"Krautlover!"
"Bitch!"
"Traitor! This will teach you!"

The shouts came from behind, from angry people who shoved against Benny and me. No way did we want to get closer, not since we found out what was going on. But the grown-ups behind us kept pressing and we didn’t want to get trampled on. So we braced our backs and planted our feet apart on the brick street. This was as far as we wanted to go.

Benny had led the way to our ringside location. He had heard the commotion first, the shouts that echoed between the row houses on the next block from where we lived. Benny was always in charge. He was my best friend.

We got to Loudon Street out of breath. There must have been a hundred people there, with more on the way. Benny and I elbowed our way through the crowd. We were good at it and never said excuse me. That was the way we did things, Benny and me.

We heard someone scream and saw who did the screaming all at the same time. It was a red-haired woman. And she was held down by two men, while a third one was doing something to her that we couldn’t make out. She had only one slipper on and she tried to bite the tallest man. Bite and scream, that’s what she did.

Jesus, I though, knowing very well I could never say that holy name out loud, this is bad! Benny looked pale and grabbed my arm. The color of his eyes matched his freckles. I had never noticed that before.

* * *

Benny and I had survived the long winter together. If there was heat, we’d go to school in the mornings. We were better off than the little
kids who had to go in the afternoons. We spent our afternoons picking up cinders along the tracks near the rail station and come home with our pockets stuffed with burnables. When we had the whole day off, we'd venture out of town and dig up edible things that were left in fields. We'd take those home, too. But if we found a looking carrot, we'd sit down and eat it right there, real slow-like.

Once at a cattle sale, we sneaked through a fence and found a cow with some milk left in her. We squirted it into a tin can and almost got caught. We laughed and punched each other all the way home. The milk was warm and it tasted so good that we kept it in our mouths as long as we could.

When spring came and we didn't have to stuff our clothes with papers to stay warm, the whole world around us changed. People smiled. "It took five years for spring to come," my dad said, "and now that it's here, everything will be O.K."

O.K. was an expression we learned from the new soldiers. Just by looking at them you could tell they had all kinds of food. Their faces were tanned and round with puffy cheeks. They came from Canada and to them we must have looked a fright, us being so skinny and pale-looking. They brought food with labels we couldn't read. What Benny and I liked best was the fluffy, white bread that looked nothing like the hard, gray loaves we used to get and had to last two people a whole week.

At least, most people.

Benny and I leaned the truth about families in our neighborhood who never looked hungry or poorly dressed. Like Benny's cousin who had leather shoes. These people had connections during the war. They were traitors, black marketeers or women friends of the Nazis.

We hated them. Everybody hated them. For years, they had walked around with their smug, fat faces and fancy clothes. But now that the new army was here, we hardly saw them at all. People were talking about revenge, of doing something ugly to them for the five years they had put us through, for people dying in the streets from hunger, for dads
and brothers trucked away to work in Germany, for the trees we had to
cut down to heat our houses, for pets that disappeared and wound up in
someone's stew, for long soup lines at central kitchens while collaborators
had cheese and eggs delivered to their homes by men in black uniforms.

Revenge was what my dad's best friend kept talking about. He
said somebody had to pay for the fourteen months he had to spend
hiding out in a damp basement and now he had arthritis. He would sit in
our kitchen, pound the table so the teacups rattled in their saucers and
raise his voice. He'd teach a few people a lesson they would never forget.
Damned collaborators.

* * *

The classy, red-haired woman on the next block must have been
one of them. Benny and I never knew her name. But we had seen her on
our way to school. She always looked special. People were polite to
her, polite and distant. Her kind was not to be trusted.

Now we hardly recognized it was her who was held down by the
two men in front of her house. Not until we saw her chin and her colored
lips, twisted and trying hard to get words out.

The tall man, whose skin seemed too tight for his bony face,
looked straight at me. He didn't live in our neighborhood, but he acted
like he owned it. He had a strange kind of smile and one of his lower
teeth was missing. He shook red hair off a pair of scissors. There was
more on the street.

To say that he cut the woman's hair wouldn't be right. Even with
two guys holding her down, she wouldn't sit still. So all he could do is
chop, one bite at a time. At first I didn't dare look, but when I finally
glanced past the open circle of her mouth and her tightly closed eyes, I
noticed her hair was not only red but several other colors. Benny kept
pinching my elbow without realizing he hurt me. I looked sideways and
saw him look at the woman's legs, the only part of her not held down.
With her slippered foot, she kept kicking the man with the scissors. With her knees spread and her dress up, I felt awkward looking at her, but someone behind giggled like it was funny.

