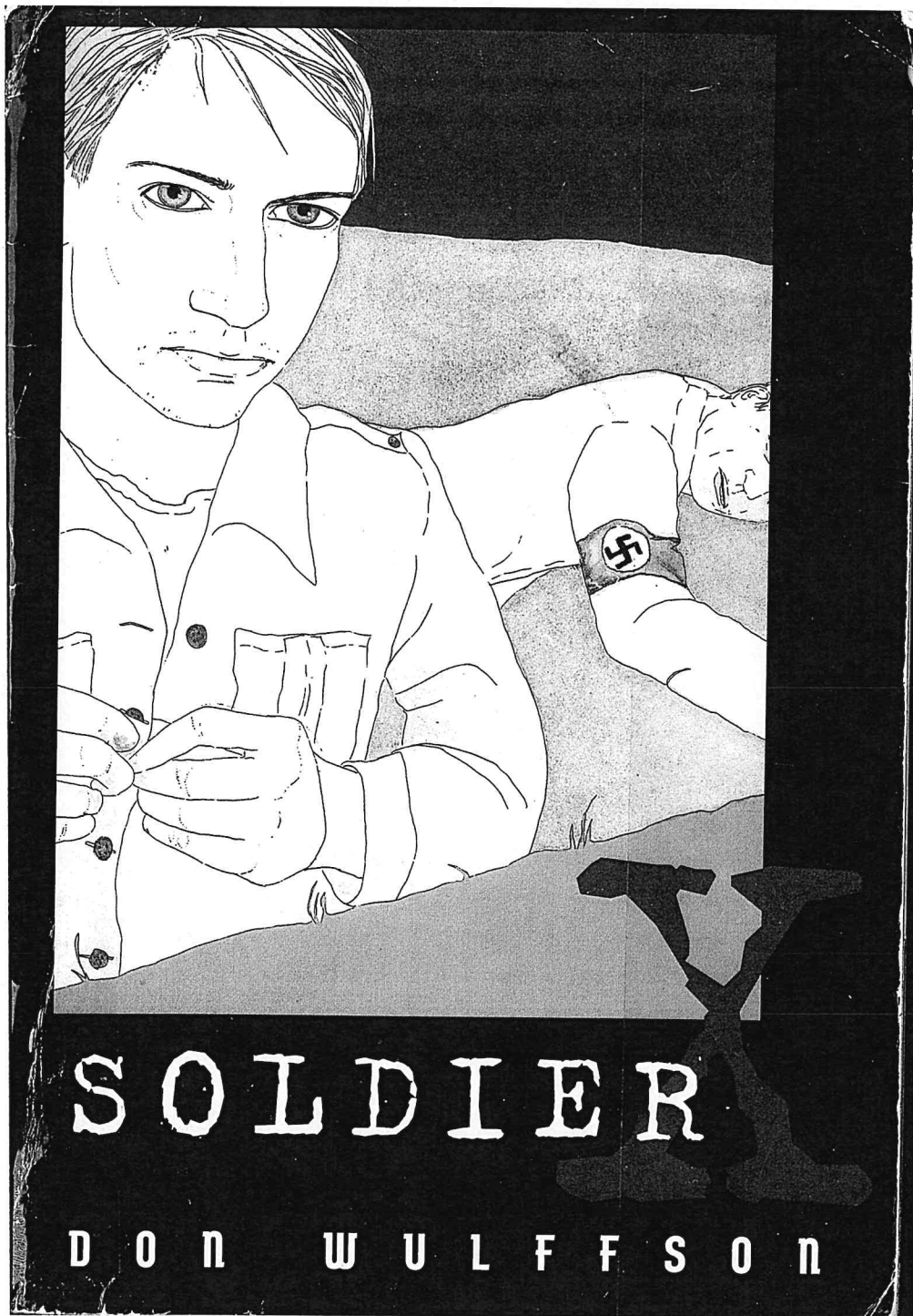


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end



## Berlin

The train crossed the border into Germany sometime during the night. By noon—September 23, 1944—we were entering Berlin. Some parts of the huge, sprawling city seemed untouched; others had been pulverized by aerial bombardment, leaving acres of broken rock and cement. Passing through these sections, the train slowed to a crawl; and once we had to stop as the rails were cleared of debris and repaired. I gazed out the window.

