

Proud Monster: Sketches · Ian MacMillan

NEAR LUBLIN, POLAND, FALL 1939 — *Travel Plans*

Weitzman stood facing the three frightened children while his wife whispered harshly up at the side of his head. The German soldier was soon to be looked for, as indicated by the expectant look in his eyes above the huge gag of Weitzman's scarf. "Men disappear," Weitzman said to the window. Now he stared somewhere above the children's heads, his face a thoughtful mask of mulish objectivity.

"Is there any chance for us now?" his wife wailed. "How many times have I told you that you have to use good manners with them?"

Weitzman remained silent. The children looked at each other, wondering. It was, after all, the way he always acted in one of their arguments. It was their mother who always did the talking, and now that a certain normalcy had set into the day, they began to feel less frightened. Their father was a huge bear with black hair reaching in thick tufts from his shirt collar and growing in sawdust clotted thickets along his forearms, and he was as silent as he was big. They had just witnessed what they figured was the first act of violence ever committed by the burly giant — when the German soldier, wearing a grey uniform and black boots which squeaked when he walked, inspected Weitzman's papers and announced that he was to be relocated to a work camp to the east, Weitzman had reached out and folded the officer up the way a spider would a fly, easily containing his grunting resistance. Then he tied and gagged him using the scarf and a couple of belts. All the while his wife babbled to the soldier in rapid, apologetic shock. Then Weitzman said, "Men disappear. I am not going with him."

The children waited. Weitzman gazed thoughtfully at the wall, and the German soldier repositioned himself to get more comfortable. "Now how will we get back in good standing with them?" she moaned, looking down at the soldier. "If we apologize, perhaps—"

"We are going south to the Tatras," Weitzman said. The children moved on the couch and looked at each other. They had heard about the Tatras all their lives, and it was as if he had announced that they were going to Paradise.

"Oh?" their mother said, "and where will you get money for the train? Who will even *let* you on a train?"

“We are walking.”

She went into a flurry of intense whispering: “Oh of course! One foot and then the other. Children too. Walk all the way to some mountains. Do you think I am insane?”

“I was born there,” Weitzman said.

“Oh is that so? I wasn’t aware. You only told me a thousand times. How can you expect children their age to walk hundreds of kilometers?”

“I carry stones all day. Logs.”

“I am not going! I am going to figure out how to explain such ill-mannered behavior to them! We must make things right.”

Weitzman remained silent. *Men disappear*. He could not shake the sensation that he was right. This time at least, he would not budge. He felt sad and embarrassed that it had come to this, but now, with the poor German all trussed up and staring at him, there was no way they could stay. “We leave now,” he said.

His wife folded her arms and looked at him with bewildered contempt.

“Each of you pack a grain sack,” he said to the children. “Warm clothes, one extra pair of shoes. No toys.”

“He doesn’t really mean it,” his wife said to the soldier.

Weitzman went into the pantry.

“We are poor Jews,” she said to the soldier. “We are always frightened. Can you imagine how hard it is for us who have nothing?”

The soldier nodded. “After all,” she said, “can you understand his obstinacy? He’s actually a very gentle man, not a brute as he appears. He’s a hard worker too. You’ll see just how hard one man can work!” The soldier nodded again. The room darkened a little as Weitzman’s form blocked the doorway light.

“It’s dusk,” he said. “We are going.”

“Well have a safe journey,” she said.

Weitzman left the room.

“Well,” she said to the soldier in a quaking voice, “it appears I must go too! What a preposterous development!” She thought for a moment. “When we are gone, will you be all right? I mean, you will, won’t you?”

The soldier nodded.

“Well, I’d better pack, too!”

She left the soldier, but he could hear her talking in the other room, and then later, outside. Uninclined to try to free himself yet, he sighed and

wondered how he would explain his situation. He had known right away when he saw the huge man that coming by himself was a bad idea.

