Will

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An extract

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A sudden fall of snow

A sudden fall of snow. It makes me think of the war. Not because of the cold or other discomfort but because of the brief silence the city gets in her clutches. Great sheets of it are coming down now. It's night. I hear the sounds congeal into muffled nothingness. And then a person like me has to go outside, lad. Old or not. I know everyone thinks: soon he'll fall and break his hip. Soon he'll be lying with his paws up in a hospital bed in Sint-Vincentius. And that'll be the end of him then, finally felled by a bacterium that's cultivated mainly in hospitals. It's strange how elderly people get infected with other people's fear. Out of that fear they have themselves shut away in nursing homes, have themselves fed on lukewarm drivel and anodyne pap, a bingo evening of kiss-my-balls and a Moroccan girl at their ass with a piece of toilet paper. Everybody can keep their fear. I've never felt fear, not really, and you can't teach this worn-out ape new tricks. Outside the snow creaks under my lace-up boots. No, none of those classy shoes but my old-fashioned laced boots, which I've treated respectfully for years, had patched up dozens of times and waxed practically every week, walking boots that now let me walk backwards into the world of time. A few flakes are still swirling down. Recently I saw a blown-up photo of snowflakes in one of the newspapers in the reading room at the library. All *pièces uniques*, these snowflakes, worlds constructed by pure mathematics, all just falling at random onto my coat and woollen hat. No, I'm not going to write a poem about it. Nobody reads them anymore and my keg's dry. The snow changes the city, forces her not only into silence but perhaps into reflection, into remembering – for me at least. When it snows I see better. When it snows in the city you know what she really means, what she's lost, what she wants to forget. She gives up the illusion of time gone by.

In front of me the Stadspark lies gleaming in white. I wait, shut my eyes for a moment. The yellow light of the street turns blue, as blue as the painted glass of the old gas lamps. Imagine a city with almost no light. A faint blue glow in the streets, testament to a terror of the fire that might fall from the sky. Any of us lucky enough to have a torch with us on night duty saw light as a privilege that wasn't the business of any German, wartime or not. It was dark enough already, after all. I remember it made the Germans furious, not being able to get that under control. They had to threaten idiotic fines and eventually the death penalty before the city's residents began to be a bit less nonchalant about what they did with their light. I've seen Feldgendarmes fly into a rage when they saw us using unhooded torches. Sabotage! And this... and that. Back at the nick our inspector looked at us: 'Come on, lads... Keep it serious.' No reprimand, we had to keep it serious and that was

