

Author's Note

I originally wrote the chapter that follows to flesh out how Ania Brandt became Ania Grabarek. It was a challenge to figure out how she would have ended up with her friend's papers, since I knew she would never have stolen them, so the real Ania Grabarek had to die, but how? Perhaps she could gift her papers to her friend on her deathbed? If not, how would Ania think to take them in her grief? These are the kinds of puzzles novelists are sometimes forced to solve.

When I came across a reference to the many refugees who died in the bombing of Dresden, I knew I had found my answer. In the chaos and horror of the moment, Ania Grabarek and her son could perish, while Ania Brandt and her boys could survive. But what about the papers? How could they remain intact? My research guided me through various horrific but plausible possibilities.

However, the more I read about the bombing, the more awful the task I had set for myself became. The accounts I read were so ghastly and tragic that I found it difficult to sit down and inhabit such moments. And anyway, what could I possibly contribute to the vivid stories already told by those who were there—to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, for example, or Victor Klemperer's diary?


Even more complicated was the fact that the firebombing of Dresden had ►

Author's Note (*continued*)

become a political touchpoint, sometimes held up by right-wing nationalists as a kind of counterpoint to the suffering of Jews and other groups in concentration camps. In writing *The Women in the Castle*, I tried very hard to avoid being influenced by any sense of what I should or shouldn't write, especially on account of any subject being "owned" by a certain cultural or political group, but this gave me pause. I certainly didn't want my story to be read in this light, and the chapter I wrote was so sad, so totally dark I almost couldn't bear to read it.

When I showed it to my editor, she agreed; it was too much and felt out of keeping with the more restrained pathos of my novel, so it never became part of the finished book.

However, I have spoken to a few readers who mentioned that they would love a fuller understanding of how Ania Brandt took on her friend's identity (it is briefly explained on page 269). But for those of you who would appreciate a more detailed picture, I have chosen to include the additional chapter here.

I hope you will read it with a generous ear, and know that I don't think it is quite up to its own task. 

Additional Chapter

February 13, 1945

PEOPLE SHE LOVES always die on Ania's birthday. She tells herself this is because she has an old soul. A strong soul, like a freight train, strong enough for the dead to hang on to. But now there are so many clinging to her they nearly bring her to a stop.

When the day begins, it promises to be a good one. They have reached Dresden, "Florence on the Elbe," a city thought to be safe from Allied bombings on account of its lack of heavy industry, its International Red Cross station, its famous beauty and culture. People say Winston Churchill has a favorite aunt who lives here, or that the Allies are preserving its lovely Art Nouveau apartment houses, Baroque palaces, and spacious villas to become their capitol after the war. Who knows? In any case, it is the city Ania has, for all these many miles, been walking toward.

The weather is fine—almost clear for the first time in weeks. When the sun flashes between the clouds, it is warm enough to feel on your cheeks. They stop and turn their faces upward, absorbing the rays like flowers storing up the sun. The day is *Fasching*, the German holiday of Shrove Tuesday, and despite the war, Dresden is celebrating. On the streets, ►

Additional Chapter *(continued)*

children play games and wear homemade masks. There is an improbable whiff of joy, even recklessness, in the air.

“Here it is,” the other Ania says, smiling, as they approach the famous buildings at the city’s center. “Your birthday present!” She makes a sweeping gesture that includes the beautiful Frauenkirche, the Johanneskirche, the Semperoper.

Of course, the city is packed with refugees like themselves. Rumor has it there are no beds in the shelters. The train station is already full and a new regulation decrees that the ration cards of nonresidents will not be filled. But the women are not deterred. There are still National Socialist Welfare groups doling out soup, and when was the last time either of them received rations anyway?

Ania waits with the children in one of the city parks as the other Ania tries to find them a place to sleep. The boys play for the first time in a long while, skipping pebbles off a tree trunk, and even Pietre, so spindly and weak, hurls the small stones with unusual energy.

When the other Ania returns, she is smiling, flushed with exertion. She has found them a place to stay—Quakers have opened a hundred cots in a church basement—and she has secured three, one for herself and Pietre, one for Wolfgang and Anselm, and one for Ania. And, even better, she has a real birthday present for Ania: tickets to the Sarrasani

Circus. A famous show of tightrope walkers, dancing Lipizzaner horses, tigers who leap through rings of fire. Incredibly, it has continued its shows throughout the war. They will go tonight and sit in an audience of two thousand. The boys are beside themselves with delight! The other Ania's plain face is made beautiful by happiness, and Ania feels the stiff and rusty mechanism of her own heart crack and swell.

