

My  
Long List  
of  
Impossible  
Things

MICHELLE BARKER



annick press  
toronto • berkeley

© 2020 Michelle Barker (text)  
Cover art/design by Elizabeth Whitehead  
Edited by Barbara Berson  
Designed by Paul Covello

Annick Press Ltd.

All rights reserved. No part of this work covered by the copyrights hereon may be reproduced or used in any form or by any means—graphic, electronic, or mechanical—without the prior written permission of the publisher.

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council, and the participation of the Government of Canada/la participation du gouvernement du Canada for our publishing activities.

Canada



Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: My long list of impossible things / Michelle Barker

Names: Barker, Michelle, 1964- author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190185368 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190185376 | ISBN 9781773213651

(hardcover) | ISBN 9781773213682 (PDF) | ISBN 9781773213668 (EPUB) | ISBN 9781773213675 (Kindle)

Classification: LCC PS8603.A73557 M92 2020 | DDC jC813/.6—dc23

Published in the U.S.A. by Annick Press (U.S.) Ltd.  
Distributed in Canada by University of Toronto Press.  
Distributed in the U.S.A. by Publishers Group West.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

Printed in Canada

annickpress.com  
michellebarker.ca

Also available as an e-book. Please visit [annickpress.com/ebooks](http://annickpress.com/ebooks) for more details.

*“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”*

—Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn

*“I love those who yearn for the impossible.”*

—Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

GERMANY,  
1945

CHAPTER ONE

EVERYTHING IS TO  
REMAIN AS IT IS

It was early March, drizzle-cold, and the world outside our window was noisy. Military vehicles rumbled down the road, and refugees and displaced Germans created a constant traffic from the east, their wagons overloaded with pots and blankets.

My older sister, Hilde, burst into the house trailing a conversation behind her like an unraveling scarf. “They say Ivan is getting closer. They say—”

“That’s enough.” Mutti was in the kitchen taking bread out of the oven. “And you will please lower your voice. Katja is practicing.”

But I’d heard. Ivan was the Soviets. That was what everyone called them—as if they were one man, the size of an entire army, wearing giant *kirza* boots.

Hilde wandered into the sitting room. “Don’t you have anything better to do?”

“Who told you that?” I asked quietly. “About Ivan?”

“A girl. I don’t know. I don’t ask their names anymore.”

Right. It was like naming barn cats. You called them Cat or Mouser, and then your heart didn’t get broken every time they moved on. But I always asked their names. A name could be held on your tongue, like chocolate.

A *name can dissolve*. I didn’t want to think about that, but sitting at my piano working on the *Moonlight* Sonata, it was difficult not to.

I persisted. “What did she say?”

“Nothing,” Hilde said. “It’s nothing to worry about.”

“Stop treating me like a baby.” I was sixteen—old enough, I felt, to know the truth about what was going on.

That morning I’d heard the radio, before Mutti had shut it off. “Everything is to remain as it is,” the Nazi *Gauleiter* announced. “The German population is in no immediate danger.” I wanted to believe him, but his voice was full of forced calm—like we were panicked horses a startle away from bolting. Even I could tell the people from the east were fleeing their homes. Was the danger like typhus? Would it spread?

Hilde went back to lingering by the side door, waiting for the postman—these days we never knew when he’d show up—while I practiced the opening arpeggios of the *Moonlight*’s third movement in the right hand. The first bars were charged with fury, hard to play without my fingers getting tangled. It took up enough of my attention that I could ignore my sister’s smug look: *I’m waiting for a love letter. All you can do is play that stupid piano.*

Hilde was like a planet; the force of gravity around her drew men in. She was taller than I was, and prettier, and had nicer hair.

Even the postman was in love with her, and he was at least sixty years old. I’d never had a boyfriend. But what did I care? A piano didn’t run off to war hoping for a fancy belt buckle that said *Gott mit uns*—God with us—like Hilde’s boyfriend did.

