

# Before the Beginning

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They sat on the bench behind the terminal and smoked. It was shaping up to be a beautiful day, though the April sun was still rather weak at this hour of the morning.

Fritz was thirty-six, with a wife of seven years and a four-year-old son, both of whom were now halfway safe out in Caputh with Aunt Trudchen.

Schultz was twenty-four, no wife, no children. His parents were making their way by foot to the Elbe, cardboard suitcases in tow.

Most people from the research facility diagonally opposite had already left. Two or three guards were feeding files into a kind of campfire. To speed things up, they threw the odd splash of petrol onto the flames, which then leapt so high and belched so much black smoke that the men jumped back out of the way, laughing and joking.

A general sense of recklessness seemed to be spreading, and the two men on the bench noticed to their surprise that it had taken hold of them too. Particles of soot sailed around lazily on the spring air, and time seemed to slow down. There wasn't much left for anyone to do. But they couldn't just up and leave.

Air traffic had long been grounded, apart from the occasional plane coming to and from Gatow, either delivering supplies or evacuating the wounded.

Schultz and Fritz were glider pilots. They'd first met during training at the Rossitten gliding school on the Curonian Spit, and both had ended up as reserves at Johannisthal in Berlin. Schultz because he was no longer any use at the front, Fritz because he'd never even seen it.

Fritz had done the one thing he did best in life: he'd dodged, he'd faked, he'd bluffed, and he'd demonstrated his uncanny ability to turn any situation to his advantage.

Smart, but not exceptionally so, he wasn't one for quiet reflection, and despite his diabetes, he could drink until he was the last man standing.

Schultz was different. Quieter, tougher, and leaner; more brooding, calculating, and lost. He wasn't exactly a good-looking man. His eyes seemed to have been positioned asymmetrically on his face, and his receding chin gave him a dim-witted look. He'd taken a bullet in East Prussia, thanks to which he had been sent back to Berlin without him coming to any real harm. Things couldn't have worked out better.

Fritz managed to avoid service for a long time, but by the start of the year, his number was up. The restaurant was ordered to close, and all staff who up to now had been considered indispensable had to report for duty within twenty-four hours. Including the boss.

He'd run out of draft-dodging excuses, but he was at least allowed to stay in Berlin for a while before being dispatched to the front at the Oder.

What a tremendous stroke of luck. Here, at the Reich's oldest airfield, there was absolutely nothing going on.

Schultz looked at his watch.

The Americans usually came around this time. Not anymore, though. A sure sign that the others weren't far off now. The last shelling – during which only a single bomb had exploded at the far end of the runway – had taken place three days ago.

He nudged Fritz.

Two shaved-headed men in striped uniforms were crawling around behind the bicycle shed. Looking for unexploded bombs, no doubt. Their guards, two SS men, watched from a cowardly distance of a good hundred metres.

Easy now, easy, thought Schultz, who'd seen many a dud explode.

"They're making a break for it," Fritz said. He nudged Schultz again and pointed to the SS men, who were making off on two bicycles they had taken from the shed.

The prisoners hadn't noticed yet, but neither Fritz nor Schultz dared shout over to them. Aiding and abetting an escape. You never knew what spies might be lurking around the corner, ready to rat you out. They began to feel uneasy. Probably best to head back inside. They stood up, stamped out their cigarettes, and hurried across to the terminal.

The door was open, the corridor empty, the orderly room deserted. Looked like the last few people had left while they'd been out smoking on their bench, their little island outside time.

"Fritz, Schultz, come here!" called a voice from the end of the corridor. The duty officer was waving them over. Over they went.

"Take this cash box to the Ministry of Aviation. Our work here is done. The Russians will be here any minute. Go to Unit IV of the ministry, third floor, and await further orders. You're dismissed."

"Aren't you going to give us written authorisation?" Fritz asked suspiciously.

"Don't panic, here are your marching orders," the officer said, smirking as he passed Schultz the slip of paper.

"And how are we supposed to get there?" Schultz asked.

"That's your business. Hail a taxi." He laughed. "For God's sake, there are still a few bikes left outside, you idiots. Now get going. We're moving out, end of story."

He handed Schultz a grey metal box. It was locked, and wrapped around it was a paper band labelled "750 Reichsmarks".

Just then an almighty banging started up outside. Gunshots. They crept over to the window and peered out.

The research facility guards, having spotted the men in the striped uniforms making a run for it, were trying to shoot them from all the way across the airfield.

But the men had got their hands on the last two bicycles and were about to ride off. Fritz charged out, pulling his pistol from its holster. "Get out of here," he yelled. "Go on, scarpers, but hands off those bikes!"

The stockier man wasn't prepared to give up so easily. Cursing in Polish, or maybe Russian, he was attempting to hop onto the saddle when Fritz made it over to him. Fritz whacked the man on the back with the grip of his pistol, hopped on the bike himself, and rode off.

God damn it, where was Schultz?

Without that slip of paper I'm as good as dead, Fritz thought. He braked and stopped, but Schultz had already caught up with him. And then they were off, leaving the airfield behind and the two men in the striped uniforms to their fate.

They pedalled as furiously as if they themselves were escapees, which in a way they were.

The air was remarkably pleasant, with its smell of suburban allotments and the month of May.

There was the usual sound of rumbling and grumbling, of course, but at least it was in the distance.

In the sky there was nothing but blueness and sunlight, not a soul on Segelfliegerdamm. They tried to get their bearings.

"We'd best keep cycling with the Spree to our right."

"MA," Fritz said. "Pilots use the river to navigate."

Schultz knew that "MA" was short for "my arse".

He himself loathed such vulgar mess-hall talk, and he resolved to devise a way to shake off his uncouth companion as soon as possible.

But as long as he, Schulz, had the travel order, there was no way Fritz was going to let him out of his sight. And Fritz had no scruples, that much he had already made clear.

If I try to get away, he'll shoot me, Schultz thought, and right at that moment Fritz bleated with laughter, as if he had read Schultz's mind.

“We’re like Laurel and Hardy,” Fritz said. “If I get a flat, you’ll have to carry me on the back of your bike. We’re stuck with each other now, eh? Go on, you cycle ahead, I’ll direct you.”

But in fact Fritz was equally unsure of how to get to Wilhelmstrasse. All he knew is they’d have to head north-west, via Neukölln and Kreuzberg. First, though, they’d have to go straight ahead and pass through an allotment site. Not a gardener in sight. Now, at the end of April, the sheds were all locked up, the saplings covered in soft down and fresh foliage. The path was a sandy shade of grey; on one corner, a sign read “Südostallee Allotment Gardens.”

They cycled slowly, more or less at walking pace, and listened out for any sign of movement.

Schultz was sure there must be people close by. This would be the perfect refuge for people fleeing the bombed-out city. There were stockpiles of provisions, somewhere to live if necessary.

