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JURA'S LAST WINTER

English sample translation by Jamie Lee Searle

[pp. 7–42]

CHAPTER 1

VIOLENCE

That must have been it: The sadists who tormented me had turned me into one of their own. It must have happened insidiously, over the course of many years. I didn't want to replay their nasty attacks on me as I fell asleep anymore. Gloomy and tense, I lay beneath my blanket and waited for a slumber without memory. But the sleep I sought was evasive; it had changed sides and allied itself with the enemy. Gone were the days when, as soon as darkness fell, I could fall into a redemptive nothingness with one last clutch of the pillow, then awake the next morning as though reborn.

I sat up in bed and systematically went through all the faces that came to mind from my year group. There were only a few prospects, because I was weak and had barely any muscles. As I counted, I used my fingers so I didn't forget anybody.

There really was no one in my class of whom I could say: “I know I could take him”. Only one boy occurred to me, and he was actually a class above me. I decided to launch a surprise attack.

This boy had grown so quickly with puberty that his spine couldn't keep up. He seemed to struggle to hold his long upper body straight. Looking at him, you could even think his balance was in danger, though he himself presumably didn't feel as though he were tipping forwards.

His usual spot on the schoolyard was by the entrance to the gym, where he would lean against a bicycle stand. When I think about it, the expression on his face was rather beautiful. I call him Reuss.

The next morning, during class, I envisioned how he would be standing at exactly this spot during the break, and when the sign came from the teacher's desk that the lesson was over, I was the first to push open the classroom door. I leapt down the two steps, ran across the concrete which was thronged with my fellow pupils and immediately had him in my sights. He was unwrapping his sandwich. I shot towards him, took a big swing, then slammed my fist into the pit of his stomach and yelled: “Yeah, that hurts, huh?”

He slumped and the sandwich flew out of his hand, he crossed his arms over his stomach, stared at me with his watery-blue eyes, and wheezed just before he fell to the floor: “What did I do to you?”

I was gripped by a fright I had never experienced before: What if he doesn’t get up again?

A few people tried to pull him up, which seemingly wasn't so easy, because he slipped out of their arms and back down to the floor, though I couldn't see very clearly, I had already turned around and was massaging my right fist soothingly with my left hand. The memory of its collision with his gurgling innards was still there, very concrete, and sent a message to my conscience, which had opened its little eyes like a wide-awake bear or panther glaring at me.

Behind me, my victim’s wheezing had fallen silent, while the bystanders asked what on earth had gotten into him.

That was me. They were talking about me.

Dear God! I thought, my legs struggling to move forwards, please let him get up again, don't do this to me, you know I’ve had to take so many beatings. And now I hit out just this once, and you immediately take him away to be with you. Please don't do that, think of my parents.

I walked across the schoolyard, didn't look back and thought: If the ambulance comes now, and then at lunchtime the news of his death, there's no point in my even going home. The police will look for me, my parents will have to pack their bags and move away from this small town, if my father, the director of the prison for young offenders, can't even stop his own son from becoming a killer.

I suddenly felt as though heaven had opened up. But it was an illusion, because I hadn't raised my head and I wasn't looking upwards. The heaven I saw existed only beneath the top of my skull, it was blue like in the Sistine Chapel, I’d been there once, after all, Michelangelo's Last Judgement, this Mediterranean intensity behind the mighty Christ, who separates good from evil with his karate-striking hand, that's the kind of blue I saw, and the opening to heaven was a deformed mouth, no, that had to be a vulva, that must be how a vulva looks, that now I finally get to see a vulva! I’d never had contact with a vulva, but that must be it, pinkish-red in the evening light, and on one of the giant lips my father was skipping from toe to toe and shouting across to my mother, who is kneeling, disappointed, like the Little Mermaid on the opposite labium: “Why didn't we just abort the boy back then?”

Now he's ruining our lives! We've already lost everything once. We can't keep starting over. For us, there's no more peace, no luxury, no recognition, no holiday, no rest, no pleasure, no success, no beauty, no concert tickets, we can't take it anymore!"

