

Odense, May 1945

For This One Pays

I had the chance to experience the euphoria of the liberation. First, the words from the BBC: “Here in London...”, followed by a brief silence, and then the shouts of joy. The feeling of the city coming back to life just as the darkness had fallen. Like everyone else, I ran onto the street. We wanted to see our neighbors and share the moment with them. Bonfires blazed; the loathsome black shades crumpled in the flames. It was as if a plague, a deadly epidemic, had finally released its grasp.

Of course, we knew it was going to happen, that it was coming, that day, which turned out to be an evening. Outside, it was windy and cool, but we were warmed by our shared joy. That feeling continued into the next day, the official day of the liberation. Gray clouds gathered over our freed land, and it rained. Still, we celebrated, even though that Saturday would be the bloodiest of the Danish occupation. Just as the war should have been ending, it broke out in Odense. Across the city, there were clashes between the Resistance and the Germans. Shots and explosions thundered in the streets. No one understood why, but the consequences were awful: dozens of dead and wounded men, women and children.

The hospital’s emergency and operating rooms were on high alert from when the first reports started arriving. Everyone was called in, and my team alone performed six substantial operations that day. Hemorrhages, broken bones, a single amputation, internal bleeding. Flesh wounds from projectiles. The usually meticulously organized labor of the surgical ward was replaced by panic and screams and bloody footprints on the gray linoleum floor. It was like being in a military hospital, and while I was in it, it felt unreal, like a scene from a grotesquely overdetailed novel. We fought to stay on top of it all, to maintain a reasonable sense of order, prioritizing the most serious injuries and admitting when we had no choice but to resign.

Some of them had lost so much blood that they were dead on arrival; others died on the operating table. Most were adults, but not all of them.

In the afternoon, two paramedics came running into the emergency room with a stretcher spattered with blood. They had done what they could to staunch the bleeding, but there were too many wounds, too many severed veins and arteries. The patient was in hypovolemic shock; almost half his blood was outside his body. When the paramedics stopped, out of breath, in the hallway, one of the other nurses, around my age, came running from the on-call room. I walked as quickly as I could: only in the most extreme cases do you run in the surgical ward. I watched her bend over the patient, place a hand on his face and turn it toward her. But when she saw him, her own face crumpled, and I knew that she wasn’t helping anyone, that she would only worsen the pain. When I reached the stretcher, she tried to say something, but her words were strangled by a sob. I pushed her aside and looked down at him. He was a boy, maybe ten years old.

I put a finger to his throat and felt for a pulse without expecting to find one. It was there, but much too fast, 150 beats per minute, and the boy’s skin was cold. I looked down at his face, dirty and bloody, a crust of something around his mouth. His eyes were almost completely closed, and had it not been for the tachycardia, I would have taken him for dead.

There was a small opening in the stream of incoming patients, and with the help of the paramedics, we moved the boy to the operating room. We didn’t have time for more than the

most essential cleaning. We sterilized the area around the table, but the floor was slick with blood that no one had the chance to mop up. It was sticky beneath the rubber soles of my clogs.

The lesions in the boy's left arm were deep. His plaid shirtsleeve was ripped, and when I cut it off, I saw exposed tendons and vessels where the blood was gushing out. Another nurse continued undressing the boy while I clamped his arteries and called for blood. Instruments rattled in stainless steel trays. The Chief of Surgery entered from the dressing room with his hands raised in front of him, and we went to work.

Later, I read the boy's name. It was in all the papers. Frantz, ten years old. He had been playing in the courtyard behind St. Hedvig Søstrenes children's home on Absalonsgade, when a hand grenade was thrown over the wall. Six children were wounded. Frantz had been struck by fragments of the wall. As soon we started operating, it was clear that while the wounds in his arm and shoulder were very serious, it was even worse in his abdominal cavity. His liver was perforated, almost torn in half. There was internal bleeding several places. It seemed strange that he was still alive when he arrived at the hospital.

We were working hard to save the boy when the Chief of Surgery suddenly lowered the hand which held the sterile retractor I just given him. I followed his gaze and saw what he was seeing in the boy's chalk-white face. He wasn't there anymore. The quick pulse was gone. It was almost a relief. We never could have saved his life. For a brief moment, it was as if I was watching the boy's soul leave his mistreated body, circle beneath the ceiling and disappear out the window. I felt my throat contract, but took hold of myself and stepped back from the operating table. I looked at the doctor. His face was somber, but also almost expressionless. We nodded to one another. We knew we had done everything we could.

Schmidt wasn't the Chief of Surgery back then. It was an older man, professor Ohlsen, who was close to retiring, but it was as if he had, that day, been stirred to action and become young again when the chaos erupted. Afterwards, he sagged like a wet cloth. He left a few months later. Maybe he had used the last of his energy that terrible day.

When I left the hospital that evening, I was so exhausted that my hands were shaking as I fished my cigarettes out of my coat pocket. I stood for a moment beneath the gray sky and filled my lungs with fresh air before lighting a cigarette and starting home.

