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Stay Away from Gretchen

An impossible love story

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Sample Translation

by Alice Thornton

ONE.

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“We’re live in two!” the production manager calls through the studio.

The cameramen put on their headsets.

“Where’s Tom’s Coke? And Sabine with the tie?”

Anchorman Tom Monderath takes a seat behind his desk.

“We’re still working on the Home Secretary – we might have things come in while you’re on air that you’re going to have to announce. I’ll let you know through your earpiece,” says the producer over the studio loudspeaker.

Tom nods, pulls his straw towards him, sips the ice-cold Coke and mumbles the opening lines to himself:

“Records are being broken as temperatures reach a sweltering peak. We’ve also had some nasty storms today which have been paralysing large parts of Germany. We must all remember to be careful during this heatwave, especially those of us who are elderly or vulnerable...”

“Bring camera one a little closer, number two can do its usual run,” calls the producer to the cameramen, and over the studio loudspeakers rings: “Make-up back here please!”

“Live in one!”

“...after the highest temperatures of the year were recorded yesterday, many hospitals experienced...”

Sabine, Tom’s assistant, adjusts his tie over his shirt with unusually shaky hands.

“What’s up with you?” he asks quietly, covering his mike with his hand.

“I’ve... my father... I just found out my dad...”

Sabine swallows the rest of her words and turns away quickly. The glass of Coke tips over. Little brown splodges now decorate Tom’s white shirt.

“Ah, shit.” His assistant helps him out of his blazer. The production manager rushes past the cameramen, clutching a spare shirt.

“Thirty!”

“I’m so sorry...” stammers Sabine.

“Oh no, don’t worry about it. Is there anything I can do for you?” asks Tom, slipping into his fresh shirt and stuffing it into the front of his trousers.

“Fifteen! Everyone get out the frame!”

The intro music starts playing.

Sabine shakes her head and straightens Tom’s tie.

“Last ad now, guys... All on in ten...”

“Thanks,” says Tom, patting her shoulder and taking a seat.

Sabine jumps out the frame.

“And five, four, three, two...”

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. The following are the most important news items from 5th July 2015.”

“Good evening, my lovely boy,” replies eighty-four-year-old Greta on her armchair from nine kilometres up the Rhine, toasting him with a cup of peppermint tea. “Not too bad, that tie you’re wearing today. But I just don’t know why your hair has to be so short. You really think that suits you?” she picks up her plate from her

dinette trolley, which is just as old as her flat, now much too big for her, and takes a bite of her liverwurst sandwich.

“...NATO operations in Ukraine. The West can no longer tolerate the war in Ukraine and Putin's strong-arming...”

“Putin, that womaniser!” she says, picking a piece of pickle out of her teeth, listening passively to American presidential candidate Clinton warn of the increasing military power of the Chinese. She also pays no attention to the fact that Greek Prime Minister Tsipras wants to negotiate debts, because, just like she does every evening, she is listening out for one thing and one thing only: the special closing phrase with which the presenter bids her farewell.

“August Bebel once said: ‘Only he who knows the past can understand the present and shape the future.’ And with that I bid you good night.”

“The same goes to you, my darling.” Greta switches off the television and pushes the dirty dishes on the serving trolley towards the kitchen. At the beginning of the sixties, she moved into this six-unit building that her husband Konrad built directly on the Rhine by the Port of Cologne. This is where her son Thomas grew up and where she has lived alone in her one hundred and sixty square metres since the sudden death of her husband almost eighteen years ago.

Greta puts the dishes in the dishwasher and thinks of Tom, as her son is usually referred to as. She can't remember the last time she saw him in person, even though he only lives a few kilometres away from her, right in the centre of Cologne. Of course, he's busy at work, but surely that's no reason never call his old mother.

Greta Monderath picks up her green telephone and says cheerfully into it, “It's Mum! Are you still alive? I wanted to get in touch but you never call, you silly sausage. Hello?” She starts telling him about her day. She'd stayed inside all day because of the heat. She can barely make it through her sentence before she is cut off by a robotic female voice: “Thank you for calling this number.”

Through the living room window, Greta sees dark clouds gathering over the Rhine. She can hear rumbling. “Well, that's not like him. To have disappeared for weeks...”

Lightning flashes over the campsite on the opposite side of the Rhine. Images of a little Tom, hiding under the bed because he was afraid of thunderstorms, come flooding into Greta's mind. She is suddenly alarmed. Thunder crashes. In her pink house dress and slippers, Greta stumbles out of the flat, gets into her 1996 BMW parked in the underground garage, puts it in reverse, turns and speeds off as soon as she reaches the road. Black rain clouds have darkened the summer sky. She turns onto Kölner Straße and pushes hard on the accelerator. She has driven this way a thousand times before, she knows she'll be in the city centre in no more than twenty minutes. But before she can get very far, she is stopped by a traffic jam, just before the bridge to the motorway.

Two ambulances race past her. A fire engine follows. Blue lights cut through the darkness. Rain falls from the sky in a torrent, pelting the roof and hammering against the windscreen.

“What am I supposed to do now? I can't just turn around here, can I?”

The windscreen wiper struggles to push aside the masses of water. The other drivers slowly overtake her in the opposite lane and turn left. The flickering strobe lights reflecting off the raindrops are starting to drive her spare. All she can think about is how to get out of here. Greta makes a move, swerving and driving after the other cars. She does whatever rear lights of the car in front of her tell her to do, turning left like him, then right, and suddenly she ends up on the motorway.

“What do I do? What do I do?” she clutches at the steering wheel with both hands and glances at the sign at the junction.

“Gremberg, Gremberg.”

She knows she has to drive off the motorway to get back to Cologne. An SUV pulls up close behind her, flashes its lights and honks its horn. She turns on the high beams, presses down on the accelerator, doesn't dare let go of the steering wheel to change gears – and drives past the Gremberg junction. At sixty km/h in the second gear.

A blue sign appears in the cone of her headlight: Heumar junction at 1000 metres.

“Heumar. That's where I have to go! Yes!”

A Dutch flower truck pulls up to her left, doesn't overtake, but stays parallel, beeping. Greta stares straight ahead with wide eyes. Stay in your lane and please, for the love of God, don't collide with the lorry, she thinks, and misses the exit back to Cologne.

The white stripes of the lane markings fly towards her, and the beeping finally stops. She doesn't hear the windscreen wipers squealing as they struggle to wipe the now-dry glass, arriving on the A3 and continuing to drive steadily at sixty km/h through the night towards the southeast. She has long forgotten about turning back.

Four hours later, between Aschaffenburg and Würzburg, her car jolts and comes to a stop on an incline. Her petrol tank is empty. Greta hears the rain pattering on the windscreen. After a while, a police siren drowns it out. Blue lights flicker in her rear-view mirror. The driver's door is pulled open.

“What's happened here?” a young patrol officer shines a torch in her face.

She stares back at him and shivers. The policeman reaches over her to the steering wheel, calls for his colleague and then, together, they push the old BMW onto the hard shoulder.

“Take me home, please!”

“And where is home for you?”

Greta thinks. “In Prussian Eylau.”

“And where exactly is that?”

“In East Prussia.”

The young officer asks her to sit in the back seat of the police car and demands she show him her papers. She's got nothing with her.

“What's your name?”

“Schönaich. Greta Schönaich. Born on 7th March 1931.”

“Is there anyone in your family we can contact?”

“My grandparents are waiting for me at home!”

The two policemen exchange a look.

