

# THE WRONG SALUTE

A novel by

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He envied pianists for their talents and  
soldiers for their scars.

— Flaubert, *Sentimental Education*

It was a combination of a Hitler salute and the crooked waving of a drunk man's arm, but maybe it was also just my clumsy attempt to copy the French *quenelle* gesture, I don't exactly know anymore. In any case, I was standing in *Trois Minutes* on *Torstrasse* in Berlin one night five years ago with the eternal troublemaker and misanthrope Hans Ulrich Barsilay, and for the first time since my childhood I performed my absurd Nazi gymnastics again.

I simultaneously gave a furious kick to the table where he'd been sitting for two hours with Leo Meinl, the constantly nervous talkshow lawyer, Zanussi, and Zanussi's radical-left French ex-wife Lola, none of whom probably want to have anything to do with Barsilay anymore. I hissed "It must hurt to be such an idiot" and "You little asshole" in his direction. Then I quickly lowered my arm again, if I remember correctly, and stared at the floor in silence. When I looked up I saw Meinl, Zanussi, and Lola sitting a little farther from Barsilay than before at the long, white-tablecloth bistro table; I could clearly see Barsilay's shocked, stupid Trotsky face out the corner of my eye; and I battled my nausea and fear of the scandal my Hitler salute blackout was likely to cause.

Who was I? Who was Barsilay? On that terrible evening, had I just ended my career as a writer before it even really began?

Half an hour later, as I was stumbling home to *Teutoburger Platz* on dark, loud *Torstrasse*, I could already see myself, a modern Nazi

refugee, packing my suitcase the next morning, taking the train to Hamburg, and catching the last ship from there to America, leaving Germany forever... cast out and chased away merely for inadvertently breaking one of the unwritten laws of the Great Re-Education.

I think I was almost to Gormannstrasse when I turned around and went back to Rosenthaler Platz, where that gigantic new brightly lit liquor store had just opened—the English words “Liquor Store” were over the door as though I had crossed the Atlantic already—and I looked for the most expensive vodka they had. It was from Finland, the bottle looked like it had been hewn out of a block of ice, and when I accidentally touched the cashier’s hand while paying—a short Middle Eastern woman with a towering mint-green headscarf, who spoke surprisingly beautiful, clear German—I thought: You poor people, you’re clearly next after me! What will they blame you for? Not Auschwitz, surely, it’ll be something to do with the Armenians.

“Barsilay’s everywhere,” I conspiratorially whispered to the diminutive Turkish or Arabic woman. She nodded politely without saying anything, and when I opened the Finnish bottle while still in the store and drank almost a third of it in one go, she said nothing then either.

I first heard Barsilay's strange name while still in high school. My father—some say I got my unusually quick intelligence and perceptiveness from him, but unfortunately also his almost maddening touchiness and his professorial absent-mindedness—came home much earlier than usual from the university one sunny summer day somewhere in the early nineties. He had red splotches on his face and neck and was sweating so much that the roots of his yellowish gray hair were wet, shining darkly above his high thinker's brow. Since no one was home except me, he told me what had upset him so much that he couldn't keep working. Over lunch he had happened to read Barsilay's shocking essay in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* about "the gorillas of Rostock-Lichtenhagen": that was what Barsilay called the idiots who had almost set their own houses on fire so that they could hound a few poor Vietnamese out of theirs. Now Papa sputtered Barsilay's foreign-sounding name out, once, twice, three times in a row, and then suddenly addressed himself to an invisible audience: "Who is the true engine of History? The hopeless reactionaries or their victims?"

In that article, which I first read myself almost ten years later as a student, for my never-completed master's thesis, East Germans like the Rostock hooligans were robbing West Germans like him of their homeland, a little bit more every day. But of course, my father said, he didn't mention that West Germans had made *us* homeless overnight. "People like this Barsilay, my boy," said my dear clever father with rare

contempt in his voice, as he stood with his lit cigarette at the open window of the large living room of our apartment on the corner of Gustav Adolf and Funkenburg Streets, from where you could see the deep, billowing green of the linden and chestnut trees of Rosenthal but also the high, grey-white roof of the Central Stadium, “people like this Barsilay always pick the wrong allies. And then they gawk at the world as stupidly as the Bolsheviks they never were. Ah well, it’s always the same story, pretty much.” At the time, I was sixteen years old—“sweet sixteen,” so to speak, and exactly as angry and confused as almost everyone else in my grade—and I didn’t know exactly what he meant, but I could feel that he and I were finally on the same side again, at least for a few seconds.

