pain that still seemed inexplicable to me. Things would soon change, and I still didn't know it.

I arrived on the spot late in the afternoon. There were three semi-detached houses of modest height that overlooked an internal courtyard, that is the clearing where we were.



The neighbors stood by the windows to browse and never took their eyes off us for a second, even if they tried to hide behind the curtains so as not to be noticed.

The first house was completely surrounded by the SS who were about to break into the house and who were only waiting for authorization from their superiors. Then, near the vans, I saw someone I knew all too well. Many years had passed, but I could not forget it.

"Kroger, are you an SS now?" I asked in amazement, seeing my old colleague and friend dressed in black, with that terrifying skull on his cap.

"Yes, Hans, now I know how to serve my nation." We had both changed since we left. Once we never thought we wanted to be military, but now it was a whole other story. We found ourselves different and I realized that something had changed in his eyes too.

"Yes, I understand," I said. I didn't understand at all instead. For him, things had turned out differently. He had had a choice. "But... we once believed in different things... remember?" I ventured. "Hans, I left behind those stupid ideas of kids we used to carry with us," he blurted out in the same tone as when he reproaches himself with a rude child. "You should do it too. We are Aryans, the only pure race, and we will not be ruined by these bright beings ».

I decided to stop that conversation before things escalated, otherwise I don't know what I would have said. This war was driving us crazy,

and if I didn't find a sure foothold I would be drowned very soon.

I decided to leave the moment the SS broke into the first house. I didn't want to see further because I was chilled by the idea that I would not be able to take it. I had seen so many and yet there were times when it was still difficult to handle the tension.

But how could I have resigned myself to such a world? How could I forgive myself for the lives I had broken that day, for all that suffering I had given to innocent children?

I realized that I had no right to blame Kroger for his changes. Not even I could say that I had the same ideals that I had years ago, considering everything I did on a daily basis.

The days passed quickly amid the denunciations of citizens and the executions of all those who were suspected of being enemies of the Führer. This was life during the Second World War. No one had the will or the strength to react anymore. To waste a minute of your time thinking about it for a moment. But all the innocents I killed haven't completely disappeared. I remember that old man who finally said: "go to hell", in his last moment of life. Years of wars fought and suffering that one day another man had decided to destroy. I remember the young man, a little boy, with shining eyes and red cheeks, rosy lips and wet with tears, who died from giving voice to so many like him. How could he not miss the words of disagreement, towards whom could he not despise? I remember the father of a family who turned his extreme

glance at his wife and child, too young to know she would never see him again. She would have grown up without a father and would have paid for a fault she did not have. And what would become of her? Probably a couple of years later she would become a woman, because she had to be strong for her mother and take care of her problems, always.

It was as if every anger, every fear I saw in others, was a blow to my chest, because the struggle inside me was constant, and maybe I couldn't even realize it. On the one hand, I was trying to convince myself that I was doing nothing wrong, I was trying to support the ideals of our homeland and to respect my role. And on the other hand, I did nothing but scold myself and hate myself every time I signed an arrest warrant, every time I commanded an unjust execution. There was a voice inside me wondering, *why am I doing this?*

Every day I felt more tired, more disappointed with my country and who I was. Sometimes I wondered why I accepted all this. Because I didn't have the strength to risk everything and run away forever, to ignore people's thoughts and reproaches. By now my world was dead, it had turned its back on me and I was just continuing to follow it in a mad rush towards madness, dreaming of reaching it and seeing once again those few I had loved. I saw young people growing up too early, soldiers shaped by the sick ideals of a madman, and girlfriends crying as they left their loved ones. Lives broken too young, too innocent, too high a price to pay for this useless

war. Then there were the Jews. What had they done wrong in the end? After all they were women, children, men like us, but they were treated like the worst beasts of this world. And for them I hated myself even more, despite justifying myself by lying to myself, pretending to do the right thing for my country. This was my conflict. It would take me a long time to decide which side to take. I always knew that I would end up in the darkest circle of hell for all the pain I had caused, because nothing could save me. And in the end, I deserved it, and that only made me feel worse. I fought against myself every day, taking sides and dividing, discovering dark parts of me that I didn't even think I could imagine. Inside me was the unconscious belief that this struggle would continue until death. I had the sad knowledge that I was and always would be a soldier of the Third Reich.

I walked at a slow and depressed pace through the streets of Warsaw. Everything was silent and melancholy now, at an hour of the day too close to curfew for anyone to dare to go out. On a September evening like this it was like being in another world. The crickets sang indecipherable tunes, and the street was completely deserted. It was strange that some Jews were still on this side of the wall. So I guessed that those captured that day had been in hiding for at least six months, or maybe longer. By now the ghetto was overcrowded and people were starving, I doubted they were there

they would have brought there. It was much more likely that they would end up in a far worse place.

I felt worse and worse. It was like I was sliding down and down, and not like people usually do. All the others wake up one day, and realize they are at the bottom of the abyss. On the other hand, I felt it, I felt myself slipping and it seemed to me that I could also listen to the sound of the pebbles that I moved on my descent, and the shoes that rubbed the wall looking for a hold. But time passed and I knew I couldn't do anything alone. I could do nothing against an entire nation.

I was just walking, with downcast eyes and uncared for demeanor, there was no one on the street anyway, and if there had been someone I wouldn't have cared that much. Small drops of water stung my forehead, making me understand that I had to hurry if I didn't want to return home wet from head to toe, as the weather in Warsaw was unpredictable. You will accelerate your pace when something caught my attention.

The hem of a gray coat that flapped, fighting against the cold Polish wind, some blond curls and damp for the capricious weather.

The tiny figure of a little girl no more than three or four years old, looking around bewildered. He laid his eyes on me, then on the uniform. An astonished expression was painted on her face, although I think I had the same expression too, as if none of us expected to see a living soul. I immediately thought she was lost, although it was unusual for such things to happen, since most

of parents never separated from their children in the 1941.

I couldn't leave her there, in the rain, when people died of the flu in the city. I stepped forward hesitantly. "Hello little one, what are you doing here all alone?" I said trying to show a friendly smile. She didn't answer me, she ignored me. "Do you want to come with me to find your parents?" They will certainly be worried ». The little girl shook her head.

"Mommy says you're bad," he said innocently, crossing his arms over his chest.

It was like a knife in the chest. The sincerity with which he told me what, in reality, was just cruel truth shocked me. I was the bad guy.

"I'm here to help you ... You don't want to spend the night alone in the rain, do you?" The girl didn't answer again, turning away as if to make it clear that she didn't want to have anything to do with me. I had to find a way to get her to tell me where her mother was. "Okay, I'll leave you here. But I warn you that there are a lot of monsters on the street at night," I added solemnly. I was sure this would work.

"Monsters don't exist, you're a liar," he muttered accusingly.

"Of course they exist, they are there and they only go out at night, when no one sees them." I looked around suspiciously, as if I had seen some wild creature around the corner of the street. She widened her eyes in disbelief.

"Really?".

"Sure," I replied, in the most sincere tone I knew. Of course she decided to follow me.

At first I didn't know exactly what to say, as I rarely talked to children and, to be honest, I always thought it was quite difficult. So I stayed silent and she did the same. Occasionally he sneezed from the cold, but nothing more. I took her hand and started walking towards the *Kommandantur*. Someone would surely find his mother there.

"Where are your parents?" I asked, hoping he would really tell me.

"It's a secret," she said confidently. "A secret?" I repeated.

She nodded.

"Yes, one of the really secret ones." I admit I was just too tired at the time to wonder what kind of secret it was.

"May I at least know your name or is that a secret too?" I asked ironically. But this time she nodded, saying her name was Marie. An unusual name for a Polish baby girl. *Maybe it is of foreign origin*, I thought. "Then please, Marie, I'm Hans." We arrived in front of the *Kommandantur*, mami noticed that the lights were out and all the doors locked. All the soldiers had gone with the SS and there was no one there who could help me. I struggled to keep from cursing. I was in serious trouble, because I certainly couldn't leave that little girl on the street. I tried to force a smile.