I finally turned around and saw in the distance a group moving towards the school building. Older school pupils were propping Reuss up, but concealing him too, he must have been in their midst, not actually visible to me; alive and slow-moving, he must have formed the core of the whole. I could guess his fragile state only from the sequence of movements around him.

And I have to say: With the growing certainty that he was alive and that his condition would improve, the heaven in my head closed. My father disappeared, as did my mother, the vulva faded away, I thanked God, and imperceptibly I slipped back into that gloomy apathy in which I had concocted the plan of attacking my fellow pupil.

This story came to me during the last Advent season. The pressure of Christmas preparations had been considerable; both children wanted to arrive just before Christmas Eve with their partners and our granddaughters. My wife had meticulously planned every meal, taking all dietary habits and requirements into consideration, we were driving to organic shops or supermarkets on a daily basis and piling up supplies in the cellar, while the fridge threatened to burst at its seams, and we had even bought additional mattresses and softer toppers so everyone could sleep well. Our narrow, vertically-striving terraced house needed to comfortably house nine people for a week – including infants who were still being nursed and who under no circumstances could be permitted to crawl unattended near the stairs or around the Christmas tree.

After a day of hard graft and an opinionated fight between my wife and I over some trivial matter – perhaps the question of whether real or artificial candles should be put on the tree – I retreated to the storage room in our cellar, where there's a small occasional desk. I sought sanctuary in "my project" and pondered how I could quickly resume contact with the 16-year-old Jura Ryabinkin. He had written a diary that had been occupying my thoughts for many years. It began in June 1941 and continued into the eighth day of the following January. Then his strength failed him, and no longer able to hold the pen, he stopped writing, in the first and worst winter during the Germans' Siege of Leningrad.

I opened his text at random and landed on an entry from the 25th of November:

I went to the optician. He prescribed me glasses and said I have zero vision in one eye and 30% in the other.

I lingered over this sentence. It occurred to me I'm constantly suppressing Jura's severe sight defect, as well as his pleuritis and painful coughing fits. His zest for life, his craving for books, novels and nonfiction, his numerous activities with his schoolmates in the clubs of the Pioneer Palace entice me to overlook his poor health. I don't even want to imagine the effects that the famine had on him. I avert my eyes from his bloated body, which held far too much water, from the atrophy of his muscles, the dirt on his clothes, the lice that lived on him until his death. It's his alert mind that draws me in. But my imagination evades the image of his body.

And suddenly I remembered Reuss on the schoolyard. More than 60 years have passed since this outbreak of violence, I'd always steered well clear of the memory, and it astonished me how clear the incident still was in my mind.

Over the next few nights, I tested out different tones in which I could narrate the incident, and I ultimately saw myself confronted with two different endings.

One of them is above:

“and imperceptibly I slipped back into that gloomy apathy in which I had concocted the plan of attacking my fellow pupil.”

The other, I like better:

“and I became aware that I don't have someone who talks with me calmly and without reproach. Just like you would explain the way to somebody who has gotten lost.”

CHAPTER 2

A DIARY BEGINS

Jura begins his records on a day when I hadn't yet been born, in a city that I've never visited and, in all likelihood, probably never will.

It's the 22nd of June 1941, towards 11 o'clock at night. Sitting at his desk, he opens the notebook and writes the date on the first line. He wants to capture on paper something that is haunting him.

If he were to express in that very first sentence what he now knows, late on that evening, I imagine that he wouldn't even need to write. He wants to tell everything in order. He has learnt on this Sunday that major events send harbingers before they strike you to your core. And so he begins with the puzzling signs that began twenty-four hours before.

The whole night, a strange humming sound stopped me from sleeping. When it finally quietened down, dawn was already breaking. The nights in Leningrad are clear, bright and short at the moment. But through the window I could see numerous searchlights wandering across the sky. Eventually, I fell asleep regardless.

And then? How was it the next morning? Was there anything of note? Not really. He's alone in the apartment when the daylight wakes him, his mother and little sister have since long gone out.

When I woke up, it was almost noon, or more precisely, almost 11. I quickly dressed, washed, had breakfast and walked in the garden at the Pioneer Palace. I want to qualify for chess this summer. I often win, after all, even in the third category.