When, as I said, I was later a student of Sartorius’s in Berlin and intending to write my thesis on “Late Bolshevism as Identity and Drawback”—and how stupid do you have to be to betray your pinko political views to your reactionary thesis adviser before the very first line?—Barsilay’s Rostock article was one of the first texts I looked up. I was sitting in the old reading room of the national library on Unter den Linden, at one of the old familiar light-wood Hellerau tables that would later, during the renovations, allegedly so cautious, after the fall of the Wall, disappear without a trace. And as I ran my beautiful, slightly crooked Dessau index finger over the yellowed, nearly socialist-brown paper of the *FAZ* and whispered Barsilay’s terse, rushed, much too plausible sentences to myself as I read, I remembered what had happened on that oppressively hot August afternoon in Leipzig when Barsilay’s effrontery had made it impossible for my father to keep working and he explained to me, after his

breathless tirade, that there would always and forever be *us* and *them*, and that I mustn't ever forget it.

Papa smoked another four or five cigarettes at least at the window as I stood in the doorway and listened to him with curiosity and interest. He even offered me one, which was something he'd never done before, and even though I wanted one badly I decided to say No. He was half-offended, half-relieved. "Then at least give me a hug, Erck, you little scamp, you big punk," he said. "You're big enough now to give your old father some courage." And I did, after a brief, uncertain back and forth between the door and the window. I thought: Why does he smell like oranges? We never have oranges. And why is he holding me as gently as a baby? Then we went, together, for a walk around Rosenthal, for the first time in many years.

Papa usually walked faster than me, and kept flinging his long, scraggly Dessau arms into the air like a director, arms that I have too, of course, a legacy of our Rostock dockworkers' predecessors. He said "Ah!", and "Oh!", and told me that whenever he was in a park, but especially ours in airy lovely Rosenthal, he would forget within seconds that he was actually dead-tired or miserable. Then he started listing off for me the many other parks he had been in. The ratio of those in the East to those in the West must have been about thirty to three. We were standing right in the middle of the large green meadow and Papa, waving his arms, was shouting: "Városliget! Sokolniki!" when suddenly a camel ran by us. It was very tall and white, its hump swayed as it ran, and it had an old, sad face. It reminded me a little of Grandfather Heironymi, known in the family as "poor, poor Jakob," who had voluntarily enlisted in the Wehrmacht due to his half-Aryan origins, so

as not to stand out in the Reich. I knew him only as an emaciated, weeping old man. Only after the camel had vanished behind the Scherbelberg bushes did I begin to marvel at his appearance. There were always rumors about animals escaping from the zoo, but I had never seen anything like that myself, and never really believed the rumors could be true. When I said, “That was crazy, Papa. Did you see that?” he said with a smile, “It feels like you must be dreaming, right?”

When we got to the long ditch with its sparse bushes and reeds that barely separated the Rosenthal park from the zoo, he said: “Look, no one there! They’re pretending to be asleep in their cages and enclosures, but of course they’re just acting. Come on, we’ll wait to see if another one of the animals is crazy enough to run away.” He grabbed my arm and almost shouted at me: “It’s always wrong to run away, Erck! Do you understand?! It doesn’t matter how bad it is in your prison. Wandering loose isn’t for people like us. I hope the poor king of the camels gets caught by his keepers soon, otherwise he’ll run into real problems being free.” I said nothing, wondering what he meant, and then: “Papa, I would like a cigarette now.”

This all went through my head as I sat in the library in Berlin almost ten years later, reading Barsilay’s article about Rostock, and realizing that Papa had left half of it out of his summary. Because of course the eternal troublemaker (and later winner of the Ludwig Börne prize) attacked the West Germans too, once his shrill, rather sadistic screed against the East Germans was done. He claimed that they, the Wessis, treated us “Bolshevized human gorillas,” the Osis, as mercilessly as Lieutenant von Trotha’s troops had the helpless, courageous Hereros. He compared southern West German to the ex-

GDR, the massacre in the Omaheke Desert of Namibia to the Treuhand pogroms, and wondered out loud whether, in a “country torn by civil war,” he could still feel at home. “I will”—I underlined one sentence and never forgot it, since it was more whiny, self-pitying, and ahistorical at once than any sentence I had ever seen—“I will stay nonetheless, for if I did leave, all my enemies would say it was I who had kicked myself out of the county.”