As a child, he’d often visited his mother’s sister, who along with her husband and two children, had an allotment in Neukölln. Playing there was sometimes good fun, sometimes very rough. The foul-mouthed bigger boys on the site used to shout obscenities at the younger ones. Once, lured by the sound of incomprehensible screams, he and his cousins peered through a hole in a shed’s wooden wall and watched as one of the older boys rocked back and forth with a naked girl.

They didn’t dare wait around too long, but later, from a safe distance, they tried to figure out what it was they’d just witnessed.

Was that how it worked? Why all the screaming?

Weeks later, they found out that the owner of the shed had been booted out for tolerating behaviour that was dangerous to children.

There was always something going on in Aunt Edith, Uncle Erich, Matthias, and Christian’s allotment site. There were spring fetes, summer parties, harvest festivals.

A small fairground was built in the middle of the site. Once again, things started going on between “those ne’er do wells hanging around” and the allotment girls, and whenever anyone asked Aunt Edith how she was, “Never better!” was her curt response.

This little working-class suburban world was completely alien to Fritz.

He was thinking about whether he might be able to pilfer something on the way into the city. A bottle of schnapps, perhaps, or eggs.

Fritz loved to pierce eggs and suck out the raw contents. “Breakfast is my favourite time of the year,” he liked to say.

He had an uncle named Hans-Werner. Hans-Werner was a businessman with a mansion in Dahlem, a wife named Milli, and two very young maids from Pomerania. Fritz thought about the time one of them let him touch her breast, and he couldn’t help but grin as he remembered her giggles. She was out on her ear the minute Aunt Milli got wind of it.

The two cyclists came to a fork and turned right.

The sheds were lined up in dense rows, and though no two were identical in design, each had a little fence with a little gate, and each garden had a vegetable patch, a shrubbery, and fruit trees. Everything in miniature. Even the trees looked like they were crouching. Fritz found it claustrophobic; it was childish, he thought, all this pottering around in gardens.

He’d only ever glimpsed allotment sites from the window of a car. A garden was something you had to yourself, along with a gardener, a chauffeur, a cook, a butler, and, of course, a sailboat.

His last race had been just two years ago.

“Keep clear! Keep clear! Keep clear!” everyone had roared as things yet again dissolved into chaos at the turning mark. Haderhoff was the first to find his way out of the fray, followed by his rival, who sailed downwind as he left the others behind.



The race's organisers had placed Buoy Four near the Klare Lanke boat club, and Fritz, in second place, could see his *Traute* peacefully moored to her buoy in the distance.

Everyone realised that this would probably be the last regatta for a long time on account of the war, and so, seeing as most sailors were at the front anyway, they allowed a jumble of classes to compete. A handicap system was put in place, as otherwise the smaller boats wouldn't have stood a chance against the big ones.

Haderhoff on his dinghy cruiser was followed closely by Fritz on a centreboard dinghy. Around a dozen other boats, comprising a few leftover Olympic and racing dinghies and even a seagoing Skerry cruiser, trailed them.

There was still some warmth in the sun, but the fresh autumn wind brought a few raindrops with it.

Under normal circumstances the men in the boats would have been suffering from the cold and damp, but all they felt was the sheer joy, here, in the middle of the war, of speeding across the water once again and losing themselves in such an inconsequential pursuit.

A wave swept over Fritz's crewmate, Teddy, as he leant out of the boat to stop it from heeling. He shook himself off.

"It's warm," he shouted in astonishment.

The Havel's water smelled a little foul as usual, but it had stored up the warmth of the summer and was uncharacteristically soft. The lake was revealing its feminine side. The hazy mood was at once peaceful and sad.

Out here in Wannsee there was peace, there was time and happiness, while just a few kilometres away, the city lay in ruins.

Can't be helped, Fritz thought, his eyes fixed on Haderhoff, who was now only a boat's length ahead.

In a sudden gust of wind just before the buoy, Fritz acquired right of way. When his opponent failed to give way immediately, Fritz bellowed

“Keep clear,” at the top of his lungs, and, as usual, he was so loud that he could be heard right across the lake.

“Clear to tack.” Teddy leapt to the other side, and then they were through and in the lead.

With his mysterious knack for clinching victory, his combination of nonchalance and exertion, Fritz had once again worked his way to the top. It was as if he was sailing in his sleep, disturbed only by his own yells.

It came so easy to him.

His maxim – “As loose as possible, but as taut as necessary” – referred to the way he kept sails from fluttering, but it could just as well describe his breezy approach to life.

Nice and easy, that’s how things should go.

Three loud horns sounded, and when they looked back at the starting vessel, they saw that the regatta had been halted.

Beside the barge was a grey naval launch, which had obviously ordered the civilians to stop their commotion.

Why now, with victory in the bag, the two men thought as they brought the dinghy about.

They had no desire to run into the soldiers, who would probably want to know what kind of men spent the day sailing in the middle of a war. There was an ever-present danger of being arrested on the spot, for no reason whatsoever, and dispatched to the front.

They expertly crossed the short distance to the Klare Lanke, dropped the sails in the mooring, and tied the dinghy to the jetty. They then removed the sails and packed everything up safely before Teddy took his leave and trotted off towards Wannsee train station. He was a waiter, and his evening shift began at seven.

Fritz watched him go. There was something dashing about Teddy, he mused, with his swinging gait and wide head.

In Fritz's grandfather's day, waiters had names like Hannibal, Napoleon, and Barbarossa, but Teddy just went by his surname. Bärlapp.

There were just three other yachts moored to the buoys. Many people, worried their vessels might be seized and afraid of what was to come, had laid their boats up, hiding them under the shabbiest tarpaulins they could find.

The *Traute V* would have to spend the winter here, though. She was too big, and the local boatyards weren't equipped to bring her ashore.

But she was made of steel, so even if it was an unusually cold winter, she could be left moored in the ice.

She'd withstand time's icy touch too, or so Fritz hoped.

Bit by bit, he'd filled her with enough provisions to last a lengthy stay in her mooring. The coal box was filled to the brim with briquettes, and there was even some coke for the marvellous stove in the saloon. When times were good, he'd stocked up on gas for the kitchen. Every available nook and cranny was crammed with tinned food, chocolate, biscuits, tinned pumpernickel, beer, wine, and schnapps. All of it bought legally with his restaurant ration coupons.

He'd felt at home here since birth, since his parents had had the boat built, and now, if the worst came to the worst, this fully stocked mothership would hide him and somehow bear him across into better times.

It was almost eleven, he noted with a quick glance at his watch.

It would be getting dark at about seven; the mission would have to be completed by then.

A night-time expedition through embattled Berlin was out of the question.

For Fritz, at least. He wasn't going to stick his neck out for this lost cause any second longer than necessary.