it. Anyhow, the Stadspark bathing in dim blue light, that's where we were. But I turn right. I slowly walk into the Quellinstraat. Your great-grandfather no longer sees shop windows. I look at the city the way she really is, a naked woman with white fur round her shoulders, the kind that one surgeon after another can't keep his paws off: a better bosom, then another face. Magnificent buildings have been flattened here, office blocks have gone up in their place. Did you know there used to be a grand hotel on the corner of the Keyserlei, close to the opera? Built by a German back before the fourteen-eighteen war. Ever learn anything at school about Peter Benoît? Probably not, which is fine by me. They used to teach you names and dates; now they act as if that was a mistake. But there's not a cat, then or now, who'll give you the whack round the ear that history really is. The bastard thing is that it never stops, not really. It goes on and on. Peter Benoît is a street-name these days. When I was at school we virtually had to go down on our knees to him. 'He taught our people to sing.' A true hero, in other words. There was a statue of him, the once-worshipped composer, right across from the opera house, surrounded by what people used to call Camille's swimming pool, named after a mayor that you'll certainly never have heard of and I actually only vaguely remember myself. The maestro, the man who once gave his people singing lessons and who stood there immortalized in bronze, looked out over a pool that was mainly for drunks to piss in. The statue's been relocated, the so-called swimming pool demolished and as for the grand hotel, where during the Second World War smart German officers drank aperitifs with their sweethearts, there's now a concrete monster towering over not very much. So was it better in the old days, granddad? I can already hear you thinking that. Incidentally, should we ever see each other again, should the family that I helped to create and that now wants nothing to do with me allow it, I'm certain you'll call me 'grandpa'. The word 'granddad' is dying out. But of course it wasn't any better in the old days. It was just as bad. Imagination is everything. In the beginning there wasn't the word and it certainly wasn't with God. In the beginning was the image of darkness, don't you forget that. I stop for a moment in the middle of the street. Two big black banners hang on a building that no longer exists. Each has two runes like bolts of lightning. I'm standing outside the headquarters of the Flemish SS. Those uniforms – we coppers were crazy about them. One of my colleagues got into trouble for failing to salute a crackpot in black. It wasn't even a German, although obviously he'd have preferred to have first seen the light of day in say BimBamBavaria. Grandstanders. So many different uniforms. You couldn't make head or tail of it. When to salute and when not? I swear it often made me grind my teeth. Some of those poseurs had zero respect; for folk like that I might as well have been standing there in the buff. At the end of the street I turn right. It must be about four in the morning. Still absolute silence, still the snow falling and not so much as a cat to be seen. Apart from a drug addict anyhow, asking me for a euro. Kiss my ass, I say. Hey, old man, he drawls. I look deep into his red-rimmed eyes and tell him I'm already gnawing at his soul like a hellhound full of tapeworm and he'd better make his getaway before he's all mine. Your great-grandfather eats riffraff like him for breakfast, you know that? You don't believe me? You will. More's the pity, perhaps. Who can say. A quick recce. To my right, at the end of the Keyserlei, is the central station, the railway cathedral known as the Middenstatie, although nobody calls it that any more. To my left, on the corner of the Keyserlei and the Frankrijklei, is Café Atlantic and above it Hotel Weber, the headquarters of the Feldkommandatur. All those men in field grey swarmed inside there, triumphant at first, dragging themselves from one swank dinner to the next, always received with due respect, their boss for example bending over a folder of pen drawings of our city, offered to him as a gift by a mayor who winked like an owl on sedatives... All that carry-on, and within only about three years they were playacting their own past triumph as much as anything, since they must have been all too well aware that their so-called thousand year Reich was already into injury time by then. Now I turn right, down the Vestingstraat. It's cold. I'm about twenty. Fifty metres ahead is the main police station for the sixth district, my district. Someone behind me calls out, 'Wilfried!' That's not really my name, but I'll explain that to you later. Lode, name of Metdepenningen, catches up with me and slaps me on the shoulder. Does his name mean anything

to you? It might. But I'm not going to lay all my cards on the table at once. Keep reading and everything will become clear. 'Freezing my balls off, mate.' Lode slips, almost twists his ankle – I only just manage to grab him by the elbow – and curses. We've recently finished our training together. Just three months of listening to bullshit and we were auxiliary constables. What it came down to was that we had to pay attention to anyone with a stripe more than we had and keep our uniforms clean. During those months I watched Lode grimly suck his pencil and stare at the blackboard. Every time a question was asked he raised his hand. An eager beaver, for sure; an attractive young man, too. Pitch-black hair, mischievous smile, son of a butcher just behind the Astridplein. He was the one who got our friendship started. The sort of guy who after a week declares that you're mates for life. 'You teach me something new every day...' I can still hear him say it. Smack at the moment we're starting to go up those couple of steps to the nick, two Feldgendarmes stride out. They look at us and one of them bellows, '*Sofort mitkommen!*' Some clichés are simply true. All those Germans in uniform spoke like that. So we do, we go with them, knowing by then that there's no other choice. Normally we needed to report for duty before receiving our orders, but when a Feldfucker bellows, you follow. We step into the Pelikaanstraat and head south. Lode and I walk behind the two uniformed supermen in complete silence, like two punished children. The Germans have been here barely seven months and it's as if they've had the game to themselves for years. The city has laid herself down in front of those men with her legs wide open. There are rules for everything. Pedestrians going from the Middenstatie to the Meir have to walk on the right, people wanting to go in the other direction are supposed to take the left side of the pavement, and woe betide you if you push against the current by accident. If anyone had predicted such a thing in the years before the war, we'd all have rolled about, hiccoughing away our guffaws in foaming beer. But one squeak from the master race and everyone does as they're told. In fact they're pleased. Order at last! We cross the street and go under the railway line into the Kievitswijk. Two streets further on we stop at a house with a flaking front wall. One of the Feldgendarmes shakes the powdery snow from his coat and knocks forcefully at the front door. The second one glances at us with a look of 'you're about to see something now'. But nothing happens. The knock actually seems to have made the house quieter. Then the fist hammers on the door again. This time we hear a bit of noise. Somebody comes down the stairs whimpering in a language I don't understand. The door creaks open. Through the gap we see an ominous face with big eyes. He gets the front door slammed into his head as the pair of them shove it further open. 'Chaim Lizke?' one of the two bellows. We hear mumbling. The Germans step briskly into the hallway and one of them gestures to us to stay outside and shuts the door. 'Evading the labour draft, most likely,' I whisper. Lode says nothing. He stamps his feet to drive out the cold. It's his bad luck that he can't afford the sturdy laced boots I have on my feet. You need to know that the supply of uniforms at the time was 'a magpie nest', as they say in this city. Those with money for enough textile coupons looked better than most. It was one more thing that drove the Germans crazy. A few years later we all had to buy new uniforms they'd designed. That made things even worse, since by then nobody besides a few of the inspectors was in a position to purchase the stuff. We all tried to wear something that at least looked good from a distance and hoped we wouldn't catch it in the balls from this one or that one. Meanwhile there's pandemonium in the house. Shouting and wailing. We hear children shriek. A cupboard falls over. Someone thunders down the stairs. More shrieking. But the orders bellowed in German are loud and clear above it all. The door swings open again and there they stand, the Lizke family. Five half-dressed children of between four and twelve, a weeping woman with a headscarf pulled lopsidedly over her coiffure and the father of the family, staring at the floor as blood seeps from his swelling ear. An array of Israelites, Angry Beard would mock. You'll be meeting him later in this story. I'm going to tell it to you like it is: I've no idea what those people stirred in their cooking pot, but the result did not make too good an impression. They reeked.