There it was, the typical Barsilay turn: this “Both-And” that only seemed complex, the move of someone who refused to be nailed down, intellectually, geographically, or humanly. I thought as much even back then, as a powerless little student in the national library on Unter den Linden, and I thought it again later, when I read or heard something by Barsilay and asked myself, trembling, why he of all people in the older generation made me so angry, not Goetz or Eylschmidt or Grünbein. And I think it and write it now, in the much too hot winter of 2012, in my large modern condo on Bernauer Street, in one of the new co-op buildings that sprung up like mushrooms years ago along the line of the former Wall. My neighbors are almost all architects, young congressional aides in the Bundestag, and journalists, and most of them are very nice to me when they see me. Clearly I’m not the invisible nobody I was before—no, definitely not—and maybe that’s precisely why I feel something like pity for my long-since overpowered adversary, who permitted himself one too many of his proverbial “Barsilay turns” and then, after it came out, with my friendly assistance, went into hiding, like a professional revolutionary under Czar Nicholas II, or maybe more like an ordinary little con man.

Now why had the insolent Barsilay not said anything when I offered him the forbidden German salute at the Trois Minutes? (I'll come back to the story of his totally incongruous first names, Hans Ulrich, shortly.) Later, much later, once I was no longer afraid of the thousandfold consequences of my idiotic arm flourish, I asked myself that question many times, and each time I did, I felt for an instant the same nausea I felt in the bad weeks and months after the incident. Was he as shocked as me about what had happened, and that's why he didn't say anything? Or was this his strategy? Had he decided to wait in silence for Meinel, Zanussi, and Zanussi's ex-wife to take his side and hound me out of the restaurant with shouts and curses, and for the lawyer to threaten to destroy my life with a nice little criminal complaint for hate crime? Or did it strike Barsilay speechless that the others, on the contrary, acted like they had seen and heard nothing? Of course it was also possible that he had other problems on his mind that night, but then again, don't we all?

I had already been sitting at the bar in the Trois Minutes for quite a while, the counter a bit too high and covered with bottles and old French bistro ashtrays, celebrating on my own my first real book deal—big advance, respected publisher, but unfortunately Barsilay's publisher, too, for more than twenty years now—and watching, at first out of nothing but a mix of boredom and amused prejudice, Barsilay

himself, mostly quiet and strangely serious in the middle of his overexcited little entourage.

He looked nothing in the least like Trotsky, of course—when I wrote that before, it was just to say it. He was much too tall and much too thin, almost like he'd spent the past several years starving out the pounds you automatically put on at his age, nor did he have the ridiculous old-fashioned goatee of Stalin's eternal rival. He looked, if anything, more like an English aristocrat, and (with a little imagination) he might have been a handsome older TV actor. His high, serious cheekbones shone, even though it was late, as if he had just shaved. He had dark, medium-length hair that he was constantly sweeping back, or, when it wasn't draped over his high, bright forehead, he would quickly throw his whole head back, and the way his thick black shock of hair flew back reminded me unpleasantly of a shampoo ad from the nineties. In his little blue Spinoza-esque eyes—Warning! The name Spinoza is obviously just a metaphor here!—burned the light of a smartass who is in fact smarter than most other people, and knows it. Naturally, he looked very sad and very happy at the same time, which women—interesting women—especially like.

Barsilay had been sneaking glances at me all night, I saw that clearly. But they weren't friendly. What did he want from me, why couldn't he just leave me alone? He looked at me... and at the same time looked right through me, pursing his astoundingly thin lips together in brooding anger. One time, while giving me one of those looks, seemingly oblivious to their intrusiveness, he bent over to Zanussi and whispered something to him, and Zanussi pushed his

gigantic gold DJ glasses up his nose, took them off, and put them back on again, slowly and seriously shaking his head the whole time.