Once they got to Wilhelmstrasse, once they handed over the cash, he'd pretend he'd received further orders and get out of that ministry pronto, with as little discussion as possible.

Depending on the current situation in Berlin, he'd be able to make it to either the house in Friedenau or the boat in Wannsee. If they wanted to reach safety before twilight, they had a maximum of four hours to get to Mitte.

It was three o'clock by the time they arrived at the Ministry of Aviation.

The entire forecourt was filled with people and lorries, which were in the process of being loaded. What they were being loaded with was unclear. But things were coming to an end here too, that was obvious. No more structure and order. An end marked by violence and bellowing.

"Any grub to be had?" Schultz asked the guard as their papers were being checked. Like Fritz, Schultz was always thirsty, always hungry.

"Ask inside," the soldier said. "I seen a mess sergeant earlier."

They leaned the bikes against a pile of wood that had been stacked beside the fence for no apparent reason.

For pallets, Fritz thought.

They went through Entrance V, across a little hall, and up the stairs at the back. The staircase was heaving with people, but they eventually managed to fight their way to the third floor. A nurse was standing in a doorway, trying to decipher something on a piece of paper. There was movement and noise everywhere.

"Excuse me, sister, do you know where Unit IV is?" asked Fritz, hoping that someone would still be there to take delivery of the cash box and, ideally, furnish them with another travel order – the vaguer, the better.

The woman looked up. "What do you want in Unit IV? Can't you see we're packing up here? You need to head west." She sounded desperately weary.

“We’ve been instructed to leave the cash box here,” Fritz said, pointing behind him to Schultz.

Where was he?

Where was the cash box?

“Schultz!” Now Fritz was the one bellowing, giving the nurse such a fright that she started, kicking him on the shin.

“Schultz!” Fritz glanced around. The fellow had disappeared without trace. And with him, the cash box. And the travel order.

Fritz felt queasy.

He did an about-turn and pushed his way through the crush of people descending the stairs.

“Schultz,” he shouted again, but there was still no sign of him.

That damned coward, he seethed. I drag him here with me, something he’d never have managed on his own, and then he sells me down the river.

Fritz would have to go back up again. Schultz could have gotten held up somewhere; he might be waiting upstairs by now.

Fritz ran back up the stairs, shoving aside anyone who stood in his way and taking the stairs two at a time wherever he could. Even in the midst of the chaotic decampment that was taking place, he began to attract attention.

“Make up your mind!” one man shouted. “Up or down?” Fritz ignored him.

When he got back upstairs, the nurse was still standing in the doorway.

It occurred to him that he could run up and down ten times, and neither time nor the people on the stairs would have moved an inch. The hopelessness of his situation had frozen everything solid.

“Any sign of him?” Fritz asked the woman. She just looked at him blankly.

“Schultz!” he shouted.

“What do you want? We’re packing up here. You need to head west!”

Hadn’t she just said that?

He shivered. His mind was empty, his stomach too. “Is there anything to eat around here?” he asked.

“I don’t know.”

But, as a precautionary measure, Fritz had assumed his tried-and-tested hangdog expression, and when she saw it, the nurse reached into her pinafore pocket.

“Here, take this and then scam!”

The parchment-wrapped sandwich added to the authority of the nurse’s words, and so Fritz did an about-turn and went. Down the stairs, through the crowds, across the hall, and out into the forecourt.

If he was to ride alone across the city, he’d need some kind of authorisation first. What did the ministry staff do when they wanted to make a break for home? It occurred to him: his soldier’s pay book. He’d have to get hold of a stamp with some illegible scrawl next to it. Things being the way they were, that should be all he needed to bluff his way through the city.

He looked around. The building was enormous and had escaped serious damage, probably thanks to the anti-aircraft cannon on the roof.

Somewhere in one of those many abandoned rooms, on one of those many abandoned desks, there were rubber stamps lying around, and some of those stamps would surely bear the Imperial Eagle or the swastika and the initials “RLM” – *Reichsluftfahrtministerium*. Reich Ministry of Aviation.

And a date stamp saying “By Order of the Central Directorate.

He’d surely be able to get his hands on something along those lines.

The Chief of Aircraft Procurement and Supply wouldn't hold it against him; Fritz had served him often enough in the officers' mess in Tempelhof.

Fritz squinted up from the forecourt. Where to go?

A small side door that didn't seem so crowded caught his eye. It led to the kitchen, from where winding backstairs led up to the next floor. While the remaining staff were busy poking around the kitchen, Fritz slipped up the stairs.

He collided first with a stack of papers and then with its owner, a civilian in a hurry.

"Where's the central directorate?" Fritz asked. The man, panting, just gave him a dig in the ribs. Two more civilians came down the stairs and jostled their past. Fritz clutched the bannister and continued to fight his way up. Left or right? Right. No, left was better. A longer corridor, more offices.

He knocked on the third door on the right. Miraculously, a voice called "Enter!"

He opened the door and saw a man in civvies kneeling in front of a rolling filing cabinet. "What is it?" the man asked without looking up.

Fritz had an answer ready, as he always did in situations like this.

"A cash-delivery guard from the military research facility at Johannisthal Airport was summoned here with me, and now he's gone AWOL."

"What's that got to do with me?" the man asked. He glanced up at Fritz with a look of utter bafflement.

"You've got the stamp," Fritz said, flapping his hand to signal that there was no time to lose.

"What are you talking about? This is the Reichsmarschall's Broadcasting Liaison Office."

"Doesn't matter, that'll do," snapped Fritz, abandoning all niceties.

“I have to go past Masurenallee anyway. Just scribble that on a scrap of paper, stamp it down the bottom, and I’ll be gone.”

“Where do you want to go?”

“To PYC in Wannsee,” Fritz replied bluntly.

“Potsdam Yacht Club?” the man asked. He clearly knew what was what, but he was perplexed. “You do know it’s been occupied by the SS?”

“Of course I know, Christ,” Fritz said. He stopped short. He knew this fellow! “My God, Poehlkow, it’s you! What on earth is going on here? And what the hell are you doing here?”

“Fritz?”

In other circumstances they’d have laughed at the fact that it had taken them this long, that they’d recognised each other at exactly the same moment. Each preoccupied with their own problems, they simply hadn’t looked at each other properly. Fritz grabbed a chair and flopped into it. They’d lost touch with each other once the war started.

Poehlkow produced a packet of cigarettes. He clearly had time. He sat down on another chair and offered his clubmate a Finas.

“Why are you still here? In civvies? Where’ve you been all this time? You, an architect! Are you with the Geriatric Father Christmases’ Sailing Club now?” That was what they used to call the neighbouring club, Seglerhaus am Wannsee.

The questions bombarded Helmuth Poehlkow, but he didn’t much feel like answering them.