AT EIGHT O'CLOCK, a time when they would usually feel half dead with exhaustion, the women find themselves drinking warm glasses of *Glühwein* and tucked into a row of balcony seats. Ania will remember this in years to come as, perversely, one of the happiest hours of her life: the glittering lights, the smell of animals and unwashed human beings, incense and candles. And the show! The troupe of acrobats walks the ring with their balancing poles, forming a delicate pattern, the trapezist swoops through the smoky air in a cloud of silk and feathers, the horses—such magnificent creatures!—are white and blond with long, decadent manes, the twitching of their tails finely tuned to the music of the band. There is a promise to it all—a reminder of possibilities beyond mere survival. A reminder of music, fantasy, and art. Beside her, in a moment of pure childish pleasure, Wolfgang reaches out and clasps her hand. ►

Additional Chapter *(continued)*

And then the first siren blares, followed by moments of confusion: the Lady Lindstrom on her high wire looks down, hesitates, foot extended. Some conferring, and then with a nod from the conductor, the music, which has faltered, resumes and the show continues. The audience sighs with relief, the triumph of art over reality is confirmed. The Germans are used to deferring to authority, and, for once, the authorities have come down on the side of beauty.

The refugees from the east are less certain though, stirring and glancing about for the exits, even though few actually leave. Everyone is focused on the acrobat in the spotlight, taking her delicate, improbable steps. When she reaches the other side, the applause is tremendous.

Then a second siren sounds and the ringmaster announces that they are evacuating the big top per the instructions in the program.

No one panics. They are all accustomed to air raids. The deadening return of reality descends, and the audience pushes down the stairs. There is some jockeying to avoid the dog cellar, which smells horrible, but basically everyone goes where directed. Ania, Ania, and their boys are ushered into a damp corner of the scenery storage hall, behind a wooden board painted with a ghoulish gypsy face, the

mouth cut into an open cackle, large enough for a man to climb through. *I'm glad we missed that act*, the other Ania says, gesturing at this. *Mama*, Pietre says, clutching his mother's hand, white-faced. *I don't like it*. Ania is amazed that a two-dimensional set piece still has the power to frighten him after all the real horrors he has lived through.

The other Ania pulls her son close, stroking his fine hair: *What's not to like about a giant laughing gypsy face?* she jokes, and the boy snuggles against her like a much younger child.

From above ground, they hear the tremor and boom of bombs dropping—so this is not simply another false alarm. The screaming whoosh of an incendiary followed by a nearby explosion turns the cellar silent. People look at one another wide-eyed.

From the dog cellar comes a woeful, frightened howl. Ania has not been in an underground air raid shelter since Aunt Gudrun's flat in Essen. On the road, there were bombings, attacks on bridges and train tracks and other pieces of infrastructure, but no shelters. The atmosphere here is calmer but more claustrophobic. At least on the road there was some illusion of control—how fast you ran, what ditch you dove into, how accurately you gauged where the falling bomb would hit . . . here you were entirely in the hands of fate. ►

Additional Chapter *(continued)*

Around eleven P.M. an all clear sounds. Warily, the audience makes its orderly way out of the subterranean warren. The circus itself has not been hit, but all around them the buildings are on fire. People flushed out of their homes wander the streets, clutching random belongings, and the crackle and rasp of flames is pierced by the cries of frightened animals—circus horses tied to fences and trees, tigers roaring from their cages.

Dresden, the supposedly invincible city, has been hit. It is oddly difficult to process. A building down the street is ablaze, burning curtains stream out the windows on the first floor and fly off into the wind. The top floors are like the head of a candle, a swollen pointed flame.

Across the river in the Altstadt, there is a massive inferno, much more intense than the patches of fire on this side, but Ania and Ania do not know this yet. Ash blows everywhere. Dazed, they try to decide whether it's best to head for the church basement, where they have secured beds for the night, or to abandon the city and head for the outskirts. Cleanup brigades have begun to emerge, providing the illusion that all this destruction is within the bounds of some plan: a possibility that the authorities have considered and now intend to address.

The other Ania wants to go to the shelter. It is not far, and they are

exhausted. Obviously, the bombing is over. If there are no fires on the block, she suggests, they should sleep there while they can.

Ania is not so sure. Fire has always scared her. How many nights have they spent in open fields and meadows in much colder, harsher weather? Wouldn't it be better to walk an hour or so and get away from the city?

In the end, the other Ania prevails. Her fatigue is like a yellow stamp across her face. During their debate, Pietre lays on the ground at her feet and, even amid the chaos, falls asleep. Ania lifts him—he is shockingly light for a boy of eight years.

They find the church untouched by the bombs. Others have made the same calculation and are already settling in for the night. The bombing is over, and if the fire spreads, they will leave. There are about forty people, mostly women. On one side of Ania is a woman with three small children, on the bench across from her, a group of three feral-looking teenage girls speaking Lithuanian and a dignified, elderly couple with their daughter and newborn grandchild.

