

M.-J. FISCHER



Paula

München,
April 1940

Du musst
nicht gehen.
Ich habe nicht
geantwortet.

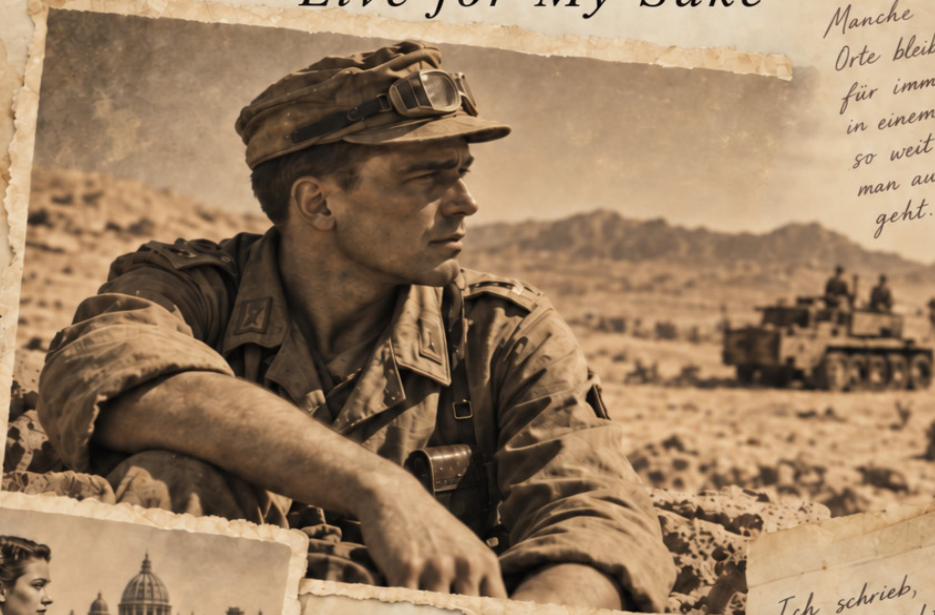
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The Father

Live for My Sake

Afrika.
Sehnsucht.
Hitze.
Stille.
Und der Tod,
der immer
zuerst kam.



Manche
Orte bleiben
für immer
in einem
so weit
man au
geht.



Anna-Maria

Rom,
September 1941
Es gibt hier
Sonne.
Und Leben.
Ich habe
einen anderen
Weg.

Ich schrie,
um ihn nicht
zu vergesse
Und um m
selbst bes
zu verste



The Father – Live for My Sake

This story is part of the chronicles from the novel “Living Forever I – The Early Years of Eternity.” In them, a first-person narrator moves through memories, historical events, and possible reconstructions in an attempt to understand what has happened to him. Here, he follows his father’s path through World War II – and in doing so, moves closer to the question of who he himself is.

In a time when truth can become lies, mercy can become hatred, and a friend can become an enemy, even opposites lose their certainty. When every assertion is only one possible truth among many, truth itself begins to lose its claim to validity, although perhaps it was never as unambiguous as we believed.

The age of opinions casts long shadows. Everything seems possible because everything can be justified. If the soul once embodied humanity’s hope for a pure, indelible essence within each individual, for something that strives toward the good despite every error, then even that idea becomes uncertain once truths multiply and cancel one another out.

What are we supposed to hold on to before we lose ourselves? How is a man supposed to save his soul if the person hearing his confession may be the greater sinner?

I keep searching. At least in the will to survive, I have found something that belongs to me.

I look back and recognize myself as a patient in restraints, a Prometheus perhaps, bound to tubes, sensors, and systems that promise me life, though I do not know what kind of life they

mean. Yet this image need not be true either. Perhaps it is only closer to the truth than the others. Looking at it no longer feels like looking into the future. It feels more like something that may already have happened, something I simply did not want to recognize until now.

For a long time I tried to go backward in search of a beginning. Now I understand that even going backward only makes sense if it eventually produces a direction.

My thoughts move while my legs lie motionless. I feel the tipping sensation beginning again inside my head, that movement that cannot be stopped once it has started. I used to calm it with a ready-made explanation. Crystals. Inner ear. An accident. That is no longer enough. Perhaps this is not harmless vertigo. Perhaps an injured brain is working with whatever remains to it and taking in whatever else is available somewhere: images, data, names, stories from other times, connecting them because otherwise it could not continue. That, too, is only one possibility. But I can think it. And that is new.

Now I search for something that truly belongs to me. No foreign city. Family. Something inside me confirms the thought. Anyone who lives long enough cannot escape his origins. Eventually he has to return to those who came before him, because the question of his own why cannot be answered in the present alone.

I think of my father.

My father died at an age I have now reached myself. The thought changes something. I am not just some consciousness generating stories. I am the son of a man. One particular man.

He was in the war and almost lost not only his life there, but something else as well, something he might later have called his soul. He made a vow to God, a deal he would later break, and in a strange way the consequences reached even me.

With my family, I believe I am safe. The spinning in my head subsides. I see my father.

He is born in Berlin in June 1921. Details appear, so many of them, and perhaps they are not memories. These particulars arrive fixed, almost matter-of-fact. Dates. Places. Years. A reconstruction.

His family lives on Schönhauser Allee, in a middle-class part of Berlin. He goes to school in the Scheunenviertel. On his way home he passes through streets where Nazis and Communists are fighting each other. On days like that, he and his Jewish school friend Abel take a detour.

I see them both, two boys with schoolbags walking through streets where adults have already declared one another enemies. Perhaps they still experience the hatred as nothing more than a disruption of an ordinary afternoon. A group of men passes by. Flags. Shouts. Boots on cobblestones. Someone is shoved against a wall. Abel stops; my father pulls him on by the sleeve. Perhaps it was the other way around. Perhaps this one scene

never happened at all. But Abel existed. His name belongs to the things that do not dissolve.

Then I try something.

I move forward. Not in space. In time.

Germany is divided. The school is still standing, now in East Germany. The word “Gymnasium” is gone from the facade. The letters have been removed, but their darker shadows are still visible in the stone. The building is empty. I can stand in front of it.

And I can go back again, back into my father’s youth. Unlike before, I no longer have to wait for a chronicle to carry me somewhere. I can search.

In the Scheunenviertel, my father begins acquiring the knowledge with which he will impress people for the rest of his life. He learns English, French, and Italian, though Europe is not yet a place where borders can be crossed almost as a matter of course.

His report cards show top marks in mathematics and physics. I know those report cards. He will show them to me later.

I recognize that thought as a memory.

Other things I simply know.

There is a difference.

My father is considered disciplined and highly capable, one of those boys for whom order means security and who therefore barely notice how dangerous order can become when someone else decides what purpose it is meant to serve. In 1933 he is

eleven years old; he will turn twelve that summer. At first the teachers remain the same, the streets too, and yet words gradually begin to change their meaning. People. Honor. Duty. Community. Germany.

And enemy.

At some point Abel is absent from class. One day at first. Then longer. Eventually his seat remains empty for good. My father walks to school alone.

I try to find out what he thought about it.

Nothing comes.

That is harder to bear than a definitive explanation.

Did he ask what had happened to Abel? Did anyone answer him? Did he remain silent because the adults were silent? Did he believe there must be some reason for all of it? Or am I placing the questions of someone born later into a boy who did not yet know how to ask them?

I can find laws, newspapers, decrees, and speeches. I can determine when rights were taken away, businesses destroyed, and people deported. I can open up the knowledge of an entire era.