I knew that I had done everything in my power, as the old nurse's oath read. That was enough. I wouldn't have horrid dreams about that day in the surgical ward. My nightmare was waiting out there. So close I didn't get to finish my cigarette.

I want so dearly to be able to say I was innocent. Maybe that sounds strange, but in a way, it would make everything easier. Part of my pain is my guilt. Yes, I knew a young man named Leo, and I cared for him very much. And yes, he was a soldier in the *Wehrmacht*. Not that I knew that when we met, but I suppose ignorance is no excuse.

Leo was German. He wouldn't have denied that. But he could hide it if he wanted to. He spoke flawless Danish. His family had lived in Southern Jutland for generations, on Als and the mainland, and had perhaps, at some point at the dawn of time, even been Danish. Leo was born in the year of the reunification, 1920, after which his parents belonged to the German minority, but they were also Danish citizens when Hitler's propagandists started agitating in Southern Jutland in the late 1930s. Leo told me how difficult the situation had been for his parents. They

identified as German, but not as Nazis. He was drafted to serve in the military, enlisted and sent north. First to Fredericia, then Odense, where we met one summer night on Kongensgade.

My parents had gone to the movies to see a new Danish film, *For This One Pays*. The very next day my mother came to my apartment and handed me a movie ticket. I absolutely had to see this movie, she said. That had never happened before.

“Why?” I asked.

She paused for a moment. “It’s a film all young people should see,” she said.

I remembered seeing the movie mentioned in Fyns Venstreblad in the hospital break room. The word “edifying” had caught my eye. It wasn’t a word which, under normal circumstances, would have lured me to the movies, but in the final year of the Occupation, distractions were far and few between.

I went by myself to see the movie that Thursday night at the Fønix Theater, and it was actually more entertaining than edifying. It was about promiscuity and venereal diseases. A young charmer meets a woman at Tivoli Gardens in Copenhagen and contracts gonorrhea. While I was sitting in the darkness of the theater—almost alone in my row of seats at the matinee—I kept laughing at the characters’ foolishness, and then I realized that I was almost the only one. There was, however, one other person, a man seated diagonally in front of me—I could make out the back of his neck, his shoulders and part of his profile—who was laughing too. It was almost uncanny—as if we were sitting together, laughing at the same scenes and at the silly young men who were so easy to put one over on.

The film ended badly for the charmer, and when it was over, the weekly revue played before the next showing. Most of the others got up to leave, but the man in front of me stayed, and I did too.

In the theater, there were scattered jeers and a single whistle at the German-friendly news. But the lights remained off. Then soldiers marched across the screen until the image suddenly stopped, and the light quickly burned through the celluloid of the frozen image. For a moment, it was quiet, and then there was a sound from the man in the row in front of me, a cross between a contemptuous snort and a muted laugh.

When the lights were finally turned on, I got up and put on my coat. I didn’t have the chance to get a proper look at him because he was already on the aisle, walking down the short set of stairs in the middle of the theater. I reached a hand into my pocket for my cigarettes. But when I clicked my lighter, it didn’t work. So I left the theater with the unlit cigarette in my mouth.

Outside the main entrance, people were looking at the posters for upcoming movies that were exhibited on the thick columns in front of the movie theater. *Freedom, Equality and Louise* was written in white, boxy letters at the top of the glass display. He was one of them. I recognized his profile, the chin and freshly trimmed, brown hair. He turned just as I was coming out the door, and when he saw my cigarette, he stuck his hand into his pocket, without hesitating, and took out his lighter. He smiled, a flame springing up between us, and I took a few steps and leaned towards it.

People say that true beauty comes from within, but you only see that kind of beauty after you’ve gotten to know someone. The other kind captures your gaze on the street. Leo was like that, a very handsome man. Tall, with broad shoulders, sharp features and curious, intelligent eyes. He was well, almost elegantly, dressed in a light-gray jacket and dark trousers. His shoes were the same color as his hair and well-polished. I noticed that all in a second, and then I leaned in towards his flame and felt the smell of gasoline from the lighter. I poked my cigarette into the

yellow flame and caught fire. I raised my eyes and looked at him. In spite of his young age, he had fine laugh lines around his eyes. I liked that.

“Thank you,” I said.

He didn’t say anything, just nodded and smiled again. I heard his voice for the first time a moment later, when I had started walking toward the sidewalk, and he started walking the same way. Then, he spoke to me, and I answered him, and we walked together to the corner of Vestergade.

The thought that he wasn’t a civilian, that he was a German soldier, off duty and dressed up, maybe in the hopes of meeting a girl, didn’t occur to me once.

During the three months that followed, we saw each other as often as we could. Always in secret. It was summer ‘44, right after the Allies had landed in Normandy. I knew—I know—that Leo wasn’t a Nazi. On the contrary. He hadn’t enlisted in the *Wehrmacht*. I believed him when he said that what he wanted most was to be Danish again, to strip off the uniform and put the war behind him.

Sometime after, he came to my apartment on Nedergade. The following weeks, we tried to avoid anyone seeing us, but of course that didn’t work. My neighbor, a postman, another neighbor’s son. Maybe one of them ratted me out. Maybe not.

