THE ASSAULT

Harry Kurt Victor Mulisch (1927-2010) was a Dutch writer. He wrote more than 80 novels, plays, essays, poems, and philosophical reflections. Mulisch's works have been translated into 38 languages to date. *The Assault* sold over 200,000 copies in the Netherlands on first publication and inspired the 1986 Oscar-winning Best Foreign Language Film of the same name.

Claire Nicolas White (1925-2020) was an American poet, novelist and translator of Dutch literature. Her work appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Partisan Review*, *Grand Street*, and the *Paris Review*, among other publications.

Thomas Harding is a bestselling author whose books have been translated into more than sixteen languages. He has written for the *Sunday Times*, the *Washington Post* and the *Guardian*, among other publications.

HARRY MULISCH

THE ASSAULT

TRANSLATED FROM THE DUTCH
BY CLAIRE NICOLAS WHITE

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INTRODUCTION

Occasionally a book comes along that hits the sweet spot: one that is so beautifully written that you want to take your time savouring each and every word and yet is so compelling, so captivating, that you are desperate to read it as quickly as possible, gobbling up sentence after sentence in breathless haste. And then when you are done you feel at a loss because you want more.

Such a book typically works on a deep level by focusing on the small, delicate moments that make up our individual lives, thereby revealing the authentic responses of those at its centre and, in so doing, renders the text intensely moving. But it also works on the broad level, containing themes of great social interest, providing abundant insights, inciting revelatory and profound thoughts. *The Assault* is such a book. Simply put, it is genius.

This book is many things. It is the story about a terrible crime and the consequences that followed. It is an exploration of memory, identity, guilt, history and the slipperiness of truth. It is also about coincidence, how one happenstance leads to the next and then the next. With that in mind, let me tell you about the series of coincidences that led me to this treasure.

Not long ago, my wife and I were staying at a friend's house outside of Florence, Italy. He was kindly letting us stay for a year so we could work on our writing. When we arrived, a little disorientated by our three days' drive from England, our car crammed so full of belongings it was impossible to see out of the rear window, our limbs aching and stiff, we walked into the large wood-beamed kitchen and were met by the acquaintance of the daughter of our friend who owned the house. This acquaintance was Dutch and had been staying at the house for a week with his girlfriend. If this all sounds tangential and a little fragmented, it felt like it at the time.

Two days later this Dutchman was due to leave with his girlfriend and asked us what gift we thought he should get for our friend, the owner. We suggested a book. A few hours later, the Dutchman was back at the house package in hand. 'It's my favourite book,' he said. Two weeks after that, our friend arrived and was delighted by the present. The following morning he came down to breakfast and said he had not slept, having spent the whole night consumed by the book. 'You must read it,' he said. Which we did. And we, too, were captivated. The book was, of course, *The Assault* by Harry Mulisch.

There was much I loved about this book. The elegant and efficient writing style, the fine portraits of fascinating human characters, the complexity of emotions, the surprising plot twists. Right from the very beginning, when that first terrible crime takes place, and the body lays in the snow with the bicycle wheel spinning, and the central characters are faced with making a series of difficult choices each with a profound consequence, I was hooked. And then, came one extraordinary scene after another – I won't spoil things by saying precisely what happens – which were so vivid to me that it felt like I was actually there, in the action, watching it all unfold in front of me. Gripping stuff. I didn't want to stop reading. So I didn't. I finished the book in one sitting.

Later, when we did some research, we were surprised not to have heard about the book and even more so when we discovered it was out of print in the UK. Which is why we then shared a copy with the team at Serpent's Tail, who were also captivated. And here we are – a series of strange connections linked by a consistently powerful and overwhelmingly positive response to a single text.

The book had a stratospheric start. It was first published by the distinguished firm De Bezige Bij in the Netherlands under the title *De Aanslag* in 1982. It sold more than 200,000 copies within the first few months. It was soon

translated into more than sixteen languages and was particularly well received in the USA, receiving high praise from numerous media outlets, including John Updike in the *New Yorker*. The book was later adapted into a film under the same name and went on to win the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film in 1986. And then, as the decades tumbled and spun forward, it was, like so many other great books, lost in the wash of new titles and reprints that are released each year. Somehow, remarkably, egregiously, it went out of print.