They’d been neighbours in Friedenau, grown up together at the boat club. But Fritz’s arrogant tendency to ride roughshod over others had left its scars on Poehlkow too.

“Listen,” said Fritz once he saw that Poehlkow wasn’t in a chatty mood. “I want to head to *Traute*. She’s moored in Klare Lanke. She’s all stocked up so I can lay low there for a few days. This can’t go on much



longer. All I need is some kind of rubber stamp on my pay book. Or wherever.” He grinned.

This hint of lewdness was enough for Poehlkow. He knew what Fritz was like and would rather not listen to his smut.

He went over to the desk, opened the drawer, pointed towards the filing cabinets, one of which was open, and said, “Help yourself.”

“You don’t have to ask me twice.” Fritz was rooting through the contents of the drawer when the telephone caught his eye.

“Is it still working?” he asked.

Poehlkow shrugged. “Try it,” he said.

Fritz picked up the receiver and could hardly believe it when he heard the old familiar toots.

“It’s working,” he said incredulously, dialling a random number as a test run.

It was a number in Zehlendorf; it began with an eight.

“Kammacher,” a woman answered.

“Good afternoon, madam. This is Poehlkow, Ministry of Aviation.” Poehlkow glared at him. “Tell me, all quiet out where you are?”

“Oh for crying out loud. Yes, it’s quiet,” the woman answered.

“Thank you. I’m sorry to disturb you.” As he placed the receiver back in the cradle, the words “What in the name of...” could be heard at the other end of the line.

Fritz dialled again, but this time he was deadly serious. From here in the ministry, he might be able to reach Marianne in Caputh. After all, a telephone like this one was incorruptible: anyone who answered would still be alive.

But the line went dead right after he dialled zero. There were no girls left in front of the switchboards on Leipziger Platz, then.

Disappointed, he hung up and pulled a form out of the drawer.

“Itemised List of Daily Situation Reports Sent by the Luftwaffe High Command.”

Something Fritz hadn't the foggiest idea about.

“Must go to Wannsee, Reich Air Defence School, Heckeshorn Bunker,” he wrote on the form in large letters. It was nonsense, of course, devoid of all logic, but the more outlandish the better.

Now all the form needed was one – even better, two – stamps to give it a touch of good old-fashioned German rigour.

On the desk was the obligatory set of rubber stamps. Fritz picked one up and thumped it down on a piece of blotting paper. “Special Delivery,” it said. Not too shabby. Might do the trick. It could be referring to Fritz himself.

He grabbed another one. “Follow-up Deployment Denied.” How cryptic. But a denial was likely to arouse suspicion. Eventually he found a second suitable stamp, this one marked “Mission”, and whacked it down on the form. Then he carefully folded the form and put it in an envelope, placed the envelope in his pay book, shoved the pay book into the left breast pocket of his uniform, and said:

“When I find Schultz, the man who left me here high and dry with no papers, I'll give him such a kick in the arse that he'll go flying over the front and land with the Russian. That rotten back-stabber. So long, Helmuth. See you at the Puz.”

That's what they called the club in Wannsee. PYC.

He's insane, thought Poehlkow, but he secretly admired Fritz's ability to think about a time after the war, a war they'd first have to survive.

Fritz went out into the corridor, made his way back down the winding stairs, and stepped out into the forecourt. It was empty apart from a drunk in a cook's uniform sitting in a corner, talking to himself. He was wielding a bottle in one hand and smoking, oblivious to the din of war around him.

The bicycle was still there! Fritz grabbed the bicycle, ducked his head as the sound of howling and whistling drew nearer, and crouched just as the shell exploded.

Deafening crashes reverberated across the horizon. As if a battery of cannon was pounding an entire neighbourhood.

The moment it stopped, the only sounds were once again the whistling of the wind around the mast and the swelling roar of the waves as they rolled in under cover of darkness.

Fritz was sitting at the helm, alone. The others had retreated below deck when the storm struck. He'll manage, thought Joachim, his crewmate, who had his hands full trying to reassure the women.

They were en route to Bornholm.

It was two years before the outbreak of war, and the *Traute* was making her annual summer trip.

Elise, Fritz's mother, who'd been single-handedly running the restaurant since her husband's premature death, had stayed in Berlin. She wasn't feeling well, and would die of lung cancer the following March. This was the first sea voyage without her. Up to now, Fritz had just come along as a crewmate; Elise had always skippered.

She had all her sailing certificates. She was fearless, and as the only woman in her club who sailed at sea, she was highly respected.

Sailing a boat of this size with just two or three other people was an enormous challenge, and the reason she conquered it so masterfully was that she'd taken up this sport, which was really more like a craft, early in life. The family were paragons of Imperial German values, and they were upholding these values out on the water.

Now she'd replaced her husband in the family business too. Lots of tourists came in the summer. They'd heard that the restaurant on Krausenstrasse was frequented by a steady stream of VIPs, who could sip

the incredibly smooth beer Fritz's grandfather had introduced from Bohemia without the other patrons gawking at them. The windows were wide open, the summertime joie de vivre untainted by the death and bloodshed elsewhere in the country, and as it got dark, the customers would sit out on the footpath with their glasses and cigars and have a rare old time.

Schultz came here once too, but indulged only in one small beer and one shot of korn. The clientele's joviality was too bourgeois for his taste, but the restaurant had been the talk of the town, and seeing as he was passing by anyway, he'd decided to drop in and see if he could catch a glimpse of one of the legendary waiters. Little did he know that he'd run into Fritz, the landlord, again at glider pilot training the following year.

Fritz went from table to table, bowing slightly and asking if everything was to the customers' satisfaction. It was his first season in charge, and, having lost both his parents prematurely, the patrons felt sorry for him. During the holidays, Sybilski ran the restaurant while Fritz went to sea, just as he used to do with his parents.

They sailed south of Ruden into the Bay of Greifswald and through the Strela Sound to Stralasund.

Then, amid glorious weather conditions, they continued on to Denmark.

After mooring off the coast of Stubbekøbing for three days, the plan was to make the crossing to Bornholm by night.

When they set sail at midnight, the weather was perfectly calm. It was exceptionally still. They had the mainsail up, the headsails too.

Fritz went to lie down "for half an hour," as he liked to say. He'd had three beers and two schnapps over dinner, and it would be no harm to get some sleep in now.

But sleeping was out of the question. Something was making him uneasy. There had been several flashes of heat lightning on the horizon

when they were setting sail, of course, but that was no real cause for concern.

He lay in his berth on the right-hand side of the boat and looked out the porthole. In his drowsy state, it took him a while to figure out what he was looking at: a single blazing patch of green. Then he realised it was the navigation light's reflection, and the reason it was so bright was that it was surrounded by pitch darkness.

