

Extract from

THE PARADISE GHETTO

by

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The Amsterdam attic apartment is freezing and since she is working today, Julia has had to strip and wash all over, so she is still cold from that. She wears her coat, scarf, and mittens and tries to warm herself with the coffee. She drinks it almost painfully hot while holding her hands tightly around the cup. It is real coffee, not adulterated in any way. She hasn't had any for a long time and doesn't know when she will have more. Bert gets it and he gave her some last time in part payment. Of course, she had to give her usual part payment too.

She hates Bert. But at least you know where you stand with him. He seems to be one of those rare people – at least she's found them to be rare – who are completely honest. Apparently he has a wife. What she must be like – given that Bert does what he does – Julia can only imagine.

She stands by the small double window of her attic apartment. She is looking at the cobwebs on the outside. The night's frost has encrusted them in white and she imagines them as miniature ropes in the impossibly complex rigging of some tiny ghostly sailing ship. She is captivated by them and it is only the sense that time is moving on and that she might be late that eventually snaps her out of her reverie.

There are cobwebs on the inside too – there is one which has collapsed and bellies like a hammock. Julia never removes them. She thinks of them as the work of her little family, so that she is not alone. She really feels that she has built a home here. The last time she felt she had anything like this was that

Christmas when her father gave her an elaborate doll's house. She hopes that it is still safe and that one day she'll be able to retrieve it.

She's glad to have some work at last. It's always quiet over Christmas – she had expected that. Men want to be, or have to be, with their families – fucking hypocrites – but this year, Christmas seems to be running well into January. Maybe it's the icy weather. Or maybe the Germans aren't spending like they used to.

The best thing is that it's Friday. Even though there is little to distinguish one day from the next, Julia thinks of it as nearly the weekend. She will have money tonight. Food. Enough, for once. She is becoming dangerously bony. She thinks that Bert noticed it the last time. She needs to fatten up a little. If he stopped giving her work she'd be completely fucked.

She looks round her eyrie, as she thinks of it. It may be grotty but it's neat, as she likes it to be. Dishes from last night washed and put away, bed made, everything in its place.

She looks at the picture, thumb-tacked to the wall. It is part of her ritual when she is heading out to work. The painting is called *A Kiss*, by someone called Lawrence Alma-Tadema. Julia found it in a magazine. In it, a little fair-haired girl proffers her cheek and receives a kiss from a woman with red hair. The red-haired woman lifts the little girl's cheek slightly and holds her hand in the gentlest of grips. A second woman with black hair looks on at the scene. She has a strange expression on her face, like she's not happy with what she's seeing.

In Julia's mind, the black-haired woman is the little girl's mother while the woman doing the kissing is a favourite aunt or friend of the family. It's only possible to see the side of the aunt's face but she looks kind and beautiful. From the expression on the little girl's face, she loves her aunt. Julia imagines she is the only person in the world that the little girl can confide in. Julia imagines the kiss.

But now she must go to work.

She sighs a deep sigh and takes the last mouthful of coffee.

Then she tips up the cup and lets the last drops fall onto her tongue. Coffee is such a beautiful thing. After the war she will drink as much of it as she likes – she will never not have some in her cupboard. She rinses the cup, upends it on the draining board and buttons her coat. She looks through the contents of her bag to make sure she has everything – mascara, eyeliner, red lipstick, powder, hairpins and brush, spare black stockings and lingerie, garter belt.

Hanging on the inside of the front door is the 1944 calendar that Bert gave her – so that she'd never miss a session. Not that she ever has. At the end of every day, she crosses that day off. Another day closer to when the Germans will be gone. She just needs to hold on. Last night she drew a big 'X' through January 13th.

Finally, she checks herself in the small mirror by the front door and goes out, locking the door of the dingy, tiny apartment behind her. Her old place was nicer but more expensive, more obvious. Here, she goes unnoticed. People keep to themselves.

It's like everybody has a secret.

Outside it is bitterly cold, with a bone-chilling wind and a leaden sky that hints at snow. As she walks, she feels her blood starting to move; she warms up slightly. She hears a car behind her. That can only be Germans and, sure enough, a black Citroën appears in her peripheral vision. It slows slightly and the driver stares at her. It's like the car hesitates but then it picks up speed again. She shudders and pulls her collar more closely around her neck.

She thinks it's funny how, once a thought comes into your head, it can keep coming back under similar circumstances. That first day she saw Germans, the first day of this new rule, it occurred to her that regimes may come and go, but lots of things don't change at all. People still have to eat, sleep, go to work just as she is doing now, have sex – as she will shortly be doing.

As she rounds the corner, she sees a couple of German soldiers on the other side of the street. They are not armed and

one is not wearing a greatcoat – just his uniform with several of the tunic buttons open. They look like they've been on a night out and are both the worse for wear, walking along unsteadily. One is trying to light a cigarette but the lighter keeps missing the tip. Eventually, irritated, he pulls the cigarette from his mouth and throws it away. She thinks to wait until they have passed and then go and retrieve the cigarette.

But then they notice her. One of them wolf-whistles and Julia looks away and down at her feet. She walks faster.

'Hey,' one of them shouts in bad French. 'Come and meet my friend, Dutch girl. He likes dark-haired women.'

She is past them now and mercifully, they don't come after her.

Fuck them. Fucking Nazis. Fucking men. Fuck all of them.

As she turns on to the street along the Vondelpark, she sees a discarded pear with a bite out of it on the pavement. She begins to salivate. She remembers the taste of pears. But you could catch anything from that ... She kicks it away savagely.

