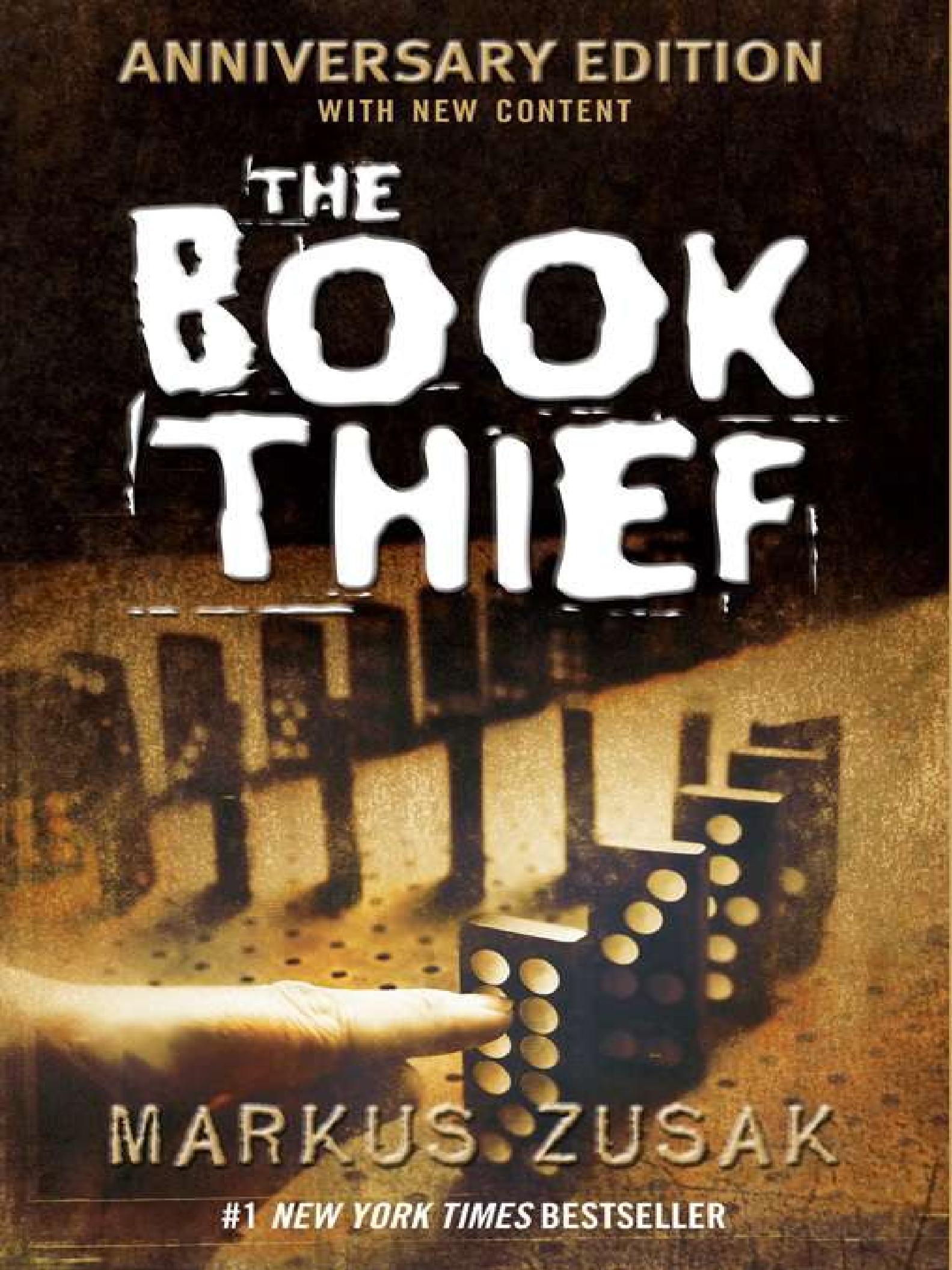
ANNIVERSARY EDITION

WITH NEW CONTENT

THE BOOK THIEF



MARKUS ZUSAK

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLER

It is 1939. Nazi Germany.
The country is holding its breath.
Death has never been busier, and will become busier still.

Liesel Meminger finds her life changed when she unearths a single object from the snow. It is *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, left there by accident at her brother's funeral, and it is her first act of book thievery.

But these are dangerous times. When Liesel's foster family hides a Jewish man in their basement, Liesel's world is both opened up and closed down.

In superbly crafted prose that burns with intensity, award-winning author Markus Zusak has given us one of the most enduring stories of our time.

Praise for *The Book Thief*

“Thought-provoking, life-affirming, triumphant and tragic, this is a novel of breathtaking scope, masterfully told. It is an important piece of work, but also a wonderful page-turner.”
—*The Guardian*

“This is a stunning book, seemingly channeled from a rare, artistic muse.”
—*Seattle Post-Intelligencer*

“[A] haunting tale [that] will steal your heart.”
—*The Miami Herald*

“One of the most highly anticipated young-adult books in years.”
—*The Wall Street Journal*

“Intricate and extraordinary.”
—*Newsday*

“An absorbing and searing narrative.”
—*Orlando Sentinel*

“Lyrical and moving.”
—*San Francisco Chronicle*

“This fabulous novel is rich, complicated and wise enough to satisfy a reader of any age.”
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“[B]oth gripping and touching, a work that kept me up late into the night feverishly reading the last 300 pages. You can’t ask for much more than that.”
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“A remarkable read.”
—*The Sacramento Bee*

“This is a brilliant look at the wartime lives of ordinary decent people.”
—*St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

“This is virtuoso work. Zusak exhibits the kind of mastery and peak power Kurt Vonnegut showed in his wartime tale *Slaughterhouse-Five*.”
—*The Grand Rapids Press*

“It’s the book to pick up for people who love to read.”
—*The Florida Times-Union*

“Remarkable, just plain remarkable.”
—*The Anniston Star*

“Subtle, simple, yet vividly imagined.”
—*Teen Vogue*

★ “Beautiful and important.”
—*Kirkus Reviews, Starred*

★ “Exquisitely written …. A tour de force to be not just read but inhabited.”
—*The Horn Book*, Starred

★ “It’s a book of greatness.”
—*The Bulletin*, Starred

★ “An extraordinary narrative.”
—*School Library Journal*, Starred

★ “An achievement.”
—*Publishers Weekly*, Starred

Winner of the Book Sense Book of the Year Award

Winner of the Michael L. Printz Honor Book Award for Excellence in Young Adult Literature

Winner of the National Jewish Book Award

Winner of the Association of Jewish Libraries Teen Book Award

A Quill Award Nominee

A *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of the Year

A *Kirkus Reviews* Editor’s Choice

A *Horn Book* Fanfare

A *School Library Journal* Best Book of the Year

A *Booklist* Editors' Choice

A *Bulletin* Blue Ribbon Book

An ALA Notable Book

An ALA-YALSA Top Ten Best Book for Young Adults

ANNIVERSARY EDITION

THE BOOK THIEF

by markus zusak

illustrations by trudy white

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For Elisabeth and Helmut Zusak,

with love and admiration

PROLOGUE

a mountain range of rubble

in which our narrator introduces:

himself—the colors—and the book thief

DEATH AND CHOCOLATE

First the colors.

Then the humans.

That's usually how I see things.

Or at least, how I try.

• • • HERE IS A SMALL FACT • • •

You are going to die.

I am in all truthfulness attempting to be cheerful about this whole topic, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me. I most definitely *can* be cheerful. I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the A's. Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.

• • • REACTION TO THE

AFOREMENTIONED FACT

Does this worry you?

I urge you—don't be afraid.

I'm nothing if not fair.

—Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will

be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A color will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away.

At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

The question is, what color will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?

Personally, I like a chocolate-colored sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every color I see—the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavors, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax.

• • • A SMALL THEORY • • •

People observe the colors of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing moment. A single *hour* can consist of thousands of different colors. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses.
In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

As I've been alluding to, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style vacation destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision—to make distraction my vacation. Needless to say, I vacation in increments. In colors.

Still, it's possible that you might be asking, why does he even need a vacation? What does he need distraction from?

Which brings me to my next point.

It's the leftover humans.

The survivors.

They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colors to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling among the jigsaw puzzle of realization, despair, and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs.

Which in turn brings me to the subject I am telling you about tonight, or today, or whatever the hour and color. It's the story of one of those perpetual survivors—an expert at being left behind.

It's just a small story really, about, among other things:

* A girl
* Some words
* An accordionist
* Some fanatical Germans
* A Jewish fist fighter
* And quite a lot of thievery

I saw the book thief three times.

BESIDE THE RAILWAY LINE

First up is something white. Of the blinding kind.

Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a color and all of that tired sort of nonsense. Well, I'm here to tell you that it is. White is without question a color, and personally, I don't think you want to argue with me.

• • • A REASSURING ANNOUNCEMENT • • •

Please, be calm, despite that previous threat.

I am all bluster—

I am not violent.

I am not malicious.

I am a result.

Yes, it was white.

It felt as though the whole globe was dressed in snow. Like it had pulled it on, the way you pull on a sweater. Next to the train line, footprints were sunken to their shins. Trees wore blankets of ice.

As you might expect, someone had died.

• • •

They couldn't just leave him on the ground. For now, it wasn't such a problem, but very soon, the track ahead would be cleared and the train would need to move on.

There were two guards.

There was one mother and her daughter.

One corpse.

The mother, the girl, and the corpse remained stubborn and silent.

"Well, what else do you want me to do?"

The guards were tall and short. The tall one always spoke first, though he was not in charge. He looked at the smaller, rounder one. The one with the juicy red face.

"Well," was the response, "we can't just leave them like this, can we?"

The tall one was losing patience. "Why not?"

And the smaller one damn near exploded. He looked up at the tall one's chin and cried, *"Spinnst du?!* Are you stupid?!" The abhorrence on his cheeks was growing thicker by the moment. His skin widened. "Come on," he said, traipsing over the snow. "We'll carry all three of them back on if we have to. We'll notify the next stop."

As for me, I had already made the most elementary of mistakes. I can't explain to you the severity of my self-disappointment. Originally, I'd done everything right:

I studied the blinding, white-snow sky who stood at the window of the moving train. I practically *inhaled* it, but still, I wavered. I buckled —I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched.

Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them.

A small soul was in my arms.

I stood a little to the right.

The dynamic train guard duo made their way back to the mother, the girl, and the small male corpse. I clearly remember that my breath

was loud that day. I'm surprised the guards didn't notice me as they walked by. The world was sagging now, under the weight of all that snow.

Perhaps ten meters to my left, the pale, empty-stomached girl was standing, frost-stricken.

Her mouth jittered.

Her cold arms were folded.

Tears were frozen to the book thief's face.

THE ECLIPSE

Next is a signature black, to show the poles of my versatility, if you like. It was the darkest moment before the dawn.

This time, I had come for a man of perhaps twenty-four years of age. It was a beautiful thing in some ways. The plane was still coughing. Smoke was leaking from both its lungs.

