When Hitler came to power I was in the bath. Our apartment was on the Schiffbauerdamm near the river, right in the middle of Berlin. From its windows we could see the dome of the parliament building. The wireless in the living room was turned up loud so Hans could hear it in the kitchen, but all that drifted down to me were waves of happy cheering, like a football match. It was Monday afternoon.

Hans was juicing limes and making sugar syrup with the dedicated attention of a chemist, trying not to burn it to caramel. He'd bought a special Latin American cocktail pestle that morning from the KaDeWe department store. The shopgirl had lips pencilled into a purple bow. I'd laughed at us, embarrassed at buying such frippery, this wooden shaft with its rounded head that probably cost what the girl earnt in a day.

'It's crazy,' I said, 'to have an implement solely for mojitos!'

Hans put his arm around my shoulders and kissed me on the forehead. 'It's not crazy.' He winked at the girl, who was folding the thing carefully into gold tissue, listening close. 'It's called ci-vi-li-sation.'

For an instant I saw him through her eyes: a magnificent man with hair slicked back off his forehead, Prussian-blue eyes and the straightest of straight noses. A man who had probably fought in the trenches for his country and who deserved, now, any small luxuries life might offer. The girl was breathing through her mouth. Such a man could make your life beautiful in every detail, right down to a Latin American lime pestle.

We'd gone to bed that afternoon and were getting up for the night when the broadcast began. Between the cheers, I could hear Hans pounding the lime skins, a rhythm like the beat of his blood. My body floated, loose from spent pleasure.

He appeared at the bathroom door, a lock of hair in his face and his hands wet by his sides. 'Hindenburg's done it. They've got a coalition together and sworn him in over the lot of them. Hitler's Chancellor!' He dashed back down the corridor to hear more.

It seemed so improbable. I grabbed my robe and trailed water into the living room. The announcer's voice teetered with excitement. 'We're told the new Chancellor will be making an appearance this very afternoon, that he is inside the building as we speak! The crowd is waiting. It is beginning to snow lightly, but people here show no signs of leaving . . .' I could hear the pulse of the chanting on the streets outside our building and the words of it from the wireless behind me. 'We – want – the Chancellor! We – want – the Chancellor!' The announcer went on: '. . . the door on the balcony is opening – no – it's only an attendant – but yes! He's bringing a microphone to the railing . . . just listen to that crowd . . .'

I moved to the windows. The whole south side of the apartment was a curved wall of double casements facing in the direction of the river. I opened a set of windows. Air rushed in – sharp with cold and full of roaring. I looked at the dome of the Reichstag. The din was coming from the Chancellery, behind it.

'Ruth?' Hans said from the middle of the room. 'It is *snowing*.'

'I want to hear this for myself.'

He moved in behind me and I drew his hands, clammy and acidic, across my stomach. An advance party of snowflakes whirled in front of us, revealing unseen eddies in the air. Searchlights stroked the underbelly of clouds. Footsteps, below us. Four men were racing down our street, holding high their torches and trailing fire. I smelt kerosene.

'We – want – the Chancellor!' The mass out there, chanting to be saved. Behind us on the sideboard the response echoed from the box, tinny and tamed and on a three-second delay.

Then a huge cheer. It was the voice of their leader, bellowing. 'The task which faces us. Is the hardest which has fallen. To German statesmen within the memory of man. Every class and every individual must help us. To form. The new Reich. Germany must not, Germany will not, go under in the chaos of communism.'

'No,' I said, my cheek to Hans's shoulder. 'We'll go under with a healthy folk mentality and in an orderly manner instead.'

'We won't go under, Ruthie,' he said in my ear. 'Hitler won't be able to do a thing. The nationalists and the cabinet will keep a tight rein. They just want him as a figurehead.'

Young men were pooling in the streets below, many of them uniformed: brown for the party's own troops, the SA, black for Hitler's personal guard, the SS. Others were lay enthusiasts, in street clothes with black armbands. A couple of boys had homemade ones, with the swastika back to front. They were carrying flags, singing, *'Deutschland, Deutschland über alles'*. I heard the cry, 'The Republic is shit,' and made out from its intonation the old schoolyard taunt – 'Rip the Jew's skirt in two/the skirt is ripped/the Jew did a shit.' Kerosene fumes buckled the air. Across the street they were setting up a stand where the young men could exchange their guttering torches for new-lit ones.