CENTRAL POLAND, SUMMER 1940—*A Lesson in Language and Values*

Rinefarth accepted the schnapps from Obersturmfuhrer Mueller, trying to recall how much he had already consumed in the morning. But this was pointless—everybody was half drunk by noon anyway, and Mueller usually led the way. Rinefarth found Mueller repulsive and gross, with his stubbled jowls and the series of urine stains on his pants fading the fabric day by day, in subtle shapes like a series of transparent map overlays. Mueller had summoned him to the trucks to discuss Rinefarth's "problem," which he was now hedging around with a kind of pompous jocularly. Rinefarth could not shoot men. He could not look into the pits at the grotesque tangle of bodies with their gaping, shattered faces. The first time he tried he vomited on the ground in front of him, making an officer go ashen with speechless rage. Of course, you mustn't do this in front of the others, you mustn't humiliate yourself, your uniform. Rinefarth settled after that into the sullen and rebellious attitude of an incorrigible schoolboy. But even this stance had become fatiguing, and he was bored with his perpetual shame.

"I have authority to shoot men who disobey orders," Mueller said. "Here, have another." He filled Rinefarth's cup.

"I'd like to be sent back."

"You have a future here," Mueller said, sitting down on the running board. "Why waste it? Going back has consequences. It is a thing that once done cannot be undone. Do you understand?" Rinefarth nodded. "But wait," Mueller said. "I have prepared a little—lesson for you. Over there."

"I'd rather not."

"You must. It's an order. You must obey."

Rinefarth felt himself swoon with growing drunkenness, so that everything, the trees, equipment, Mueller with his urine stains, all seemed bright and two dimensionally flat.

Mueller rose with some effort, as if testing his balance, and led Rinefarth past the trucks into the woods. It felt to Rinefarth like an inane dream, with the flat plane of his vision rocking and shifting in jerks. Soon

he found himself standing in a clearing before a blindfolded woman who was tied to a tree. "Now then," Mueller said. "Here we have your standard vermin, in this case a mute dolt who knows nothing of our, say, exercise here." Mueller squinted at Rinefarth's face. "Are you all right?" Rinefarth nodded. "Look at the ground next to the dolt," Mueller went on. Rinefarth looked, and focussed on a rider's stirrup, and next to that an egg. On the other side of the woman was what looked like a little statue of a dancer. The absurdity of this arrangement made him reel with dizzy nausea.

"Please, shoot the egg with your pistol," Mueller said.

Looking doubtfully at Mueller, Rinefarth took out the pistol and aimed at the egg. Then he realized what Mueller was up to. "I—what is the meaning of this?"

"The meaning?" Mueller said. "Well, shoot the vermin then."

"I can't—I'm not going to shoot her."

"I don't understand."

"I can't."

"Can't what? Can't shoot an egg?"

Rinefarth sighed with exasperation. "Her. I can't."

"Where is 'her'?" Mueller asked, his face a mask of exaggerated wonder. "I see no 'her.' I order you to shoot it."

"Please, I— Shoot what? The egg?"

"It! It! The taller object in the middle!"

"Please—"

"I order you to shoot it!" Mueller yelled. "Now!"

Shaking violently, Rinefarth raised the pistol, but when it came to pulling the trigger, he could not. His hand began to tremble uncontrollably, and then his arm fell limply to his side.

His face florid with rage, Mueller yelled, "You weakling! You poof! Shall I order a pink triangle for you, you poof?"

"I am not going to shoot it," Rinefarth said softly.

"I am through with you then," Mueller said coldly, and walked back toward the trucks.

When Rinefarth returned to the trucks he heard Mueller talking to other soldiers about the incident. He was animatedly throwing his arms around and using the word poof. One soldier disappeared in the direction of the woman tied to the tree and Rinefarth heard the single shot. After

that Rinefarth walked away from the men, feeling weak with humiliation and bitter regret.

LENINGRAD, WINTER 1941—*Stew*

My father has now broken the couch up and is carefully scraping the dried glue into a can using the pocket knife he usually uses to open letters. Mother has a pot on a wire grate over the sink because there is no fuel for the stove. In the sink she has a little fire going, and she fans the smoke out the window, though it comes back in with each stroke, as if rocking. On the floor there are two green felt St. Nicholas dolls, now ripped open and empty—we will stuff them with paper. Next my father will scrape the wallpaper in Peter's room. Last week Mama wrapped Peter in a sheet and we took him to the church and left him by the graveyard. There was ice in the corners of his mouth and eyes. Our boots squeaked on the snow. Mama laid him next to an old lady with bare feet, who was wrapped up in frilly window curtains.

