

Dear Moon, you go so quietly

A novel

by

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SAMPLE

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Instead of a prologue

"From now on you need to be a boy", Hein says gravely. "Or at least look like one. Will you be able to do that for us?"

Maike is confused. Why should she disguise herself? Why should she sacrifice her beautiful blonde braids that already suspend all the way down over her shoulders?

"It is safer, Beetlely", the brother quietly says to her. "Where we are heading to, it is better that they think you are indeed a boy."

(Germany, July 1944)



Please note: The German female first name 'Maike' consists of two syllables (with emphasis on the first syllable), and is pronounced like "My" (as in "my dear") and "ke" (as the beginning of the word "celtic"). The name has the word "Mai" (German for the month May) in it; therefore the nickname for the girl in this story is in the original German version "Käferchen" (translated as "Beetlely") lovingly said after the German word "Maikäfer" (= May bug).

Part 1

Hiding-Places

SAMPLE

Hamburg-Altona, July 1944.

“Beetlely! Get up! Hurry!”

It is the urging voice of her brother that awakens Maike. Puzzled, she blinks for a moment into the dim light coming in from the window to the courtyard. The darkening cardboard is gone, even though it is high time for brownout, and at the same time the door to the illuminated hallway is open. Where there is light, there are people. And where there are people, the bombs fall.

“Only the coat”, urges the brother her and helps Maike with the sleeves. In the hallway are the suitcases, just next to the flat's door, already packed as usual. But this time it seems to be different. For the brother does not take the brown leather handle in his strong hand; he only stuffs Maike her laced boots into her arms. With his other hand he pulls her out of the door within a heartbeat, and then down the winding staircase and into the courtyard.

“Whereto are we going?” Maike gasps silently when the brother solemnly pulls her past the house next door. There is the air-raid shelter which has gotten much too much of their presence within the last months. But today, the brother seems to have another destination in mind, and there are no ear-splitting sirens to be heard. Quite the contrary, it is calm and quiet in the twilight streets; scarily calm and quiet.

The soft pitter-patter of her naked feet on the asphalt can probably be heard miles away, just as are the long steps of the brother who – even though it is a mild summer night – is wearing his warm winter coat.

“I cannot go any further”, Maike wants to pant against the stinging sensation in her sides, but the brother relentlessly pulls her onwards until he finally pushes her through a half-open door of a bombed out residential house.

Maike has no idea where they are. But she knows the tall, dark-haired man who is awaiting them inside the dusty hall. It is Hein, correctly: Heinrich Schön. He is her hero since time began. A good friend of her brother's he is also, even though he must be at least twice his age and might as well be their father.

However, when he is around, Maike feels safe and sound as only her brother's arms around her make her feel. Hein radiates this certain power that bolsters anyone to find their courage. And he always gave her something whenever he came visiting.

Even in those horrid hours in the air-raid shelter she never was in tears like the other small children – just because she could press Katinka against herself. Of course, like everyone else she was afraid of the enormous delftware pott full of sauerkraut that is standing on the top shelf with the canned food and is shaking threateningly whenever there is a bomb impact nearby.

But with holding Katinka in her arms, this has never been as bad as it could have been; not even when the naked light-bulb under the cellar ceiling died. Katinka always gave her strength.

Nowhere she went without Katinka. The other children always envied her this rag-doll in her beautiful blue dress, a present by Hein on her fifth birthday. That was back then in the year the war began. And now – Maike startles with a hot flash – Katinka is lying alone at home just next to the cushion of her bed. Maike feels the tears welling up.

“Glad you're here”, Hein whispers and gestures towards the grey pile of rubble that blocks the back part of the house. “Over there is the staircase.”

Even before Maike can realise what is happening, she is pulled up and carried over the rubble. A few steps later on the brother whispers to her that she should press her head close against his skinny breast – for now they are going down the narrow staircase towards to basement.

Maike is afraid. She hates basements stairs. Basement stairs are dangerous, she knows that – ever since that dreadful night last summer...

NO! Do NOT think about it!

Here it must be safe; otherwise the brother would no walk down with such forceful steps. He walks on an on, down, down it goes, always following Hein. Maike's heart is pounding so loudly she is afraid it might jump out of her chest at some point. The brother feels it and comfortingly strokes her hair.

“Have no fear, Beetlely”, he whispers into her ear. “Nothing will happen to us here.”

Maike feels a soft shiver running down her spine that may also originate from the brother's warm breath tingling her neck; or is it indeed this basement that gives her the goosebumps?

Down there it is as dark as in a grave, and cold and damp. But behind yet another door, hidden behind an enormous wardrobe of oakwood, there is a small, almost cosy room. Maike is amazed when she sees the woollen carpet on the stone floor. Then there is an old sofa and a few mattresses. Just when she is about to ask whether she may continue her night's sleep on one of them, she spots the thin man.

Behind a chest-high drawerstand he has raised himself and is now glaring at her with his big dark eyes. His face is gaunt and full of deep shadows, almost like a skull.

“No fear, child”, he softly says and splits his face into an almost toothless smile. “Do nothing. I – Juri. You – name?”

His voice has a raspy sound, but his smile catches his dark eyes and brings something like life back into his pale face. But nevertheless, Maike is too scared and surprised to answer him.

“Maike”, the brother says for her.

The thin man nods and sighs silently while lowering himself onto one of the mattresses. From a hiding-place inside the stone-wall he pulls a little parcel, wrapped in textiles. A few moments later he offers Maike the crusty end of some grey bread and a piece of smoked sausage. His smile widens when she takes these offerings after just a short hesitant moment. Even while the brother puts her down on the sofa, she begins to chew.

“Ah, well, that reminds me...” Hein murmurs and pulls out another such parcel from under his coat. Form and size suggest it holds a full smoked sausage and at least half a loaf of grey bread.

The man who called himself Juri, takes the parcel without a word and places it in the hiding-place behind the loose stone in the wall. Then he lies himself

down on his mattress and curls up like hedgehog as if he wanted to sleep. But Maike sees that his dark eyes are open and that the thin man just like her is listening to Hein's voice.

“You need to stay here for a while, Axel”, Hein says calmly to the brother. “We need to prepare a few things before we can move you to your destination.”

The brother nods, while Maike is sitting silently on the sofa, still chewing the smoked sausage. She shivers, even though she wears her coat. And her head is spinning round and round – if from the lack of sleep or from the haste they had to make, she does not know. Or maybe it is because of this strange talk between Hein and the brother?

They take no notice of Maike. Interesting conversation is usually done without her, always very quietly and stealthily. Even now Hein and the brother make an effort to talk as quietly as possible. Maike obliges them by pretending not to hear anything; but, of course, she pricks her ears to not miss any word.

'Stay alert', that is what the teacher said, 'you need to keep your ears open all the time and listen to what is talked about – especially in those conversations that are happening in quietness and stealth.'

“Maybe all this rumpus has died down again by tomorrow”, the brother murmurs. “Maybe they decide on *not* doing it after all.”

“Not, if what we've heard is true”, Hein replies, shaking his head. “It’s just like back then when the Reichstag burned. It’s a very welcome occasion to arrest political opponents. And, unfortunately, this time they’ve got hold of our friend von Kesten. Others like Tannweis were lucky; but for how long will he remain that way? How long before they find *him* out? This time, I fear, they will be more consequent and absolutely merciless, if it is true what we have heard from Berlin.”

“There will be other attempts”, the brother answered with hope. “Now that there are even high-ranking Wehrmacht-officers who are against him...”

“I hoped that would be enough”, Hein sighs. “But as they stood them against the wall and elimi... well, indeed, it looks like nobody is safe anymore; especially as it becomes a personal matter now.”

