

DRAFT TWO: THOSE WHO SAVE US

Scenes from Trudy's marriage to Roger...once elderly Anna has come to live with them.

i. breakfast

In the beginning of March, a warm front pushes up from the Gulf across the Plains states, belling all the way into the Upper Midwest. Overnight, it seems, the temperature rises fifty degrees. In Minneapolis, there is rejoicing. The weatherpeople are triumphant, as though they are responsible. The ice dams that have blocked gutters and collapsed roofs all winter become harmless freshets; road surfaces are visible for the first time since the previous November. Tables spring up like toadstools in front of coffee shops and cafes, and people huddle at them with their lattes even though it's still really too cold to sit outside, laughing when passing cars drench them with sheets of slush. In Minnesota, being outdoors during relatively good weather is a moral imperative.

All of this makes Trudy profoundly uneasy. The thaw seems false to her, the celebration that grips the city feverish and hysterical. She thinks of the frenzied USO dances and rash of ill-fated marriages that broke out just after America entered the war. She marvels with everyone else at the unseasonable warmth; it's either this or to talk at all, since it's the only topic people discuss. But as Trudy drifts through the rounds of her daily responsibilities, she's uncomfortably aware of how different her concerns are from those of others, their trivial trials and joys. She's in a fugue state, half past, half present, seeing everything through that lens of another era. She's playing the game.

Of course, she always has, for as long as she can remember. But now it's getting worse. Trudy can't turn it off. In the city hall, for instance, as she stands in line waiting to renew Le P'tit's liquor license, Trudy thinks, The man behind the counter, self-importantly licking his thumbs, he'd be a paper-pusher for the Gestapo. On the street, that blond woman wedging five dollars into a homeless guy's cup: Trudy dresses her in kerchief and wood-soled shoes, looking furtively over her shoulder as she slips bread under the ghetto fence. That boy with the cold, sniffing, his skin flushed--to the gas. Trudy watches the good-hearted, upwardly mobile young matrons pushing strollers on the streets of Edina, at the bright educational toys their children cram into their mouths, at the tiny expensive sneakers on the toddlers' feet. *It's too bad*, these mothers would say, drawing protectively together; *it's a shame what's happening to those people, but what can we do? We have our children to think of.*

She's doing well, Trudy thinks, at concealing her heightened preoccupation from Roger. Of course, she's has years of practice; Roger has always viewed Trudy's historical interest as a beloved idiosyncrasy, no more significant than her addiction to coffee or her double-jointed

thumb. And now, as Le P'tit is undergoing a Renaissance along with the rest of the city, he's cheerfully distracted, accepting any excuse Trudy feeds him about her absences: she's investigating a new meat wholesaler, she's checking out a competitor, the laundry has scorched half their tablecloths and she's going to return them herself, giving the owner a good dressing-down in the process.

But it's harder in the bedroom, where one dawn Trudy wakes from a soupy doze--more a nap than a night's sleep--to feel Roger pushing at her, his erection insistent against her tailbone. Trudy rolls her eyes. She hates early morning sex, the slow musty stickiness of it, like rhinos in rut. Still, she turns to him and applies herself to appearing interested. It's true she's been neglecting Roger lately; as Anna would say if she ever discussed such things, one has certain marital obligations to fulfill. Besides, it won't do for him to get suspicious.

Roger moves on top of Trudy, one hand over her mouth to prevent any noise that might rouse Anna. And Trudy obligingly twines her legs around his hips in the way she knows he likes, arcs her spine, runs her nails down his back. But all the while she's thinking, Is this enough? Would this display of enthusiasm be sufficient? If Roger were an SS officer, pacing back and forth during selection, would Trudy be chosen from the panicked crowd to work in the camp brothel? She's pretty enough, blond enough, blue-eyed--but, of course, no longer young. Would Roger make her his special pet, or would he send her straight to the gas?

Roger uncovers Trudy's mouth to kiss her, then bends his head to her neck. He murmurs something. When she doesn't answer, he draws back.

"Are you all right?" he whispers.

"Mmmmm," Trudy says.

Roger resumes, speeding up a bit with an air of wanting to be done. Now Anna, Trudy reflects, she's another matter entirely. She would be instantly whisked from the railway siding and given preferential treatment. Trudy closes her eyes, but instead of this scenario she sees Anna splayed on a bed, pinioned beneath a big man laboring above her.

Trudy wriggles under Roger, then begins struggling in earnest. She pushes at him, then bats him with her fists--shoulders, arms, chest, anywhere she can reach.

"Get off," she gasps, "get off, just please get off me."

Roger withdraws immediately. He heaves himself from the bed and stands beside it, staring down at his wife. He is breathing heavily through his nose, snorting almost, like a bull.

"What is *wrong* with you?" he asks.

Trudy doesn't know how to answer this. She glances guiltily at the part of Roger most directly in her line of vision: his midsection, his hands balled on his hips, his erection now sadly deflated. Then she looks away, at the window.