“Is there anyone else? A daughter perhaps, or a son?”

“Yes, I have a daughter.”

“And where does she live?”

Greta looks through him. “My son is on TV.”

“I see,” says the policeman, and he and his colleague drive her straight to the Aschaffenburg hospital in the middle of the night.

TWO.

1939-1945

“We are now at war!” shouted headmaster Schleifer.

Greta Schönaich, who was quite small for an eight-year-old, stood on her tiptoes to look over the heads of the year one girls.

She had just been sitting in the classroom, writing Friday, 1 September 1939 in her best Sütterlin script, when the door of the classroom had been ripped open by a year six boy who had yelled that all the pupils had to line up in the schoolyard immediately on the headmaster's orders. And now, together with all the other pupils of this East Prussian primary school, she stood in line – the boys on the right, the girls on the left – and listened to the headmaster who, after this proclamation, now continued in a quivering voice:

“Children, history is being made today! This is a day you will not forget for the rest of your lives. The Führer has declared that we have been firing back at Poland since 5:45 am. From now on, bomb will be met with bomb!”

What a special day, Greta thought, imitating the older pupils, shouting out cries of joy like them, stretching out her right arm and calling “Sieg Heil.”

To finish off the assembly, they all sang the national anthem together: “Deutschland, Deutschland, über alles, über alles in der Welt...”, “from the Meuse to the Memel, from the Adige to the Belt.”

Rector Schleifer gave the children the rest of the day off school to celebrate.

Greta shouldered her rucksack and skipped across the cobblestones of the market square of her hometown, Preußisch Eylau. She wanted to get home as quickly as possible to tell her family the wonderful news. She heard a muffled thudding that grew louder with every beat. She stopped and saw a Hitler Youth parade marching up the street with swastikas waving to the rhythm of the beating drums. Behind the uniformed kids, her sister Josefine, whom everyone called Fine, walked as the flag bearer of the Jungmädel, and Greta's heart filled with pride. She would have to wait an infinitely long year and a half until she too was ten and would be accepted into the Jungmädelbund. Fine had already been a member for two years.

With her right hand raised, Greta let the marching column pass by and joined in the chant: “The flag is high! Our ranks stand united! The Sturmabteilung marches with a steady and firm step!” She goose-stepped on, happily singing the lines of the Horst Wessel song: “Millions look at the swastika with awe, days of freedom and bread dawn.”

When she got to Gartenstraße on the outskirts of town, where her family's little house stood, she could hear the dull bangs coming from her grandfather's workshop – he was home!

Greta ran across the yard and pulled open the door: “Heil Hitler, Grandpa!” Her voice cracked with excitement.

“I think you mean hello?” replied Ludwig Sabronski, who was sitting at his workbench, hammering a sheet of metal with steady blows, shaping it into circles. “Shouldn't you be at school?”

“We're at war now! We got the day off school to celebrate!”

“War isn't something to celebrate, Gretche,” her grandfather replied grimly, examining the kettle he was holding. “Pass me the file.”

She pushed the stool against the wall, climbed up and reached for the tools: “Which one?”

“The one on the left.”

Greta liked to watch her grandfather work, who at sixty-one was the oldest coppersmith in the village. She was always helping him, too. She was fascinated by all the things he could repair and conjure up from the smallest, most measly scraps of metal. Because he had lost a leg in the Great War and could only move using crutches, he often sent his granddaughter around to the neighbours' with repaired kettles or plates. Greta would then gather up the money he desperately needed to supplement his tiny pension.

“How can Grandpa say that war isn't something to celebrate?” Greta asked her grandmother Guste a little

later. She was helping her peel some potatoes. “You told me that you and Grandpa would never have met if it hadn't been for the war?”

“I met Grandpa in the military hospital. And that's true, without his injury we would never have met. But war still isn't something to celebrate. It brings a lot of suffering to people, you know?” says Granny Guste. She wasn't Greta's real grandmother. Auguste Holloch, whom everyone called Guste, was from Heidelberg and the second wife of Greta's widowed grandfather and thus Greta's step-grandmother. She was nine years younger than her husband, and spent her time looking after the house and the garden. She had raised Greta and Fine as her own children. She'd been doing this even before her stepdaughter Emma, Greta's mother, found work in a textile factory, where she worked sixteen-hour shifts sewing swastika flags and fabrics for the Wehrmacht. Now Emma only really had time to come home to eat and sleep.

“Come, Lord Jesus, be our honoured guest and bless what you have given us,” prayed Grandpa in the evening, when Granny Guste had put the steaming pot of soup on the table.

Greta pressed her hands together in prayer and secretly watched her family: her mother Emma, who looked much older than her twenty-nine years and could hardly keep her eyes open from exhaustion. Her father Otto Schönaich, who had turned thirty-one two months ago, and had recently trimmed his moustache into a neat little rectangle just like the Führer, who was sitting there with his arms folded and his eyes open, staring ahead. Fine with her long blonde plaits, who did the same, and her step-grandmother who prayed beside her husband.

“Amen,” said her Grandpa, his messy beard trembling as he spoke.

Granny Guste passed around the soup, first giving her husband a plate and then her son-in-law, who only came home every few weeks. He was usually out in the Reich building motorways. Greta's turn came last, as she was the youngest, but she didn't mind.

Nothing could be heard except the scraping of forks on dishes, the smacking of Vati's lips, the clicking of Grandpa's teeth and Mutti's slurping. No one spoke a word.

“Oh, don't I just love this Flädle soup 'ere!” said Greta brightly, beaming into the silence to try and lift the mood. Imitating her grandmother's Baden-Württemberg dialect was always a safe bet, but today no one even cracked a smile.

“Eat up, duck!” Granny Guste stroked her hair.

Greta was relieved when after dinner she and Fine could escape the tense atmosphere and were sent to feed the meagre kitchen scraps to the chickens, geese, and the two pigs behind the vegetable garden.

“This is the beginning of the end!” she heard Grandpa grumble as she passed by the kitchen window behind Fine. “Hitler is a fool, and a dangerous one at that.”

“I won't stand for that kind of talk,” her father chided him.

“Nobody forbids me anything under my own roof! Basta.”

It's nice that Vati was finally home again, but it's awful that he and Grandpa are always fighting, Greta thought, and threw the thin potato peels to the chickens. The two of them never seemed to agree, no matter what the topic was.

“What were these idiots thinking? How on earth am I supposed to make it five kilometres there and back every day with my wooden leg?” Greta could tell her grandfather was getting agitated, and she pricked up her ears – she wanted to understand everything clearly.

“Be quiet, Lud,” Guste warned her husband. “You're going to get us all into trouble with that loose mouth of yours.”

“What's wrong with Grandpa?” asked Greta to Fine, who had also been listening.

“He has been conscripted to work in a factory that makes ammunition and tank equipment,” Fine explained

with her grown up voice. "But Vati doesn't ever complain about his back like Grandpa complains about his leg. We all have to do our bit."

"Right!" said Greta, even though she didn't really understand why her father and grandpa were debating so heatedly. She was still too young to understand the full details of their disagreement. Much later she would learn that her grandfather, a Social Democrat who kept his party book hidden behind the crucifix, looked down on his son-in-law because the latter had been a member of the NSDAP since 1930. The old man had never forgiven the younger man for impregnating his daughter Emma, who was sixteen at the time, and for making himself so comfortable in the family home ever since. Greta's father spent a large portion of his wages on drink. And so it wasn't uncommon for the family's only income to be the the small allowance Ludwig received from the state for his lost leg, the money from Ludwig's blacksmith work, and Emma's salary.