“It has been all the time”, replies the brother with emphasis, “at least for me it is; and for you, too, I reckon.”

“Yes, for sure.”

“So why then did you reject my proposition?”

“Because it is too damned unreliable. What do you think, how fast will the Bloodbrothers be back when we take on their protégé? You can say good-bye to that as long as he high up there is still holding his hand over them.”

“Is it really absolutely certain that he did survive?”

The brother's voice is expectantly and utterly disappointed at the same time. Maike can see how he seems to fall into decay when Hein nods. He steadies himself against the chest of drawers near the door and lets his head drop.

“It will not be long now”, Red Hein says softly. “And then it will not be over just for Adolf, but also for your very special friend.”

Maike notices with puzzlement that he emphasises the last word very strangely while accompanying it with a grim gesture along his throat. She has absolutely no idea what they are talking about. But the name “Adolf” she knows. It is the first name of the Führer. But he cannot be meant by it – as the brother never talks about the Führer.

Sometimes he quietly talks about some “Herr Schicklgruber” who Maike cannot place. She remembers some indistinct pieces of conversation she heard in April.

Back then the brother was visited late in the evening by a young man who called himself Fabian. And with this Fabian he sat for about an hour in the browndarkened kitchen and talked about “stencils”, “paint” and “present for Schicklgruber”. Maike in her bed next door could hear fragments of the conversation through the not fully closed door, but the strain of pricking her ears for so long made her sleepy too soon.

Next day on her way to school she passed by many brickred house-walls that sported widely noticeable the words *Freedom* and *Peace* in bright white paint.

That was the same day she had to recite a very long and complicated poem in school – because it was Führer's birthday. The teacher had chosen her to recite in the great hall in front of the whole school, standing up on the stage next to the head boy in his gleaming black HJ-uniform. She herself was dressed in her best dress – light-blue flannel with a white collar of needlepoint.

Ah, well, the school. Will she be able to return there after the holidays?

It is not like she would actually miss it, if she were not to go. She will not miss the every-morning standing in attention during the principles address in the great hall; and she will definitely not miss the greeting of the teachers which requires her to raise her right arm and yell “Heil Hitler!” But, on the other hand, she does not want to stay here either.

This basement is spooky, even though the old sofa is quite comfortable. It is more the dim twilight that gives her the shivers; not even the small flame of the little candle on top of the drawers can brighten her or the room up. She almost physically senses how the rubble of the ruined house above are towering over her and how they press down on the ceiling of the basement.

And then there is the thin man who lies with open eyes not more than two metres away from her on his mattress and is chewing calmly on a piece of bread, while the brother and Hein are standing all the way over there at the other end of the room next to the door and are still whispering to each other.

Maike cannot understand much now, but she is too tired anyway to concentrate on the conversation. Anyhow, she does not know what Hein means with the repeatedly used phrase “laying low”. Slowly she glides deeper down into the battered dark green cushions and leans her cheek to the partly bursted arm-rest.

She does not hear anymore how Hein quietly bids his farewell. She does not feel either how the brother carefully covers her with his winter coat and lovingly strokes a strand of her blond hair from her face. With her sausage-greased thumb in her mouth she glides over into a foggy dream full of rubble over which a haggared scimitar moon is smiling coldly.

It is the quiet whispering of men's voices that calls Maike a few hours later from her uneasy sleep. Whether it is day or night - in the dim light she can only make out three rough human shapes. Close by the thin man perches on one of the mattresses and stitches up a hole in his spotted linen trousers. Maike is surprised at how skillfully he manages it.

Then her gaze glides over towards the door. In the small candlelight she sees the brother standing there next to the dressers with a man she does not know and earnestly talks to the stranger. This other man repeatedly shakes his head and finally answers in a low voice: "Let's see what Hein has to say to that. It is dangerous enough as it is. We really have to be absolutely sure that Inge's aunt is not under observation before we are able to place you there. You know that this gang is not one to be trifled with."

"All too well, yes", the brother growls.

"By the by, Andresen is soon to wear yet another uniform", the other man says. "Special Division, just like Koch. Only Andresen will probably go to Sachsenhausen rather than Mauthausen."

"As long as he stays here", the brother answers, "here where we can keep an eye on him..."

"We know nothing to the contrary", replies the other man with a headshake. "We assume our special friend is supposed to hold the fort here - at least until the Bloodbrothers are back."

"Maybe", the brother murmurs grimly, "he is flirting with the idea of joining the 'Hat-and-Coat-Faction'."

"Possible. That would explain why he is searching so eagerly for you and the other comrades."

"You eat, child."

Maike is startled when a thin hand presents to her a piece of grey bread and some smoked sausage. It is the thin man who friendly looks at her and carefully places a dented military flask right next to her against the back of the sofa cushions.

The brother and the other man shortly look over before they continue to speak with each other in such a low voice that Maike cannot get any word. To make herself busy she starts chewing the hardened bread. Her dry mouth only drudgingly fills with saliva to make the small bites go down her throat. Quickly Maike takes a long sip from the flask that, to her relief, contains cool fresh water.

The sausage is of some wonderfully aromatic Mettwurst that smells promisingly and tastes just like heaven. With relish Maike eats alternately one bite of bread and one bite of sausage before she finally takes another sip from the military flask.

Then she cuddles up on the sofa and pulls the brother's coat closer around herself. The voices from the other end of the room are only fragments to her now. There is talk of some Kreisau-viscount who has been arrested in January. Strange. Then there is talk about the family of some "Freiherr" (German baron) who is about to be arrested due to kin liability – even though one of the sons just had a fatal 'accident' and is now with his father "beyond of everything". A little time later there is talk about "Edelweiss", "White Rose" and something called "Wandervogel" (German youth movement, forbidden in the Nazi-Reich) that makes no sense to Maike at all.

Vaguely she remembers some foggy conversation that the brother had with his best friend Paul in the winter before last. But the more she tries to remember the more uncertain those buried fragments of conversation. She is sure, however, that it has to do something with Paul's cousin Tina who stayed with Paul's family at that time. Why Tina and her boyfriend Fritz were suddenly gone one day, Maike did not learn. And she has not seen Paul again since then neither.

But maybe she just needs to listen more carefully when the brother and the other adults are talking with each other – just as they are doing it now.

Maike pricks her ears so much it nearly hurts. Her heart is pounding louder and hinderingly; but she is able to catch some more fragments of conversation.

"It will be hard", the brother is whispering. "But it will work out somehow."

"It has to", the other one answers. "If you are found out, all are in with you. Sooner or later they will work out the connection."

“If only the Allied powers hurried up”, the brother sighs. “Then we’d need not endanger Inge and her family.”

“It is a long way”, returns the other man, “from the Normandy to here. And the opposition is strong, nearly as much as in the east.”

“I was under the impression that there are all signs set to ‘taktische Absetzbewegung nach rückwärts’ (Nazi-jargon for ‘tactical retreat in the face of overpowering enemy forces’). Is that not true?”

“It is. But the progress is slower than expected. And that’s why you need to be patient, Axel, even though it is hard to do so.”

“I know”, the brother murmurs. “Our good *Bolkónski* has other worries at the moment, for sure... I hope we are no trouble to anyone or make the matter more complicated than it already is; I mean, there will be three of us.”

“It’ll go awry”, the other man says with an encouraging nod. “As I said, you need to be patient, as hard as that may be.”

The brother snorts quietly and answers with a sigh in his voice: “As hard as nothing before.”

Maike hears the sadness in his words. She does not completely understand what those two are talking about. The word “Normandy”, however, has awakened another blurry memory of hers.

“What do you mean with *landed*?”