The address Bert gave her is a stylish townhouse from the last century with a balcony, large windows and a richly ornamented façade. How does he find these places? Presumably their owners are still wealthy because they side with the Nazis. But how does Bert get their permission to let him use their houses? Do they know what he uses them for? Of course Bert must be in bed with the Nazis too. That's where most of his business comes from.

The concierge is an old lady, who smells like she hasn't washed in a few days. She directs Julia to the stairs.

'Second floor, door facing you. Bert is already up there,' the woman says. Julia shakes her head. That's another thing about Bert. He either knows everybody or, if he doesn't, he's about to. It only takes him a minute or two to make them feel like they've known him all their lives. Why do people take to guys like that? The thought makes her sour, resentful.

She knocks on the door and a sharp-faced girl with dyed blonde hair, still in her street clothes, answers it. Julia doesn't know her. She's not one of Bert's regulars. She must be new.

She's older than Julia – by maybe ten years, Julia reckons. Probably in her early thirties. Strange. Generally the girls are much younger. Sometimes *much* younger.

'I'm Julia.'

'Chantal,' says the girl, who is smoking.

She turns without another word and walks back down the hall, ass swaying, high heels clicking loudly on the parquet.

Bitch.

Julia has dark auburn hair. Bert likes to do this – blonde and black or blonde and brown. He's told Julia he thinks of it as one of his trademarks.

Fucking idiot. Bert thinks he's fucking Cecil B. DeMille. Pompous prick.

Now that she's here she just wants to be done with it. She imagines herself in a couple of hours, stepping out into the street, money in her pocket, ready to go and buy things. She puts down her bag on a chair and is taking off her coat when Chantal says aggressively, 'Are you Jewish?'

Julia is so surprised by both the question and the way it is asked that the first words that come into her head are, 'What if I am, you wizened old cunt?' She is about to say this but, mercifully on this occasion, her brain stays a fraction of a second ahead of her mouth.

'Of course not.'

But now Chantal is looking at her queerly.

'You are, aren't you?'

'Don't be fucking ridiculous,' says Julia.

A look of horror appears on Chantal's face. She turns and walks towards the other room.

'Bert!' she calls, going in and slamming the door behind her.

Julia finishes taking off her coat and goes to the door. Once again, her brain gets there before her. Rather than storming in as was her impulse, she stops and listens, ear against the door.

'I'm not working with that Jewish bitch,' Chantal says angrily.

'Listen to Betty Grable here,' Bert says.

‘Fuck you. I’m not working with her.’

‘She’s not Jewish,’ Bert says. ‘And if you don’t need the money, that’s fine. Fuck off. I can have someone else here in an hour.’

‘You should have told me,’ says Chantal, but already the wind is going out of her argument.

‘I told you she’s not Jewish,’ says Bert. ‘And anyway, what difference would it make?’

‘It makes every difference,’ says Chantal, but now she just sounds like a sulky teenager.

Julia breaks away from the door and moments later Chantal emerges. She flashes a look of absolute hatred at Julia.

‘Come on then,’ Bert calls from the other room. ‘Time to go into wardrobe.’

Always with the Cecil B. DeMille. Dickhead.

‘We need to know the script,’ says Julia.

It’s a dig at Bert. While it could be taken as just teasing, Julia doesn’t intend it to be. He is as much a failed filmmaker as she is a failed actress. The thought makes a flame of anger flare inside her.

Bert emerges from the other room. He is a short dumpy man with a bald head, glasses and a light meter on a cord round his neck. Before the war he must have been very fat. Now, even though food is scarce, he has lost some weight but not that much. His shirt sticks out of the waistband of his trousers which are pressed down under his paunch. He is always sweating, especially when he is filming under lights. He is sweating now and carries a brown paper package tied with string.

‘The story is in three acts,’ he begins.

This just makes Julia angrier.

‘In the first one, the postman delivers the package. Here, I’ve made up the package.’

He hands it to Chantal.

‘You’re going to be the postman, Chantal.’

‘Why do I have to be the postman?’

‘Just shut up and be the fucking postman,’ Bert replies. He

continues. ‘The postman delivers the package. You take the package, Julia, and open it. It’s a dress so you put it on. Then, the second act, Chantal – now no longer the postman but in character – comes along and finds you in the dress – the dress that she ordered. There’s a bit of an argument. Third act. Well, you know, after that it’s the usual. Clear?’

‘Sure,’ says Julia.

She suddenly feels weary even though the day is only beginning. Chantal, still being sulky, says nothing.

‘So – wardrobe, ladies, please.’

Bert flashes them a smile without warmth – it’s really pity. That or disgust.

In the bedroom where most of the filming is due to take place, Bert has set up a short rolling rail. There are only a few items of clothing on it, mostly underwear, hanging forlornly from hangers. Julia would much rather wear her own underwear – there’s no telling where this stuff has been, who’s been using it or what they’ve been doing in it. But she has found that often her lingerie gets damaged – pants get ripped, stockings get laddered – and she can’t afford to keep replacing them. So reluctantly she will use some of the things on the rail.

Chantal undresses and puts on all black – bra, knickers, garter belt, stockings. She takes a pair of black boots with high heels from a suitcase full of shoes that Bert has brought. Julia glances across at her. She has a nice body that is not as bony as Julia’s – Chantal is obviously getting food from some place – but her face isn’t that pretty. It’s kind of foxy.

Julia smiles as she is reminded of that last summer before the war, before she left home. They had gone on holiday, she and her parents, by the sea at Scheveningen. Julia met an English girl – Sheila. They became real friends. Julia told her about wanting to become an actress and Sheila said she must come to London to study. They would get a flat together. They had leant on the railing of the promenade, people-watching – mainly boys. Sheila, who was really quite beautiful, was also scathing about some of the girls they saw. It was cruel really, but Julia couldn’t help but laugh when Sheila would call some

girl 'a dog' or a 'bug-eyed Betty'. Chantal is a dog.