The stars weren't casting their usual dim glow across the dark sea, which could only mean that clouds had completely covered the sky. Blacker now than the night, it started to rain. He leapt out of his berth. This was a bad sign.

When rain comes before the wind, halyards, sheets, and braces mind, he thought.

That was a cardinal rule.

He pulled on trousers and a jumper, struggled into his terribly stiff and uncomfortable oilskins, and went on deck.

"The lightning keeps getting worse," said Joachim, who was sitting beside Marianne on the thwart.

"Take down the headsails and reef the mainsail," said Fritz, setting to work immediately. They had no time to lose; the first gust was already crashing into the stern with no little force.

The heavens had opened. It was raining so heavily that the lines had become damp and difficult to handle.

Marianne took the helm for a few minutes, managing reasonably well as the two men took down the headsails and furled the mainsail. Meanwhile the wind became fiercer and fiercer.

"Go below deck, there's no point in us all getting wet," Fritz said. A smart decision, as the storm that was striking at that moment would be unlike any he'd ever experienced.

Jutta, the other passenger, was shaking uncontrollably. She started to scream. Her entire body could sense danger. It was her first time on a boat, and all hell had broken loose. It was all Joachim could do to calm her down. He told her that the storm was nothing out of the ordinary, that Fritz had everything under control.

But Fritz's mastery of the situation was illusory.

There was nothing he could do other than attempt to run before the wind. He was unable to see a thing; he literally couldn't see the hand in front of his face.

He'd never seen a night so black, nor the rain beat down with such ferocity. To avoid being tossed over, he had to take the waves at perfect right angles.

He looked around and caught a glimpse of something white. Crests of waves. Within a split-second, the sea had turned violent, though Fritz could only hear and feel it. Each time a wave hit, it thrust the boat upwards as if she were in an elevator, only to hurl her back down the mountainside a moment later, causing her helm to quake so violently that Fritz was afraid it would break.

When she arrived back down at the bottom, there was a moment of absolute stillness, and then the trick was to anticipate, to intuit, the angle of the next wave before the boat rode up again with the next elevator.

He'd learned this trick over the course of countless boat trips, first with both his parents and later with just his mother.

But there was something different about this trip.

A sense of doom.

Alone in a nutshell in the pitch-black night, a dazzling flash filled the vastness. The light was so intense it seemed to glare for minutes, when in fact it only blazed for a fraction of a second.

And in that instant, you could see where you were.

In space.

The earth had been swallowed up, the devastation absolute.

It wasn't just water that surrounded him; the universe itself had engulfed everything.

Then came the thunder.

It had a clear message. It came directly from God.

And it extinguished all hope.

Here, out at sea, its might unbridled by land or people, it was the end of the world.

How were they to survive? Who among them had the strength to withstand this?

What hope was there?

There was only the storm, there was only night. There was the fear wound so tightly around his neck that all he could do was keep steering, keep listening intently to the sea, keep staring vacantly into the night. They were the only things keeping him alive.

Below deck, Marianne clutched Jutta to her. Having been flung against a table as he was attempting to butter a piece of bread, Joachim's wrist was sprained.

Fritz didn't think about the others. They didn't exist.

He was the only soul left in the world. The wrathful heavens had annihilated everything, and all he had left was the helm.

One bolt after another tore through the blackness, the thunderclaps following at ever shorter intervals until the frenzied rage built to a crescendo of simultaneous lightning, thunder, rain, wind, and cold.

The helm shook ferociously. The beginning and end of the world, a primal cosmic state.

It probably lasted no longer than thirty minutes, but to him it was hours.

He glanced around. Something was different.

The rain eased, then it stopped altogether. And now he could barely believe his eyes.

At the furthest end of the horizon astern was a streak of stars.

Safety!

His racing heart immediately changed direction. Salvation!

Might they yet be delivered from this damnation?

A second look back provided confirmation.

The storm was moving away, leaving nothing but a stiff, icy wind behind.

Fritz began to tremble.

It was hard to recover from it all. Never before had he experienced such terror, and he would never experience it again. Being pounded with shells was nothing in comparison.

What he went through that night carved a scar into his heart, planting within him a yardstick of fear that would help him get through the rest of his life.

And she, the *Traute*, had lived up to her name that night: *Fortitude*.

She'd shown courage, bearing her wretched little humans out of the depths of hell.

The *Traute* would survive anything. That's why he had to go back. Back to his boat, his saviour.

Of course, this was all just an unconscious inkling.

Fritz was sensitive enough to feel it, but too pragmatic to acknowledge it.

He made it across Tiergarten, down Kaiserdamm, and through Halensee to the Funkturm. By seven, he'd reached the lido.

Fritz stopped in front of the entrance building.



A low, oblong construction, it lay like a crossbeam on the hill overlooking the water. In its centre were two entrance passages with ticket offices. He got off his bike and listened. Something was murmuring.

He could hear the sound of engines coming from the lake.

It would be dark soon, and he'd be home and dry. He just needed to walk a small part of the beach to Schwanenwerder and then, under cover of darkness, get from there to the *Traute*. He'd swim the short stretch of icy water if he had to.

He shoved his precious bicycle under a bush near the building and arranged the leafy branches over it as best he could.

He might be able to find it, providing no one pinched it, and cycle back into the city in a few days' time.

This madness couldn't carry on for much longer.

He went through one of the entrances, crossed the small green leading down to the beach, and stopped, rooted to the spot. The entire strip of sand, which would usually be strewn with wicker beach chairs and sun loungers in an attempt to replicate a seaside resort, was now crawling with soldiers. Full of men shouldering firearms, lugging light and heavy machine guns. It seemed they'd made a brief halt here and were now moving on. There must have been nearly three hundred of them. Around twenty assault boats lay on the beach, most of them already full.

Where were they headed? What kind of invasion was being launched?

Little Wannsee had become a deployment zone for an entire fleet.

Further out, more boats were circling as they waited.

Get out of here, the lot of you, thought Fritz, I don't care where you go. Go to Potsdam, go anywhere, so I can hide away.

He slipped into a cabin and watched through a knothole in the door as more and more boats revved off, and more and more soldiers, from the Wehrmacht and the SS, left the beach.

A sudden bang, a jolt, the lock's little hook flew out of its eye, the door flung open, and Fritz sprang back.

Two *Feldjäger*, military policemen, instantly recognisable with those laughably old-fashioned, militaristic metal plates chained around their necks, stood in front of Fritz, barking in unison, or so it seemed:

“Out! We’re going to shoot you.”

“Eh? What? But...but why?” Fritz stammered. Thinking quickly, he clutched his waistband with both hands to make it look like he’d just pulled up his trousers.

“I was just ‘avin’ a pee.” He put on a thick Berlin accent in an attempt to seem a bit innocent. But it didn’t look like it was going to help.