Harry Mulisch (1927–2010) was born and grew up in Haarlem. He was just thirteen-years old when the Germans occupied the Netherlands in 1940. As it happens, he was the same age as one of the main characters in this book and living at the same time and in the same city. Perhaps more pertinently still, his mother was Jewish and was rounded up by the Nazis. She was rescued by his father who worked in a bank that handled confiscated Jewish assets and had good connections. Her mother, the author's grandmother, was killed in the gas chambers. After the war his father was held in prison for helping the Nazis. 'It's a terrible paradox of the war,' Mulisch would later say. 'My father took great risks to save my mother and was later condemned as a collaborator.'

Along with Gerard Reve and Willem Frederik Hermans, Harry Mulisch is considered to be one of the 'Great Three' (*De Grote Drie*) of Dutch post-war literature. During his career he wrote more than eighty novels, plays, essays, poems, and philosophical reflections which were translated into more than thirty languages. He won the Anne Frank Prize in 1958, was shortlisted for the Booker International Prize in 2007 and, in a nationwide poll in the Netherlands, his novel *The Discovery of Heaven* was nominated as the best Dutch book of all time. Mulisch lived in Amsterdam from 1958 till he died in 2010, aged eighty-three. He had three children, two by his wife Sjoerdje Woudenberg (they

did not divorce, remaining good friends) and the third by his partner Kitty Saal. 'We all grew up with him,' said the Dutch prime minister, Mark Rutte, following his death: 'Mulisch presided over Dutch literature. This is the end of an era.'

The translator Claire Nicolas White (1925–2020) also grew up in the Netherlands. She was born in the small village of Groet before moving with her family to France. When she was fourteen, she and her parents (her father was a stained-glass painter and her mother a sculptor) fled the Nazis and found refuge in New York. Later, she attended Smith College by which time she had fallen in love with the English language. Indeed, she wrote a poem celebrating this romance: 'But English I wed for better or worse / my reality, my daily companion.' Later, she set up home with her husband in St. James, Long Island, New York. She had four children, the youngest, Natalie, died in a car accident when she was only 17. White, therefore, knew something of the language of grief.

She was an accomplished and prolific author in her own right. Her publications include a family history, *The Elephant and the Rose*; a memoir, *Fragments of Stained Glass*; and a biography, *Joep Nicolas, His Life and Work*. Her poetry appeared in the magazines the *New Yorker*, *Paris Review* and the *Atlantic Monthly*. In addition to *The Assault*, she translated two other important Dutch novels, *The Vanishing* by Tim Krabbé and *My Father's War* by Adriaan van Dis.

It was during a visit to Amsterdam that she saw a copy of *The Assault* in a bookshop. She was already familiar with Mulisch's work as she had previously translated one of his plays. She quickly devoured the book. 'I was absolutely dazzled by its classical construction,' she later recalled. Indeed, she was so impressed that she contacted the Dutch government department in charge of promoting translations and learned that the American publisher

André Schiffrin had already expressed an interest in the book. She immediately reached out to Schiffrin, who she knew as a boy had also fled Nazi-occupied France, and soon it was agreed that she would translate *The Assault*. Another improbable connection leading to a consequential outcome.

So what is this book about? Mulisch says it 'is a story of an incident'. On the simplest level, he is correct, but there is more going on here. This story is about how an incident, and the decisions and actions taken in response, can alter the course of a person's entire life. It is also about how one incident can be read entirely differently by those involved and that such misunderstandings and gaps in memory can then initiate new trains of occurrences, insights and decisions, for both good and ill. And, perhaps most intriguingly, it is about how, even though our lives are chock-full of moments, happenings and, yes, incidents, there are some that are so freighted with meaning that they rise about the rest, transcending the quotidian and the everyday, making one question the nature of fate, randomness, morality and life itself. In other words, while this book is indeed centred around the gripping drama of a single incident, it is also one of remarkable gravitas, depth and scope.

Simply put, this book is superb. So read it. I doubt very much that you will regret it.

Thomas Harding
Hampshire, UK, January 2024

THE ASSAULT

"By then day had broken everywhere, but here it was still night—no, more than night."

Pliny the Younger
Letters, IV, 16

PROLOGUE

Far, far back during the Second World War, a certain Anton Steenwijk lived with his parents and his brother on the outskirts of Haarlem. There four houses stood close together along a quay that bordered the water for about a hundred meters. After a gentle curve, the quay straightened out and became an ordinary street. Each house was surrounded by a garden and had a little balcony, bay windows, and a steep roof, giving it the air of a modest villa. The rooms on the top floor all had slanted walls. The houses were somewhat dilapidated and in need of paint, for their upkeep had already been neglected during the thirties. Harking back to lighter-hearted days, each bore a brave sign with its name: Hideaway, Carefree, Home at Last, Bide-a-Wee.