What was Barsilay thinking as he looked at me? What was he so mad about? And why couldn't he control himself? Was he perhaps in such a bad mood over the *Frigid* trial that had been dragging on for years? That too, of course. But this gossip known to everyone in town had no doubt heard by now that three days earlier, in Sacrow, with his and now my publisher in her villa, I had signed the contract for world rights to the first major biography of Naftaly Frenkel, and now he was thinking that I was going to approach the grandmaster of the Stalinist inquisition in a way that not even a fanatic for the truth like him would like. Maybe he had been planning for a long time to write something big and mean and à la Barsilay about Frenkel—he had, after all, slipped Frenkel into his failed Stalin-goes-west novel as a kind of Soviet Zuckerberg—and he was afraid I would steal his idea.

Right you are, Comrade B.! I thought when Barsilay shot his distracted flamethrower look at me for the third or fourth time. That's just what happened! Obviously I'd gotten the idea from him. Obviously I would do everything I could to beat him to the punch. And obviously I would write the truth and nothing but the truth about shrewd, shifty Naftaly Aronovich Frenkel, and I couldn't care less who would declare themselves my willing or unwilling ally after reading my taboo-breaking docu-novel. Hadn't Barsilay himself, in *My People*—his most famous book and only bestseller; I've read it twice—said in almost these exact words that there's no such thing as praising the wrong people, there is only literary-slash-historical truth, and chutzpah. And now, out of vanity, and in a sudden fit of political

correctness, he actually wanted to stop me from writing about how one of the most brutal mafiosi of Odessa, compared to whom Isaac Babel's Benya Krik was a quaint little altar boy, became the king of the Solovetsky Islands and emperor of the Siberian railway gulags? Seriously? Had we come to this, in Germany?

As I responded ever more aggressively to Barsilay's looks, a short, depressing movie called *Intrigue in Sacrow* ran through my head. The jealous Great Writer would no doubt never hesitate a second to silence me! The next morning, maybe the one after, he would go to tea at our publisher's giant, impressive villa once owned by Martin Bormann and furnished in the morbid Italian style of the losers of wars from the late Forties; he would have an XXL bouquet of flowers in his hand, and surely some very expensive, insanely French thing to drink, even though, as everyone knew, he himself, like so many of *them*, drank no alcohol. Then he would sit, monosyllabic, shy, knees pressed girlishly together, on the same enormous rust-brown Gio Ponti sofa I had just recently sat on. He would appear cowed by so much splendid luxury and tristesse, for which the publisher, usually dressed in flowing black like a Classical priestess, was well known. He would gaze out at the wintry gray lake, marveling, distracted, through the sixteen-foot-high windows of the gymnasium-sized living room of the Bormann villa, and whenever the publisher asked him why he seemed so unhappy and bashful today, he would wave his hand through the air and say: "Oh, it's nothing." Eventually the publisher—that was what everyone called her, incidentally, in the office, in the newspapers, everywhere: "the publisher," as though she didn't have a real name—eventually the publisher would go sit down next to

Barsilay on the sofa. She would take the cup of tea from him and press a glass of Dom Perignon or whatever it was into his hand and say: “So, tell me about it, Hans Ulrich.”

And then he would start. With the theatrical earnestness he always brought out whenever the topic was anything to do with *them*, he would tell the publisher that he’d heard about my Frenkel project, and that it made him so terribly sad, because hadn’t he told her, a long time ago, that he wanted to write about Frenkel himself, but something more on the literary side, of course. And even though she didn’t remember any such conversation she would nod, and then when he added that he was afraid how one of *us*, of all people, would tackle this highly sensitive subject, full of so many trapdoors, she would abruptly stand up, she would stand with her back to him—a short black silhouette against the enormous living room windows—and softly say: “Let me think it over a little, my dear...”

No, no, no, I thought, please no! as for the second or third time I played through in my head the scene that would take place in Sacrow sometime in the next few days, I was absolutely sure of it. The only part I wasn’t sure about was what they would use against me in the end, as a way to get rid of me. Anything was possible: some trivial, unexpectedly revealed story of harrassment in my otherwise rather unspectacular biography as a man and self-sufficient perpetual bachelor; Barsilay’s prior claim to the Frenkel story, which she had somehow forgotten to bring up; or my membership, which I had never denied or hidden, at the Youth Library in Gohlis, Leipzig, when it was so exciting to be able to read Johnny Rotten’s memoirs, Thomas Pynchon, and Rosenberg’s biography of Horst Wessel at the same

time. Yes, exactly, it would be something like that—and I'd be out on my ass and my contract would be good enough to light on fire before doing the same to myself, doused in gasoline, shaking, howling, and sobbing outside the villa of my former future publisher.