“Cut the crap, you were doing a runner. And now we’re going to shoot you.”

They dragged him out of the hut by his uniform jacket, pushed him ahead of them, and shoved him against the wall.

Something needed to happen. If something didn’t happen this instant, he was a dead man. Servility, grovelling, and fake naivety weren’t going to get him anywhere now.

Fritz decided to take a different tack.

He’d spent enough time in both bourgeois circles and the officers’ mess to learn how the right tone can be enough for a man, a boss, a leader to assert himself.

“Now look here, you gentlemen would do well to listen to me very carefully,” he said in a calm but harsh tone. “I have direct orders from the Ministry of Aviation on Wilhelmstrasse, from the office of the Chief of Aircraft Procurement and Supply, who has sent me on a mission to the Reich Air Defence School in Heckeshorn. I assume you know that high command is based there now.”

The two men were visibly taken aback by Fritz’s precise knowledge of the situation.

“Wannsee Bridge is down,” he added quickly. “So I need another way to get across. I didn’t realise that boats are departing from here right now. Needless to say, this makes my mission easier. I request your assistance in carrying out my orders.”

“Give it here,” one of them snapped, extending his hand.

Fritz’s right hand didn’t tremble even remotely as he put it into his left breast pocket, moving a shade slower than he wanted to.

He coolly handed over his pay book.

“What in God’s name is this?” The chain dog shook his head when he saw the stamp in the book.

He took out the envelope and opened it.

Luckily the date Fritz had stamped on the form was valid.

23 April 1945.

But that was about all that was valid. “Mission,” “Special Delivery”– the words made absolutely no military sense.

At least the “By Order of the Central Directorate” stamp carried some weight.

The *Feldjäger* were uncertain.

“All aboard, final call!” someone shouted up from the shore.

“We have to go, you heard the man! I should hope you’re not going to leave me here.”

Fritz summoned the determination of a model student scheming to rescue his classmate. His plan was thwarted for now, but his life may have been saved.

“What’s wrong with you? Do you want to be left behind or what?” A highly decorated SS officer was waving his submachine gun at them, and it seemed quite possible that bullets might start flying out of it at any minute.

“Now move, forward march.” Fritz, with the two military policemen behind him, trudged down to the beach, where the SS man was waiting for them.

“The state of you man,” the officer snarled.

“Herr Sturmbannführer, sir, I’m on orders from the RLM to go to Heckeshorn.” Forcing himself to stand to attention, Fritz made a vague attempt at a heel-click. “I’ve been through the whole city since I set off from Johannisthal this morning. First Wilhelmstrasse, then here, and now the last stretch. Requesting permission to travel with you.”

Before the pigs could object, the SS man marched Fritz over to one of the boats, shouted “Take him aboard and arm him,” and turned back to the policemen. “I don’t care where the hell he wants to go. We need every man we can get. Climb aboard, gentlemen.”

The men in the boat, a hodgepodge of ages, looked tired, and they didn’t utter a word as Fritz joined them.

He had no time to process the fact that he was still alive, for now. His mind was working too slowly to grasp that he’d escaped death by a hair’s breadth.

In any other situation he might have crumpled at this point, but he was by no means out of danger yet.

“Where are you going, anyway?” he asked, feeling more assured. “I need to get to Heckeshorn.”

“Yeah, and I’m off to Timbuktu!” one of the men said, and a low mumbling, which in other circumstances might have turned into chuckling or sniggering, spread through the boat.

“Can you let me out there?” Fritz turned to the skipper, who was sitting at the back by the outboard motor’s very long shaft.

“Shut your trap!” the skipper said, and Fritz immediately gave up. He had to do as he was told, he had to go with them.

They sped around to the left at Tiefehorn and rapidly approached Pfauneninsel. The little canal was lined with barges, which for some inexplicable reason were moored alongside the island.

These evenings are bright for so bloody long, Fritz thought.

He was trying to figure out a way to exploit his knowledge of the area.

The assault boat slowed down, coasted to a stop, and moored at the ferry slip. The soldiers disembarked and joined the troops who had arrived before them.

The boat and her skipper set off again to make room. They went to the other side of the canal, the boat's short draught enabling her to cross the shallows in front of the island, and disappeared. But where to?

Fritz had a discreet look around him. He needed a boat. If not now, then certainly later. But he couldn't see any. Every boat that arrived set off again straight away.

"Fall in!" On hearing the command, he got in line as near the front as possible. He wanted to keep as far as possible from those who arrived after him, seeing as the military policemen were probably among them. They began marching towards the palace. God damn it, I'm hungry, thought Fritz, his hopes of getting something to eat fading.

In a few minutes they arrived, and they assembled in a square where there was, in fact, a field kitchen.

I hope they don't trample on everything, Fritz thought. As a child, the importance had been drilled into him of not snapping so much as a twig on this gem of an island.

There seemed to be plenty to eat, at least. Thank God.

They were astonished when, in addition to the now obligatory potato soup, they were served sausages and later even pork belly and lumps of stewing meat.

This lifted spirits considerably, of course, and the soldiers started to speculate. The enemy couldn't be far now. Somewhere on the other side of the Havel.

As if to confirm their suspicions, flares soared on the opposite bank.

Sparkling like Christmas-tree baubles, they illuminated the Church of the Redeemer. As they dangled from their parachutes, they sounded the death knell for the little party down on the island.

“Assemble!” A captain was screaming orders behind them. “The Russians have crossed at Moorlake and are attempting to take up position in Nikolskoe. This company will clear the forest from the ferry slip to the church.”

“Then what?” Fritz wanted to ask, for the operation seemed as pointless as it was difficult. They were certain to be outnumbered and surrounded in no time. They’d never get away from there.

He had to find a boat no matter what and make his escape. He looked around, but other than the barges moored alongside the island, there was nothing. Apart from the rowing boats, that is, which had been used to ferry soldiers back and forth across the parts of the Havel that were no wider than a creek. He was standing on the jetty, crammed together with the other men waiting to get back into the boats, when he spotted the policemen on the shore, the two chain dogs who’d been seconds away from executing him in the lido. They were probably making sure no one stayed behind on the island. The men were getting into the boats now, ten at a time. They’d been warned not to make a sound. Neither engines nor shouting were to alert the enemy.

As soon as they got to Wannsee Shore, they were immediately divided into small groups and hounded up into the woods.

Fritz joined a group of men muttering quiet and probably inevitable curses as they tried to find footholds in the marshy ground.

All his life, he’d fought, but it had always been in order to spare himself real battles. It seemed to him that what was starting now was his own personal final battle – the real one.

He had no idea how to handle a gun. He vaguely remembered doing one or two drills in Johannisthal. How to load, cock, and shoot.