"Jesus *Christ*," Roger says, and stomps off to the bathroom.

Trudy lies listening to the water running in the sink, the flush of the toilet, the thud and clank of pipes as Roger turns the shower on. Maybe he would make her his special pet and then, when he had used her up, he would send her to the gas anyway.

She climbs from the bed and makes it slowly, feeling bruised, as though she's been beaten in her sleep. She dresses with the same arthritic apathy. When the bathroom is free, Trudy dashes water on her face, the steamy spice of Roger's cologne rendering her a little dizzy. Then, thumping down the risers like a recalcitrant child, she ventures downstairs to make amends.

But apparently this isn't necessary. Roger seems to have forgotten all about what has just happened. He is sitting at the breakfast table, damp and mussed in his robe, smiling at Anna as she bustles from table to stove. Anna, in contrast, is immaculately groomed as always, neat in a navy dress that brings out the color of her eyes, her hair in an elaborate configuration that requires, Trudy knows, at least sixteen pins. Trudy feels heat rising from her neck to her face. Of course Anna has been up since dawn; after all those years of living on the farm, she's incapable of doing otherwise. How much has she heard through the walls?

"Good morning," Anna says to Trudy.

"Morning."

"Why, thank you, Anna," Roger says, as Anna sets a plate of sausages before him. There is already brown bread on the table, and fruit and soft cheese, all the components of a hearty German *frühstück*. "These look wonderful. I can't remember the last time I had sausages."

He spears a fat link and eats it in two bites.

"The reason we don't eat sausages," Trudy reminds him, "is because they're saturated with cholesterol."

"Ach," Anna says. She waves a hand as though swatting a fly. "Such silly hoopla over this cholesterol. Meat is good for you. It has iron. Good for the blood."

She pulls out a chair for Trudy, who recognizes her own apron knotted around Anna's waist. Trudy remains pointedly where she is, leaning against the doorframe. But Anna pays her no attention. She is busy providing hot chocolate for Roger, served European-style, in a steaming bowl instead of a mug.

"This is heavenly," Roger says, swabbing some from his mustache, "absolutely delicious. How did you make it so frothy?"

Trudy could recite the answer along with Anna: use dark chocolate only; real cocoa, not a mix; whisk it with a fork instead of a spoon to break up the lumps; heat and add the liquid slowly, half milk, half cream.

"Delicious," Roger repeats. He remembers Trudy. "You should really try some, honey."

"Yes, you should," Anna tells her. "It will bring color to your face. You are very pale."

Trudy looks at her husband looking at her mother, wearing the same pole-axed expression men inevitably get when they look at Anna: Jack, a traveling vacuum salesman, the delinquent teenaged attendant at the New Heidelberg gas station.

"Strudel?" Roger says. He pushes the bowl across the table.

“Sit, Trudy. Sit and eat.”

Trudy gives her head a little shake.

“No,” she tells them. “No, I have to....”

The rest of her excuse for leaving is incomprehensible, which is just as well since Trudy doesn't know what it is anyway. She pushes past Anna and grabs her coat from the back of the door, then dives through it, leaving them staring after her.

ii. backe backe kuchen

After Trudy flees like a refugee from her own home, she's enraged to find herself longing for the breakfast she's left behind. Her mouth fills with sour saliva at the thought of the thick brown bread, the cheese, the chocolate; her stomach grumbles and whines and even, at one point, sends up a forlorn *ping!* Trudy, wanting to make many of the same noises, drives around looking for an open bagel place, a twenty-four hour McDonald's, even a pizza joint. Anything, she thinks, but a Goddamned bakery.

She ends up at a bakery. Everything else is still closed. Trudy buys two doughnuts and a French roll. As she waits for the teenager behind the display case to wrap these for her, she yawns so widely that tears come to her eyes. Swaying a bit on her feet, she asks for a cup of coffee to go.

Back in the car, she drains half of it in a single swallow, puts the Civic in gear, and drives with no set destination in mind. Up 50th Street, past the slumbering houses around Lake Harriet, their windows sheened with strengthening light. Around Lake Calhoun and Lake of the Isles, describing a rough figure-8; some die-hards are already out jogging. Through the shopping area of trendy Uptown, the stores shuttered behind their grates. And back again, back again, ending up a street over from her house, in the lot of the elementary school a block away.

Trudy parks and shuts off the engine. If she looks to the right, she can just make out the peak of her roof through the winter-bare trees. Beneath it, no doubt, Anna will be doing the dishes; Roger will have left for work. Have they been discussing her? Trudy has a moment's unease that Anna will mention the Project as an explanation for Trudy's strange behavior. But of course Anna would rather cut out her tongue and eat it before saying anything connected to the Holocaust, so Trudy figures she's safe on that front.