Benny and I had seen street fights before, with people getting bloodied, but this was worse. The woman didn't have a chance. Except for her husband, standing in the living room window, everyone had it in for her. "Hey, slut," a high voice behind us shouted, "you've had this coming for a long time."

I began to feel strange inside. Like the time my mom told me our neighbor had died and my mouth wanted to smile. I knew I wasn't supposed to feel good seeing this woman get hurt. But now I wasn't so sure anymore. Whatever a slut was, didn't sound like a nice thing to be. If she had been in with the Nazis, well, she ought to pay for it.

What Benny and I saw was so real. It was not at all like a school play where people only acted. We could almost touch the men who were working on the woman. They were using clippers now, just like barbers. But the woman got so vicious with them and moved around so much that the men finally gave up.

"That will do," the tall man snarled. And with his one-sided smile he looked around and held up his tools. "Now what do you have to say?"

The woman bristled louder than two fighting cats, then jumped up. Her eyes looked for the door. You'd almost think she was drunk the way she moved toward it.

"You're gonna pay for this, you rotten, dirty..."

Her words disappeared as the man behind the door pulled her in. We laughed about the tufts of hair that looked like little islands on her almost bald head. What a sight she was.

On the sidewalk, a man with huge hands made a choking gesture. "Sure hope her husband knows she had someone on the side," he grinned. The cigarette stuck to his lower lip swayed with each word. This time, everybody laughed.

"Who's next?" someone behind us yelled.
"Just follow us."

The tall man wiped his scissors, then pulled a wrinkled piece of paper out of his coat and looked at it. He walked away with long strides. His helpers, much younger than him, took off behind him. Benny and I made sure we followed ahead of everybody else. Now that we knew what to expect, we thought we could cope with the next hair cutting episode without going funny inside.

A few blocks away, the men stopped at a walkway between two neatly trimmed hedges. The man checked his paper and told his helpers that this was the right place. They banged their fists on the shiny, varnished door of a ground-level apartment. They didn't bother to ring the bell. When a woman in a flowered dress opened the door, the mob who had caught up with us shouted, "We want your daughter."

They seemed to know about the daughter.

One of the helpers stuck his foot between the door and the door sill to keep it open. The older woman faced them, her cheeks and neck blotchy with red spots.

"No, please, no. Not my Anje!" Her chin trembled as she spoke. And then it happened.

A blonde girl in sandals came to the door to check what was happening.

"Hey Benny," I whispered. "I know her. She goes to our church."
She couldn't have known what the men wanted, because she didn't look one bit scared.

"Come on in, mom."

"You're sure, Anje?" the woman looked bewildered but quickly snuck into the safety of her home followed by one of the men who came out a minute later with a fancy chair with a padded seat.

We could feel the crowd behind us getting excited. And still, they were strangely quiet. It was eerie. The girl looked around but didn't seem puzzled about all the people at her doorstep.

"I think I know what you want," she said, spotting the scissors in
the tall man's hands. Then she sat down and folded her arms. She didn't even look down. She just sat there, quiet-like.

The tall man raised his scissors. Like an experienced barber he began to cut. He didn't even need helpers to hold her down. Long strands of hair tumbled down, quickly. But the man's lips showed a strange twitch. Somehow the fun had gone out of it. He was no longer in control.

Somebody passed him the clippers and he silently exchanged them for the scissors. With long swoops, starting at the back of her neck, the clippers took the last remnants of her hair. Soon, there was nothing left to take off, but the tall man looked as though there should have been.

I swallowed hard. Benny, next to me, looked like the time we tried smoking cigarettes and got sick. Of all the people there, not even one shouted "krautlover" or "bitch." Somebody should have talked to get rid of the silence, but no one did. My throat felt as if a stone was stuck in it and couldn't decide whether to go up or down.

When the man was done, the girl stood up. Her face now looked like a skinny boy who had been deloused. Her eyes looked big, sad and warm all at the same time. And when she turned toward the door, the back of her pale head could have had the same big eyes for all I knew.

That's all I kept seeing.

Why don't you just disappear? I wished inside. It would make all of us feel better.

Then, as she opened to the door, the girl turned around and her big, sad eyes looked with one sweep at all of us. What she said then, she said in a kind of whisper, but Benny and I heard it clearly and I think everyone else did, too. "I just want you to know I'm still engaged to my German. Some day we hope to be married."

* * *

I remember standing behind the green hedge for a long time, staring at the closed door. She was someplace inside. The chair stood
alone on the walk and the wind kept pushing blonde hair around its legs. The people behind me had followed the tall man somewhere else. Even Benny was gone.

The sun made strange circles of light in front of my eyes as I walked home. My teeth pressed so hard against each other that even my neck hurt.

When I got home and told my mom what had happened, she cried, too.