If Chantal is in black lingerie, then Julia goes in white. This is standard practice in Bert's films. She changes into a white bra, knickers and no stockings. She prefers not to think about the yellowish stains on the items she puts on. Over these, Julia adds a white blouse and a tight-fitting black skirt with a slit up the back. She picks a pair of black stilettos from the suitcase. The effect is demure – she looks like a perfectly flat-bellied secretary or office worker. Normally she and any other participants would have chatted while doing this – anything to make it bearable – but with Chantal there is an icy silence.

When all of this is complete they are ready to start. Chantal puts her coat back on over her underwear, wraps one side over the other, and pulls the belt tight. The three of them move out into the hall. Chantal brings the package, Bert carries the heavy movie camera on its wooden tripod, sweating and cursing its weight, and Julia brings the microphone on its stand. Bert switches on the light in the hall. It's not very bright and he looks at it with irritation. It's obvious that he's considering bringing the arc light from the bedroom. But he eventually decides he can't be bothered and that the hall light is sufficient. He checks the light meter just to be sure and confirms that it's acceptable. Bert is careful about attention to detail. Maybe, in another life, he might have been Cecil B. DeMille.

Now that they've started, Julia feels her anger slip away as the other, professional Julia, takes over. It may not be a very noble profession but it is the one she has.

The camera and mic are about four metres from the door. Bert looks through the viewfinder and adjusts a couple of things. Finally he is ready to start.

'All right, Chantal,' he says. 'Action!'

Chantal goes out the front door and closes it behind her. Julia stands to one side of Bert, out of shot.

'Rolling,' he calls loudly, so that Chantal can hear.

There is a knock on the door. Julia walks on in front of the camera, swinging her ass, and goes to the door. Just to irritate Chantal, she asks, 'Who is it?'

She can hear the annoyance in Chantal's voice as she calls back in a poor imitation of a male voice, 'Postman!' Julia opens the door slightly but not enough that the camera can see Chantal. Julia takes the package, thanks the 'postman' and closes the door again. Then she walks down the hall and past the camera. Bert yells 'Cut' and picks up the camera to take it back to the bedroom.

As he does so, he says to Julia, 'Let her back in.'

'Let the bitch stay out there,' says Julia, even though she goes to do as Bert asks.

The next set-up is in the bedroom.

As soon as Bert calls action, Julia walks in front of the camera carrying the package. The effect is that she has just entered the bedroom from some other part of the house. Chantal waits out of shot. She has taken her coat off and stands there in the underwear, stockings and boots. Beneath the arc light it is very hot.

While Bert might like to think of himself as DeMille, there is never a written script. As a result the girls have to make up most of the dialogue themselves. Julia doesn't mind this. She loves books and reading and making up the script is something that she is quite fond of. The dialogue comes easily to her – though it's hardly *Anna Karenina*.

She reads the address on the package.

'For Emily. Hmm – I wonder what this could be. Maybe I'll just take a look.'

'Emily' is Chantal's name in the movie. Julia doesn't have a name. She unwraps the package and takes something out. She holds it up and lets it fall out. It is a red silk dress in a Chinese style.

'That is just – *gorgeous*,' Julia says. 'I'll bet it would look fabulous on me.'

She holds the dress to herself. 'I don't think she'll mind if I try it on and see. What's the harm?'

Julia puts the dress on the arm of a couch and begins to undress. She takes off her blouse. Then she turns her back to the camera, unzips her skirt, and pushes it down, wiggling her

ass as she does so. She steps out of the skirt, picking it up and throwing it onto the couch with the blouse. The movement of the skirt has caused her knickers to slip down a fraction. She tucks her thumbs into the waistband and pulls them back up so that they cling to her, outlining the shape of her buttocks.

She holds the red dress to herself again, puts a dreamy look on her face and sighs. Again she turns her buttocks to the camera, then steps into the dress, wiggling her ass as she pulls it up. She reaches behind her for the zip and manages to get it about halfway up. But then there's a problem. She can't pull it the rest of the way. She struggles, tries by putting her hands over her shoulders instead of round by her shoulder blades but the effect is the same. Bert calls 'cut' in an exasperated voice.

He asks Chantal to do the zip but she refuses so Bert has to come out from behind the camera and do it himself. Bert is being smart – he'll give Chantal the odd little victory so that she'll stay in the game. He doesn't want her storming off when they're halfway through so that he'd have to re-shoot with a new actress. Julia saw this happen once and Bert's anger really was a Biblical epic.

Julia has never stormed off. She has never missed a shoot, is always on time, and has always been able to do the things that Bert wanted. Even when she has felt terrible, she has done what needed to be done. But she has also set limits for herself. For example, she won't do more than one male/female scene in a week. Everything is too intense and usually with a much-larger-than-average man. Her body needs a few days to recover after that.

'Cow,' Bert mutters under his breath as he pulls up the zip. With that sorted out and the dress buttoned at the top, filming can resume. There is a cheval glass near the bed and Julia admires herself in it, turning this way and that. She pouts and smooths the silk down over her hips.

'Very nice,' she says. 'It fits me like a glove. I think I'll keep it.'

She holds up her hair.

'I think I should do something different with my hair – so it

doesn't distract from this beautiful dress.'

Julia ties up her hair in a ponytail, looks in the mirror again and says, 'Perfect.'