Was it true? Would it get that bad, and could I, the son of a highly intelligent but overcautious father, seriously let it come to that?

I slammed the counter in a fury, knocking over my wineglass and the carafe, which was luckily only half full by then. I watched as the little red stream flowed across the paper doily with the *Trois Minutes* menu printed on it and quickly reached the edge of the bar, then dripped onto the new Acne jeans I had just bought for far too much money at *Galleries Lafayette*. Then I slammed my hands into the bar even more furiously and heedlessly than before; I leaped up from my barstool so awkwardly that it swayed back and forth a couple times, though it was too heavy to fall over; then I walked slowly, nastily, threateningly, through the bistro that was surprisingly empty and unglamorous just then, straight to the table where Barsilay, Meinl, Zanussi, and his exaggeratedly made-up, loudly giggling, compulsively eye-rolling French ex-wife were sitting. It was right next to the door, and in winter the draft was as bad as in a Berlin streetcar—I have no idea what made a sniveling hypochondriac like Barsilay decide to sit there of all places. But then, at the last moment, I turned around and hurried to the bathroom.

The unnaturally short and sulfurous winter day in December of the tumultuous year 2000, the day on which I disposed of my master's thesis forever in about ninety seconds, had begun with a large English breakfast in Café Einstein, on Unter den Linden of course. I had never been there before—it was too expensive, too loud, with too many famous people, my valiant classmates had said. But because I was so worked-up before my meeting with Sartorius, I thought I needed some kind of extra superpower to win him over to my topic, and I decided that this was the place I would acquire it. Bacon, scrambled eggs, buttered toast, Earl Grey tea with warm milk: all of that was a good start, although the sixteen euros (plus tip) I would have to pay for it seemed as crazy and outrageous as my secret Nazi gymnastics had been, or my regular unenthusiastic masturbation, once everyone in the Gustav Adolf Street apartment had finally gone to sleep and I tried to behave like a regular teenager. I realize that this is a rather drastic comparison, but that's exactly how I thought of it on that agitated morning itself.

As I ate breakfast, as slowly and worshipfully as if it were the first breakfast of my life, I noticed someone who looked exactly like the former Foreign Minister, sitting next to a short, black-haired woman who reminded me of an old GDR sportscaster that everyone in my school was in love with, including the girls. They were sitting half-hidden by a full coat rack in the very back corner of the brightly lit café, with all its mirrors, flashing coffee cups, and white, stained

waiter's aprons surrounding me and shining in my eyes. At another table, I saw three men in very broad suits—red faces, dead eyes, quick gestures—and kept hearing the words “committee” and “push through” repeated over and over in their quiet discussion. Clearly they were real live legislators from the real live Reichstag nearby, but at the same time I couldn't believe that's who they actually were. Then there was another table where a little man was sitting alone: snow-white seven day's growth of beard, constantly swiveling lecherous gaze, in short a rather good copy of the notorious Israeli ambassador who was always a little too confident and self-assured in his many TV interviews as he advocated for whatever his government was doing. Of course there were also people there who didn't remind me of anyone, but they too radiated so much non-neurotic confidence and professional get-ahead-ism that every minute I spent in the same room as them felt like it was contaminating me with a little more of their energy. Here I come, Sartorius! I thought. And: By the end he'll be begging me to write my thesis under him, not Münkler or Van Heydel!

“Can I have your newspaper?” I heard a voice suddenly say. It was the young—or maybe not quite so young anymore—platinum blonde at the table next to mine. Before I could answer, she had taken the *Welt am Sonntag* that happened to be between us on the beautiful brown leather Café Einstein bench; I smelled her shimmering sweet perfume and something that I was rather sure had to do with the covered parts of her curvy but firm body. I was flustered, a fact that surprised me—as I've said, women interested me only in ways very much reined in by civilization. It was probably also partly because she looked like the Russian women I knew from the old Soviet films that

were always shown on our TV, and thus in a way truly did look like a wraith: lots of hairspray in her insanely blonde hair, even more make-up, but an open, clear face, big Slavic eyes with their slightly Asian quality, gorgeous teeth, sexually charged potential hysteria. “You’re shaking,” this visitor from the past said coolly, then she turned away and started flipping through the *Welt am Sonntag*, from the back page forward.