This question the brother put to Hein just a short while ago in some night at the beginning of June when Hein visited them in yet another brownout night – in secret as always so that he appears to Maike almost like a ghost walking through walls. The following conversation Maike has, as usual, only heard in fragments and understood even less: There was talk of “Normandy”, “beach” and “counter-offensive” as well as some mentioning of “France” and “Vichy-government” and “the beginning of the end”.

Just the same phrase is now used by the other man before he continues: “And I promise you, once it is over, we will get ourselves the satisfaction of seeing *him* shiver.”

“We will make him accountable...”

“... yes, him and his two companions...”

“I owe it to her”, murmurs the brother hoarsely. “To her, the others and...”

“... and your father.”

Those last three words hit Maike like a bolt of lightning. Whomsoever the brother wants to make accountable for whatever those three male people did – what is their connection to her father?

She has no recollection of him, no memory of that tall impressive man whose framed portrait stood at home on the living room dresser. It shows a man in his prime, looking a little bit earnest and wearing a Wehrmacht-uniform. There is a black ribbon in one of the upper corners of the picture frame, with two Wehrmacht-medals dangling from it. Maike is very proud that her father has been honoured for his bravery in the last war. In school, she has been one of the few who had been able to boast on two such medals.

But whatever he did – her father was not alive when she herself was born. He is reported to have been a brave and strong man – for which reason he worked on the shipyards of *Blohm & Voss*, together with the father of Paul and Anne-marie; yet another subject that has not been spoken about to her with openness and explanation.

Maike suppresses a yawn. She is awfully tired, but the conversation promises some answers to her open questions. She has to force herself to stay awake. But that’s easier thought than done, for the brother and the other man are talking even more quietly than before; she can hardly understand anything.

With half-closed eyes Maike lies there and pricks her ears – well-knowing that the thin man is now sitting just one metre away from her on his mattress. With a small curved knife he is cutting a little figurine from a piece of wood.

Curiously Maike peeps through her eye-lids and marvels at the little round tower with battlemented top that slowly emerges from the wood. The next piece is formed to something that appears to be a column with something like a crown on top. The third and last piece of wood is crafted very carefully. Fascinated Maike watches how the head of a horse appears, followed by the body,

the slender legs and finally the hooves on a round stand space. Only when the thin man folds back a piece of carpet next to him and places the three little figurines on a chalk-white drawn chequered square, Maike recognises the figurines as chess figures.

Similar figurines were also in the possession of nice Herr Lipowetzky from No. 18 next door. Almost every Sunday afternoon he has sat opposite from Léon Giesemann's father, the chess board between them. When the sun was shining, those two bearded men sat down in the courtyard behind No. 18 so that Maike and the other children were able to watch how they moved the small white and black figurines about the chess board, following some mysteriously fascinating rules.

The children have tried to learn the game and capture one figurine after the other by their clever moves. Paul Kirchhoff, the brother's best friend, has been very smart at that; but the smartest has always been Léon Giesemann who lived across the street at No. 47 until a few years ago.

Ah, well, Léon.

Just like so many other children of their street, he is not there anymore. Maike heaves a silent sigh. She misses him very much, maybe even more than her best friend Annemarie Kirchhoff or her second-best friend Helene Weiss. Both girls have lived in the house next door of No. 20 – Leni on the ground floor and Annemi on the first floor just below the flat of Herr and Frau Lipowetzky.

Maike has visited them very often – and not only because her own brother has been friends with Leni's big sister Pauline and Annemi's big brother Paul being the brother's best friend.

They all have played together, all children from No. 20 and the surrounding houses. Especially the inner courtyard between No. 18 and the rear house with the open arch towards the next street has always been very popular among them.

But since there are hardly any children left to play with, Maike has spent less and less time there. The children that still are living in her street are all wearing a uniform – HJ (Hitler Youth), Jungvolk (HJ for under 14 males) or BDM, short for Bund Deutscher Mädels (HJ for girls 14+) and Jungmädelsbund (HJ for under

14 females). Maike herself is, on doctor's forbiddance, not allowed to join the HJ – due to her weak heart that has been attested to her and clears her from any sportive activities in school, too.

Strangely enough, her heart has never caused her any trouble when she was playing with Leni and Annemi in the courtyard. And when Katie visited, they were wild as young horses. But all of that is now in the past.

It is no fun playing without Annemi, Leni or Katie, no fun riding the hobbyhorse made from an old broomstick around the yard – at least not, when there are Herr and Frau Behm of No. 18 sitting in the sun on their folding chairs and loudly talking to black-uniformed Herr Braun (German word for the colour brown!) about the successes of the German Wehrmacht. They talk about “German bravery” and “bold forays on the Eastern front”; only sometimes they mention “very minor tactical evasive moves”.

Just like the teacher in school they use a lot of words that Maike does not comprehend. Her ears hurt whenever their not-to-be-ignored loud voices echo in the courtyard like the bulky Volksempfänger (German radio device of the 1930s) that Herr Braun of No. 18 always places in his open window to the yard whenever there is a radio-broadcasted speech of the Führer on. It is hard to understand what the Führer is saying in those speeches; but that is, of course, the radio device's fault.

Anyways, the teacher always tells them the next day in school what the Führer said. Much of what he said they have to memorize by heart and recite, mostly in the lessons with Studienrat (German graduate secondary-school teacher rank) Herr Wolf whom Maike likes the least of all the teachers. This is not only because he sometimes looks at her so strangely that she feels uneasy.

It has nothing to do with her being poor in his teaching subject; quite the contrary, she is excellent in all the subjects – maybe a little better in mathematics than in Rassenkunde (Nazi-school subject about anti-Semitic Race Theory), even though she does not like to calculate how many kilometres a German air-fighter with hundred-twenty kilograms of bombs on board is able to fly, if one with seventy kilograms manages nine-hundred-ten kilometres (the approximate distance between Berlin and London).

It is more this impalpable threat she senses behind any of his glances and even hears in every word of his. The curious thing is, though, that it was Studienrat Herr Wolf who – with a gleam in his dark eyes – suggested her first, when the principle looked for someone of her class to have the honourable special task to recite that poem on Führer's birthday.

Quietly, as not to disturb the adults, Maike whispers the poem to herself that she had to recite back then in front of all pupils and teachers. It consists of so many complicated words she hardly understands. But she had to learn it by heart and recite it anyway, because it has the Führer as its topic. And the Führer is the one who takes care of them so well; yet then there is the passage about German soil and pure blood.

She herself is of pure German blood and has the noble Aryan head shape, as she has learned in her Rassenkunde-lessons. She is not particularly proud of it; her pride is her beautiful blond hair that reaches down in thick plaids way over her shoulders. Her eyes are blue and her skin is pale, even though she tans nicely in the summer when she is playing outside.

In the poem, there is a passage that describes the perfect German woman who is at home at the cooker and prepares the meal for her husband; who has effortlessly managed to get seven children (the seventh is automatically the Führer's godchild and the mother gets the Cross of Honour of the German Mother, a Nazi-medal for women); and, of course, this German woman is always happy and glad. Maike assumes that she has been picked by her looks for the recitement task.

A little further on, there is a passage that was challenging even while learning it. There are so many complicated words that have "nigger" as the easiest of them. She has not understood why the poem does not only talk in one go of Negroes, but also of "Jews" and "Red bastards" (whatever that is). It sounds very menacing, because it has something to do with the "pureness of the German blood" that is much-heralded in this passage. "All ye brethren of pure German blood", it says there, "beware ye of the danger that is all around ye..."

When she reaches this passage now, she comes to a halt, even though she has obediently learnt the poem by heart. Thoughtfully she licks her fingers that still

smell of sausage and taste a little greasy while she ponders the conversation that has just been completed by the other man's departure.