"Look Marie, I don't think we're going to find your mom tonight, so we have no choice but to go to my house, okay?"

Marie shrugged, probably sympathetic to me, especially after the monster business. I was amazed because I didn't think I was good with children. I opened the front door and walked in, leaving the cold Polish autumn behind me.

I gently picked up her water-soaked gray coat and placed it on the coat hanger. "Are you cold Marie?" She said yes. "Then let's light the fire, will you?" I walked over to the fireplace with the matches and grabbed the poker, making a nice little fire.

Then I took a warm blanket from my room for Marie.

"Take this little one," but I didn't finish the sentence. I found her already asleep on the sofa.

"How tender ...!" I whispered to myself. I didn't immediately realize what I had said. But what was happening to me? I could not feel tender for a child, a superior of mine would not have taken it well, because a German must never show himself weak or easily impressionable, he must not soften in front of anyone.

I decided to listen to the radio, even though I knew what I would hear would only make me sad. Now we only talked about war.

*"The Allied Aryan troops are advancing quickly towards Moscow, the victory of Germany and our Führer is upon us!"* Germany, Hitler, conquests and defeats were at the center of every discussion.



I changed station hoping for something different than usual Hitler, which is very difficult.

«*Long live Germany and our Führer! The Führer will make our nation great... »*. I looked for other channels but it was all the same. It was always like that now. I turned off the radio before smashing it against the wall and decided to go and rest for a while after such a day, hoping at least to be spared from nightmares.

I got up at dawn and Marie was still asleep. Blessed child, who could not know what was happening to the world, as piece by piece everything was collapsing under the weight of human madness. I shook it gently.

"Hey, baby ... wake up, we need to find your family, remember?" She rubbed her sleepy eyes. "Good morning, did you sleep well?" I asked curiously. He nodded, but he didn't seem to be feeling very well, every now and then he had a little cough. At first it was just someone, light, as happens to everyone, sometimes, when something goes wrong, but then it started to increase in intensity.

"Marie! Marie, are you all right? "

"Y ... yes." He whispered, but it was all white. His nose was red and frozen, so I suspected he had some flu. I knew it was the cold, the only enemy worse than the Germans that threatens them too. I had to get her back to her family as soon as possible. We had a lot of soldiers from the flu. "Here," I handed her a glass of water, hoping it might help, when suddenly the phone rang.

"Hello," I said, curious to know who it might be. They hadn't called me more than a couple of times since they'd installed that phone.

"Hello, Hans. I'm Kroger ». A shiver ran down his spine as he heard her name spoken. "Kroger... why did you call me at home? Has something serious happened? ' I remembered when I had met him the day before. Of his stone eyes, of the skull on his cap and of his uniform as dark as death. An SS usually has no reason to speak privately with a Wermacht officer.

"Yes, Hans. We have a problem". He said, with some concern in his voice.

"What is it about?" What could have happened that was so bad? His voice sounded the same as that of the *Führer*.

"We had some problems with one of the clandestine families last night. The Lacroix family, who moved from Paris a few years ago. Father, mother and two children, ordinary matter, "he paused, as if wondering whether to continue or not. Or maybe he was asking me, but I didn't answer.

"So what happened?" I asked. I heard a sigh through the receiver.

"It happened that while we were loading them into the van we realized that the little daughter was missing. Flew into thin air, one moment before it was there and the next it wasn't. We've been looking everywhere, but that filthy little Jew seems to have disappeared! "She began, raising her tone word after word. He seemed very agitated, he knew the commander wouldn't let him get away with it. It was obvious that he felt hurt in pride. Suddenly

everything seemed clearer to me, everything made sense, everything connected. But how could I not understand something so obvious?

"And ... and what do you want from me? I am not an SS ».

"My men can't waste time on a child, there are still too many Jews hiding in Warsaw, so I have no choice but to put your department in charge. The family has already been sent to Auschwitz, I think they will end up in the gas chambers immediately ", he let out a kind of mocking laugh as he said it, and that made me shiver and rage again," find her and show me we can trust you, Hans Mayer, because I am beginning to have some doubts. Heil Hitler ».

«Heil Hitler...». The receiver slipped slowly from my hands, until it ended up dangling against the wall. What was I supposed to do, what? Now that I knew the truth, I had to choose. And I chose.

I couldn't jeopardize everything I had for that little girl, I couldn't. I didn't even know her, she was a stranger. I had to do what was right for me and for my nation. I had to deliver it.

*Maybe it won't die*, I thought. Perhaps someone else would have hidden her in the concentration camp and one way or another she would have survived.

However she would go, she couldn't stay with me, she had to go now. Neither his life nor his safety was any of my business. I headed for the living room where I had left it. I wouldn't have waited a second longer. We would have gone straight to the *Kommandantur*, and there would happen what had to happen.

"Quick, Marie, put your coat on. We have to go... », but I froze as soon as I saw her.

She was on the sofa, perhaps asleep, with the blanket wrapped around her like a bundle and her face as pale as a hospital sheet. «Marie... What is happening to you ?!». I felt her forehead, she was hot, she must have had a high fever. It looked like it came out of a cold room for how cold it was.

I couldn't hand her over to the SS in that state. He would be dead before he even got to the camp and then he wouldn't even have a chance. He had to have a chance. I decided that I would wait a few days, just long enough for him to recover, but then he would be gone forever. I couldn't hide it, it was too much for me.

"I'm cold, Hans ..." he said in a whisper when he had regained some consciousness. *But why does it have to be so difficult?* I thought.

"I know, I know baby. But you will see that soon you will get better. Let's have something now, do you want? ». In fact, I hadn't really thought he must be hungry, and I was too. I prepared two dishes of *sauerbraten*, my favorite plate. Slowly, she managed to enjoy something, and drink some milk. I realized that he was really puny and that he would have to eat more to get over that bad flu soon. I didn't even know why I cared, why I felt so apprehensive about him, but it was as if the whole world had teamed up against me to make me feel even more guilty than before.

I walked her back into the living room and pulled a couple of blankets over her, then sat down beside her with the

newspaper, to make sure he didn't feel bad. I looked out the window: it was snowing. That was the first snow. The one that would mark the beginning of a long and cold winter, and in a sense I hoped that that white mantle would also cover all my doubts and pain, that it would put an end to my torments. How I wanted it to really happen. Suddenly a terrible thought flashed into my mind. That afternoon I had to go to the *Kommand- dantur* and, paradoxically, mobilize Marie's research by leaving her at home alone. How could I leave her in those conditions? If she felt bad, no one could help her. And I don't even dare imagine what would have happened if someone had knocked on the door. The very thought made my skin crawl.

Too bad I had no choice, with the suspicions that already existed on memes I would have compromised too much by not going to the barracks. Until she was healed, though, I would have to keep pretending.

"Hey, little girl I have to go to work soon and unfortunately you can't come with me."

«But I don't want to be alone, don't leave me...» Marie whimpered, sniffing. "I'm so sorry, but I can't stay here. You try to sleep, okay? So when you wake up I will already be back ». And I smiled at her, trying to calm her down. She certainly couldn't have known that I was more worried than her and that it was I who needed someone to calm me down, but I was alone.

"Okay," he said, greeting me with a little hand as I walked away. I left the house with sadness

in the heart. I would have tried to finish as quickly as possible. As I walked I thought about what had just happened to me. That little girl hadn't even been with me for a day and had already turned my life upside down. It only remained to figure out whether this really was a change for the worse, or one for the better. *Maybe ... maybe my decision was rushed*, I thought as I walked. Maybe it was time to sleep on it before making such an important decision.