She turns away and gazes out over the playground. From this handsome, war-era school Trudy's heard the rhythmic metallic clank and squeal of swings and seesaws at noon, the cries of children at play, the shrilling bells that govern their little lives. The proximity of the school is the reason the newly married Roger and Trudy chose their house, long before they discovered that none of their offspring would be careering through its halls. Trudy remembers coming here the night of the closing, silly with champagne, Roger growing lewd on the swingset. *You want some candy, little girl?*

Trudy opens the bakery bag and bites into a doughnut, which turns out to have all the

taste and consistency of pulp with gritty sugar mixed in. She throws it out the window for the birds and tries the roll next, ripping its crust to dig out the soft insides. This, at least, is still faintly warm. Trudy balls it into pellets which she chews by rote, staring vacantly at nothing. She is so tired. She has never been so tired. The dreams have been frequent and bad since Anna's arrival, and Trudy is terrified of sleeping. She drops off near dawn only to be awakened twenty minutes, an hour later, by the sound of her own gasps. Her eyes are permanently grainy, as if with sand, and the days seem like hallucinations: people's movements too quick and jerky; colors too bright. Trudy botches the simplest tasks, forgets the most elementary things. The other day, unable to remember where she put her car keys, she found them in the refrigerator, next to the butter dish. This is, Trudy thinks, what the early stages of Alzheimer's must be like.

And perhaps this isn't too far off the mark, since sleep is as essential to well-being as food or water, equally necessary for mental functioning. The Nazis knew this. One of the most popular Gestapo tortures, less dramatic and messy than beatings or ripping out fingernails or immersion in a tub of water, was sleep deprivation. The subjects would be kept in a small room in which a bright light was never turned off, shocked with electrodes when they started to doze. Trudy seems to recall that this was also a study performed at one of the camps; was it Mengele's brainchild? Or was the experiment conducted at Buchenwald? Trudy's eyelids stutter shut as she tries to remember; she stifles a yawn with the back of a wrist. The bread, as her grip loosens, slips from her hand into her lap.

In this one, Trudy is playing in the rear dooryard, behind the house which houses the bakery. She has been banished there. Her mother has told her to go outside and amuse herself until called. Why don't you clean your *Trog*, little rabbit? Anna suggests, kissing Trudy on the nose and pressing a glass of milk into her hand before shooing her from the kitchen. Trudy dutifully fetches the broom from behind the door and takes it to the stand of lilac bushes that conceals her *Trog*, her rabbit hutch, a child-sized space in which she serves tea to imaginary companions. Here, glancing guiltily at the house, Trudy pours the milk into the grass; she doesn't like the taste of it, fatty and thick. Then she sets about sweeping the dirt floor of the hutch, which she and Anna have industriously tamped down. This she usually enjoys. But today, though it is spring, the weather is chilly and damp; the *Trog* is muddy so that soil clings to the broom, and really it is not much fun being outside.

After a quarter hour spent drawing the bristles through the wet earth, trying to create orderly swirls, Trudy parts the bushes and abandons her *Trog*. She stands in front of it, looking at the house. It is a gray house made of gray plaster, its steeply canted roof jutting into a gray sky. A light rain starts to fall, mist condensing in droplets. Trudy thrusts out her bottom lip and wriggles her hips back and forth. Surely her mother didn't intend for her to remain out in this wet. Dragging the broom behind her, Trudy marches toward the door. But on the stoop she hesitates. An upstairs window is cracked open, the one in Tante Mathilde's bedroom;

Anna keeps it this way for air, Trudy knows. From this window comes her mother's voice, forming not words but sounds: *nnnfff, nff, oooff, nnnff!*, like the whimpers of a dog asleep and dreaming of an owner who kicks it.

Mama? Trudy calls.

The noises stop. Trudy tosses the broom aside and, without removing her shoes as Anna always tells her to, she runs into the kitchen.

There she finds not her mother, but Saint Nikolaus. He is wearing trousers and a white shirt, Anna's ruffled apron tied around his waist. When Trudy comes in, he is bent over the oven, taking something from it.

Why, hello, he says, turning to her with a sheet cake pan in his hands. He sets it on the wooden worktable and perches on a stool. I've just finished baking. Would you like a slice of delicious cake?

Trudy stares.

Come now, Saint Nikolaus says, don't be shy. Clapping, he begins to sing:

*“Backe, backe Kuchen!”
der Baker hat gerufen.
“Wer will guten Kuchen backen
der muss haben sieben Sachen:
Butter und Salz,
Zucker und Schmalz,
Milch und Mehl,
und Eier--”*

He breaks off, smiling.

It's got all those good things, he says, butter and salt and milk and eggs. Won't you try even a little piece?

Trudy shakes her head.

Saint Nikolaus makes a *tsch tsch tsch* sound with his tongue and pulls the other stool next to him. He pats it.