After finishing the washing up, Greta's mother rode her bicycle to the factory and took Fine with her on the pannier rack for a bit so that she didn't have to walk all the way to her Jungmädel meeting.

Greta peeled herself out of her school clothes in the bedroom, hung them neatly over a chair along with her stockings, slipped into some patched-up trousers and tied on her work apron. What does 'fit for war' mean? she asked herself, hearing from downstairs the heavy thumping of grandpa's wooden leg as he walked across the garden to his workshop.

She hopped down the stairs and found her father in front of the Volksempfänger in the living room. With his huge, calloused hands, he turned the dial, looking for a signal. "Vati, what does fit for war mea--"

"Quiet!" he interrupted her. They both heard the Führer over the static: "He who fights with poison will be fought with poison gas."

Greta's heart beat faster as she stood next to her father. He smiled at her and put his arm around her.

"He who himself departs from the rules of humane warfare," Adolf Hitler continued, "can expect nothing less than the same from us. I will fight this battle, against whoever challenges us, until the security of the Reich and its rights are guaranteed."

Exactly! Greta thought and felt safe in the arm of her almost two-metre-tall father.

"Where are you hiding, duck?" her grandmother called, sticking her head in the door and beckoning her granddaughter to come and help her.

In the potato field next to the chicken coop, Granny Guste stuck the garden fork vertically into the earth and lifted out the tubers. For once, she did not sing as she worked. Greta walked over to her carrying two wicker baskets, picked up the potatoes, sorted them by size and thought of the Führer's words: I will fight this battle, against whoever challenges us, until the security of the Reich and its rights are guaranteed.

She studied Granny Guste's serious expression and didn't dare ask what it meant that her father was fit for war.

In the evening, Greta lay in the bed she shared with her sister. Fine was already asleep, she could hear that from her regular breathing, but she herself was still wide awake. As the stairs creaked, she pretended to be asleep. Behind the curtain that separated the room and its occupants, her parents lay in their marital bed, whispering. Greta pricked up her ears. She knew it was naughty to eavesdrop, but the quieter they talked, the more curious she became.

"And what if you come back a cripple like my dad did?" whispered her mother.

"We all have to do our bit!"

"We all have to do our bit," Fine also said the next morning as she braided Greta's long hair and told her how

she'd been writing letters to soldiers on the front lines in the Jungmädel meeting.

Greta would have also liked to contribute to the war effort, but everyone seemed to think she was too young for that. She was old enough, however, to march the five kilometres to the factory at six o'clock every evening to pick up her limping grandfather, whom Granny Guste would pull him there in the morning in her cart. Greta had to pull him home over the bumpy cobblestones. Day after day. Week after week. Grandpa Ludwig often fell asleep from exhaustion, and Greta felt that with every step the cart was getting heavier and heavier. Landsberger Straße seemed to never end.

Every other Saturday, Granny Guste picked up Grandpa, so Greta had time to go to the station. There she waited excitedly for her father, who was being prepared for military service in the barracks in Königsberg. Her heart swelled as soon as she saw the smoke from the locomotive and she could hardly wait for the moment when he got off and hugged her.

On 7th March, Greta's ninth birthday, her father away at a training camp. But ten days later, he surprised the family and arrived carrying a present for Greta. She carefully unwrapped it, wrapped in grey paper, and almost forgot to breathe in amazement.

"Do you like it?"

"Yes," she said, enraptured, and carefully turned the delicate, gold-rimmed ornamental cup in her hands until she saw the likeness of the Führer between the rose vines. "This is the most beautiful present I've ever got. Thank you, Vati!"

At the beginning of May, her father had written that he could visit as early as next Thursday. To his delight, Greta had picked lilies of the valley for him. She had already been waiting for him on the platform for a whole hour before the train finally rolled into the station. The brakes squealed and soot hissed from the smokestack. Greta stretched her neck and immediately recognised her father among the passengers. He towered over them all.

"Vati!" she called, waving at him and running to meet him.

"Your Fräulein daughter, Otto?" asked the foreign soldier who had got off with him.

"Yes, my Gretchen!" her father announced proudly. He took the fragrant hand-picked bouquet in one hand and Greta in the other and walked home with her. When they arrived, he announced that he had received his draft notice.

"Roll down your socks, then you won't be able to see how dirty they are," Greta's mother said to her the next day, shaking her head as everyone gathered in front of the house for a photo, spitting into her handkerchief and using it to wipe the dirt off her youngest's knee.

Greta, like Emma, was wearing her best dress, while Fine was wearing her Jungmädel uniform: the black skirt, the white blouse with the rolled-up scarf held together with a braided knot. Vati beamed proudly in his new Wehrmacht uniform and stood in front of the house with his little ladies, as he affectionately called them.

"Watch out, here comes the birdie!" Granny Guste called as she pressed the shutter release on the camera.

A framed picture of Otto was placed on the sideboard in the living room. Otto put the family photo in his notebook, which he always carried in his breast pocket. Then he said goodbye to Granny Guste and Grandpa, and Greta noticed that, for once, the two of them were not arguing. They almost looked like they were conspiring with each other down at the other end of the front garden. She couldn't hear what they were talking about. She could only make out the last sentences as they came closer.

"The main thing is that you come back safe, Otto," said Grandpa.

“I’m too mean to die. You can’t get rid of weeds, as they say,” he replied.

Exactly! thought Greta, who accompanied him to the station with Fine and her mother. He was to be sent off to fight for the Führer, the people and the fatherland, and Greta couldn’t be prouder of him.

His train was headed west, and he wrote to them almost daily. First from Belgium, where he saw so much destruction and was met by a continuous stream of refugees. Sieg Heil!

On 20 June 1094, he reported from Paris: My dear little ladies, today your father marched through the capital of France in the early hours of the morning as a German soldier.

Greta and Fine sat at the kitchen table as they always did when their mother read out their father's letters and hung onto her every word.

You can't even begin to imagine just how delicious croissants are – and how elegant French women are. They all paint their mouths red and powder their faces. Even the really old ones, who end up looking like mummies.

Greta burst out laughing, pouting her little lips and screwing up her face to look elegant and mummy-like like the French ladies. She barely noticed that Emma was now quietly reading about which of Otto’s friends had fallen.

I miss you all so much. Soon, when the war is over, we’ll come to this cosmopolitan city as a family.

Greta eagerly wrote back to her father with the field post number 32566. First she tried: Dear father, later:

My dear father, and once he replied that he loved her, she always opened her letters with: My dearest Vati.

Greta and her classmates were looking at a map in the classroom, trying to find the places with the mysterious-sounding names that their fathers had written about.

“Paris is the most beautiful city in the world,” Greta said.

“But Bialystok is much bigger, my Dad wrote,” retorted her friend Elke. “They’ve got a real palace.”

“And my Dad is by the big sea. There are ships there that are even bigger than the castle in Königsberg,” claimed the red-haired Gisela.

Greta had no idea how big this castle was as she had never been to Königsberg – even though it was only thirty-five kilometres away. She was just thinking about what she could say to outdo the other two when the teacher came in and announced that the winter holidays would begin tomorrow, St. Nicholas Day, because the school had to save on fuel for heating.