No, I didn't have to think about it, I didn't have to think about it because I had only chosen to do the right thing. The more I dwelled on what I should do, the more I felt bad, so I promised myself that I would do something to distract myself. I had just decided to put things back in their place, that's all. I had postponed the decision, so to speak. And anyway, I was always in time to change my mind. I arrived at the Kommandantur, where all my soldiers came to attention.

"Heil, mein kommandant!" They said in a perfect chorus. All kids, all the same. Ash blonde hair strictly two centimeters long, non-existent beard and ice-colored eyes. Ice like their hearts, molded with hatred as if it were clay. This I thought every time I saw them. We were all like that now. We were like wooden toy soldiers in the hands of a capricious child.

Looking at them I almost seemed to hear their thoughts. There were those who thought of their girlfriend, who of their mother, and most of them thought of themselves. I don't think any of them should have worried about a girl of about four alone in their own home. But these were the concerns

which, unfortunately, tormented me. Sometimes I thought those kids enjoyed seeing terror in people's eyes. Power is like a numerical value that men feel within themselves. The more we feel it grow, the more we feel satisfied with who we are. It is clear that the world would not be able to endure our growing hatred any longer.

The search lasted all afternoon while a thunderstorm enveloped Warsaw, in a disturbing concert of thunder and lightning. With every glance, every attention that rested on me, I had to pretend a rage that I didn't have, I had to improvise an absurd theatrical scene. Lightning ripped through the leaden sky and seemed to perfectly describe what was happening inside me. Although perhaps this is more to be considered a positive side, because imagining myself as a missing person in that storm distracted me from everything else, while my face, mirror of my frustration, deflected all external curiosity. Fortunately, after those hellish hours, I was able to retire. I walked briskly home, into the boulevards of that destroyed and submissive Warsaw, whose heart had been broken by the brick and iron monster that cut her in two, under the street lamps that dimly lit the street. I opened the door and entered a house that I had not recognized for a few hours, or perhaps a long time before.

I didn't even set foot in the house when a little girl with blond curls wrapped around my legs and buried her face in my uniform.

"What's Marie?" Aren't you feeling well? »I took her frightened face in my hands, trying to calm her down.

"There was thunder Hans," he said to me in a voice trembling with terror. "And then there was the rain and lightning, and ...". The storm had been really terrible, so loud and roaring it almost scared me too.

"Oh, it's just a thunderstorm, baby. It will pass soon, you will see ». I felt her forehead, she was still hot, too hot. He needed medicine and I didn't have it. But I had no idea what to do, or where to look for them. I took her in my arms and carried her on the sofa, I would have to find a remedy for that temporary arrangement. Maybe I could have made a secret room out of the closet. It was windowless and was not in the house plan: it looked perfect. Even just for one night would be fine. Also considering that practically the whole neighborhood had a hidden room somewhere. There was no wonder, with the rumors going around among the civilians. I made something to eat and luckily Marie didn't leave much, which made me feel she was better. The cough was still there unfortunately, but the fever seemed to have gone down. I decided to wait for him to fall asleep and then retire myself to the world of darkness, my only moment of peace.



I woke up panting and sweating, disturbed by an annoying sound that kept repeating itself over and over. At first there was only a buzzing in my head, but then it got louder and more irritating. Constant, with a regular pace. I knew him. *Oh no*, I thought. I couldn't think of anything else. Just this. In a few moments the sleep was completely gone.

The anti-aircraft siren. I rushed to the screen, practically falling out of bed and leaving my clothes on the floor. Almost automatically, I put on my green uniform and ran to Marie, finding her confused and scared as never before.

«Marie, everything is fine... everything is fine! Listen to me », I tried to reassure her, but in reality my heart was in my mouth and I couldn't think clearly. I absolutely had to calm down before going crazy and ruining everything. This was a huge problem, because she couldn't go out and go like the others in the shelters, it would have been madness. They would see us and we would have a horrible end, and the very thought was a real nightmare. The anguish grew in me within seconds, because I felt stuck in the impossibility of doing anything to help Marie.

"Hans, I'm afraid," she moaned, her voice broken by sobs. Her cheeks were streaked with tears and her eyes were red with tears. I really wanted to stay with her. But I couldn't, my role as an officer required me to be ready to keep order during the bombings. I always had to be in the front row of the defenses with my men. I wished I had the opportunity to choose. Go back and choose

to be a normal man. A man who during an attack does not lose his soul under the mines but who, like all the others, hides in a hole under the ground. Because now it was like this: we were just frightened rats and in that sky thousands of eagles hungry for life and hope flew. Hungry for victory, for toasts and acknowledgments that for them were only the surface. That depth of death was insignificant. It was the price of success. While they celebrated, we glanced over each other surviving in the constant terror of the sunlight.

"Listen to me, I have to go. I'll be back soon, keep calm ». Marie squeezed my hand with all her strength.

"No, don't leave me alone. I'm scared". She was too young to know what was really going on, but all that confusion would have been enough to terrify anyone. Terror during the war became part of the people.

"I know, I know, I'm sorry, I'll be back as soon as I can. Don't be afraid, little one. I will be back soon". I closed the door behind me before I even had time to look back and change my mind. "I'll be back," I muttered to myself. I told her I would be back ... I hoped for it with all my heart and, for the first time in many years, I knew I wanted to survive. I had to survive. I had to do it for someone now.

Warsaw had gone mad, people were running everywhere, huddling on each other to reach the shelters. The thought that a bomb might hit my house was constant. Life no longer existed, it was

just for survival. For everyone. It was survival that pushed those people to forget the world, to think only of themselves and their family.

I kept looking in that direction, hoping not to see what I feared so much. The worst could happen at any moment.

I tried to keep calm and keep my mind clear, I had to be cold and indifferent to everything that happened.

It may seem unbelievable, but in fact all my soldiers were impassive towards the citizens who ran from side to side. They were like ghosts to them. Invisible and insignificant. Had it been up to them, they would have killed anyone, regardless of who was Jewish and who was not, also because, after all, these were not their people. Their wives, their families, those were in Germany. Besides, they didn't care at all about the others, those people. They did it only for their homeland. They did it because they were the orders of the *Führer*.

The noise of aircraft engines, the screams, the tears, the swearing in a very narrow German. It was all confusion and madness. The world no longer existed because the men who inhabited it no longer existed. Because we all felt this way, it was as if we were already dead, we were like shadows made of memories of the men, women and children we were. Of tormented souls forced to repeat for eternity the same succession of events that had led us to death. And although we had endless possibilities to change everything, we did nothing to make our future different.

It was as if I was in a bubble, and all around me time had stopped. At that moment I was no longer a Wermatch officer, but an ordinary, ordinary man who felt his heart torn from his chest. I tried to hide in the refuge that my body and my uniform had become. I had the unconscious feeling that if Marie died, a part of me would also die. I knew this was madness for many reasons, but one reflection more than any other touched me like a ghost: I was growing fond of a Jewish child.

My comrades screamed and scattered. The bombs hit the roofs of the houses, leaving only rubble in their path. Useless rubble piled up like the feelings left in my heart. Above me was an immense and dark sky, a little mournful, which seemed to judge me in all its grandeur. I felt small, infinitely small and insignificant compared to everything in the world. And I felt so immensely stupid to think that in my smallness as a human being I could imagine doing such a great action. Then something happened, a faint light scattered along the horizon, without my noticing it at first. It was dawn. It was dawn and it seemed that with the sun also peace had come, the end of everything. An almost unreal quiet after that storm that seemed to last forever. Nobody said a word, or maybe it was I who hadn't heard them, and I left without saying anything. I was completely twisted. There had never been an attack of this magnitude before, and lately there were many more than when I arrived there.

As soon as I was far enough away from the Kommandantur, I started running as I had not done in a long time. I was short of breath, but I didn't care. The air was frozen and hit my face like a thousand needles. All my muscles were tight and ached, but that didn't matter either. I only cared about getting back to that little girl. I realized how irrational I was.

