

ASHES ASHES

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Try to relax, I say to myself, consciously easing my posture and unclenching the vice grip that my hands have on each other in my lap. My eyes are fixed directly on the train seat in front of me. The engine gives a hiss and roars to life, and I exhale deeply. Finally, the wheels roll forward, forward, forward on the tracks.

My head turns mechanically to the window and my eyes take in the hills outside. Three war planes buzz over head and children chase them on the rolling green below, waving and cheering them on. As the train picks up speed, these images roll faster and faster into my past. I make a point to turn farther to the side when the guard paces by me in the aisle. Thinking back to the past seven years of my life, I wonder how, just how, it had all come to this.

It was the winter of 1935. I was twenty-three years old and three months pregnant with Willi when they took his father away. Adolf Hitler was on the radio bragging that he had rescued Germany from the cesspool of the Great Depression and avenged the humiliation of Germany's loss in the Great War. People loved hearing him say stuff like that.

At the time I fell in love with my husband, I didn't realized it was a sin to be Jewish. I often forgot he was Jewish. We had planned to get married, but the Nurnberg Laws forbidding marriage and sex between Germans and Jews were made too early. Our wedding had been planned for October 1, 1935—fifteen days too late.

Jared and I became husband and wife in practice, if not by law. We exchanged rings and had our "honeymoon" at home. By late December, I was already starting to show. We should have considered going into hiding, but Jared didn't think we had anything to worry about.

It was snowing the night the SS came for him. We were at home in our house in Munich. Jared was in front of the fireplace, coaxing the kindling we had pulled off the Christmas tree to light. I was sitting on the couch with my feet tucked under me, holding a cup of tea. The scent of pine and smoke filled the house, mingling with the smell of the vegetable stew that we had eaten for dinner. The crackling of the fire eating the branches was pleasant music. We were feeling warm and lazy until we heard the knocking.

Looking through the peephole, I saw an angry group of SS men outside, grunting and stamping in the snow. Confused, I hesitated opening the door. They smashed it open. I was shoved aside and thrown against the wall. My

shrieks were muffled by the violent swarm of black uniforms pushing their way through the door.

“Pig!” the guards shouting, throwing Jared on the ground. “Revolting swine!” Bodies collided, sending a shelf of books and knickknacks crashing to the floor. My husband moaned under a tirade of blows.

“Jared!” I cried. “Jared!” Hysterically, I clawed my way through the sea of black backs and shoulders. An annoyed guard put his hand on my stomach and pushed me out of the way. I tripped backwards on the leg of a stool that had been broken. Where I landed in the corner is where I caught the last glimpse of my husband. An SS guard heaved his unconscious body over his shoulder and stormed out of our house.

“*Heil Hitler!*” he called, before slamming the door behind him.

Our house was suddenly empty. Clutching my stomach, I staggered wildly after the guards, tripping on the broken furniture that was strewn across the floor. One of the guards had taken the burning log from our fire and thrown it in the center of the living room; flames were already licking the carpet.

Once outside, I dove to the ground, scraping for rocks to hurl at the SS. I found one, threw it and missed! Another one, miss! Another one! The last guard turned around and marched back to me. Gripping me forcefully by the shoulders, he yanked me to my feet and put his face directly in mine.

“You have no idea how lucky you are, Helga!” he scolded with foul breath. “You’re a traitor, you know, but we spared you.” His fingers dug under the bones of my shoulders. “Start acting like the German woman you are!”

He released his grip and swaggered off with the rest of the SS. I stood frozen in that spot, watching them march until they were black flecks on the horizon. Then I watched my house catch fire. The blaze reduced my world to ashes flurrying down among the snowflakes.

Willi was born the next summer, the year the Olympic Games came to Germany. The whole country was caught up in Olympic fever. The summer games of 1936 came as a great relief to Germany, offering both Jews and Germans a respite from Hitler’s policies of violence and fear. The whole country, including myself, thought the worst was over.