The pot splutters on the sink and I can smell the odor of vaseline. Mother put that in first, then sawdust, and then the beans from the St. Nicholas dolls. Across the room my grandmother sleeps on a cot. She is so thin that the blue veins on her arms can be held away like tiny, soft pipes under her skin, and she smells like old food or the toilet. She does not speak, and Mama says it will only be a day or two before we take her to the church.

The wallpaper makes slick gobs of whitish stuff that smells almost sweet. Mother takes spatula loads of it to the pot and shakes it in, and the sweet smell replaces the smell of the vaseline. It is getting dark now. We will eat soon and have to hurry, because we have no candles.

While we eat I can see that Grandmother is watching us, blinking and moving her mouth. Mother sighs and looks at my father, who shrugs once, trying to swallow the stew. Then he says, "No, it's too late for her." My grandmother blinks.

In my room I peel thick, dry paint flakes from the windowsill and eat them. The flakes have three thin layers of color, white, green in the middle, and light grey. I set my dolls up in their house. The small mother doll with the porcelain head is very old, once my grandmother's. She wears a peasant costume. The boy doll wears shorts with straps and has no shirt. Father will not take the glue from the little bed and chairs and the

wardrobe because there isn't enough for the stew. The insides of the dolls are hair so he won't need that. I speak to the dolls in a whisper because my parents think I am sleeping. Shh, don't worry, the bombers will be gone soon. Don't cry. After a while I think that Peter is in the room. A picture of him, like smoke, moves in the darker corner. I decide that the little boy doll is Peter. He sits in the chair in the living room next to the mother, his arms down at his sides like at the church. Peter gets up and goes to the window to see the planes. Get away from there! Mother snaps. I'll spank you! Peter stays at the window and Mother strikes him. He goes back to the chair crying. Wait till your father hears of this! The house shakes as the bombs fall. The iron frypan in the kitchen falls off the counter and Peter is now off the chair and on the floor, lying on his face. Mother picks him up and puts him back on the chair and waits for the planes to go away.

Then the wardrobe falls down in front of Mother, and she gasps in dismay. How will she pick it up? Peter, help me with this. It's so heavy and I'm only a girl. Peter lifts the wardrobe back up. Mother looks at him and then says, Peter, thank you, would you like some candy? Yes I would, he says. She goes to the kitchen, past the frypan, and brings it out. Peter is sitting now with one hand up, holding the candy. Can I have some too? Why yes, Mother says, of course you can. The white flakes of candy sting in my mouth at first, and then I taste the sugar. Oh, this is good.

Yes it is, isn't it? she says.

Can we have more?

And she says, yes, all you want. There's plenty in the kitchen.

THE UKRAINE, FALL 1942 — *A Practical Joke*

Dieter Gebhardt was only eighteen, the youngest in our group. He had that thick-lipped, androgynous look about him, with a child's almost hairless face and large, beautiful eyes. His hair was ash blonde and had Himmler seen him he would have instantly become a poster soldier. But he was not a poster soldier—he was a killer of a special kind, puncturing women and children with his PPK, always with a strange smile on his face along with a look of a kind of experimental curiosity, as if he were pulling into himself for the purpose of deliberately savoring the moment.

Some of the older members of our little rural death squad hated him for his beauty and his happy enthusiasm—you must not enjoy this. There was something sick about enjoying this.

At night we were usually drunk, and one night when we were drunk we began to wonder, had Gebhardt ever had a woman? When he came into the billets Duerbacher asked him that. "Say, Gebhardt, have you ever done it with a woman?"

Gebhardt's beautiful face went into a sneer of disgust. "Of course not!" he snapped. His voice still had that tendency to fail upwards into falsetto. "It's a waste of time, a lot of stupidity you older men prattle about."

"You're not a man until you've had a woman," Duerbacher said. "Some of these little girls you shoot with your pistol could use a little before they go."

"I would never touch any but an Aryan."

"Come, have a drink with us."

"Drinking is for fools and old men," Gebhardt said.

Duerbacher watched him swagger off and said, "That little pig's ass. Why were we ever saddled with a little bastard like that?"

Duerbacher needled Gebhardt about women every night for a week or so and tried to get him to drink with us. I was against it because he would ruin the moody indulgence I had become used to after doing the things I had been ordered to do. But my problem is another story.