This is how harmlessly a calamitous day can begin, and with the most beautiful weather too.

When he leaves the apartment, he notices a series of changes, but he doesn't question what has led to them. He has firm plans for this day that he doesn't want to endanger. But perhaps that's also the way with fateful events: that we intentionally refrain from interpreting their harbingers because we don't yet feel ready to do so.

Outside, I noticed something strange. In front of our building door, I saw the caretaker with a gas mask and a red armband. The same in front of all the buildings. The militiamen were carrying gas masks too, and at all the crossings, the radio blared out of loudspeakers. Something told me that an ominous state of affairs had been declared in the city.

He doesn't ask anyone what's happening, but at the same time, he senses the energy of the catastrophe he is headed towards.

In the Pioneer Palace, I met only two chess players, it was probably still too early. Later, a few others did turn up. As I set out the chess pieces, I heard something new. I turned around and saw a group that had gathered around a little boy. I listened more closely and then ...froze

The news that will overwhelm him comes from a boy soprano. The fact that he himself had spoken in the same high tone not all that long ago feels, in this moment, like another lifetime – or so I imagine.

At four o'clock this morning, German bombers attacked Kiev, Zhytomyr, Sevastopol and other cities too. Molotov has spoken on the radio. We're now at war with Germany.

In next to no time, it all comes together: the noises last night, the guise of the militiamen, the tense atmosphere in the streets.

You know, I was so stunned that I had to sit down for a while. What news! I wouldn't have been able to imagine such a thing even in a dream. Germany! Germany have started a war against us! That is probably why everyone was wearing gas masks. I didn't know where my head was. I was completely blindsided.

Now a few older chess partners approach him. Before he knows it, he's drawn into the game, and despite the shock in his limbs, he scores one victory after the other.

I played three games regardless. Strangely, I won all three. Then I stumbled home.

Numbed by the outbreak of war and simultaneously euphoric at his own tactical skills, he remembers, while standing beneath one of the loudspeakers and listening to a speech by the foreign minister, that lunch is on the table at home. Three games won without giving it any thought. His reflexes have worked. All the better. Next, he writes:

When I got home, only my mother was there. She had already heard what had happened.

Two meagre sentences. Then he's back out on the street again.

After lunch, I walked through the city, the tension was in the air everywhere, the city's entire muggy, dusty atmosphere was saturated with it.

Just a moment, I can't follow him this quickly. Didn't his mother say anything? Wasn't there any conversation? "She had already heard what had happened" is remarkably casual, as though he's trying to suppress something.

My curiosity is sparked; I'd like to know more about this situation. But my storage room here in the cellar isn't particularly inspiring. Piled-up mattresses, a long row of suitcase-like bags storing duvets for different seasons, towers of decommissioned electrical devices, moving boxes containing unanswered letters, documents and photos of my lived life. All this junk that's stored here temporarily before it ends up in landfill demands that I do some tidying. Two child car seats make me think of my granddaughters, whose childhood I'm currently missing. A group of startled Steiff animals in a wooden doll's pram ask me whether I wouldn't prefer to dedicate my time to them.

In the foot area beneath the desk lies the open box containing my mother's death mask. I still don't know where to hang it. It arrived in the post a quarter of a century ago, the lid has gotten lost, her noble presence lies concealed beneath the loose protection of crumpled tissue paper. I don't want it to frighten anyone who's just hurrying through the cellar rooms in search of something.

When I got home, only my mother was there. She had already heard what had happened.

I began to regularly read Jura's notes even before Putin's war, and I had hoped to be able to travel to St. Petersburg, rent a room there somewhere, walk Jura's route from the apartment in Sadova Street to the Pioneer Palace, to see what he had seen, and perhaps even meet people that knew something about his family. But now there is no other country I want to visit less than Russia. I still can't comprehend how hostile the world has become in such a short space of time.

I now have to see it as an advantage that I only have Jura's text and a few supplementary books about the Siege of Leningrad. I have to force myself to draw my own conclusions. I have to rouse and bring into the light what is buried within me: the fear of war, of violence, of forgetting.