When it crashed, three deep gashes were made in the earth. Its wings were now sawn-off arms. No more flapping. Not for this metallic little bird.

• • • SOME OTHER SMALL FACTS • • •

Sometimes I arrive too early.

I rush, and some people cling longer to life than expected.

After a small collection of minutes, the smoke exhausted itself. There was nothing left to give.

A boy arrived first, with cluttered breath and what appeared to be a toolbox. With great trepidation, he approached the cockpit and watched the pilot, gauging if he was alive, at which point, he still was. The book thief arrived perhaps thirty seconds later.

Years had passed, but I recognized her.

She was panting.

From the toolbox, the boy took out, of all things, a teddy bear.

He reached in through the torn windshield and placed it on the pilot's chest. The smiling bear sat huddled among the crowded wreckage of the man and the blood. A few minutes later, I took my chance. The time was right.

I walked in, loosened his soul, and carried it gently away.

All that was left was the body, the dwindling smell of smoke, and the smiling teddy bear.

As the crowd arrived in full, things, of course, had changed. The horizon was beginning to charcoal. What was left of the blackness above was nothing now but a scribble, and disappearing fast.

The man, in comparison, was the color of bone. Skeleton-colored skin. A ruffled uniform. His eyes were cold and brown—like coffee stains—and the last scrawl from above formed what, to me, appeared an odd, yet familiar, shape. A signature.

The crowd did what crowds do.

As I made my way through, each person stood and played with the quietness of it. It was a small concoction of disjointed hand movements, muffled sentences, and mute, self-conscious turns.

When I glanced back at the plane, the pilot's open mouth appeared to be smiling.

A final dirty joke.

Another human punch line.

He remained shrouded in his uniform as the graying light arm-wrestled the sky. As with many of the others, when I began my journey away, there seemed a quick shadow again, a final moment of eclipse—the recognition of another soul gone.

You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the colors that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies.

I've seen millions of them.

I've seen more eclipses than I care to remember.

THE FLAG

The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places, it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked across the redness.

Earlier, kids had been playing hopscotch there, on the street that looked like oil-stained pages. When I arrived, I could still hear the echoes. The feet tapping the road. The children-voices laughing, and the smiles like salt, but decaying fast.

Then, bombs.

This time, everything was too late.

The sirens. The cuckoo shrieks in the radio. All too late.

Within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies were stuck there, like driftwood after the flood.

They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of souls.

Was it fate?

Misfortune?

Is that what glued them down like that?

Of course not.

Let’s not be stupid.

It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds.

Yes, the sky was now a devastating, home-cooked red. The small German town had been flung apart one more time. Snowflakes of ash

fell so *lovelily* you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them. Only, they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth.

Clearly, I see it.

I was just about to leave when I found her kneeling there.

A mountain range of rubble was written, designed, erected around her. She was clutching at a book.

Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. In hindsight, I see it so obviously on her face. She was dying for it—the safety of it, the home of it—but she could not move. Also, the basement didn't even exist anymore. It was part of the mangled landscape.

Please, again, I ask you to believe me.

I wanted to stop. To crouch down.

I wanted to say:

"I'm sorry, child."

But that is not allowed.

I did not crouch down. I did not speak.

Instead, I watched her awhile. When she was able to move, I followed her.

• • •

She dropped the book.

She knelt.

The book thief howled.

Her book was stepped on several times as the cleanup began, and although orders were given only to clear the mess of concrete, the girl's most precious item was thrown aboard a garbage truck, at which point I was compelled. I climbed aboard and took it in my hand, not realizing that I would keep it and view it several thousand times over the years. I would watch the places where we intersect, and marvel at what the girl saw and how she survived. That is the best I can do—watch it fall into line with everything else I spectated during that time.

When I recollect her, I see a long list of colors, but it's the three in which I saw her in the flesh that resonate the most. Sometimes I manage to float far above those three moments. I hang suspended, until a septic truth bleeds toward clarity.

That's when I see them formulate.

• • • THE COLORS • • •

RED: WHITE: BLACK:

They fall on top of each other. The scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white, onto the thick soupy red.

Yes, often, I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt—an immense leap of an attempt—to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.

Here it is. One of a handful.

The Book Thief.

If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story.

I'll show you something.

PART ONE

the grave digger's handbook

featuring:

himmel street—the art of *saumensching*—an ironfisted woman—a kiss attempt—jesse owens—sandpaper—the smell of friendship—a heavyweight champion—and the mother of all *watschens*

ARRIVAL ON HIMMEL STREET

That last time.

That red sky …

How does a book thief end up kneeling and howling and flanked by a man-made heap of ridiculous, greasy, cooked-up rubble?

Years earlier, the start was snow.

The time had come. For one.

• • • A SPECTACULARLY TRAGIC MOMENT • • •

A train was moving quickly.

It was packed with humans.

A six-year-old boy died in the third carriage.

The book thief and her brother were traveling down toward Munich, where they would soon be given over to foster parents. We now know, of course, that the boy didn't make it.

• • • HOW IT HAPPENED • • •

There was an intense spurt of coughing.

Almost an *inspired* spurt.

And soon after—nothing.

When the coughing stopped, there was nothing but the nothingness of life moving on with a shuffle, or a near-silent twitch. A suddenness found its way onto his lips then, which were a corroded brown color and peeling, like old paint. In desperate need of redoing.

Their mother was asleep.

I entered the train.

My feet stepped through the cluttered aisle and my palm was over his mouth in an instant. No one noticed. The train galloped on. Except the girl.

With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief—also known as Liesel Meminger—could see without question that her younger brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead.

His blue eyes stared at the floor.

Seeing nothing.

Prior to waking up, the book thief was dreaming about the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler. In the dream, she was attending a rally at which he spoke, looking at the skull-colored part in his hair and the perfect square of his mustache. She was listening contentedly to the torrent of words spilling from his mouth. His sentences glowed in the light. In a quieter moment, he actually crouched down and smiled at her. She returned the smile and said, *"Guten Tag, Herr Führer. Wie geht's dir heut?"* She hadn't learned to speak too well, or even to read, as she had rarely frequented school. The reason for that she would find out in due course.

Just as the *Führer* was about to reply, she woke up.

It was January 1939. She was nine years old, soon to be ten.

Her brother was dead.

One eye open.

One still in a dream.

It would be better for a complete dream, I think, but I really have no control over that.

The second eye jumped awake and she caught me out, no doubt about it. It was exactly when I knelt down and extracted his soul,

holding it limply in my swollen arms. He warmed up soon after, but when I picked him up originally, the boy's spirit was soft and cold, like ice cream. He started melting in my arms. Then warming up completely. Healing.

For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement and the staggered onslaught of thoughts. *Es stimmt nicht.* This isn't happening. This isn't happening.

And the shaking.

Why do they always shake them?

Yes, I know, I know, I assume it has something to do with instinct. To stem the flow of truth. Her heart at that point was slippery and hot, and loud, so loud so loud.

Stupidly, I stayed. I watched.

Next, her mother.

She woke her up with the same distraught shake.

If you can't imagine it, think clumsy silence. Think bits and pieces of floating despair. And drowning in a train.

• • •

Snow had been falling consistently, and the service to Munich was forced to stop due to faulty track work. There was a woman wailing. A girl stood numbly next to her.

In panic, the mother opened the door.

She climbed down into the snow, holding the small body.

What could the girl do but follow?

As you've been informed, two guards also exited the train. They discussed and argued over what to do. The situation was unsavory to say the least. It was eventually decided that all three of them should

be taken to the next township and left there to sort things out.

This time, the train limped through the snowed-in country.

It hobbled in and stopped.

They stepped onto the platform, the body in her mother's arms.

They stood.

The boy was getting heavy.

Liesel had no idea where she was. All was white, and as they remained at the station, she could only stare at the faded lettering of the sign in front of her. For Liesel, the town was nameless, and it was there that her brother, Werner, was buried two days later. Witnesses included a priest and two shivering grave diggers.

• • • AN OBSERVATION • • •

A pair of train guards.

A pair of grave diggers.

When it came down to it, one of them called the shots.

The other did what he was told.

The question is, what if the *other* is a lot more than one?

Mistakes, mistakes, it's all I seem capable of at times.

For two days, I went about my business. I traveled the globe as always, handing souls to the conveyor belt of eternity. I watched them trundle passively on. Several times, I warned myself that I should keep a good distance from the burial of Liesel Meminger's brother. I did not heed my advice.

From miles away, as I approached, I could already see the small group of humans standing frigidly among the wasteland of snow. The cemetery welcomed me like a friend, and soon, I was with them. I bowed my head.

Standing to Liesel's left, the grave diggers were rubbing their hands together and whining about the snow and the current digging conditions. "So hard getting through all the ice," and so forth. One of them couldn't have been more than fourteen. An apprentice. When he walked away, after a few dozen paces, a black book fell innocuously from his coat pocket without his knowledge.

A few minutes later, Liesel's mother started leaving with the priest. She was thanking him for his performance of the ceremony.

The girl, however, stayed.

Her knees entered the ground. Her moment had arrived.

Still in disbelief, she started to dig. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't—

Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.

Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.

Somewhere in all the snow, she could see her broken heart, in two pieces. Each half was glowing, and beating under all that white. She realized her mother had come back for her only when she felt the boniness of a hand on her shoulder. She was being dragged away. A warm scream filled her throat.

• • • A SMALL IMAGE, PERHAPS • • •

TWENTY METERS AWAY

When the dragging was done, the mother and the girl stood and breathed.

There was something black and rectangular lodged in the snow.

Only the girl saw it.

She bent down and picked it up and held it firmly in her fingers.

The book had silver writing on it.

They held hands.

A final, soaking farewell was let go of, and they turned and left the cemetery, looking back several times.

As for me, I remained a few moments longer.

I waved.

No one waved back.

Mother and daughter vacated the cemetery and made their way toward the next train to Munich.

Both were skinny and pale.

Both had sores on their lips.

Liesel noticed it in the dirty, fogged-up window of the train when they boarded just before midday. In the written words of the book thief herself, the journey continued like *everything* had happened.

When the train pulled into the *Bahnhof* in Munich, the passengers slid out as if from a torn package. There were people of every stature, but among them, the poor were the most easily recognized. The impoverished always try to keep moving, as if relocating might help. They ignore the reality that a new version of the same old problem will be waiting at the end of the trip—the relative you cringe to kiss.

I think her mother knew this quite well. She wasn't delivering her children to the higher echelons of Munich, but a foster home had apparently been found, and if nothing else, the new family could at least feed the girl and the boy a little better, and educate them properly.

The boy.

Liesel was sure her mother carried the memory of him, slung over her shoulder. She dropped him. She saw his feet and legs and body slap the platform.

How could that woman walk?

How could she move?

That's the sort of thing I'll never know, or comprehend—what humans are capable of.

She picked him up and continued walking, the girl clinging now to her side.

Authorities were met and questions of lateness and the boy raised their vulnerable heads. Liesel remained in the corner of the small, dusty office as her mother sat with clenched thoughts on a very hard chair.

There was the chaos of goodbye.