One night we managed to get Gebhardt drunk. Through it all, even with his speech slurring, he maintained that youthful condescending insolence that so enraged Duerbacher. But this one night Duerbacher seemed to smile a lot and to indulge the young egomaniac, as if he were somehow one up on him. Finally Duerbacher said, "My boy, I've saved you an Aryan—she's in the back room in the bed, you know, the big room at the end of the hall. We drugged her. She's a virgin, like you, and we thought it would be more humane to knock her out. But if you're going to invade that sacred grotto, son, you'd better do it now. She's the type who would fight, and if she wakes up—"

Gebhardt looked at the hall, then at Duerbacher, blinking slowly, the facade of insolence gone for a moment.

"What is this?" I whispered to Duerbacher. He merely shook his finger in front of my face. I didn't mind because I was drunk.

"Her hair is like spun gold," Duerbacher said. Gebhardt looked at him, his eyes carrying on with their labored blinking.

I knew something was wrong now because a Ukrainian guard was hanging around, long after he was supposed to have been dismissed. He had

Duerbacher's smile on his face. "She's in there naked and sleeping," Duerbacher said, "and just bursting at the seams with the bloom of youth."

"What is her name?" Gebhardt asked.

"Helena," Duerbacher said. "Pity, she's a partisan."

"Since when do we—" I began, but Duerbacher cut me off and told me to drink my schnapps. Then he said to Gebhardt, "Do you know how to do it, I mean where to—"

"Of course!" Gebhardt said. "Do you think I am stupid? Naturally I shall have to shoot her afterwards."

"Naturally," Duerbacher said. "But hurry up. You'll see—once you give it to her you'll be into all the good-looking ones you find."

"This is contrary to our orders," Gebhardt said.

Duerbacher waved that off with a sneer and said, "Look, the older you get the less in the way of juice you have. This is why you should not be wasting it the way boys your age always do."

"I resent what you imply," Gebhardt said. This seemed to fire the little killer up. He took another long swallow from his drink and marched unsteadily down the hall.

"What's going on here?" I asked Duerbacher. "What's he doing here?" We both looked at the guard, a tall man who snickered with a kind of dirty complicity when we looked. Then he slipped back down the hall.

Duerbacher rose from the table, tested his balance briefly, and said, "It won't work if we've taken too much time." Then the guard came out from the hallway and nodded.

"Duerbacher cleared his throat and called, "Gebhardt, if she seems a bit unresponsive, even cold, it's because she's dead. Check the back of her neck — there's a little hole our Russian friend put there a little while ago."

There was a short silence which was then shattered by a series of shrieks, as if Gebhardt had been scalded. He came running out into the front room holding his pants together at the waist, his face ashen and his body trembling.

"How was she?" Duerbacher asked, then adopted a look of sudden astonishment. "But wait! You've got it backwards! You've deflowered a corpse! It's the other way around!"

The Ukrainian guard burst out into hoarse laughter, and poor Gebhardt bolted from the room.

"That was a horrible thing to do," I said. "A horrible thing. A horrible thing. My God, that was horrible."

Duerbacher looked at me scornfully, thinking. Then he said, "I agree. It most certainly was."

Gebhardt remained the insolent killer, and Duerbacher seemed baffled by this. Apparently he had thought that the experience should have made some impression on the young man.

STALINGRAD, FALL 1942 — *The Pig Who Understood*

Semyon Lubko looks again out through the window. He and Nikolay Polyonov are on watch at the edge of the Tractor Factory. Their orders are due to come down in less than an hour, and Semyon Lubko's face is twisted with fear and a kind of dumbfounded wrath. No one had expected the fighting to be like this, where bomb by bomb and bullet by bullet the city was being reduced into piles of bricks and twisted metal. No one had expected seventy to eighty percent casualties, or to stumble around a corner and stand face to face with German soldiers, or to have to fight them with thumbs gouging eyes or to smell their acid sweat and their blood. Lubko positions the Degtyarev on the window sill and shakes his head. It is obvious to him now that he will not survive this, and he considers deserting.

Nikolay Polyonov clears his throat softly and looks at his comrade. "I am curious to see our orders," he says.