A convoy of trucks passed by. Aboard them I saw what at first I took to be midget soldiers, but which I soon realized were children, boys with smooth, determined faces—being sent off to fight for what remained of Berlin. They looked to be only nine or ten years old. I was sixteen, an old man by comparison.

A woman hurried toward the train, a little girl wearing a green ballet costume in her arms. The child appeared to be dead.

## Berlin

We reached the Berlin depot untouched.

There, instead of unloading the wounded, we took on yet more patients, mostly German civilians. They took the places of soldiers still able to fight. These men, including the guards from the roof of the train, were formed into ranks. An officer informed them that they would be sent to strategic points in and around Berlin, such as supply dumps, bridges, and airports. At these places, they would join the *Volkstrum*—the civilian militia, which consisted of women, children as young as seven, and elderly men—to make a last stand against the encroaching Russians, British, and Americans. With blank expressions, they shuffled off like men condemned to death—which, in reality, was the case for most.

The train lurched. Tamara and the doctor and I began tending to the patients, especially the new arrivals. Our train was shunted to another line; and we were underway again, now headed south and out of the city. Soon we were clacking smoothly along through open countryside. From the open door of the car we saw farms, harvested fields, and country roads down which a few refugees were walking.

Our destination turned out to be a small village, a neat little hamlet tucked away in a wooded area. There, an aid station and a curious sort of hospital had been set up. Civilians and others helped us unload the wounded and get them situated—in houses. Every house in the hamlet, it appeared, had been turned into either a ward or operating room.

As we worked, whenever we had a chance, Tamara and I discussed what our next move should be. We'd leave the place; we'd escape it and head west, we decided. And doing so looked easy. There were no guards. There was only one officer, who was directing the operation, and a few wounded soldiers, earlier arrivals now recuperating in the place.

We waited until most of the wounded from the train had been unloaded; then, between us, Tamara and I lifted a young woman onto a stretcher. Her face and head wrapped in bloody bandaging, the woman kept begging us to tell her what had happened to her children. After laying her down on a sofa, Tamara patted the woman's hand. I told her that we would go and try to find out about her children.

"Thank you," she mumbled through her bandaging.

A nurse gave her a shot, and she was soon asleep. The two of us took the stretcher from the house. We leaned the thing against a wall, walked casually into the woods, then ran.

## Dead

We slept that night in a woodcutter's shed. In the morning we talked over our plans. We would continue heading southwest. Vilsburg, my hometown, was in that general direction; so too was Switzerland, as well as the advancing troops of the Americans.

"We'll make it," I told Tamara.

"Of course we will, X."

It was early autumn, in the waning days of October; the elm, beech, and oak trees had already begun to drop their leaves, which crunched softly underfoot as we hurried along. The woods provided a degree of concealment, and safety. We kept to them as long as possible. But the trees thinned; then they were behind us, and we found ourselves on open road winding through farm country. There were other refugees, but only a few. Most were grim-faced and silent. A boy passed us on a bicycle, the tires of which were stuffed with grass. For a time we walked amidst a curious threesome. A humpbacked old man was pushing a

baby carriage; in it, blue-veined legs hanging over the sides, was an old woman, probably his wife.

"I have rheumatism," the elderly lady told us. "I can't walk."

Alongside them, hands stuffed in his pockets, shuffled a teenage boy. "Why don't you leave us alone?" he snapped. "Get away from us!"

Perhaps an hour later we became aware of the delicious aroma of cooking meat. Our noses, and the babble of voices, quickly led us to the source. Around a bend in the road was a horse-drawn wagon. But the harness lay empty on the ground. The horse had been killed and cut up into steaks, now cooking on open fires around each of which several people had gathered.