They have barely settled in when the astonishing roar of an entire bomb squadron descends. There was no siren, or alarm of any kind this time, but the sound is unmistakable, and directly overhead. People startle and sit upright on their beds. Only Pietre— ▶

Additional Chapter *(continued)*

is something wrong with him?— continues to lie still. Before they have time to consider, there are explosions— tremendous, everywhere, one indistinguishable from the next.

The church shakes and blasts of dust escape from the old beams and girders. The women stare at one another. It is too loud to speak. The explosions seem to go on and on—a sea of sound and tremors, chunks of plaster fall around them. Has the church itself been hit? Will it collapse and bury them all under a pile of rubble? The questions are too horrible to consider. Ania holds her boys and the other Ania holds Pietre, and with her face buried in Wolfgang's hair, Ania tries to fill her mind with the sort of thoughts she would like to die thinking. How when Anselm was a toddler, just learning to walk, and they were living in the lager in the south, they would visit the horses at the end of the road, his little hand reaching out, frightened but brave, to feel the softness of the giant animals' muzzles. Or the trip she took with the group of girls from her gymnasium to see the great cathedral in Aachen—how they had laughed, drinking beer and eating chocolate below the eaves of the funny little inn where they had stayed.

It is too loud to talk, but she tries to anyway—*Think of happy things*, she tells her boys, *think of the time we went sledding in the Sauerland*, but she is not

sure they were even old enough to remember this. Happy memories of the last few years do not present themselves readily to her, and her boys stare with wide, unreadable eyes. Thank goodness they can't hear her because she has nothing to offer them.

Finally, the explosions diminish and the two women look at each other without speaking. Pietre coughs—a strange, raspy, choking sound.

The temperature in the cellar has risen. Someone goes to the door to see what is happening above—an older man, a veteran of the first war. He returns with a look of shock. The streets are on fire, he says, a strong wind is blowing. To the south and east there is nothing but flame. Half the church has collapsed, but the entrance is clear.

Now that he says it, they can feel it, clearly—the rising heat. There is general panic as people gather themselves: Should they stay and hope the shelter will protect them? The doors are heavy reinforced steel, the walls stone, but is there enough oxygen? Who knows how long the fires will burn? Or should they venture out and try to weave their way through the damage to safety in the river or at the outskirts of town? This is the decision. More people lift the steel doors to judge for themselves. There is more panic and jostle. Some elect to leave through the breakout wall at the back of the cellar, which connects to the ►

Additional Chapter *(continued)*

basement of the next building and, hopefully, to another after this and so on in a direction they think (or hope?) is away from the fire. Neither this nor running through the burning streets is a viable option for the sick and elderly.

In the chaos, Ania doesn't at first realize that the other Ania has not moved. She remains with Pietre, who is now awake, but still as a mouse, clutching his mother.

You go. The other Ania shakes her head. *We will stay here.*

No! Ania protests—that is impossible. Her conviction deepens as she speaks. They will suffocate here.

Go, the other Ania insists, urgent now. *Leave us—it is better this way.*

Anselm and Wolfgang are already pushing toward the exit along with the others—a growing majority. *Wait!* she calls in their direction but it is impossible to hear and no one is listening anyway.

Go! the other Ania hisses. *Don't make me push you.*

Others have chosen to stay, too—mostly the elderly and sick, a woman alone with three small children. The dignified elderly couple, who, like the other Ania, are pushing their daughter and infant grandchild to leave. The three small children, like Pietre, sit against their mother, still as statues, wide-eyed. None of them cry.

Then, somehow, Ania finds herself at

the door—she does not even know how she got there, was not aware she had moved—but Wolfgang is there, holding it for her, pulling her arm, screaming at her. *We'll come back for you*, she tries to shout over her shoulder in the direction of her friend but she is half outside now and the air is thick with a hot sooty wind that seems to turn the words to ash.

The world up here is bright as day. A building a few blocks down is ablaze, its windows blown out, shards of glass cover the street, reflecting flames. And not just this building but the one beside it, and the one beside that one. Toward the far end of the street, they are all engulfed. Ania can't even make out their shapes, only fire.

Someone shoves her from behind and she begins to run, holding on to her children's hands. *Dear God* repeats itself in her mind as they make their way into the fire. *Dear God*. But it is like speaking to a fellow witness, a being as powerless as she is, as culpable, as dumb.

SOMEHOW, IN THE MORNING, Ania and her boys are still alive. She leaves Anselm and Wolfgang at the Red Cross camp on the outskirts of the city that they stumbled into around three A.M. She is going back to find her friend. *Don't go, Mama*, Wolfgang pleads, but neither OF THE BOYS says the obvious: Ania and Pietre will not be there, even if they are alive. ►

Additional Chapter *(continued)*

With her mind steeled against thought, Ania sets off on what proves to be a gruesome reverse trek. Past husks of buildings, jagged facades, chimneys and support columns rising from great mounds of smoking rubble. Some buildings are still burning. How will she find the church?