When Willi was three months old, I took advantage of the hiatus and fled across Germany to a remote, southern village tucked away in the Black Forest. The village of Himmelreich was quaint, small, and seemingly Nazi-free. It had one winding road, about two kilometers long, nestled in a valley of pine-blanketed mountains. The center of town had a post office, a town hall, a butcher store, a grocery store, a bakery, and a school. The houses were small white buildings with brown roofs and shutters and window boxes

spilling with pink, red, and orange flowers. It was a village vibrant with nature and life. The only visible sign of National Socialism was a banner hanging over the town hall that read, *Ein Volk, Ein Reich, Ein Führer!* One nation, one government, one leader. It was a far cry from the city, where flocks of SS patrolled the streets.

Himmelreich was the perfect place to hide out. Jared had lived here as a child and he told me that if I ever needed to escape, I would find peace here. I decided to change my last name to that of his friend, Christof Kraftmann, an air force officer who had staged his death and fled the country when rumors broke out that he was a homosexual.

Thus, I became Helga Kraftmann. I didn't know what the Nazis had done with Jared, but I hoped if he was alive, he would eventually look for me here. People had whispered of work camps within Germany where Jews could earn their freedom through labor. That's what he would do, I was sure. In the meantime, all I could do was get on with life.

Even in Himmelreich, I had to be careful. National Socialism exerted its influence in the form of Dirk Schultz, the local block leader. Dirk was the village postman, watchman, handyman, tax collector, youth counselor, social worker, law enforcement official, activity planner, father figure, uncle figure, brother figure, and best friend. He was like a priest who brought the sermon to his parishioners. Nothing happened in the village without Dirk's knowledge. It was his job to know everything and everyone. He gave me a week to settle into my new home before paying me a visit. I had just put Willi down for a nap when he arrived on my doorstep.

His firm knocking called me promptly to the door. My hair in knots and my shirt stained with breast milk, I was embarrassed to find such a young, attractive man standing on my threshold. No more than twenty-five years old, Dirk was a sturdy column with light brown hair and clear blue pools for eyes. He was athletic with a strong, clean jaw. He was smiling. If it weren't for the swastika embroidered on his armband, I would have invited him in. I realized, though, that I had better make friends with him.

Wiping the baby powder from my palm, I reached out and shook his hand. "Good afternoon, Herr Schultz," I said. His grip was firm but unthreatening. A slight scent of soap I didn't recognize pricked my nostrils.

"Good afternoon, Frau Kraftmann," he replied. "It is a pleasure to finally meet you. The neighborhood ladies have told me so much about you," he said, wiping the baby powder that had transferred to his palm. "Please, call me Dirk."

We talked briefly in that first visit, me in the doorway, Dirk standing on the stoop. He asked if I was enjoying myself in his village and if the neighbors were being hospitable. He asked me for a donation for the Winter

Relief Fund, he convinced me to subscribe to the local newspaper, and he invited me to the next town meeting. His presence made me uncomfortable at first; I spent the beginning of the conversation shifting my weight and fingering my wedding ring. He only stayed for a few minutes, but I had the feeling I'd be seeing him around quite often. The thought of having to let a Nazi into my life, even a polite, attractive one, suddenly made me ill. Pictures of the SS men in my living room and my last glimpse of Jared flashed on the screen inside my head. As soon as the door shut behind Dirk, I dashed to the sink and vomited. A mixture of guilt and hatred swirled down the drain.

Dirk made his second appearance a few days later when I was sitting down to breakfast. I answered the door and was surprised to find him standing there with a bunch of wildflowers and a small cake in his hand. I was so distracted that I didn't notice the red Nazi flags hanging outside my neighbors' houses.

"Good morning, Helga," Dirk smiled politely. "May I come in?"

"Yes, of course," I said, not wanting him to think I had anything to hide. I accepted the flowers and cake and led him into the kitchen.

"The ladies all chipped in to make you this cake. It's a welcome present," he said proudly.

"They didn't have to do that," I objected. "They shouldn't have wasted their sugar on me!"

I shut Dirk's offensive uniform coat away in the closet and set him a place at the breakfast table. He sat down next to Willi, who was gurgling in his high chair at the head of the table. Willi's belly was fat with my milk and he was delighted to be playing with the wooden spoon I had given him. So far, he was showing only the traits of his mother.