But I cannot enter every thought my father had.

Perhaps that is a boundary too.

After graduating from high school, he begins his military training. In June 1941 he turns twenty. On June 22, Germany invades the Soviet Union, and after only brief training my father is there as a gun commander.

I know how it ends.

He does not.

That is just as hard to bear.

I see him heading east, into a country whose vastness looks manageable on maps as long as you sit far enough away from it. The young soldiers believe in a quick campaign. Poland had shown them how war supposedly worked; France seemed to have confirmed it. Weeks instead of years. Break through borders. Encircle combat units. Keep going. Caucasus. Moscow. Oil. Raw materials. Living space.

Arrows on maps.

I can even see the other maps my father never saw. Army groups. Operational objectives. Rail lines. Supply routes. Plans in which people appear as numbers and landscapes as nothing more than space to be crossed.

The men are young. Many of them have no idea what war means as long as they are winning. My father carries a rifle. Will he fire it?

I search.

Nothing suggests that he kills anyone on this front. Perhaps I am comforting myself with that. Perhaps it is true.

But something else begins behind the advance. A war fought not only against armies. People are dragged from their homes, Jewish families rounded up, men, women, and children shot. Orders turn murder into administration. Extermination is not separate from this campaign. It is part of it.

I know that.

My father?

I find nothing. Perhaps he saw none of it. Perhaps he saw something and did not understand it. Perhaps he did not want to understand it. Perhaps I am searching for an excuse because he is my father.

I have to allow myself that thought too.

Near the Ukrainian border he encounters farmers whose fields lie between the fronts. Tanks carve deep tracks into the earth, yet people keep working because even a war cannot stop animals from needing to be fed or potatoes from needing to be harvested.

German soldiers are taken into people's homes. Not necessarily out of hospitality. Anyone who leaves soldiers standing at the door does not know what will happen next. My father takes off his boots at the threshold. That is how he was taught at home. The family laughs. The foreign soldier who takes off his boots. Something changes because of it. A red soup is brought to the table. Beets. Potatoes. White cabbage. Borscht. That word comes to me too.

I watch my father eat. I could taste it, or imagine that I can. I do not like the flavor. My father eats. The soup gives him strength. It carries him through the weeks of the advance.

He has read a great deal. Caesar's *De Bello Gallico*. Clausewitz. War as strategy, as the movement of troops, supplies, terrain, and time. On paper, everything can be put in order. In reality, my father is only a young gun commander who barely

has to use his weapon because the front is moving so quickly at first.

Coffee. Chocolate. Soups. Canned food. Small things that become strikingly important in his notes.

Once, I stand facing him.

Very close.

We drink the same thin coffee. It barely tastes like coffee. My father likes it. He looks at me. No recognition. Why should he recognize me?

I am his son, but I have not been born yet. The thought is absurd. And perfectly clear.

Then it continues. The towing vehicle breaks down. Engine failure, he writes in his diary. Spare parts are missing. A week later they still have not arrived. The supply lines have grown too long.

Like Napoleon, my father thinks.

I hear the thought. Or I know it from his diary. I can no longer tell which is true. You're right, I want to say.

With every mile an army advances, it also lengthens the route over which it must be supplied. Fuel has to reach the vehicles, ammunition the guns, food the soldiers, spare parts the machines, which do not become any less prone to failure just because a general draws an arrow farther east. The space the fast war was meant to conquer begins to become a weapon in its own right.

My father senses some of that. He cannot know the outcome from the history books.

Then something ordinary happens, almost ridiculous compared with everything threatening him. He jumps from the bed of a moving truck and breaks several bones in his midfoot.

My father swears. To him, it is a catastrophe.

I look at his foot and know that the fracture may save him.

That ends his deployment in the East. How many coincidences does it take for a person to survive? A truck moving a little too fast. A foot landing wrong. A bone breaking at exactly the right moment. Sometimes a body saves a life by failing.

He will never see the men he spent those weeks with again. After the war he will search for some of them. Without success. In his diary he sketches the injured foot. Not bad. He had top marks in art too.

After a long stay in a military hospital in Potsdam, he is sent out again. First to Munich.

We sit across from each other on the train. By now I have grown used to being there. He looks at me from time to time. Perhaps he recognizes a resemblance. Perhaps not. His thoughts are already elsewhere. Africa. Or with his brother, who is said to have been exposed to poison gas in Poland and is now severely paralyzed in a military hospital.

Munich. Central Station.

When we get off the train, I hardly recognize the city. It seems smaller, almost provincial. My father likes it here. Above all, he likes the young women in the taverns, who speak in dialect and laugh when soldiers from Berlin try to imitate them.

One of them is named Paula. He sees her several times. Not only while she is working. One evening I see them walking side by side down a blacked-out street. Almost no light escapes from the windows, and somewhere a poster still hangs showing a soldier with a determined face staring into a future that apparently contains no dead.

Paula has linked her arm through my father's.

"How long are you here?"

"I don't know."

"Then make sure it's longer."

My father laughs.

"That's not how things work for us."

"What does work for you?"

He looks at her.

"Orders are orders."

"That's what they all say."

They keep walking. Perhaps this conversation never happened. Perhaps I lend Paula words because I need them. But I can see the possibility she represents. A young woman. Munich. A room. A foot that could keep causing trouble. An assignment far from the front. Another life, perhaps only for a few weeks at first, perhaps longer.

Paula stops.

"Your foot still hurts, doesn't it?"

"Barely."

"Then make it hurt again."

My father understands. His expression changes.

"I'm not shirking."

"I didn't say you should shirk."

"Yes, you did."

She slips her arm out of his. For several steps they walk side by side without touching. My father is twenty-one. He does not want to be the one who stays behind while others leave. Perhaps that has been taught to him for years. Perhaps he taught it to himself.

Later we sit in his hotel, the "Bayerische Krone." He tells me about Paula and takes me for a soldier in civilian clothes. I let him believe it.

"You meet girls and forget them again," he says. "That happens quickly in a war."

I look at him. I could tell him which women he will forget and which he will not. Which decisions will have consequences that reach all the way to me. I do not.

For the first time, it is enough simply to know who I am.

On December 3, 1942, my father receives orders to proceed to Rome. In his diary he writes, "indescribable joy."

I can hardly believe it.

Stay in Munich, I think. Stay with Paula. Let your foot start hurting again. Ask for some desk assignment. Hide in a village outside the city if you have to.

But my father does not want to stay. That is different from being sent away. The war is not simply pushing him onward.

He goes.

Perhaps that is the real tragedy of his journey. Again and again a door opens that could lead him away from this war, and each time he believes another door is the more honorable one.

I see Paula one more time at the station. Perhaps I invent this farewell because a woman who might have kept someone from leaving deserves one last moment. She is wearing a dark coat. My father holds his suitcase. The train is already waiting at the platform.

"You don't have to go along with everything," she says.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Exactly what it sounds like."

"We're at war."

"Exactly."

He looks past her at the train.

"We'll see each other again after the war," he adds.

What a cruel sentence. It is made almost entirely of future. Paula looks at him for a long time.

"Maybe there will be different people after the war."

"I'll still be here."

"How can you know that?"

He does not answer. Then he kisses her, boards the train, and leaves. At 8:20 p.m., the night train pulls out of Munich heading south.

We see nothing of the Dolomites, nothing of Bolzano or Verona. The windows reflect only the faces in the compartment. Young men. My father. His comrades. And me. I look older than they do. Not like a soldier. More like someone who knows too much. Even so, I cannot stop the train.