It was a goodbye that was wet, with the girl's head buried into the woolly, worn shallows of her mother's coat. There had been some more dragging.

Quite a way beyond the outskirts of Munich, there was a town called Molching, said best by the likes of you and me as "Molking." That's where they were taking her, to a street by the name of Himmel.

• • • A TRANSLATION • • •

Himmel **= Heaven**

Whoever named Himmel Street certainly had a healthy sense of irony. Not that it was a living hell. It wasn't. But it sure as hell wasn't heaven, either.

Regardless, Liesel's foster parents were waiting.

The Hubermanns.

They'd been expecting a girl and a boy and would be paid a small allowance for having them. Nobody wanted to be the one to tell Rosa Hubermann that the boy didn't survive the trip. In fact, no one ever really wanted to tell her anything. As far as dispositions go, hers

wasn't really enviable, although she had a good record with foster kids in the past. Apparently, she'd straightened a few out.

For Liesel, it was a ride in a car.

She'd never been in one before.

There was the constant rise and fall of her stomach, and the futile hopes that they'd lose their way or change their minds. Among it all, her thoughts couldn't help turning toward her mother, back at the *Bahnhof*, waiting to leave again. Shivering. Bundled up in that useless coat. She'd be eating her nails, waiting for the train. The platform would be long and uncomfortable—a slice of cold cement. Would she keep an eye out for the approximate burial site of her son on the return trip? Or would sleep be too heavy?

The car moved on, with Liesel dreading the last, lethal turn.

The day was gray, the color of Europe.

Curtains of rain were drawn around the car.

"Nearly there." The foster care lady, Frau Heinrich, turned around and smiled. *"Dein neues Heim.* Your new home."

Liesel made a clear circle on the dribbled glass and looked out.

• • • A PHOTO OF HIMMEL STREET • • •

The buildings appear to be glued together, mostly small houses and apartment blocks that look nervous.

There is murky snow spread out like carpet.

There is concrete, empty hat-stand trees, and gray air.

A man was also in the car. He remained with the girl while Frau Heinrich disappeared inside. He never spoke. Liesel assumed he was there to make sure she wouldn't run away or to force her inside if she gave them any trouble. Later, however, when the trouble did start, he simply sat there and watched. Perhaps he was only the last resort, the

final solution.

After a few minutes, a very tall man came out. Hans Hubermann, Liesel's foster father. On one side of him was the medium-height Frau Heinrich. On the other was the squat shape of Rosa Hubermann, who looked like a small wardrobe with a coat thrown over it. There was a distinct waddle to her walk. Almost cute, if it wasn't for her face, which was like creased-up cardboard and annoyed, as if she was merely tolerating all of it. Her husband walked straight, with a cigarette smoldering between his fingers. He rolled his own.

• • •

The fact was this:

Liesel would not get out of the car.

"Was ist los mit dem Kind?" Rosa Hubermann inquired. She said it again. "What's wrong with this child?" She stuck her face inside the car and said, *"Na, komm. Komm."*

The seat in front was flung forward. A corridor of cold light invited her out. She would not move.

Outside, through the circle she'd made, Liesel could see the tall man's fingers, still holding the cigarette. Ash stumbled from its edge and lunged and lifted several times until it hit the ground. It took nearly fifteen minutes to coax her from the car. It was the tall man who did it.

Quietly.

There was the gate next, which she clung to.

A gang of tears trudged from her eyes as she held on and refused to go inside. People started to gather on the street until Rosa Hubermann swore at them, after which they reversed back, whence they came.

• • • A TRANSLATION OF • • •

ROSA HUBERMANN'S ANNOUNCEMENT

"What are you assholes looking at?"

Eventually, Liesel Meminger walked gingerly inside. Hans Hubermann had her by one hand. Her small suitcase had her by the other. Buried beneath the folded layer of clothes in that suitcase was a small black book, which, for all we know, a fourteen-year-old grave digger in a nameless town had probably spent the last few hours looking for. "I promise you," I imagine him saying to his boss, "I have no idea what happened to it. I've looked everywhere. Everywhere!" I'm sure he would never have suspected the girl, and yet, there it was—a black book with silver words written against the ceiling of her clothes:

• • • THE GRAVE DIGGER'S HANDBOOK • • •

A Twelve-Step Guide to

Grave-Digging Success

Published by the Bayern Cemetery Association

The book thief had struck for the first time—the beginning of an illustrious career.

GROWING UP A SAUMENSCH

Yes, an illustrious career.

I should hasten to admit, however, that there was a considerable hiatus between the first stolen book and the second. Another noteworthy point is that the first was stolen from snow and the second from fire. Not to omit that others were also given to her. All told, she owned fourteen books, but she saw her story as being made up predominantly of ten of them. Of those ten, six were stolen, one showed up at the kitchen table, two were made for her by a hidden Jew, and one was delivered by a soft, yellow-dressed afternoon.

When she came to write her story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started to mean not just something, but everything. Was it when she first set eyes on the room with shelves and shelves of them? Or when Max Vandenburg arrived on Himmel Street carrying handfuls of suffering and Hitler's *Mein Kampf?* Was it reading in the shelters? The last parade to Dachau? Was it *The Word Shaker?* Perhaps there would never be a precise answer as to when and where it occurred. In any case, that's getting ahead of myself. Before we make it to any of that, we first need to tour Liesel Meminger's beginnings on Himmel Street and the art of *saumensch*ing:

Upon her arrival, you could still see the bite marks of snow on her hands and the frosty blood on her fingers. Everything about her was undernourished. Wirelike shins. Coat hanger arms. She did not produce it easily, but when it came, she had a starving smile.

Her hair was a close enough brand of German blond, but she had dangerous eyes. Dark brown. You didn't really want brown eyes in Germany around that time. Perhaps she received them from her father, but she had no way of knowing, as she couldn't remember him. There was really only one thing she knew about her father. It

was a label she did not understand.

• • • A STRANGE WORD • • •

Kommunist

She'd heard it several times in the past few years.

"Communist."

There were boardinghouses crammed with people, rooms filled with questions. And that word. That strange word was always there somewhere, standing in the corner, watching from the dark. It wore suits, uniforms. No matter where they went, there it was, each time her father was mentioned. She could smell it and taste it. She just couldn't spell or understand it. When she asked her mother what it meant, she was told that it wasn't important, that she shouldn't worry about such things. At one boardinghouse, there was a healthier woman who tried to teach the children to write, using charcoal on the wall. Liesel was tempted to ask her the meaning, but it never eventuated. One day, that woman was taken away for questioning. She didn't come back.

When Liesel arrived in Molching, she had at least some inkling that she was being saved, but that was not a comfort. If her mother loved her, why leave her on someone else's doorstep? Why? Why?

Why?

The fact that she knew the answer—if only at the most basic level—seemed beside the point. Her mother was constantly sick and there was never any money to fix her. Liesel knew that. But that didn't mean she had to accept it. No matter how many times she was told that she was loved, there was no recognition that the proof was in the abandonment. Nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone.

The Hubermanns lived in one of the small, boxlike houses on Himmel Street. A few rooms, a kitchen, and a shared outhouse with neighbors. The roof was flat and there was a shallow basement for storage. It was supposedly not a basement of *adequate depth*. In 1939, this wasn't a problem. Later, in '42 and '43, it was. When air raids started, they always needed to rush down the street to a better shelter.

In the beginning, it was the profanity that made an immediate impact. It was so *vehement* and prolific. Every second word was either *Saumensch* or *Saukerl* or *Arschloch*. For people who aren't familiar with these words, I should explain. *Sau*, of course, refers to pigs. In the case of *Saumensch*, it serves to castigate, berate, or plain humiliate a female. Saukerl (pronounced "saukairl") is for a male. *Arschloch* can be translated directly into "asshole." That word, however, does not differentiate between the sexes. It simply is.

"Saumensch, du dreckiges!" Liesel's foster mother shouted that first evening when she refused to have a bath. "You filthy pig! Why won't you get undressed?" She was good at being furious. In fact, you could say that Rosa Hubermann had a face decorated with constant fury. That was how the creases were made in the cardboard texture of her complexion.

Liesel, naturally, was bathed in anxiety. There was no way she was getting into any bath, or into bed for that matter. She was twisted into one corner of the closetlike washroom, clutching for the nonexistent arms of the wall for some level of support. There was nothing but dry paint, difficult breath, and the deluge of abuse from Rosa.

"Leave her alone." Hans Hubermann entered the fray. His gentle voice made its way in, as if slipping through a crowd. "Leave her to me."

He moved closer and sat on the floor, against the wall. The tiles were cold and unkind.

"You know how to roll a cigarette?" he asked her, and for the next hour or so, they sat in the rising pool of darkness, playing with the tobacco and the cigarette papers and Hans Hubermann smoking

them.

When the hour was up, Liesel could roll a cigarette moderately well. She still didn't have a bath.

• • • SOME FACTS ABOUT • • •

HANS HUBERMANN

He loved to smoke.

The main thing he enjoyed about smoking was the rolling.

He was a painter by trade and played the piano accordion. This came in handy, especially in winter, when he could make a little money playing in the pubs of Molching, like the Knoller.

He had already cheated me in one world war but would later be put into another (as a perverse kind of reward), where he would somehow manage to avoid me again.

To most people, Hans Hubermann was barely visible. An un-special person. Certainly, his painting skills were excellent. His musical ability was better than average. Somehow, though, and I'm sure you've met people like this, he was able to appear as merely part of the background, even if he was standing at the front of a line. He was always just *there*. Not noticeable. Not important or particularly valuable.

The frustration of that appearance, as you can imagine, was its complete misleadence, let's say. There most definitely *was* value in him, and it did not go unnoticed by Liesel Meminger. (The human child—so much cannier at times than the stupefyingly ponderous adult.) She saw it immediately.

His manner.

The quiet air around him.

When he turned the light on in the small, callous washroom that night, Liesel observed the strangeness of her foster father's eyes. They

were made of kindness, and silver. Like soft silver, melting. Liesel, upon seeing those eyes, understood that Hans Hubermann was worth a lot.

• • • SOME FACTS ABOUT • • •

ROSA HUBERMANN

She was five feet, one inch tall and wore her browny gray strands of elastic hair in a bun.

To supplement the Hubermann income, she did the washing and ironing for five of the wealthier households in Molching.

Her cooking was atrocious.

She possessed the unique ability to aggravate almost anyone she ever met.

But she *did* love Liesel Meminger.

Her way of showing it just happened to be strange.

It involved bashing her with wooden spoon and words at various intervals.

When Liesel finally had a bath, after two weeks of living on Himmel Street, Rosa gave her an enormous, injury-inducing hug. Nearly choking her, she said, *"Saumensch, du dreckiges—it's* about time!"

After a few months, they were no longer Mr. and Mrs. Hubermann. With a typical fistful of words, Rosa said, "Now listen, Liesel—from now on you call me Mama." She thought a moment. "What did you call your real mother?"

Liesel answered quietly. *"Auch Mama—also* Mama."