He wanted to be prepared. He thought of his wife, his Jochen. At Aunt Trudchen's. Were they still there? Were they alright? He sensed a long-suppressed longing for his kin, for normality. For time you didn't have to measure and allot, time you could spend however you wanted. And for intimacy that was lavished upon you.

He'd met Marianne while he was doing his apprenticeship in the Hotel Minerva in Cologne. She worked at reception; her job was to greet new arrivals and show them to the desk.

They became closer while out dancing in an inn just outside the city. That night, Marianna had enquired about him and his life with a seriousness and interest he'd never experienced before. Enquired that's one way of putting it, Fritz thought. Without her questions he wouldn't have had any answers. She didn't let up until he revealed things he barely even knew about himself. And yet he felt totally at ease the whole time.

Another night, they took a steamer trip on the Rhine. They lay entwined on a deck chair, wrapped up together in a blanket, and watched the stars for hours.

"If we're meant to be together, we have to go to sea together," he'd said, and she'd agreed.

And it was that very trip that led them into the terrible thunderstorm a year later. The fact that they survived it together got them thinking about marriage and children.

He tripped. The steep ascent was covered in thick undergrowth, and it was completely dark. Someone beside him sneezed, and someone else hissed at them to be quiet.

There were no more than five of them now. The others must have been quicker or slower, or have taken another route. Twigs, branches, and bushes crackled a little further away; the sound was unmistakable.

Someone was crawling around. Who? One of ours? The enemy?

No shot was fired. It seemed that no one wanted to be the first. Neither attacker nor defender was willing to make a risky move so late in the game.

He held his gun at the ready nonetheless. He wasn't going to let anyone get their hands on it. He didn't care what side they were on.

He looked up. Some kind of noise had unnerved him. Something sounded different from before. Yes, there were probably animals moving around. But this came from above.

He scanned the dark treetops. He could just about see something moving in one of them, about ten metres up.

A bird? At night?

Suddenly, something metallic glinted in the wan light, and in that instant Fritz knew: someone was sitting up there.

He sensed a barrel pointed at him, and to cover all eventualities, he raised his gun, cocked it, and pulled the trigger. All in an instant.

There was a bang and a scream, both of which pierced Fritz to the marrow, so overwhelming had the silence been up to now.

Branches came crashing down in front of him, and a body dropped out of the tree. Fritz scrambled back a few metres, narrowly avoiding being hit.

A dull thud was followed by a hard clatter. Must be the gun, which for some curious reason took a few seconds to descend from the tree.

The body lay deathly still on the ground. Fritz crept closer, more out of curiosity than any desire to help.

He was completely calm. He realised he'd just had a narrow escape, for lying in front of him was a Russian soldier, probably a sniper – and it was a woman.



She was dead, there was no doubt about that. Her eyes were open and she was staring fixedly ahead, as if she were still looking through her gunsight. The war kept raging into death, it seemed.

There was no sign of an external injury. He couldn't even see where his bullet had entered her.

Her hair was piled up underneath her helmet; it was by no means short. In spite of the darkness, Fritz could see that it was black.

He felt her forehead cautiously. It was still warm, the skin surprisingly soft. She didn't move. He gently closed her eyes and murmured, "Oh God".

He'd heard the rumours about *Flintenweiber*, but everyone assumed these Russian "gunwomen" didn't fight at the front. Now he had physical evidence to the contrary right in front of him.

But now she's dead, Fritz thought. She's warm, her eyes were open, just a minute ago she was alive, but now she's dead.

As sudden as the shot from my gun, so sudden was her death. Couldn't the direction be reversed, couldn't she suddenly live again?

The possibility was so real that Fritz became afraid.

He backed away from her.

She must have climbed the tree like a cat, thinking she'd be safe up there.

Who would have thought the enemy could be so agile?

This meant, of course, that Fritz immediately became convinced that the enemy was everywhere.

And indeed, after the shot had shattered the silence of hiding, gunfire broke out all around him. It seemed to be coming from everywhere, and there was no way to distinguish enemy from ally.

He shook himself, opened his eyes wide, slapped his arms. I've got to pull myself together, he thought. Now's not the time to run out of steam. I'm clearly in shock. I've just killed someone. And a woman at that.

He had to go back down. Like a sleepwalker, he staggered down the hill to the shore, instinctively ducking every now and then, but otherwise utterly unafraid of the gunfire.

Suddenly he stumbled into a large, seemingly impenetrable thicket. Its branches stretched back into the lake's depths, and he needed both hands to hold them out of his face. The water was past his ankles when he spotted a distinct shape in the middle of the thicket. There, in the undergrowth, someone had built a hideout! On closer inspection, he made out the arc of a bow protruding from the bottom branches. It was a boat! Beating the tangle of branches apart with some force, Fritz managed to make his way to the vessel.

It was time to push off, as the howling and whistling of shells was getting closer.

Standing up, Fritz used the oar to push himself away from the shallows by the lake shore.

The boat gradually picked up speed. Just get away from the shore first, he thought, as he put his back into rowing. It felt good. He'd learned to row before he'd learned to sail, and the movements sent warm currents through his body.

There were no other boats around. For now, thought Fritz. Over his right shoulder he saw the barges moored alongside Pfaueninsel. It annoyed him, the thought of having to leave whatever treasures were on board to some fat cats to pick up after the war. Over the past few years he'd served many of them. He'd got to know them and to hate them: the profiteers.

The artists who haunted his restaurant had to decide where to go too: with violence or against it.

There was one actor Fritz was particularly friendly with. To him, everything was a role, a game. Unscrupulous, unthinking, and exuberant.

He was an extraordinarily talented mimic, and he could afford to be fearless, secure in his position as star of the ensemble at Gendarmenmarkt.

Whether he was taking off the Reichsmarschall's laboured tones or Goebbels's sing-song Rhenish accent, he was applauded by everyone, even dyed-in-the-wool party members, and gales of downright subversive laughter would run through the restaurant.

By making tiny, barely detectable changes to his intonation or posture, he would undergo a profound, indeed frightening, metamorphosis. In a fraction of a second, the bureaucratic, constipated gentleman who'd come in the door would transform into a lecherous, drunken faun single-mindedly lusting after juicy young nymphs.

The idea of taking a conscious political stand was completely alien to him. He didn't resist the regime in any way, and when he returned from a guest performance at the Burgtheater in Vienna, the newspapers were full of praise for his grotesque portrayal of the Jew Shylock.

Slavering and agitated, with twitching fingers and dishevelled hair, he pursued the merchant Antonio, his voice so shrill that it hurt the audience's ears. It was a vicious caricature, yet there was something credible about his portrayal. The world and its people passed through him.

He was never really himself, not even in private, and if there were moments in serious conversations when he appeared to reveal his true self, it was always just another performance.

It was always whatever the situation required.

He reflected the times, and the times and he were evenly matched; they facilitated him.