"There's more than enough for everyone," said a tall man. "Take what you want. Otherwise it will just go bad."

Tamara and I ate ravenously. It had been days since we had eaten our fill, and neither of us could remember the last time we had had meat, except a little fish or pork in a thin soup.

After thanking the man, feeling stuffed, we continued on our way.

We passed the bombed remains of what had once been a large military training camp. About all that remained intact were wire fencing and a sign over a large gateway that, in German, read "Victory Forever!" Nearby was a fresh graveyard. I translated the sign for Tamara.

"If victory is death," I added, "then we have won."

We hurried off. About a half hour later, a misty rain began to fall. At first we ignored it, but soon we were getting soaked. We looked around for cover. There was none. Finally we saw a village looming ahead—and were sure it was our salvation. But as we approached the place we heard gunfire and then the *kruumf* of explosions.

Wanting no part of the bloodletting going on there, we headed across an open field. Scattered across it was the wreckage of an American bomber. Only the tail section was still in one piece. Tamara and I crawled in, and sat there, waiting for the rain to stop. It didn't. Instead it only came down harder, pinging overhead on the tinny metal and blowing into our faces through the jagged opening. It began to grow dark. Our cold, damp clothes glued to our bodies, shivering, hugging one another for warmth, we spent a miserable night.

The morning wasn't much better. It had stopped raining, but it was cold and dreary, and the field we were in had turned into a shallow, muddy lake. In water sometimes up to our knees, we slogged along for what seemed an eternity. Finally we reached higher ground. A feeble autumn sun came out; a cold breeze began to blow. Ahead, near the charred skeleton of a barn, we spotted an apple tree; hurrying to it, we found a single apple on a high branch.

As Tamara and I shared it, I remembered a freckle-faced boy, a friend, from what seemed a past life. Jakob. I could hear his voice: "*My father is an apple dealer. Our apples are shipped all over Germany!*"

"What are you thinking about?" asked Tamara.

I told her about Jakob, about the troop train, and about how his father was an apple dealer. "I don't know what happened to him, whether he lived or died," I said. "I hope he survived."

"So do I," said Tamara.

A thought turned my lips into a wry smile. "What," I asked facetiously, "a Russian caring about a German?"

"It just so happens that I am in love with a German!" she replied with mock adamance.

Tamara and I found a few overripe potatoes; we stuffed our pockets with them, and soon were on our way again. High overhead, endless clouds passed, looking like dirty rags being dragged across the sky. The sun went on and off, bathing us in sunlight one moment, in cold shadows the next. And then there was only shadow. Big, sloppy raindrops began to fall. I thought I heard artillery fire, but then realized it was the rumble of thunder; a spiderwork of electricity danced in the distance. Silver pins of electricity played across the underside of the cloud cover, then flickered out as the feeble pattering of rain rapidly gained momentum. Soon, we were being battered by another downpour, wind-driven rain flying almost horizontally into our backs, pushing us along. The road became a quagmire. Rain dancing on its hood, a black Mercedes passed us, its wheels looking like revolving balls of mud.

"Stop!" I yelled at the driver, who appeared to be the only occupant. "Give us a ride, please!"

The car kept going.

Ahead we spotted an umbrella. Red, fully open, and oversize, it was balanced in the branches of a tree beside the road. We hurried to it, momentarily under the impression that, by some peculiar stroke of luck, just the thing we needed had somehow been left for us. This silly notion was quickly dispelled. Crouching together under the umbrella was a young woman and a little boy. Though wrapped in a blanket, the two were shivering terribly—and looked even worse off than us. We gave them two potatoes. The little boy stared at his as though he had never seen one before. The woman smiled wanly. "*Danke schön*," she said, then whispered something into her little boy's ear. He smiled brightly. "*Danke schön!*" he piped in a babyish voice, echoing his mother and obeying her whispered request to say thank you.

We saw no one else before reaching the town. The place took us by surprise; night had long since fallen, and most of the time we'd been walking with our heads down, as if in surrender to the rain. One moment we were tromping forlornly through muck, our feet heavy with mud; the next we were on a paved highway, the black-against-black skyline of a town looming ahead.