I'm not accustomed to having my invitations rejected, he says. You've hurt my feelings.

He splays a hand over his heart and inclines his head toward Trudy with an expression of exaggerated sorrow. His eyes are so light that the pupils are but pinpricks in them, floating black specks.

Trudy tries to back away, in the direction of the door, but instead she finds her legs carrying her over to Saint Nikolaus. He grins.

That's better, he says, that's much better.

From the pocket of Anna's apron he removes a straight razor and shears away a slice of cake. It's golden and spongy in texture, and the unfamiliar sugary fragrance it emits causes

Trudy to salivate helplessly. Saint Nikolaus extends the slice in his bare palm.

Take it, he says.

As Trudy reaches for it, she sees a single blue eyeball embedded in the sponge. Saint Nikolaus has put her mother in the oven and baked her. Trudy wants to scream; the skin around her mouth hurts from being stretched so wide, but she can't make a sound.

Poor appetite? Saint Nikolaus asks. A shame. He shrugs, then folds the cake in half and pops it into his mouth.

Delicious! he says, eyes gleaming, and claps his hands to dust off her mother's crumbs.

A tapping on the window jerks Trudy awake. She rears up in a single violent movement and the children on the other side of the glass scatter, shrieking. Trudy swipes her mouth with a wrist and grimaces. She's been drooling in her sleep.

The children, a gaggle of girls, regroup and creep back to the car. The biggest and bravest one, with corn-rowed hair and braces, thrusts her face next to the windshield. "What are you doing?" she calls.

"Nothing," says Trudy. "Having a nap."

"In the *car*?" More shrieking and giggling. "We thought you were dead," the girl says.

"Well, I'm not," Trudy tells her. "Shouldn't you be in school?"

The girl gives her a look of infinite scorn.

"It's winter *break*," she says.

Eventually, when Trudy doesn't answer, the girls grow bored and drift onto the playground, shooting dubious glances over their shoulders and whispering. Trudy is relieved. She doesn't much like children; in her experience, they're not to be trusted. The stocky girl who talked to her, for instance: it's all too easy to picture her in the brown uniform of the *Bund Deustcher Madel*, her hair pulled into tight pigtails, pointing at another child from the front row of the classroom and saying, *Her, I heard somebody say her parents are hiding Jews.*

Trudy rolls her head first to the left, then to the right, trying to loosen the knot in her neck. On the other side of the chain-link fence, the girls form a line and begin skipping rope. Legs flashing, they chant in unison, a rhyme Trudy recalls from her childhood:

Miss Mary Mack, Mack, Mack

All dressed in black, black, black

With silver buttons, buttons, buttons

All up her back, back, back

backe backe Kuchen

der Baker hat gerufen

Wer will guten Kuchen backen

*der muss haben sieben Sachen:
Butter und Salz, Zucker und Schmalz,
Milch und Mehl,
und Eier machen den Kuchen gel'.
Backe backe Kuchen--*

Trudy, who has bent to retrieve the roll and brush crumbs off her lap, pops up, eyes wide. She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. She forces herself to unclench her fists. There are little red hyphens in her palms where the nails have bit into the skin.

“Miss Mary MACK MACK MACK,” shout the children, “all dressed in BLACK BLACK BLACK, with silver BUTTONS, BUTTONS, BUTTONS all up her BACK BACK BACK--”

“That’s better,” Trudy mutters. “That’s much better.”

She rubs her face. She has to get more sleep. *Ashes, ashes*, the children are singing now. *Ashes, ashes, we all fall down*. Trudy presses the heels of her hands to her eyelids until black stars explode against the red. One way or another, she has to get Anna out of her house.

Here is an original Trudy interview, when Trudy was interviewing Jewish survivors specifically, not German ones.

1. Mr. Wisneski.

Remembrance Project Interview 57 Survivor: Peter (nee Piotr) Wisneski Interviewer: Trudy Swenson Location: St. Paul, MN Date: February 13, 1998

Q: ...Can you tell me a little about the work you did in Treblinka, Mr. Wisneski?

A: I don’t know. I guess so. What do you want to know?

Q: Were you assigned to a specific work detail?

*A: Yes. Yes. As soon as I got there, I was put on *Sonderkommando*.*

Q: Could you translate that term, Mr. Wisneski?

*A: Ha! Yes. It means *Special Duty*. What a love the Nazis had for dressing everything up in fancy names, the murdering bastards. I always think whoever invented the term “ethnic cleansing” must have been a Nazi at heart. The politicians these days, they all talk like that--*

Q: They remind you of Treblinka?

A: Well, a little. But of course it was worse there. In Treblinka, whenever you heard a fancy-sounding term, you prayed to God that you wouldn’t be any part of it. Not that it made a difference. There was no God in Treblinka.

*Q: But you had to be part of the *Sonderkommando*.*

A: Yes. Yes, I did. It was either that or...

(Survivor makes a slashing motion across his throat.)