"I wasn't expecting company," I said, preparing Dirk a cup of tea, "or I would have gotten some fresh rolls from the bakery. I just have the stale ones leftover from yesterday."

"Stale leftover rolls are alright with me," Dirk smiled appreciatively. "And how are you this morning, little guy?" he playfully questioned Willi, whose mouth was much too full of wooden spoon to respond. Dirk patted Willi's head, flattening his newly sprouting curls. "What a little trooper you've got here, Helga. If you ever need any help with him, or anything else for that matter, you can count on me."

Looking down, I nodded that I understood.

"I mean it. I'm here to help you."

"Thank you," I said, turning my wedding ring on my finger. "What brings you here so early this morning? I hope you didn't come all this way just to bring me the cake."

“Well,” he hesitated. “Actually, I was wondering why you weren’t at the town meeting last night?”

“Oh,” I replied, inspecting my fingernails. “Well, Willi wasn’t feeling well, and I was tired. I had planned to stop by, but I didn’t make it.”

“Our meetings are important, Helga,” Dirk leaned slightly forward in his chair. “You should really come to them.”

“I’ll try harder next time,” I said looking up, not wanting to aggravate him.

“Good!” he said. “No harm done this time. Besides, I’ve brought the meeting to you.”

“Oh?”

“The main order of business was handing out these flags that you’ll see everyone on the block displaying. It is the Führer’s orders that everyone has one.” He reached into his bag and pulled out a bright red flag with a black swastika on it. It was the likeness of the one on his armband and he held it out for me to take. It was instantly clear to me that the meetings weren’t just “town” meetings. I stared blankly at Dirk until he nudged the air, motioning again for me to take the flag. I realized that I had no choice in the matter, so I stiffly took it and placed it on the counter.

“I’ll hang it up at once,” I said. There was a moment of silence. I took the opportunity to place the rolls, butter, and marmalade on the table. I broke a piece off of my roll and gave it to Willi to gum. We began eating.

“You know, Helga, my mother raised me and my two brothers by herself,” Dirk said. “It wasn’t easy on her. I don’t think anybody should have to raise a family all by herself.”

“Oh, I’m managing alright, I guess.”

“What happened to Herr Kraftmann, Helga,” Dirk asked, “if you don’t mind me asking?”

His question sent a shockwave under my skin. I could feel heat collecting in my face. “Well,” I replied, my voice beginning to tremble, “he was killed in a plane accident. It was terrible. I don’t like to talk about it. I loved him very much.”

“I’m sorry, Helga,” Dirk replied with sympathy in his eyes. “I didn’t mean to upset you. That’s what I had heard from your neighbor, Steffi Gleich, but I wanted to get the story from you. You know how gossip can be.”

I nodded.

“I hadn’t heard of an accident in which a German officer was killed, so I just wanted to make sure that Frau Gleich had the story straight.”

A tear that I was trying to keep inside escaped and trickled down my cheek.

“I’m really sorry.” He spoke softly. “I know how you feel. My father was killed in battle. My mother almost didn’t survive his death. What a

pointless war.”

His choice of words surprised me. No one I knew was denouncing the war. I wasn't sure if he meant it or was just trying to feel out my feelings on the subject. “I know,” I said. “It's still very painful for me.”

“Are you absolutely certain he's dead, Helga?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, there's no death certificate for him in our files. He could be just missing in action.”

“Dead, missing in action, what's the difference? His plane went down and he never came home!” I answer, pushing myself up from the kitchen table. The tears broke free. I jammed my shirtsleeve into my eyes to absorb the falls. “Thank you for stopping by, Herr Schultz, but I'm not feeling very well this morning and I have to give Willi a bath. But I appreciate you eating breakfast with me and for bringing me the flag.” I hurried out of the kitchen, retrieved his coat, and held it out for him. He slowly eased himself out of his chair and walked towards me at the door.

“I'm sorry, Helga. I know it's agonizing for you.”