We reach Rome in the afternoon.

My father frantically looks for a place to stay. The men find a guesthouse on Via Francesco Crispi. The others are already thinking about food and wine. My father wants to go to St. Peter's Basilica. Of course he does. I follow him.

He crosses St. Peter's Square, studies the Egyptian obelisk and the colonnades, then loses himself inside the church. Numbers open up as soon as I look. Centuries. Columns. Architects. Stone. Power. My father cares less about numbers. He sees grandeur.

Later he will write in his diary that the true splendor of the place emerges only in the presence of the Pontifex maximus. As though the pope were a Roman emperor.

He does not see him that evening. Mass is over.

We walk back. I know this man. Decades later I will walk through other cities with him and wait outside churches he

absolutely has to see. That is memory. Not data. I am getting better at recognizing the difference.

At the guesthouse, a friendly Italian woman brings red wine and white bread. The next few days blur together. The image grows thin. Some scenes are barely there anymore, as though too much light had been switched on behind a screen.

I force myself to keep watching. The pain in my head returns. Sharp. Then fading again. It feels as though someone were sliding a new reel into an old projector, except the images move and I can decide which one to watch longer.

Christmas. Christmas Eve. My father goes back to St. Peter's Basilica. Midnight Mass. The church is full of people. German soldiers lean against columns. Voices rise beneath the dome.

"Astro del ciel."

"Silent Night" in Italian.

My father pushes far forward. I lose sight of him. For a moment I feel real fear, then I see him again beside a young woman, an Italian. They are standing close together. Perhaps because it is crowded. Perhaps for another reason.

The Mass lasts a long time, and when people finally stream out onto the square, my father is still with the young woman. Now they kiss. So quickly. As though they have to spend the time they may not have before it is taken from them.

Her name is Anna-Maria.

Later, in his diary, he will mention her passionate nature. They meet again. And again.

Anna-Maria leads him through Rome as though the war existed only outside the city, or perhaps precisely because it exists everywhere. She shows him little cafés where the wine is bad and the bread is fresh, churches he would have visited without her, and streets the Fascist regime has laid out on such a monumental scale that power seems measurable by the width of a boulevard.

On the Via dell'Impero, my father gazes at the ruins for a long time.

"Bella?" Anna-Maria asks.

"Sehr."

She does not understand the German word, but she understands his tone.

"Mussolini," she says, making a face.

My father laughs.

"You don't like him?"

"No."

"Why?"

She shrugs.

"Troppo." Too much. Too big. Too loud. Too many speeches. Too many uniforms. Perhaps she means all of it. My father replies that Germany and Italy are allies.

Anna-Maria studies him.

"Germania o Hitler?"

Germany or Hitler? Perhaps she does not ask that. Perhaps I am the one asking. My father understands it anyway.

“Germany.”

“E Hitler?”

He hesitates. Not for long.

“Now they’re the same thing.”

The sentence frightens me. Perhaps because I invented it. Perhaps because it could be true. Anna-Maria lets go of his hand. Only for a few steps. Then she takes it again.

Between Christmas and New Year’s, they live through days that feel like stolen eternity in the middle of a war. Christian catacombs. The Spanish Steps. The Capitoline. Cafés. Holding hands. Kisses. My father is a young man in a foreign city, and sometimes even to him the uniform seems like nothing more than a piece of clothing he can take off at night.

On one of the Christmas days, they go to the opera. Here the image stumbles. I see a name.

Mefistofele. Arrigo Boito. Faust. Of course Faust. And Beniamino Gigli. My father barely notices the performance because Anna-Maria is sitting beside him holding his hand. I, on the other hand, cannot get past the name. Something is wrong. A second kind of knowledge opens up, sober and intrusive, like a file someone lays over a beautiful memory.

Gigli really did sing in Rome during those Christmas days. But on December 25 and 29, 1942, he sang Enzo Grimaldo in Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*.

Not *Mefistofele*. I stop. Which image is wrong? The trip to the opera? Gigli? The date? Or only the title? Perhaps I wrote Faust into it. I look at the program again. Now it says *La Gioconda*. Then *Mefistofele* again. The letters change.

Anna-Maria notices none of it. Neither does my father. In the foyer, Gigli greets several guests. My father barely sees him because he has eyes only for the young woman. I, however, have my father's diary with me.

Why? He left it at the guesthouse. Yet I can carry it anyway. I walk up to Gigli and ask him for an autograph. Later my father will find that autograph in his diary. He will have no idea how it got there.

Can I change something? Or do I merely remember that the autograph really existed and am now inventing a story about how it got there? I do not know. For the first time, I like this uncertainty. It means there is something to discover.

On one of the following days, my father and Anna-Maria walk along the Via dell'Impero to the Capitoline Hill. In front of the Palazzo Senatorio they kiss again. The square was designed by Michelangelo. Set into the paving is a many-rayed star, a geometric universe with a center.

Caput mundi. Capital of the world. My father sees me. This time he speaks to me.

“Comrade!”

I turn around. He waves me over. Anna-Maria stands beside him with her arm linked through his.

“This is Anna-Maria.”

She smiles. I look at her for a long time. Perhaps too long. If I knew what place she would later occupy in his life, I could say something. But I do not know. Not yet, not in this moment. Or I would have to travel farther into the future. I do not.

“Nice to meet you.”

My father tightens his arm around her. He does not know me. I know him. And yet I am his son. Once again, that thought is enough.

On New Year’s Eve, perhaps they are standing somewhere above the city. Bells. Scattered lights. The war has banned the big fireworks displays. Anna-Maria is cold and slips her hands into my father’s pockets.

“Resti a Roma.” Stay in Rome.

He smiles.

“If I could.”

“Puoi.”

You can.

“No.”

“Sempre no.”

Always no.

She looks at him, and for a moment I see something in her expression that Paula may already have understood. He does not absolutely have to leave. There are assignments in Italy. Staff posts. Interpreting. Courier work. His foot could start giving him trouble again. His language skills make him useful even here.

But my father wants to go to the front. Perhaps he does not say it that evening. Perhaps he says only:

“Africa.”

Anna-Maria understands the word.

“Rommel?”

My father nods. She shakes her head.

“Pazzo.” Crazy.

Whether she means Rommel or my father remains unclear.

Early in January 1943, he receives a courier assignment during the night. He is to leave for Livorno early the next morning. At noon, he is supposed to meet Anna-Maria in Piazza Navona.

They have known each other only a short time. He does not know her exact address. A message cannot simply be sent after her. No phone in his pocket, no quick way to reach the woman who is waiting for him.

My father leaves. Anna-Maria waits. I see both.

I ride the train with my father and at the same time stand beside Anna-Maria in Piazza Navona. Or perhaps I switch

between the two images so quickly that there is no difference anymore.

She waits by the fountain. An hour. Then longer. Again and again she searches the crowd for his face. Perhaps she is angry at first. Then worried. Then hurt. I do not know when one becomes the next. Her eyes fall on the stone Neptune fighting a giant octopus with his trident. She keeps waiting. I could go to her. Tell her he is not coming. That he did not stand her up on purpose. That an order intervened. But I do nothing. Perhaps I cannot change anything. Perhaps I only want to be able to. My father knows nothing about it. The storylines move apart. I can follow them. Both of them.

From Livorno he continues to Naples. An air-raid alarm in broad daylight. And there my father does something I understand even less than his departure from Munich.