“Beethoven wasn’t pleased with this sonata,” Herr Goldstein had told me during one of our lessons. It was winter and the cellar was especially cold. He’d brought down a mug of warm water for my hands, and we both kept our coats on. A yellow Star of David was sewn conspicuously across his. “He considered it inferior to his other pieces for piano.”

“How could he think that?” I said. “It’s the best sonata he ever wrote.”

“I agree.” My piano teacher gave one of his theatrical shrugs. “But an artist is rarely satisfied with his own work. Look at you, how hard you are on yourself.”

The memory was even sweeter than the smell of Mutti’s bread. He had called me an artist.

But I was an artist with small hands. Anything more than an octave reach was too much of a stretch, so Herr Goldstein had doctored up the sonata, crossing off nonessential notes to make the bigger chords manageable.

“For God’s sake, stop playing the same bits over and over,” Hilde shouted from the door. “You’ll make us all crazy.”

“It’s called practicing,” I said. “It’s how you get better.”

When the postman arrived, she stepped outside and asked, “Anything for me?”

“No, my dear. I’m sorry,” he said in a softened voice.

I didn’t know why she bothered waiting for mail anymore. There hadn’t been a letter from her boyfriend, Paul, in months.

These days most mail arrived in black-bordered envelopes, like the news of Papi's death. The postman had the worst job, handing over those envelopes and watching people's faces crumple. Papi's farm jacket still hung in the closet—smelling like the hay fields, expecting his return.

Hilde's skinny, pimpled boyfriend, Paul: if he was all that stood between us and the Soviets, we were in trouble.

Mutti darkened the doorway between the kitchen and sitting room. "The bedsheets should be ready for scrubbing now."

I groaned. Washing bedsheets was a three-day chore. They'd been soaking in soapy water since yesterday, in gigantic pots in the pig kitchen.

Hilde glared at me. "Today you're helping."

"Herr Goldstein said it's not good for my hands," I said.

"Herr Goldstein isn't your teacher anymore."

"Hilde." Mutti gave her a pointed look. Herr Goldstein was one of those names that silenced a room and made everyone pretend to be busy.

"And I don't care about your *delicate* hands." Hilde flicked her long hair back. "You didn't make her help yesterday," she said to Mutti. "It's not fair."

Hilde was eighteen, but my piano playing reduced her to a whiny five-year-old.

"All you did yesterday was boil the water," I said. "You didn't need my help."

"All you did was play the same notes you're playing today," Hilde said. "You're not even getting any better."

"Shut up. That's not true."

"Girls." The dirty washrag was in Mutti's hand. One of us

would get it in a second. "You will help this morning, Katja. The piano isn't going anywhere."

I wanted to work on putting the right and left hands together in the opening bars, but I would have to do it later. I rose reluctantly, exchanged my house shoes for wooden clogs, and went outside. The winter snow had melted and the ground was thawing, but the world was in that in-between stage where everything looked brown and bare and smelled like sour chicken shit. The mud sucked at my clogs as I crossed the small yard to our barn.

The pig kitchen was dim and cold and smelled of the boiled potatoes we cooked for the pigs. A hint of manure lingered from the other side of the barn, even with the door closed. Three large buckets in the middle of the room held the soaking bedsheets. In a corner sat a basket of potatoes from last year's harvest.

Mutti brought out the washboards and we began scrubbing. The bedsheets were heavy when they were wet. After ten minutes my arms ached. Mutti used to sing when she worked, but that was before Papi had been killed. Now she just worked, hair pulled tight into a bun, face pulled tighter with determination. The back-and-forth scrubbing reminded me of the dull noise of marching soldiers.

"Ach, Katarina, do a better job," Mutti said. "It's all for nothing if they don't come out clean."

Hilde gave me one of her looks. "I'm not redoing the sheets because of you."

There was a blur of sound in the background, as if the crowd on the road had swelled. I heard it, then set it aside, more concerned about how I would practice the piece I was preparing for Mutti's birthday without her finding out. It was by Schumann,

her favorite composer, from a collection of *Lieder* Herr Goldstein had given me.