Anton lived in the second house from the left, the one with the thatched roof. If it had not already been called Carefree when the family rented it shortly before the War, his father would have preferred to name it something like Eleuthera, written in Greek letters. Even before the catastrophe occurred, Anton used to think that Carefree meant a place where cares entered freely, not a place free from cares; just as someone could think priceless meant without cost, rather than beyond price.

The Beumers, an ailing retired attorney and his wife, lived in Hideaway. Anton sometimes dropped in on them for a cup of tea and cake, in the days when there were still such things as tea and cake—that is to say, long before the beginning of this story, which is the story of an incident. Sometimes Mr. Beumer read him a chapter from *The Three Musketeers*.

Mr. Korteweg was the neighbor in Home at Last, on the other side of Anton's house. Formerly a second mate in the merchant marine, he was out of work now because of the War. After the death of his wife, his daughter Karin, a

nurse, had moved back home. Anton sometimes dropped in here also, through an opening in the backyard hedge. Karin was always friendly, but her father paid no attention to him.

There wasn't much socializing on that quay. The most aloof neighbors of all were the Aartses, who had lived in Bide-a-Wee since the beginning of the War. It was said that he worked for an insurance company, though no one was really sure.

Apparently these four houses had been intended as the beginning of a new development, but nothing more came of it. They were surrounded by fallow fields overgrown with weeds and bushes, and even some tall trees. It was on these undeveloped lots that Anton spent most of his time, playing with other children from a neighborhood further away. Occasionally in the late twilight when his mother forgot to call him in, a fragrant stillness would rise and fill him with expectations—of what, he didn't know. Something to do with later, when he'd be grown up—things that would happen then. Something to do with the motionless earth, the leaves, two sparrows that suddenly twittered and scratched about. Life someday would be like those evenings when he had been forgotten, mysterious and endless.

The cobblestones on the road in front of the house were laid in a herringbone pattern. The street did not have a sidewalk. It petered out into a grassy bank that sloped gently down to the towpath, where it was pleasant to lie on one's back. The wide canal's uneven, winding bank showed that it had been a river at one time. Across the water stood a few farmhands' cottages and small farms; to the right, where the bank curved, was a windmill that never turned. Behind the farms, the meadows stretched out to the horizon. Still further lay Amsterdam. Before the War, his father had told him, one could see the glow of city lights reflected against the clouds. Anton had been there a few times, to the zoo and the Rijksmuseum, and to his uncle's to spend the night.

Lying on the grassy bank and staring into the distance, he sometimes had to pull in his legs because a man who seemed to step out of another century came walking along the trampled towpath. The man had one end of a pole several yards long attached to his waist, while the other end was fastened to the prow of a barge. Walking with heavy steps, he pushed against the pole and thus moved the boat through the water. Usually a woman wearing an apron, her hair in a knot, stood at the wheel, and a child played on deck.

At other times the man remained on deck and walked forward along the side of the barge, dragging the pole behind him through the water. When he reached the bow, he planted the stick sideways in the bottom of the canal, grasped it firmly, and walked backwards, so that he pushed the boat forward beneath his feet. This specially pleased Anton: a man walking backwards to push something forward, while staying in the same place himself. There was something very strange about it, but it was his secret that he didn't mention to anyone. Not till later, when he described it to his children, did he realize what primitive times he had witnessed. Only in movies about Africa and Asia could one still see such things.

Several times a day sailing barges, heavily laden ships with dark-brown sails, appeared silently around the first bend and, driven solemnly onward by the invisible wind, disappeared around the next.

The motorboats were different. Pitching, their prows would tear the water into a V shape that spread until it reached both sides of the canal. There the water would suddenly begin to lap up and down, even though the boat was already far away. Then the waves bounced back and formed an inverted V, which interfered with the original V, reached the opposite shore transformed, and bounced back again—until all across the water a complicated braiding of ripples de-

veloped which went on changing for several minutes, then finally smoothed out.

Each time, Anton tried to figure out exactly how this happened, but each time the pattern became so complex that he could no longer follow it.