"Bloodbrothers", the brother has said, just like yesterday. The strange word sends cold shivers down Maïke's spine. Now she is certain that it has nothing to do with the poem's text. Bloodbrothers. That is a word the brother articulates with horror. She has heard before, about one and a half year ago.

Back then it was the first time they hurried to leave home without their suitcases in the dead of night. For two and a half days they visited an acquaintance of the brother's who lives two streets away. And this Thomas Lüttich it has been who talked about Bloodbrothers.

Maïke has not understood much of what was being said. But she has realised very acutely that Thomas despises these Bloodbrothers. When she asked the brother later on about that word, his face saddened very much.

"Like so many others, Thomas had to suffer so much within these last ten years. Have you noticed he has to walk with a limp in his right leg?"

When she nodded, the brother's face became even more gloomy and his voice more quiet. "It was them, the Bloodbrothers. They have brought much pain and suffering to many people. People like Thomas."

"Did they break his leg?"

"Yes, they did."

The brother's voice was hard, almost grim. On her question about the Why, however, he only shrugged and answered: "Because Thomas is not one of them. Because someone denounced him. Because the defeat at Stalingrad made them angry and they wanted to smash the hell out of somebody. Because they were just in the mood for it. I don't know."

"Has the Führer allowed them to do that?"

"The Führer? Tz..., he does not care about that at all..."

"But the teacher said that the Führer knows and cares about everything."

"Herr Gruber is not always right, Beetlely. The same goes, by the way, for Herr Rosinski and Herr Wolf and their alike."

She had to think about that for a long time, also about that what the brother meant with “their alike”. Who are these people, those “Bloodbrothers”, that beat up Thomas? She almost ventured to ask Herr Gruber about it. In his mathematics lessons, he said to the class, they may ask everything – but she had the instinctive feeling that he was only talking about questions concerning mathematics.

Maybe, she thinks now, it was the Jews that she has heard about in her Rassenkunde-lessons with Studienrat Wolf. She has been told that the Jews are inferior to the Germanic race of the Aryans that she belongs to. Any close relationship with Jews is therefore “Rassenschande” (Nazi-jargon for deminishing aspects of “race defilement”), for the Jews have completely different blood.

This statement has never made sense to her. When Léon cut himself with his pocket-knife in his thumb, there was just a much red blood as the time when she herself cut her hand on the rusty nail on the courtyard door of No. 18. She knew, of course, that he was Jewish, just like Leni and Katie. But it never bothered her when they were playing together – especially, because Léon was the nicest and most handsome boy of the entire neighbourhood.

Furthermore, she has seen that Léon's father has talked to Thomas very often and very amiably; therefore it seems strange and implausible to Maike now that it was people like Giesemanns that are accountable for Thomas's damaged leg.

Other possibilities are those “Anti-socials” or those, explicitly dangerous, Reds or Politicals she has been warned about right at the beginning of her school-days three years ago. She is still puzzled that those words are mentioned again and again, especially that word “Jew”.

In the third from her last lesson prior to the holidays it was that the teacher – just like Studienrat Herr Wolf two lessons earlier that day – once again talked very much about “the Red danger”, “the Samuels” and “the Bolshevik-Jewish world conspiracy”. Herr Gruber has used so many complicated words back then that she has not grasped even half of it.

The brother only shook his head on her inquiries at home and quietly murmured “I don't know”; obviously, only men like the teacher, Studienrat Herr Wolf and Oberstudienrat (German higher graduate secondary-school teacher)

Herr Rosinski who wear the Swastika-badge clearly visible on their collars, know these strange words.

It is curious, because the brother has been top of his class in his German Literature lessons in his last year in school. His teacher, Fräulein (Miss) Niese has even awarded him for the best essay – with a book containing speeches and essays by Reich Minister Goebbels.

When Maike took the book from the brother's nightstand one day, the book jacket came off – revealing, to her utter surprise, a totally different book with the funny title *Buddenbrooks* (famous novel by German author and expatriate Thomas Mann, winner of Nobel Prize for Literature of 1929).

“They obviously confused that in the book shop”, the brother said with a shrug, when she showed it to him. That there was a slim band of textile like a bookmark between the pages, she only realised later on. But then she did not have the courage to ask him about it.

She has realised early on that it is not always the smart way to ask questions – especially not in school; and absolutely not in the lessons given by Studienrat Herr Wolf who substitute her teacher Herr Gruber three times a week and talks with them about Rassenkunde.

Maike remembers with discomfort her own innocent question whether the Führer – having dark hair and eyes – is belonging to a very special Nordic race. For one horribly long moment, the Studienrat looked like he wanted to punch her. Then he snidely murmured “children!” and continued with the measuring of Martin’s head. Maybe he just remembered himself presenting Maike – with her blue eyes and blond plaids – just moments ago as an optimal example of the Aryan master race.

But Studienrat Herr Wolf is not the only teacher Maike is afraid of. There is also the terrifying Oberstudienrat Herr Rosinski who gives lessons in geo-politics twice a week and who sports an always very accurate parting of the hair and a moustache just like the Führer. His keen eyes pierce everyone, his masterful voice rings in the ears, and his punishments with the cane are notorious – for he does not make any difference between boys or girls. Twenty hard hits that you still feel three weeks later, if little Steven is to be believed. He is, so far, the

only one of their class who had to endure this disgrace, being bent over the first row table – for being late.

Since the last day prior to the holiday, however, it is not the hardness of his beating that gives Maike the shivers when she is thinking about the bulky teacher of the Obersekunda (third highest class in German schools in the 1940s). In the long break while playing hide-and-seek, of all things, she has listened to a conversation she has been pondering about a lot ever since then.

“After the holidays the new German teacher, a Fräulein Kramer, will finally be with us”, she has heard her teacher Herr Gruber say to Oberstudienrat Herr Rosinski in a low voice.

Maike remembers herself pricking her ears while keeping motionless in her hiding-place inside the hollow plum tree and hoping to learn more. She is not the only one who has been puzzled by Fräulein Niese’s sudden disappearance.

About one month after the Easter break it has been that the amiable, delicate woman with her warm green-blue eyes came to school one morning – and was forcibly escorted to the principle by two uniformed boys of the Oberprima (highest class in German schools in the 1940s), including the HJ-leader of their school.

A short while later, there came a dark big car into the schoolyard, with two men in long dark coats stepping out of it. The Oberprima-boys have stood in attention with their right arms raised high, when the grim looking principle – who sports a Führer-moustache and always wears a very neat suit with the Swastika-badge in a button hole – passed Fräulein Niese onto those two strange men. After that day, the most amiable teacher of the whole school has not been seen again.

Silently Maike has pleaded to the two men to not go away, but to continue their conversation right next to the tree – before Hannah finds her and it may be her turn to count to twenty before yelling “ready or not, here I come!”

Fortunately, the two teachers unknowingly headed her plea and kept standing just next to the tree.

“Have you noticed it?” Herr Rosinski asked. “I mean that she was half-Jewish?”

“Well, not so much by looking at her”, Herr Gruber answered slowly, “but her curriculum, well, that had to have made me suspicious, too.”

“You were not working with her classes so much, that’s excusable.”

“Fortunately, you have had a keen eye. I suppose Sturmbannführer (SS-rank) Berger and our colleague Herr Gröhn were very much satisfied with you, yes?”

“Yes, indeed, thank you. But, honestly, Joachim Ringelnatz and this Theobald Tiger – they really stood out from the reading list.”

Maike did not understand whom the teachers talked about and she forgot those names quickly – for the next words of Herr Rosinski’s brought ice-cold dread to her: “It is a very lenient punishment for her, just hundred-fifty days working camp and a few broken bones, don’t you think?”