"Thank God!" Tamara, her wet hair plastered down against her head and face, squeezed my hand.

Gathering our energy, we quickened our pace. The leather sole of my left shoe started coming loose, and soon was flapping against the pavement.

The town was a strange-looking place, an odd mixture of modern and medieval buildings, ancient church spires mingling with factory chimneys, derricks, and billboards. All was quiet, and in the dark and rain, the place gave the impression of being deserted. As with other towns, some sections seemed relatively untouched while others had been shattered into slabs of broken concrete by bombing raids.

"Which way?" asked Tamara, her teeth chattering.

I shrugged wet shoulders, and then led the way, not having the slightest idea as to where I was going.

We made our way along cobblestone streets, the only sounds the wet crunch of our footsteps—and the flapping of my left sole. Through drifting curtains of fog and rain, we spotted a small hotel. From the outside it looked in good shape, but as we pushed our way inside we found that, beyond the front wall, hardly anything remained of the place. What had once been the lobby now consisted of busted chairs and other junk floating in a huge, water-filled crater. Above what was left of the registration desk hung a banister from which broken spindles dangled.

Out in the rain again, one street over, we came to a bleak row of storefronts, among them what was left of a barbershop. Entering the place, I almost jumped out of my skin. Coming toward me was a man. I stopped. He stopped, and I realized I was looking at my own dark re-

flection in a remnant of a wall mirror. I turned, and taking another step, stumbled over a body—that of a German officer lying facedown between two barber chairs.

"Dead," said Tamara, feeling for a pulse.

We took from the body only what we could use, items we desperately needed; still, I had the disturbing feeling I was robbing one of my fellow soldiers. I pulled off his heavy gray-green coat, then helped Tamara into it. The thing engulfed her. A pistol lay nearby; I wanted no part of it, but I took the dead man's boots and wool shirt. I began to worry. The officer, who had been killed by a wound to the side of the neck, was still relatively warm.

"By the looks of him he has hasn't been dead long," I told Tamara. "There's been fighting in this part of town, and not very long ago. We should get out of here."

She nodded.

I looked out into the street through a little waterfall pouring off a doorway awning. All was dark and still.

Bundling up as best we could, we picked our way along the cobblestone street through the sodden, dead-looking town.

A hand touched my shoulder. "Look," whispered Tamara.

In a nearby building a light glowed eerily in a window, then suddenly went off. Tamara turned to me, a questioning look in her eyes.

"Something's wrong," I said softly.

We backed away, then headed up a winding side

street—nervous, moving slowly and warily. At first I wasn't sure what I was hearing. I held up a hand. Tamara stopped. Over the gurgling of water flowing down a gutter came the sound of muted, small voices. A hiss for quiet. The voices abruptly stopped; in the same instant, I stared, paralyzed by fear. In the ruins of a storefront, I saw movement . . . and saw a helmeted form in silhouette behind the black, wet barrel of a machine gun.

"*Ach! Nein!*" I gasped.

All changed to slow motion. Tamara, a short distance ahead of me, was turning. I reached out my left hand for her, as the black of night was speared red with machine-gun fire. Tamara shrieked as she was knocked backward—and away from me. My arm and face exploded with pain. Screaming, blood spilling from my mouth, I stumbled forward a step, then fell.

"Cease fire!" someone yelled in English.

In agony, I struggled to my knees. The machine gun was silent. Dark forms were coming toward me. I felt a pair of hands search me for weapons as another hand came to rest on my shoulder.

"Hang in there, buddy," said someone in the tough, strangely accented English I had heard in American movies.

"They're just kids—civilians," said someone else. "Dammit!"

The barrel of a rifle pointed at me was lowered. A soldier, an American flag insignia on one shoulder, frowned grimly.

The left side of my face hurt horribly and I was having trouble seeing out of my left eye. I tried to reach up to touch the eye but found that for some reason I couldn't.