He asks about an assignment in Africa. No one else suggests it. He himself looks for a way to Africa. Fate has just offered him several chances to escape it. The broken foot. Munich. Paula. Rome. Anna-Maria. Again and again he could at least have tried to stay where he was.

Instead, something keeps pulling him onward. As though he, too, were following a navigation system whose origin he did not know.

Back then he is like me now. I wander through time in search of my future. In Naples I step into his path. Perhaps I really do. Perhaps I simply need an answer at last.

“Why Africa?”

My father stops.

“What?”

“Why do you want to go to Africa?”

“They’re fighting there.”

“That’s exactly why I’m asking.”

He furrows his brow.

“You could stay here.”

“On special assignment?”

“Why not? You speak Italian.”

“I’m a gun commander.”

“First of all, you’re alive.”

He looks at me as though I have said something ridiculous.

“That’s not what I was trained for.”

There it is. The sentence I have been looking for. Not: I have to. Not: They’re forcing me. He wants to go where the fighting is.

“Paula could have kept you there.”

His face suddenly turns serious.

“How do you know Paula?”

I do not answer.

“Anna-Maria too.”

“What do you know about Anna-Maria?”

“That she waited for you.”

My father goes pale. For a moment I think I have reached him.

"In Piazza Navona," I say.

He looks at me.

"How do you know that?"

"She waited a long time."

He turns away.

"There was nothing I could do."

"Yes, there was."

Now he gets angry.

"You don't know anything."

Perhaps he is right.

"I'm a soldier."

"You could be something else."

"After the war."

That sentence again. After the war. As though the future were something you could count on waiting for you.

"And what if you don't live to see it?"

He looks at me.

"Then at least I'll have done my duty."

"For whom?"

"For Germany."

I hesitate. Then I say it.

"For Hitler."

My father steps closer to me.

"Watch what you say."

"But that's the Germany you're fighting for."

"You don't understand."

“Maybe I understand it better than you do.”

His hand lifts as if he is about to grab me, then drops again.

“We’re fighting for living space and raw materials. Without oil, industry stops. The British are everywhere. If we show weakness now, everything will have been for nothing.”

I hear words that did not originate in him and yet have found their way into him. Living space. Raw materials. Duty. Weakness. Perhaps this is exactly how propaganda works. At some point no one can say where a sentence originally came from.

My father picks up his suitcase.

“I have to go.”

“No,” I say.

He actually stops one more time.

“What?”

“You want to.”

Then he goes. And with him, the history behind his decision suddenly opens up. Not his history. The larger one. The other knowledge. Mussolini. Hitler. Rommel. El Alamein. Stalingrad. Tanks. Ships. Fuel. Maps.

Perhaps all of it comes from books, archives, films, databases. I care less and less where it comes from. What matters more is whether it helps me understand my father’s journey. Why Africa?

Why does a war that has already begun devouring itself in Russia continue sending young men into a desert that is becoming harder and harder to hold strategically?

I see Mussolini. Or I see the man from the newsreels who might have been Mussolini. Bald head. Thrust-out chin. Uniform. Balcony. Crowds.

I see Hitler. Perhaps I put the two men in a room where they never stood together like this. I know that. I need the room anyway.

On a table lie maps of North Africa, the Balkans, and the Soviet Union. They overlap one another, and perhaps the answer is already there.

Mussolini wants an empire. He entered the war in 1940, when France was already collapsing and he believed Germany had nearly won. He wants his share. North Africa. Egypt. Suez. Greece. The rebirth of Roman greatness.

The offensives fail. In North Africa, the Italian army is driven back. In Greece, it bogs down.

Hitler helps. Later, this will become a seductively simple story. Germany, people will claim, lost the war only because Hitler had to save Mussolini. Greece delayed the invasion of the Soviet Union, so the Russian winter caught the Wehrmacht outside Moscow. Modern tanks sat in the African sand while they were missing on the Eastern Front. Without Mussolini, Hitler would have won.

I can feel how much I like this explanation. It is simple. One man makes one wrong decision, and everything else follows from it. Chronicles like to work that way. Too well. That is why I distrust it.

Yes, the Balkan campaign ties up troops and transport capacity in the spring of 1941 while the attack on the Soviet Union begins later than early plans had envisioned. Yes, Africa consumes aircraft, ships, tanks, fuel, ammunition, and men.

But the first German units under Rommel are sent to Libya before the Eastern Front even exists. They are not pulled out of an ongoing battle outside Moscow and dropped into the desert. Nor is the Russian winter the sole reason for the failure in the East. Roads, distances, supply, Soviet resistance, faulty planning, underestimated reserves - all of that is part of it. The truth is more complicated. As always. And still, something remains. Every additional front has a cost. Every ambition requires material. Every empire devours people. Hitler does not have to support Mussolini. He chooses to. And long after the military situation has deteriorated, he repeatedly chooses against retreat because retreat looks like defeat.

Perhaps that is the connection I am looking for. I let the two men speak. Not because I know what they said. Because documents are not enough for me.

“Africa must not be lost,” Mussolini says.

Hitler studies another map. Russia.

“Africa will not be lost.”

“Rommel needs tanks.”

“Everyone needs tanks.”

“Then send him some.”

Hitler raises his head.

“From where?”

Mussolini does not answer. Perhaps the conversation is invented. The conflict is not. In the winter of 1942-43, the Axis world is breaking open in several places at once. The Sixth Army is encircled at Stalingrad. American and British forces have landed in western North Africa. From the east, Montgomery is advancing after his victory at El Alamein. Tunisia becomes the space between two Allied movements.

Germany does not respond by withdrawing from Africa. It sends in more troops. Aircraft land in Tunis. Ships come from Sicily. New formations are brought across the Mediterranean, including heavy tanks. While every reserve is being fought over on the Eastern Front, another major force is assembled in Tunisia.

My father knows nothing of this contradiction. For him, Africa has one name. Rommel. The Desert Fox. A name like a promise.

At first I see Rommel as my father might have seen him. In a newsreel. Goggles. Peaked cap. Dust. A commander who drives far forward, spreads maps across engine hoods, decides quickly, and surprises the enemy with maneuvers he does not expect. Tobruk. Gazala. The advance into Egypt. Victories. Every success creates the next myth.

The British help create it too. A dangerous opponent explains your own defeats better than an ordinary one. But by now I can see a second figure behind this Rommel. The farther his

tanks advance, the longer the routes along which their fuel has to follow. A liter of gasoline that reaches the front consumes gasoline just to get there. Spare parts are in Italy or Europe while the damaged vehicles are in Africa. Ships are sunk in the Mediterranean. Aircraft need fuel. Trucks need tires.

Rommel gains ground and loses supply. That, too, is an equation. Perhaps part of the later controversy lies there. The brilliant war of movement he masters creates distances that eventually take away his freedom to maneuver. The man has not suddenly become stupid because the victories end. The conditions are different. The enemy is stronger. British supply works better. The skies belong increasingly to the Allies. The Desert Fox becomes a man in retreat.

My father still wants to join him. At the operations center in Italy, it initially seems unclear who has authority over him. A German captain wants to keep him back for special duties. ZBV. His language skills make him useful.

If it stayed that way, perhaps he could return to Rome. To Anna-Maria.

I catch myself hoping for it.

But my father keeps asking about Africa. Eventually an Italian officer arranges a flight to Bizerte. From there he is to continue toward Tunis.

I watch my father leave and follow him.