Suddenly the blurred sound clarified into shouts and shooting.

Panic rose like fire on Mutti's face. "Stop. Stop the washing."

We crowded around the small window. Soldiers with rifles ran across the field, noise exploding everywhere. Our neighbor stood beside his cows with his hands in the air.

My whole body prickled. "But the *Gauleiter* said . . ." Everything was to remain as it was. Wasn't that why we were washing the sheets?

Mutti rushed us across the soggy yard and into the still-warm kitchen without even changing her shoes. She pulled the portrait of Hitler off the wall and threw it behind the compost pot. Supporting Hitler was one of those things we'd been pretending about for years. You pretended, or you got in trouble.

"Into the attic." She was shoving us out of the kitchen when three soldiers burst through the front door—the door reserved for guests. They wore long coats, heavy boots, and helmets. Eyes wild, breathing hard, they pointed their rifles at us and my heart thudded into my knees.

Mutti grabbed a cookie sheet and held it in front of us like a shield.

"*Nemetski?*" one soldier asked.

Mutti looked confused. "We are German."

The soldiers stomped through the house in their muddy boots, opening closets and cupboards, rattling the cups and saucers of Mutti's coffee sets—the ones with a man and woman having a picnic under a willow tree. One of them found the piano and leaned on an octave of bass notes with his forearm.

Another pointed at me. "Papa here?"

"*Nee,*" I said.

Beside me Mutti stiffened. *Don't speak out.* It was one of her wartime rules. But surely the soldiers would figure it out. There were no men left in the village anymore except grandfathers and young boys.

"My husband will be back soon," Mutti said in a confident voice.

When a soldier put out his cigarette on the floor, I grimaced. *Savages.*

The men found a bottle of Papi's schnapps, cheered, and took it outside. We watched from the window as they opened the barn doors and fence gates, and our cows, pigs, and chickens filed out onto the road. There went our milk, meat, eggs—and not just ours. Mutti sold food at the market in town.

"If Ivan is here, that means the war is almost over, doesn't it?" Hilde asked in a quiet voice.

"Almost over," Mutti said. "And just beginning."

A wave of unease rose inside me. I waited for her to tell us it was time to go back to the bedsheets. I was chilled, my sleeves still damp from the washing. The fire in the grate had gone cold.

The door burst open again. "Out," said a soldier. He tapped the gold ladies' watch on his arm and held up ten fingers. Then he left.

"What does he mean, out?" I said.

But Mutti was already on her way to the kitchen. "We have ten minutes. Take only what you can carry, and only the important things. Clothes, food. Nothing frivolous. Hurry."

"But why are they making us leave?" I said.

"They have guns," Mutti said. "They don't need a reason."

I felt dizzy. Out meant out. "We can't walk away and leave

everything behind.” I’d never lived anywhere except in this house. I knew all its bumps and corners by heart.

Hilde glanced at Mutti. “We’ll be back soon. Right?”

“It’s only temporary,” Mutti said.

Outside our window people passed with their horses and wagons, the women riding with the children, the men walking alongside waving long sticks to keep the horses moving. Only temporary? Their wagons were so stuffed it was a wonder they didn’t topple over.

Mutti rushed around gathering food. I was surprised to see she already had a bag packed with photographs and clothes—things she must have prepared in advance.

“Where will we go?” I asked.

“I’m sure Aunt Ilse and Uncle Otto will take us in until this blows over,” she said. Like a storm, or the smell from the fields when the manure had been spread. She handed us each a bowl and cup, a fork, a shawl. She wrapped up the bread she’d made that morning, and packed all the salami.

I ran to the piano and grabbed my book of Beethoven sonatas, and the book of Schumann’s *Lieder* Herr Goldstein had entrusted to me before he’d gone away. *You’ll take care of it for me*, he’d said.

“No, Katja, they’re too heavy,” Mutti said. “You’ll have to choose one.”

My heart argued with me back and forth. It was like choosing which kitten to save.