"Pull back," a soldier ordered, getting to his feet. "Get 'em outta the street."

A shock wave of horror hit me. I slowly turned. A short distance behind me lay a coat-covered bundle. Tamara.

"Dead," said someone.

I tried to cry out. It was impossible. My mouth was full of blood; I started to gag as I opened it.

"You heard the lieutenant," said a soldier, looking around apprehensively, rifle in hand. "Pull back. Now!"

A hulking helmeted silhouette went slowly past, a coat-bundled form in his arms.

I spat blood. My words were garbled, but I managed to say the only thing that mattered. "Tamara!" I shrieked.

## Narcissus

I was dreaming I was hanging from something by my left arm. The arm felt as though it was being pulled out of its socket. It hurt horribly. People were asking me questions, but all I could remember is that I was supposed to say that I didn't remember. And this time it was true: I really didn't.

I blinked awake, lying propped up in hospital bed. The dream evaporated. With my right hand I touched a thick mask of white bandaging covering my head. Through eye slits I could see patients in white gowns, and white-sheeted beds and nurses in crisp, white uniforms. White. Everything was white in that hospital. I wondered how I had gotten there.

"He's coming around," said somebody in English.

I'd heard the same words—a similar statement—long ago. I tried to remember where.

My head hurt. My face hurt, and I could not see much out of my left eye. But mostly it was my left arm that hurt.

## Narcissus

I tried to move, to sit up straight. Traction pulleys jangled. I screamed in pain.

An oversize face loomed close to mine. A nice face, that of a nurse with little glasses perched on her nose.

"Please, the pain!" I cried—in German . . . then English . . . then Russian, my voice sounding funny, garbled.

The nurse said something to me. She bustled about. I felt sheets pulled aside, and then the cooling sensation of alcohol on my shoulder, quickly followed by the sting of a needle.

"That should do the trick," the nurse said in American English.

Her footsteps tapped away. A doctor walked by. I followed him with my eyes, but the vision in my left eye was still blurry. I began to feel a little woozy, and much better—except I knew that something was terribly wrong, that something awful had happened, but I couldn't remember what. My face felt numb, the pounding in my head had stopped, but my left arm, though the pain had faded, continued to throb.

Unable to see much of anything out of my left eye, I turned my head to see out of my right. I looked at the traction wire hanging from an overhead bar, and at my left arm. Only there was no arm. From a few inches below the shoulder, it was gone.



The town of Lathenow, Germany—that is where it had happened, I learned later. A machine-gun blast had shattered my left arm; one bullet had entered my open mouth and exited my left cheek; the heavy-caliber bullets had also ricocheted and splintered, and fragments of stone and steel had hit me in the head and face, mostly on the left side. My left eye had been abraded. At the American Red Cross hospital in Stasfurt, Germany, where I had been taken, my left arm had been amputated, and more than a hundred stitches had been needed to close the wounds to my scalp, forehead, and left cheek.

When I first regained consciousness in the hospital, I only knew that I had been badly injured. Then came the horror of finding that my arm was gone. I had seen so many others with missing limbs, and I'd thought I'd understood what they had been feeling, what they had been going through. But I had understood nothing—not until it had happened to me.

The wounds to my face were serious, but they would heal, I was told, and the vision in my left eye would probably return to normal. But my arm—all I could think about was my arm—and the unimaginable, unacceptable reality that it was gone. In drugged sleep, I often dreamed that it was still there, always to awaken to the awful truth that it was not. I would turn away from it, from the stump, and look emptily through eye slits at the ward, thinking back.

More and more, I began remembering the incident. I remembered the machine gun firing, and right before that,

hurrying up a cobblestone street, shiny with wetness. Strangely, my recollection was of being alone, of being by myself when the shooting started. It seems incredible to me now, but for days, as I lay there in the hospital, I did not remember Tamara being killed. I did not remember her at all. Not even her name.