FIRST EPISODE

1945

1

It was about half past seven in the evening. The coal stove had been purring softly, fed by a few bits of wood, and then gone out again. Anton was sitting at the table in the back room with his parents and Peter. A zinc cylinder about the size of a flowerpot was standing on a dish. A thin pipe stuck out on top, split in two like a Y, and from little holes at its tips emerged two pointed, blinding-white flames that were aimed at each other. This gadget cast a dull light through the room. Silhouetted against the deep shadows, the much-darned and -mended laundry was hung up to dry. The light also revealed mounds of unironed shirts, a box to keep the food warm, and two piles of books from his father's study: the row on the dresser to be read, the stack of novels on the floor to light the emergency stove on which the cooking was done, whenever there was anything to cook. Newspapers had not appeared in months.

Except for sleeping, all daily life took place here, in what used to be the dining room. The sliding doors were kept closed. Behind them, on the street side, the living room had not been used all winter. Even in daytime its curtains remained closed against the cold, so that the house looked uninhabited from the quay side.

It was January, nineteen forty-five. Almost all of Europe had been liberated and was once more rejoicing, eating, drinking, making love, and beginning to forget the War. But every day Haarlem looked more like one of those spent gray clinkers that they used to take out of the stove, when there had still been coal to burn.

A dark-blue sweater lay on the table in front of his mother. She had already unraveled half of it. In her left hand she held the growing ball of wool around which her right hand quickly wound the sweater's yarn. Anton watched the yarn speeding back and forth while the sweater

vanished from the world. The sleeves, spread out flat, looked as if they were holding on, resisting this transformation into a ball with all their might. His mother gave him a fleeting smile, and he lowered his eyes to his book.

His mother's blond tresses were coiled over her ears like two ammonite shells. Now and then she stopped and took a sip of her cold tea substitute, made with melted snow from the backyard because the pipes were frozen. She had a cavity in her tooth that couldn't be treated just then; to relieve the pain she had found a leftover clove in the kitchen to put on the sore spot, just as her grandmother used to do. She sat up straight, but her husband across the table was bent over, reading a book. His dark hair, turning gray, grew in a semicircle like a horseshoe around his bald pate. From time to time he blew into his hands, which were large and clumsy, though he was not a laborer but a clerk at the district court.

Anton wore his brother's hand-me-downs, while Peter was dressed in an oversized black suit of his father's. Peter was seventeen, and since he had begun to grow fast just when there was less and less to eat, his body looked as if it had been put together with sticks of kindling. He was doing his homework. He had not set foot in the street for two months, because he was old enough to be rounded up by the police and sent to a labor camp in Germany. He was still only in his second year of high school, for he had failed twice. Now he was being taught by his father, homework and all, so he wouldn't fall behind even more.

The brothers didn't look anything alike; neither did their parents. Some couples have a striking resemblance to one another (possibly this means that the wife looks like her husband's mother, and the husband like his wife's father, or something even more complicated, which no doubt it is). The Steenwijk couple, however, were two distinct entities. Of the sons, Peter had the blond-and-blue coloring of his

mother, Anton his father's dark-brown complexion, even to the way their nut-brown skin grew darker around the eyes.

Anton wasn't going to school just then either. He was in the sixth grade, but because of the coal shortage, the Christmas vacation had been extended until the end of the freezing weather.

He was hungry, but he knew that he wouldn't get his sticky gray sandwich spread with sugar beet syrup until morning. That afternoon he had stood in line for an hour at the central kitchen in the nursery school. The pushcart, its pans guarded by a policeman with a rifle on his back, had not entered the street till after dark. Once Anton's tickets had been punched, four ladles of watery soup were dished up into the pot he had brought along. On his way home across the lots he had tasted just a little of the warm, sour concoction. Luckily he would be going to bed soon; in his dreams there was always peace.

No one spoke. Outside too, all was quiet. The War had lasted forever and would last forever. No radio, no telephone, nothing. The flames hissed. Now and then they sputtered softly. Wrapped in a scarf, his feet stuck into a foot warmer that his mother had made out of an old shopping bag, Anton was reading an article in *Nature and Mechanics*. For his birthday he had been given a secondhand bound copy of the 1938 edition: "A Letter to Posterity." A photograph showed a group of well-fed Americans in their shirt sleeves looking up at a large, shiny capsule shaped like a torpedo that hung vertically above their heads. The capsule was about to be lowered into a hole fifteen meters deep. In five thousand years it was to be dug up and opened by posterity, which would then learn what human civilization had been like at the time of the World's Fair in New York. Inside the capsule, made of amazingly durable "cupalloy," was a fire-resistant glass cylinder filled with hundreds of objects: a microfilm containing a survey of science, technology, and

the arts in ten million words and a thousand illustrations, newspapers, catalogs, famous novels, the Bible, of course, and the Our Father in three hundred languages. Also messages from famous men, movies of the terrible Japanese bombings of Canton in 1937, seeds, an electric plug, a slide rule, and all kinds of other things—even a lady's hat that was in fashion during the autumn of 1938. All the important libraries and museums in the world had received a document specifying the location of the cement-covered capsule, so that it could be retrieved in the seventieth century. But why, Anton wondered, would they have to wait until precisely the year 6938? Wouldn't it be of interest long before then?