It wasn't like I had much choice in the matter. Whatever the Germans said, you did. Double-quick. I was a big strapping guy and a hard worker. That's how I stayed alive. That and luck. Certainly not God.

Q: Can you tell me what the work consisted of?

A: It--It wasn't pretty, I can tell you that. It was the devil's work. I was on *Sonderkommando* for nine months or so. After that--

Q: I'm sorry to interrupt, Mr. Wisneski, but could you describe for me what a day's work on *Sonderkommando* was like?

A: I don't know. I don't know. What do you want to know?

Q: Any specific moment you can tell me about, any one thing you saw or heard that sticks out in your mind. Anything you remember.

A: Oh, I remember all right. I remember everything. If I were still a praying man, I'd pray for Alzheimer's. My wife had Alzheimer's, did I tell you that?

Q: I believe so. I'm sorry. But we were talking about something specific you remember about *Sonderkommando*.

A: Okay. Something specific. Okay. Well, the main thing we did, we had to remove the bodies from the gas chambers. We-- I'm sorry. This isn't easy for me.

Q: Take your time, Mr. Wisneski. All the time you need.
(*Survivor pauses for one minute, forty-seven seconds.*)

A: It was me and twelve other guys. Some of them I knew from my hometown. There was this one guy, Moshe, I knew him from childhood. We went to *Shul* together. And was he ever a cut-up! I remember one time he--

Q: Forgive me for interrupting, Mr. Wisneski, but you were telling me about being on *Sonderkommando*. What would you say was the worst thing about that detail?

A: *The worst thing was-- Well, there were a lot of terrible things. One was that our survival depended on transports coming in every day. More people to be murdered. We knew the Nazis wouldn't want any witnesses to what they were doing, so our days were numbered. Some guys I worked with committed suicide. I guess they figured if they were going to die anyway, they wouldn't do the Nazis' dirty work for them first. They wanted to get to heaven with their souls clean. But I didn't believe in heaven anymore, so I did the work. Most of us did. Like I said, there wasn't much choice.*

You know, when my wife was alive, she was always trying to get me to go to temple. And she was a survivor herself! I didn't understand how she could worship anymore after the things she'd seen. I told her, I said--

Q: Again I have to interrupt, Mr. Wisneski--I'm sorry. I'm just trying to keep things in chronological order here. We'll definitely talk about your wife. But about the transports-- How often did they come in?

A: Every day. Every night.

Q: And what would happen when a transport came in?

A: Well, it-- Okay. What happened was, the people would come off the trains and be forced straight onto the road to the *Todeslager*--sorry, the gas chamber. The Nazis called it *Himmelstrasse*, the Street to Heaven, but we called it Death Avenue. It was planted with bushes and pretty flowers so the people wouldn't suspect what was going to happen to them. The ones who couldn't make it down Death Avenue, like the sick and the old and the children, they were taken on a different road and made to undress in a small hut. Then they would go through the back door, through some bushes, and behind the bushes there was a pit full of burning corpses. Naturally, when the people saw that they'd walked into a trap, they tried to get away, but the SS shot them and pushed them into the pit. The bushes were trampled from the people trying to escape and there was another work detail that had to straighten them. The *Tarnungskommando*. I don't know why they bothered. The stink of that place told you everything. It made your eyes water.

They tried to make everything nice, the Nazis. At the end of Death Avenue, when the Jews were going into the chamber, there was an orchestra. When I first started on *Sonderkommando*, it was just a trio, but then they got ahold of Artur Gold. He was a famous conductor from Warsaw. They found ten guys to play with him. I guess they hoped people would think it was a parade maybe, or that it would make them march faster. Also it covered up the screams from the *Todeslager*. Sometimes the SS would bring their girls and they would dance. The Ukrainian guards did this too. The Germans liked waltzes.

Q: Did anybody try to resist going into the chamber?

A: Yes. Yes. Some of them figured it out. Like I said, you couldn't hide the smell. But if they tried, there was this one guard who had a sword, and he would cut them. He would cut their hands off if they tried to hold onto the door. He sliced babies in half. Sometimes smashed their heads against the wall.

Q: And after they went into the chamber?

A: They were gassed.

Q: With Zyklon-B?

A: No. Exhaust. There was a tank behind the *Todeslager*, a Tiger tank with a pipe running from its muffler through a hole into the chamber. I've read where other people say it was quick, but that's a lie. It took forty minutes at least. Sometimes an hour or more. And the people screamed the whole time.

When it was finished... I'm sorry. Can we stop for a minute?

Q: As long as you like.

(Survivor pauses for one minute, fifteen seconds, wiping his forehead with a handkerchief and drinking water.)

A: Where was I?

Q: You were telling me about the-- what happened after the gas.