Icy winds blew the snow in from the east. No one was out on the streets unless they absolutely had to be, but Greta bravely took her grandfather to the factory in the dark every morning as well as picking him up again in the evening, as usual. She was glad that Grandpa was allowed to stay at home on the day before the Fourth of Advent as a snowstorm was raging outside.

In the middle of the night, when everyone was asleep, there was a loud knock at the door. Greta and Fine breathed on the ice flowers that covered the window with an almost magical film and peered out through the small hole that their warm breath had created. Downstairs in front of the door stood a stranger with a thick, coarse beard. They only recognized him when he looked up and called out their names.

“Vati's here!” Greta shrieked, running barefoot down the ice-cold stairs before Fine and her mother had even made it out of their beds and turning the house key with a shaky hand.

“Vati!” She shouted, wrapping her arms around him and not feeling the cold for joy.

“Otto?” called her mother in disbelief, pulling him into the house and showering him with kisses. Greta had never seen her do anything like that before. She felt her face blush and gave Fine an embarrassed look.

“Come on, give me your luggage, Ottoche,” her mother said, taking his big rucksack off his back. Her father let her take it off, standing rooted in the hallway and looking around.

“My girls,” he said softly and gave them both a hug. Greta felt his feeble hand.

Granny Guste and Grandpa came out of their bedroom.

“Put some more wood on the fire, Fine,” Grandma said, helping Greta's frozen father out of his clothes and shoes.

“Get us some hot water, too.”

Greta stood rooted to the spot watching Granny Guste peel the damp socks off her father's feet. She inhaled their foul odour. The toes and pads of his feet were covered in festering boils. Her mother's hands went up to cover her mouth and she turned away. Greta saw that she was crying.

“Are you in pain, Otto?” Granny Guste, who had been a nurse in the last war, asked in a soft voice.

He shook his head weakly.

Grandma ladled lukewarm water into the washbasin, dissolved some soap into it, and started washing his feet.

It hurt Greta to see her father like that. She went to him, stroked his hair and placed a little kiss on his cheek.

“Tell me about Paris, Vati,” she said, trying to distract him.

But he gave her no answer. He had fallen asleep sitting at the kitchen table. With nod, Granny Guste sent the two girls back to bed.

Otto slept for two whole days and two whole nights. Everyone tiptoed around the house, whispering so as not to wake him.

He was still asleep on Christmas Eve, when Greta and Granny Guste decorated the Christmas tree as quietly as possible with marzipan hearts and chocolate figurines. Fine came home from the Jungmädel meeting and unpacked what she had brought especially for this Christmas: silver baubles with the inscription Sieg Heil, and a couple of red ones with a white glittering circle on which a swastika was emblazoned.

“Oh, they are beautiful,” whispered Greta. She was very proud.

Just then, Grandpa came into the room. “Is nothing sacred to you people anymore?” he grumbled, but Granny Guste pulled him aside and begged him softly “Leave them, Lud. I beg of you! For the family's sake.” Greta gave Fine a solemn look and handed her the last red bauble as she heard her father coming down the stairs. Dropping everything, she followed him into the kitchen and watched as he shaved his wild beard down to the fashionable rectangle above his upper lip. The entire house smelled once more like his usual camphor oil, and this the most best present Greta could have received.

The family did not attend the church service that evening as usual, instead they listened to the first Christmas broadcast of the Großdeutscher Rundfunk from Berlin. The candles on the tree were lit, the Volksempfänger was moved to the middle of the room, and everyone listened with rapt attention as the radio announcer started speaking, rolling his 'r's:

“Ninety million of us are celebrating together. Forty microphones connect the front to the homeland. Never with greater joy and pride have we switched on our microphones than today on Christmas Eve 1940.”

A soldier stationed on the Channel coast greeted his family and the relatives of his friends. Another, from the Eastern Front, wished the best to parents in the Western March.

Greta saw her dad holding back tears, and sat on his lap, wrapping her arms around him. She didn't like seeing him this sad.

After the song “Homeland, your stars” was played, a mother spoke to her parachutist son who was currently missing in action. In a firm voice, she greeted him from his father and seven siblings, wished him health and happiness, and told him that on Sunday she had been awarded the Golden Cross of Honour of the German

Mother. Greta saw Granny Guste glance at her mother and shake her head almost imperceptibly. She remembered the two of them recently having an argument about this – whether medals should be given to women whose children were born with pure German blood. For your fourth child, you would get the bronze cross, for your sixth, the silver, and for your eighth child, the gold. “They want us to go at it like rabbits,” Granny Guste had ranted at the time, though Greta hadn't understood what she meant by that. From the loudspeaker rattled ‘O Tannenbaum’ and everyone except her father sang along. Greta leaned her head against his shoulder and thought of the German mother who didn't know where her son was. She forgot to carry on singing.

“Why don't they know where that soldier is?” She asked after the song.

“We say ‘missing in action’, my little lion,” explained Grandpa. “It's probably harder for that poor mother to accept than if her son were dead.”

Greta wondered if the mother would be stripped of her gold medal if her son never came home. She felt her father breathing unsteadily, saw his shaking hands, and decided not to ask any more questions, although she wanted to know what the Führer was doing to find all these missing men.

“Now it's time for the presents,” said Granny Guste. She turned off the radio and Grandpa handed them out. Greta was overjoyed by the thick winter coat her mother had sewn for her out of uniform fabric, and Fine, who was now becoming a woman, was absolutely delighted with the silk blouse that had been made for her from the Parisian fabric her father had sent over weeks ago. Emma blushed as she unwrapped the pink cami knickers made of pure silk, with a lacy brassiere to match.

“Parisian chic,” said Otto, opening the bottle of champagne he had brought especially for this evening. The children also got a little glass each, and everyone toasted each other. Greta knew how special this gift was, so she kept to herself just how awful it tasted.

Her dad took a blue pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and offered one to his father-in-law. “Gitanes!” Grandpa took a drag on the filterless cigarette and exhaled the smoke through his nose. “They taste the same as they did during the last war,” he said, patting his son-in-law's forearm as if he could calm his tremor that way.

On the evening of Boxing Day, when all the socks had been darned and his open wounds were only just half-healed, Otto put on his washed and mended uniform to take the night train back to the Western Front.

“I don't want you to go away again,” said Greta through her tears, clinging to him.

Her father took her in his arms and squeezed her tightly.

“I'm sure the war won't last much longer. I'll be back soon, I promise.”

Greta sobbed. Her father swallowed and tried his hardest to not cry.

“Let me show you something, Gretchen,” he said, and carried her to the window, pulling back the curtain and squinting at the sky. “Do you see that really bright star over there?” he asked, wiping away her tears.

Greta looked up at the sky, trying to find it. “Yes.”

“That's Venus, the evening star. And you know what?”

Greta shook her head.

“Starting tomorrow, you're going to send me this star. No matter where I am, I'll be waiting for it every night.”

“But what if it snows or rains?”

Otto gave her a kiss on the cheek. “The stars are always there. Even behind the rain clouds. You don't have to see them to know that they're there. If you think about it hard enough, Venus will come to me. And the two of us will be connected. No matter where I am. Deal?”

Greta nodded solemnly and wrapped her arms around him.