'Where have you been?' Chantal snaps, walking on. 'I've been looking for you everywhere.' Then as she sees the dress, she says, 'Hey, isn't that the dress that I ordered from the catalogue?'

'It is,' says Julia, 'and doesn't it look fabulous on me?'

'Why are you wearing my dress? Opening my mail? I can't believe you're doing this.'

'Well, believe it. I'm sick of you flaunting everything you have. Constantly ordering gifts for yourself. You're very inconsiderate. You never buy me anything.'

'I don't like your attitude,' Chantal spits.

'I think at this stage in our relationship,' says Julia, 'I'm just going to reward myself.'

At this point she puts two fingers under Chantal's chin and tilts it up slightly. As she does, she says, 'For all the things I do for you.'

Chantal's eyes blaze and she is not acting.

Julia points a finger at her and adds, 'And you know what I mean.'

'I'll give you a little reward,' says Chantal. 'And you probably wanted me to do this.'

Julia had expected this build-up to take longer but it seems Chantal has jumped a page or two of the non-existent script. She grabs Julia's ponytail hard and says, 'Get down on your knees.'

The look in Chantal's eyes is vicious.

'Facing me,' Chantal commands.

It feels like Julia's hair is going to be torn out of her head.

With Julia kneeling, Chantal kneels opposite her. She takes a riding crop which Bert has placed conveniently on the couch and lifting up the hem of the red dress, she begins to spank Julia's buttocks.

Because of their relative positions, Chantal cannot swing the crop very much and the smacks do little more than sting.

Julia can smell Chantal's perfume – it's something expensive – and the cigarette she smoked is still on her breath. Julia utters little whimpers every time the crop strikes.

'But I just love this dress,' Julia appeals.

Chantal continues to slap Julia with the crop.

'You're certainly in a bitchy mood today, mistress,' Julia says, trying to maintain the role that Bert had outlined to her when he booked her.

'I'm going to a party,' says Chantal. 'Without you, of course. And you're wearing my dress.'

Now Chantal moves on her knees behind Julia, hoists up the dress some more, pulls down Julia's knickers and begins to hit her hard with the crop. These strokes are really painful, strong enough that Julia is sure they're going to leave red marks. But she is reluctant to cry out. For one thing, she wants this all to be over with as quickly as possible. She wants to get her money and get out of here. If she complains, Bert will have to call cut, there will probably be an argument, and will things be any better when filming starts again? And the other thing is that she is a professional. She is good at what she does. This is why Bert gives her so much work. And anyway, next time she will get Bert to make sure that she is the mistress and Chantal the servant. Or slave. Or whatever the fuck it is. That thought comforts her.

But it appears as if Bert has seen her predicament. He looks out from behind the camera and begins to make pouting expressions at Chantal. This means that he wants kissing. Chantal stops with the riding crop – but she doesn't seem to be finished yet.

'Do you know what bad girls get?' she says. 'They get spanked. You've been acting like a spoilt child so you need to be punished.'

She slaps Julia's buttocks with the palm of her hand. She reaches round to Julia's front, catches her groin between her fingers and the heel of her hand and squeezes hard. Then she slaps Julia a few times right in the groin. Each time she does so, Julia cries in pain or gasps. She's not acting now – the

blows really hurt.

Bert is pouting manically, indicating, by stabbing his forefinger downwards, that he wants kissing right now. Still on her knees, Chantal goes round to Julia's front. She looks into Julia's eyes. Chantal's eyes are blue and alight with hatred.

'You know – you are going to have to work hard to earn my trust again. Give me a kiss and make it a good one.'

Chantal pulls Julia's head to her and Julia does indeed make it a good one. She slips in her tongue and groans with fake desire. It doesn't bother Julia for an instant that Chantal is a woman – but it is a strange feeling indeed to be kissing someone as passionately as this when you loathe them and they you.

Chantal pulls away from the kiss and says, 'Now I'm going to give you a proper spanking.' She sits back on the couch.

'Over my knee,' she says. 'What are you waiting for?'

Julia stands up. With the waistband of her knickers just above her knees, it is difficult for her to walk. She lays herself across Chantal's knees. Chantal yanks on Julia's ponytail, jerking her head back, and spansks her hard. Julia makes the little whimpers and moans all the while. Chantal orders her to count the slaps and Julia does as she is told. Then Chantal tells her she must apologise and Julia does that too. Chantal makes her say 'I'm sorry' several times.

'I know you're enjoying this, aren't you?' says Chantal.

Julia says that she is.

'I don't think this is punishment enough for you,' says Chantal. 'And you know I can do what I want to you. So first of all – take the dress off, because it really doesn't suit you.'

Julia stands up and begins to take off the dress.

'Do a little strip show for me,' Chantal says.

Julia removes the dress while Chantal pushes Julia's knickers down to her ankles. Julia steps out of them and kicks them away. Now Julia is only wearing a bra. Chantal indicates that she should take that off too. When she does, Chantal kisses her breasts. Julia almost recoils when Chantal puts her mouth on her nipple and sure enough, Chantal nips her with her teeth.

Julia makes a little yelp, repeated when Chantal does the same on the other side.

‘Fucking bitch,’ Julia hisses, soft enough so that Chantal will hear but the mic won’t pick it up.

Chantal grins at her. Julia has infused her moans and whimpers with weariness as though all of this punishment is wearing her out. She doesn’t really have to act it.

‘What am I going to do with you, you naughty girl?’ asks Chantal rhetorically. As she says this she strokes Julia’s breasts with the top of the riding crop. ‘What do you think you can do to earn my trust again? Any ideas?’

Julia is not expected to reply to any of this so eventually Chantal says, ‘Then it looks like I’ll have to come up with something. Well that shouldn’t be a problem.’