This storage room, when I think about it, is just the right place for me to imagine the hopelessness which is increasingly consuming Jura's day-to-day life.

Since yesterday evening, I've been troubled by images whose impact I have no language for yet. The America First president, dressed in his state colours, has thrown his Ukrainian colleague, who predominantly appears in combat gear, out of his gold-plated office. It was the last February day of this year. The Ukrainian maintained astounding composure as the new establishment in the White House tore into him then threw him out. He stood there, lonely, at the rear exit of the historic location, stretched his back out, then shook the hand of a translator or protocol lead's hand in a statesmanlike manner before climbing into the awaiting SUV and disappearing behind the tinted windows.

After the car door fell into the lock, did his countenance slump for a moment? Just for a few seconds, before he began the next telephone call? Or has he seen so many dead bodies in Bucha, Mariupol or Kharkiv whose next of kin he had to comfort, that he can easily file away a haranguing by the dangerous narcissist and his henchmen in the Oval Office? Does he sometimes allow himself to break down, like we all do? Or does the immense task of helping his attacked countrypeople defend their freedom have a dimension in which breakdowns are a private luxury?

I know I can't use this scene as a comparison in order to imagine what the outbreak of war means for Jura and his mother. But the fact that speechlessness is a possible reaction to such breaking points in world history became clear to me yesterday in front of the television.

If I now reread the two meagre sentences about the lunch at the Ryabinkins, I get the impression that, in this silent scene, the event of the day unfurls its full force. The fact that mother and son sit silently opposite one another, spooning their soup, seems to me an expression of deep shock. Time stands still.

When I got home, only my mother was there. She had already heard what had happened.

And so I'm pulled into the vortex of this silence and have to lay out the sparse material I have at my disposal, to connect it with the powers of my imagination.

The Ryabinkins are a small family and haven't even been living together for as many years as Jura is old. There are three of them. His sister Ira is only eight and he considers her a nuisance. He spent the first seven years of his life with his aunt, his mother's sister, whose name is Tina. The mother and father wanted to live alone. I wonder how they explained that to their son? Perhaps as an achievement of the new society: Family is passé, a bourgeois thing of the past?

His mother is called Antonia. For each of them, she and Jura, I have seen one passport photo. They have the same big dark eyes. Jura conceals the secret of his sight impairment within his gaze, he doesn't want anyone to find out about it. He's an obsessive reader; everything from 19th century novels to Maxim Gorky's latest publication passes through his hands as quickly as daily newspapers. His dream is to work at sea. How to achieve that without passing a sight test is a problem he hasn't yet solved. The Germans' attack could soon upset his plans; the appointment for his physical examination at the Naval School is rapidly approaching. The examination would expose everything; his bad eyes and the fluid in his lung. His seafaring dream would be dead and buried.

His mother won't suppress her concern over his ailing lung. As they sit silently at the dining table, I see her mechanical gaze keep returning to his forehead. Is sweat dripping down it again?

And Jura? It can't be any other way: He doesn't like this gaze. Is this why he wants to get back out onto the street as soon as possible, among people?

Antonia is educated, I read. She speaks French, German and English, and comes from a middle-class family. Her father was a general under Tsar Nikolaus II and, in the 1917 Civil War, made the jump into the Red Army as an Officer and Deputy Chief of the artillery base on the Western Front. He apparently died of natural causes, which, for a former Tsarist general under Stalin's rule, was by no means a given.

It will, I imagine, fill Antonia with pride to collaborate on building a society in which workers and farmers call the shots, in which centuries-old class differences disappear and the existence of mankind is being fundamentally rethought, on scientific foundations and with such clear ethical demands that God is becoming superfluous. Everyone in the family wants to be part of this. Only Jura's father is in prison in Ufa, in southern Ural, because of counter-revolutionary activity. He disqualified himself when he absconded seven years ago with another woman. His entire attitude must be so fundamentally different from the rest of the family that he is best forgotten.