"Well, I'm Mama Number Two, then." She looked over at her husband. "And him over there." She seemed to collect the words in her hand, pat them together, and hurl them across the table. "That

Saukerl, that filthy pig—you call him Papa, *verstehst?* Understand?"

"Yes," Liesel promptly agreed. Quick answers were appreciated in this household.

"Yes, *Mama,"* Mama corrected her. *"Saumensch*. Call me Mama when you talk to me."

At that moment, Hans Hubermann had just completed rolling a cigarette, having licked the paper and joined it all up. He looked over at Liesel and winked. She would have no trouble calling him Papa.

THE WOMAN WITH THE IRON FIST

Those first few months were definitely the hardest.

Every night, Liesel would nightmare.

Her brother's face.

Staring at the floor.

She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets. On the other side of the room, the bed that was meant for her brother floated boatlike in the darkness. Slowly, with the arrival of consciousness, it sank, seemingly into the floor. This vision didn't help matters, and it would usually be quite a while before the screaming stopped.

Possibly the only good to come out of these nightmares was that it brought Hans Hubermann, her new papa, into the room, to soothe her, to love her.

He came in every night and sat with her. The first couple of times, he simply stayed—a stranger to kill the aloneness. A few nights after that, he whispered, "Shhh, I'm here, it's all right." After three weeks, he held her. Trust was accumulated quickly, due primarily to the brute strength of the man's gentleness, his *thereness*. The girl knew from the outset that Hans Hubermann would always appear midscream, and he would not leave.

• • • A DEFINITION NOT FOUND • • •
IN THE DICTIONARY

Not leaving: **an act of trust and love, often deciphered by children**

Hans Hubermann sat sleepy-eyed on the bed and Liesel would cry

into his sleeves and breathe him in. Every morning, just after two o'clock, she fell asleep again to the smell of him. It was a mixture of dead cigarettes, decades of paint, and human skin. At first, she sucked it all in, then breathed it, until she drifted back down. Each morning, he was a few feet away from her, crumpled, almost halved, in the chair. He never used the other bed. Liesel would climb out and cautiously kiss his cheek and he would wake up and smile.

Some days Papa told her to get back into bed and wait a minute, and he would return with his accordion and play for her. Liesel would sit up and hum, her cold toes clenched with excitement. No one had ever given her music before. She would grin herself stupid, watching the lines drawing themselves down his face and the soft metal of his eyes —until the swearing arrived from the kitchen.

"STOP THAT NOISE, *SAUKERL!"*

Papa would play a little longer.

He would wink at the girl, and clumsily, she'd wink back.

A few times, purely to incense Mama a little further, he also brought the instrument to the kitchen and played through breakfast.

Papa's bread and jam would be half eaten on his plate, curled into the shape of bite marks, and the music would look Liesel in the face. I know it sounds strange, but that's how it felt to her. Papa's right hand strolled the tooth-colored keys. His left hit the buttons. (She especially loved to see him hit the silver, sparkled button—the C major.) The accordion's scratched yet shiny black exterior came back and forth as his arms squeezed the dusty bellows, making it suck in the air and throw it back out. In the kitchen on those mornings, Papa made the accordion live. I guess it makes sense, when you really think about it.

How do you tell if something's alive?

You check for breathing.

The sound of the accordion was, in fact, also the announcement of safety. Daylight. During the day, it was impossible to dream of her brother. She would miss him and frequently cry in the tiny washroom as quietly as possible, but she was still glad to be awake. On her first night with the Hubermanns, she had hidden her last link to him—*The Grave Digger's Handbook—under* her mattress, and occasionally she would pull it out and hold it. Staring at the letters on the cover and touching the print inside, she had no idea what any of it was saying. The point is, it didn't really matter what that book was about. It was what it meant that was more important.

THE BOOK'S MEANING

1. **The last time she saw her brother.**
2. **The last time she saw her mother.**

Sometimes she would whisper the word *Mama* and see her mother's face a hundred times in a single afternoon. But those were small miseries compared to the terror of her dreams. At those times, in the enormous mileage of sleep, she had never felt so completely alone.

As I'm sure you've already noticed, there were no other children in the house.

The Hubermanns had two of their own, but they were older and had moved out. Hans Junior worked in the center of Munich, and Trudy held a job as a housemaid and child minder. Soon, they would both be in the war. One would be making bullets. The other would be shooting them.

School, as you might imagine, was a terrific failure.

Although it was state-run, there was a heavy Catholic influence, and Liesel was Lutheran. Not the most auspicious start. Then they discovered she couldn't read or write.

Humiliatingly, she was cast down with the younger kids, who were

only just learning the alphabet. Even though she was thin-boned and pale, she felt gigantic among the midget children, and she often wished she was pale enough to disappear altogether.

Even at home, there wasn't much room for guidance.

"Don't ask *him* for help," Mama pointed out. "That *Saukerl."* Papa was staring out the window, as was often his habit. "He left school in fourth grade."

Without turning around, Papa answered calmly, but with venom, "Well, don't ask her, either." He dropped some ash outside. "She left school in *third* grade."

There were no books in the house (apart from the one she had secreted under her mattress), and the best Liesel could do was speak the alphabet under her breath before she was told in no uncertain terms to keep quiet. All that mumbling. It wasn't until later, when there was a bed-wetting incident midnightmare, that an extra reading education began. Unofficially, it was called the midnight class, even though it usually commenced at around two in the morning. More of that soon.

• • •

In mid-February, when she turned ten, Liesel was given a used doll that had a missing leg and yellow hair.

"It was the best we could do," Papa apologized.

"What are you talking about? She's lucky to have *that* much," Mama corrected him.

Hans continued his examination of the remaining leg while Liesel tried on her new uniform. Ten years old meant Hitler Youth. Hitler Youth meant a small brown uniform. Being female, Liesel was enrolled into what was called the BDM.

• • • EXPLANATION OF THE • • •

ABBREVIATION

It stood for *Bund Deutscher Mädel*—

Band of German Girls.

The first thing they did there was make sure your *"heil* Hitler" was working properly. Then you were taught to march straight, roll bandages, and sew up clothes. You were also taken hiking and on other such activities. Wednesday and Saturday were the designated meeting days, from three in the afternoon until five.

Each Wednesday and Saturday, Papa would walk Liesel there and pick her up two hours later. They never spoke about it much. They just held hands and listened to their feet, and Papa had a cigarette or two.

The only anxiety Papa brought her was the fact that he was constantly leaving. Many evenings, he would walk into the living room (which doubled as the Hubermanns' bedroom), pull the accordion from the old cupboard, and squeeze past in the kitchen to the front door.

As he walked up Himmel Street, Mama would open the window and cry out, "Don't be home too late!"

"Not so loud," he would turn and call back.

"Saukerl! Lick my ass! I'll speak as loud as I want!"

The echo of her swearing followed him up the street. He never looked back, or at least, not until he was sure his wife was gone. On those evenings, at the end of the street, accordion case in hand, he would turn around, just before Frau Diller's corner shop, and see the figure who had replaced his wife in the window. Briefly, his long, ghostly hand would rise before he turned again and walked slowly on. The next time Liesel saw him would be at two in the morning, when he dragged her gently from her nightmare.

Evenings in the small kitchen were raucous, without fail. Rosa Hubermann was always talking, and when she was talking, it took the form of *schimpfen*. She was constantly arguing and complaining. There was no one to really argue with, but Mama managed it expertly every chance she had. She could argue with the entire world in that kitchen, and almost every evening, she did. Once they had eaten and Papa was gone, Liesel and Rosa would usually remain there, and Rosa would do the ironing.

A few times a week, Liesel would come home from school and walk the streets of Molching with her mama, picking up and delivering washing and ironing from the wealthier parts of town. Knaupt Strasse, Heide Strasse. A few others. Mama would deliver the ironing or pick up the washing with a dutiful smile, but as soon as the door was shut and she walked away, she would curse these rich people, with all their money and laziness.

"Too *g'schtinkerdt* to wash their own clothes," she would say, despite her dependence on them.

"Him," she accused Herr Vogel from Heide Strasse. "Made all his money from his father. He throws it away on women and drink. And washing and ironing, of course."

It was like a roll call of scorn.

Herr Vogel, Herr and Frau Pfaffelhürver, Helena Schmidt, the Weingartners. They were all guilty of *something*.

Apart from his drunkenness and expensive lechery, Ernst Vogel, according to Rosa, was constantly scratching his louse-ridden hair, licking his fingers, and then handing over the money. "I should wash it before I come home," was her summation.

The Pfaffelhürvers scrutinized the results. *" 'Not one crease in these shirts, please,' "* Rosa imitated them. " 'Not *one wrinkle in this suit.'* And then they stand there and inspect it all, right in front of me. Right under my nose! What a G'sindel—what trash."

The Weingartners were apparently stupid people with a constantly molting *Saumensch* of a cat. "Do you know how long it takes me to

get rid of all that fur? It's everywhere!"

Helena Schmidt was a rich widow. "That old cripple—sitting there just wasting away. She's never had to do a day's work in all her life."

Rosa's greatest disdain, however, was reserved for 8 Grande Strasse. A large house, high on a hill, in the upper part of Molching.

"This one," she'd pointed out to Liesel the first time they went there, "is the mayor's house. That crook. His wife sits at home all day, too mean to light a fire—it's always freezing in there. She's crazy." She punctuated the words. "Absolutely. Crazy." At the gate, she motioned to the girl. "You go."

Liesel was horrified. A giant brown door with a brass knocker stood atop a small flight of steps. "What?"

Mama shoved her. "Don't you 'what' me, *Saumensch*. Move it."

Liesel moved it. She walked the path, climbed the steps, hesitated, and knocked.

A bathrobe answered the door.

Inside it, a woman with startled eyes, hair like fluff, and the posture of defeat stood in front of her. She saw Mama at the gate and handed the girl a bag of washing. "Thank you," Liesel said, but there was no reply. Only the door. It closed.

"You see?" said Mama when she returned to the gate. "This is what I have to put up with. These rich bastards, these lazy swine …"

Holding the washing as they walked away, Liesel looked back. The brass knocker eyed her from the door.

When she finished berating the people she worked for, Rosa Hubermann would usually move on to her other favorite theme of abuse. Her husband. Looking at the bag of washing and the hunched houses, she would talk, and talk, and talk. "If your papa was any good," she informed Liesel *every* time they walked through Molching, "I wouldn't have to do this." She sniffed with derision. "A painter! Why marry that *Arschloch?* That's what they told me—my family, that

is." Their footsteps crunched along the path. "And here I am, walking the streets and slaving in my kitchen because that *Saukerl* never has any work. No real work, anyway. Just that pathetic accordion in those dirt holes every night."

"Yes, Mama."

"Is that all you've got to say?" Mama's eyes were like pale blue cutouts, pasted to her face.

They'd walk on.

With Liesel carrying the sack.

At home, it was washed in a boiler next to the stove, hung up by the fireplace in the living room, and then ironed in the kitchen. The kitchen was where the action was.

"Did you hear that?" Mama asked her nearly every night. The iron was in her fist, heated from the stove. Light was dull all through the house, and Liesel, sitting at the kitchen table, would be staring at the gaps of fire in front of her.