The Mediterranean below us is blue. Too beautiful for a war.

A warm soldier's welcome in Africa. Men slap one another on the shoulder, tell stories from the front that may have happened or may only have taken shape in the telling, and pretend that a firm handshake can hide the fact that the situation has become almost hopeless.

Under these circumstances, my father admires the "upright bearing" of the German lieutenants. Embarrassing, I think. But that is who he is at this point. Dutiful, disciplined, still convinced that an assignment becomes right simply because it was ordered. He does not ask where all of this is leading or what this war might make of him.

In the morning I help him search the dugout for his rifle and finally hand it to him. By now I can do more than watch. I can act inside these images.

My father has flown headlong into a hornet's nest. The company commander wants to assign him to a gun crew again, but the light antitank gun, a PaK 36, has not yet arrived. The towing vehicle is missing too. At the same time, the Italians at the Mareth Line are demanding immediate reinforcements. Even infantrymen would be welcome.

So, leave Tunis. Go to the front with nothing but a rifle. For now. More orders, counterorders, overlapping responsibilities that no one seems able to see as a whole.

By now I can almost see this web of command channels. Hitler. The Italian Comando Supremo. Kesselring. Rommel. Messe. Corps. Division. Regiment. Company. And at the very

bottom, a twenty-one-year-old man from Berlin digging a hole in Tunisian soil. At one end, lines are shifted on maps. At the other, my father sweats.

“A man has to stand where the leadership puts him,” he writes in his diary, describing it as the sense of duty of a German soldier. Horror has its own language.

They begin digging positions. In the intense heat, the men dig into gravel and sand, stretch shelter halves over the depressions, and wait. Then comes the next order. Farther south. Toward the enemy. Still no direct contact. Just driving on dusty roads. Stopping. Digging. Driving again. Digging again.

And suddenly I realize that something I had taken for pain may not be pain at all. It is heat. The heat of the desert. That, too, can only be one of many possible explanations.

The landscape unfolds before me with such precision that the room in which I lie seems to have no boundaries anymore. I see roads and ridgelines, distances, terrain profiles, and soil types. And as I look across the plain, details arrive without my searching for them.

The Jeffara stretches out before me, a dry coastal plain that at first glance appears almost devoid of vegetation. But when I look more closely, the apparent emptiness dissolves. Tough grasses grow among sand, limestone crusts, and rubble. After the winter rains, patches of fresh green have appeared between the gray-green shrubs, annual plants that must use the brief

spring before the heat makes them disappear again. There is so much information that I nearly lose my bearings.

Farther west, the Matmata Hills rise. The steppe changes with the soil and elevation. Esparto grass grows on the slopes, and in more favorable locations there are Phoenician juniper and rosemary.

I know all of this although I cannot remember ever learning it.

Farther north, where the plain opens toward the Gulf of Gabès, the landscape changes color almost without transition. The oasis appears as a concentration of green between steppe and sea. Date palms form the uppermost layer. Beneath them grow pomegranate, olive, and other fruit trees, and lower still lie gardens and small cultivated plots in the shade of the crowns. The knowledge is already there before I see it.

Gradually the landscape before me organizes itself into a map. The long chain of the Matmata Hills runs roughly south to north, almost parallel to the coast, separating the narrower, more inhabited Mediterranean plain from the dry uplands and desert regions to the west. Between the hills and the Gulf of Gabès lies a corridor through which routes from Libya have led north for centuries. Today the road from Ben Gardane through Medenine and Mareth to Gabès and on to Tunis runs there as well.

At Mareth, this corridor between the Matmata Hills and the sea narrows enough to be blocked by a defensive line. Now I understand why it was built here of all places. It is a bottleneck.

The landscape becomes military geography. The French built the Mareth Line between 1936 and 1940 to protect their Tunisian protectorate against a possible attack from Italian-controlled Libya. Stretching roughly forty-five kilometers, it connects the sea with the Matmata Hills. It blocks primarily the corridor between the mountains and the coast, running southwest from the area around Zarat across the plain, along Wadi Zigzaou, to the high ground.

The French did not have to build every part of this barrier themselves. Wadi Zigzaou, a usually dry, deeply cut riverbed, crosses the plain diagonally from the mountains to the sea. Its steep banks already form a natural obstacle to tanks and are incorporated into the defensive system.

The terrain itself is used as a weapon.

Behind it rise reinforced-concrete casemates, gun positions, observation posts, trenches, and obstacles; artificial antitank ditches supplement the wadi, along with barbed wire and minefields.

A Maginot Line in the desert.

I even know the numbers. Forty infantry casemates, eight large artillery casemates, fifteen command posts, twenty-eight fortified strongpoints. I see firing slits in concrete, low entrances, wire stretched close to the ground, and positions whose

fields of fire are meant to overlap. It all appears at once, almost like different layers of a map laid over one another.

After the French defeat, the installations are demilitarized in 1940. Weapons and military equipment disappear; parts of the defenses are rendered unusable. For more than two years the position loses its importance. Sand collects in front of the firing slits, wind moves through empty chambers, metal rusts, concrete crumbles.

Then the war changes direction. After El Alamein, the German-Italian forces retreat west through Libya, and suddenly the French defensive line against Italy becomes a position Italians and Germans are supposed to defend together against the British. The irony does not strike me until I have already understood it.

Rearmament begins as early as November. Soldiers, engineers, and civilian laborers clear the old installations and repair them. In February the work accelerates. New field positions are built, antitank ditches dug, barbed wire strung, mines laid. The old concrete works remain the core of the line, but some embrasures are too small for the larger antitank guns now in use, some of the metalwork is rusted, and much of it is militarily obsolete.

When the British Eighth Army reaches Mareth in March, not everything is finished. But enough is finished to make people believe the line can hold.

At its western end, it relies increasingly on the Matmata Hills. French planners had considered the terrain beyond them difficult enough to make a large-scale flanking maneuver seem unlikely.

But there are routes through. Ksar el Hallouf. Beni Khedache. Toujane. Desert farther west. And to the north, a gap between the hills and Djebel Tebaga. The Tebaga Gap. Whoever gets through there can advance toward El Hamma and then move east toward Gabès. The attacker would then be behind the Mareth Line and threaten the retreat north.

I no longer see the position as a line on a map but as a door, with the sea as its eastern post and the Matmata Hills as its western one. The corridor between them is blocked, but there is a way around behind the western post. That is its weakness.

My father could not have seen this much. Nor could he have told me all of it. Yet it is all laid out before me.

And then I see Rommel.

Or perhaps I imagine him because by now I know so much about him. Perhaps that is even more likely. First I see the Greif, his armored command vehicle, the name painted on its side, the machine in the dust. Then the man.

Not the Rommel of the newsreels.

A tired field marshal. His face has grown narrow. His skin is burned, his eyes deeper, his body marked by illness and months of retreat. Behind him lie El Alamein, Tripoli, and thousands of miles of road.

He looks west. Toward the Matmata Hills. Perhaps he stood in exactly that place. Perhaps not.

I know he understands the danger of being outflanked. I know he considers the front far too long and the supply situation inadequate. I know he would rather concentrate the forces farther north, in a position that is shorter and easier to supply.

My father knows none of this. To him, Rommel is still the Desert Fox. The man who wins.

I see both at once and understand how slowly defeats reach the mind. Soldiers at the front can still believe in a commander while the commander himself already knows the numbers no longer add up.