"Papa, how long is five thousand years ago?"

"Precisely five thousand years," said Steenwijk without looking up from his book.

"Yes, I know that. But was there already . . . I mean . . ."

"Say what you mean."

"Well, did people, just like now, have . . ."

"Civilization?" asked his mother.

"Yes."

"Why don't you let the boy formulate it himself?" asked Steenwijk, looking at her over the top of his glasses. And then to Anton, "Civilization was still in its infancy, in Egypt and in Mesopotamia. Why do you ask?"

"Because here it says that more than . . ."

"Ready!" said Peter and looked up from his dictionaries and grammar. He pushed his homework over to his father and came to stand beside Anton.

"What are you reading?"

"Nothing," said Anton, bending over the book, hiding it from his brother with his chest and crossed arms.

"Stop that, Tonny," said his mother and pulled him upright.

"I'm never allowed to look at his!"

"That's a dirty lie, Anton Mussert," said Peter, upon which Anton held his nose and began to sing in a nasal voice:

For I was born with bad luck
And I'll die with bad luck . . .

"Quiet!" Steenwijk called out and slapped the table with the flat of his hand.

That his name should be Anton, like the leader of the Dutch Nazi Party, was a nuisance of course, and the cause of much teasing. During the war, Fascists often called their sons Anton or Adolf, sometimes even Anton Adolf, and proudly sent out birth announcements decorated with Germanic runes, or with the emblem of the Dutch Nazi Party, a wolf trap. Later, whenever he met someone with either of those names, or with the nicknames Ton or Dolf, he'd try and find out if they had been born during the War. If so, it was a sure sign that their parents had been collaborators, and not just by half. The name Anton became acceptable again ten or fifteen years after the War, which goes to show how insignificant Anton Mussert actually was. For of course the name Adolf still won't do. Not until people are called Adolf again will the Second World War be really behind us. But that means we'd have to have a third world war, which would mean the end of Adolfs forever.

As for the jingle that Anton had been singing in self-defense, it too has become meaningless. It was a nasal refrain sung by a radio comedian called Peter Pech, at a time when radios were still allowed. In Dutch, Pech means bad luck. But there are many more things about those times that have become meaningless today, especially to Anton himself.

"Why don't you come and sit next to me?" said Steenwijk to Peter, taking up the homework. In a solemn voice he began reading the translation aloud:

> Just as when rivers, swollen with rain and melting snow, streaming down from the mountains to a valley basin and welling up out of abundant springs, gather in their hollow beds—and far away in the mountain the shepherd hears their muffled roar—so sounded the shouting and the painful struggle of the soldiers engaged in a hand-to-hand battle.

"How beautiful this is," said Steenjwijk, leaning back and taking off his glasses.

"Sure, great," said Peter. "Specially after I've been working on it an hour and a half, that lousy sentence."

"It's worth a day's work. Look at the way he evokes nature, but only obliquely, in comparison. Did you notice? What one remembers are not the fighting soldiers, but the image of nature—and that goes on existing. The battle has vanished, but the rivers are still there, one can still hear them, and then one becomes, oneself, that shepherd. It's as if he wanted to say that all of existence is a metaphor for another reality, and that the whole point is to grasp that other reality."

"Then that other reality must be the War," said Peter.

Steenwijk pretended not to have heard.

"Very well translated, my boy. Except for *one* mistake. They are not rivers, plural, that come together, but two rivers."

"Where does it say that?"

"Here: *symballeton*, that's a duality, the coming together of two things, two. Now the two armies also make sense. This is a form you find only in Homer. Remember the word 'symbol,' which comes from *symballo*, 'to bring together,' 'to meet.' Do you know what a *symbolon* was?"

"No," said Peter in a tone implying that he couldn't care less.

"What was it, Papa?" asked Anton.

"It was a stone that they broke in two. Say I am a guest

in another city, and I ask my host whether he would be willing to receive you too. How can he be sure that you really are my son? We make a *symbolon*. He keeps one half, and at home I give you the other. So then when you get there, they fit together exactly."