Antonia, I discover from Jura's diary, has a managerial post at the district library. This is an important role in emerging communism. It's possible that people have to be careful of what they say in her presence. And she wouldn't let her son say just anything either. It's entirely possible that she's the person at the library who decides what makes it onto the shelves, and that she discards anything Stalin's sharp gaze wouldn't want to see. Perhaps she has to report on who's reading Marx and Lenin and Bakunin, or who keeps reaching for bourgeois literature, like Turgenyev, for example, whose works Jura, her son, devours at home.

As the two of them sit silently opposite one another at the lunch table on this 22nd of June, spooning their soup, what's going on in Antonia's mind?

In my imagination, she is chewing with impotent rage on the gristle in the boiled meat. She keeps her thoughts to herself. Just like her sister, she must have suspected that the Germans would break the Hitler-Stalin pact. But the fact that Stalin even signed this contract in the first place, talked into it by the dubious Ribbentrop, is something for which she is struggling to forgive her party leader on this particular lunchtime.

In her eyes, I imagine, it must have been lunacy to share the buffer state of Poland with the fascists, and to then live in the immediate vicinity of a people with whom they were competing to become the most modern type of state.

Meanwhile, in Berlin, the Jewish-Communist global conspirators are being targeted. Berlin's anti-Semites cry out: "They all come from Leningrad! That's their den!" She will have already heard about this.

It's also possible that on this Sunday lunchtime Antonia is simply feeling small and defenceless. The Germans have the most modern weapon systems. There's no doubt that they will employ their highly-developed chemical warfare agents. But why should she scare Jura? Her son is ill, even though no one wants to acknowledge that. He keeps having coughing fits until he's doubled over with pain. What if he's called up and ends up at the Front? What if the People's Army don't take him and he has to stay behind in Leningrad as a cheap labourer? What will become of her small family then? Will she be drafted to dig trenches? What will happen to her daughter? Sometimes her sister comes to visit, then there are four of them, and then she feels stronger.

Tina is a staff surgeon with the army, and when she's there, Jura is no longer sure who his mother is. Antonia gave him away for seven years and let him grow up at her sister's, back when she and Jura's father were still a couple. Why, she may be asking herself, did she do that? For this man? For her career?

For Jura, the close connection to his aunt is still there. Every letter from her is precious to him and finds its way into his diary, and when famine breaks out, he's speechless as to why she doesn't send any parcels. Why doesn't his aunt sense that he goes to bed every night with a painfully empty stomach? The longer he writes his diary, the more intensely he wishes that Tina were his reader. They meet one more time, in early September, during one of her brief periods of leave. Then she is dispatched to Siberia, and her scant letters become impersonal, probably through fear of censorship.

In late autumn, when his chances of survival are fading, Jura imagines himself in a fantasy that goes beyond his death, in which Tina is sitting over a cup of tea, nibbling biscuits and discovering from his diary how he was dying of hunger. That's his bittersweet vision, and once the dystrophy has him firmly in its grips, it spurs him on to keep writing to the very end of his strength, while his mother, bloated from dropsy and barely able to climb the steps with her immense, swollen legs, screams at him to put the pen down at long last and find something edible from somewhere as quickly as possible.

He is more connected to Tina than any other person in the world. It couldn't be any other way: She's the one who tossed him up into the air as a little child and caught him again,

the person with whom Jura experienced this moment of happiness, of flying towards someone else's face from a height while filled with joyful anticipation. Because anybody who catches a child in this way enjoys seeing the excitement in the little person's expression, two faces falling toward one another for barely a second, while both shout out their glee and tremble toward the moment when the hands reach for the waist, though it's so ticklish, and that's precisely where the grip takes hold, to lower the child redemptively towards the floor and perhaps even a little bit further through the gate of the legs, in order to gain new momentum before it's back up again for the umpteenth time, all depending on the weight of the child and the condition and strength of the thrower, but always driven by the desire to trigger nothing but joy in the trembling body, all enveloped in a net of invisible care. But the loveliest thing is the movement of the faces toward one another. That's unforgettable.