What the hell was I thinking? I didn't have to care. I had to stay clear and remember that she was going to go away. It was meant to be and that was how we would do it. Everything was now a succession of events, places, people and lives. I saw the men and women returning to their homes, without anyone saying a word. The sleepy children, still a little shaken, who couldn't understand how much they had risked that night, how close they had been to death, and how much their parents had feared for their lives. Nobody broke that beautiful stillness. Slowly the windows of the houses opened wide, everything returned to normal. A normality destined to go, soon, destroyed on another night like that. Because that was not the first time nor would it be the last time we would have experienced that nightmare. That peace was destined for an almost immediate end compared to how long that moment of fear had seemed to last. I arrived in front of my house assailed by my doubts and hopes. I paused for a moment in front of the entrance as if it were only a dream, and in fact everything that was happening to me did not give the impression of being real. I could no longer command my body, such had been the fear. I no longer felt anything,

the smells were dull, the colors less vivid. If someone had asked me, I would not have been able to find the right words to describe my state of mind, perhaps because there are no human words to explain such a thing.

Not even these same lines can fully represent what I felt. I felt like a child at that moment, the child I had been and still am today, that child inside each of us.

Yes, because at that moment I wanted a mother who would come and give me a kiss on the skinned knees, a father who would teach me how to live, the father I never had. I was shocked to see something where I expected to find only rubble.

Everything was static, suspended in the void, but nothing had changed. I pushed the door slowly, almost as if I wanted to enjoy that moment of brief happiness. I rushed into the house like a runaway train, and when I saw that frightened little figure running to meet me, I froze. Suddenly my legs no longer supported me and I sank into myself. Marie squeezed me tight and I squeezed her. In a moment that seemed infinite to me, all the tears I had been able to hold back up to that moment flowed into an uncontrolled and liberating river. All my fear was in those tears. They were shy, silent, almost invisible tears that only I could feel. We held each other for endless minutes, destined to last inside me for the rest of my life. Now silence for me represented only tranquility,

It was still some time before I could speak. "Little one, are you okay?" My cheeks were red and wet, like hers, and a half smile on my face.

«Yes, it was very frightening», then, between a few coughs, he managed to continue: «but I'm fine, only my head is spinning a little ...». He did not even finish speaking that he fell into my arms, fainting. It couldn't be so bad that I couldn't even stay awake, I had to figure out what it was. Worried I felt her forehead, it was hotter than the night before and it was clear that the fever was skyrocketing. I couldn't wait any longer, I needed antibiotics and I only had one chance, I knew what I had to do. There was a small pharmacy at the end of a street, little known and well hidden from the suburbs of Varese. A few months earlier I had discovered that the doctor who ran it was Jewish, and I knew him. He was the man who raised me, my mother's best friend and the nicest person you can ever meet. When I discovered that he lived in the suburbs and did not have the papers in order, I decided to provide him and his family with false documents, in exchange for a future favor. I hadn't met him many times since that day, but we had always remained friends. He had cradled me on his knees when I was Marie's age, before moving to Warsaw for economic problems. Beyond that, how could I let them stop him? I would never have allowed him to end up in the ghetto or, worse still, in one of those camps. He was like a second father to me and I didn't care if this second father believed in a God When I discovered that he lived in the suburbs and did not have the papers in order, I decided to provide him and his family with false documents, in exchange for a future favor. I hadn't met him many times since that day, but we had always remained friends. He had cradled me on his knees when I was Marie's age, before moving to Warsaw for economic problems. Beyond that, how could I let them stop him? I would never have allowed him to end up in the ghetto or, worse still, in one of those camps. He was like a second father to me and I didn't care if this second father believed in a God When I discovered that he lived in the suburbs and did not have the papers in order, I decided to provide him and his family with false documents, in exchange for a future favor. I hadn't met him many times since that day, but we had always remained friends. He had cradled me on his knees when I was Marie's age, before moving to Warsaw for economic problems. Beyond that, ho

different from mine. My father, on the other hand, had always hated him and forbade my mother to see him. Except that it was not jealousy, but a deep and rooted hatred, grown over time towards him only for his religion. Besides, I was sure he would have no hesitation in repaying that favor.

After making sure Marie was warm by the fire, I quietly sneaked out of the house, trying to look as natural as possible despite my nervousness. So I headed for the low-lying areas of Warsaw, in a world totally foreign to mine.

Little boys in poor clothes played with crumpled footballs on the side of the road, and anxious mothers peered at them from the windows. Occasionally a few peddlers passed through the narrow, potholed streets with their hand-built wooden cart.

It was as if the war was always being fought there, not only in those dark years. Time had stood still there since 1939. We never talked about the war, and if the children asked their parents any questions about us or anything else that concerned it, they were immediately silenced.

I arrived at the small box office after ten minutes, a small terraced house with a sign saying "Pharmacy at Lewandowski", miraculously with all the letters in place.

I went in, ringing the bell hanging there. I saw poor Adam Lewandowski whiten at the sight of the Nazi swastika.



"Adam? SonoMayer, HansMayer. Delilah's son. Do you remember me? "I asked. He heaved a sigh of relief and adjusted his glasses on his nose.

"Oh yes, sure. But, please, next time you come to see me, before entering you could warn me with an "Adam, I'm Hans Mayer, not a malicious SS. "; before I have a heart attack. ' If it hadn't been for the situation I was in, I would no doubt have burst out laughing. Instead I showed him a slight smile. Adam had always been a witty person, even in tense times like the

1941, but at that moment I didn't have time to joke, I had to hurry.

"Sorry, Adam, but I didn't come by to say hello. I need a very, very big favor. Obviously trusting in your discretion ». He looked me straight in the eye, and he became much more serious. "What happens in Lewandowski's shop stays in Lewandowski's shop." I knew I could trust his word, so I walked over to the counter after making sure no one was watching or listening to us.

I looked at it and decided that I would say it all in one go. "A Jewish girl of just four years is hidden in the house. She escaped to the SS. Unfortunately, he has had a fever for a couple of days and needs a doctor. I know it's risky but you have to help me, you have to come to my house ». If he accepted, the risk would be enormous for him. Someone might have seen him and suspected something. I certainly wouldn't have blamed him if he didn't want to take the risk, so I was struck by his answer.

"A good doctor does anything for his patients," he said sternly.

"I knew I could trust you," I smiled again, trying to hide my nervousness, "but, I need another favor," I added.

"Tell me," she pointed her brown eyes at me.

"I know you have a carpenter friend, if he could save me some wood and some tools. Just enough for a bookcase and a bed. Then if you could give me some old little dress for your granddaughter ... »I took a breath, adding:« obviously you won't do anything for free », and with that I put a bag with three thousand zlotys on the counter.

'No, Hans. There really is no problem. And then these are really too many ». He knew better than I that he had to accept them. By now the price of bread had reached fifty or sixty zloty a piece.

"Please accept them. You know you need it more than me. " And I was serious. I wouldn't let him risk so much without getting paid off. His family needed to eat, and if I could consider myself more than wealthy, being an officer, Adam couldn't say the same. He said nothing more and gave up, taking the money.

"I'll come before curfew tonight, give me the address," he said.

"Thanks, Adam. You're one of the few people I really trust. '

I greeted him and headed home. Now the sky was brushed with bright colors, and the sun was preparing to disappear over the horizon. I got home and rushed inside, trying not to make any noise. Luckily that

day I had not been called to the Kommandantur, I could not have left Marie alone. I found her still asleep on the sofa, and tucked the covers up for her to keep her warm. The forehead was still hot but less than before, the fever seemed a bit 'down, fortunately. I shook her gently to wake her up. "Good morning, baby," she stretched and then looked at me with her little green eyes.