Now, it also needs to be said: sometimes I almost keeled over when I saw Lode. That lad could stink of blood and entrails – it was indescribable. I'm sensitive to smells, always have been. My father used to say I had the nose of a pregnant ewe. Funny, of course, but I could have smashed his head in every time he let that one slip, usually at a party with plenty of sozzled listeners.

One of the Feldgendarmes beckons us over and points at a piece of paper, underlining an address with his gloved finger: Van Diepenbeekstraat. That's where we need to go and they don't know how. Lode avoids my look, as if he's not there. The street isn't too far from where I live. Along the railway and then back under the bridge on the Van den Nestelei? I nod at the Germans. It's an address is in the seventh district, not our area, but I'm not stupid enough to tell them that. So here we go. The two of us in front with one of the Germans alongside; behind us the foreigners and the other Feldfucker. The woman goes on crying while her husband murmurs gentle words of encouragement, in Polish I think, but it could be Hebrew or whatever. The Feldgendarme hisses something and we hear him give the man a clout. There you go – all the kids sobbing again. I'd have set about it quite differently, Lode too I suspect, but what are we in all this? City guides for all weathers. It's very slippery now, the snow no longer creaks underfoot and it's turned the streets into skating rinks. The Germans are attempting to set a pace that a family with little ones simply can't match. One child after another falls on its bum. Another stop, another bellow, another kick, even more crying. Lode is still saying nothing. I watch his face tense. Looking back, it makes me think of the sea. At that point I'd never seen the sea, but when I went there later and lay on the beach, nibbling at a waffle and pretending the experience was thoroughly worthwhile, I saw a family with numerous progeny beat a sudden retreat, with all its bags and deck chairs and parasols and all the children hysterical, faces red as tomatoes. The father exploded. He dragged one of his youngest children across the sand while carrying one of his daughters under his other arm and his wife had a child in either hand too, looking with embarrassment at the angry faces of bystanders. I swear I saw it snow then, at a temperature of thirty degrees. And I'm certain I heard someone bellow something in German. '*Wier zind bald daar*,' I say to one of the Feldgendarmes. Mangled German, I know, but I'm so sick of the whole ridiculous situation by this point that I make use of their language for the very first time, if only in an attempt to moderate the rising anger a little, because it doesn't do anyone any good, it's really not going to scare these Israelites into skating like crazy. It's true, too, what I said: we're almost there. We've just turned into the Van Diepenbeekstraat. 'That lady and those children must be evading the labour draft as well, right?' Lode whispers. His vocal cords are trembling. 'Kiss my ass, kid, really. Is that any way to behave?' I don't say anything. What am I supposed to say? He's telling me something I know. But we go along, we walk with them; dutiful and spruce, we accompany that reeking rabble to an address on a scrap of paper. The moon comes out and makes the ice on the streets gleam like silverware. And then it happens. One of the children, a little chap of about twelve, pulls free of his father's hand and dashes ahead. He races past us. I don't know why. We hear the father bellow. The Feldgendarme walking beside us does nothing for a few seconds. He's as surprised as we are by the little fellow hurrying over the ice on his thin legs like a newborn foal that's only just managed to stand. It's not five seconds before he slips over. Even before he can scrabble to his feet the Feldgendarme catches up with him and gives the lad such a kick in the ass... Unbelievable. We see him slide across the ice like a sledge until he smashes headfirst into a lamp post and lies there. The Germans split their sides, and it would indeed be a comical sight, were it not that the mother lets out a howl as if someone is twisting a serrated knife in her stomach. She collapses. Her husband clasps his hands together, weeping, and raises them in the air as if the Almighty with a burning sword might restore order at