The meadow in front of the former apiary was coated in hoarfrost. Clouds of mist hung in the valley in the early November morning as Greta pulled her woollen military coat over her cardigan and baggy trousers, pushed her cap so far onto her head that she could barely see, shouldered her rucksack, and started trotting into town. She was going to drop in briefly at Auntie Elis's, as she usually did, as Greta's bargaining chip depended entirely on what things Elise Holloch needed that week, and how much she was willing to invest. Approaching the end of Hirschgasse, she swung open the rusty gate. Startled by the creak, a guard, who had been huddled on the steps taking a nap, rose. Greta stopped in her tracks as he came towards her. It was not one of the GIs she had got used to seeing around these parts, but a stranger. He was African American, he was shivering just like she was, and he seemed to be in an extremely bad mood.

"Halt!" said the young lad, who was at least two heads taller than her, looking down at her with a furrowed brow. His name tag was dangling in front of her nose: Robert Cooper.

"I'm on my way to see my Aunt, Misses Holloch, Private Cooper," she stuttered, pointing towards the top floor of the building in front of them.

Robert Cooper continued staring at her wordlessly, but when Greta made an effort to move, he stood in her way. "Halt!" his wide mouth commanded once more.

She looked around slowly. No one was in sight. She was beginning to feel uneasy and decided to turn back. She locked the gate behind her and watched as the lanky man sat back down on the steps. "Arschloch," she muttered under her breath.

"I heard that, you know!" She heard him shout.

Greta dashed away as fast as she could, across the barrage. She kept turning around, worried that he was following her. Only when she had reached the other side of the river did she feel safe and could finally slow down.

She wandered along the Neckar, hoping she would be able to steal something with which to bargain from the coal ships that were being unloaded there. But the military police were guarding the loading quay and were shooing away all those trying to pick up the fallen briquettes. Tired and hungry, she moved on and trudged around the black market behind the station.

Greta was looking for firewood and would have offered a lot for it that day, but no one had any on offer. Then, out of the corner of her eye, she spotted a sewing machine. It was the exact same model that had stood in their drawing room in Prussian Eylau. Her mother had sewn all the children's clothes on it and taught them how to use it: how to move the pedal rhythmically so that the V-belt would get the machine going, so that the needle would pierce from above and intertwine with the bobbin thread. Greta knew it like the back of her hand. The cast-iron base, the wooden table with the drawer for accessories, and the wooden cover with the black sewing machine under it, with its golden design, in the middle of which the company name SINGER was emblazoned. "How much for this?" She asked the woman of about thirty who had sunken cheeks and chapped lips.

"Well, what have you got?"

"Five," said Greta, even though she actually had six packs of cigarettes with her. She knew from experience that it was better to keep some spare up her sleeve.

The woman shook her head vigorously. "A sewing machine like this one is worth three times that. At least!" Greta moved on, wondering whether she should exchange her cigarettes for some wool that was being sold by a short lady, or for a chunk of lard from a farm boy standing nearby. But she couldn't get that sewing

machine out of her mind. If she bought it, she knew that her mother, a trained seamstress, could earn some extra money; clothes were in short supply, after all. She stood to the side of the market, thinking. No one seemed to be showing any interest in the Singer. Everyone was looking for the same thing on this cold day: food and fuel.

“Does it even work?” Greta asked, returning to the stall and lifting the lid of the machine.

“Of course. Everything here works, you can be one hundred percent sure of that. I can also throw in a couple of threads,” said the woman, pulling open the drawer, which was full of thread and bobbins.

Greta shook her head and started walking off.

The woman grabbed her arm. “Please. I’ll give it to you for five. I have three small children at home and my husband is dead.”

“I’m here alone, I don’t know how I’d get it all the way home.”

“It’s got wheels on the base. Plus, I can help you.”

Greta didn’t try to get the price any further down, as she knew this was more than a bargain. She took five packets of Lucky Strike out of the lining of her coat, and the sewing machine was hers. The two of them carried the machine towards the station. But when a whistle sounded, the woman let go of the machine and scuttled away along with all the other traders. Greta continued dragging the Singer behind her on its tiny wheels along the bumpy ground. And as the military police circled nearer to her with their four jeeps and truck, she deftly tipped the machine over the railway embankment.

She threw the remaining packet of cigarettes down, too. She was sure nobody had seen her. Knowing that she was not hiding anything forbidden in her backpack or coat pockets, she could remain calm and seem innocent when a policeman strode over and asked her to open her coat. She watched as a man next to her, who had been found with half a chicken on his person, spat at the feet of a black GI. The GI swiftly took out a wooden club, beat the swearing Heidelberg man, and led him away in handcuffs.

Greta was struggling to hide her glee over her successful shopping trip, and stood around as inconspicuously as possible until the policemen drove off with their arrests. She then hastily climbed over the embankment to be reunited with her new sewing machine. The wooden cover was cracked, the table had scratches on it, but otherwise it was good as new. The pack of Lucky Strike was, however, nowhere to be found. Bit by bit, she heaved the machine up the slope.

When she finally reached the top, in her way stood a dirt-smearred boy of about thirteen. Greta could tell straight away that this boy belonged to the Kirchheim Gang, a ruthless group that would hang around black market, claiming to guard it, and who demanded money from everyone for the privilege.

“What do you want?” she snapped at him.

“Hand over your fags!”

“You really think I’d have any left? I’ve obviously just traded them all.”

“Without us you wouldn’t have even got that sewing machine!” He whistled through his fingers.

In a flash, another boy of a similar age appeared in front of Greta. He held Greta in her place while the first unbuttoned her coat and examined the lining. Greta fought back with all her might, kicking and thrashing about. But when a third gang member arrived to help hold her down, she knew she didn’t stand a chance. Finding nothing in her coat lining, the first boy took Greta’s cap off her head and put it on. Then he reached under her cardigan and groped her.

“You filthy pigs!” Greta screamed and spat in the boy’s face. As the words left her mouth, an old man came out of the station with his cart. “Have you no decency, you bastards?”

The boys let go of Greta and scattered.

“You better clear off now or I’ll ruin you,” the old man called after them.

She buttoned up her coat, crying. "Thank you."

"Where are you going?"

"To Neuenheim."

"Good God, child, how are you going to manage that?" the old man asked and offered to carry the sewing machine for her on his handcart.

Together they walked through the old town. But when Greta saw that the market square was full of military jeeps, she stopped in her tracks.

"Don't worry, child. It's not like sewing machines are banned. As long as you're not near the black market, no one can hurt you. You could just tell them that you got it as a gift. Tell them you got it from me," the old man reassured her.

When they reached the barrage, Greta told him that she could manage the rest of the way on her own. "My aunt lives just over there. I can leave the machine with her."

She thanked the old man, lifted the cast-iron frame and started to pull the machine behind her over the wooden planks of the bridge. It began to drizzle. Without her cap, Greta felt unprotected – naked, almost. When she reached the Neuenheim bank, she heaved the heavy machine down the stairs, pulled it across Ziegelhäuser Landstraße, and turned into Hirschgasse. The gate to Auntie Elis' house was open. Greta took stock of the situation. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a GI strapping down the top of a jeep. He walked around the car, into view. It was Cooper.

"Scheiße! I'd forgotten about him!" she muttered. She was so cold. She shivered and ran her fingers through her wet hair. She decided to push on and, with her eyes fixed to the ground, pulled the machine past the courtyard entrance and up the hill. When she heard footsteps in the gravel behind her, she turned around, startled, and saw the black GI.

With his arms folded, he stood in the rain, which didn't seem to bother him, and stared at her. "Miss arschloch?"

Greta avoided his gaze and turned back around, walking faster this time, but barely covering any ground with the heavy machine in tow. Every metre took an eternity. Despite the low temperature, she was sweating with fear.