"That's great," said Anton. "I'm going to try that someday."

Groaning, Peter turned away. "Why in God's name should I learn all that?"

"Not in God's name," said Steenwijk, peering at him over his glasses. "In the name of *humanitas*. You'll see how much pleasure it will give you for the rest of your life."

Peter slammed his books shut, piled them up, and said in a strange tone of voice: "Who looks at man, laughs if he can."

"Now what has that got to do with anything, Peter?" asked his mother. With her tongue she pushed the clove back in place.

"Nothing."

"I'm afraid so," said Steenwijk. "*Sunt pueri pueri pueri puerilia tractant*."

The sweater had disappeared, and Mrs. Steenwijk stowed the ball of yarn in her sewing basket.

"Come, let's play a game before we go to bed."

"To bed already?" said Peter.

"We've got to save gas. We only have enough for a few days."

Mrs. Steenwijk pulled the box out of the drawer of the dresser, pushed the lamp aside, and unfolded the game board.

"I want green," said Anton.

Peter looked at him and tapped his forehead.

"Do you really think green will make you win?"

"Sure."

"We'll see about that."

Steenwijk laid down his book. A moment later the only

sounds were those of the dice being shaken and the pawns being moved across the board. It was almost eight o'clock: curfew. Outside all was as still as it must be on the moon.

2

In the silence that was Holland then, six shots suddenly rang out. First, one echoed through the street, then two more in rapid succession, and a few seconds later, a fourth and a fifth. After a moment came a kind of scream, followed by a sixth shot. Anton, about to throw the dice, froze and looked at his mother, his mother at his father, his father at the sliding doors; but Peter picked up the cover of the carbon lamp and put it over the flame.

Suddenly, all was dark. Peter stood up, stumbled forward, opened the sliding doors, and peered through a crack in the curtains of the bay window. Freezing-cold air immediately streamed in from the parlor.

"They shot someone!" he said. "Someone's lying there." He hurried into the front hall.

"Peter!" cried his mother.

Anton heard her follow. He jumped up himself and ran to the bay window. Unerringly he dodged all the furniture there, which he hadn't seen for months: the armchairs, the low, round table with the lace doily under the glass plate, the dresser with the ceramic platter and the portraits of his grandparents. The curtains, the windowsill, everything was icy cold. No one had breathed in this room for so long that there weren't even any frost flowers on the windowpanes. It was a moonless night, but the frozen snow held the light of the stars. At first he thought that Peter had been talking nonsense, but now he too saw it through the left side of the bay window.

In the middle of the deserted street, in front of Mr. Kor-

teweg's house, lay a bicycle with its upended front wheel still turning—a dramatic effect later much used in close-ups in every movie about the Resistance. Limping, Peter ran along the garden path into the street. The last few weeks he'd had a boil on his toe that would not heal, and his mother had cut a piece out of his shoe to ease the pain. He knelt beside a man lying motionless in the gutter not far from the bicycle. The man's right hand was resting on the edge of the sidewalk, as if he had made himself comfortable. Anton saw the shimmer of black boots and the iron plates on the heels.

In a whisper that was surprisingly loud, his mother called Peter from the doorstep to come in at once. He stood up, looked to right and left along the quay and then back at the man, and limped home.

"It's Ploeg!" Anton heard him say a minute later in the hall, a tone of triumph in his voice. "Dead as a doornail, if you ask me."

Anton too knew Fake Ploeg, Chief Inspector of Police, the greatest murderer and traitor in Haarlem. He passed by regularly on his way between his office and his house in Heemstede. A big, square-shouldered man with a rough face, he was usually dressed in a hat, a brown sports jacket, and a shirt with a tie. But he wore black riding pants and high boots, and he radiated violence, hate, and fear. His son, also named Fake, was in Anton's class. From the bay window Anton stared at the boots. He knew those, all right, because Fake had been brought to school a couple of times by his father on the back of that very bicycle. Each time they arrived at the school entrance, everyone fell silent. The father looked about with a mocking glance, but after he left, the son went in with downcast eyes and had to manage as best he could.

"Tonny!" His mother called. "Get away from that window!"