Hans returned to the kitchen, but I couldn't tear myself away.

After half an hour I saw the wonky homemade armbands back at the stand.

'They're sending them around in circles!' I cried. 'To make their number look bigger.'

'Come inside,' Hans called over his shoulder from the kitchen.

'Can you believe that?'

'Honestly, Ruthie.' He leant on the doorjamb, smiling. 'An audience only encourages them.'

'In a minute.' I went to the closet in the hall, which I'd converted into a darkroom. It still had some brooms and other long things – skis, a university banner – in one corner. I took out the red flag of the left movement and walked back.

'You're not serious?' Hans put his hands to his face in mock horror as I unfurled it.

I hung it out the window. It was only a small one.

PART I

RUTH

'I'm afraid, Mrs Becker, the news is not altogether comforting.'

I am in a posh private clinic in Bondi Junction with harbour views. Professor Melnikoff has silver hair and half-glasses, a sky-blue silk tie, and long hands clasped together on his desk. His thumbs play drily with one another. I wonder whether this man has been trained to deal with the people *around* the body part of interest to him, in this case, my brain. Probably not. Melnikoff, in his quietness, has the manner of one who appreciates having a large white nuclear tomb between him and another person.

And he has seen inside my mind; he is preparing to tell me the shape and weight and creeping betrayals of it. Last week they loaded me into the MRI machine, horizontal in one of those *verdammten* gowns that do not close at the back: designed to remind one of the fragility of human dignity, to ensure obedience to instruction, and as a guarantee against last-minute flight. Loud ticking noises as the rays penetrated my skull. I left my wig on.

'It's *Doctor* Becker actually,' I say. Outside of the school, I never used to insist on the title. But I have found, with increasing age,

that humility suits me less. Ten years ago I decided I didn't like being treated like an old woman, so I resumed full and fierce use of the honorific. And comfort, after all, is not what I'm here for. I want the news.

Melnikoff smiles and gets up and places the transparencies of my brain, black-and-white photo-slices of me, under clips on a lightboard. I notice a real Miró – not a print – on his wall. They socialised the health system here long ago, and he can still afford that? There was nothing to be afraid of, then, was there?

'Well, Dr Becker,' he says, 'these bluish areas denote the beginnings of plaquing.'

'I'm a doctor of letters,' I say. 'In English. If you don't mind.'

'You're really not doing too badly. For your age.'

I make my face as blank as I can manage. A neurologist should know, at the very least, that age does not make one grateful for small mercies. I feel sane enough – young enough – to experience loss as loss. Then again, nothing and no one has been able to kill me yet.

Melnikoff returns my gaze mildly, his fingertips together. He has a soft unhurriedness in his dealings with me. Perhaps he likes me? The thought comes as a small shock.

'It's the beginning of deficit accumulation – aphasia, short-term memory loss, perhaps damage to some aspects of spatial awareness, to judge from the location of the plaquing.' He points to soupy areas at the upper front part of my brain. 'Possibly some effect on your sight, but let's hope not at this stage.'

On his desk sits a wheel calendar, an object from an era in which the days flipped over one another without end. Behind him the harbour shifts and sparkles, the great green lung of this city.

'Actually, Professor, I am remembering more, not less.'

He removes his half-glasses. His eyes are small and watery, the irises seeming not to sit flush with the whites. He is older than I thought. 'You are?'

'Things that happened. Clear as day.'

A whiff of kerosene, unmistakable. Though that can't be right.

Melnikoff holds his chin between thumb and forefinger, examining me.

'There may be a clinical explanation,' he says. 'Some research suggests that more vivid long-term recollections are thrown up as the short-term memory deteriorates. Occasionally, intense epiphenomena may be experienced by people who are in danger of losing their sight. These are hypotheses, no more.'

'You can't help me then.'

He smiles his mild smile. 'You need help?'

I leave with an appointment in six months' time, for February 2002. They don't make them so close together as to be dispiriting for us old people, but they don't make them too far apart, either.

Afterwards, I take the bus to hydrotherapy. It is a kneeling bus, one which tilts its forecorner to the ground for the lame, like me. I ride it from the pink medical towers of Bondi Junction along the ridge above the water into town. Out the window a rosella feasts from a flame tree, sneakers hang-dance on an electric wire. Behind them the earth folds into hills that slope down to kiss that harbour, lazy and alive.