A: Yes. Yes. We had to rake the bodies out and separate them. It was hard work, because they had gotten kind of-- welded together. Just one big block of flesh. Sometimes we had to break the bones. Sometimes the arms and legs would come off by themselves. The bodies had bruises from where the people had fought each other for air. All of them were covered in-- They had soiled themselves from the exhaust.

We laid them out on the ground for the dentists. Those were the prisoners who had to take the gold teeth from their mouths. Then we loaded the bodies on stretchers for the burn detail to come and take them away. They put them on a giant, a giant grill, I guess you could say. Railroad ties laid on concrete posts over a huge pit. Three thousand bodies a day were burned this way. When I was on *Brennenkommando* later they made us put fat women on the grill first because they'd catch easier. Then men, women, children, whatever they brought us. We had to pour gasoline-- When the fire died down, we had to collect the bones--We had to break them and burn them again-- I can't talk about this. I can't talk about this.

Q: That's fine, Mr. Wisneski. Why don't you tell me-- Why don't we talk about the perpetrators. Do you remember who was in charge of the gas chamber?

A: The guy in the tank, you mean? His name was Ivan. Of course we all called him Ivan the Terrible. Not very creative, I know, but it fit. He wasn't the only one who did that job, but I remember him most because he used to read magazines while the gas was being pumped into the chamber. Girly magazines. Sometimes he'd show them to the other SS. You know.

That's what I remember best about these guys. They were all voyeurs. They had a peephole built into the side of the gas chamber, I guess so they could see when their work was done. But a lot of them liked to watch the whole process. Not always, but it was a pretty safe bet that on any given day there'd be at least one SS guy with his face glued to the peephole. They used it to show off, too, whenever other Nazis came from another camp. Like they were demonstrating how a new car worked or something. Himmler came once, in-- 1943, I think. Spring. I didn't see him. But whenever some really high-ranking bastard came to Treblinka, the *Kommandant, Hauptsturmfuhrer* Strangl, may his black soul rot, he'd bring him to the *Todeslager* and they'd look through the peephole together.

There was this one guy I especially remember. Tall, with blank eyes, very light blue. He couldn't get enough of the peephole. He'd look, then walk away a few feet, then come back and look again. Even Strangl got impatient with him, you could tell, though he was laughing. It was like a boys-will-be-boys thing. They were all like little boys watching a woman undress through her bedroom window.

And this is what still keeps me awake nights. To kill millions of people, to gas them and shoot them and burn them in grills and ovens, that's bad enough. Unbelievable, in fact. Even when I was seeing it with my own eyes or handling the bodies, I still sometimes didn't believe it was happening. It was insane. Insane. But to watch on top of it! To not even allow people the privacy of their own deaths. They made it into a peepshow. What kind of monsters

would do such a thing? I know there's some voyeur in everybody. I've looked through a few windows myself in my day. That's just human nature. But does that mean we could be like them? Would everybody, under the right conditions, look through the peephole?

(Survivor pauses for twenty-seven seconds.)

I guess I don't believe that. If I did, I wouldn't be able to live anymore. I would have to kill myself, like my friends. Or that poor man Primo Levi. Something must have happened to change the SS, to take that normal instinct and pervert it into something a thousand times worse. Maybe they figured that since they'd pulled out all the stops and were damned anyway, they might as well do the worst things they could think of. They went nuts with power. They looked like men, but they were no longer human.

Like this Ivan the Terrible I was telling you about. A little bullet-headed guy with pimples and a tiny white-blond mustache. If you passed him on the street you wouldn't look at him twice. Today he'd probably watch X-rated movies on cable and that would be the end of it. But then, when he got bored, he'd climb out of the tank and go to the peephole. He would watch the whole time, all forty minutes. With his trousers undone.

He'd be--well, you know. Jerking off. Jerking off while these people screamed to death, choking and defecating. These monsters who looked normal on the surface, this is what I think about when I can't sleep. This is what I remember.

And finally, for the ladies of Mary Claire Schwartz's New Jersey book club, the requested Trudy-Thomas love scene. Enjoy! (This scene takes place after Trudy has just heard Rainer's devastating "up the chimney" monologue—though in this draft, his name is Mr. Goldberg.)

i. at the truckstop

It's snowing hard when Trudy and Thomas stumble from Mr. Goldberg's house, the air gray with it and the advent of evening. Trudy, helping Thomas load his things into the van, wonders why she didn't notice the storm through Mr. Goldberg's windows, then remembers that Thomas tacked a sheet over them to block out the light. Of course. As always. Trudy is grateful that she came with Thomas today instead of driving her own car, since both the weather and her state of mind are approaching white-out.

On the local road back to the highway, despite Thomas's careful concentration, the van fishtails and twice goes into a skid. On 52, the conditions are even worse. The land is flat and open here, and the wind buffets the van, driving icy particles sideways and then at the windshield, so that the snow in the headlights flies straight at them from the dark. There is nobody else on the road but the occasional semi creeping past in the left lane, invisible until its running lights draw up alongside the van. The whirling tailspin leaves them completely blind.