On the second day of school when nobody knew who he was yet, Fake had appeared in the pale-blue uniform and black-and-orange cap of the Nazi youth organization. That was in September, shortly after Mad Tuesday, when everyone thought the liberators were on their way and most National Socialists and collaborators had fled to the German border or beyond. Fake sat all alone at his desk in the classroom and pulled out his books. Mr. Bos, the math teacher, stood in the doorway, his arm against the doorjamb to keep out the other students; he had called back those who had already entered. He announced to Fake that there would be no teaching students in uniform, it hadn't gotten that far and would never get that far, and he should go home and change. Fake said nothing, did not look back at the doorway but remained motionless. After a while the principal edged through the students and began to whisper excitedly to the teacher, who wouldn't give in.

Anton stood in the front of the crowd and, under Bos's arm, stared at the back of the boy in the empty room. Then, slowly, Fake turned around and looked him straight in the eyes. All at once Anton was overcome by a pity for him such as he had never felt for anyone. How could Fake possibly go home, with that father of his? Before he knew what he was doing, Anton dove under Mr. Bos's arm and sat down at his desk. This broke down the general resistance of the others. After school the principal stood waiting for him in the hall, caught him briefly by the arm, and whispered that he had probably saved Mr. Bos's life. Anton didn't quite know what to do with this compliment. He never told anyone at home about it, and the incident was never mentioned again.

The body in the gutter. The wheel had stopped turning. Above, the amazing starry sky. His eyes were used to the darkness now, and he could see ten times better than before. Orion lifting his sword, the Milky Way, one brilliant, shiny planet, probably Jupiter—not in centuries had Holland's

skies been this clear. On the horizon two slowly moving searchlights crossed each other and fanned out, but no plane could be heard. He noticed that he was still holding one of the dice in his hand and put it in his pocket.

As he was about to move away from the window, he saw Mr. Korteweg come out of his house, followed by Karin. Korteweg picked Ploeg up by the shoulders, Karin by the boots, and together they began dragging him through the snow, Karin walking backwards.

"Look at that," said Anton.

His mother and Peter were just in time to see them deposit the body in front of Carefree. Karin and Korteweg ran back. Karin threw Ploeg's cap, which had fallen off, onto his body. Her father moved the bicycle to the road in front of Carefree. The next moment they had disappeared into Home at Last.

Everyone was speechless in the bay window at the Steenwijks'. The quay was once more deserted, everything was as quiet as it had been, yet everything had changed. The dead man now lay with his arms above his head, the right hand clasping a gun, the long coat gathered at the waist, as if Ploeg had fallen from a great height. Now Anton clearly recognized the large face, its hair slicked down and brushed back, practically undisturbed.

"God dammit!" screamed Peter suddenly, his voice breaking.

"Hey, hey, watch it," came Steenwijk's voice from the darkness of the back room. He was still sitting at the table.

"They put him down in front of our house, the bastards!" Peter cried. "Jesus Christ! We've got to get him out of here before the Krauts come."

"Don't get involved," said Mrs. Steenwijk. "We had nothing to do with it."

"No, except that now he's lying in front of our door! Why do you suppose they did that? Because the Krauts are going to retaliate, of course. Just like before, at the Leidse Canal."

"We didn't do anything wrong, Peter."

"As if they care! You're dealing with Krauts." He left the room. "Come on Anton, hurry; you and I can do it."

"Are you crazy?" Mrs. Steenwijk cried. She choked, cleared her throat, and spat out the clove. "What do you want to do?"

"Put him back—or at Mrs. Beumer's."

"At Mrs. Beumer's? How can you think of such a thing?"

"Why not at Mrs. Beumer's? Mrs. Beumer had nothing to do with it either! If only the river weren't frozen . . . We'll see what we can do."

"No you don't!"

Mrs. Steenwijk rushed out of the room. In the dim light that fell through the transom into the front hall, Anton saw that his mother had posted herself in front of the door; Peter was trying to push her aside. He heard her turn the key as she called, "Willem, why don't you say something?"

"Yes . . . yes . . ." Anton heard his father's voice, still in the back room. "I . . ."

In the distance, shots rang out again.

"If he'd been hit a few seconds later, he'd be lying at Mrs. Beumer's now," called Peter.

"Yes . . ." said Steenwijk softly, his voice breaking in an odd way, "But that is not the case."

"Not the case! It wasn't the case that he was lying here, either, but now it *is* the case!" Peter said suddenly, "In fact, I'm going to take him back. I'll just do it alone."

He turned to run toward the kitchen door, but with a cry of pain tripped over the pile of logs and branches from the last trees his mother had chopped down in the empty lots.

"Peter, for God's sake!" cried Mrs. Steenwijk. "You're playing with your life!"

"That's exactly what *you're* doing, dammit."