I think Jura's mother already senses on this 22nd of June that he's tapping his feet at the lunch table so he can get back out on the street. He should be happy that she even cooked. So it seems she's washing up alone too! It's enough to drive a person mad: Within half a day, all the forces of the world seem to be turning against her. Luckily, the boy doesn't ask any questions.

But perhaps Jura doesn't actually need his mother's commentary on the outbreak of war. He already has a sixth sense for history. By the age of twelve, he was giving presentations at school about military tactics, about Suvorov and Bagration, he knows the details of the Patriotic War, when his people taught Napoleon the meaning of fear. The famous historian Tarle attests that he has a sense for history, Jura's sister Ira recounts decades later. That's significant praise from the mouth of the eminent Russian authority. Tarle apparently went to his mother and said: "Keep an eye on this boy. He really understands the contexts between things." Since then, Jura has considered himself the family expert when it comes to politics and history. But now he needs to first listen to what people out on the street are saying.

He stands by a kiosk, gathers the comments of the bystanders who are waiting in the endless queue for a newspaper, makes a mental note and will later write it all down. What an advantage; that on a day like today one can so easily get into conversation with complete strangers. Everyone talks to everyone, that's how it is at turning points in history, unfamiliarity is temporarily lifted, you can spontaneously air your thoughts everywhere and leave a sentence half finished, because somebody will pick it up and complete it. And then

you've found a new acquaintance, and if you happen to bump into them the next day, you can pick up exactly where you left off.

By evening Jura has had enough; he wants nothing but to sit in his room, and goes home. It's not tiredness that's spreading out within him, but the urge to make sense of his experiences.

The day is coming to an end. The clock shows half past eleven. A decisive battle has begun, and it needs to be taken seriously. Two antagonistic systems have collided: Socialism and Fascism. The wellbeing of humanity depends upon the result of this historic battle.

Perhaps by writing down the events, he has pushed the shock of this Sunday just slightly away from himself.

CHAPTER 3

DEATH MASK

Years before her death, I asked my mother whether I was allowed to have a cast of her face made after she died.

"I'm not Beethoven," she answered.

You don't have to be famous to have a death mask, I objected.

She looked at me, bewildered, and said: "I'm still alive."

I didn't press the issue any further.

The daughter of the stonemason next to the northern cemetery was trained in mask making and immediately agreed. She went with me to the morgue; my mother's body was pulled out in its drawer. I was astonished that the face beneath her forehead suddenly looked glued together.

"You won't see that afterwards," the woman reassured me, pulling out her tools and mixing the clay. She slapped the brown mass onto my mother's face, and in this moment I have to admit I wished I could undo the procedure. The way she pressed the cold paste down onto the corpse's eyes felt brutal to me. But she shook her head and explained that it was necessary, so that the fine lines around the eyes leave a clear imprint in the plaster. Last of all, she placed thick, curled mounds on my mother's eyelids, making her look like an Indonesian spirit mask, and, leaving her in this state, rolled her back into her compartment.

"The clay needs to be absorbed deep into her skin," she explained.

Watching the process of the craft had upset me. Resignedly, I told myself that my mother was already dead and gone.

Weeks later, the package was delivered by a postman, in a gigantic box with red stickers: Caution, delicate contents.

I can still remember how I held her plaster face in both hands, pressed my lips against her forehead and then studied it for a long while from a slight distance. Her last expression looked to me like a Prussian ideal. The tiny wrinkles and fine veins where the corners of her eyes transitioned into her temples, as well as the tiny hairs of her thin eyebrows, really did

create a feeling of aliveness beneath my fingertips. Only my father or her own parents would have been permitted to touch her face like that.

Before her marriage, my mother had been a nanny for a noble family in Brandenburg, and the boys entrusted to her care had appreciatively declared: "Miss, if your face were on the flagpole we would've won the last war." She was a beautiful woman, but not one to be touched. Her faith resided in her skull. I saw that now very clearly, because her hairs in the plaster elongated her forehead in a way that was only just perceptible. Martin Luther lived there; it must have been the home for her personal relationship with God.