Hilde stood there with her hands on her hips. “What will you do with piano music but no piano?” She always said she was the one God had given all the common sense to.

No piano. I had stepped away from it so easily that morning.

You never knew when something would happen for the last time. If you did, you’d cling to every precious second. I stuffed Herr Goldstein’s book into my bag and then eyed the piano—the most immovable instrument of all time—as if there were some way of bringing it. How did you fit a lifetime onto your back? You folded it and folded it until your life was so small it took up almost no space. Out of impulse, I snatched the doily from on top of the piano and stuffed it into my pocket.

I went to the bedroom Hilde and I shared, put on my second dress and my sweater, and packed socks, underclothes, and a blanket. Then I put on my coat. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Hilde pack a hairbrush and the pictures of fancy city clothes she’d cut out of catalogs and pinned onto our bedroom walls. I suspected Paul’s love letters were already in her bag.

Our two beds sat side by side near a tall *Kachelöfen*. During winter we filled it with wood and coal until the ceramic tile radiated heat and made our room as warm as a cave. On the window there were green curtains—beside the ugly blackout curtains—and through it I could see the pond was thawing.

Mutti stood waiting for us at the side door. She fastened a bucket to my rucksack, stuffed our pockets with food, and said, “We have to go.”

None of us wanted to take that first step out the door.

“Hold your head up,” Mutti said, leading the way. “We’ll leave with dignity, if nothing else.”

“Who’s going to milk the cows while we’re gone?” I asked. The cows would come back to the barn when it was time for milking. They would call out, and be upset if no one came to relieve them of all that milk.



But Mutti didn't answer my question.

"The rhododendrons and lilacs will need a layer of compost." Hilde's voice trembled.

We walked past the pond where a willow trailed its branches in the water like hair; past the vegetable garden, the soil not yet turned for spring. I heard Hilde's heart break. It was a delicate sound, the sheen of ice on a puddle shattering and sinking.

I was surprised to hear Mutti singing. "All the birds are already here." It was a song about spring.

I made myself respond, "All the birds, all." When I was younger I used to put my ear to the earth to listen to it wake up. As the thaw began, I swore I could hear the soil stretch with relief. But this year the ground had been shaken awake by soldiers' boots and, farther away, by bombs and tanks.

Papi had planted two pear trees in the front yard for us girls. I wrapped my arms around one of the rough trunks. I wanted to believe we would come back, to know it the way I knew the return of summer.

"Blackbirds, thrushes, finches, and starlings." Mutti's voice cracked. "Come, Katja. You must make yourself brave."

I tightened my grip on the tree. It was Hilde who eased me away, her arms around me, guiding me as Mutti closed the small wooden gate behind us. It shut with a click.

## CHAPTER TWO

# OVER. AFTER. NEVER.

The *Autobahn* would have been the most direct route to Aunt Ilse and Uncle Otto's place, but it was full of tanks. We took a smaller road, lined with pine trees and jammed full of people like us. I recognized several from our town, including the butcher and his wife. Farmers walked with their cows. Others pushed things in heavy carts that were trussed like Christmas geese. My heart ached at what we had left behind. There hadn't been time to pack up a cart, and Mutti wouldn't have let us anyway.

"Look how they're struggling through the mud," she said to us quietly.

The bucket banged a hundred times against my back. One hundred steps. Or rather, one hundred *more* steps away from home. "The piano will still be there when we're allowed to go back, right?"

Hilde and Mutti exchanged a look.

“The war is almost over,” I added. Surely we’d go home again. Even the dogs on the road must have thought so, the way they kept looking behind them.

“Stop making that face,” Hilde said. “Of all the things you could be upset about. It’s only a piano.”

“What do you know about that?” I said. “All you care about is your hair.”

All at once the air filled with a sharp scream and Mutti pulled us behind the trees. *Make yourself invisible*: it was another wartime rule. A *Tiefflieger* came out of nowhere, flying barely higher than the trees and shooting at everything. People on the road scattered, ran, fell. I gripped Mutti’s hand. The war wasn’t on the radio anymore; it didn’t echo in empty houses or arrive in black-bordered envelopes. It was right here in front of us.