"Godalmighty," Lubko whispers, "I think the strategy is to suffocate the Germans with an avalanche of flesh! We throw ourselves at them by the thousands! I see! We'll exhaust their ammunition with our bodies! Ah, what brilliant strategy!" He is so amazed and overwrought that tears fill his eyes. "Yes. Funnel all of Russia on them! They can't survive being engulfed by millions of corpses! Dam up the Volga with Russians and flood them out!"

"Yes," Polyonov says, "it is apparent that we are drawing the line here. It is also apparent that the Germans feel they must have this mountain of trash. So, it goes on." Polyonov pauses, gazes out over the looming hulls of the gutted and truncated buildings. "Our choice is therefore simple. You know, on our collective farm we slaughtered a lot of pigs, usually in a room about the size of this one." This irrelevance makes Lubko gesture with an exasperated appeal at the ceiling. "The pigs would be driven in one by one, and we would put our knives into the jowls and cut their jugulars and send them off to bleed, where they would go on eating and

grunting until they died. Well, this one pig apparently knew what was up, because when we went after him he became enraged and simply would not let us catch him. All the time he screamed, with what sounded like some strange logical argument carried out at the top of his lungs. In any case, he was so deft, so athletic, that he had the three of us on the defensive for a long time. We finally got him, but the point is that he interrupted our work so much that the other pigs waiting outside got to live an extra day. He was no ordinary pig."

"Well," Lubko says to the wall, "how do you like that? My friend tells me a story about pigs! How interesting!" Then he turns to Polyonov. "Well, how about a story about swans? Or horses? Or ducks? I'd love to hear one about ducks."

Polygonov laughs. "I thought you'd see what I meant. I'm sorry." He pauses, looks out through the window. "Our choice is a simple philosophical one. If we don't attack we die, all of us. If we attack, a few of us will live, or all of us will die. The only answer is that you have to be brave and go forward. It's very simple, even for a cynic. Bravery is our only chance."

"You mean we might be forced into being heroes of the Soviet Union?" Lubko asks with infuriated contempt.

"Exactly," Polynov says, "it's all set up that way. You don't think anybody would be stupid enough to give us a choice, do you?"

"Hah! So what are our chances?"

"On the weak side, at best."

"Oh no," Lubko says, seeing a hunched figure running in the direction of their observation post. "Here comes comrade Gusev. It's our orders."

"Ah, our orders."

Lubko watches the running figure for a moment, then says, "So what do you suggest we do?" He turns to Polygonov. "Eh? What do we do?"

Polygonov is no longer listening. He crosses himself and whispers into his folded hands.

"I see," Lubko says, sighing. "So that's it, then."

KURSK, RUSSIA, SUMMER 1943—*The Musical Prodigy*

Budenkov had made up his mind and walked away from the war. The absurd din of artillery, of tank cannon and Katiusha rocket fire, and the ear-shattering buzz of the Stormoviks, all because of him, seemed finally

so comically exaggerated a development that he felt things had simply gone too far. He took with him a heavy Degtyarev automatic, carrying it on his back so that the round cartridge pan banged his shoulder with every step, and walked out of the sound, until he could hear it only in the distance. The line he made walking was absolutely straight, in watchful disregard of geography. This took him half a day. He hid in a burned-out barn, down in the dark, cool manger, the Degtyarev set up and pointing at a block of light where a door and stairwell had been. His fingers were sore and bruised, and he wondered if the little injuries would in any way affect his playing, that somehow they would revolt from his mind's order and be unable to hit the keys of the piano. But the days of music seemed to him long ago. Briefly he conceived the image of himself at ten, playing before the audiences in Odessa and at the spas on the Black Sea. Fifteen years. A century.

He waited. It made no difference who blocked the light above—German, Russian, Partisan, Kalmuk. The recognition of his secret reality made them all his executioners. He was awakened to this reality upon emerging from a brilliant shellburst, blinking and numb and nearly deaf but otherwise unhurt. Life until then had been like a child's optical illusion on paper—what you are convinced is an urn in silhouette becomes forever two faces nose to nose. Since he was born the world lived in perpetual, rigid dread at his very existence, and this war was a collective strategy to corner him unaware and kill him, thus releasing the world into a monumental sigh of relief. He should have known long ago, of course, when his parents, so doting and hesitant, had groomed him for his performances. Even they had to treat him as if he were a deadly snake. Now he knew that even matter conspired against him—the hidden strand of barbed wire on the ground, the sudden rainstorm, where bolts of lightning would be hurled with outrageous incompetence, missing him by kilometers, the “stray” bullet, simply matter's bad aim. Would the organs of his body, sliding over each other encased in that symmetrical arrangement of bones, be next to mount a conspiracy against him?