"What?" she'd reply. "What is it?"

"That was that Holtzapfel." Mama was already out of her seat. "That *Saumensch* just spat on our door again."

It was a tradition for Frau Holtzapfel, one of their neighbors, to spit on the Hubermanns' door every time she walked past. The front door was only meters from the gate, and let's just say that Frau Holtzapfel had the distance—and the accuracy.

The spitting was due to the fact that she and Rosa Hubermann were engaged in some kind of decade-long verbal war. No one knew the origin of this hostility. They'd probably forgotten it themselves.

Frau Holtzapfel was a wiry woman and quite obviously spiteful. She'd never married but had two sons, a few years older than the Hubermann offspring. Both were in the army and both will make cameo appearances by the time we're finished here, I assure you.

In the spiteful stakes, I should also say that Frau Holtzapfel was

thorough with her spitting, too. She never neglected to *spuck* on the door of number thirty-three and say, *"Schweine!"* each time she walked past. One thing I've noticed about the Germans:

They seem very fond of pigs.

• • • A SMALL QUESTION AND • • •
ITS ANSWER

And who do you think was made to clean the spit off the door each night?

Yes—you got it.

When a woman with an iron fist tells you to get out there and clean spit off the door, you do it. Especially when the iron's hot.

It was all just part of the routine, really.

Each night, Liesel would step outside, wipe the door, and watch the sky. Usually it was like spillage—cold and heavy, slippery and gray—but once in a while some stars had the nerve to rise and float, if only for a few minutes. On those nights, she would stay a little longer and wait.

"Hello, stars."

Waiting.

For the voice from the kitchen.

Or till the stars were dragged down again, into the waters of the German sky.

THE KISS
(A Childhood Decision Maker)

As with most small towns, Molching was filled with characters. A handful of them lived on Himmel Street. Frau Holtzapfel was only one cast member.

The others included the likes of these:

* Rudy Steiner—the boy next door who was obsessed with the black American athlete Jesse Owens.

* Frau Diller—the staunch Aryan corner-shop owner.

* Tommy Müller—a kid whose chronic ear infections had resulted in several operations, a pink river of skin painted across his face, and a tendency to twitch.

* A man known primarily as "Pfiffikus"—whose vulgarity made Rosa Hubermann look like a wordsmith and a saint.

On the whole, it was a street filled with relatively poor people, despite the apparent rise of Germany's economy under Hitler. Poor sides of town still existed.

As mentioned already, the house next door to the Hubermanns was rented by a family called Steiner. The Steiners had six children. One of them, the infamous Rudy, would soon become Liesel's best friend, and later, her partner and sometime catalyst in crime. She met him on the street.

A few days after Liesel's first bath, Mama allowed her out, to play with the other kids. On Himmel Street, friendships were made outside, no matter the weather. The children rarely visited each

other's homes, for they were small and there was usually very little in them. Also, they conducted their favorite pastime, like professionals, on the street. Soccer. Teams were well set. Garbage cans were used to mark out the goals.

Being the new kid in town, Liesel was immediately shoved between one pair of those cans. (Tommy Müller was finally set free, despite being the most useless soccer player Himmel Street had ever seen.)

It all went nicely for a while, until the fateful moment when Rudy Steiner was upended in the snow by a Tommy Müller foul of frustration.

"What?!" Tommy shouted. His face twitched in desperation. "What did I do?!"

A penalty was awarded by everyone on Rudy's team, and now it was Rudy Steiner against the new kid, Liesel Meminger.

He placed the ball on a grubby mound of snow, confident of the usual outcome. After all, Rudy hadn't missed a penalty in eighteen shots, even when the opposition made a point of booting Tommy Müller out of goal. No matter whom they replaced him with, Rudy would score.

On this occasion, they tried to force Liesel out. As you might imagine, she protested, and Rudy agreed.

"No, no." He smiled. "Let her stay." He was rubbing his hands together.

Snow had stopped falling on the filthy street now, and the muddy footprints were gathered between them. Rudy shuffled in, fired the shot, and Liesel dived and somehow deflected it with her elbow. She stood up grinning, but the first thing she saw was a snowball smashing into her face. Half of it was mud. It stung like crazy.

"How do you like that?" The boy grinned, and he ran off in pursuit of the ball.

"Saukerl," Liesel whispered. The vocabulary of her new home was catching on fast.

• • • SOME FACTS ABOUT RUDY STEINER • • •

He was eight months older than Liesel and had bony legs, sharp teeth, gangly blue eyes, and hair the color of a lemon.
One of six Steiner children, he was permanently hungry.
On Himmel Street, he was considered a little crazy.
This was on account of an event that was rarely spoken about but widely regarded as "The Jesse Owens Incident," in which he painted himself charcoal black and ran the 100 meters at the local playing field one night.

Insane or not, Rudy was always destined to be Liesel's best friend. A snowball in the face is surely the perfect beginning to a lasting friendship.

A few days after Liesel started school, she went along with the Steiners. Rudy's mother, Barbara, made him promise to walk with the new girl, mainly because she'd heard about the snowball. To Rudy's credit, he was happy enough to comply. He was not the junior misogynistic type of boy at all. He liked girls a lot, and he liked Liesel (hence, the snowball). In fact, Rudy Steiner was one of those audacious little bastards who actually fancied himself with the ladies. Every childhood seems to have exactly such a juvenile in its midst and mists. He's the boy who refuses to fear the opposite sex, purely because everyone else embraces that particular fear, and he's the type who is unafraid to make a decision. In this case, Rudy had already made up his mind about Liesel Meminger.

On the way to school, he tried to point out certain landmarks in the town, or at least, he managed to slip it all in, somewhere between telling his younger siblings to shut their faces and the older ones telling him to shut his. His first point of interest was a small window on the second floor of an apartment block.

"That's where Tommy Müller lives." He realized that Liesel didn't remember him. "The twitcher? When he was five years old, he got

lost at the markets on the coldest day of the year. Three hours later, when they found him, he was frozen solid and had an awful earache from the cold. After a while, his ears were all infected inside and he had three or four operations and the doctors wrecked his nerves. So now he twitches."

Liesel chimed in, "And he's bad at soccer."

"The worst."

Next was the corner shop at the end of Himmel Street. *Frau Diller's*.

• • • AN IMPORTANT NOTE • • •

ABOUT FRAU DILLER

She had one golden rule.

Frau Diller was a sharp-edged woman with fat glasses and a nefarious glare. She developed this evil look to discourage the very idea of stealing from her shop, which she occupied with soldierlike posture, a refrigerated voice, and even breath that smelled like *"heil* Hitler." The shop itself was white and cold, and completely bloodless. The small house compressed beside it shivered with a little more severity than the other buildings on Himmel Street. Frau Diller administered this feeling, dishing it out as the only free item from her premises. She lived for her shop and her shop lived for the Third Reich. Even when rationing started later in the year, she was known to sell certain hard-to-get items under the counter and donate the money to the Nazi Party. On the wall behind her usual sitting position was a framed photo of the *Führer*. If you walked into her shop and didn't say *"heil* Hitler," you wouldn't be served. As they walked by, Rudy drew Liesel's attention to the bulletproof eyes leering from the shop window.

"Say '*heil*' when you go in there," he warned her stiffly. "Unless you want to walk a little farther." Even when they were well past the shop, Liesel looked back and the magnified eyes were still there, fastened to the window.

Around the corner, Munich Street (the main road in and out of Molching) was strewn with slosh.

As was often the case, a few rows of troops in training came marching past. Their uniforms walked upright and their black boots further polluted the snow. Their faces were fixed ahead in concentration.

Once they'd watched the soldiers disappear, the group of Steiners and Liesel walked past some shop windows and the imposing town hall, which in later years would be chopped off at the knees and buried. A few of the shops were abandoned and still labeled with yellow stars and anti-Jewish slurs. Farther down, the church aimed itself at the sky, its rooftop a study of collaborated tiles. The street, overall, was a lengthy tube of gray—a corridor of dampness, people stooped in the cold, and the splashed sound of watery footsteps.

At one stage, Rudy rushed ahead, dragging Liesel with him.

He knocked on the window of a tailor's shop.

Had she been able to read the sign, she would have noticed that it belonged to Rudy's father. The shop was not yet open, but inside, a man was preparing articles of clothing behind the counter. He looked up and waved.

"My papa," Rudy informed her, and they were soon among a crowd of various-sized Steiners, each waving or blowing kisses at their father or simply standing and nodding hello (in the case of the oldest ones), then moving on, toward the final landmark before school.

THE LAST STOP

The road of yellow stars

It was a place nobody wanted to stay and look at, but almost everyone did. Shaped like a long, broken arm, the road contained several houses with lacerated windows and bruised walls. The Star of David was painted on their doors. Those houses were almost like lepers. At the very least, they were infected sores on the injured

German terrain.

"Schiller Strasse," Rudy said. "The road of yellow stars."

At the bottom, some people were moving around. The drizzle made them look like ghosts. Not humans, but shapes, moving about beneath the lead-colored clouds.

"Come on, you two," Kurt (the oldest of the Steiner children) called back, and Rudy and Liesel walked quickly toward him.

At school, Rudy made a special point of seeking Liesel out during the breaks. He didn't care that others made noises about the new girl's stupidity. He was there for her at the beginning, and he would be there later on, when Liesel's frustration boiled over. But he wouldn't do it for free.

• • • THE ONLY THING WORSE THAN • • •

A BOY WHO HATES YOU

A boy who loves you.

In late April, when they'd returned from school for the day, Rudy and Liesel waited on Himmel Street for the usual game of soccer. They were slightly early, and no other kids had turned up yet. The one person they saw was the gutter-mouthed Pfiffikus.

"Look there." Rudy pointed.

• • • A PORTRAIT OF PFIFFIKUS • • •

He was a delicate frame.

He was white hair.

He was a black raincoat, brown pants, decomposing shoes, and a mouth—and what a mouth it was.

“Hey, Pfiffikus!”

As the distant figure turned, Rudy started whistling.

The old man simultaneously straightened and proceeded to swear with a ferocity that can only be described as a talent. No one seemed to know the real name that belonged to him, or at least if they did, they never used it. He was only called Pfiffikus because you give that name to someone who likes to whistle, which Pfiffikus most definitely did. He was constantly whistling a tune called the Radetzky March, and all the kids in town would call out to him and duplicate that tune. At that precise moment, Pfiffikus would abandon his usual walking style (bent forward, taking large, lanky steps, arms behind his raincoated back) and erect himself to deliver abuse. It was then that any impression of serenity was violently interrupted, for his voice was brimming with rage.

On this occasion, Liesel followed Rudy’s taunt almost as a reflex action.

“Pfiffikus!” she echoed, quickly adopting the appropriate cruelty that childhood seems to require. Her whistling was awful, but there was no time to perfect it.

He chased them, calling out. It started with *“Geh’ scheissen!”* and deteriorated rapidly from there. At first, he leveled his abuse only at the boy, but soon enough, it was Liesel’s turn.