I nodded. He took his coat and put it on. I opened the front door for him. He turned to me before he left and took my hand. He squeezed it.

“I'm sorry,” he said again. “Please let me know if there is anything I can do for you,” and he walked out the door. The moment I heard the click of the latch, I scooped Willi out of his high chair and rocked with him on the floor. I kissed him and cried, kissed him and cried, and told him everything was going to be alright.

Later that day, I went outside with a hammer and nailed that Nazi flag to the side of my house.

Despite the pain he caused me, Dirk and I soon become friends. We came to an unspoken agreement: I never mentioned my husband and he never mentioned the Nazis, unless he had to. He oddly respected my apprehension about the regime; I sensed that he was apprehensive about the regime too, despite his position in it.

Although plagued with fear for Jared, my first couple years in Himmelreich were relatively pleasant. I made friends with my neighbors, took long walks with Willi in the forest, and fed the wild animals that passed through our backyard. The next winter, Dirk actually put me in charge of collecting the Winter Relief Fund. Since my own funds were somewhat tight, I got a part-time job in the new local factory, which was manufacturing weapons for the German army. Frau Gleich watched Willi while I was at work. Apparently, the whole country was rearming, but we didn't realize that Hitler intended to go to war. He was even on the radio saying things like, “The battlefield is the final test of the foreign policy of a people ... basically,

I did not organize the armed forces in order not to strike. The decision to strike was always in me.”

Willi absolutely loved hearing Hitler’s voice come through the radio. It was such state-of-the art technology that we were all were a bit mesmerized. None of us should have been surprised when in March of 1938, in full violation of the Treaty of Versailles, the German army marched into Austria.

By this time, Willi had grown a lot. He was a toddler now with a head of wild blond curls, but he was beginning to develop the dark eyes of his father. Thankfully, it wasn’t enough to give away his secret.

During those two years of peace, Dirk’s and my relationship had also grown. I walked with him to all the town meetings and he regularly joined Willi and me for dinner. When I needed to get out of the house, he took me to the art shows or to the new outdoor theatre in the neighboring town. When I needed time to myself, I allowed him to do things with Willi. He took Willi waddling down to the river to fish, or hiking in the forest. I was uneasy with this at first, but Willi adored his new father figure. He would race to the door when Dirk arrived and welcome him in by suctioning himself to Dirk’s leg. He giggled ecstatically as Dirk playfully struggled to pry him off and then tossed his little body in the air.

“Higher! Higher!” Willy would squeal.

Frequently, I felt guilty about letting Dirk into our lives, and I spent many nights awake in bed, aching for Jared. Other days it was a challenge to convince myself that Jared had been real and not just a figment of my imagination. I hated not being able to talk about him to anyone, not even to his son. Willi believed that his father was an air force pilot that had died in a plane crash. It was safer for him that way, but it killed me. I yearned to be loved again. I felt pulled in opposite directions by loneliness and loyalty.

After two years of torment, I started to break down. I had been staring at my wedding ring, feeling like Jared would never come back to me, like he had never been real in the first place. *Would he even find me if he were alive? Why had he not earned his freedom yet?*

The pain was so bad, one night I put Willi to bed and ran into the forest where no one could hear me. I screamed and pounded my fists into a tree until they bled. I spent half the night out in the woods, curled into a ball among the dirt and twigs. I could have easily stayed there and died. Willi was the only thing that brought me back, or so I thought.

The next night there was a town meeting, an outdoor one. It was held at night, as they all were, with lights, flags, and singing. I got caught up in the emotion, which was the point. Afterwards, Dirk walked me home. He asked about my scraped hands and I told him I had cut them at work. When we got to my house, he asked if he could come in. I let him.

When we were inside, he bent down and squeezed me in his arms. I melted into him, burying my head into his shoulder, letting tears seep into his shirt. He took a step back, took my chin in his palm, and kissed me.

It had been so long since a man had touched me that I had to pull away for a moment and take a deep breath. When I opened my eyes, I caught a glimpse of Dirk's swastika glaring at me.