He sighed with a sensation of prehistoric fatigue. He felt hunger, but knew food was unnecessary, a stupid human weakness he had assumed applied to him. How long they must have worked on *that* particular act of brainwashing! The sound of the battle, like distant thunder, continued, and he laughed until tears filled his eyes. What idiots! They still didn't

know he had left, and so continued their imbecilic charade.

He had a little cheese in his sack, and wondered if he should eat it. Imagining that he was human was a habit, but not unpleasant. He reached for the sack and saw movement in the darker corner of the barn. Groaning with jovial contempt, he swiveled the Degtyarev around and aimed, his finger hesitating on the trigger. It was a cat, orange striped. Budenkov stood up straight. The cat came out with an E-sharp “Br-r-raalp?” Then it slid along the wall toward a beam, and seductively arched its back.

“Who sent you?” Budenkov demanded. The cat pointed its rear end to the beam and sprayed, his tail vibrating in a long, vigorous strain. Budenkov sighed. The universal conspiracy had become so frustrating that he felt like simply giving up, letting them off from their vigil and permitting them to do with him whatever they deemed appropriate. He felt like a densely pressurized container of poison of infinite toxicity, and even the cat, circling him along the wall, could not hide his collusion. “I have decided to go to Odessa,” he said. He pulled the block of half-dried cheese out of the sack, and broke off several crumbs. He threw one to the cat, who ate it quickly as if fearing its magical disappearance. “Very well,” Budenkov said, “we shall establish a pact of interim noblesse oblige.” He tried to stroke the cat’s head, but it retreated suspiciously, so he gave it another crumb of cheese. Then the cat understood. “Yes, we shall go and let them carry on. They are unaware of my absence! Can you imagine? Hear that? Bombs, rockets, gunfire, and all because of someone who isn’t even there! Come, we will go to Odessa, and it’s a long way.”

The cat allowed itself to be stroked. Budenkov considered taking the Degtyarev, but realized he didn’t need it. Why participate in their games? He gave the cat more cheese, and a little later they left for Odessa, the cat following him by darting quickly and warily from bush to bush. Walking with that exhilarating sensation which always comes from knowing you are going south, Budenkov noted with interest and curiosity that bombed-out trucks, shattered trees and obscure lumps of rubble on the ground all sat in careful but oddly benign observation of their passing.

AUSCHWITZ, POLAND, SPRING 1943—*The Sonderkommandos’ Repast*

The four Kapos sit on a bunk, looking down at a grainy chunk of bread the size of a man’s hand. It is illuminated by a burning taper held above by

Mandel, the “dentist.” His job is removing gold fillings and bridges from the mouths of the dead. Dulpers, whose job is furnace tending, prepares to cut the bread five ways using a small gold pocket knife he pried from the hand of a woman on her way to the oven. Kretchmer and Muller watch, frequently looking over their shoulders toward a nearby bunk where body carrier Steigl lies. He is the only other Kapo awake in the block. The five men have sacrificed this hour of sleep to divide the bread, which was smuggled in by a Ukranian guard they bribed with gold fillings and currency stolen from personal effects. A pause in the sure process of their starvation, the bread is even more valuable now because the cold weather continues to gnaw at them physically, and because the SS have cut their food rations as punishment for damage to a furnace.

The feast of the bread is to be a solemn occasion, because Steigl told them that he could not eat and would die tonight. He had been here too long, and would not make roll call tomorrow. Muller reported to the others that Steigl had suddenly begun to whisper in his hunger and exhaustion about the past, his family, his native town. “I think it is a bad sign,” Muller said, and Kretchmer said, “It means he has lost his hold, yes.”

Dulpers takes a breath and begins to cut the bread, carefully figuring the first slice at one fifth. “Five ways,” he whispers. “Watch—we’ll draw straws to see who chooses first.”