"Bye ... bye," he said, with his usual cough.

"You've slept quite a bit, you know? Now the doctor will come and make you pass this bad fever. '

She smiled, despite everything, adding in a sleepy voice, "Okay." His smile was beautiful, and so sincere it gave me confidence. I looked at her and for some reason felt that everything would be fine. Then I would turn around and think about his cough that was only getting worse, and I was afraid it was serious. I made a meat broth, hoping it would help her stand up for a while. The more time passed, the more I was afraid that I would not be able to do what I should have done shortly thereafter. I was afraid of being too fond of, of not being able to let her go. Or let her die, because that was what a voice was telling me.

And maybe my conscience was right, maybe she would die. How could I let her die like this? I thought about it and thought about it, but in the end I put off the conversation. On the one hand, I could have told my superiors that I had found her lost somewhere, and get out of trouble. On the other hand, I imagined what Adam would think of me. Thinking about it was more painful than piling up problems. But let the problems pile up

one on top of the other, like autumn leaves, was more dangerous.

There was a knock on the door. It was Lewandowski.

"Come on, Adam, he's over there," I said leading the way.

"Marie, he's the doctor."

"Hi," she managed to say, but then she started coughing again. "Good evening Miss. I see we're a little sick, huh? ' He took her temperature, which turned out to be quite high, then took her blood pressure and listened to her heartbeat. Marie seemed to find him very nice. Adam, after a full visit, asked me to speak privately.

"Is it serious?" I asked, worried.

"Not what it looks like. I was afraid it was pneumonia, but luckily we intervened in time. Just take this," she pulled a bottle containing a medicine out of her bag.

"What is that?"

"A simple antibiotic, but it will work, you'll see. Then here I brought some of my granddaughter's dresses », and he showed me a wrapped package, perhaps from his wife. I have already talked to the carpenter, my friend, he will deliver me what I need tomorrow. Hopefully, I'll bring it to you. '

"I really don't know how to thank you, Adam," I said, seriously grateful.

«Not at all, not at all. We help each other among friends, and remember that you risked a lot for me. Hello, Hans, see you, 'and as he said this he started to leave, but suddenly he stopped and looked at me, as if something important had occurred to him.

«Wait, I almost forgot, my wife is sending you this ...», and he handed me a folded sheet, a little worn. «It is the score written by your father, I found it a few months ago I had forgotten it. If I don't remember, it was your mother who gave it to me when Joseph stopped writing. I thought it was the right opportunity to get it back ».

A grimace was about to appear on my face, but I held it back.

"Yes, indeed. Thank you, "and this time he really went away. I've always hated talking about my father and my past, but Adam couldn't know that.

My father was a composer a little out of the box, but as soon as we got through our early childhood, he and I drifted off dangerously and never managed to communicate. It was he who had taught me how to read a score, but I hadn't played for years now, so as not to think about all the pain it had caused me. By now the only solution I knew was to forget, perhaps because I had never tried to find another way. I still hadn't figured out that forgetting was the wrong thing. Trying to forget the people who had filled my past with memories, I practically led to ruin.

"What is it?" Marie asked me, placing her hand on the score.

«It is a sheet where music is written. A musical score ».

"Ahh ... This is the same as my dad's," she added sadly, coughing from time to time. I felt myself sinking.

"Did your father read music?" He looked at me confusedly, without answering my question. I was perplexed, but I preferred not to remark on the subject precisely because it was too irritating for me to talk about it. From that moment on, many painful memories began to resurface.

That evening I closed myself almost completely in myself. It was too hard to accept that terrible memory that still haunted my dreams as an adult.

After an hour, Marie was already asleep, while I was still in my bed with my gaze lost in total emptiness. I was just reflecting on our conversation. On my life. On the whole. It was as if the whole world was trying to force me to bring my memory back to the surface. Only I kept focusing all my strength on not doing it.

"Hans, Hans," I was awakened by a sobbing voice.

"What happens? The bombing?" I stammered in a sleepy voice.

"I had a very bad dream," the little girl said through her tears. I stretched, fighting fatigue, and trying to keep my eyes open. "How? A bad dream, what did you dream about?" I was a nightmare expert by now. Every night when I closed my eyes I could hear them crawling in my bed and often wanted someone who could sit next to me just to tell me that everything would be okay. That I was not alone. Yet I always was. When I was little, I defeated them by staring at the ceiling for hours on end and hoping I would never fall asleep. Then I no longer had the strength to escape the shadows, and I let them envelop me forever.

"My mother was there and she was not well, Hans," she went on, her eyes red and glistening in the light of the oil lamp, "she didn't answer me when I spoke to her." I did nothing but stare at her in silence. "She didn't look at me, she looked behind me and looked very sad, and ...". I realized that he could no longer continue, so I took courage.

«Don't worry, I'm here with you. It was just a bad nightmare. ' I really hoped it was just a horrible dream.

"Can I stay with you?" He said, wiping his tears. I thought about it, and for one night it could be done. "Okay, but only tonight!" She quickly climbed onto the bed and got under the covers.

"Hans," she said to me after a while, when I was already starting to sleep again.

"Yes, Marie?" I said, yawning.

"I miss my mom," she said, with such simplicity compared to the heaviness of what I should have told her instead. *Your mom is gone*, I thought, but didn't say it. I didn't have the courage to tell her the truth. I cowardly refused to do so. But then how could I? I wasn't even sure he could understand. Otherwise he would have hated immensely for who I was. He would have felt disgust for the monster I was.

"Marie, listen," I said, taking a deep breath and carefully selecting each word, "your parents and your brother will be away for a while."

"For a while, how long?" He asked me. His naivety was touching, and I didn't have the strength to watch as I continued.

"A lot, baby. A long time. But you must be brave as a lion and wait », I realized that in the meantime she had moved her gaze to the ceiling where I was looking, as if she expected to find something there, and I smiled at her.

"Will you let me sleep now?" She laughed and after a few minutes her breathing became lighter. *At least she can sleep*, I thought. I only hoped that she dreamed, that at least she could enjoy the joy of not knowing, of being able to involuntarily ignore everything that



happened around. And slowly, I let myself be enveloped again by the white stillness of the night, with all the nightmares it brought with it.

I woke up around dawn, as always, and looked around.

Marie was not there, I thought she was already up, when suddenly a sound caught my attention. A sound I haven't heard in a very long time. I ran into the living room, completely confused, and stood in stone in front of what I saw. The score was open, resting on the lectern. And further down, on the black chair, a small figure was experimenting with such patience that it didn't seem possible to me, trying to read the little waltz that my father had written for me many years before.

Marie stopped when she noticed my presence, and turned to look at me, smiling.

"Marie, can you read notes?" Probably because of my expression he burst out laughing. "What a strange face you have!"

"How did you learn to read the notes?" I asked her. I couldn't really believe it. Maybe it was because I hadn't heard the keys of that piano playing for so many years, or maybe because seeing Marie play had a strange effect on me.

"My dad taught me that. One day I'll let you know. Look, this is the do, then there is the king, the mi... ». *We will never see your dad again*, it was the thought that crossed my mind, but I tried to ignore it, trying to concentrate on something else. The reality was that that music destroyed me, and those memories all together made

bad. But I couldn't afford to show that weakness, otherwise all the memories would come back one after the other, and I'd have to deal with them. I had to remind myself that this was just a song, not my father's song.

"You know, damn it, you're better than me!" I exclaimed enthusiastically. For a second I imagined that she could become a great musician, that I could teach her everything if only I had the courage to put my hands on the keyboard again. But I knew I would never make it. That little girl, on the other hand, was really special. It really was and I couldn't deny it. And above all, I couldn't deny how special she was becoming to me. It was so clear and yet I couldn't resign myself to the idea of what was happening to me. "You're just doing the right thing, you're just doing the right thing," my reason was trying to convince me. But what was, really, the right thing? "I'm sorry, little one, but now we have to stop playing."