After that, we chose a narrow path through the fields and forests, sticking together with a group of people—some we knew, many we didn’t. The air smelled of smoke and unwashed socks.

When school had still been on, a map of Europe was pinned to our classroom wall showing Germany conquering other countries. The way our teachers had talked about *Lebensraum*, living space, I’d always pictured Germany as a big man flexing his muscles in a small room. The line of pins on the map would advance five centimeters in this direction, and five in that one. Not once did our teachers show the line moving backward, the great German army retreating.

That first night the group of us slept in the hayloft of an abandoned barn. I was slipping off my shoes when the butcher’s wife said, “No. Leave them on.”

“Why? I don’t want to sleep with my shoes on.”

“Someone might steal them,” Hilde said.

But that night, huddled against my mother and sister in the farthest corner of the loft, we heard gunfire and Russian voices and I understood: you slept with your shoes on in case you needed to run.

After three more days of walking, I couldn’t help but ask, “How much farther? Where do Aunt Ilse and Uncle Otto live again?”

“Fahlhoff,” Mutti said. She’d brought a letter with the address on it.

It might as well have been China, or the moon—it was farther than I wanted to walk. My feet knew it. Even my shoes were ready to give up.

“I think it’s silly to go all the way to Fahlhoff,” I said. Especially if we were just waiting for this to blow over. “Why can’t we stay somewhere closer?”

“Luckily, no one has asked for your opinion,” Mutti said, “so you will please keep it tucked in your pocket where it won’t do any harm.”

Fine. I didn’t want to think about Fahlhoff, some German city in the middle of who-knew-where (I knew where: a place I didn’t want to go), or Aunt Ilse, who anyway wasn’t even our aunt and didn’t know we were coming. Guess how happy she’d be to see us. Three more mouths to feed, and *who are you again?* Distant relatives, which didn’t count for much when there was no food anywhere and millions of people were wandering the countryside with nowhere to go. All the Aunt Ilses in the world must have cringed every time there was a knock at their door.

“Ilse will be relieved to know we’re alive,” Mutti said. “She and I were very close when we were youngsters. We used to play Piggy on the Ladder together in the hayloft.”

Mutti with her no-nonsense bun, her lips pursed, scrubbing milk churns or covered in flour—I couldn’t imagine her as a little girl playing a game with string. She had talked to us often about Ilse, because Ilse and her husband owned a clothing shop. I was curious to meet someone whose idea of dressing up meant more than taking off her apron.

Hilde wasn’t just curious; she was thrilled. “Will Aunt Ilse have Paris fashions? Will she let us borrow them, do you think?”

“Stop making that face,” I said. “They’re only clothes.”

I worried we wouldn’t be fancy enough for Ilse, but that was a problem for Tomorrow-Katja. Today-Katja had other things on her mind.

“You know what I really want?” I said.

“Here we go,” said Hilde.

“I want a wristwatch.” I’d seen them on Soviet soldiers: their serious field uniforms with the fancy shoulder boards, their caps with the Red Star emblem, the rifles and tall black boots—and five ladies’ wristwatches lined all the way up one arm.

“You need a wristwatch like a toad needs a waistcoat,” Mutti said. “A farmer works by the sun. When it rises, you get out of bed—end of story. A wristwatch is pure silliness.”

“That’s why I want one.” Something dainty, so I could turn my arm and pretend to check the time while admiring the way it looked on my wrist. A farmer didn’t wear a watch, but a concert pianist did. Perhaps a pocket watch, with a long gold chain disap-

pearing into my pocket like a secret. It would tick against my chest like a second heartbeat. “Not just one. Two, three wristwatches,” I said. “I’d wear them all at once. I’d set one on Berlin time, one for London, and one for New York City.”

“*Dummkopf.*” Hilde’s cheeks went red. “As if you’ll ever perform in New York City. Herr Goldstein must have given you that idea.”