“You’re saying they should have passed her on to the East right away?”

“Yes, indeed. Such as Fräulein Niese have absolutely no right to be here.”

“Yes, I think you’re right. Where would we be, if we were to hand over the stage to the Jewish world conspirators, right?”

“Well”, Herr Rosinki answered. “The gentlemen at the Neuer Wall will surely decide the matter to all our satisfaction.”

“It just may take a little while longer”, Herr Gruber answered indifferently. “It’s all haywire there, since Herr Hauptmann Sonne went away and started on his new tasks.”

“No, sir, no such things occur with the Gestapo.”

This last word – Maike remembers it very well – got her attention. She has heard it before – spoken afraid, in whispers or like a curse – but she has never known the meaning of it. *Ge-sta-po*. For some strange reason this unknown word has made her afraid, too; it is not graspable, not explainable to her, but definitely inescapable.

Later on at home she has told the brother about that conversation and asked of him the meaning of the word Gestapo – making him almost fall off the kitchen bench by shock. A painfully long moment she was afraid his death-pale face meant that he would never ever speak to her again. Then, however, he got up,

ostentatiously took the kettle and made himself some coffee substitute from roasted beechnuts.

He ignored her continuously inquisitive face and only casually said: "The Gestapo is the Geheime Staatspolizei (Nazi-Secret Police). They are... well, yes, very secretive, Beetely. They usually wear long dark coats and a hat. Their Hamburg-headquarter is in the inner city, at the Neuer Wall."

"Why did they arrest Fräulein Niese?"

"I don't know."

"Why must she go to a working camp? And what is a working camp?"

The brother just shook his head with a silent shrug. But in his face she could see his emotions that were no good at all. She has noticed his inner uproar, even though he turned away from her to check on the boiling water in the kettle. She has sensed that any further questions would not receive any answer at all. For quite some time she has come to the conclusion that she is not told the whole truth – maybe, he thinks her too young for it. Maybe even the brother does not know it all; or maybe it is, because he is afraid to say too much.

Important conversations – and those are all those whispered words in haste between the adults in her own small world at home – are always carried on without including her, and so quietly that she can hardly hear a word. And even if she has been able to catch some phrase, it has almost every time been unknown words or allusion to things she has no knowledge of; therefore it has been very hard for her to make sense of what she has heard.

Who, for example, is this "idiots' club" the brother mentioned a few times when he whispered with his friends? "We are the Idiots' Club and give a heartily welcome to you", he once whispered in a strange sing-song manner. "We welcome everyone who just needs to be stupid to the extreme. Our motto is 'Be stupid until death' – and whoever is the stupidest is our leader-idiot."

At first she thought he meant the Schneider-boys from across the street who are a little stupid but very eager members of the HJ. But when she asked the brother later on about the phrase "Idiots' Club", his gaze became very hard. She must have misheard, he said and looked at her for a minute or so, before adding: "Maybe I was talking about the Stamp Collectors' Club that Herr

Tischendorf from across the street is a member of. Anyway, it was nothing of significance, Beetlely.”

Maike remembers herself nodding in silence while being absolutely sure that it has been of significance. More than once she has had the feeling that the brother – and the mother, too – have left her in the dark on purpose; possibly, because they thought her not old enough for the information or because they believed she would not comprehend it anyway. It was like almost every other overheard conversation she does not comprehend. Therefore she has always shaken her head and answered “no, nothing” when Studienrat asked her in his lessons whether she had to report some suspicious actions she witnessed.

On the other hand – never ever would she telltale on the brother, unless he explicitly allowed her to do so! Only once – three years ago, on the afternoon of her second day of school – she unguardedly said to Frau Tischendorf from across the street that the brother does not like it how Herr Braun from next door always placed his radio in the open window to the courtyard whenever a speech by Reich Minister Goebbels or the Führer is broadcasted.

The consequence was that Herr Braun, accompanied by the Blockwart (Nazi-position for janitor work) Herr Miess, knocked on their door the same evening and rigorously asked the brother what it was that he did not like in those broadcasts of the great Führer and his minister.

Maike sat quietly behind the half-closed living room door and heard how the brother answered in a strange emotionless voice: “You always tune your radio wrongly, Herr Braun. It’s hardly anything than acoustic noise to be heard.”

Herr Miess ordered Herr Braun in a sharp voice to tune his radio in the future in a way that all neighbours would be able to listen to the Führer’s broadcasts. Nothing much came from it, for Herr Braun now always tunes his radio up to the highest volume – causing that no one can understand anything due to the echo in the inner courtyard. That the brother is not distressed about this, Maike has realised very soon. Sometimes she thinks to have seen a small satisfied smile around his mouth whenever the ear-splitting noise like many steam trains echoes in the courtyard. But most of all she remembers his words to her when he placed her in bed that night:

“Beetlely, you need to listen very carefully now. You must not say what you think. And you must not repeat what you may have heard. Promise me that you will take extra-care what you say to anyone else than me in the future. Promise?”

She has promised, and if only to chase away that sad and sorrowful gleam in his eyes. Secondly, she has been ashamed of herself – just like a little kid she has blurted out what he said. But as a school-kid she is a smart girl and needs to about her wits.

“Are you terribly cross with me?”

The brother has seen the tears in her eyes and instantly swooped her up in his arms while shaking his head. It is only so very important, he said that nobody starts to ask questions. Otherwise Hein would never be able to visit them again.

“And without him, Beetlely, we will not survive the next winter. We need his support and care, do you understand?”

In the months following that night the brother has been very well guarded to make her not overhear anything of the conversations he had with Hein or some other adults. Even the very few fragments she could overhear in the meantime are making no sense to her at all. They are some strange words like “B-B-C” or “death camps” which obviously belong to some secret language she herself with her only ten years of lifetime is not supposed to understand. The same is true for the vague allocations the brother made just a moment ago and she did not understand either. Who, for example, is this friend mentioned by the other man?

It cannot be Thomas Lüttich, for he vanished a few days after they visited him. Maike remembers vaguely some talk about a “Buchenwald” (German word for beech forest, also name of a concentration camp near the city of Weimar). It was there, she overheard, that Thomas suffered from a severe lung inflammation and died.

Also, the other man enunciated the word ‘friend’ so strangely that she is almost certain he did not talk of any actual friend. Maybe he was talking about some person like Herr Braun, the unpleasant man from No. 18 who – like so many of her teachers – wears the black SS-uniform. Or maybe it was talk about the

Blockwart Herr Miess, the unfriendly man who sent them away back then – just before the big disaster struck...

Charcoaled roof beams that stretch up into the sky... Rubble and the dust of burst walls everywhere, accompanied by the biting stench of phosphorus and sulphur... A staircase in ruins, illuminated by the pale light of a crescent moon...

NO! Do Not Think About It!

Maike forces herself to not dive down into those horrible memories. She does not want to break into tears right now. She wants to listen to the whispered words the brother speaks, now that the other man is gone, to the thin man named Juri. They are sitting just about two metres away from her on one of the thin mattresses and whispering with each other. But even though she fights her sleepiness with all her might and pricks her ears as much as possible, she cannot overhear more than two words: “Smo-lensk” and “K.Z.”

Her eyes are already dropping and she is sliding sideways onto the sofa, when the brother quietly says: “Red Hein was a good friend of my father’s. He, like myself, can hardly await the day when this detestable brown gang of murderers will finally stand accountable for all they’ve done – rather sooner than later, of course.”

Maike feels a hot-cold sensation gripping her body. The brother must not be thinking about the Führer, when he says such things; for if he did, she would need to tell this to her teacher and to Studienrat Herr Wolf. Nobody is allowed to threaten the Führer. This great strong man who – like Herr Gruber always says – is the one they owe everything to. There is a portrait of him hanging in every classroom. At home, there is no such portrait.