Chantal makes Julia kneel at the couch, with her elbows on its seat. Chantal disappears off camera and reappears a few moments later carrying a strap-on dildo. First she takes off her knickers and Julia is made to lick her. She tastes piss. Then Chantal puts the dildo on and begins to fuck Julia very hard, very painfully with it.

While this is going on Julia puts together her shopping list. She will have to go to three different shops – the grocer’s, the baker’s, and a third place to get wine. That’s three queues. She could manage with just one but fresh bread and wine are her two big treats. The bread will probably be shit but at least it will be fresh out of an oven. And the wine – well, there’s nothing but good to be said about that.

Chantal has been moaning while this was going on, but now her moans start to increase in volume. Her stroking in and out of Julia becomes deeper and more painful. Sometimes the people Julia works with get carried away, forgetting that they are meant to be acting. Julia can’t see Chantal’s face but it sounds very like that has happened to her now. Chantal announces that she is going to come and she commands Julia to come too. Julia fakes the orgasm. The movie ends with Julia still kneeling at the couch whimpering and Chantal trying on the dress. The last line is ‘Hey, bitch, this dress fits me a lot

better than it fits you.’

It has all taken little over an hour; the movie itself will run for about twenty minutes. Once Bert announces – as he likes to do – that it’s a wrap, Chantal begins to change back into her street clothes while Bert packs up the equipment. Julia stays in her underwear, pulling her coat back on to keep warm. She takes one of Bert’s cigarettes, lights it and goes into the living room. She is very sore.

Once Julia is out of the bedroom, Chantal slams the door, voices are raised and there is an argument. Chantal wants her money and there are going to be no extras today. It was bad enough that she had to fuck a Jew. After a few minutes, the door flies open and Chantal storms out, past Julia as though she doesn’t exist and out the front door, slamming it so hard that the whole house shakes.

‘Cunt,’ says Julia.

Bert comes out of the bedroom. He is seething.

‘No threesome then, Bert?’ Julia says, delighted that this has probably ruined the rest of the morning for him.

‘I’d drop the cow altogether except she does things that you aren’t prepared to do.’

Julia remembers the first time she met Bert. He went through a whole list of things asking whether or not she would do them. Jesus – her innocence back then. Some of them she didn’t even know what they meant.

‘Did you tell her I was Jewish?’ Julia demands.

‘No, I didn’t. It’s just that, you know ... in a certain kind of light ... from a particular angle ... your face...’

He leaves the sentence unfinished.

Always with the fucking Cecil B. DeMille.

There’s one last thing to be done. Julia doesn’t even ask. She just looks at him, waiting to be told. He has to be the most unattractive man in the world. Fat, sweaty face. Grey and white stubble. Thin, greasy hair. Shirt hanging out of his trousers revealing a triangular patch of bulging, hairy belly. Smell of old sweat. A smile slowly breaks out on his face.

‘No holes barred,’ he says to himself, thoughtfully.

He thinks for a little while, obviously enjoying his moment of power. Eventually, he indicates with his forefinger that she should turn round. She does so, shrugging off the coat and then bending over.

When he is finished, he pays her.

‘Don’t spend it all at once,’ he says. ‘Though I may have something more for you before the end of the month. Depends on these Nazis. Some of them are starting to get a sense that they may not be around here for much longer. It’s distracting them.’

Julia wouldn’t have spent it all anyway. She’ll put some away in case of emergency and spread the rest out equally over the seventeen remaining days of the month. She will treat herself today but do that by reducing the amount she can spend for the rest of the week. Ever since she left home and started supporting herself she has done this. She wonders if it’s the Jew in her.

When Julia leaves the apartment, she finds it uncomfortable to walk but as the afternoon wears on, the discomfort eases.

With money in her purse, she spends the time until it gets dark queuing. As the long lines move slowly, she fantasizes about after the war. Then, she will try – again – to become an actress. A proper one. Maybe go to England and find Sheila – if she’s still alive and hasn’t been killed in the bombing. Or even America. Hollywood. Now that would be wonderful. It makes Julia angry to think of all the years of her life that she has wasted here.

Fucking war. Fucking Germans.

She manages to buy some bread, a little ham and cheese, a couple of potatoes, two eggs for breakfast and a bottle of very cheap wine. She looks forward to the evening, a full belly for once and the pleasant numbness that the alcohol will bring.

She is exhausted by the time she gets home. It has been a long day – first at work and then all of the standing in line. She is cold. Being indoors seems to make little difference. She wonders if the temperature inside and outside are the same. And she is hungry, having eaten nothing since the two slices of

sawdusty bread she had for breakfast with the coffee. Terrible bread that sucks all the moisture from your mouth. Slowly she climbs the stairs to the top floor, carrying the bag of food and wine. Before the war she would not have regarded it as heavy but now it seems like a dead weight and she has to stop halfway up and change it into her other hand. Her heart is beating fast and she is breathing heavily.

The food is delicious and everything she anticipated it would be. She finishes the wine so that she is slightly tipsy when she goes to bed and falls into an almost drugged sleep. But later that night, she catapults into waking, in a lather of sweat. Her heart is pounding, her face on fire, despite the frigid air of the apartment.

Chantal!

What if she goes to the authorities and says something? All it takes these days is a suspicion.

Julia checks her watch, the one her father gave her that last Christmas. She would throw it in a canal except she has come to depend on it. She feels that she has been asleep for hours but in fact, it is only just after midnight. She went to bed barely two hours ago.