I tore at Dirk's shirt, clawed at his buttons, and when that wasn't fast enough, I scrambled into the kitchen and returned with a pair of scissors. I cut the horrid thing off of him ... and then the rest of his shirt ... and then everything else.

He looked innocent and pure when I was done, standing naked in a pile of cloth. Under that uniform he was just a normal man, not a fascist, just a man. Suddenly free of all his burdens, Dirk reached for my left hand and twisted my wedding ring until it came off. He let it drop into the fabric at his feet. Then he picked me up like a bride and carried me into my bedroom.

The sun is setting now, as the train crosses the border into a strange land I've never seen, but love more than my own life. Pink and purple hues fall on white mountain slopes I've never seen. I continue to hide my face in the scene outside from the pacing guard in the aisle. The soothing rocking of the train has put all those around me to sleep; I, however, am wide awake.

Dirk and I woke up for the first time in each other's arms about the same time that Hitler rekindled his hateful spirit and put an end to the temporary peace over Germany. Suddenly, things got violent again. The Jews were required to carry identification cards, they were arrested en masse, they were prohibited from public places, and I heard a rumor about what was happening in the work camps. My neighbor Steffi Gleich said that a friend of a friend of hers knew a doctor in one of these camps. When a trainload of people arrived, they were given a medical exam on the spot. Those strong enough to work were sent to the right and into the camp. Those too weak, too old, too sick, or too young to work were sent to the left and never heard from again.

"Don't say such things," I whispered back to Steffi. "They're fanatics, but not barbarians ... right?"

The night of November 9, 1938 put an official end to the respite from terror in Germany. *Kristallnacht* came completely out of the blue and crushed our hopes of a dignified Germany. The SS rampaged through the streets across the country, destroying and burning Jewish shops, businesses, and synagogues. On my way to work the next morning, the snow was black with ashes. Broken glass littered the streets and the smell of charred wood sickened the air. It was happening again.

From that day on, there were SS guards in Himmelreich. There was also the Hitler Youth, young boys ages ten to eighteen. Just like the older soldiers, they drilled, carried weapons, and trained to become instruments of warfare.

By the next year, Willi was four years old and he understood nothing of what was happening. He remained a happy child. He loved to play in the street with the other neighborhood children and the new soldiers. He was simply delighted to have Dirk as a frequent overnight guest.

My instincts told me to lock Willi up and never let him out of my sight, but reason got the better of me. I figured the more Dirk and the other soldiers got attached to Willi, the harder it would make him to kill.

Willi took a particular liking to the boys in the Hitler Youth. Whenever they came marching by, he would run outside, salute them, and giggle and dance around them. The boys became quite fond of him as well. They showed him their guns and gave him candy. He joined in singing their songs, and marched behind them with his own rifle, a glorified tree branch. I watched him from the kitchen window, his miniature legs stepping furiously to keep up with the older boys.

As Willi got older, he also started asking questions.

“Is Dirk my father, Mama?”

“No, dear.” I prayed for the strength to answer these questions. “You know your father died.”

“What was my father like?”

“Well, he was very brave.”

“Could he shoot a rifle and survive alone in the woods like my friend Micha in the Hitler Youth?”

“I’m sure he could, Willi. Your father was very rustic.” I ruffled Willi’s curls.

“Could he fish like Hans?”

“I really don’t know, honey. Your father never took me fishing.”

“Was he strong like Dirk, Mama?” Willi’s big eyes gleamed with curiosity.

I paused. “Yes, dear, of course he was. Willi, I hear your friends outside. Why don’t you run and play.”

“Okay, Mama.” Willi wiped the crumbs from his face and hopped off his stool. He took a few steps towards the door but then stopped and turned around.

“What did my father look like?”

“He looked like you, dear.” My voice cracked. “Now stop asking me these silly questions. We want your father to rest in peace, now don’t we?”

Willi nodded.

With the increased Nazi presence in Himmelreich, Dirk was suddenly busy all the time. Though he came to me three or four nights a week, we hardly had any time to talk. He was given little black journals in which he had to log all the information of every citizen in town. He wrote down physical appearance, occupation, medical history, family history, attendance at town meetings, and anything suspicious that anybody said or did. He was obviously suspicious about my past, because he came for my information last.