Before Peter could pick himself up, Anton turned the key in the kitchen door and threw it into the hall, where it clat-

tered and became invisible; then he ran to the front door and did the same with the house key.

"God dammit," cried Peter, almost in tears. "You're stupid, stupid, all of you."

He went to the back room, tore aside the curtains, and with his good foot pushed against the french doors. They burst open with a crash, sending strips of paper insulation flying, and suddenly Anton saw his father's silhouette outlined against the snow. He was still sitting at the table.

As Peter disappeared into the garden, Anton ran back to the bay window. He saw his brother appear limping around the house, climb over the fence, and grip Ploeg by the boots. At that moment he seemed to hesitate, perhaps because of all the blood, perhaps because he couldn't decide which direction to take. But before he could do anything, shouts echoed at the end of the quay.

"Halt! Stand still! Hands up!"

Three men approached, bicycling hard. They threw their bikes down on the street and began running. Peter dropped Ploeg's legs, pulled the gun out of Ploeg's hand, ran without limping to the Kortewegs' fence, and disappeared behind their house. The men screamed at each other. One of them, wearing a cap and an overcoat, took a shot at Peter and chased after him.

Anton felt his mother's warmth beside him.

"What was that? Are they shooting at Peter? Where is he?"

"Out in back."

With wide eyes Anton watched everything. The second man, who wore a Military Police uniform, ran back to his bicycle, jumped on, and rode away at full speed. The third, who was in civilian clothes, slid down the other side of the embankment and crouched on the towpath, holding a gun with both hands.

Anton dove below the windowsill and turned around. His

mother had disappeared. At the table the silhouette of his father was a little more bent than before, as if he were praying. Then Anton heard his mother, in the backyard, whisper Peter's name into the night. It was as if the cold which now streamed into the house emanated from her back. There was no further sound. Anton saw and heard everything, but somehow he was no longer quite there. One part of him was already somewhere else, or nowhere at all. He was undernourished, and stiff now with cold, but that wasn't all. This moment—his father cut out in black against the snow, his mother outside on the terrace under the starlight—became eternal, detached itself from all that had come before and all that would follow. It became part of him and began its journey through the rest of his life, until finally it would explode like a soap bubble, after which it might as well never have happened.

His mother came in.

"Tonny? Where are you? Do you see him?"

"No."

"What should we do? Perhaps he's hiding somewhere." Agitated, she walked outside again and then came back. Suddenly she went to her husband and pulled at his shoulders.

"Will you ever wake up? They're shooting at Peter! Perhaps he's been hit already."

Slowly Steenwijk stood up. Without a word, tall and thin, he left the room. A moment later he returned wearing a scarf and his black bowler hat. As he was about to enter the garden from the terrace, he drew back. Anton could hear that he was trying to call Peter's name, but only a hoarse sound came out. Defeated, he turned back. He came in and went to sit, trembling, on the chair next to the stove. After a few moments he said, "Please forgive me, Thea . . . forgive me . . ." Mrs. Steenwijk's hands wrestled with each other.

"Everything has gone so well until now, and now, at the

end . . . Anton, put on your coat. Oh God, where can that boy be?"

"Perhaps he went into the Kortewegs'," said Anton. "He took Ploeg's gun."

From the silence which followed his words he understood that this was something terrible.

"Did you really see that?"

"Just as those men came . . . Like this . . . as he ran away . . ."

In the soft, powdery light which now hung about the rooms, he acted out a short sprint and, leaning over, pulled an imaginary pistol out of an imaginary hand.

"You don't suppose he . . ." Mrs. Steenwijk caught her breath. "I'm going to Korteweg's right now."

She started to run into the garden, but Anton followed and said, "Watch out! There's another man out there somewhere."

As her husband had done before her, she drew back from the freezing silence. Nothing stirred. There was the garden, and beyond it the barren, snow-covered lots. Anton too stood motionless. Everything was still—and yet time went by. It was as if everything grew radiant with the passage of time, like pebbles at the bottom of a brook. Peter had disappeared, a corpse lay in front of the door, and all about them the armed men remained motionless. Anton had the feeling that by doing something which was within his power but which he could not quite think of, he could undo everything and return to the way they had been before, sitting around the table playing a game. It was as if he had forgotten a name remembered a hundred times before and now on the tip of his tongue, but the harder he tried to recall it, the more elusive it became. Or it was like the time when he had suddenly realized that he was breathing in and out continuously and must make sure to keep doing it or else suffocate—and at that moment he almost did suffocate.