She lies wide awake, staring at the ceiling. Or rather, where the ceiling is. She can't see it in the almost solid darkness caused by the blackout curtain. She tries to put the thoughts of Chantal out of her head. When that doesn't work, she tries not so much not to worry about it – going round in the same circles like a mule powering a grindstone – but to treat it as a problem to be solved.

What would she do if they came knocking on her door right now? She could climb out of the window and onto the roof but the tiles would be slippery with frost or ice. And it's a long way down. But if she was careful she could make it along to the next house, which is a direct copy of this one, and then break in the top floor window. She's already dressed – it's too cold to undress. If they came now, all she would need to do would be to put her shoes on. How long would that take? Should she try now and time it? But it is so cold beyond the

bedcovers. Maybe in the morning, in daylight, she should check how doable it would be.

Julia ponders this and a dozen other details and scenarios until exhaustion eventually causes her to fall back asleep.

It is some time later when they kick in the door.

2

The first Julia knows of any of this is when the light blazes on and a face appears, centimetres above hers. It is the face of a big man, a bull face. His breath smells of cigarettes and mints.

She begins to scream.

‘No!’

She screams louder.

‘Please!’

Until it is blood-curdling.

‘Go away! Don’t touch me!’

She sees surprise on the man’s face but then he slaps her hard across the cheek.

However, instead of making her go quiet, this only causes her to get worse. She pulls the bedcovers over her head. She tries to roll to the far side of the bed but strong arms pinion her. She kicks, or at least tries to, but the covers and the weight of the man, who has now spread himself on top of her, mean she can’t do much.

She struggles some more but she realises it’s pointless. His strength is way beyond anything she is capable of fighting. Finally, she goes limp. He hesitates for a little while and then pulls the covers off her face so that the light and his bull face return. He is half on the bed, pressing his hands onto her upper arms and with his thigh and knee holding down her legs.

‘We’re not going to touch you,’ he says quietly, almost tenderly, in Dutch. ‘You just have to come with us. Understand?’

Her eyes slowly become used to the light and comprehension dawns. She returns.

‘Understand?’ he says again.

Eventually she nods.

‘OK,’ he says, climbing off the bed.

Slowly, she sits up. There are two of them – the one with the bull face who looks like a policeman out of uniform and one in a leather coat. He is short and thin and wears wire-rimmed glasses. Small and weaselly, he looks like a student.

A small man. Never good.

It occurs to her that it’s lucky she’s not naked, as she would have been had it been the summer. Tonight, this morning, whatever it is, she’s fully dressed, having slept in her clothes.

‘You have ten minutes to pack a case,’ says the Dutchman, severely, this time.

She climbs slowly from bed, still somewhat stunned by what has just happened. She kneels down, groggily poking around under the bed for her suitcase. It is the same one she used when she left home three and a half years ago, just as the Germans were entering Amsterdam.

The Dutchman lights a cigarette, offering one to the other who declines with a curt ‘Nein’.

So – the weaselly one is a German.

While the Dutchman watches her, the German begins to search the place. He opens the wardrobe, his leather-gloved hand leafing through the few items of clothing that hang there. Then, he opens in turn the three drawers of the chest. The top one contains Julia’s underwear and he seems to spend an inordinate amount of time with his hand in that. She can’t be sure because he’s got his back to her but she thinks he pockets something.

Now, at least, she is able to think a little more clearly. If she is packing it means they are not going to kill her. At least not yet. Not tonight. And it doesn’t look like they’re going to rape her. At least not here. Ever since she left home, Julia has kept a mental scale of the most frightening things she has done or that have happened to her. She decides that this would not be the

top of her scale – maybe second. Up until tonight, second had been the first time she made a film. That’s now slipped to third.

‘You should bring food,’ says the Dutchman. ‘And a bowl and a spoon.’

Encouraged by his tone, Julia asks, trying to sound defiant but not really succeeding, ‘Why are you arresting me? I haven’t done anything.’

‘Just pack, Jew,’ the German says in a cold, toneless voice.

Chantal.

Julia packs any food she has into the suitcase and puts whatever warm clothes she has around that. She has a beautiful flowery summer dress. It’s her favourite – the first thing she ever bought with money she had earned herself. No point in bringing that now.

On top of her chest of drawers are a dozen or so books that Julia either brought with her from home or that she has accumulated since then. She thinks of them as her ‘library’, a term that always causes her to smile inwardly. Now, she has to decide what she’s going to do with them.

Julia loves books. With their ability to whisk her away to other places, to become part of amazing people’s lives, books have been her solace ever since her mother first read to her and then taught her to read herself, so that Julia could get through grown-up books by the time she started school. She would love to bring them all but they will be too heavy. And picking just one of them, she thinks, is like being asked to choose between your children.

‘*Schnell. Schnell,*’ says the German. ‘We haven’t got all night.’

She wonders if she should take *Hollands Glorie* by Jan de Hartog but before she can decide, the Dutchman, who appears quite nervous despite his size, stubs his cigarette out on the floor and says, ‘Come on, that’s enough’. He shoves her aside and clicks her suitcase shut, before picking it up and thrusting it at her. Now that she’s being taken, now that it’s time to leave her little haven and she is fully awake, she’s starting to feel very frightened. What is going to happen to her?

The Dutchman goes in front, the German behind. Julia has a sense that the whole building is wide awake and listening, but she doesn't see a soul as they descend the stairs. Outside in the icy night, a car waits for them, engine running. Its exhaust creates a small cloud of fog in the freezing air.

They drive her to a police station and she is reassured a little by this. She is taken down a corridor that is almost painfully bright – the lightbulbs protected by wire cages. Then she is pushed into a pitch dark cell.