“Helga,” Dirk said to me one night after I had just put Willi to bed.

“Hmmm?”

“I have to ask you some questions.”

I tensed in my chair. “No, I’m tired. Wouldn’t you rather just go to bed?” I tugged him gently by the shirt in the direction of the bedroom, hoping to distract him.

“Now I know you don’t like to talk about this, but I have to ask you these questions. I’m sorry.”

“Can’t it wait till morning?” I said, unbuttoning his top shirt button.

“No, I absolutely must ask you now. Who exactly was your husband and what happened to him?” he asked, eyeing me intently.

“I told you,” I said, trying to control the tremble in my voice, “he was a pilot in the air force and—”

“Helga that’s impossible! I’m not stupid, you know. It didn’t take me long to figure out that Christof Kraftmann wasn’t killed in action and didn’t go missing in action. He went absent without leave.”

“Why are you investigating my husband?”

“And another thing, Christof Kraftmann could not have been your husband, because he was never married. I doubt he was ever actually with a woman.”

“That’s enough! What are you saying? What are you doing?”

“Christ, Helga, I’m doing my job! You think I like being a Nazi? You think I like filling out these cursed black books?” Dirk took the book in his hand and threw it near me on the floor. “You think I don’t see where all of this is going? You think I want to go to war after losing my father in the last one? I don’t, but *I have no choice!*”

Dirk’s eyes were darting wildly around the room and he looked like he was losing control of himself.

“I’m a Nazi now, whether I like it or not! And I have to fill out these books. If I don’t, they’ll pick me off just like a Jew or a queer or a cripple.”

“No,” I reached out my hand and touched Dirk’s face.

His hand snapped up and gripped my wrist.

“There are things about you, Helga that I don’t understand.” His grip on my wrist tightened. “I will try to write them down in the best possible light, but you have to tell me the truth. If you don’t tell me, they’ll figure it out

themselves, and they won't be understanding. I love you, Helga, and I don't want anything to happen to you. Please tell me the truth ... tell me who your husband is."

Something inside me snapped. "Jared is none of your goddamn business!" I shouted at Dirk.

"What?"

I gasped and covered my mouth with my hands. "Christof," I whispered. "I meant Christof."

Dirk slapped me hard on the cheek. Stunned, I fell back in my chair and started to bawl. "Why are you asking me these questions?"

"I can't save you, Helga," Dirk replied. "Not after all these lies."

I couldn't speak, only cry. I watched Dirk's face contort with confusion. Tears welled up in his eyes too and his face turned as red as the Nazi flag. He stood in front of me for a minute, his head bowed, and then turned towards the door. He stopped on the stoop and took a long look at me. Then he disappeared, leaving the door open behind him.

The next time I saw Dirk was a week later at the town meeting. It was September 3, 1939. Great Britain and France had just declared war on Germany. There was music and fireworks in the street outside the town hall. I brought Willi with me, afraid to be away from him for a minute. I held him back from running to Dirk, who refused to look at us. He must have figured it out. The question was, *what would he do about it?*

There was much celebrating at the town meeting, but I couldn't bring myself to fake a smile. I had to get out of there. Willi sang the National Anthem proudly with the crowd. I refused to sing. On my way home, I refused to give the Nazi salute.

The next day, the SS brought Willi and me a package. They lined up in perfect ranks outside our house and called in unison, "Heil Hitler!"

Willi bounded outside to meet them. "Heil Hitler!" he answered. I followed. Our Nazi flag flapped in the wind. One of the soldiers stepped forward and presented Willi with a box wrapped in brown paper. A familiar smell wafted to my nose.

"Please give this to your mother, Wilhelm." The soldier handed it to him and then stepped back in rank. The troops proceeded on.

"Thank you!" Willi called after them, waving. He bounded up to me and held out the package. "They brought us a present, Mama!"

I took it from him with trembling hands and just stared at the parcel.

"What's wrong, Mama? Open it! Open it!"