I was ready to shout at her, but Mutti laughed. “The cows would be grateful. You’d be on time to milk them for a change.” She put a hand on my shoulder. “Your sister didn’t mean anything by it.”

But I saw Hilde’s face.

“Anyway,” Hilde said, “we don’t need to know the time anymore. What time is it? Over. It’s after. It’s never. You don’t need a wristwatch to tell you that. Just look around.”

“That’s quite enough.” Mutti took out the nettles we’d gathered that morning, held them upside down, and removed the stinging hairs with one hand. Then she passed us each a handful of leaves. Hilde portioned hers out, but I ate mine all at once. Even though they tasted like spinach, I imagined they were a big bite of cheese, or bacon, things I hadn’t eaten in days.

I reached for Mutti. Hilde mouthed *baby* and walked by herself, but ever since we’d left home I’d been happy to hold Mutti’s hand. Her hands were strong from years of churning butter and washing bedsheets and, after Papi was gone to war, mending fences and guiding the horse plow.

We were back on a proper road again, the conversations around us mostly about food. I composed a list in my head of the things I actually wanted:

- my piano, obviously

- to go home again
- a new pair of shoes
- rabbit stew, oh, rabbit stew—the way Mutti made it, turning it into a feast, with sauces and braised this and sautéed that. I imagined us sitting at the dining room table with her favorite Schumann *Lieder* playing on the radio and the midday sun shining right on her pretty coffee set. *Eat your fill, girls*, she would say. We would eat so much we'd have to nap afterward.
- also my own coffee set, but not yet. When I was older and was getting married. To Jacob? Maybe—if I ever found him again.

In the distance, I spied something hanging from a tree branch. I was surprised no one had stolen it. As we drew closer, my skin went cold: it was a body. Closer still, the body of a boy with long thin legs. He couldn't have been any older than I was. I thought of Jacob, and that feeling, the one I'd been fighting ever since we'd left home, came rushing back—as if I'd tripped, but hadn't yet caught myself before falling.

A sign around the boy's neck read, *This is what happens to cowards*.

## CHAPTER THREE

# MEN WITH KNIVES

The boy wore a black and red armband that marked him as a member of the *Volkssturm*—the young boys and old men who'd been rounded up since October and were ordered to fight, with outdated weapons and no training. People in our town had called it an execution rather than an army.

The breeze made the rope creak like an old floor. Something black stuck out from between the boy's teeth. I realized with disgust that it was the tip of his tongue. His lips were blue, his face pale, and his hands—a dark red—were clenched tight.

“Look away,” Mutti said to me, but I couldn't.

“Why did they put that sign on him?”

“He probably tried to desert,” she said. “Those boys were so young.”

And someone called him a coward? “I'm taking the sign off.”

“No, you mustn't touch him,” Mutti said. “If anyone sees . . .”

I took out my pocketknife, my grip tighter than it needed to be. The butcher, Herr Schiffer, limped over with his wife. He had a clubfoot, like Reichsminister Goebbels, so he hadn't fought in the war. I wasn't used to seeing him away from the butcher shop, and without his apron on. *Men with knives*. I put that thought back in its box.

Herr Schiffer eyed my hand. "Tell your daughter to leave the soldier alone," he said to Mutti, even though I was standing right there.

"The sign is disrespectful," I said to him, "and it's wrong."

Mutti looked like she wanted to fling a dirty washrag at me for voicing my opinion. Luckily she'd left it at home.

"Fräulein, we have not had the luxury of deciding right from wrong for some time now." Herr Schiffer's brusque manner had always scared me, the way he'd squint and size things up, in his bloodstained apron. He acted like everything could be chopped into pieces and wrapped in brown paper.

I strode over to the dead boy, avoiding Mutti's arm that tried to stop me, and checking right and left for German soldiers. The smell nearly made me gag. *Don't touch anything*. I cut the twine, pulled the wooden sign off his chest, and threw it as hard as I could into the nearby field.