With a muffled scream, Maike awakens. There is a hand over her mouth, while another one tries to calm her beating arms.

“Quiet, child”, she hears a low voice next to her face. “No loud. We danger.”

Maike gasps and gazes into the blue-black dark of the basement room. Only a tiny piece of candle is left on the chest of drawers, flickering weakly and painting dark shadows into the pale face of the thin man who is holding her. Her heart is racing even faster when her terrified eyes realise that the brother is nowhere to be seen. She is all alone with the thin man who called himself Juri.

“You no cry”, he whispers and widens his eyes into an inquisitive stare. Maike is way too terrified to answer him. “You quiet now”, Juri repeats and gestures with his head up to the ceiling. “Up there Nazis.”

The terror is so dominant in his pale face that Maike is almost able to sense it physically. Immediately she stops beating about her and fighting against the hand over her mouth.

Juri looks at her inquisitively and slowly raised his hands – as if he were to grab her once again in a flash, in case she starts screaming again. But Maike is motionless by fear.

She knows that something horrific must have happened. Otherwise the brother would be here with her. All through the night he was lying next to her, holding her safely. He knows all too well how much she is terrified by basements. But now he is gone. Pleadingly she prays that he may return any moment now. But on the other hand... she knows from experience that it happens that people do not return.

Her friend Katie Gerstenberg, for example... The clever girl with the pretty red-blond plaids used to live nearby in the rear house, just where the open arch to the next street is, leading over to the grocery of Frau Steiner’s. But in the flat above the arch there is now the Schmeißer-family with their three sons who all wear uniform. The eldest son is group leader in the HJ, the youngest is one of the most eager members of the local unit of the Jungvolk.

“Nazi-children”, the brother said grimly when the Schmeißer-family moved in. “I don’t think you will be able to play with them, Beetlely. They seem to take their HJ-careers very seriously and will not have any time for children play.”

The same idea had already come to her mind, for the youngest Schmeißer-boy only gave a sniff at her marbles which he snidely called “kids’ stuff”.

“Well, well”, the brother returned when she told him about it. “I beg of you to never say anything when they are listening. Promise me, Beetlely.”

She did promise, even though she never knew back then, why it was so very important to him. Well, she does not really know now either. But there is a vague suspicion in her that the Nazis are not as great as Herr Gruber and Studienrat Herr Wolf always proclaim them to be. Maybe the Nazis are even dangerous.

At least they seem to be involved in many of the strange things happening from day to day – maybe they even cause them, though Maike cannot find an explanation why. For example, why were Katie and her parents not there anymore from one day to the next?

Frau Behm from No. 18 next door said to Frau Schneider in the street that the Gerstenberg-family had moved into the East – to some town that the Führer had given to such people as the Gerstenberg-family. When Maike had asked the brother to immediately inform her when there was a letter from Katie for her, he had gazed at her for a long while.

“I will”, he finally said very quietly. “But, Beetlely, it may be that Katie will not be able to get in touch. Do not expect any letters from her.”

When his best friend Paul came over that same evening for exchanging food stamps, he quietly said: “I do hope they are allowed to stay in Terezín.”

“Yes”, Pauls answered solemnly. “If it is indeed true what father has heard, then they have just a little chance there to... Well, unless they are forced to go on to one of those other camps...”

They have not noticed Maike listening through the half-closed kitchen door. She remembers lying awake for a long time that night with pounding heart, staring out through the window and up to the smiling half-moon in the night-sky. Holding Katinka in her arms, she has pricked her ears to get every word spoken in the next room.

She has not understood much, but she knew instinctively that it was something of significance. Maybe it even was – her heart skips a beat – something forbidden that she ought to report to Oberstudienrat Herr Rosinski or to Studienrat Herr Wolf.

On the other hand, maybe she did not really get the meaning of the things the brother and his best friend talked about: some prisons under the open sky; some “Special-Division Skull”; and some camps the Führer let be built in the East. It did not sound like they were talking about sleep-away camps for the HJ.

“Do you think”, the brother carefully asked, “that the girls are there, too?”

“I pray they are not.”

“And Peter?”

“I hope not.”

“Could it make a difference”, the brother asked after a while, “when the arrest was? I mean, do you think..., can it be that she is still...?”

There was no quick response from Paul to this question; he took a while before he sighed and said with a steady voice: “A lot has happening since then, Axel. Do not drive yourself mad with things you cannot change anymore. You need to be strong. You need to look ahead, go on living.”

“But how?”

“It is possible, somehow, I tell you.”

“Don’t you miss her?”

“There is no day”, Paul answered in a very low and sad voice, “no morning I awake and, for a wonderful short while, hope that all has been just a bad dream... that she is soon to come across the yard with her bright smile and running into my arms... my sweet little Liza...”

These words, Maike remembers it very well, made her flinch in pain. So Liza and Léon Giesemann and their parents *did* disappear in that night when the brother visited the Kirchhoff-family next door until dawn.

The mother said back then that Paul had taken seriously ill all of a sudden. For full three weeks the brother’s best friend did not walk outside; however, what illness he was suffering from, the mother did not elaborate.

Yes, the mother.

Maike swallows hard. The memory hurts. In this cold basement it is easy for the pain to press her down so that she feels like the last flicker of the dying candle while lying on the mattress. Close by she feels more than she sees the thin body of Juri. He, too, has curled up as he now needs not to hold her anymore.

In the feeble flicker of the candle's flame she can see that his eyes are open as he is lying and staring at the grey ceiling. His stiffness and the unmoving stare awaken uncomfortable memories – of that starry night that fills her nightmares ever since...

Maike feels her eyes beginning to swim. She forces the tears back, even though she is lying in total darkness now that the candle has gone out. Not even the enamel pot under its cover she can see now; and it is only two metres away from her in the corner of the room. If she now felt the urge to pee, she would need to feel her way over there on her hands and knees.

Immediately she is overcome by the urgent need to pee, even though she has not drunk anything for hours. Her stomach is hollow and empty as if she had not eaten for days. Only with a lot of force she can fight down the queasy feeling in her belly and the urge to pee. She must not make a sound – at least not as long as there are Nazis up there. It is hard, but she manages somehow with a lot of effort to make her mind wander to another topic – far away from this horrific basement.

A wide green meadow she sees in front of her inner eye, and a soft slope down towards the river Elbe in a beautiful little park overlooking the river. All around there are the impressive houses on the noble street called Elbchaussee where the rich people live.

Within the park, there is an age-old oak tree with low hanging branches that are great for being used as a see-saw. Only two weeks ago they have been there, she and the brother. It was a Sunday, just like that day last summer, when there were the three of them – when they were still a family...

A deep rumbling and roaring noise... then a soft and very high hissing sound that become louder and is getting nearer and nearer... an ear-splitting crashing noise that makes the earth shake under her feet... the starry sky where just a moment ago the dark ceiling of the basement has been... the pale moonlight that shines on the terrified face of the brother... and...

NO! Do Not Cry Now!

The brother does not cry either; at least not, when Maike is around. She has to be strong now, just like the brother and Hein. The darkness makes her uneasy and uncomfortable, just like the cold that is creeping into her bones despite the warm coat.

If only the brother was back. The Nazis up there must be gone by now; so no one will be in the brother's way. Whatever it is he went away to do, it must be time for his return by now. Or did he...?

NO! She must not even *think* that! Never!

Forcibly she pushes the thought away. It is hard enough that she has thought about Katie, Leni and Annemi and about Liza and Léon. Her chest is tight and like being laced up too much, while her thoughts spin around in her head.