Thomas hunches forward with his tongue between his teeth, his face set in grim lines Trudy hasn't seen before. Eventually a glow materializes in the sky to the right, coalescing into a white sign that says FOOD. They've reached the truckstop just past Coates. Trudy checks the dashboard clock: this should have taken them fifteen minutes. It's been over an hour.

"I'd like to stop for a while, if you don't mind," Thomas says. "This is really hard on the eyes. And I could use something to eat."

"That's fine," Trudy tells him.

It's the first exchange they've had since leaving Mr. Goldberg's house.

Thomas begins edging the van toward where he assumes the exit ramp to be. The tires judder on the washboard shoulder and he quickly cranks the wheel one way, then the other. Once he's brought them safely into the truckstop lot, he drives behind the restaurant and parks with the bigger vehicles. There are only a few semis and detached cabs, already covered in snow. Thomas helps Trudy from the van and takes her elbow as they make a run for it, slipping and sliding, around the building to the entrance.

Just inside the door, next to the gumball and baseball card and Love-O-Meter machines, Trudy spots a pay phone.

"You go ahead," she tells Thomas. "I'll be right in."

She dials the digits of her calling card and then her home number, shaking the snow from her hair and boots while she waits. With any luck, Roger will be at the restaurant. Please don't let him answer, she prays. Please. She looks at the Love-O-Meter machine--*Cold Fish, Lukewarm, Passionate, Hot Stuff, Dynamite!*--and wishes she were still a smoker. Maybe she'll start again.

Her prayer is granted. "Hi, hon," she says to the machine. "I went for a drive and now I'm caught in this snow. Silly of me, huh? I'll be home late. Don't wait up."

This accomplished, Trudy enters the shocking fluorescence of the diner, where Thomas has taken the booth farthest from the door. He's had his pick of seating, Trudy sees; they're the only customers except for two truckers slumped on stools at the counter, staring slack-jawed at a TV over the cash register.

By the time Trudy hangs up her coat and reaches the booth, the waitress is there too, a tired-looking woman with forearms as brawny as a sailor's. "You want buffet?" she asks.

Trudy looks at the food that sits glumly in steam trays under orange lights, chicken wings an angry reddish-pink, scrambled eggs a yellow never intended by Nature.

"Could we see some menus?"

"Just buffet," says the waitress, digging in her ponytail with her pen. "Coffee?"

"Please."

“I’ll have herbal tea,” says Thomas.

The waitress narrows her eyes at Thomas’s longish hair, all the more unkempt for his having removed his knitted ski-cap.

“Herb?” she says.

Now this woman, Trudy thinks, would have turned her Jewish neighbors in to the Gestapo for a monetary reward.

“Never mind,” says Thomas. “Lipton’s is fine. And two buffets.”

“No, one,” Trudy corrects him. “I’ll just have coffee.”

“Come on, Trudy.”

“Really, I’m not hungry.”

“You should have something in your stomach,” Thomas admonishes her. “They don’t call it comfort food for nothing.”

The waitress bounces her pen against her order pad as if she has somewhere better to be. “One buffet or two?”

“Two,” Thomas tells her.

The waitress marks this on their check before ripping it off and slapping it on the table. Trudy stares at the rings of water bleeding through the thin green paper.

“Trudy,” says Thomas. He reaches over to touch her hand. “It wasn’t your fault, you know.”

“I know.”

“What happened back there, with Mr. Goldberg, it could have happened to anybody. Any of the interviewers.”

“I know.”

“He was just waiting for an opportunity to say what he had to say. A very angry man. Granted, it’s understandable, given what he’s gone through. He obviously had terrible survivor guilt. But it wasn’t fair for him to hit you out of the blue like that.”

“I know, Thomas. Thank you.”

Thomas retracts his hand as the waitress returns with a vacuum-sealed plastic urn of coffee and a mug with a teabag floating limply in it.

“Don’t thank me,” he says, when she’s gone. “Just eat something, will you?”

Trudy rolls her eyes and he mistakes this for acquiescence, for he gets up and goes to the buffet. As he heaps two plates with food, Trudy gazes at the window. Beyond the snow coming down in staticky lines beneath the gas station lamps, the darkness is as absolute as a principle of physics. Superimposed over this is Thomas’s reflection, and Trudy’s own. She looks like a stranger, pallid and tired and infinitely sad.

It’s ironic, Trudy thinks, that Mr. Goldberg and Anna, though coming from opposite

ends of the spectrum, have in essence told her the same thing: the past is the past, and better it should remain that way. Perhaps they're right. Perhaps Trudy should give up the Project, make an effort to see the world as it is instead of as it was. She won't have to keep hiding for Roger. The dreams might stop. Trudy might, impossible as it seems, even get along better with Anna if she lets it go.