“You little slut!” he roared at her. The words clobbered her in the back. “I’ve never seen you before!” Fancy calling a ten-year-old girl a slut. That was Pfiffikus. It was widely agreed that he and Frau Holtzapfel would have made a lovely couple. “Get back here!” were the last words Liesel and Rudy heard as they continued running. They ran until they were on Munich Street.

“Come on,” Rudy said, once they’d recovered their breath. “Just down here a little.”

He took her to Hubert Oval, the scene of the Jesse Owens incident, where they stood, hands in pockets. The track was stretched out in front of them. Only one thing could happen. Rudy started it. “Hundred meters,” he goaded her. “I bet you can’t beat me.”

Liesel wasn’t taking any of that. “I bet you I can.”

“What do you bet, you little *Saumensch?* Have you got any money?”

“Of course not. Do you?”

“No.” But Rudy had an idea. It was the lover boy coming out of him. “If I beat you, I get to kiss you.” He crouched down and began rolling up his trousers.

Liesel was alarmed, to put it mildly. “What do you want to kiss *me* for? I’m filthy.”

“So am I.” Rudy clearly saw no reason why a bit of filth should get in the way of things. It had been a while between baths for both of them.

She thought about it while examining the weedy legs of her opposition. They were about equal with her own. There’s no way he can beat me, she thought. She nodded seriously. This was business. “You can kiss me if you win. But if *I* win, I get out of being goalie at soccer.”

Rudy considered it. “Fair enough,” and they shook on it.

All was dark-skied and hazy, and small chips of rain were starting to fall.

The track was muddier than it looked.

Both competitors were set.

Rudy threw a rock in the air as the starting pistol. When it hit the ground, they could start running.

“I can’t even see the finish line,” Liesel complained.

“And *I* can?”

The rock wedged itself into the earth.

They ran next to each other, elbowing and trying to get in front.

The slippery ground slurped at their feet and brought them down perhaps twenty meters from the end.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" yelped Rudy. "I'm covered in shit!"

"It's not shit," Liesel corrected him, "it's mud," although she had her doubts. They'd slid another five meters toward the finish. "Do we call it a draw, then?"

Rudy looked over, all sharp teeth and gangly blue eyes. Half his face was painted with mud. "If it's a draw, do I still get my kiss?"

"Not in a million years." Liesel stood up and flicked some mud off her jacket.

"I'll get you out of goalie."

"Stick your goalie."

As they walked back to Himmel Street, Rudy forewarned her. "One day, Liesel," he said, "you'll be dying to kiss me."

But Liesel knew.

She vowed.

As long as both she and Rudy Steiner lived, she would never kiss that miserable, filthy *Saukerl*, especially not *this* day. There were more important matters to attend to. She looked down at her suit of mud and stated the obvious.

"She's going to kill me."

She, of course, was Rosa Hubermann, also known as Mama, and she very nearly did kill her. The word *Saumensch* featured heavily in the administration of punishment. She made mincemeat out of her.

THE JESSE OWENS INCIDENT

As we both know, Liesel wasn't on hand on Himmel Street when Rudy performed his act of childhood infamy. When she looked back, though, it felt like she'd actually been there. In her memory, she had somehow become a member of Rudy's imaginary audience. Nobody else mentioned it, but Rudy certainly made up for that, so much that when Liesel came to recollect her story, the Jesse Owens incident was as much a part of it as everything she witnessed firsthand.

It was 1936. The Olympics. Hitler's games.

Jesse Owens had just completed the 4 × 100m relay and won his fourth gold medal. Talk that he was subhuman because he was black and Hitler's refusal to shake his hand were touted around the world. Even the most racist Germans were amazed with the efforts of Owens, and word of his feat slipped through the cracks. No one was more impressed than Rudy Steiner.

Everyone in his family was crowded together in their family room when he slipped out and made his way to the kitchen. He pulled some charcoal from the stove and gripped it in the smallness of his hands. "Now." There was a smile. He was ready.

He smeared the charcoal on, nice and thick, till he was covered in black. Even his hair received a once-over.

In the window, the boy grinned almost maniacally at his reflection, and in his shorts and tank top, he quietly abducted his older brother's bike and pedaled it up the street, heading for Hubert Oval. In one of his pockets, he'd hidden a few pieces of extra charcoal, in case some of it wore off later.

In Liesel's mind, the moon was sewn into the sky that night. Clouds

were stitched around it.

The rusty bike crumbled to a halt at the Hubert Oval fence line and Rudy climbed over. He landed on the other side and trotted weedily up toward the beginning of the hundred. Enthusiastically, he conducted an awkward regimen of stretches. He dug starting holes into the dirt.

Waiting for his moment, he paced around, gathering concentration under the darkness sky, with the moon and the clouds watching, tightly.

“Owens is looking good,” he began to commentate. “This could be his greatest victory ever ….”

He shook the imaginary hands of the other athletes and wished them luck, even though he knew. They didn’t have a chance.

The starter signaled them forward. A crowd materialized around every square inch of Hubert Oval’s circumference. They were all calling out one thing. They were chanting Rudy Steiner’s name—and his name was Jesse Owens.

All fell silent.

His bare feet gripped the soil. He could feel it holding on between his toes.

At the request of the starter, he raised to crouching position—and the gun clipped a hole in the night.

• • •

For the first third of the race, it was pretty even, but it was only a matter of time before the charcoaled Owens drew clear and streaked away.

“Owens in front,” the boy’s shrill voice cried as he ran down the empty track, straight toward the uproarious applause of Olympic glory. He could even feel the tape break in two across his chest as he

burst through it in first place. The fastest man alive.

It was only on his victory lap that things turned sour. Among the crowd, his father was standing at the finish line like the bogeyman. Or at least, the bogeyman in a suit. (As previously mentioned, Rudy's father was a tailor. He was rarely seen on the street without a suit and tie. On this occasion, it was only the suit and a disheveled shirt.)

"Was ist los?" he said to his son when he showed up in all his charcoal glory. "What the hell is going on here?" The crowd vanished. A breeze sprang up. "I was asleep in my chair when Kurt noticed you were gone. Everyone's out looking for you."

Mr. Steiner was a remarkably polite man under normal circumstances. Discovering one of his children smeared charcoal black on a summer evening was not what he considered normal circumstances. "The boy is crazy," he muttered, although he conceded that with six kids, something like this was bound to happen. At least one of them had to be a bad egg. Right now, he was looking at it, waiting for an explanation. "Well?"

Rudy panted, bending down and placing his hands on his knees. "I was being Jesse Owens." He answered as though it was the most natural thing on earth to be doing. There was even something implicit in his tone that suggested something along the lines of, "What the hell does it look like?" The tone vanished, however, when he saw the sleep deprivation whittled under his father's eyes.

"Jesse Owens?" Mr. Steiner was the type of man who was very wooden. His voice was angular and true. His body was tall and heavy, like oak. His hair was like splinters. "What about him?"

"You know, Papa, the Black Magic one."

"I'll give *you* black magic." He caught his son's ear between his thumb and forefinger.

Rudy winced. "Ow, that really hurts."

"Does it?" His father was more concerned with the clammy texture

of charcoal contaminating his fingers. He covered everything, didn't he? he thought. It's even in his ears, for God's sake. "Come on."

On the way home, Mr. Steiner decided to talk politics with the boy as best he could. Only in the years ahead would Rudy understand it all —when it was too late to bother understanding anything.

• • • THE CONTRADICTORY POLITICS • • •
OF ALEX STEINER

Point One: **He was a member of the Nazi Party, but he did not hate the Jews, or anyone else for that matter.**

Point Two: **Secretly, though, he couldn't help feeling a percentage of relief (or worse—gladness!) when Jewish shop owners were put out of business—propaganda informed him that it was only a matter of time before a plague of Jewish tailors showed up and stole his customers.**

Point Three: **But did that mean they should be driven out completely?**

Point Four: **His family. Surely, he had to do whatever he could to support them. If that meant being in the party, it meant being in the party.**

Point Five: **Somewhere, far down, there was an itch in his heart, but he made it a point not to scratch it. He was afraid of what might come leaking out.**

They walked around a few corners onto Himmel Street, and Alex said, "Son, you can't go around painting yourself black, you hear?"

Rudy was interested, and confused. The moon was undone now, free to move and rise and fall and drip on the boy's face, making him

nice and murky, like his thoughts. “Why not, Papa?”

“Because they’ll take you away.”

“Why?”

“Because you shouldn’t want to be like black people or Jewish people or anyone who is … not *us.”*

“Who are Jewish people?”

“You know my oldest customer, Mr. Kaufmann? Where we bought your shoes?”

“Yes.”

“Well, he’s Jewish.”

“I didn’t know that. Do you have to pay to be Jewish? Do you need a license?”

“No, Rudy.” Mr. Steiner was steering the bike with one hand and Rudy with the other. He was having trouble steering the conversation. He still hadn’t relinquished the hold on his son’s earlobe. He’d forgotten about it. “It’s like you’re German or Catholic.”

“Oh. Is Jesse Owens Catholic?”

“I don’t know!” He tripped on a bike pedal then and released the ear.

They walked on in silence for a while, until Rudy said, “I just wish I was like Jesse Owens, Papa.”

This time, Mr. Steiner placed his hand on Rudy’s head and explained, “I know, son—but you’ve got beautiful blond hair and big, safe blue eyes. You should be happy with that; is that clear?”

But nothing was clear.

Rudy understood nothing, and that night was the prelude of things to come. Two and a half years later, the Kaufmann Shoe Shop was reduced to broken glass, and all the shoes were flung aboard a truck in their boxes.

THE OTHER SIDE OF SANDPAPER

People have defining moments, I suppose, especially when they're children. For some it's a Jesse Owens incident. For others it's a moment of bed-wetting hysteria:

It was late May 1939, and the night had been like most others. Mama shook her iron fist. Papa was out. Liesel cleaned the front door and watched the Himmel Street sky.

Earlier, there had been a parade.

The brown-shirted extremist members of the NSDAP (otherwise known as the Nazi Party) had marched down Munich Street, their banners worn proudly, their faces held high, as if on sticks. Their voices were full of song, culminating in a roaring rendition of *"Deutschland über Alles."* "Germany over Everything."

As always, they were clapped.

They were spurred on as they walked to who knows where.

People on the street stood and watched, some with straight-armed salutes, others with hands that burned from applause. Some kept faces that were contorted by pride and rally like Frau Diller, and then there were the scatterings of odd men out, like Alex Steiner, who stood like a human-shaped block of wood, clapping slow and dutiful. And beautiful. Submission.

On the footpath, Liesel stood with her papa and Rudy. Hans Hubermann wore a face with the shades pulled down.

• • • SOME CRUNCHED NUMBERS • • •

In 1933, 90 percent of Germans showed unflinching support for Adolf Hitler.

That leaves 10 percent who didn't.
Hans Hubermann belonged to the 10 percent.
There was a reason for that.

In the night, Liesel dreamed like she always did. At first, she saw the brownshirts marching, but soon enough, they led her to a train, and the usual discovery awaited. Her brother was staring again.