Then I am standing in a command post. Or I invent it. Low concrete ceiling. A lamp over a table. Maps. Grease pencils. Rulers. Gabès. El Hamma. Matmata. Tebaga. Wadi Akarit.

Rommel is bent over the map. Across from him stands Giovanni Messe, Generale d'Armata, recently appointed commander of the Italian First Army. Knowledge about Messe arrives too.

He is not the caricature of an Italian general that German soldiers' jokes like to make of every ally. He is experienced, can read the situation, and sees the dangers facing his front perfectly well.

Rommel points north. Wadi Akarit. A shorter line. Less ground.

"Here we can force Montgomery to come at us head-on."

Messe studies the map.

"Our orders are to hold Mareth."

"The orders are wrong."

Perhaps they speak German. Perhaps Italian. Perhaps there is an interpreter. Perhaps my father is even standing somewhere in the background because his language skills make him useful between the command posts, hearing fragments of sentences without realizing that they are talking about his life.

I see him at the edge of the room. He is holding papers. I like that too much. So I become suspicious. Perhaps I am putting him there only so these levels can touch.

Messe places a hand on the map.

"To you, Libya is a lost position."

Rommel looks at him.

"What else could it be?"

"To Italy, it is a lost empire."

"That does not change the military situation."

"But it changes the orders."

Now Rommel falls silent. Perhaps I am giving them words they never spoke. But the conflict is real. Mussolini needs a line to be held because every line abandoned makes the failure of his empire more visible. Hitler needs an ally who does not collapse, and he refuses to give up ground voluntarily whenever retreat looks like defeat. Rommel needs a front that can be held militarily. Messe needs options for an army whose equipment and morale have been worn down by months of retreat.

My father needs only an order. This is how catastrophes happen. Because no one sees them coming. Sometimes many people do see them. Just from different directions.

Rommel points to Wadi Akarit again.

“If we wait too long, we won’t get there in good order.”

Messe replies:

“Then you have to report that to Rome and Berlin.”

“I have.”

“And?”

Rommel looks at him. The answer needs no words.

I can even see what has not happened yet.

Or perhaps I only know what will happen later. The difference keeps shrinking.

By now my father really is moving between German and Italian command posts, translating, listening, and slowly beginning to understand that the grand words about victory do not quite match what is happening on the roads. Retreat. Repairs. Shortages. New position. Another position. Attack is the best defense, they say.

In early March, the PaK 36 finally arrives. Gun training in the desert sand. Calculating trajectories. On paper, every round hits the tank on the horizon. In reality, a whistling sound ends the lesson. Then impacts. Very close. Sand rises in black and pale columns.

My father throws himself into cover, into a hole dug according to the Russian model.

“Russian model,” he later notes explicitly. You learn from the enemy. Even in war.

The “Tommy,” as they call him, is firing.

And suddenly I think about the fact that this enemy is no enemy of mine anymore. Thirty-five years later, I will travel to London with my school class. We will be welcomed warmly, eat fish and chips, speak English, and barely be able to imagine that our fathers once shot at one another.

I get down into cover beside my father.

“You’re in the wrong place,” I say.

He looks at me.

“What?”

“This whole war is wrong. Germany would get farther with trade, good neighbors, and peace than with any of this. We proved that later.”

My father stares at me as if I have lost my mind.

“Don’t say things like that out loud.”

“Why?”

“Are you a Bolshevik?”

I almost laugh.

“No. Just born much later.”

Of course he does not understand that.

“We’re fighting for living space,” he says, “and for raw materials. Without oil, our factories stop.”

“And Abel?”

The word comes out before I can think about it. My father freezes.

“What?”

“Abel.”

His face changes.

“How do you know him?”

I do not answer.

“What does Abel have to do with Africa?”

“Maybe more than you think.”

My father gets angry.

“You’re talking nonsense.”

“Maybe.”

I could tell him what Germany will become. About camps. Deportations. Murdered children, women, and men. About cities in ruins. About a border running through the middle of the country. I do not. Perhaps a person can bear only one future at a time.

My father points toward the edge of the dugout.

“Now get out. I didn’t dig this hole for you.”

Something falls from his jacket. A small book with a yellow cover. I pick it up.

“Hey, that’s mine.”

My father reaches for it. I catch sight of the title.

The Divine Comedy. Dante. Here, of all places. Between artillery fire and a war descending ever deeper into hell. “Through

me the way leads into eternal sorrow; through me the way among the lost." Dante was Italian too.

I leave the dugout and walk a few steps through the sand. I cannot lose my father.

The next day there is a stillness that feels more threatening than the gunfire before it. The air shimmers. Dark points tremble on the horizon, perhaps vehicles, perhaps only light.

My father stands at the gun with several men. He commands the crew. Sand keeps fouling the weapon.

"Why are you still stuck with the PaK 36 here?" I ask.

My father looks at me.

"What else are we supposed to have?"

"The PaK 38. At least."

Private Brinkmann, even younger than my father, looks up.

"We're never getting those out here."

My father points at me.

"Watch out for him. He's a Bolshevik."

This time he is smiling as he says it.

"With that thing, you barely stand a chance against modern British tanks," I say. Brinkmann snorts.

"You're a smart-ass. We do it the way we're ordered to."

Orders are orders. That sentence belongs to this war too.

During the night, the artillery starts again.

The British Eighth Army is massing near Medenine. My father knows only that more and more vehicles must be gathering

there. I know more. Too much. Ultra. The word opens knowledge. Not a device, not a single machine, but a code name for intelligence derived from decrypted German messages. Radio traffic. Enigma. Analysis. Staffs. Information reaches Montgomery that my father believes is secret. The British know an attack is coming.

Rommel wants to disrupt the buildup of the Eighth Army and buy time for Mareth. It is his last attack in Africa.

Brinkmann does not know that. He volunteered. With nothing but his rifle. Full of confidence.

The attack begins on March 6. The armored divisions come down out of the Matmata Hills. Once again, the hope rests on the old principle: surprise, maneuver, move faster before the enemy can bring his strength to bear.

But the enemy is not surprised. Montgomery has prepared his antitank defenses. Guns are waiting. Positions are manned. The tanks do not drive into open ground but into fire. Columns of sand rise. With every impact, the landscape seems to lose its shape for a moment. Tanks stop, burn, turn away. Infantry lies in front of the positions.

For a long time, Rommel's special gift was acting faster than the enemy expected. This time the enemy is expecting him. Perhaps that is the simplest difference between the Rommel of the victories and the Rommel of the defeats. The man has not changed completely in a matter of months. The world around him has.

The German advance grinds to a halt. Men scream. Others do not anymore. Brinkmann is shot in the head. He falls before I can do anything.

I look at him lying on the ground and think how quickly a person can disappear from a story. Only a few hours ago he called me a smart-ass. Now his life is over. History is full of dead people like him. People whose names survive only in diaries or lists, sometimes not even there.

My father is alive. Still. I have to reach him. I run back across the dry ground, up a slope, on toward the fortifications, though I do not know why my body can do any of this. Perhaps the thought alone is enough. I find my father at the gun.

"It was a trap," I say, out of breath. "They knew you were coming. They can decrypt your radio traffic."

My father looks at me differently this time. No longer as though I were insane.

"I'll report it."

Then he briefly puts a hand on my shoulder.

"Good work."

The touch feels real. More real than much of what came before. While my father tries to keep fighting his war, another image is already opening.

Rommel leaves Africa. It is inevitable. The most famous German soldier in this theater leaves because he is ill, because he is supposed to report in person, perhaps also because he has understood that the military situation can no longer be saved.