Her breath becomes short and uneasy when she realises that not only her friends from her neighbourhood are gone. The same is true for Hannah and Lotte and for some girls in her school class – all girls who, like herself, do not wear the blue-black uniforms of the Jungmädelbund.

The brother once said it would make him sad to see her join the uniformed girls. Luckily she has that heart issue since her birth, attested by Doctor Gutmann (German surname composed of the words “good” and “man”). This makes it unhealthy for her to do as much sportive activities as are expected from the Hitler-girls.

In school, too, she needs not participate in any gymnastic lessons and the like – even though she would like to try her luck some time in a game of Völkerball (German word for dodgeball) or “Negerland-Durchquerung” (roughly translated as “Negro-land trail”; Nazi-activity that both incorporates the diminishing word for black people in a disgracing way and is something like a military fitness trail for children)... Especially this last game would be one she could be very good at – as it consists of rapidly climbing over, under and through a parcours of many gymnastics apparatus from one end of the gym to the other. The brother and the mother were hardly getting her away from the climbing trees in the grand Jenisch-park near the river Elbe on their Sunday outings.

It is almost like she can hear the warm voice of the mother in the darkness. The words are muffled, like being buried under a lot of heavy debris...

NO! Do Not keep thinking about it! But suddenly, and in spite of all her forces to the contrary, the images are back in front of her inner eye.

The vicious laughter of the Blockwart Herr Miess... the desperate face of the brother... the pleading gestures of the mother... the starry night... the smiling moon in the skies... the burning house... the basement stairs... the unmoving eyes...

The tears are welling up all on their own. Like hot torrents they burst from Maike's eyes and down her cheeks, while her throat is getting painfully tight. Now she remembers what she has dreamt of. It has been the same nightmare as so many times before, of that horrible night...

"Good, good, child", she hears a hoarse voice whisper very softly.

A hand carefully strokes her back, very carefully, like she was a butterfly the hand did not want to hurt. Then Maike hears a hoarse sing-song of a voice not used for a long time. It hums and finally starts to sing in a foreign language, right next to her ear:

"Spi mladjénets, ma'a prekrásna, bájuscki bajú. Tícha smótrit mjésiats jásni w kôlibjél twajú..." (Russian lullaby).

Even though she does not comprehend any of the words, Maike feels consoled and safe like a little child. She closes her eyes and listens to the melody that seems to gently rock to sleep. She glides in a peaceful half-sleep that even drives away the worry about the brother for a while.

Just when the soft noise of wood on stone is to be heard, Maike opens her eyes again. In the dim light coming in from outside and through the open door, she can see three people. The tall man with his slender silhouette against the light from the ante-room – is Hein. Next to him there is a smaller man, slender as

well, wearing a hat and unknown to Maike. When the third person lightens a matchstick and a new candle, Maike's heart jumps up: It is the brother!

He has hardly time to put down the candle – Maike is clinging to him like she was drowning, all the while crying in relief into the thick woollen pullover he is wearing under his open coat.

“Hello Beetlely”, he says quietly and presses her tightly while placing a tender kiss on the crown of her head. “Did you suffer much of fear?”

She solemnly shakes her head, well-knowing that she cannot deceive him. The remains of her tears are not to be overlooked.

“My brave Beetlely”, the brother says and breathes a kiss onto her forehead.

“It is time”, Hein says softly. “It will be light soon.”

Juri gets up, swoops up the rest of the food and crams all into his pockets. Then he looks at Hein. But it is the smaller man who talks next: “We go at five minute intervals. Meeting point: Himmelsleiter.”

“In case, neither Nils nor I are there”, Hein says, “you keep on going outbound by the riverside until you reach Blankenese. There will be somebody waiting for you and taking care that you will be under cover for the day.”

“One of us will be there”, the smaller man called Nils says. “Care only for nobody watching you while climbing down that staircase.”

The brother nods and presses Maike close for a moment, after placing a grey cap on her head that make her blond plaids almost disappear.

“Listen to what Hein says, Beetlely. See you later.”

With that Maike is swooped up by Hein and carried out and up the steep stairs. The brother stays behind with Juri and Nils. Shocked, Maike hardly knows whether to be afraid or to just start crying.

But Hein's strong hand gives her shelter and power, when he puts her down in the hallway and pulls her through the back of the bombed-out house into a small park. In silence, Maike is running along with him, through dark streets and in the direction of the river Elbe. Through cobblestone streets Hein leads her on a zic-zac route towards the river, passing by many bombed-out and

burnt down residential houses. No living being crosses their path, not even a cat or a rat. The smiling half-moon is high up in the starry spring sky over them and illuminates their path just enough to see ahead. It is almost as if there was peace and everything alright – no war and no danger.

But then, suddenly, Hein stops without a warning and rushes Maike into the shadows of the next street corner. Through the ruined wall, they can peep into the next street. There is a big dark truck parking in it, with many men in black SS-uniforms jumping from the truck bed. They hold dangerously looking big machine pistols and position themselves around the entrance of one of the houses, while a few of them follow two men in long coats into the same house.

Maike recognises her neighbour Herr Braun among the SS-men outside. Even before Hein can silently gesture to her to follow him on tiptoes away from here, there are some muffled banging-sounds coming from the house.

Next thing happening is two people jumping out of the door and knocking down the uniformed men. Horrified, Maike witnesses how Herr Braun and the other SS-men yank up their machine pistols and, without any hesitation, shoot at the two bolting men in plain clothes. One of them is hit and yells out in a high voice so that Maike realises, even before the SS-men lighten up his face, that it is a young man in his teens dying over there.

Herr Braun's facial expression is clearly to be seen in the moonlight and very much satisfied when he catches up with the other person after just a few steps and, grabbing the hurt legs, pulls his prey back to the house he came from.

"Enough Nigger-Jazz for you, Swing-Heini (Nazi-abusive term for people listening to Swing music which was forbidden by the Nazis)", he says coldly and pushes the hurt man down into the ring of the other SS-men. "Forward march! It's Fuhlsbüttel (Hamburg city-prison) for you."

"Just a moment", a sharp voice intervenes.

It, too, belongs to a rather young man who just returned from the house. It is SS-Sturmbannführer Gunnar Berger, followed by ten other SS-men and four young people in handcuffs. The two taciturn men in coats and hats are forming the tail.

"Where is he?"

The hurt young man is kneeling just in front of Berger on the sidewalk, his half-long light hair shimmering like silver in the moonlight. Maike senses Hein next to her drawing in some air in a sharp and immediately muffled way, while he grabs her tighter. An almost inaudible “bloody bastards” comes from his tight lips when Berger over there kicks the hurt young man with his boot between the legs so that the unfortunate falls to the ground.

“Now tell me”, Berger hisses. “Where is he? I know that you know it.”

But the young man lying in pain does not answer – at least not immediately. When Berger pulls his cold shimmering pistol from its holster and aims it directly at the young man’s temple, Maike hears words in a foreign language that is not German and she therefore does not understand: *“It don't mean a thing, if it ain't got that swing...”*

Only after the pistol shot has stopped echoing in the street, Maike realises it has been the young man on the ground who has sung those words. Now he is lying motionless between the black boots of the SS-men. Maike presses her face into Hein’s coat and feels how he softly and soothingly strokes her hair.

“Courageous, my friend”, Hein quietly murmurs to himself. “Now do rest in peace, Sebastian.”

Maike winces. Is that young man over there that same Sebastian who visited the brother just after Paul Kirchhoff vanished? She wants to take another look at him to recognise his face, but Hein holds her back and gestures her to stay where she is, while solemnly shaking his head and comfortingly stroking her head.

“Well now, my Hottentotten-music fans”, the snide voice of the SS-Berger is heard. “Who of you is now so kind and tells me what I want to know?”