When she woke up screaming, Liesel knew immediately that on this occasion, something had changed. A smell leaked out from under the sheets, warm and sickly. At first, she tried convincing herself that nothing had happened, but as Papa came closer and held her, she cried and admitted the fact in his ear.

"Papa," she whispered, "Papa," and that was all. He could probably smell it.

He lifted her gently from the bed and carried her into the washroom. The moment came a few minutes later.

"We take the sheets off," Papa said, and when he reached under and pulled at the fabric, something loosened and landed with a thud. A black book with silver writing on it came hurtling out and landed on the floor, between the tall man's feet.

He looked down at it.

He looked at the girl, who timidly shrugged.

Then he read the title, with concentration, aloud: *"The Grave Digger's Handbook."*

So that's what it's called, Liesel thought.

A patch of silence stood among them now. The man, the girl, the book. He picked it up and spoke soft as cotton.

• • • A 2 A.M. CONVERSATION • • •

“Is this yours?”

“Yes, Papa.”

“Do you want to read it?”

Again, “Yes, Papa.”

A tired smile. Metallic eyes, melting.

“Well, we’d better read it, then.”

Four years later, when she came to write in the basement, two thoughts struck Liesel about the trauma of wetting the bed. First, she felt extremely lucky that it was Papa who discovered the book. (Fortunately, when the sheets had been washed previously, Rosa had made Liesel strip the bed and make it up. “And be quick about it, *Saumensch!* Does it look like we’ve got all day?”) Second, she was clearly proud of Hans Hubermann’s part in her education. *You wouldn’t think it,* she wrote, *but it was not so much the school who helped me to read. It was Papa. People think he’s not so smart, and it’s true that he doesn’t read too fast, but I would soon learn that words and writing actually saved his life once. Or at least, words and a man who taught him the accordion …*

• • •

“First things first,” Hans Hubermann said that night. He washed the sheets and hung them up. “Now,” he said upon his return. “Let’s get this midnight class started.”

The yellow light was alive with dust.

Liesel sat on cold clean sheets, ashamed, elated. The thought of bed-wetting prodded her, but she was going to read. She was going to read the book.

The excitement stood up in her.

Visions of a ten-year-old reading genius were set alight.

If only it was that easy.

“To tell you the truth,” Papa explained upfront, “I am not such a good reader myself.”

But it didn’t matter that he read slowly. If anything, it might have helped that his own reading pace was slower than average. Perhaps it would cause less frustration in coping with the girl’s lack of ability.

Still, initially, Hans appeared a little uncomfortable holding the book and looking through it.

When he came over and sat next to her on the bed, he leaned back, his legs angling over the side. He examined the book again and dropped it on the blanket. “Now why would a nice girl like you want to read such a thing?”

Again, Liesel shrugged. Had the apprentice been reading the complete works of Goethe or any other such luminary, that was what would have sat in front of them. She attempted to explain. “I—when … It was sitting in the snow, and—” The soft-spoken words fell off the side of the bed, emptying to the floor like powder.

Papa knew what to say, though. He always knew what to say.

He ran a hand through his sleepy hair and said, “Well, promise me one thing, Liesel. If I die anytime soon, you make sure they bury me right.”

She nodded, with great sincerity.

“No skipping chapter six or step four in chapter nine.” He laughed, as did the bed wetter. “Well, I’m glad that’s settled. We can get on with it now.”

He adjusted his position and his bones creaked like itchy floorboards. “The fun begins.”

Amplified by the still of night, the book opened—a gust of wind.

Looking back, Liesel could tell exactly what her papa was thinking when he scanned the first page of *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*. As he realized the difficulty of the text, he was clearly aware that such a book was hardly ideal. There were words in there that he’d have

trouble with himself. Not to mention the morbidity of the subject. As for the girl, there was a sudden desire to read it that she didn't even attempt to understand. On some level, perhaps she wanted to make sure her brother was buried right. Whatever the reason, her hunger to read that book was as intense as any ten-year-old human could experience.

Chapter one was called "The First Step: Choosing the Right Equipment." In a short introductory passage, it outlined the kind of material to be covered in the following twenty pages. Types of shovels, picks, gloves, and so forth were itemized, as well as the vital need to properly maintain them. This grave digging was serious.

As Papa flicked through it, he could surely feel Liesel's eyes on him. They reached over and gripped him, waiting for something, anything, to slip from his lips.

"Here." He shifted again and handed her the book. "Look at this page and tell me how many words you can read."

She looked at it—and lied.

"About half."

"Read some for me." But of course, she couldn't. When he made her point out any words she could read and actually say them, there were only three—the three main German words for "the." The whole page must have had two hundred words on it.

This might be harder than I thought.

She caught him thinking it, just for a moment.

He lifted himself forward, rose to his feet, and walked out.

This time, when he came back, he said, "Actually, I have a better idea." In his hand, there was a thick painter's pencil and a stack of sandpaper. "Let's start from scratch." Liesel saw no reason to argue.

In the left corner of an upturned piece of sandpaper, he drew a square of perhaps an inch and shoved a capital *A* inside it. In the other corner, he placed a lowercase one. So far, so good.

“A,” Liesel said.

“*A* for what?”

She smiled. *“Apfel.”*

He wrote the word in big letters and drew a misshapen apple under it. He was a housepainter, not an artist. When it was complete, he looked over and said, “Now for *B.”*

As they progressed through the alphabet, Liesel’s eyes grew larger. She had done this at school, in the kindergarten class, but this time was better. She was the only one there, and she was not gigantic. It was nice to watch Papa’s hand as he wrote the words and slowly constructed the primitive sketches.

“Ah, come on, Liesel,” he said when she struggled later on. “Something that starts with *S*. It’s easy. I’m very disappointed in you.”

She couldn’t think.

“Come on!” His whisper played with her. “Think of Mama.”

That was when the word struck her face like a slap. A reflex grin. *“SAUMENSCH!”* she shouted, and Papa roared with laughter, then quieted.

“Shhh, we have to be quiet.” But he roared all the same and wrote the word, completing it with one of his sketches.

• • • ATYPICAL HANS HUBERMANN • • •

ARTWORK

“Papa!” she whispered. “I have no eyes!”

He patted the girl's hair. She'd fallen into his trap. "With a smile like that," Hans Hubermann said, "you don't need eyes." He hugged her and then looked again at the picture, with a face of warm silver. "Now for T."

With the alphabet completed and studied a dozen times, Papa leaned over and said, "Enough for tonight?"

"A few more words?"

He was definite. "Enough. When you wake up, I'll play accordion for you."

"Thanks, Papa."

"Good night." A quiet, one-syllable laugh. "Good night, *Saumensch."*

"Good night, Papa."

He switched off the light, came back, and sat in the chair. In the darkness, Liesel kept her eyes open. She was watching the words.

THE SMELL OF FRIENDSHIP

It continued.

Over the next few weeks and into summer, the midnight class began at the end of each nightmare. There were two more bed-wetting occurrences, but Hans Hubermann merely repeated his previous cleanup heroics and got down to the task of reading, sketching, and reciting. In the morning's early hours, quiet voices were loud.

On a Thursday, just after 3 p.m., Mama told Liesel to get ready to come with her and deliver some ironing. Papa had other ideas.

He walked into the kitchen and said, "Sorry, Mama, she's not going with you today."

Mama didn't even bother looking up from the washing bag. "Who asked you, *Arschloch?* Come on, Liesel."

"She's reading," he said. Papa handed Liesel a steadfast smile and a wink. "With me. I'm teaching her. We're going to the Amper—upstream, where I used to practice the accordion."

Now he had her attention.

Mama placed the washing on the table and eagerly worked herself up to the appropriate level of cynicism. "What did you say?"

"I think you heard me, Rosa."

Mama laughed. "What the hell could *you* teach her?" A cardboard grin. Uppercut words. "Like you could read so much, you *Saukerl."*

The kitchen waited. Papa counterpunched. "We'll take your ironing for you."

"You filthy—" She stopped. The words propped in her mouth as she considered it. "Be back before dark."

"We can't read in the dark, Mama," Liesel said.

"What was that, *Saumensch?"*

"Nothing, Mama."

Papa grinned and pointed at the girl. "Book, sandpaper, pencil," he ordered her, "and accordion!" once she was already gone. Soon, they were on Himmel Street, carrying the words, the music, the washing.

As they walked toward Frau Diller's, they turned around a few times to see if Mama was still at the gate, checking on them. She was. At one point, she called out, "Liesel, hold that ironing straight! Don't crease it!"

"Yes, Mama!"

A few steps later: "Liesel, are you dressed warm enough?!"

"What did you say?"

"Saumensch dreckiges, you never hear anything! Are you dressed warm enough? It might get cold later!"

Around the corner, Papa bent down to do up a shoelace. "Liesel," he said, "could you roll me a cigarette?"

Nothing would give her greater pleasure.

Once the ironing was delivered, they made their way back to the Amper River, which flanked the town. It worked its way past, pointing in the direction of Dachau, the concentration camp.

There was a wooden-planked bridge.

They sat maybe thirty meters down from it, in the grass, writing the words and reading them aloud, and when darkness was near, Hans pulled out the accordion. Liesel looked at him and listened, though she did not immediately notice the perplexed expression on her papa's face that evening as he played.

• • • PAPA'S FACE • • •

It traveled and wondered, but it disclosed no answers.

Not yet.

There had been a change in him. A slight shift.

She saw it but didn't realize until later, when all the stories came together. She didn't see him watching as he played, having no idea that Hans Hubermann's accordion was a story. In the times ahead, that story would arrive at 33 Himmel Street in the early hours of morning, wearing ruffled shoulders and a shivering jacket. It would carry a suitcase, a book, and two questions. A story. Story after story. Story *within* story.

For now, there was only the one as far as Liesel was concerned, and she was enjoying it.

She settled into the long arms of grass, lying back.

She closed her eyes and her ears held the notes.

There were, of course, some problems as well. A few times, Papa nearly yelled at her. "Come on, Liesel," he'd say. "You know this word; you know it!" Just when progress seemed to be flowing well, somehow things would become lodged.

When the weather was good, they'd go to the Amper in the afternoon. In bad weather, it was the basement. This was mainly on account of Mama. At first, they tried in the kitchen, but there was no way.

"Rosa," Hans said to her at one point. Quietly, his words cut through one of her sentences. "Could you do me a favor?"

She looked up from the stove. "What?"

"I'm asking you, I'm *begging* you, could you please shut your mouth for just five minutes?"

You can imagine the reaction.

They ended up in the basement.

There was no lighting there, so they took a kerosene lamp, and slowly, between school and home, from the river to the basement, from the good days to the bad, Liesel was learning to read and write.

"Soon," Papa told her, "you'll be able to read that awful graves book with your eyes closed."

"And I can get out of that midget class."

She spoke those words with a grim kind of ownership.

In one of their basement sessions, Papa dispensed with the sandpaper (it was running out fast) and pulled out a brush. There were few luxuries in the Hubermann household, but there was an oversupply of paint, and it became more than useful for Liesel's learning. Papa would say a word and the girl would have to spell it aloud and then paint it on the wall, as long as she got it right. After a month, the wall was recoated. A fresh cement page.