The smell is the first thing that hits her. It is really bad – shit, piss, bad breath, the meaty smell of unwashed bodies. There is the sound of the heavy breathing of sleep. At first she can see nothing and stands by the door. But eventually her eyes adjust to the very faint light that comes in from a street lamp somewhere outside the thick, frosted glass window. She sees that the space is already crowded. There are at least eight other people there, as well as a pile of luggage in one of the corners near the door. There is a bed and there are people sitting on that, backs to the wall in various attitudes of sleep. There are more people on the floor, including some children. It reminds her of a photograph she once saw of a painting by Goya – something about a massacre. There is some space near the luggage so Julia steps across the prone bodies and inserts herself into it, back to the wall. She has just enough room to stretch out her legs. There is some coughing and snuffling. Somebody talks in their sleep. Someone else starts to snore. Despite all the bodies, the cell becomes very cold and Julia draws her coat around her and pulls the collar up. It doesn't make much difference.

The day, three and a half years ago, that Julia had resolved to leave home was in May. A Saturday. Shabbes. She feigned illness so that her parents would go to synagogue without her. The German invasion had started a few days previously and she had hesitated that Saturday morning after she heard the door close. Should she go ahead? She had a plan – she had had it for weeks. Everything was in place. She had found a place to live, she had a job. But now this – the Germans.

She didn't have much time to decide. Her parents would be back. She agonised. The minutes ticked by. Her suitcase sat on the bed, looking at her. Asking the question. 'Are we going? *I'm ready.*'

And finally she thought – if not now, when? If I am not for myself, who will be for me?

'Fuck it,' she said, and picked up the suitcase.

Julia wanted to be either a writer or an actress. Maybe both. Her job was at the Hollandsche Schouwburg theatre. It was menial – a dresser and general dogsbody. The pay was shit but just enough to cover the rent on a dump and cheap food. It was a start.

But things started to go wrong almost immediately. Her ration cards were sent to her home and she couldn't go back there. When she tried to re-register with her new address she was told that because she wasn't yet eighteen, she would have to get her parents' permission. That closed that door. Without ration cards, she couldn't get food. She eventually managed to get some cards on the black market – in the theatre somebody always knew somebody – and to get herself re-registered, but the cost was everything she earned. She needed money for the rent. That was when the idea came to her that she could use her looks and her body. That led her to the photographs. She only did them a few times to pay off the cost of the ration cards.

After that things were settled for a few months. She worked, she earned, she ate, she had a little money. But in October 1941, the Germans changed the name of the theatre to the Joodsche Schouwburg and decreed that only Jews could perform there. Julia had become friends with an old guy called Anton who had worked backstage there for ever.

'It's the beginning,' he said. 'You should get out of here while you can, kid. It's only going to get worse.'

She hadn't believed him until the following April when the order for the Star came.

'Get out,' Anton said again. 'Find some other way to make money. If you're really – and I mean *really* – stuck, call this guy.'

‘This guy’ had turned out to be Bert.

That first time, the first film, she had felt the same sense of dislocation she feels now. Obviously, her being here is only a temporary thing and they are going to take her somewhere else. She tries not to think about that. She tries to just be here now.

In the time since she left home, Julia has developed a skill that she calls ‘moving her mind’. It was what she did during the films. She would be naked, legs open, and doing what she had to do, but her mind would be in a different place. It would be walking out the door after the shoot into the fresh air outside. Her body might be in front of the camera but she tried to make it that the rest of her was outside waiting for her. After the shooting, she and that other piece of herself would rendezvous. They would have money. They would go off and do things together.

Now it is like the opposite of that. Her mind wants to wander off, to try to anticipate what lies ahead, but Julia keeps bringing it back.

‘Please stay with me,’ she keeps saying to herself in her head. At some stage she must actually say it aloud because somebody shushes her and tells her to be quiet.

She dozes.

Some time later, while the night is still black outside, the cell door opens and a rectangle of light falls across the tangle of sleeping bodies. Julia’s eyes snap open. Someone else is pushed into the cell and the door clangs shut again. A female silhouette in a coat stands there, unable to see after the brightness of the corridor outside.

‘I can’t see.’

‘Over here,’ says Julia. ‘There’s space.’

‘But I can’t see.’

The voice is young, fearful. Wet. She has been crying.

Julia puts her hand up.

‘Take my hand.’

Ice cold fingers find hers.

‘Just be careful where you step.’

The girl steps over Julia’s outstretched legs. Julia makes a

space between herself and the piled-up suitcases. The girl puts her back against the wall and slides down, slotting into the space beside Julia. She can just make out a girl about her own age or maybe a bit younger. She is taller than Julia.

‘Thank you,’ the girl whispers.

Julia goes to take her hand away but the girl continues to grip it tightly. Julia leaves it there. The girl is shaking. Julia just wants to go to sleep now. She is beyond exhausted. So much has happened it seems like months since she was filming with Bert – was it really only yesterday? But the girl has begun to cry and is soon sobbing.

This makes Julia angry. *She* wants to fucking cry. She wants somebody to hold her. To comfort her. Just once in her life to tell her it’s all going to be all right. But this girl isn’t going to do that.

The crying continues. It’s really getting on Julia’s nerves now. She sits there stonily until the girl goes silent. Eventually, Julia falls asleep. When she wakes, the girl’s head is on Julia’s shoulder and Julia’s head rests against hers. The girl has drooled onto the sleeve of Julia’s coat. When Julia lifts her head, the girl wakes. As soon as she becomes aware of her surroundings she starts to cry again.