The men watch, breaths held. When he is at the point of starting the third cut they all hear noise outside, and pause briefly to listen. Guards are beating someone over near the transport workers’ blocks. “That’s way beyond the fence,” Kretchmer says. Dulpers nods and continues cutting the bread. When he is finished, the men look at each other with tentative satisfaction. It may mean extra days, maybe weeks of life. The risk was worth it.

Muller rises and tiptoes through the darkness to Steigl’s bunk. He leans down to him, saddened by the older man’s hairless emaciation, and whispers, “Come, the bread is ready.” Steigl opens his eyes, and Muller sees the taper flame reflected in them. “Come,” he says, “it’s better to eat it sitting up.”

Steigl’s head moves, just perceptibly. He blinks slowly, then looks at the ceiling.

“No, you’re not going up the chimney. We’ll work something out, hide you here. We’ll organize food.”

Steigl's eyes say no. Then, with great effort, he whispers, "finished."
"No, you only need rest. I will hold the bread for you."

Steigl whispers, "finished."

He dies while they eat the bread.

Muller discovers this after he has finished his portion, which he ate discussing the possibility of hiding Steigl under a bunk. After all there are so many men at roll call, some deception could easily be arranged. But Steigl is dead.

Returning to the other men, Muller whispers, "He sleeps with the angels." In the dim light the men study each other's faces, and then they look down. Finally Dulpers sighs and takes out the little knife. "Four ways," he says. Very carefully he measures out the portions while the other men watch.

MAIDANECK, POLAND, FALL 1943—*Moslems*

The three inmates stand at the fence, draped in tattered rags and staring at a line of angular, leafless trees in the distance. In camp slang they are called 'Moslems.' The two camp guards, usually unaware of those who have lost the will to live and are simply waiting for a comfortable way to die, now watch the three men, wondering what it is that attracts their attention. Reismann, the younger of the two, is fascinated by Moslems because of their closeness to death. The term identifying them seems grimly appropriate—with rags covering their heads, they wander in a stupefied, catatonic trance. They are so near to being dead that nothing touches them.

Voss, the second guard, is Reismann's voluntary mentor. He has assisted the younger man in his first month here at the camp by explaining to him details of its operation and instructing him on its slang and peculiar social order. "Moslems," he told Reismann, "are retired, no matter what their ages. If, for example, one of those three men at the fence falls down, he will simply curl up into a fetal position and die there, and the other Moslems will not even notice. It is hard to say what degree of awareness they have, but they don't seem to feel pain, and are no longer hungry."

"Why don't they just herd them into a gas chamber, then?" Reismann asks.

Voss holds his shoulders up in a sustained shrug.

Reismann watches. The three Moslems stare at the trees. Becoming cold and bored, Reismann stamps his feet to get his circulation going again. Then, as he watches, one Moslem gingerly sits down in the mud and slush at the fence. "Look," Reismann says to Voss.

"Yes, he's gone. He'll be there tomorrow, ice cold."

Reismann watches. The two Moslems still standing shuffle a short distance away, as if giving the third proper space to die. Reismann leans his rifle against the wall and steps out of the guard shack and walks toward the Moslems. "Don't touch them!" Voss calls after him. "Typhus!"

Reismann approaches the Moslems. The one who sat down is now balled up, his face nestled in the dirty slush—he stares at the mud just in front of his face. Reismann gains the attention of one of the other two, an old man, perhaps in his sixties, whose watery, red-rimmed eyes set in the stubbly, emaciated face rest on him with casual objectivity. "What are you looking at?" Reismann asks. "What do you see out there?" The Moslem seems to think, weighing Reismann's question as if it is almost mystifyingly complicated.

"Trees," he whispers.

"Why? What's so interesting about trees?"

The Moslem looks at the trees. "A swan."

"Swan? What swan?"

"In the trees," the Moslem whispers.

Reismann looks, baffled. "One, two, three," the Moslem whispers. "There—see?"

Reismann grunts and leaves the men. In the shack he says to Voss, "Insane. They are insane."