Some nights, after working in the basement, Liesel would sit crouched in the bath and hear the same utterances from the kitchen.

"You stink," Mama would say to Hans. "Like cigarettes and kerosene."

Sitting in the water, she imagined the smell of it, mapped out on her papa's clothes. More than anything, it was the smell of friendship, and she could find it on herself, too. Liesel loved that smell. She would sniff her arm and smile as the water cooled around her.

THE HEAVYWEIGHT CHAMPION OF THE SCHOOL-YARD

The summer of ’39 was in a hurry, or perhaps Liesel was. She spent her time playing soccer with Rudy and the other kids on Himmel Street (a year-round pastime), taking ironing around town with Mama, and learning words. It felt like it was over a few days after it began.

In the latter part of the year, two things happened.

• • • SEPTEMBER-NOVEMBER 1939 • • •

1. **World War Two begins.**
2. **Liesel Meminger becomes the heavyweight champion of the school yard.**

The beginning of September.

It was a cool day in Molching when the war began and my workload increased.

The world talked it over.

Newspaper headlines reveled in it.

The *Führer’s* voice roared from German radios. We will not give up. We will not rest. We will be victorious. Our time has come.

The German invasion of Poland had begun and people were gathered everywhere, listening to the news of it. Munich Street, like every other main street in Germany, was alive with war. The smell, the voice. Rationing had begun a few days earlier—the writing on the wall—and now it was official. England and France had made their declaration on Germany. To steal a phrase from Hans Hubermann:

The fun begins.

The day of the announcement, Papa was lucky enough to have some work. On his way home, he picked up a discarded newspaper, and rather than stopping to shove it between paint cans in his cart, he folded it up and slipped it beneath his shirt. By the time he made it home and removed it, his sweat had drawn the ink onto his skin. The paper landed on the table, but the news was stapled to his chest. A tattoo. Holding the shirt open, he looked down in the unsure kitchen light.

"What does it say?" Liesel asked him. She was looking back and forth, from the black outlines on his skin to the paper.

" 'Hitler takes Poland,' " he answered, and Hans Hubermann slumped into a chair. *"Deutschland über Alles,"* he whispered, and his voice was not remotely patriotic.

The face was there again—his accordion face.

That was one war started.

Liesel would soon be in another.

Nearly a month after school resumed, she was moved up to her rightful year level. You might think this was due to her improved reading, but it wasn't. Despite the advancement, she still read with great difficulty. Sentences were strewn everywhere. Words fooled her. The reason she was elevated had more to do with the fact that she became disruptive in the younger class. She answered questions directed to other children and called out. A few times, she was given what was known as a *Watschen* (pronounced "varchen") in the corridor.

• • • A DEFINITION • • •

***Watschen* = a good hiding**

She was taken up, put in a chair at the side, and told to keep her mouth shut by the teacher, who also happened to be a nun. At the other end of the classroom, Rudy looked across and waved. Liesel waved back and tried not to smile.

At home, she was well into reading *The Grave Digger's Handbook* with Papa. They would circle the words she couldn't understand and take them down to the basement the next day. She thought it was enough. It was not enough.

Somewhere at the start of November, there were some progress tests at school. One of them was for reading. Every child was made to stand at the front of the room and read from a passage the teacher gave them. It was a frosty morning but bright with sun. Children scrunched their eyes. A halo surrounded the grim reaper nun, Sister Maria. (By the way—I like this human idea of the grim reaper. I like the scythe. It amuses me.)

In the sun-heavy classroom, names were rattled off at random.

"Waldenheim, Lehmann, Steiner."

They all stood up and did a reading, all at different levels of capability. Rudy was surprisingly good.

Throughout the test, Liesel sat with a mixture of hot anticipation and excruciating fear. She wanted desperately to measure herself, to find out once and for all how her learning was advancing. Was she up to it? Could she even come close to Rudy and the rest of them?

Each time Sister Maria looked at her list, a string of nerves tightened in Liesel's ribs. It started in her stomach but had worked its way up. Soon, it would be around her neck, thick as rope.

When Tommy Müller finished his mediocre attempt, she looked around the room. Everyone had read. She was the only one left.

"Very good." Sister Maria nodded, perusing the list. "That's everyone."

What?

“No!”

A voice practically appeared on the other side of the room. Attached to it was a lemon-haired boy whose bony knees knocked in his pants under the desk. He stretched his hand up and said, “Sister Maria, I think you forgot Liesel.”

Sister Maria.

Was not impressed.

She plonked her folder on the table in front of her and inspected Rudy with sighing disapproval. It was almost melancholic. Why, she lamented, did she have to put up with Rudy Steiner? He simply couldn’t keep his mouth shut. Why, God, why?

“No,” she said, with finality. Her small belly leaned forward with the rest of her. “I’m afraid Liesel cannot do it, Rudy.” The teacher looked across, for confirmation. “She will read for me later.”

The girl cleared her throat and spoke with quiet defiance. “I can do it now, Sister.” The majority of other kids watched in silence. A few of them performed the beautiful childhood art of snickering.

The sister had had enough. “No, you cannot! … What are you doing?”

—For Liesel was out of her chair and walking slowly, stiffly toward the front of the room. She picked up the book and opened it to a random page.

“All right, then,” said Sister Maria. “You want to do it? Do it.”

“Yes, Sister.” After a quick glance at Rudy, Liesel lowered her eyes and examined the page.

When she looked up again, the room was pulled apart, then squashed back together. All the kids were mashed, right before her eyes, and in a moment of brilliance, she imagined herself reading the entire page in faultless, fluency-filled triumph.

• • • A KEY WORD • • •

Imagined

“Come on, Liesel!”

Rudy broke the silence.

The book thief looked down again, at the words.

Come on. Rudy mouthed it this time. Come on, Liesel.

Her blood loudened. The sentences blurred.

The white page was suddenly written in another tongue, and it didn’t help that tears were now forming in her eyes. She couldn’t even see the words anymore.

And the sun. That awful sun. It burst through the window—the glass was everywhere—and shone directly onto the useless girl. It shouted in her face. “You can steal a book, but you can’t read one!”

It came to her. A solution.

Breathing, breathing, she started to read, but not from the book in front of her. It was something from *The Grave Digger’s Handbook*. Chapter three: “In the Event of Snow.” She’d memorized it from her papa’s voice.

“In the event of snow,” she spoke, “you must make sure you use a good shovel. You must dig deep; you cannot be lazy. You cannot cut corners.” Again, she sucked in a large clump of air. “Of course, it is easier to wait for the warmest part of the day, when—”

It ended.

The book was snatched from her grasp and she was told. “Liesel—the corridor.”

As she was given a small *Watschen*, she could hear them all laughing in the classroom, between Sister Maria’s striking hand. She saw them. All those mashed children. Grinning and laughing. Bathed in sunshine. Everyone laughing but Rudy.

In the break, she was taunted. A boy named Ludwig Schmeikl came up to her with a book. “Hey, Liesel,” he said to her, “I’m having trouble with this word. Could you read it for me?” He laughed—a ten-year-old, smugness laughter. “You *Dummkopf—you* idiot.”

Clouds were filing in now, big and clumsy, and more kids were calling out to her, watching her seethe.

“Don’t listen to them,” Rudy advised.

“Easy for you to say. You’re not the stupid one.”

Nearing the end of the break, the tally of comments stood at nineteen. By the twentieth, she snapped. It was Schmeikl, back for more. “Come on, Liesel.” He stuck the book under her nose. “Help me out, will you?”

Liesel helped him out, all right.

She stood up and took the book from him, and as he smiled over his shoulder at some other kids, she threw it away and kicked him as hard as she could in the vicinity of the groin.

Well, as you might imagine, Ludwig Schmeikl certainly buckled, and on the way down, he was punched in the ear. When he landed, he was set upon. When he was set upon, he was slapped and clawed and obliterated by a girl who was utterly consumed with rage. His skin was so warm and soft. Her knuckles and fingernails were so frighteningly tough, despite their smallness. “You *Saukerl.”* Her voice, too, was able to scratch him. “You *Arschloch*. Can you spell *Arschloch* for me?”

Oh, how the clouds stumbled in and assembled stupidly in the sky.

Great obese clouds.

Dark and plump.

Bumping into each other. Apologizing. Moving on and finding room.

Children were there, quick as, well, quick as kids gravitating toward a fight. A stew of arms and legs, of shouts and cheers grew

thicker around them. They were watching Liesel Meminger give Ludwig Schmeikl the hiding of a lifetime. “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph,” a girl commentated with a shriek, “she’s going to kill him!”

Liesel did not kill him.

But she came close.

In fact, probably the only thing that stopped her was the twitchingly pathetic, grinning face of Tommy Müller. Still crowded with adrenaline, Liesel caught sight of him smiling with such absurdity that she dragged him down and started beating *him* up as well.

“What are you doing?!” he wailed, and only then, after the third or fourth slap and a trickle of bright blood from his nose, did she stop.

On her knees, she sucked in the air and listened to the groans beneath her. She watched the whirlpool of faces, left and right, and she announced, “I’m not stupid.”

No one argued.

It was only when everyone moved back inside and Sister Maria saw the state of Ludwig Schmeikl that the fight resumed. First, it was Rudy and a few others who bore the brunt of suspicion. They were always at each other. “Hands,” each boy was ordered, but every pair was clean.

“I don’t believe this,” the sister muttered. “It can’t be,” because sure enough, when Liesel stepped forward to show her hands, Ludwig Schmeikl was all over them, rusting by the moment. “The corridor,” she stated for the second time that day. For the second time that hour, actually.

This time, it was not a small *Watschen*. It was not an average one. This time, it was the mother of all corridor *Watschens*, one sting of the stick after another, so that Liesel would barely be able to sit down for a week. And there was no laughter from the room. More the silent fear of listening in.

At the end of the school day, Liesel walked home with Rudy and the other Steiner children. Nearing Himmel Street, in a hurry of thoughts, a culmination of misery swept over her—the failed recital of *The Grave Digger's Handbook*, the demolition of her family, her nightmares, the humiliation of the day—and she crouched in the gutter and wept. It all led here.

Rudy stood there, next to her.

It began to rain, nice and hard.

Kurt Steiner called out, but neither of them moved. One sat painfully now, among the falling chunks of rain, and the other stood next to her, waiting.

"Why did he have to die?" she asked, but still, Rudy did nothing; he said nothing.

When finally she finished and stood herself up, he put his arm around her, best-buddy style, and they walked on. There was no request for a kiss. Nothing like that. You can love Rudy for that, if you like.

Just don't kick me in the eggs.

That's what he was thinking, but he didn't tell Liesel that. It was nearly four years later that he offered that information.

For now, Rudy and Liesel made their way onto Himmel Street in the rain.

He was the crazy one who had painted himself black and defeated the world.

She was the book thief without the words.

Trust me, though, the words were on their way, and when they arrived, Liesel would hold them in her hands like the clouds, and she would wring them out like the rain.