My father stays.

I do not follow Rommel into every real room. Instead, another room forms. Perhaps the Führer Headquarters.

Perhaps only a stage assembled from film footage, photographs, and records I read later. Hitler stands at a map table. Rommel faces him.

"Tunisia cannot be held this way," the Desert Fox says.

Hitler raises his head.

"You wanted to retreat to Mareth."

"Yes," Rommel says.

"Now you're there. So where are the victories?" Hitler asks.

"The situation changes constantly."

"That is why you have to respond to it."

Perhaps Rommel never said it this way.

I give him the words.

"If we don't shorten the front, we'll lose the troops."

"Retreat is not a concept," Hitler says.

"Sometimes retreat is the only way to preserve your forces."

Hitler's face hardens.

"You think too much like a tactician."

Rommel does not answer. Or perhaps I do not let him answer. Because I suddenly notice what I am doing. I am handing out reason and unreason like roles in a play. Rommel gets insight. Hitler gets delusion. Messe gets duty. Mussolini ambition. My father naivete. Is history really that simple?

Rommel himself had crossed limits, advanced farther than his supply situation sensibly allowed, chosen attack when others urged caution, and for years been one of Hitler's favored generals. The myth of the brilliant commander prevented from victory only by political leadership is a story too. Perhaps it is simply better told.

I let the image fall apart. What remains is more sober. The front is too long. Supplies are inadequate. The Allies are superior.

Rommel and Messe consider another retreat necessary. Hitler wants Mareth defended.

My father hears nothing about these disputes. He lies in his hole. The weather changes. Rain falls across the plain. Water runs through depressions and gathers between stones and sand. The heat disappears for a while, but the ground turns heavy. Clothing stays damp. Boots grow cold.

Then preparations begin for the real battle.

On March 19, the British offensive against the Mareth Line begins; during the night of March 19-20, Montgomery launches his main assault.

That date is right too, I think.

British artillery opens fire. Shells strike the positions along Wadi Zigzaou. The British 50th Division tries to cross the wadi and establish a bridgehead on the other side. Men go over ladders, through water, up embankments, under fire.

My father sees only a small part of it. Concrete shakes. Dust falls from ceilings. The PaK stands in a field position that offers nothing like the protection promised by the word fortification. One impact very close. Then another. My father stands beside me at the edge of a dugout.

Suddenly he asks:

“Who are you, anyway?”

I have been waiting for this question. Even so, I do not know what to say.

“I can’t explain it to you.”

“You’re not a spy.”

“No.”

“But you know things you can’t possibly know.”

“Yes.”

My father leans on his rifle and looks across the wet ground. A piece of sky is reflected in a puddle.

“Are you trying to give me a riddle?”

“No.”

I look at him.

“Only time separates us.”

He says nothing.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That we’re closer than you think.”

My father wipes sand from his face.

“How does this end?”

This time I answer.

"If you get the chance, let yourself be taken prisoner."

He stares at me, appalled.

"Prisoner?"

"It will cost you years. But not your life."

"We have to fight."

Then he adds:

"For Germany."

"Germany will not stop existing if you surrender."

"The war isn't lost yet."

"It is."

My father's expression hardens.

"You don't talk like that."

"It's still true."

He looks at me. Perhaps he decides I am insane. Perhaps he has already decided that I am telling the truth.

"And afterward?" he asks.

"Afterward, Germany will be different."

"How?"

I try to explain a country to him that cannot exist for him yet. Democracy. Division. Reunification. Europe. France as a partner. England as a friend. American soldiers as allies. A state that one day signs treaties with Poland and has to acknowledge its crimes. It is too much.

"You'll be friends with the people you're shooting at today," I say.

My father gives a dry laugh.

"You don't believe that yourself."

"I do."

"And the Russians?"

"Complicated."

The word actually makes him smile. Only for a moment. I cannot ask him to take in more than that. For him, Germany is still this Germany. For me, it has long been another one.

"Save your life," I say.

Then, after a brief hesitation:

"For my sake."

My father looks at me.

"For your sake?"

I nod.

"Why?"

I could tell him now. I still do not.

An impact cuts us off. Fragments rain down. A bunker nearby has been hit. Paul Michel is dead. Burkhard too. Names. More and more names. The war erases them while I try to hold on to them.

Then figures appear in the haze. My father pulls me back.

"Don't move."

Cloth. Stooped bodies. For a moment they look like beings from another world. My father raises his rifle. A woman shouts in French:

"S'il te plaît, ne tire pas!"

He lowers the barrel. Two people come closer. A young woman and an injured man. At first my father assumes they are soldiers or members of a North African unit, but too much does not fit. The man is wearing no recognizable uniform. Neither is the woman. I see the wound. Blood across his upper body. Shrapnel. And suddenly I know what should be done. Medic knowledge. Breathing. Blood loss. Bandage. Was I trained for this? I am a trained medic. Is that a memory? Or just knowledge again? It no longer matters.

The man is badly wounded. Help is too far away.

"Laissez-moi mourir ici," he whispers.

My father has hidden away a painkiller, meant for himself in case he is wounded. He gives it up. The man grows calmer. We bring both of them into cover. The woman's name is Zina. My father speaks to her in French. The wounded man is her brother. The two had been caught by the fighting and had tried to reach the Matmata Hills. The fragment struck him before they found shelter. I look at the wound. There is almost no hope. I tell my father to explain that to her. Zina listens. At first her face barely moves. Then she bends over her brother and presses her cheek to his. Only then do the tears come. They run into his blood-matted hair. He dies. We bury him under stones. My father helps. A German soldier. A young woman from this place. Me. For a few minutes, it does not matter which side anyone is on. Perhaps that is the only thing war should leave behind.

Later Zina sits with us in the dugout and asks my father something. He does not answer.

“What did she ask?”

“Why we’re here.”

“And what did you tell her?”

“That there’s a war.”

“That’s not an answer.”

My father looks at me, irritated.

“Then you give her one.”

I look at Zina.

I could explain Hitler. Mussolini. Versailles. Fascism. Living space. Colonialism. Oil. Suez. Empires. Loyalty to alliances. Fear. Ambition. Propaganda. I could give a lecture.

None of it explains why her brother is lying under stones.

“Je ne sais pas,” I say.

I don’t know. Zina nods. Perhaps that is the first sensible answer.

The assault on the coastal plain is repulsed, but far to the west a second battle is already moving. Formations sweep south and west around the Matmata Hills. Where the old French planners had treated the terrain as protection, modern vehicles find routes through.

The envelopment begins. I see it on the map. My father sees only impacts. I see columns far out in the distance. He sees sand. I see the Tebaga Gap. He sees the next trench. That is the difference between history and a life being lived inside it.

"We have to get out," I say.

My father shakes his head.

"Until an order to withdraw comes, leaving would be desertion."

"If the British break through at Tebaga and reach El Hamma, you'll be trapped here."

"How do you know that?"

"I just know."

By now my father almost accepts that answer.

On March 26, Montgomery intensifies the flanking attack. Tanks, artillery, and aircraft strike the forces assigned to hold the approaches to El Hamma. The Mareth Line is not conquered in a single heroic assault. It becomes militarily useless because its rear is threatened. That is different. And perhaps worse.

A massive defensive system can still be standing after the reason for remaining inside it has already disappeared. Then the order finally comes: disengage. Retreat. The Mareth Line is abandoned. Artillery continues to strike. Metal against concrete. Dust. Screams.