Christ, Julia thinks, this one. She wants consoling. But nobody’s consoling Julia. That’s the way it’s always been her whole fucking life – she’s had to stand alone, with nobody to protect her. Julia ignores her, struggling with herself as her mind races off again, trying to anticipate what’s coming.

The girl eventually stops, takes a handkerchief from her sleeve and wipes her nose. She is very skinny and wears a coat, beneath it a dark dress and black stockings. It’s very hard to see what colour anything is in the weak light of the cell. The clothes look like they were expensive once but are now worn and shabby. The girl is maybe a year or two younger than Julia and unbelievably pale – more bone white than a corpse, with hollow dark circles around her eyes. Julia speculates that she might have worked in an expensive shop or maybe in De Bijenkorf, the department store – maybe the perfume

department or expensive clothes or lingerie.

The girl returns the hankie to her sleeve and then takes a pair of glasses from the pocket of her cardigan. Putting them on, and with her blonde hair tied up, she suddenly doesn't look at all like a girl from De Bijenkorf. Rather, she reminds Julia of the girl who was top of the class in school. Julia can't even remember her name now – just that she hated her.

'I'm Suzanne,' the girl says.

She extends a hand. Reluctantly Julia takes it. The freezing fingers again.

'Julia,' she says shortly, not wanting to get involved.

'Pleased to meet you,' says Suzanne, with unexpected formality.

Julia says nothing. The rest of the occupants of the cell are waking up. People are having to go to the toilet. A coat is used as a screen. Somebody complains that the bucket is nearly full. The smell of shit and piss is suddenly much stronger. The children begin to moan and say that they're hungry.

'Are these some of your family?' asks Suzanne.

Julia shakes her head. *Don't talk.*

She does anyway.

'No, I'm by myself.'

'Me too.'

The implication seems to be that they should join forces in some way. Fuck that.

After a pause, Suzanne continues. 'I was in hiding. My parents found a place for me. But there was only room for me. I suppose my parents must be gone to the East now.'

Suzanne chokes back a sob. Julia remembers that that was why she hated that girl in school. Sara. That was her name. She hated her because she was so smart and seemed to have such a perfect life. It sounds like this one had had the same. *My parents found a place for me.*

'I hope they're still alive,' says Suzanne. 'I think somebody betrayed me. What about you?'

'I just carried on. Didn't report. Didn't play their stupid fucking game.'

‘You did? My God, that was so brave.’

Julia didn’t think it was brave. Just smart. You can be smart in school and still be pretty stupid. Julia wonders where Sara is now. In hiding? Yes, her parents would probably have tried to find a hiding place for their darling daughter too.

Suzanne’s face is not so much pretty as intriguing. She has high cheekbones and kind eyes. It’s a face that invites questions. Curiosity. Julia both wants to ask but doesn’t at the same time.

Suzanne says, ‘You don’t seem afraid.’

‘I’m very afraid. But so far, it’s not the worst thing that’s ever happened to me.’

Julia knows she’s bragging.

‘No?’

‘No.’

‘Do you mind me asking –’

‘Maybe some other time.’

An awkward silence follows. Suzanne asks the question that has been tormenting Julia.

‘What do you think is going to happen to us?’

How the fuck should I know blazes in Julia’s head but she manages to say, ‘Ship us off to some place. A camp or something. If they were going to kill us they’d have already done it.’

The words come out without thinking. Julia doesn’t know where they came from. Are they a wish or what she actually thinks? She finds though that, either way, they make her feel a bit braver. Despite herself, she says to Suzanne, ‘It’s better to be afraid. Makes you sharper.’

‘You think so?’

Julia doesn’t but she says that she does. Why is she trying to make this girl she doesn’t like feel better?

‘I’m sorry I was so upset earlier on,’ says Suzanne. ‘I was in shock. I had been in hiding for two years. I thought I was going to get through. That I’d made it.’

‘I can see how you would,’ says Julia noncommittally.

‘I’m better now,’ says Suzanne. ‘It won’t happen again.’

This is too much for Julia. She cracks.

‘How can you say that? How can you say such a stupid thing?’

‘What’s stupid?’

“‘It won’t happen again.’” What do you mean? You won’t cry again? You won’t be afraid again?’

‘I might cry,’ says Suzanne. ‘And I’ll certainly be afraid. But I’ll try to control it. I’ll try to control my fear.’

Julia’s heard it all at this stage. ‘And how the fuck are you going to do that?’ she asks.

She’s enjoying swearing in front of Suzanne who’s clearly taken aback by it. Little daddy’s girl never heard bad words.

‘You know the weather?’ says Suzanne. Her voice is even. Calm. Rational.

‘Of course I know the weather,’ says Julia.

‘Our emotions are like the weather. They change from day to day, from hour to hour. Sometimes from minute to minute. Right?’

‘Yeah’

‘I try to make my own weather. Bring my own weather with me.’

‘How do you do that?’

‘It was something I realised while I was in hiding – that it’s weakness to let your thoughts control your actions. You can let your actions control your thoughts. Then you’ll be strong.’

‘Like how?’

‘Well, for example, I had these long days with almost nothing to do. So I made up these movies in my head. I would film a bit every day and assemble the movie in my head and then play it.’ Suzanne has been speaking quietly but now is becoming more animated. ‘Happy movies. Sad movies. Whatever mood I wanted to create I just played that movie.’

‘Fucking weird,’ says Julia.

But now the conversation stops because suddenly there is the sound of several sets of footsteps in the corridor. The cell goes silent. Everybody listens and stares at the door. The footsteps stop. There is a jangle of keys and then the metallic

clatter of a key being put in the lock and turned. The cell door squeals open.

‘Jesus, these Jews stink,’ a voice says in Dutch.