But I also recognised behind this forehead her conviction that we Germans were a people without sufficient space, wanting to dedicate itself to its Drive to the East. Later, when she voted for Willi Brandt against my father's will and wrote letters to her Jewish school friends to ask how they had survived, this drive for expansion must have disappeared and given way to the desire to put something right. She was often devastated by the briskness with which her letters were answered by her emigrated schoolmates.

I presume that grief was absent from her impulse to write. Her compassion had failed when her neighbours and acquaintances had been "collected", as it was called in the language of the dictatorship. She hadn't written anything about that.

It is presumptuous of me, of course, to speculate on her motives. But nonetheless, I'm writing this down here. And I think: First we see the enemy in the other nation, then we grasp that the dividing lines run through our society, then through our family, and eventually – through ourselves.

Perhaps that's the reason why our face, when we look at it in the mirror, can so shockingly invoke a feeling of unfamiliarity.

CHAPTER 4

JURA INTERVENES

What is it you want from me? a voice asks.

I'm just coming out of the bathroom and I'm completely confused, because while splashing my face I forgot I still had my glasses on and banged the frame really hard into my face. As far as I'm concerned it can go jump, this cold water spritz thing that supposedly chases away sleep in the mornings and revives our spirits.

Sorry, what's this about? I ask into the nothingness.

What do you want from me?, the voice repeats.

Hang on! I say.

For a moment, I can't orient myself. Ever since I can remember, I've held conversations with myself. I've always assumed that I'm the one who decides *when* I do it. Now I fear that the balance may be tipping.

It can only be Jura. There's no one else I've occupied my thoughts with as intensely in recent weeks.

What was that? I ask, as a test of sorts.

How did you even find out about me? That's what I'd like to know, he says.

Good, I can tell him that, of course.

It was 2014, I say, late January, maybe even early February, in the last sunlight of the afternoon. I was standing in the kitchen in front of the glass balcony door with an open newspaper, looking at a speech that was printed on a double-page spread: an address by the 95-year-old Russian writer Daniil Granin on the 70th anniversary of the end of the Siege of Leningrad, held on the 27.01.2014 in the German Bundestag. And you're mentioned in it. Towards the end.

Why am I in it? he asks.

Granin mentions your diary, I answer.

Aha. What does he say about my diary?

He calls it something like the story of your conscience.

That's how he puts it?

Yes.

What else does he say? he asks. Let me hear what he says about me.

It's in the last third of his speech, I think, and he says: "One day someone gave me the book of a blokadnik." By that, he means you. He gives your name, says you're fourteen years old and that you live with your mother and sister. The diary astonished him. He called it the story of "this boy's" conscience.

Jura protests: He was born in 1925, he says, and on the 2nd of September.

Does he say anything else? he asks.

Granin speaks, I reply, about how you secretly eat the bread rations that are actually your mother's and sister's. How you feel ashamed and label yourself a thief. He talks about your daily battle between your hunger and conscience.

And he tells the entire Bundestag this? exclaims Jura.

That's why he's there! He was invited by the members of parliament on this special day to give an eyewitness account of everyday life in the blockade. And he uses you as an example. He tells of how you put your bare hand into the hot porridge on your neighbour's stove in order to lick your fingers, and that you berated yourself afterwards in your diary for your weakness.

I reached into the pot with my bare hand? he asks.

Those are his words in the Bundestag. I'm sure of it.

He's wrong! I used a spoon, that's what's written in my diary, and the scene played out in our kitchen, the porridge was on our stove. The neighbour had been living in our apartment for a short while, with her husband, an engineer. She was twenty-five, unbelievably miserly, and attractive.

Well, Granin leaves out the spoon, I say. Is that so bad? It's about your daily temptations, the wavering back and forth between theft and propriety.

With my bare hand! Jura repeats in agitation. Is he even trustworthy?

Yes, I say. For me he is. I've read the famous "Blockade Book" which he wrote together with his Belarusian colleague, Ales Adamovich. It was published in the late 1970s and is a courageous testimony against the party dictatorship. They interviewed many survivors, quoted from numerous diaries, and got it published in spite of brutal censorship. I think 70% of it was deleted initially. It's a book that does away with the concept of the steely heroes of Socialism and brings the suffering of Leningrad's population to the fore, not even shying away from cannibalism. Almost your entire diary is reproduced in it. Granin

commentates on it with love and respect. Your original text is a major part – I think about an eighth of the entire tome.