In danger of losing their sight. I had very good eyes once. Though it's another thing to say what I saw. In my experience, it is entirely possible to watch something happen and not to see it at all.

The hydrotherapy class is at the fancy new swimming pool in town. Like most things, hydrotherapy only works if you believe in it.

The water is warm, the temperature finely gauged so as not to upset the diabetics and heart fibrillators among us. I have a patch I stick on my chest each day. It sends an electrical current to my

heart to spur it on if it flags. From previous, quietly death-defying experiments, I know it stays on underwater.

We are seven in the pool today, four women and three men. Two of the men are brought down the ramp into the water on wheelchairs, like the launching of ships. Their attendants hover around them, the wheels of the things ungainly in the water. I am at the back, behind a woman in an ancient yellow bathing cap with astonishing rubber flowers sprouting off it. We raise our hands obediently. I watch our swinging arm-flesh. The aging body seems to me to get a head start on decomposition, melting quietly inside its own casing.

'Arms over heads – breathing in – now bringing them down – breathing out – pushing till they're straight behind you – breathe IN!'

We need, apparently, to be reminded to inhale.

The young instructor on the pool edge has a crescent of spiky white hair around her head and a microphone coming down in front of her mouth. We look up to her as to someone saved. She is pleasant and respectful, but she is clearly an emissary bearing tidings – rather belatedly for us – that physical wellbeing may lead to eternal life.

I am trying to believe in hydrotherapy, though Lord knows I failed at believing in God. When I was young, during the First World War, my brother Oskar would hide a novel – *The Idiot* or *Buddenbrooks* – under the prayer book at synagogue so Father would not notice. Eventually I declared, with embarrassing thirteen-year-old certainty, 'Forced love hurts God,' and refused to go. Looking back on it I was, even then, arguing on His terms; how can you hurt something that doesn't exist?

And now, eons later, if I am not careful I find myself thinking, Why did God save me and not all those other people? The believers? Deep down, my strength and luck only make sense

if I am one of the Chosen People. Undeserving, but Chosen still; I am long-living proof of His irrationality. Neither God nor I, when you think about it, deserve to exist.

'Now we're concentrating on legs, so just use your arms as you like, for balance,' the girl says. Jody? Mandy? My hearing aid is in the change rooms. I wonder if it is picking all this up, broadcasting it to the mothers wrestling their children out of wet costumes, to the mould and pubic hair and mysterious sods of unused toilet paper on the floor.

'We're putting the left one out, and turning circles from the knee.'

A siren sounds, bleating on and off. Over at the big pool, the waves are going to start. Children walk-run through the water with their hands up, keen to be at the front where the waves will be biggest. Teen girls subtly check that their bikini tops will hold; mothers hip their babies and walk in too, for the fun. A little boy with red goggles darts in up to his chin. Behind him a slight young woman with hair falling in a soft bob on her cheeks walks calmly forward, shoulderblades moving under her skin like intimations of wings. My heart lurches: Dora!

It is not her, of course – my cousin would be even older than me – but no matter. Almost every day, my mind finds some way to bring her to me. What would Professor Melnikoff have to say about that, I wonder?

The wave comes and goggle-boy slides up its side, tilting his mouth to the ceiling for air, but it swallows him entire. After it passes he's nowhere. Then, further down the pool, he surfaces, gulping and ecstatic.

'Dr Becker?' The girl's voice from above. 'It's time to leave.'

The others are already over near the steps, waiting for the wheelchair men to be positioned on the ramp. I look up at her and see she's smiling. Perhaps that microphone gives her a direct line to God.

'There's ten minutes till the next class but,' she says. 'So no hurry.'

Someone is meting out time in unequal allotments. Why not choose a white-haired messenger, lisping and benign?

Bev has left me a small pot of shepherd's pie in the fridge, covered tight in plastic wrap. It has a sprinkling of pepper on the mashed-potato topping, and it also has, in its perfectly measured single-serve isolation, a compulsory look about it. So I thaw a piece of frozen cheesecake for dinner – one of the advantages of living alone – then fizz a Berocca in a tall glass to make up for it. I'll have to explain myself to Bev when she comes tomorrow.

In bed the cicadas outside keep me company – it's still early. Their chorus coaxes the night into coming, as if without their encouragement it would not venture into this bright place. *What a ni-ight!* they seem to chirrup, *what a ni-ight!* And then we are quiet together.