Before the bend in the road, she turned around again. Cooper was still standing in the rain in the middle of the lane, watching her leave. She scanned the area around them. She hoped to catch sight of someone behind a hedge or watching from a window who could come to her rescue if necessary. But there was not a soul there. It was as if there was nobody but her and this man for miles and miles. She carried on and slowly disappeared from his field of vision.

Her heavy breaths were visible in the winter air as she pulled her heavy cargo further up the slope. As she reached the second bend, barely a hundred metres remained until she would be home. But all of a sudden she heard quick footsteps approach her from behind and felt a push. She saw the frosty ground coming towards her.

"What an awful sight you are!" her mother exclaimed as her daughter came through the door. Greta had a black eye, her hands were covered in scrapes, the sleeve of her coat was almost completely torn off, and her dungarees were ripped at her knees revealing a bloody mess.

"What on earth happened?" asked Granny Guste, helping her out of her clothes.

Greta felt like crying, but she pressed her lips together and kept silent. Guste fetched some clean rags and tended to the wounds while Emma gently washed her daughter.

"'avent I always said that we mustn't let that girl go out all on 'er own!" said Grandpa. He had turned away as

Greta was undressing. "That black market is way too dangerous."

There was a knock at the door. Greta flinched. Guste and Emma looked at each other questioningly – nobody had ever called on them here, not since the day they had moved in. Not even Aunt Elis.

"Hello?" asked a deep, male voice, in English.

Greta's blood ran cold in her veins. There was another knock, a little louder this time. Guste crept over to the door, opened it a crack, and slammed it shut again.

"Lud, there's a negro outside!" she whispered nervously. "What does he want from us?"

Greta peered out of the window. She could only see the man's uniform, but she could tell it was Cooper. She gathered some clothes quickly and got dressed. What could this guy possibly want? Was he going to arrest her for insulting him? She thought about running away. But where to? She wouldn't stand a chance.

"He mustn't find me!" she cried, trembling, and pushed herself under Grandpa's bed. She knew that from here she had a good view of the door but would be invisible herself.

"Is he the one that did this to you?" Guste asked quietly.

"Hello?" Cooper knocked again.

Greta could hear her heart racing. And in the distance, she could also hear grunting.

"Oh no, Truman! He mustn't see our sow, or she'll be confiscated!"

"I'm going out." Guste smoothed her apron resolutely. "Play something, Lud, to drown out the grunting!" She crossed herself and courageously opened the door.

"Hello," repeated the GI. Greta saw that he was smiling kindly and pointing to the sewing machine he had put down next to him.

Stunned, Guste stared first at the machine, then at his face. She had no idea what was going on.

"Here, the girl forgot this," he said in broken German and held Greta's cap out to her grandmother.

The sow grunted.

"Lud. Go on!" Granny Guste hissed over her shoulder and then smiled awkwardly at the GI.

"Alright, well. Bye, then," Private Cooper seemed to sense the fear he was causing and wanted to leave quickly. He started walking towards the gate.

Grandpa finally began to play the trumpet. The only song he could think of playing in the spur of the moment was César Franck's 'Ave Maria'. The American stopped walking and remained rooted to the spot.

"Dear God, why isn't he leaving!" Granny Guste gave her husband a sign to stop.

Cooper turned around, mesmerised, and thanked them.

Then Greta heard a car start up and drive away.

"What was that all about?" Granny Guste was stunned.

"And where did that sewing machine come from?" Emma asked, inspecting it.

"Is he definitely gone?" Greta crawled out from under the bed.

She proceeded to tell them what had happened – how she had got the machine from the black market and how the two boys had followed her and stolen it from her, as well as her cap.

"My God, child," Emma said, stroking Greta's bruises. She got a new rag, cleaning the dirt off the cast-iron frame, and turned the handwheel carefully. The needle began to move. She carried the Singer over to the shed as if it were her most prized possession. Emma found the thread in the little drawer, wound it around the bobbin, threaded the upper thread, pushed her foot against the pedal, got the drive belt going, and sewed a couple of test stitches onto a scrap of fabric. Everything was working perfectly.

"Bring me those torn clothes of yours, Gretchen!"

The purr of the sewing machine filled the room, reminding Greta of her lost home. Emma was beaming like she hadn't beamed in years.

“Shh! Stop that for a second!” Grandpa ordered and listened. He was right, there was indeed a sound coming from outside their home. Someone was playing a trumpet.

“Who is that?” Greta asked and hurried to the window. “I can't see anyone.”

“Quiet,” said Ludwig, visibly touched. “That's the piece I played earlier, ‘Ave Maria’.”

Greta looked at her grandfather: he was transfixed. He took his trumpet out of the cupboard, put it in his waistband as the women looked on, astonished, and hobbled outside the hut.

“What's he doing?” asked Greta quietly.

Her mother and Granny Guste hurried over to the window to see what was happening, but Grandpa was hidden behind the garden gate. Grandpa was now also playing the trumpet. The same melody, in a different key.

When the garden gate opened, there stood Private Cooper, puffing out his cheeks and trumpeting on. It sounded beautiful, and yet Greta couldn't enjoy it out of fear. When the piece was over, both men were grinning from ear to ear.

“Why don't you come in?” Grandpa called to him, and Greta forgot to breathe. “I'm Ludwig.”

Through the door she heard: “My name is Bob. So nice to meet you!”

Grandpa pushed the door open and the man, tall as a tree, stuck his head in. Greta jumped and hid behind her mother. But her mother ignored her and went straight up to him, holding out her hand.

“Thank you for the sewing machine,” she said.

Cooper looked at Greta.

“Everything okay with you?” he asked.

She nodded shyly.

Truman grunted outside. Greta froze.

“What was that?” Bob asked, pointing in the direction from which the sound had come.

No one answered. Truman grunted again, louder this time.

“That's our pet,” Granny Guste finally broke the silence.

“Pet?” asked Bob, confused about this new German term.

“Like a dog or cat,” Granny Guste explained, letting out a bark and then a meow so the stranger would be sure to understand. “Not for eating!”

Bob stuck his head out of the door and looked towards the pen, where the sow, which was now a magnificent thirty kilos, was peering over the gate, squealing.

“Come on, Gretchen, let's show our visitor what she can do!” said Granny Guste.

Greta pushed past Bob and ran over to her favourite animal, who, as soon as she had opened the gate, came out and abruptly threw herself on her back, waiting to be scratched on the belly.

“Good girl! Now sit!” the pig obeyed and sat down. At the next command, it lay down flat on the ground and looked at Greta with loyal eyes.

The American approached with Emma, Granny Guste and Grandpa in tow.

“She's like a member of our family,” Greta's mother laughed in spite of herself.

“Good girl, Truman!” Greta gave the sow an acorn.

“Truman? Like my President?” Bob asked with wide eyes.

Everyone held their breath. The house pig, excited by this unusually large audience, performed her next trick and spun on the spot.

Bob clapped his hands. “Truman,” he burst out, and the family laughed in relief.

The next morning, there was a box of kitchen scraps at the door. On it was a cardboard sign: For Truman.

Greta went into the hallway and saw a stranger staring open-mouthed at the three-and-a-half-year-old child.

“There's a man, Mutti,” Marie cried and ran into her arms. Slowly, Greta took a step towards the stranger. The tall man, whose facial features were barely recognisable behind his full grey beard, was stooped in front of the door, wearing a blue quilted jacket and carrying an oversized rucksack on his back.

“Are you looking for someone?”