I was afraid that the neighbors might suspect something, since I had never touched the piano since I was there. They probably didn't even know I had one. It was better not to risk it.

"Ugh!" She snorted. I was relieved, because now he seemed to be better: the cough was less aggressive and the fever seemed to have subsided. Anything from Adam, by the way.

Obviously one day would not be enough for him to recover completely, but on the one hand I was happy, because this could have postponed my decision.

"Marie, I'm sorry, but you're going to be alone all day today, baby. I just can't go back anytime soon this time. I left you something to eat. '

"But how ...?" He moaned, looking at me with that frowning face of his.

"I know, but I can't stay here," I said. I turned around, but the little girl tugged at the hem of my jacket.

"Can I come with you please?" He asked. My hands trembled at the very thought of being able to perform such a madness.

"No, you can't come with me. Not today". I hugged her and gave her a kiss on the forehead. Then I added: "I'll do it as soon as I can, I swear to you."

"Do you swear to me?" And he handed me his little finger, reminding me of the games I played as a child, before losing all the dreams of freedom along with all the friends I had dared to believe true. So, cowardly, I swore on something I had long lost.

"On my honor."

I walked the usual road, in that city so static that that morning did not seem to be at war, heading towards the Kommandantur. Some officers preferred to use the motorbike, but I lived near the barracks, and I liked walking the way.

As soon as I set foot in the barracks, however, I noticed that something was wrong. All the soldiers stood at attention, as usual, but they were nervous, I knew they were tense.

"Rest, soldiers." It looked like they had seen a ghost.

"You, come on," I said, pointing to the one who seemed the most agitated of all.

" *Was ist los?* ".

"The commander is angry, mein herr. He said he'll have us all shot if we don't find information about the missing child. "As he spoke he had turned white, while I thought about how cowardly all of them were, aware that the same thought was even more cowardly than their fears. To myself, it was easy to say that the commander just disgusted me, but in front of him I was no different from everyone else. It scared me, I admit, because it was a slimy and disgusting being with the power to crush you under your shoes. "So? Where is the problem? We will find the information the commander wants. Now get back to your work, otherwise I'll send you in front of a firing squad », I blurted out, realizing that the thought of the commander had made me say those words with a crescendo of anger.

I knew well that the commander was not joking. And, in fact, after less than ten minutes, there was a knock on my door.

"The commander wants to see you, mein herr," NCO Keller said.

"Ja, I'm coming." I quickly got up, leaving the papers on the table in a messy way. I stood in front of his office door, my hand suspended in midair. What a shame, if there was anyone there, to see me shaking and indecisive in having to speak with

my superior, it was not even an entire fleet of the American navy. I knocked twice. "Come on," I heard the commander's hoarse, scratchy voice.

"Heil Hitler!" I exclaimed, saluting rigorously and trying to hide my nervousness. "No, stop. Don't take another step ». I froze in place, my legs numb like the tentacles of an invertebrate. I had a feeling that he knew, that he knew my secret, and I was there waiting for him to tell me. "Come back immediately," he ordered. I stared at him for a few seconds, dazed, then took a step back. "Again and again. Get out of the room, *dummer idiot!*". I did what I was commanded to do in silence, but full of questions. "Shut the door and knock three times, as is proper for your superior, Officer Mayer." I was speechless for a few moments, but immediately after that first moment I could hardly hold back the anger I felt running through my body. I was very grateful that there was that thick steel door between me and the commander, which prevented him from seeing the blush in my face.

"Well, well, Officer Mayer, I've been waiting for you." His tone alone terrified me, let alone if he said something truly threatening.

"Why was I summoned, if I may ask? Did something happen?" I asked, with the most hidden arrogance I knew. I was staring at the portrait of Hitler hanging on the wall, with that penetrating gaze, and it seemed to me that that sheet of canvas was peering inside me, and was telling me that he didn't like me.

at all. Then I shifted my gaze to the abominable figure of the commander, sitting right under it, and in him I found, with a certain disquiet, the same mouth, the same nose, the same scornful eyes. It was as if his face was molding itself in front of me, to recreate the same being that terrified millions of people and that had taken place in their nightmares as well as mine.

"He asks too many questions, Mayer, and I have few answers. You've been given the case of that little Jewess, right?" She replied to my question. With another question.

"Jawol," I replied, swallowing.

"I know there have been no results, isn't it?" He asked again, with a veiled accusing manner. "We are doing all the necessary research, mein kommandant." His face twisted into a revolving grin. By now I was trying to stare at him only occasionally, sideways. The idea of that fat, sadistic fellow in the role he was assigned to, certainly only through recommendations, made me turn my stomach at the mere sight of him.

"Apparently what you do is not enough, then!" He continued, trying to alter the tone at the end, which was not possible due to a coughing fit. "Do you want to end up in a military court, by any chance?" He whispered with irony, hiding a sort of derision.

"Nein, mein kommandant," I replied, with the impression of being slightly bleached. I wasn't afraid of dying, but the military court was too much for me. A pressure that I could not have sustained.

A man who was found guilty before a military court was just a deserter. Not that I cared about being seen as a traitor to the nation, but the insults and heavy looks of the people were devastating. What others thought was still too important to me.

"Then find that filthy Jewess!" He said, shouting this time and banging his palm on the table, which shook all over. A stack of papers slid to the floor as I miraculously blinked my eyelids. The commander's hand must have hurt him a lot, but his face did not change in the slightest, petrified in that angry expression. "We can't wait any longer, they just send telegrams from above! The news of this tragic mistake has already spread throughout Poland. People talk, they point to us as incapable! », And so saying he took the pitcher of beer he had on the table and poured some into a glass. "You have forty-eight hours." I think I've turned blue or purple. The commander must have noticed this because he laughed maliciously, and then handed me a glass of beer.

"Please, do you want to favor?" He asked, in a nasal voice. "Danke," I replied, grabbing the glass without hesitation and swallowing it all in one gulp. I was tempted to wipe my lips with the sleeve of my shirt, but decided it was best to avoid. I just wanted to get out of my room as soon as possible.

"Goodbye and good work, Herr Mayer." I went out with my heart out of my chest, picking up my pace as soon as I passed the office door. I had fists

clenched and clenched teeth, and I was sure that if anyone talked to me I would kick him.

Two days. Two days to do something I couldn't do. Two days for a decision that I was afraid I could not make.

Two days would not have been enough. It was like having a clock ticking constantly in my head. *Tic knock. Tic knock.* I felt like I was going crazy.

Seeing that walking back and forth down the corridor seemed pointless, I decided to go back to my office. I sat down at my desk, leafing through the documents that were lodged there in a messy way, but without paying too much attention to them. My mind wandered elsewhere. I didn't have time to think, but I did nothing else. I thought.

I thought, and as I did, hundreds of hypotheses crossed my mind like a river. And I analyzed them one by one, evaluated them and discarded them, I didn't really know how to do it. Every possibility proved impossible. I searched for a plan to resolve the situation in the best possible way, until I got an unbearable headache.

At times it occurred to me that my head was about to burst.

Around noon I decided, to make believe that at least I would try to find "the mysterious missing child", to take my platoon to the peripheral areas. Nobody had searched there yet, and those neighborhoods were far, far away from my home.

On the street we saw the kids coming out of school, with their satchels in their hands, and their stomachs probably rumbling already, who stopped to follow with the



look at our every move. The bakers, most of them big fat men, who made the pasta fall on the ground, distracted by our passage. And so did a bit of everyone, since we never went there. The slums had always been out of this world, out of that era and out of that war. And, after all, most of those people could not read and could not afford a radio or a telephone in the house, so they probably knew nothing of the course of events.