So many words had been turned upside down over the past six years of war. To me it seemed like the bravest act in the world to refuse to do something if it was wrong. I was a more traditional coward, afraid to kill and skin the rabbits on our farm. Hilde was the one who did that job; she never minded getting bloody. Also, when I was younger, I hadn't liked going to the outhouse alone in

the dark, but that was because of Hilde and her stories. *There are men with knives hiding under your bed*, she used to tell me, *and if you hang your legs over the side they'll cut off your feet*. I would jump from my bed as far as I could, hoping the men's weapons were more like bread knives and less like scythes, and I'd run all the way to the outhouse. I wasn't scared anymore, but I still didn't like going in the dark.

Mutti yanked me back toward the road, where Hilde stood with her arms crossed. Behind her was a deep ditch that none of us would look at.

"Stop being so pigheaded," my sister said, "or you'll get us all in trouble." She went to walk with some older girls, but Mutti made me stay behind.

"What have I been telling you all this time?" she asked.

"Don't speak out, don't touch anything, make yourself invisible," I repeated. Silence and invisibility had protected us for the past six years.

"We will survive this war by being lucky," Mutti said, "but luck is something you make." She gathered me in her arms. Normally she smelled like cloves and rosemary, but that was a kitchen scent from home, and we were many smells removed from there. For the last fifty kilometers we'd been at sticky sweat. I wondered if I smelled as bad as she did.

She let go of me and we walked together. *Pretend the ditch isn't there*.

"Does Aunt Ilse have a piano?" I asked.

"If she doesn't, we'll find you one." She patted my hand. "Fahlhoff is much bigger than our town. Someone will have a piano."

“And a teacher?”

“I’m sure there’ll be plenty of women in Fahlhoff like Frau Erdmann.”

“I didn’t mean her,” I said. “I meant Herr Goldstein.”

Mutti acted as if she hadn’t heard me. Frau Erdmann had been my official teacher, but my real piano lessons happened once a week, in secret, at Herr Goldstein’s house. His son, Jacob, was always home studying. He wanted to become a doctor. Sometimes when I finished my lesson, I caught Jacob standing outside the cellar—though the room was almost completely soundproof.

But he was two years older than I was. The conversations we had, which had meant everything to me, had probably meant nothing to him. Still, I couldn’t think of the piano without thinking of the Goldsteins.

Three years ago they had moved to Poland, and though I wrote to Herr Goldstein, I never heard from him again. Someone else moved into their home. No one spoke about it. Whenever I asked Mutti, she would say she didn’t know what had happened to them. But my mother—candid in every other way—wouldn’t look at me when she said it. Frau Erdmann wouldn’t let me play the Mendelssohn Scherzo that Herr Goldstein and I had been working on. It was better that no one heard it from an open window, she said. So I’d played it at home with the windows closed.

“We’ll ask Aunt Ilse about a teacher when we get there,” Mutti said finally. “She’ll know someone.”

The borscht ladies—four round women from a neighboring town who did nothing but talk about how to make the perfect borscht—called Mutti over and she went to walk with them. One carried a cage with a small yellow bird in it that refused to

sing. In my head I rehearsed Mendelssohn’s Scherzo, a piece that reminded me of approaching rain.

Whatever happened, I swore I would not grow up to be a woman who fixated on soup. I would be a concert pianist, maybe play with orchestras or in a chamber music group. The world I walked through said, *Orchestras? Chamber music? There is no such thing.*

I went over Herr Goldstein’s recital rules:

- Memorize the music so well you can start it from any section.
- Stand tall and proud when you walk onstage.
- Tie your hair back so it doesn’t fall into your eyes while you’re playing.
- Wear shoes that don’t give you blisters . . .

. . . unlike the ones I was wearing right now that I wanted to rip off and throw into the deep ditch beside the road. *Don’t look.*

I looked. I couldn’t help it. The ditch was full of people—all dead. Some of them had their eyes wide open, as if they couldn’t believe what had happened to them. Their bodies were puffed up, their skin as purple as the eggplant in our garden last summer. The smell of rot choked me—though *smell* was the wrong word for what it was. It was more like a wall that pressed itself against my nose and mouth until I couldn’t breathe.