“Yes. My family.”

That was when Greta saw his green eyes. “Vati?”

In the parlour, china smashed on the floor.

Emma came running into the hallway. “Otto?” she fell onto her husband, draping her arms around his neck. She hadn't seen him for twelve years.

“Who is that?” whispered Marie in Greta's ear.

“That's Vati,” Greta replied, her cheeks wet with tears, and as her mother finally took a step back, she put her arm around her father.

“Vati!” cried Fine, coming running out of the parlour, pushing Greta aside and embracing him as well. Fine's husband John followed her and slapped his father-in-law on the shoulder. Until now, he had only seen him in an old photograph.

“Welcome home, Dad,” he said with a strong American accent and broken German, beaming at the stranger and holding out his hand. “It's so great to finally to meet you. Your daughter has told me so many good things about you.”

Otto bristled. His gaze lingered on John's American uniform.

“This is John, Dad,” said Fine. “My husband, John A. O'Sullivan.”

Emma took the rucksack from her husband. “You must be hungry!”

Otto nodded and followed her into the parlour. Grandpa greeted him with tears in his eyes. Finally, he was able to settle down on a chair and he quickly stuffed the yeast cake Emma had cut off him into his mouth, staring ahead.

“I always knew! I was sure you were alive and...” Greta's voice cracked and she couldn't continue.

Otto washed down the cake crumbs with coffee, broke off another piece of yeast cake and shoved it into his toothless mouth. Marie sat opposite him on her mother's lap and gaped at him with wide eyes.

“And who is that?” he asked.

“This is Marie, my little daughter, Vati,” said Greta as she pressed the little girl to her breast.

“Slow down, this is all too much for your father. Isn't that right, Ottoche?” cooed Emma, gesturing wildly with excitement.

“Where is your dad?” Emma wanted to know the following day when she returned from her cleaning job.

“He's gone to the registration office,” Greta said and looked at her mother knowingly.

All the colour drained from Emma's face. “Oh my God,” she muttered, pacing the room, agitated all of a sudden. She kept walking over to the window and looking out to see if Otto had returned.

After more than an hour, she saw him and ran out of the flat. Greta saw from above how her father crossed the street with a stumbling step and disappeared into their front door. She hurried down the hall, opening the flat door a crack to hear her mother in the stairwell: “Otto. I... I wanted to explain it to you properly, but... I didn't know that you'd be going there on the very first day.... you have to understand what kind of situation I was in. After all these years, I didn't think you were coming back... and I...”

As Emma's voice and the footsteps on the stairs grew louder, Greta scurried into the kitchen. Through the crack in the door she could see that her father, who had shaved off his beard, leaving a neat square across his upper lip, was not paying any attention to her mother.

"Please, Otto, talk to me," she begged.

He yanked open the parlour door and slammed it shut behind him.

"Vati needs to rest now," Emma warned Greta and Marie, who were in the kitchen with Grandpa so that Otto could sleep in the parlour. Fine and her husband, who had come to say goodbye, weren't allowed to see him either, but Emma promised to pass on their good wishes.

At dinner time, Greta snuck off to see her father. He was lying on his back and snoring. She was horrified when she saw his feet sticking out from under the covers. Well, what was left of them. They were bluish in colour, two toeless stumps.

"Vati," she whispered. "You have to eat something. Don't worry, you can go right back to sleep afterwards." Emma had cooked Otto's favourite dish, Wrukensuppe, and had hoped to win him over with this East Prussian turnip stew. She had cut the pork belly into tiny slivers so that he would have no trouble eating it with his now-toothless mouth.

Otto sat at the table in silence, staring into his bowl, and not even Marie dared say anything. Nothing could be heard but the clang of his spoon on the bowl and the smacking of his lips.

Emma collected the dishes and carried them over to the sink.

"I could do with some Schnapps," said Grandpa Ludwig.

He fetched the whiskey bottle from the parlour shelf and poured two glasses. He seemed to hope that this would break his son-in-law's silence.

"Here's to you being back."

Otto emptied the glass in one gulp.

Greta got Marie ready for bed and went back to the kitchen with her. "There's someone here who'd like to say good night to you all..."

In her pyjamas, the little girl snuggled up to her great-grandfather and looked with wide eyes at the man sitting opposite him.

"What do we say?" Greta asked her daughter.

"Guid night, Grandpa," the little girl said in a broad Baden-Württemberg dialect and offered Otto her hand.

He ignored her, filled his glass with another whiskey and downed it.

"Come on, Mariele, it's time," said Greta, taking her in her arms, carrying her into the parlour and lying her on the mattress she shared with her child.

"Grandpa is mean," whispered Marie.

"No, you mustn't say that," she answered softly and tucked the little girl in. "Grandpa is a good man. He just needs a little time. We have to be patient."

"I've come back and found the worst kind of shit here," her father yelled in the kitchen. "How has it ended up like this? This is fucking unbearable! I fought and put my skin on the line. And for what? For both of my daughters to just offer themselves up to the enemy like whores!"

"Please..." said Grandpa in a soothing voice.

Greta was trembling.

"Where is Granny Guste?" asked Marie.

"In heaven. She'll look after you from there."

"She's looking after you too!" The little one stroked her mother's hand.

Greta's eyes were swimming with tears. She heard her father yelling in the kitchen: "I fought in the war and sacrificed my health so that these whores could fuck the first person who came along. They have no shame, no pride, and no dignity!"

"Otto!" his father-in-law warned him.

"What?" he snapped back. He mumbled something racist about Marie.

Greta looked into the Marie's wide brown eyes. She didn't understand what this stranger she was supposed to call Granddad was getting so worked up about.

"Sleep now, little one," she whispered.

"Is Granny Guste with the stars?" asked Marie.

Greta couldn't answer. Crying, she nodded and thought of how her Dad had once shown her the evening star. The gentle man she had so longed for had nothing in common with the man who was now shouting in their kitchen.

"What, you think I should drink less? I won't be able to stand this shit for a second longer if I'm sober. And you, Emma, you're the worst bitch of them all!"

"Please, Otto," Emma begged him.

"You've lost the right to ask anything of me. You've lost it! I've been out of sight, out of mind for too long. Who were you sleeping with this whole time?"

"Otto!"

"What do you mean 'Otto'? What Otto? Otto doesn't exist anymore! Otto is long gone. You just couldn't wait for me to die, could you?"

Greta lay down next to Marie, pulled her close and covered her ears. She could hear her mother crying.

Grandpa tried once more to talk some sense into his furious son-in-law: "Otto, pull yourself together!"

Greta began to sing a lullaby softly to drown out the argument. "Do you know how many little stars there are in the blue sky..."

But her raging father couldn't be drowned out: "You had me declared dead! I'm so sorry I didn't die in a Siberian quarry like you wanted."

This sentence bored into Greta's soul like a sharp knife. She could tell just how much Mutti had hurt Vati with this stupid registration business. But his words "bitch" and "whores", and not to mention his racist remarks, overrode her pity, and she realised that he wouldn't have been any nicer had Emma not done this. A bang shook her out of her thoughts. It sounded as if someone had banged on the table.

"Shut up!" Her grandpa was louder and more determined than she had ever heard him. "Stop boozing and stop sitting around feeling sorry for yourself!"

Something banged against the wall, and glass shattered on the floor. Greta forgot to breathe.

"Where were you when your wife was raped? Where were you when the whole family had nothing to eat?"

Grandpa continued to roar.