Even when I was told that a girl had come to see me—even that did not stir the slightest recollection. But then I heard her voice. Through the eye slits I saw her, a bandage on her head, black, raccoon-like circles around her eyes. I gasped, and then began to cry. I remembered her. She was dead. Unbearable grief at losing her overwhelmed me. Incredibly, I was looking at her when the impact of her loss hit me for the first time.

“You’re dead,” I mumbled through the mouth slit in my bandages, even as I said it realizing that it wasn’t true.

“X!” Tamara was holding me, sobbing.

My right arm went around her shoulders. What remained of my left arm was stopped by the traction wires. Restrained by them, the stump, seemingly with a mind of its own, rattled noisily as it too tried to reach for her.

Tamara came to see me every day. She told me that a bullet had grazed her head, knocking her cold. When she'd come out of it, with only a concussion and two black eyes, she had repeatedly asked after me. At first, no one had understood her. Two days had passed before a Russian-

speaking nurse had found out that Tamara was only one floor up from me, in the women's ward.

She fussed over me. She took care of me. She chattered, her eyes averted from my stump of an arm. I didn't mention it, and perhaps for that reason, neither did she. I said little. And I began to get irritable, annoyed, angry. I didn't want to hear her voice. It grated on me. And I did not want her there. I didn't want her pity. I didn't want to see her—or, really, her to see me.

One afternoon she was helping feed me. A little broth dribbled from the opening around my mouth and into the gauze. Furious, I cursed, and with my right hand sent the tray of food flying.

"Clean it up!" I yelled. "Then get out!"

The next morning I told the nurses I did not want Tamara to be allowed to visit. Later I heard Tamara at the door to the ward, first arguing, then crying. I looked over at her as a nurse came to talk to me. Before she said a word, I asked her to tell Tamara that I was sorry for what I had done but that I needed to be alone.

The nurse headed away. I turned my head. I saw Tamara and two nurses talking. I looked away. When I looked back, she was gone. One of the nurses was frowning across the way at me.

November 1, 1944: An American soldier in the bed next to mine died that day. Envy—that's all I felt.

I began receiving notes from Tamara. Desolation, emptiness—that is what they caused me to feel. Once, I wept; I cried for all that was lost, and what might have been. A little stack of her notes began to grow on the table at my bedside. I couldn't throw them away—any more than I could bring myself to write back.

"You have a letter," said a nurse one morning.

"Just put it on the table," I said, thinking it was another note from Tamara.

"It came by military post; it's from your mother."

"My mo-mother?" I stammered, certain it was from Aleksandr's mother, and feeling as though I was reliving an ugly moment from the past. "But how would she know I'm here?"

"The girl contacted your family."

I looked at the postmark; the letter was from Vilsburg. "Please read it to me," I said.

"My darling Erik," the nurse began. "It was the most wonderful moment of my life when I learned that you are alive! I know that you have been badly hurt, but time heals all wounds, as they say. I would give anything to come see you, but travel is impossible right now, as I'm sure you understand.

"Some bad news: I am sorry to tell you that your grandma has passed away. Fortunately, she died peacefully in her sleep, and for this I am thankful to God. I was

afraid that losing her would kill Grandpa. He was so depressed, so lost. But the news that you are alive has restarted his life! He is filled with energy, and can't wait to see you! Love, Mother.'"

I was crying and smiling at the same time. The nurse put the letter on the table, then squeaked away on rubber-soled shoes.

Early one evening my arm was taken out of traction. Wires were slowly lowered. The stump of my left arm was cleaned and rebandaged. It hung useless at my side. I moved it, raised it, stared at the thing in disgust, and wondered what had been done with the amputated hand and arm. A vision passed through my mind, a remembered image: Seen through an oval-shaped window on the troop train, a young woman walked toward an incinerator, a human leg in her arms.

Two or three days later came a moment I was dreading. There were two nurses and an American doctor. I remember that the doctor had unusually small hands.

"Keep in mind," he said, "that the healing is not yet complete. The wounds to your face were severe, but in time . . ." He left the sentence unfinished; then, with his small hands, he began unwinding my head mask of gauze. There seemed to be miles of the stuff. He and the nurses began snipping and pulling the stitches—carefully

and slowly, seeming to be taking forever to get all of them out.