She was right. I was shaking, inside and out, or something, and in her presence my new superpowers vanished as quickly as I’d felt them infuse me a moment before. But that shaking was nothing compared to the single powerful annihilating depressing shudder that ran from my ankles to my neck when a tall, exaggeratedly thin pretty boy appeared in the narrow aisle alongside the bar, in tight jeans and a very short dark blue jacket over a blinding white shirt, looking exactly like the man whom my father, on a certain oppressively hot August afternoon shortly after the fall of the Wall, had brought, with his *FAZ* essay, to the edge of something I didn’t yet know existed or what to call it. Yes, Papa had fled the institute, chainsmoked at the window, hugged me for the first and last time in my life, taken a walk with me, given a strange little speech about a camel, and lain down, crying, suffering a genuine nervous breakdown, as I realized only years later. But that unfortunately didn’t change the fact that ever since that day I saw in him only the revenant of the forever tear-stained puffy-eyed Grandfather Hieronymi, a better educated version maybe but no real role model.

Was this really Hans Ulrich Barsilay in the flesh? I thought, shocked, as the guy in the ridiculously tight jacket walked straight

towards my table, slowly and quickly at the same time. Or was it just someone who copied him because he liked him, liked how this tall Barsilay dressed, arrogant and roosterish as a gay French fashion designer—some wacko Barsilay fan who worshipped his articles, books, and TV appearances, who thought it was funny that Barsilay would call himself now a “postmodern Antichrist,” now a “bipedal cavalry of Enlightenment”? And why would there be any Barsilay fan at all who was one of *us*, I thought, unless he was also one of *them*? This doppelganger—who maybe wasn’t one, just like the other VIPs in Café Einstein might be the real things—took two or three steps in my direction, and I pressed my body against the backrest in a panic, wiping my mouth with the large linen napkin; but then he swerved aside to the beautiful Russian from bygone times. He bent down to her, with a sweet and cannibalistic smile, kissed her, stroked her cheek and the back of her neck, and sat down on the bench between her and me—and ten minutes later I was telling him about the meeting I was about to have with my professor, about my worries, about me, about *my people*. I have no idea how that rhetorical fraud and amateur Freud had managed it.

Yes, it was Barsilay himself! First I told him everything about my master’s thesis—after he had put his sloshing glass of tea on my notes, like a child, and left a stain there—and my idea of proving, right in the introduction, with the help of Jauss, Tröbst, and the French Principlists, that there are no better or worse social systems, only winners and losers. Then, so that this wouldn’t sound too dry, I hinted at my father’s suicide; after that, since Barsilay was asking in such a friendly, pushy way about the rest of my family, a way that *we* would

never ask even among our closest friends and relatives, I explained that I hadn't spoken or thought about my faithless mother since July 1996. Finally, as though hypnotized, I admitted that sometimes I missed certain things, never having realized that they'd mattered to me—the exciting “Days of Defense Readiness” training in high school, the bitter taste of sea-buckthorn jam from the East German Baltic coast—and I said with a laugh that I wished I had a reverse time machine to turn reunified Germany into a Socialist country. I hated myself for being so honest with him, and because of that I hated him even more—the phantom of my shattered, half-orphan youth suddenly come to life.

“What can you write that hasn't been thought and written already?” he said severely when I was done, staring for a few seconds too long at my blood-encrusted index finger, which I'd bitten in my sleep the night before. “And are you sure you want to?”

I shrugged and thought for the thousandth time about the thesis title I was so proud of: “Late Bolshevism as Identity and Drawback.” No, it wasn't really anything new. I already knew that myself.

“The first thing you need to do is stop shaking, Erck. I imagine Valeria's already told you that. No, I'm sure she has! She's always so caring and empathetic.”

He placed his left hand on my hand and his right hand on that of the Soviet ice princess, and it felt like I was directly touching her, as though she and I already knew so many things about each other.

“Sometimes the really courageous thing to do is give up, do you understand what I mean?” he said.

“And then?” I said.

“Then,” said the Russian apparently named Valeria, without a trace of an accent in her deep but incredibly smooth Miss Volgograd voice, “the shadows turn to light. A white page at the start of a novel. A Gestapo headquarters in a school for the disabled.” I saw how she pressed his hand while saying it, and he simultaneously made his hand very heavy on mine, and all of a sudden I knew exactly what he was trying to tell me.

[END OF SAMPLE]