"Where was I? You seriously want to know where I was?"

"Without your Hitler, there would never have been this damn war and—"

Greta heard a clatter, then a loud thud.

"Keep my father out of this!" Emma begged.

"Now where is that black bastard?" Otto bellowed from the kitchen. Greta was shaking like a leaf. Marie began to scream.

The next day, with deep shadows around her eyes, Greta sat with her child and her mother at the youth welfare office. "My husband has returned from a prisoner of war camp, and our flat is too small now," said

Emma, trying to hide her black eye with her right hand.

The sky was grey, and the Neckar had been swallowed by the fog. Greta had her child on her lap and sat next to Marie's new official guardian in his dark grey VW Beetle. Karl-August Ebert didn't say a word as he drove the car the five kilometres up the Neckar and parked in Ziegelhausen in front of the Protestant children's home, which lay right next to the church on Brahmsstraße.

There was no other solution, because Greta had nowhere else to take Marie. She had no money for her own flat and had no one to help look after the child when she was working. As she stood in front of the three-storey house with the red-rimmed mullioned windows, it felt like an impenetrable fortress. Marie looked at her mother with wide eyes. It was as if she could sense that she was going to have to part with her, and so she clung to her leg.

"Mutti will be back soon to get you," Greta told her little girl, trying to sound as convincing as possible.

"Come on then!" Ebert strode up the sandstone stairs and rang the bell. The door opened and a religious woman stuck her head out. She wore a calf-length grey habit and a bonnet held together with a bow under her double chin.

"We've brought you Marie Söchnaich, Sister Erdmuthe," said Ebert.

The lady gave Greta a disapproving look, grabbed her child under the shoulders and said: "Well, come on then! Don't dawdle!"

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Afterword

In the autumn of 2015, as temporary accommodation for refugees was being set up all over Germany, I was glued to the news. One day, I watched as an old couple, clutching belongings for donation, stood in front one of these facilities just north of Cologne. A reporter asked them why they were getting involved. The pair were finding it hard to get their words out, not least because they weren't used to having a microphone shoved in front of their faces. It was clear, though, that part of the reason they were finding it so difficult to talk was because they were overcome with emotion.

"We know exactly how these people feel," the woman, carrying a pillow and a blanket, finally said.

"When we were children, we went through something similar ourselves. We came from East Prussia," her husband added.

This exchange was what planted the seed of this novel.

I saw first-hand just how alive the painful experiences from the Nazi era still are, especially in old age, when my mother became ill with Alzheimer's. The horrors of her past flooded into her present. She was defenceless against it all, just as she was then, as a young girl.

Despite all our differences, I rushed to support her as best I could as she struggled with this debilitating illness. This decision turned my life as a freelancer completely on its head, especially since I lived several hundred kilometres away from my parents.

My mum's illness lasted for twelve years. Witnessing her trapped in a never-ending tunnel of suffering and pain was almost unbearable for me. I always knew that she had lost her mother as a young child, and the premature death of her first love and my older sister were also never a secret. But I only learned of the exact circumstances, the parts of her that were lost, the abysses, as her illness progressed – as the lid that had been there to cover up her suffering was lifted bit by bit.



I will never forget how I was forced to watch on helplessly as her world disintegrated and her spirit slowly dissolved. To this day, I can still feel the way the ground opened up under me when she told me about her daughter Susanne as if it were not me, Susanne, standing before her.

And yet this illness also provided some beauty, some richness. As my mother left her protective shield behind her, the soft, loving woman for whom I had longed for all my life emerged. Her pragmatic hardness dissolved. All that remained was love. Facing this vulnerability has been one of the most intense experiences of my life. My mother's traumatic experiences have also shaped my own life. Just how much they shaped me has only recently been coming to light. Stay Away from Gretchen is purely fictional – and yet, in a way, both my mother's story and my own serve as a blueprint.

During my research, I came across many instances of African American GIs helping Germans after the war ended, when it was still forbidden to have contact with the enemy. The late cabaret artist Dieter Hildebrandt, who was briefly a prisoner of war in America, speculated that they were more attracted to the defeated Germans, the underdogs, than to the victors because of the oppression they experienced both in their American homeland and within the US Army.

I was especially intrigued by the fact that these African American soldiers, who had been seen as 'affenartige Untermenschen', or 'ape-like sub-humans', during the Nazi regime, could in post-war Germany suddenly walk into any establishment without encountering any racial barriers. These men brought jazz and swing to the world of orderly marching and made connections with young women in ways that were still completely taboo in the USA. And as my research into the experiences of black GIs continued, I soon learned about the Brown Baby Plan.

The subject of adoption and the search for genetic origins has occupied me for decades. I have seen countless documentaries about people who spend their lives trying to find out where their roots are. I have also been deeply touched by the stories of women who, under unthinkable circumstances, had no choice but to give their children away. Especially when I learned that this decision, which was usually kept a secret, would affect a woman like this for the rest of her life, covering it in a grey film. Particularly during the war and immediately afterwards, many such fates were sealed in both the East and the West. Nevertheless, I knew next to nothing about the fate of the Brown Babies in Germany. I was lost for words when I heard the 12th March 1952 Bundestag speech for the first time, as well as the scandalous Süddeutscher Rundfunk report from 1957, from which I quote in this novel.

It is shocking that no one felt responsible for these mothers and children, and also that this subject is still largely unknown. It is such a blessing that there were people out there like Mabel Grammer who tried to help some of these children achieve a better life with her adoption agency.

Everything in my book goes back to the Second World War. The Brown Baby Plan, the doomed love story, and the racism – with this theme in particular sadly remaining relevant today.

Seventy-five years after the end of the war, its memory still affects our lives. And not only because bombs are still often found on the construction sites of big cities. The effects are felt in our families and in us war grandchildren. And in order to understand ourselves better, it is critical that we understand our past.

With this novel, I want to give a voice and a face to the elderly, who are oft forgotten in this more-bigger-further-faster era. Even if they often seem a bit too stern and rigid in their drab, beige clothes, they aren't any less of individuals than we younger people. They are no less crazy, no less passionate. They too have loved desperately, been reckless and daring, looked beautiful, risked life and limb. They are eight, they are



eighteen, and are eighty, all at once. This core is still there. It is ageless, no matter how withered the skin. You'll be able to see the spark in their eyes if you look closely.

The political and social backgrounds in which I have embedded my fictional characters correspond to reality. All the speeches, interviews, newspaper reports, radio broadcasts, television reports, and films that appear in the text are real and were transcribed by me.

The CDU politician Luise Reling really did give the speech I quoted on page 305 on 12th March 1952 in the Bundestag in Bonn.

Both of the children's homes where Marie lived are fictional – though, of course, the overall circumstances were based on real events. The same goes for the events surrounding Marie's adoption in which Mabel Grammer is involved. Everything else that I have written about Mrs Grammer, who lived with her husband and adopted children in 7 Arndtstraße in Mannheim, is true.

To my knowledge, no journalist accompanied Angela Merkel to Heidenau in 2015, but all her statements correspond to interviews from that time. The sentences chanted by the demonstrators in Heidenau in the novel were all actually chanted on the day.

The American journalist and presenter Anderson Cooper, whom I greatly admire, was my inspiration for Tom Moderat's professional development.

My mother Else Abel's hilarious and refreshingly direct nature has rubbed off on Gretchen. And on me. "Be good and don't steal anything. But if you do, send it home to me," is her legacy!

Susanne Abel

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