We searched all the houses that came within range, from the most bare to those of the "richest" workers. We caught most of the families at the table, or while they chatted on the sofa, the usual things you do at that hour, in short. Luck would have it that none of them were Jewish or there were setbacks, and this made me relax a bit.

We searched, even in the darkest corners, for the whole range from East to West, but as it is obvious to think, there was no sign of the child. By now I did not expect anything, I was calm and I was convinced that everything would go smoothly. We continued along the north side, without problems, to a house.

It was a normal house, on one level: the tiled roof, the bricks up to a quarter of the wall, the embroidered white curtains, the cobalt blue windows. The usual house you can find in a suburb. Unfortunately, however, it was not the house that made me realize that something was wrong, but the owner. A thin, middle-aged man of medium height, with a gray but well-groomed beard, and a smile that in other circumstances would have been that of a loving grandfather. A pair of glasses with lenses

thick and round they rested on his nose. Not so much in appearance as in demeanor, it was suspicious, perhaps the most blatant attempt to hide fear I had ever seen. He was pale as death and his hands could be seen shaking. Although I realized my men hadn't even noticed. These are things that only an officer with years of experience can notice.

We began to search the house with the utmost care. We checked every corner, every fold, hit every wall. I walked along one wall, tapping the wallpaper with my knuckles. And I walked slowly, hoping to hear only a thud. Everything was fine in the beginning, I kept hoping silently that I was wrong. I was beginning to believe that we would find nothing and that we would leave. Then there was that faint, almost imperceptible echo, which meant only one thing. There was something behind that wall. It had happened, what I feared had happened. I looked at the man, standing a few meters from me, and his liquid eyes told me everything. He too was staring at me, perhaps for a few minutes already, with a melancholy expression. You couldn't tell, looking at him, that he was scared, but I could see his fear. It was there, printed on his face, but only a look like mine could notice it. He knew I understood and now he was looking at me, as if we were the only people in that room. I passed on, in silence and without being noticed, continuing to tap on the walls and entering the small kitchen. I had the sad knowledge that I had only postponed the inevitable for a few minutes. Then a voice surprised me.

"Why did he do it?" Asked the bearded gentleman behind me.

"I don't know what he's talking about," I lied. What was the point of bragging about that little gesture, after all the horrible things I'd done for the past ten years? Nobody could understand how dirty I felt, how heavy my heart felt, even physically.

"Mein herr, why do you deny the evidence?" He said, with a calm that impressed me not a little, "please, I must know, why did you do it?"

I sighed sadly. After all there was no real reason, but I answered anyway.

"Because I understand what's in there."

Because we weren't very different after all. I was a Wehrmacht soldier, a Nazi, a German, and he was an ordinary gentleman who would very soon lose his life for refusing to respect the laws of death. And then what I feared happened.

«Mein kommandant! We found something here. ' The gentleman closed his eyes, and I could see a small tear running down his cheeks. Two younger soldiers tore off the wallpaper, revealing a plasterboard door beneath it, which they ripped open with a sharp swipe of a truncheon. Behind it was exactly what I expected.

About ten people are frightened and confused. Human beings who would soon be herded into the cattle car of a train. Human beings who for the third reich were not human beings. But if being human meant wearing a black uniform to tear apart the lives of millions of innocent people, then perhaps it would be better to be beasts without conscience.

After about twenty minutes the SS arrived and left, taking with them the eleven Jews we had found, including three children.

But we left an hour later, headed for the Kommandantur, together with the man we had arrested. I kept looking at him as the soldiers shoved him, insulting him. And like any coward, I did nothing. I looked at her suffering and I suffered too, but I did nothing to alleviate that pain, more moral than physical, that was crushing both of them. The trial would take place that same afternoon, but I knew very well that it was just a show. We all knew that, and we all knew what the sentence would be. The sentence was already written.

The road was long ... perhaps because of too many thoughts in my head. Then, suddenly, it started snowing. Candid white flakes descended from the sky, whitening the roofs of that Warsaw destroyed and weighed down by human squalor.

And that snow, in a way, calmed me. I had tried to distract myself from what had just happened and had forgotten for a moment all the burdens and worries that weighed on me. And even today I wonder, every day, if I wasn't just Hans at that moment. A Hans who did not know war, destruction, wickedness. That boy in love, who just wanted to be happy. But that didn't make it.

The sun started to go down, and so I headed home.

The trial that afternoon had destroyed me and, as I had foreseen, the man had been given the worst sentence. His name was Hermann Morroe, and his only fault had been to have saved lives, to have used his heart as each of us should. I did not give myself peace, I did nothing but blame myself for not doing anything.

We were told that we were the pure breed, the best, the elite, but we were unable to save a man. We did nothing but destroy anyone who still had the courage to have a little humanity. Here is the honor of our race, we were worse than animals.

I entered the house and, as always for a few days, I found myself with Marie in my arms. He was always so sweet and he loved me so sincerely he made me feel guilty. After all, I loved her from the first moment, but everything I had was at stake. It all depended on that decision, and time was too short. I wanted to have someone by my side, someone to support me and tell me what was the right thing to do.

After all, we all live to be on the side of the good, but when you don't know who is the good and who is the bad of a story? In short, every time we read a book, listen to a story, or simply leaf through a newspaper, we are perpetually conditioned by the personal interpretation of others. The protagonist of a story is always the good, and the bad is that ruthless man without values, but if it were the other way around, who would be the enemy?

Nobody tries to identify with those like me, those who grew up in the wrong world, at the wrong time, and this makes it impossible for anyone I have told this story to justify my doubts, my torments and my fears. "Baby, come on you have to take the medicine, so you'll be well sooner."

I headed into the kitchen to get the vial of antibiotic when my heart skipped a beat. *Someone was knocking on the door.* I put an index finger on my lips with one hand, and with the other motioned for Marie to hide.

An indescribable fear took hold of me, and without even realizing it my hands began to tremble. Then, I realized something. I knew that fear. I saw it, every day, in people's eyes. That fear was the same one that I had seen explode in mothers' chests, with every cackle of their children playing happily on the street. The same fear that was in the eyes of those Jews I had arrested when the SS knocked on their door. The same one that Hermann Morroe had felt, a good man capable of feeling a fear even more human than mine. That primal fear, written in our blood, that kept me from thinking clearly as I took small steps towards the door. Each step seemed to take an eternity, and on the one hand I hoped it wasn't just an impression.

I put my hand on the doorknob, silently praying that there was no SS in front of me. Finally, pressing lightly, I opened that door thinking it would be the last time.

Within seconds all my fear turned to amazement, and I felt like a real fool.

I had completely forgotten that Adam was going to pass. I stood there, looking dazed.

"So? Are you going to let me in or do you want to stay there staring at me as if I were Hitler himself?"

He asked, smiling. I tried to recover.

"Oh, yes, yes. Come inside". He wiped off his mud-soaked shoes on the doormat, then, wearily, left the heavy canvas sack he had with him near the door. "Damn, Hans, I have to go on a diet." I barely held back a laugh, then we went to the hall.

"Marie, it's just Adam, the doctor," I said aloud. Marie entered the room and ran to meet us, greeting Adam.

"Good morning, miss, I see you're already much better off," Adam said jokingly, checking her over. "I think she'll be completely healed tomorrow. Every now and then children happen to have a fever without reason, but with the right care it is never dangerous », and as he said this he smiled at me. Adam was the most sincere and loyal man I had ever known, and that was why my mother liked him. I would have given anything to be the son of a man like him.

"Thanks, Adam. Really, you are a wonderful person. For anything, I'm here. '

*October 5, 1941*

That morning was forever etched in my mind, as one of the hardest I've ever had to endure. I knew what was going to happen, but I kept telling myself that everything would be fine, that I just had to hold out for a few hours. I arrived at the Kommandantur by motorbike, perhaps simply because of my need for a change. For no real reason, since Marie was there, I didn't want to do the same things again, I wanted to change my life as much as possible. I didn't want to see my soldiers again, or my stuffy office, or the portrait of Hitler on the wall. I no longer wanted to see what was happening around me.