But as Trudy drinks her coffee and considers this, there rises in her the complete certainty that she can't. It's not just Ruth's disappointment or Trudy's professional pride, the knowledge that others would be out there doing her job and not doing it as well, although these factors are a part of it. It's that even if Trudy stopped conducting interviews, she'd still view everything through a historical membrane. It's as much a part of her as her arms or legs or eyes. She tries to imagine her existence without it: Trudy Swenson, middle-aged restaurateur, living with her handsome husband Roger and her mother Anna in their house. It's a pretty picture, like something seen through a little window in an Advent calendar, but it's not hers.

Thomas returns with the food and Trudy thanks him. They eat without speaking, and Trudy discovers she's hungry after all. She cleans her plate, mopping it with a roll and emptying the urn of coffee as Thomas settles the bill. Then they put on their damp coats and go back out to the van. The snow has almost stopped, only a few flurries spinning uncertainly beneath the halogens, and a great muffling quiet has descended over the land. This may be only a temporary hiatus, however, since beyond the parking lot the sky is as red as in Mr. Wisneski's Treblinka.

Thomas puts the key in the ignition but doesn't start the engine. He sits with his hands loosely on the wheel, gazing through the windshield at the snow, the loading dock attached to the back of the restaurant, the truck cabs like mastodon carcasses under their blankets of white.

"I just want you to know," he says, "it's a privilege for me to work with you. I have the highest admiration..."

He pauses, his breath frosting the windshield.

"What I'm trying to say is--"

He stops and laughs, a short bark of frustration.

"I guess I don't know what I'm trying to say," he says. "Except--"

"Thomas, look at me," Trudy says.

After a moment, he does. His round face, bereft of its smile, is full of miserable longing.

"I know," Trudy tells him.

Then she slides across the long seat of the cab, curls a cold hand around his neck beneath the shaggy hair, and kisses him.

What follows, their coupling, is quick and frantic and undignified. Also, Trudy thinks, a mistake. She knows it almost instantly. It's true that with Thomas she's able to stop playing

the game, doesn't imagine him as an SS officer or a doomed Jewish professor or anything else, doesn't cast herself in the role of a woman desperate to survive, doesn't think of Anna at all. Nor does Trudy think of Roger, really, except to observe how different Thomas's technique is. But Trudy can't feel much of anything either, aside from the awkwardness of zippers, the vinyl seat freezing beneath her bare buttocks, the gearshift protruding into her right thigh. She tries to push herself up and away from it and bangs her head on the window.

"Sorry," Thomas gasps. "Sorry, Trudy, you all right? Oh, God--"

He pants above her, his face an inch from hers, and Trudy, looking up at the soft underside of his chin, thinks that from this familiar vantage point he could be any man. He's removed as few of his clothes as possible, because of their hurry and the cold, but one of them has undone his shirt, and what's revealed makes Trudy sadder than ever. The scant gray hair on Thomas's chest. The surprise of his pot belly. Nudity is supposedly a natural state, but to Trudy it seems as false as a dog in a coat, a cartoon fox in a suit. People ought to keep their clothes on.

The episode is over as quickly as it began. After a pause for rest, Trudy and Thomas separate and return to their respective corners of the cab, buckling and buttoning. Trudy twists the rearview mirror in her direction to fluff her hair and apply some lipstick. Her cheeks feel abraded from Thomas's stubble, her mouth swollen and bruised. This is so reminiscent of Trudy's highschool days, when she would sneak into the farmhouse after a evening's necking in a field, her skirt wrinkled and cornsilk in her hair, that she wants to laugh. She wants at least to tell Thomas about it. But for some reason she can't, and behind her eyes is the hot insistent press of tears.

They drive back to the Twin Cities in silence. As the snowplows are just starting to go about their rounds, it's still slippery going, and by the time Thomas pulls up to Trudy's house, it's very late. Trudy looks at it with trepidation, but all the lights are off except the one over the front door. She exhales a small whistle of relief and bends to retrieve her belongings from the floor mat.

"Well," Thomas says, "it's been quite a day."

Trudy laughs. She reaches for the doorhandle to let herself out, but as she does she pictures Thomas letting himself into his-- house? Apartment? Whatever it is, it will be sad in the way places are when only men live in them, hairs in the sink, dustballs tumbling across the floor, smelling of dirty laundry. And everything exactly as it was when Thomas left, since he is the last person, the only person, to have been there. Trudy sets her portfolio on the seat and reaches over to give Thomas a hug.

It's only a friendly gesture, but in their palpable and mutual relief they embrace longer than necessary. Neither of them notice Roger until he's next to the van in his shirtsleeves,

thudding a fist on the roof.

“I knew it,” he yells at Trudy. “I knew there was somebody else.”

He pounds on her window and bends to glare at Thomas.

“And you,” he says, “whoever you are, get your fucking hands off my wife.”