"Let's go inside, dear." Once inside, I sent Willi to his room. I told him I would tell him when it was okay to come out. He went grudgingly.

It was several minutes before I had the courage to open the box. Shakily, my fingers peeled off the tape that held the paper together.

Willi came rushing out of the bedroom when he heard me scream. He found me on the floor, covered in ashes. A wooden box with a swastika etched into the top was open on the floor, half full of dark gray flakes. In my hands, I clutched Jared's wedding ring.

That instant, I began preparing to run away. The Nazis had gotten my husband, but they were not getting my son. I hurried Willi into the bedroom and dressed him in as many clothes as I could. I threw all of our bread, fruit, and cheese in a blanket. I filled a jug with water, spilling half of it onto the floor. By dusk, we were ready to go. I didn't know where we were going, but it didn't matter. The SS broke down our door as Willi and I were running out the back.

Willi did not cry as a guard tore him from my grasp and heaved him over his shoulder. He just looked confused as I cursed and clawed at the back of the man taking him out of our house. Sensing my distress, Willi called out, "Mama!" before disappearing out the door.

I leapt after him but another guard stepped in front of me and shoved me into a chair. "Helga, stop it!" he shouted hot in my face. "There's nothing you can do!"

I was left alone in my house, for the second time, defeated. I couldn't fight, I couldn't scream, I couldn't cry. I dropped to the floor and lay there for more than a day. My mind was completely blank, except for one thought: *Those too weak, too old, too sick, or too young to work were sent to the left and never heard from again.*

"Helga, for God's sake, get up!" said my neighbor, Steffi Gleich, as she shook my forcefully. I had no answer for her. "Helga, I'm not kidding, get up now!" she ordered in an authoritative voice. Her words sounded very far away.

"Let me be," I whispered. Steffi pulled me up off the floor and sat me down on the couch. I slumped over, my head in her lap, drifting out of consciousness.

"Read this, Helga!" She shoved a newspaper in my face. I opened my eyes and saw a blurry image of our local Nazi newspaper in Steffi's hands.

"I can't."

"Okay, I'll read it for you. *Local Block Leader Executed,*" she read.

"What?" I said, and tried to sit up with some help from Steffi.

She continued reading. *"Yesterday, Himmelreich block leader Dirk Schultz was executed as an example to all Germans of the penalty of treason. Sources reported witnessing Herr Schultz help a Jewish child, Wilhelm Kraftmann, four years old, escape from a train en route to a protection camp"*

in Poland. Herr Schultz was taken immediately into custody. He refused to cooperate in locating the boy and was executed by firing squad. Any information on the whereabouts of Wilhelm Kraftmann should be reported immediately at town hall. The body of Herr Schultz will be placed on display—

“Steffi!” I called out, struggling to regain consciousness. “What does it mean?”

“Helga, it means that Dirk is dead. He sacrificed himself to save Willi.”

“What?”

“I wish I had known your son was Jewish. I would have gotten him out much earlier. I’ve done it a few times now. Dirk figured it out and was going to turn me in. But he approached me last week instead and requested help for Willi. I’ve arranged everything. Your son is waiting for you at an orphanage in Bern. All we have to do is get you out of Germany.”

“What?”

“There is no time to waste, Helga!” Steffi held out some papers for me to take. “Here is your forged passport. You are Sandra Bauer, returning to Switzerland after visiting German relatives. Speak as little as you can.”

“What?”

“Here is your train ticket.”

For the first time in two days, energy entered my body. I gave Steffi a strong hug and then got to my feet.

My heart struggles now against the confines of my chest cavity as I feel the wheels on the train begin to slow, slow, slow. The sleeping passengers beside me open their eyes, yawn, and stretch their arms and legs. The guard in the aisle walks to the front of the compartment and disappears through a door leading to the front of the train. In a few moments, I hear his voice over the loudspeaker. “Attention passengers, next stop, Bern, Switzerland. Attention passengers, next stop, Bern, Switzerland.”

I feel a kick inside my stomach. “Soon, little one,” I whisper. “Soon.”