Less than a week ago, death had been a word received in an envelope bordered in black. Now it had a smell, and a color. Now it had eyes. *This war has turned normal people into savages.* It was



a thought I'd had too many times on this journey.

Daffodils bloomed nearby. Even they were pretending they couldn't see what surrounded them.

I couldn't help thinking of Papi, dead now for two years—a hero's death, the letter had told us, as if that made any difference. He'd never wanted any part of the war; he hadn't even voted for Hitler. But he spoke Russian, they needed him, and it wasn't the sort of thing you could say *no* to. Anyway, whether you were a hero or not, dead was dead. We'd never said a proper goodbye to him. Mutti didn't even know where he was buried—or if he was buried.

My aching feet. My empty stomach.

My empty stomach. My aching feet.

Mutti was well into a discussion about whether or not a proper borscht should contain meat, so I caught up to Hilde and the other girls. They weren't paying attention to the ditches. They were talking about the film star Hans Albers. He was dreamy—*no, too fat*—and the controversial Hedy Lamarr who, *shh*, showed her naked body on camera. *Did she really?—Yes, my cousin's aunt's neighbor's friend* saw the film in Hamburg-Munich-Berlin-Somewhere.

"Paul and I used to walk to the beach together," Hilde told the girls.

My shoulder grazed a tree branch, which showered me with cold water. "You're not going to talk about him the entire way, are you?"

"Shut up, *Scheisskopf*," Hilde said. It was *Scheisskopf* now instead of *Dummkopf* because Mutti couldn't hear us. "Just because you're too young to have a boyfriend."

"I'm not." I hated when Hilde did this, insisted I was too young for anything that encroached on her territory: and men, boys, boyfriends were definitely her turf.

The girls turned to evaluate me. They were old enough to wear lipstick and see-through stockings, though none of them wore such things now. But they had that older-girl manner about them, the way they huddled together to shield the great secret of life from me. Mutti had insisted on braiding my wispy blond hair to keep it from going wild. They wore theirs loose, and it was long and thick like Hilde's. I imagined them at home spending hours in front of the mirror before a date, curling it just so. Compared to them, I looked like I was in first grade.

I hadn't told Hilde about my crush on Jacob—not because she would have been remotely interested in him, but because she would have spent hours telling me why I couldn't have him. Even though nothing had happened between us, keeping him secret was better. I could add anything I wanted to the secret—a first kiss, Jacob's eyelashes, the scent of lavender from his family's garden—and no one could dispute it.

"Who's Paul?" one of the girls asked Hilde.

Paul was skinny and had a big nose and laughed like a donkey. But he was a real boyfriend. He'd written letters to Hilde from the front, which she'd hidden and wouldn't let me read—but I'd found them and read them all. I'd admired the purple ribbon she'd tied them with, and the rose petals she'd sprinkled on them to make them smell good. And even though I told myself piano was more reliable than a boyfriend, I'd reread the romantic bits, imagining the letters had come from Jacob and were addressed to me.

“When Paul comes back,” Hilde said, “he’s going to finish his apprenticeship in baking. He’ll go to master’s school and be a master baker and have his own shop, and I’ll work nearby in a greenhouse.”

*Do you really think he’s coming back?* I didn’t have the heart to say it out loud.

The sky was wrapped in gauze, and only a dull light managed to fight its way through to us. A breeze swirled dust and ash in the air, making my eyes burn.

Hilde pointed. “Look at that guy carrying a table. How dumb do you have to be?”

As dumb as me. I’d wanted to bring our piano. Down the road there were large framed paintings of landscapes, and beautiful antique chairs, things people thought they couldn’t live without—until they had to carry them. I wanted to sit on one of the chairs with my legs crossed like a lady and wait for someone to serve me coffee. But when I got closer I saw they’d been shot full of holes.