Jura doesn't say anything more.

Is he still there? I'm still standing in front of the bathroom door. Has he just asked me why I was so interested in Granin?

I could tell him that. It was his photo in the newspaper, which captivated me for a long while. The way he was standing there behind the speaker's podium in the plenary hall, one hand on his walking stick, the other stretched out towards his listeners, dressed in a loosely-cut suit jacket, the upper buttons of his shirt open, his white hair hanging uncombed over his brow. The thought shot into my head: "So that's what he looks like, my father's opponent from the Second World War". But almost as soon as I'd thought that, Granin's gaze corrected me, and I heard him say to me: "I know as little as you do about why I'm in the world and what my purpose is."

I was moved by the fact that this very old man had left his hometown of St. Petersburg once more in order to give a speech in our Berlin Parliament, for us all, so that we could finally grasp the horrific ways in which our peoples are connected. And suddenly, as I studied his picture, I rushed straight out of the attic of my ancient brain into the ground floor of my childhood. I can't say for sure which year I landed in, but I'd estimate it was before 1960. I must have been around ten.

I was sitting in short trousers in my parents' dining room, lunch was over, dessert had been eaten, my mother had said the prayer of thanks and piled up the dirty plates, and my father stood up, went into the neighbouring room and came back with a book. I no longer remember the title. He put the book down where his cutlet had just been and opened it. They were portrait photographs, but it would be more accurate to call them human heads, because the depicted faces didn't look as though they had willingly presented themselves to the camera. Their hair was closely shorn, and from their gazes sprang a horror which reflected the force with which they were being scrutinised.

"Apparently these are the subhumans", murmured my father, and my mother sat back down at her place and looked at the book with him from the side.

A web of brief, quietly-spoken information stretched out between them, and in my ears arose a kind of atlas of words like Siberia, Mongolia, Kazakhstan, Ural and Krim. I discovered from my father that "our Wehrmacht" had to head into this expanse in order to

create space for our people. The name "Barbarossa" was mentioned, and based upon my parents' expression, this seemed to be an incomprehensible, devastating failure.

My father leafed on and read out precisely where each of the faces had been photographed, and whether it was a Jew or a Crimean Tatar or a Mongolian. There were women in there too. And I began to feel afraid, because my parents were classifying these shaved skulls according to their formal characteristics and were capable of judging why evil and criminal activities had been brought into the world by these people. They believed they could recognise this, and were convinced that we, in our family, were on another level of humanity. With obstinate solemnity, my father, if I remember correctly, expressly didn't question the science that found its way to such destructive judgments. He was surprised by the changing times, that something which was seen as proven yesterday could today appear absurd, forbidden and unfounded.

I became afraid that my head, if it were shaved and I didn't get anything to eat for days on end, could also fit into this picture book. In my mind, I took off my mother's pearl necklace, shaved her hair and glued her head beneath the portraits. In my opinion, neither of us would have stood out.

I was also worried about my character, because I was so good at lying, cowardly and fearful and constantly whined when asked to fetch something from the cellar. I silently resolved to become braver, more obedient and to place my goodnight kisses on exactly the part of my parents' face that they offered to me. If needs be, even on their mouths.

But if I tried really hard and looked really closely, I could see a sadness in the faces of this eerie book, incarcerated behind the poster-like façade.

And then I soared back out of my childhood and saw Granin on the photo in front of me again. He demanded that I stay in the present. It was true about the incarcerated sadness, he said, but I could find that in any living face. I just had to look closely enough. And also, "subhuman" was an ill-fated, abusive term used to systematically disqualify other human beings so that, sooner or later, they could be murdered.

"Stay in the present". That seemed important to me, I wanted to note it down once I was back at my desk. And then I read Granin's speech from beginning to end.

I wonder whether Jura is even still there.

Was he really talking to me?

I take off my glasses and rub my eyes, uncertain whether I'm even allowed to tell him this childhood memory.