Fritz was fascinated. What he saw in this actor was that you could expand life by creating endless duplications. That you could be more than one man. That you could be unfettered. So he stayed silent when the braggart actors beside him, convinced of their own infinite superiority, sneered at Jews, weaklings, and foreigners.

Once, though, he and Marianne saw something at the theatre that astounded them, something they'd never seen the likes of before: a man and

a woman in Renaissance costumes discussing the nature of their love with a gravity that took the audience's breath away. In the costumed figures of a play, the spectators encountered their own transient existence.

For one evening, time unravelled and became visible. You were left shaken, feeling as if you were at the beginning of things. Sometimes theatre could be like that.

They left and, without exchanging a word, went over to Krausenstrasse. The two actors came by later for a glass of wine. Fritz took Marianne by the hand, they walked up to the actors like Hansel and Gretel, and Fritz bowed.

He'd made good time and was now about halfway to Schwanenwerder.

Would the battles be over by the time he got there? Would he get there at all? To the *Traute*? There were two options. Either row around the entire island, which would almost double the journey time, or go left at the lido, past the Berlin Yacht Club, and under the bridge leading to the island. The bridge was low, and the channel underneath it extremely narrow. There was room for only the smallest of boats, but he was sure his would fit.

He'd just have to give it a try.

He was on the final stretch now.

Scattered lights twinkled on the island, and he could see there was frenetic activity going on in the lido, but he couldn't figure out what its purpose was.

He had to go in here, into this funnel between the island and the lido, in order to then slip right under the centre of the bridge, like a mouse through the eye of a needle. Beyond the bridge lay the Klare Lanke, his destination.

The boat was just five lengths before the bridge when Fritz noticed a Russian soldier walking back and forth across it; in other words, patrolling it. Fritz's stomach tensed.

With intense concentration, he managed to complete one last quiet stroke, take the oars out of the water, and glide onwards.

Just as he was passing under the bridge, the sound of the soldier's booted steps echoed in his ears.

A second later, the footsteps stopped.

The man was standing still.

Had he noticed something? Would he be bending over the railings at the very moment Fritz emerged?

Why had he stopped? Were others close by? Was he waiting Fritz to reappear, his gun cocked?

Fritz's mind was racing. The few remaining metres, seconds of his journey stretched into an age.

The moment the tip of the little boat's bow glided out of the tunnel, a terrible din of whistling, howling, and banging erupted. It was as if the gates of hell had opened.

Stalin's organs – Katyusha multiple rocket launchers. They must have been positioned in the lido to fire at the opposite shore and the nearby Wannsee neighbourhood.

Missiles were fired one after another without pause.

It was horrific, but for Fritz, it was useful.

He picked up his oars again and, in the shadow of Stalin's organs, rowed on unnoticed to his destination.

There was the *Traute*.

She was moving gently in the still water, rocking like a cradle above the ground.

He leapt on board, lay flat on the deck so that he could reach down side, and pushed away the boat that had carried him here so safely. He'd

hidden the key for the deckhouse underneath a wooden crate containing two gas cylinders.

He found it right away.

He unlocked the little door, locked it behind him straight away, and went down the companionway. He undressed, fetched a wonderfully soft bathrobe from the wardrobe in his cabin, and wrapped himself up in it. Then sat down at the saloon table and peered out the window. The porthole on the right looked directly out onto the bridge.

After staring for a while, he began to toy with the idea of putting on the gas cooker. A passer-by might be able to see the blue glimmer of the gas flame through the window. But really, amid the chaos outside, who was going to pay much heed?

He'd heat up some broth. Right now.

And then everything melded into one. Solitary pleasure, night, and death.

Fritz was still shivering. Lighting the stove was out of the question, of course; the smoke from the chimney would give him away instantly. He greedily slurped down the rest of his soup, and a wave of fatigue immediately engulfed him. He collapsed onto the sofa and fell asleep.

When he awoke, it took some time for life to make a cautious return to his mind. His eyes began to move. He sat up slowly.

The large room he was sitting in, the saloon, was flooded with light. The sun formed a large circle on the floor; it shimmered and turned as the boat moved. An almost summery spring day had dawned.

Fritz understood why he understood nothing right now.

It was absolutely silent.

No more booming, no banging.

No shouting or screaming, no barking. No planes droning, no screeching; there wasn't so much as a chirp to be heard. It was dead.

“Dead?” Fritz thought. “Or just quiet?”

There! There was a sound!

A fly was buzzing, quietly but distinctly.

“So I’m not all on me own after all. Come ‘ere, fella.” The fly understood. But not fully. It landed on his forehead, and he waved it away with his hands.

Fritz stood up. There was something in the air. There was something going on up there.

He edged up the companionway and warily poked the tip of his nose out into the air.

It smelled of smoke. Of charred wood. A smell he loved.

Of course it smelled of smoke, after all the rockets that had been fired here.

But that wasn’t what he was drawn to. Through one of the big windows in the deckhouse, he looked towards the shore. The boathouse by the bridge, that beautiful clubhouse, had obviously burned down at the last minute. Then his gaze froze.

Someone was standing on the shore!

A man was waving furtively at Fritz.

Fritz picked up the binoculars from the card table mounted above the companionway and looked through them.

He recognised him at once.

It was Schultz.

It was Günther Schultz, the man with whom yesterday morning – or was it days ago? – he’d cycled from Johannisthal to Mitte, the man who’d left him in the lurch.

Fritz opened the door gingerly. The silence was eerie, and it could mean anything. There was no one around apart from Schultz. No one on the bridge either.

Dead silent, Fritz thought.

Not far away was the boat he'd rowed here in.

It lay there exhausted, floundering, filled to the gunwales with water.

Fritz got down to work. He knew the manoeuvres, and within seconds his own dinghy was in the water.

He sat in and rowed to shore. The air was warm. Astonishingly warm. Like summer.

When he reached the shore, he tied up the boat, climbed the few steps, and stood in front of Schultz, his backstabbing sidekick.

They looked at each other in silence. They didn't shake hands.

Schultz spoke. Having not spoken in some time, his voice was hoarse. "It's over. The war's over." Fritz nodded. Silence.

"After you scarpered in the RLM," Schultz continued – and Fritz didn't bother correcting him – "I barely made it two hundred metres before Ivan got hold of me. They didn't have time to keep an eye on me, thank God, so I got away shortly afterwards and escaped from the combat zone through the train tunnel at Potsdamer Platz."

"I knew where to find you. Here." Schultz grinned and held out a wad of banknotes.

"Half of it is yours. It's a start, eh?"

He took a packet out of his bag and offered Fritz a cigarette.

They sat on the ground, took a few wordless drags, and watched the delicate puffs of smoke form even more delicate plumes as they curled up through the warm air.