Was it a crime? Was it wrong? Can love be wrong? Because I loved him. And he me. We started making plans for after the war. Peace. Work. Children. A home.

And then one day, he was gone. Despite what the weekly revue had said, the Allies were advancing. The Germans mobilized all of their forces. I never saw Leo again. He probably died at the Atlantic Wall or in the Ardennes.

Never before nor since have I cried as I did the day he left. I was distraught. The thought that something even worse could happen as a consequence of our love never occurred to me.

But someone is always envious of other people’s happiness. And in a tiny society, nothing stays hidden. So, when the vermin crawled out on the day of the liberation, many of them had heard of Leo and his Danish girlfriend. I later found my name in one of the illegal newspapers: suspected of collaboration, without any evidence. They knew who I was, where I lived and where I worked. They knew my daily routines and my parents, and they had been awaiting the day when they could exact the revenge they believed they deserved.

I didn’t know any of them, but they knew me. And when I left the hospital on the fifth of May, they were waiting for me.

Every once in a while, I think about who they were. But more often, I think about who I was before it happened. The night of May 4th, for example. I was at a party with my neighbors and I remember how happy and exuberant I was. I laughed and laughed, and the carpenter from the next building, a kind man with a pretty wife and three children, picked up a bottle of Gordon’s gin and poured it into the tiny glasses, which there were nowhere near enough of. He and I stood side by side in front of the stinking fire. He passed me the bottle and I drank from it. I was a little tipsy, but still, I remember that night clearly.

Who was Molly Dahl that night? A nurse, relatively new, relatively young, but ambitious, yes, that she was. Smart. Happy and...trusting? Yes, I think so. I wasn’t afraid of people back then. I didn’t shrink when men looked at me, maybe I even enjoyed it. The gaze of men. I knew that I was attractive to them. But I wasn’t afraid. That’s important. That’s how I was. But it’s as though I’m not remembering correctly. I’m watching from outside. I see Molly standing next to

the carpenter, laughing and smiling and happy, but I can't remember that I was that girl. What happened the next day broke my connection to her. I became someone else.

The Scissors

I saw them too late. When I left the hospital, I was exhausted, and I was on foot. When I was called into work that morning, I had found the back tire of my bicycle flat, and I hurried to Flakhaven, where I hopped onto a tram. But after the exhausting day in the surgical ward, I wanted to walk and put some distance between myself and the horrors of the day. It was only one and a half miles home, and the weather was better. It was still and springlike.

Most of them must have been hiding behind the stonemason's, next to the main entrance to the cemetery. Only one of them, one of the women, was standing by the gate that led into the cemetery, and I wasn't suspicious of her at all, barely saw her. When I was right by the gate, she suddenly addressed me, and I stopped, baffled to hear those words coming from a complete stranger.

"You little Nazi tramp," she said. Her voice was hushed, almost a whisper, and her words were so shocking that, at first, I thought—hoped, oh, how I hoped—that I had misheard. But then I turned, and I realized I was in danger. Her face was pale and hateful, and behind her a small group had assembled, whose staring eyes left nothing to doubt. It was me they had come for.

There were seven men and two women. Later, I thought about how, even though the men were crude and bawdy, it was the women who were most brutal. They hit and kicked the most. They clawed and growled and spit like vicious cats, tearing my clothes apart and striking my face and body.

I ran as fast as I could, down the street, and soon I was out of the next gate. A solitary figure was walking a little further ahead. A man. I stopped and called after him, screamed for help, but he didn't react, just sped up and continued without turning around. Then my pursuers reached me. A hand grabbed my arm and held me in place, and the rest of them caught up and started dragging me back toward the gate as I screamed.

I fought back, and when one of them rasped a series of curses into my right ear, I swung my elbow up hard and back and hit a face. I could hear in the yelp that it was one of the women. She disappeared behind me as the others pulled me further into the cemetery. I lost my sense of direction, but eventually we arrived at a little clearing between the bushes and the trees. There were a number of pompous graves, one of them with a life-size bronze statue of a shepherd with a crook and two lambs.

Then I was hit in the back of the head and saw another one, and everything went blurry. They were on top of me now. Their hands were everywhere, groping me, grabbing my clothes and tearing them. I resisted and they hit me again and again, and then they turned me onto the ground and held me down and finally, I was still. I looked up. The woman was standing over me. The one I had hit. Her face was bloody, her nose was broken and blood streamed down her chin as down the chin of a predator who has just bitten off a chunk of its living prey.

"You ugly *whore*," she whispered. She bent down and slapped me in the face, and I tasted blood on my lips. Then she stuck her hands into my already unbuttoned coat, grabbed my uniform's straps and yanked. I wanted to stop her, but my arms were pinned down by two heavy

figures kneeling on the grass. I looked up at their faces, and one was laughing, his yellow teeth glittering in his big, wet mouth hole. The straps sprung open, and the woman straightened up, holding something up to the light in front of her bloody face. "Molly," she read. "Molly Dahl." She said something else I didn't hear, and threw my nametag into the grass.