"I'd like a mirror, please," I said when they had finished.

The doctor exchanged glances with the nurses, and then nodded. One of the nurses left; the mirror she returned with was a feminine one, of the kind a lady would have on her dressing table. It was heart-shaped and had a pink handle and frame, and a red backing. For a long while I stared at the plastic red back of the thing. Then I turned it over and saw my face. My left eye drooped beneath a deep scar that snaked across my forehead; my left cheek looked like someone had carved a hideous design in the flesh; and part of my jaw had a sunken look to it.

"It's not so bad," said one of the nurses. "Really."

I handed the mirror back to her, then asked the three of them to leave.

I continued to refuse to let Tamara in to see me. And then I wrote her a long letter in which I told her I wanted her to be happy and go on with her life without me. I wrote that I would always love her, always remember her, but too much had changed, and it was better that we go our own ways.

The next morning I awoke to find her standing at the foot of my bed.

"I love you," she said, and then walked out of the ward.

I wanted to call to her to come back. I didn't. Instead, numb inside, sick with grief and self-pity, I just lay there, staring at nothing.

That afternoon I was taken in a wheelchair out to a garden area to get some sun and air. Narcissus. I can still smell the aroma of narcissus, and of pine trees and fresh-mown grass. And there was a trellis-like fence on which a flowerless vine grew. I saw only nurses and other patients, at first. And then I saw Tamara, standing there quietly by the fence, wearing a blue dress, and with a white ribbon in her hair.

I turned my head, covering the left side of my face with my one hand. I wanted to scream. I wanted to run.

She sat down beside me. I felt the touch of her fingertips on my right arm; and then she gently pulled my hand from my face. "I love you," she said. Her soft lips touched mine.

I tried not to, but I couldn't stop myself. I hung my head and cried—for myself, for everyone, and for all that had happened. Tamara's arm went around me, and then her head was on my shoulder.

## Epilogue

On May 7, 1945, Germany surrendered. On March 21, 1946, my eighteenth birthday and two years after leaving for the front, Tamara and I were married—in a chapel in Vilsburg—the town itself having remained mostly untouched by the war. Only the congregation at my wedding had been touched: Among them were there were many widows and widowers, and many cripples—other men and women like me. Tamara wore a simple white dress, a bouquet of narcissus in her hands. My mother and grandfather were there. They beamed with great joy.

Three years later, Tamara and I arrived in America. From New York we moved to Fort Worth, Texas, and from there to Seattle, Washington. After just arriving in Seattle, we learned Mother had remarried, and Grandpa was living with them, and the three had refurbished and reopened the *Küche Apfelsine*. After less than three years, Tamara be-

came a registered nurse at a Seattle hospital, then went on to run a free clinic. We have three grown children—Hals, Nikolai, and Katerina Elena. Katerina, who is as beautiful as her mother, is a doctor. Hals is a social worker. Nikolai is an artist, a sculptor.

For many years I taught history and languages. Now I am retired, as is Tamara, though we both sometimes volunteer our time at the clinic. Often, in the evenings, we take long walks together in the woods, usually along the shoreline of the lake near our home. It was during one of these walks that Tamara suggested I write this book.

At first I refused to even consider it, mostly, I think, because the memories are so painful. Little by little, she changed my mind. She convinced me to put into writing what happened. With patience, she explained to me the reasons why she believed it had to be done, and why this strange—and sometimes ugly—story had to be told.

### *Author's Note*

This is a work of fiction based on the lives of two very remarkable people. Though names, dates, and places have been altered whenever necessary, the story is not only true, but also loosely parallels the experience of an estimated thirty thousand German soldiers during World War II on the Eastern Front. A great many were trapped behind Russian lines. Some of the wounded were given medical attention; others were literally thrown out of Russian hospitals and left to die. A great many—wounded or not—were executed; some were imprisoned and enslaved. A few were able to blend into Russian society or flee to neutral, friendly nations.