Later, near sundown, Reismann watches the western sky go from yellow to orange and feels the chill advance. The two Moslems are gone, the third remains sleeping in the mud and slush. It is only a few minutes before the changing of the guard. Reismann sighs and looks at the color in the sky, above the line of trees. Then in a peculiar transformation of his vision he sees a shape, which in a matter of seconds materializes into the Moslems' swan, sitting facing south with its long, graceful neck lined with an artist's perfection by the thin tangle of limbs from several trees meshing in against one another. Even the wing tips rising slightly off its back are included in the picture, and the soft, rounded beak sits exactly where it should be, as if the two trees were bent and manipulated together

with an almost agonizing precision. He steps out of the shack and walks to his left, to some higher ground where he can get a better look, but as he moves laterally, the swan disappears as magically as it had appeared. One had to stand exactly where the Moslems stood in order to see it.

NEAR MINSK, SUMMER 1944—*The Dead Are Not Hungry*

Smelkov leaned against the barbed wire fence, watching the other prisoners at their preparations for the reprisal. Each man had made some kind of peace with the idea—some prayed, some gazed with an inward turning distance at the line of trees down the slope near the river, perhaps imagining somehow running to them and avoiding the bullet which would finally end all this horrible discomfort and this hunger, which ate at them constantly. Smelkov took the news with something like relief—to be released from this torture in a single, hot flash. The prospect of death invited him like a long, dreamless sleep.

Kalinin, the man closest to him at the fence, stared at the gate. “Why are the Germans not here?” he asked.

“They need all their men for the killing,” Smelkov said. “This morning they took three hundred. It’ll take days.”

They learned of the reprisal the day before. The SS had found the bodies of three of their men in the woods, mutilated and naked. The reprisal would be the execution of four thousand men, and as the information rippled through the crowds of prisoners, the mumbling and whispering rose into a deafening assembly of screams and wailing. Men fell to their knees, invoked the names of saints, pounded the ground with their fists. And later their hunger became intolerable, and they shed the last vestiges of humanity and acted like animals—after all, only a day or two left to live, let’s at least go with something in our bellies. Some of the weaker men were set upon at night by prisoners with crude weapons, and Smelkov could not at first understand the logic of what they did—they cut them open and pulled out their livers. Why? Because it could be easily chewed, unlike muscles. He had heard of incidents like this before, stories from other camps and from the famines after the Great War. The thought of it frightened him because thin and weak as he was, he could be the next source of their food.

Smelkov looked at Kalinin’s hands. The dirt under the nails had that

dark reddish brown hue telling him that Kalinin had participated directly. Yesterday, late in the night, he gave three little sticky scraps to Smelkov, who ate them quickly lest he think about it too long. But the bitter taste was almost worse than the hunger.

“Stop looking at me!” Kalinin said. “The poor fellow was nearly dead anyway! Anyway, we knocked him out first.” He paused, and Smelkov looked at the grey stubble on his emaciated head.

“Yes, I know,” he said.

Kalinin was thinking. “Why do we hear no shots?”

“I don’t know. They may have invented another method.” Not a bullet? he wondered. What other ways were there? Clubbing? Drowning? The thought of some more painful method made Smelkov tremble. It was unfair. He looked again toward the gate. In the distance, shimmering inside a cloud of dust, he could see men marching toward the camp, shuffling along in dirty grey smocks. “Prisoners?” he asked. “They seem to be coming back.”

Kalinin looked too. The column of men moved toward the camp as slowly and looking as weak and fatigued as when they left to be shot.

“What’s happening?”

They heard yelling from the gate. The word spread quickly back through the crowds of men. The Germans were gone. The Russians were only a few kilometers away. The men had seen tanks, dust, and glints of light. The ground had shuddered with the rumble of powerful engines.

The discovery that they were to be spared caused a reaction similar to that caused by the news that they were to be shot. Men fell to their knees, prayed, invoked the names of saints and wept with seeming misery. Smelkov moved as if in a fog, not knowing what to do—free, he was free. Although he felt the subtle, weak surge of a kind of joy, he realized that he had to be careful or he would faint. The lightheadedness kept him at the fence, holding onto the wire for support. He felt a strange uneasiness and growing nausea, as if he wanted to retch his insides out. He began to sweat.

Kalinin seemed unable to move. He sat by the fence, staring with dumbfounded, glassy eyes at the dirt before him, saying something to himself over and over.

“What? What’s the matter?” Smelkov asked.

Kalinin was weeping, holding his hands to his face. He looked up at

Smelkov, his face drawn with astonishment and growing fright.

“I have eaten human flesh,” he whispered. “Dear God, I have eaten human flesh.”