his request or at least be dragged out of standby mode by that gesture and watch what's going on down here. '*Aufstehen!*' comes the command, to both the mother and the boy ahead of us. The German at the front is about to go over to him, but Lode is quicker. It's as if he's wearing skates, he's that fast. He reaches the spot, kneels down and curls his whole body around the boy like a cocoon, like a snail's shell made out of muscle. He doesn't let go, not even at a prod from the still smiling Feldgendarme who says, rather quieter now, '*Schon gut.*' The German jabs him again, then kicks Lode's backside almost playfully. Lode bellows: 'Suck my balls, you bastard!' You can tell from his voice that he's crying now too. I can see part of his face, bright red, his beautiful pomaded black hair falling in shafts over the boy's face, his white helmet lying a metre away upside down in the snow like a yawning chamber pot. The German loses his sense of humour, curses and reaches for his truncheon. Before I know what's happening, my hand shoots out and my fist clamps like a vice around the Feldgendarme's wrist. We look at each other, the German and me. What saved me there, lad, were those few seconds of astonishment on the face of the Feldfucker. He can't take in the fact that this is happening in this laughable country they've occupied with almost no trouble at all. In those few seconds he can't absorb it, in this city they've sat upon with their fat asses. A stupid brat like me in a ridiculous uniform squeezing his wrist and looking him straight in his arrogant mug is a scene playing out on a different planet. Okay, so I let him go and he does nothing. He carries on staring while his companion yanks the mother onto her feet, holding the children off. The father of the family looks at me and Lode as I pick his helmet out of the snow, put my hand on his shoulder and gently help him up with the boy in his arms. He watches me brush snow off the weeping Lode and sees Lode's fingers wipe the blood from his son's forehead and then pull the lips of the boy's half-open mouth into a pout as if he's about to give a drowning child mouth-to-mouth. Then the boy's eyes open a little and Lode gives a deep sigh as he presses that spindly body still closer. He doesn't want his helmet. Without saying a word or looking at us, he strides off with the boy in his arms and his head proudly raised and we follow him, all of us silent, including the Germans, like in a family quarrel when the drunken father emerges from his boisterous intoxication and looks at the havoc with a suddenly paralysed voice. Even two colleagues of ours, who are waiting at the entrance to the old army bed depot, the final destination of this wild hike, say nothing when we arrive. They've seen none of what happened, although they probably heard the bellowing. They stand there pale and stiff at the sight of Lode without a helmet and with that child in his arms, like the resurrected and probably now less than famous Hollywood hero Errol Flynn, and it even makes them forget to salute the Germans. Before being dragged inside with his family, the father carefully takes his son out of Lode's arms, looks into my comrade's eyes and murmurs something. And then they're gone, swallowed by the hollow darkness that prevails in the building, as if they never existed. We're left standing outside, Lode and me. It would be better simply to make ourselves scarce, but my mate doesn't feel like doing that yet. He swallows, neatens his hair, takes his helmet out of my hands and then calmly asks the guards whether they've got any cigarettes on them. We smoke while it haltingly starts to snow again. One of the guards, a copper of about thirty with a bushy moustache, known to everyone as Swivel-Eyed Gust because his eyes turn in all directions after the downing of five glasses of stout, says the whole lot of them shut up in here will be put on a train for Limburg tomorrow, Sint-Truiden to be precise. No one asks what's going to be done with them there. 'And I've got to travel on the train with them,' Swivel-Eyed Gust adds. 'Quite a job, that'll be. Anyhow, I get a few extra cents for it, so I'm not complaining.' Lode draws the smoke deep into his lungs and asks how much. 'Forty-five francs,' Gust answers. 'That's not bad money,' says Lode, pitching his stub into the snow.