Inside I saw the soldiers running from side to side, creating a great confusion. After all, I too understood why, with what would happen shortly thereafter. It disgusted me to see my soldiers excited as they talked to each other, and I didn't understand how they could be so cynical about what, more than execution, was murder.

Everything would happen in the middle of the morning. Meanwhile, I was hoping to find a way to distract myself, to try not to collapse. Unfortunately, however, I couldn't help but think of Hermann Morroe. To the tears he had shed that night and all the tears he would shed for saving the lives of those Jews. I was not able to



do not think that he would wake up for the last time, he would see his last sunrise and say his last words aware of everything. That man did not deserve such suffering, it was I who deserved it. And that was why I didn't give myself peace because I would have preferred a thousand times to be in that chair and die a hero today, because he was a hero, rather than live a life of cruelty and guilt, and die a murderer. I would have given anything to not be remembered as a monster, not to be the only one who would suffer at my funeral. On my coffin, I didn't want a Nazi swastika. When the sun was already high in the sky, I left my office to go to the square where that shame would occur.

But I didn't even set foot in the corridor when someone came upon me.

«Welche Idioten ...? *Who is the idiot who ...?*».

I stopped when I realized who I had run into. She was a girl about my age.

"I'm sorry, mein herr. I was in a hurry and I didn't see her," he mumbled as I looked at her in amazement. He seemed eager to resume his own way. Civilians weren't allowed to go around Kommandantur like that, but what was that girl doing there then? «Miss, who are you? What are you doing here? It is forbidden to enter the barracks without special permission. Get out now," I began, in a serious tone. She looked at me, with a calmer air.

"Oh, well, my name is Victoria Steiner, the commander hired me as a servant for the soldiers' quarters and I was trying to figure out where to go," I grew stiffer than I already was.

"Miss Steiner, I advise you to reconsider. The Kommandantur is a very dangerous place for a young woman. The soldiers often come back drunk, chronically ». The girl squared her shoulders confidently, almost offended by my statement.

"I can take care of myself, don't worry, herr ...?"

"Mayer," I said.

"Well then, goodbye and good luck, Herr Mayer."

And it left as quickly as it had come. Her confidence had blown me away, I had never seen a woman like this. But I knew he was wrong; I had seen my soldiers so many times when they came back from the lodge staggering and delirious. It was necessary to pay attention, to dose the words and to avoid replying, if one did not want to become the center of outlet for their anger. But the truth was, it wasn't just the soldiers that worried me, but rather what threatened my own safety: the commander. A slimy man no one could afford to irritate if he didn't want to end up with a noose around his neck. After all, however, it was none of my business. If that stubborn girl didn't want to listen to me, let her do as she pleased, that was her problem. And with the temper that she found herself, so bold and haughty, she wasn't going to stay at the barracks for long. Yet I couldn't deny that that encounter had left me with a strange feeling.

Then, at the appointed time, I found myself in the square. To my right, the soldiers lined up as they loaded their rifles. I was tense, my heart almost popping out of my chest in frustration, when my NCO approached me.

"Are you nervous, Keller?" It was his first execution as a non-commissioned officer, and although I didn't really care much, I tried to take the matter in hand to distract myself. I just wanted to try to be nice. "Nervous? Far from it, it will be fun! »He exclaimed. I gave him a withering look and Keller went white as a sheet.

"Yeah, you're right," I said, with an eerie calm, "but I think you'd enjoy the show more if you were *on the other side*". It took him a few seconds to realize the heaviness of my words, and he swallowed. From that moment on he said nothing more.

After ten minutes the second group of soldiers arrived, with Hermann Morroe. The man was in very bad shape, it was clear that he hadn't slept all night, and he was bruised all over his body. They had beaten him. *Die tiere sind*, I thought. But what perhaps only I could see was his moral pain. That something that is beyond the understanding of those who have never tried it. And I had tried it.

It was a deep pain, which burns for too long, which is hard to forget, it was a pain that I had been carrying inside for years. Perhaps this was Hermann's only luck, he would not have this sentence, he would die and that pain would forget him. He would forget the remorse of failing. Of being dead without saving anyone.

Then he sat down on that damned chair, in the middle of the square, which might have looked like so many others, but it wasn't at all. That was the chair of death. He looked into my eyes, he had a sad smile on his face, and

I could decipher that look in one way: "Thank you for trying."

His irises shone, bathing his face with tears as well, with resignation, but perhaps also with peace. Perhaps now he was certain that it would end, that he would no longer have to endure a war that was not his. Maybe he could finally allow himself to forget every life he had seen break, every mother who lost her child in battle, every child who died in a bombing. He would have that peace that I so longed for. That thoughtlessness that I could not have and that innocence that I had lost for more than ten years.

"Load up," I shouted in an apparently clear and confident voice. But inside of me I felt my heart sink. I heard a voice in my chest trying to scream, "I'm not proud of who you've become." And I knew exactly whose voice it was. "Bet". I was at a breaking point. I had endured more than a human being can endure.

I took all my courage and, without knowing why, looked at the innocent man I was about to kill. And with my eyes I spoke to him, as he had done to me. "Forgive me," I told him.

And as always, Hermann Morroe, a man who died for his love on October 5, 1941, understood. That day, he lost his life to save many others. The precise moment is much more confused in memory. I just remember that I said it, with all my strength, I said it. That cry exploded in my throat like a liberation, but I didn't speak the words of freedom, but of death. I screamed at what I had inside, and it was real death.

"Feuer". There was a moment that seemed to last forever. For a few seconds a tense silence fell over the square, even the small crowd around us stopped whispering softly.

It seemed to me that the air became jelly. Everything was slower, everything was a very long moment. A moment that was terribly painful for me.

And finally I understood a disconcerting truth. That's why I felt all that pain, that's why it had become so difficult for me to do what I once did without hesitation. That's why I could no longer deny that I was a monster. Because now there was Marie.

Because now every time I had to ruin a life I thought about her. She had opened my eyes, but I had no idea the nature of that change. I didn't know if that was a good thing or a bad thing, I couldn't know, but it scared me. Because the truth was not something I could understand. After all I was just a boy who had deprived of his innocence and youth, and I did not even imagine that that boy was still living inside me, fighting to get out of his prison. I thought the free boy I had been was dead.

That day changed the rest of my life, although not immediately. Maybe because at first I didn't want to accept the truth, I didn't want to accept the truth because I wanted to choose the simpler way. Much later, when I realized this thought, I realized how cowardly I had been, lying to myself about everything.

We finished early enough, but as much as I managed to hide it, I was too shaken to go home to Marie. I decided that I absolutely had to distract myself, otherwise I would collapse. I left the Kommandantur after signing the necessary documents to certify the correct execution of Mr. Morroe's sentence, and quickly took my motorbike. Instead of turning to my villa, I headed to a nearby bakery that I saw every morning on the way to the barracks. I bought four donuts and had them wrapped. Adam would postpone the diet for now. I absolutely had to thank him, and I knew those were his granddaughter's favorite sweets.

When I stopped in front of the small pharmacy, however, I realized that something was wrong. A tractor was parked outside the door, old and dented, with various merchandise in the back. The tracks in the fresh snow were clearly visible, as if it hadn't been there very long. I also approached the entrance, creating clouds of steam with my hot breath and peered inside.

A man, burly and muscular, had crushed poor Adam against the wall, pinning him with one arm under his chin and holding him by the collar with the other. At first I decided to go in and stop that madman, but I knew I couldn't be that impulsive. The best I could do was hide and eavesdrop on what they had to say.

"How long are you going to keep me waiting, Lewandoski? I'm really tired, you know?" Adam was shaking clearly, and I became aware of