My father still wants to go back to the gun. I hold him.

"Leave it."

"We can't leave it behind."

"Yes, you can."

He tries to pull free.

"That's our gun."

He looks at me.

“Otherwise you’ll stay here forever,” I say. I look at the shattered positions. “In this iron desert.”

My father coughs. Then he gives in. Perhaps this is the first time he stops following the war. We leave. Zina leads us along a path into the Matmata Hills and farther north. She knows trails that are not even marked on the map inside my head. That, too, corrects my knowledge. Maps do not show every path people know. There is almost no cover. We move hunched over, wait between impacts, run again, until the sun sets and darkness takes back at least part of the landscape. We reach Zraoua, a Berber village in the hills. The houses seem to have grown out of the terrain itself. Stone. Clay. Dark openings. Long before this war, people here found ways to endure heat and drought.

Zina opens a cloth bundle. Chicken. Pastry. A little vegetables. Makroud, gone soft. A canteen of lben, sour milk. In the past I would not have touched some of it. Now it tastes like milk and honey.

Zina looks at us.

“Nous survivrons.”

My father translates:

“We’ll make it.”

Then the moon rises. Its light softly lifts the horizon out of the dark landscape. We finish eating and keep moving, northward, toward Gabès, perhaps only toward wherever we think we can still find a road. Sometimes we hear tanks. Sometimes

artillery. Then we run. When one of us can no longer keep going, the other grabs his arm. A fellowship forged by fate in a matter of hours. By now my father is walking in front, his hair disheveled, carrying his rifle like a walking stick. I try to read his thoughts. This time I cannot. Perhaps he is thinking of Berlin. Perhaps Paula. Perhaps Anna-Maria. Perhaps Abel. Perhaps only water. Not knowing everything about him comforts me. He remains my father and therefore another human being. Not everything about him belongs to me. The artillery sounds closer.

“There are the British,” he says. “Just like you said.”

He walks a few more steps. Then he stops.

“Then we should surrender.”

It takes me a moment to understand what has happened. I did not say it. He did. My father does not want to keep fighting. Zina looks at me.

“Tu n’es pas un soldat. Tu ne peux pas te rendre.”

I look down at myself. She is right. No uniform. No equipment. Only clothes that do not belong in this time at all. Why have I not noticed that before?

My father looks at me for a long time.

“I don’t know who you are.”

He is silent.

“But now I know what I have to do.”

The British positions are not visible yet. Only movement in the distance, the sound of an engine, perhaps voices. My father takes the rifle from his shoulder. Then he pauses.

“What becomes of me?”

The question catches me unprepared.

I could tell him his life. Long years in captivity. Homecoming. University. Work. Family. Me. His old age. His death. An entire life in a few sentences. I do not want to.

“You live.”

My father looks into the darkness.

“Do I make it home?”

“Yes.”

“When?”

“Later.”

“How much later?”

“Too late for some things.”

He nods as though a soldier could do something with an answer like that.

Then he asks:

“And Paula?”

I was not expecting that. I look at him.

“What about her?”

“Do I see her again?”

I search. Nothing. Perhaps I do not have the data. Perhaps she truly disappeared from his life.

“I don’t know.”

He accepts that.

“Anna-Maria?”

I search again. Piazza Navona. Waiting. Neptune. A woman looking into the crowd again and again. After that, nothing.

“I don’t know that either.”

My father smiles wearily. Then he looks at me.

“And you?”

“What about me?”

“You can see the future, can’t you? What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to look for you,” is all I say.

My father says nothing. The artillery is far enough away that between the individual detonations you can hear the night again. Then he steps toward me and embraces me. Not like a comrade. The way he will always embrace me later when he wants to comfort me. I know this embrace. He does not hold me especially tightly, only enough that as a child I always knew I did not have to be alone for a few moments. That peculiar feeling that a problem becomes smaller because someone else is there to share it with me. That is memory. My memory. No data. No reconstruction. No chronicle. I hold on to the thought. For him. For his journey into a captivity that will last for years. Among people who will later become our friends.

“If my son is looking for me,” he says, “then he should know I wasn’t always like this.”

I do not know what he means. The deluded soldier? The young man who was determined to go to Africa? The man who could not save Abel? Perhaps he does not say the sentence at all. Perhaps I need him to. I want to answer, but my voice is silent.

My father puts his hand on my shoulder. I know this gesture too. Not exactly from one particular moment. More from many. A hand. A touch. The unspoken assurance that he is still there. I hold on to his hand. Now I would have to say it.

"It's me."

My father looks at me.

"What?"

"It's me. Your son."

He does not react. Perhaps I only thought the sentence. Perhaps my voice does not reach him. Perhaps he hears individual words and cannot make sense of them. His face hardly changes. Only something in his eyes. A brief hesitation. I must not make more of it than that.

I do not know whether he recognized me. He cannot recognize me. I have not been born yet. And yet he puts his hand on my shoulder a second time.

"Then I suppose I have to go," he says.

"Yes," I say.

He looks at me. Now he finally seems to notice that I do not look like a soldier, that my clothes do not belong here, that I have no luggage, no weapon, no place in this world.

“Don’t stay here,” he says. Then he releases me from the embrace. Takes a few steps. Stops again.

“After the war,” he says. This time the words sound different. No longer like the promise of a young man who believes the future will simply be waiting for him. More like a plea. I nod.

“After the war.”

My father takes the rifle. For a moment I think he is going to keep it after all. Then he throws it away. It lands in the sand. An unremarkable sound. Metal on earth. Perhaps this is the most important moment of his war. Not the moment he is given a weapon. The moment he throws it away. He raises his hands and walks toward the British positions.

I stay behind. Zina is somewhere beside me.

Two soldiers come toward my father. One keeps his rifle trained on him. The other shouts something in a harsh voice that I do not understand, although I should understand English.

My father raises his arms higher. They empty his pockets. The small book. The diary. I want to run toward him.

No. The diary has to survive. I know it. Decades later I will read from it. It cannot be lost here. For a moment the scene seems to stall. Then one of the soldiers gives my father the diary back. Did he really do that? I do not know. Perhaps this is another of those repairs my mind makes after the fact so that the past will fit what exists later.

My father walks on with the foreign soldiers. I want to follow him. I cannot. He turns around. Perhaps because of my silent calls, which he somehow hears. I look into his serious face. He raises a hand. I raise mine. We look at each other.

Perhaps I never saw Rommel and Messe, assembled Hitler and Mussolini only from images, gave Paula sentences she never spoke, made Anna-Maria wait in a square longer than she really did, and built an entire battle around a few pages of my father's diary.

War crushes lives into seconds. One wrong step, one impact you fail to notice, a fragment, a bullet, and an entire future disappears before anyone knows what people might have come from it. Brinkmann might have had children. Paul Michel too. Abel, perhaps. I cannot reconstruct the futures that were lost. Perhaps that is why the idea of eternity is so seductive. Because a life ends so easily.

But my father survived. I know that. Because one day I will be born. If I exist, he must have survived. For the first time, my own existence is proof of something in the past. Not of every detail. Not of these images. Not of Rommel's command post. Not of Hitler looking at a map. Not of Paula at the Munich station. Not of Anna-Maria at the fountain. Perhaps not even of Zina. But of him. My father lived. And I am his son.

In an altered form, this story is part of the novel
“*Living Forever I - The Early Years of Eternity -
The Chronicles*” (2025).

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