Work crews (almost all prisoners of war) clear bodies from collapsed buildings and leave them lined up along the street.

As she nears the shelter, it becomes clear that the path she and her boys cut through the Neustadt the previous night was directly into the fire and then out again. The area around the church is not as badly burned as the area closer to the river. This gives her hope.

And then, there is the street sign. The pole still stands, the metal placard blackened and hanging askew, and there is the church! The roof has caved in, but the facade is remarkably intact. The steel bulkhead door to the shelter is wide open and unobscured by debris. Ania sees this and her heart leaps.

“Do you know where I can find the people from this shelter?” she asks a boy wearing a Hitler Youth uniform, digging through a pile of rubble.

“The people?” he says blankly, as if the question is an unusual one.

“Who were in there!” Ania demands, her lips cracking as she opens them—it

seems forever since she has spoken.

“Where do you send them?”

The boy glances doubtfully at the line of bodies down the block.

“The survivors!” Ania demands, her voice rising.

“We aren’t there yet,” he says inscrutably.

As she looks around for someone else—surely there is a chief of this rescue operation, someone who can illuminate the system for her—she sees a man, a prisoner of war, emerge from the steel doors, carrying a woman in his arms.

Are people still in the cellar? Have the doors only just now been opened? This possibility had not occurred to her. The woman being carried—Ania recognizes with a start—is the young mother with the children, the one who had sat beside her. But where are the children? The woman herself looks unnatural in the prisoner’s arms.

She is dead, Ania realizes with a start.

As she recognizes this, her own legs and arms go limp with dread.

She stands absolutely still, watching the man lay the body on the ground. He is not particularly gentle, but he is not rough either, and as he straightens, he pauses to nudge the woman’s leg closer to the other with his foot. Then he continues toward the cellar and at once Ania understands. The inhabitants are all dead. Not burned, not crushed, but ►

Additional Chapter *(continued)*

suffocated. The shelter was so small, the fire too hot, how could it be otherwise?

The realization spills through her like cold water, down to the ends of her fingers, along her scalp. Her friend. Her dear sweet friend and little Pietre. How could she have let them stay?

The cold is followed by hot—sweat forms on her upper lip and forehead—and for a moment, she thinks she will fall. But then the need to run after the man, to go to her friend, to *save* her—what if she is just sitting there, weakened but alive, waiting—comes over her.

In a moment, she has crossed the rubble and lowered herself through the steel doors into the cellar. She stands in the darkness, fumbling forward, waiting for her eyes to adjust.

The heat is intense.

Her friend is exactly where she left her, Pietre's head in her lap, her hand on his shoulder. The look on her face is almost as if she was sucking in a breath to relay something significant, the ending of one of her stories maybe, the formation of an idea.

Ania drops to her knees before her. She has no tears: they have been sucked dry by the fire. Instead, a great, choking explosion builds in her chest, a kind of cannonball that threatens to detonate.

With a shaking hand, she reaches forward and closes her friend's eyes.

As her hand drops, it catches on the string around her friend's neck, the small


cloth bag she wears under her shirt. Ania knows its contents well: a few cracked photographs, her husband's leather billfold, and their papers—two worn passbooks belonging to Ania and Pietre Grabarek, citizens of Poland. In a moment that she will later try to forget (that in fact she *will* forget until one day very close to the end of her life) some pragmatic, animal part of herself takes charge and gently but efficiently pulls the bag up and out from her dead friend's blouse, and slips it over her head. The feel of her hair—so indifferent to death, just as it was yesterday, or the day before—fills Ania with expanding horror.

Beside her now, the prisoner of war bends to lift little Pietre's body, and Ania scrambles to her feet. She cannot bear to see this small, beloved body laid next to the others on the street. She cannot bear to see his mother laid beside him. Clutching the bag, white-knuckled against her chest, she makes her way out of the shelter and begins to run.

The cannonball of feeling inside her remains though—a great, carefully contained weight that could easily destroy her. She conjures an image of great metal doors, not unlike those of the shelter she has just emerged from, closing over this ball, shutting away these images, this place, and these moments forever. She propels her body forward and makes her way back out ►

Additional Chapter *(continued)*

of the city, up the hill to the camp, and to her boys. But her self—the self she has been to this point does not follow—Ania Fortzmann Brandt is buried below those doors.

And this new self, clutching Ania's papers in her dirty palm, is nothing but a husk, an empty shell waiting to be inhabited. 

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