None of the arrested people reacts on his words. Some cries of pain tell Maike that the SS-men have beaten or kicked their victims to lend weight to Berger’s words. But it is again just SS-Sturmbannführer Berger’s cold voice wafting across the street: “Whosoever tells me where we find him needs not to accompany us to the Neuer Wall. That’s a promise, am I correct, gentlemen?” He looks at the two men in hat and coat who curtly nod. “Well, I hate to repeat myself, so here it is for the last time: Where is he? Where is Axel Sommer?”

With her heart galloping, Maike gazes up at the grey basement ceiling. The almost square room has no windows and hardly any furniture despite the rickety chair, a small table, a few thin mattresses and a sofa. Like seen through thick fog she remembers the terrifying events of the previous hour.

Standing close to Hein she has had to wait with him until the SS did beat and kick the arrested group of people onto the truck bed and drove them off. A dark car collected the two men in hat and coat, while Sturmbannführer Berger and Herr Braun came walking across the street – straight towards where she and Hein stood hidden.

Maike has felt how Hein held his breath, too, when the two men came to a halt just a few steps away from the hole in the wall that shielded her and Hein from them.

“Actually”, Berger did say, “it would be a start to get hold of the little girl. This would make Sommer come to us all on his own.”

“That snotty little miss”, Herr Braun added, “is nowhere to be found, vanished without a trace, just like that Kirchhoff-boy back then.”

“Well”, Berger returned with a cold laugh, “but at least you made sure that the rest of that Red breed has been cleared from No. 18 so neatly.”

“And tomorrow we will catch this Fabian Hofmann”, one of the SS-men who had joined them just then said. Maike did immediately recognise the voice of Herr Gröhn, teacher of the first grade at her school. “That will be the end of all those ‘freedom’-graffiti.”

“We meet tomorrow evening”, Berger closed the conversation. “Come to the ruin of the church. And now, be safe on your way home. Heil Hitler.”

Maike remembers the painful grip with which Hein took her arm and pulled her from their hiding-place into the opposite direction the SS-men were going. Her

legs have hardly been usable, such a terrible shock it was – and it is still! The brother is a wanted man! But why?

“Quickly now”, Hein just murmured while leading her through the nightly streets. “And quiet as a mouse.”

Running in the overshadows of the houses as much as possible they finally reached the Elbchaussee, the long noble avenue along the river Elbe leading from Altona westward to Blankenese. Nobody was to be seen in the dim twilight, no person, no animal. They made good speed for out here there was not so much rubble as in the city streets.

Close to Övelgönne (part of Hamburg, westward of Altona) they climbed down the long staircase towards the riverside without anyone noticing it. There was no one to be seen at the foot of the stairs; but when they carefully made a few outbound steps, there suddenly was a shadow coming from the blackness of an overhanging wall: Nils.

“Quickly, follow me”, he has murmured and led them with soundless steps along the footpath at the riverbank until they reached the slope below one of the noble houses standing near the old English park-gardens of a rich Hamburg merchant of the last century. This Jenisch-park, nowadays belonging to the people, is Maike’s favourite as it contains all those wonderful tree to climb and green meadows to play in.

Through a narrow opening behind a thick rhododendron bush, they squeezed themselves onto a hidden overgrown path below thorny bushes and found the basement walls of the noble house at the end of it. Maike has not witnessed what Nils did there behind Hein's back; but a few moments later she was handed down through a hole in the ground and carried through a thick steel door into the basement of the noble house. In there she was carried onwards, with Hein’s hand over her eyes, through a hidden door and into a small window-less room full of shelves with blankets and canned goods. An open door led on from there to this square room she is now in, trying to catch some sleep while lying on one of the mattresses on the floor.

But how can she even think of sleeping?

The brother is not here yet, even though Nils has returned and brought Juri with him who has now curled up on one of the other mattresses and calmly sleeps. Hein has disappeared after a short whispered conversation with Nils. And Nils now fixes the small candle to a three-legged stool near the door, waves his goodbye at Maike and closes the hidden door behind him.

Maike gazes over at the corner where there is an enamel pot similar to the one in her last hiding-place. She has hardly drunken at all, even though Nils immediately pressed a military flask onto her once she was here in this new hiding-place. But the drinking water needs to last a while, for quite some while, assumedly. Who knows when it is possible for Hein or Nils to return and bring some more...

The little candle flame starts to flicker. Soon it will be dark in here. Just to be on the safe side, Maike crawls over to the enamel pot, holds her breath when opening the lid, and tries to pee as silently as possible. Then she rushes back to 'her' mattress and curls up on it. But even when the candle flame dies with an almost inaudible hiss, she is not able to find sleep. Where is the brother? What is keeping him?

Just to be doing something and to distract herself, Maike starts to hum silently into her folded hands. It takes a few bars until she realises what she has unwittingly chosen. Without making a sound her lips form the words she has heard so often coming from the brother's mouth:

*"How still is the world,
And in the veil of twilight,
As comfortable and lovely
As a quiet chamber,
Where the misery of the day
You will sleep away and forget."*

A soft sigh escapes Maike. If she falls asleep, she may forget the misery of this day; but what about the misery of the days passed? Already there are memories streaming in from her subconscious mind and starting to dance as blurry images in front of her inner eye:

The starry night... The smiling moon in the skies... The burning house... The basement stairs... The motionless eyes...

Big tears are rolling down Maike's cheeks, falling down on her folded hands like the beginning of a cloudburst. Quietly she swallows and sniffs for a moment. She has to learn how to forget these terrible memories. But how? She hardly dares to go to sleep anymore.

Her heart pounds in her ears. She freezes in spite of the woollen blanket she was handed. Where is the brother? He should be here by now. What has happened? Why does he not arrive here? Did something happen to him? Or someone... was he caught by the SS-men around Gunnar Berger?

If the Nazis have caught the brother, what will happen to her? In that case... she would be left with no family at all... Shaking all over, she pulls the thin blanket closer around herself and whispers, already drifting away, into her folded hands:

*"Do you see the moon standing there?
There is only half of it to see,
And yet it is round, and fair!"*

Night of July 24, 1943.

“Quickly, take the suitcases.”

The mother’s voice sounds rushed. Even before Maike is able to fully open her tired eyes, she is lifted from her bed and hurriedly carried out of the flat. A strange wailing sound is hanging in the air, that becomes softer and softer so that Maike is not sure to have heard it at all.

It is the night before Sunday the Twenty-fifth of July in the year 1943, just one day after the mother’s thirty-sixth birthday. They have celebrated the anniversary with a long walk along the river Elbe, walking all the way to Blankenese and resting there for a short while on the panorama terrace belonging to Sagebiels Fährhaus (famous ferry-house and restaurant in Blankenese) where they ate some apple pie with whipped cream.

But now – everything is different. The strange wailing increases again, decreases and increases alternately, and finally ends. It scares Maike, though she cannot say why. Maybe it is the fear she feels coming from the brother and the mother who carries her out of the flat. As if through a grey veil she sees the brother rushing down the stairs in front of her. He is carrying the big suitcase containing things belonging to the mother and him, and he holds the small suitcase with Maike’s things in his other hand. Both suitcases used to lie peacefully alongside each other on top of the big wardrobe in the mother’s chamber. Why did the brother take them down?

She gets the answer when the strange wailing sound starts again and become a roar. The sirens warn of imminent air-raids, Maike knows that. One needs to run to the air-raid shelter - the low-ceilinged room in the house next door that has one naked lightbulb hanging from the ceiling which illuminates a tall shelf with canned goods and the big enamel pot full of sour kraut. All around the walls there are uncomfortable wooden benches where one has to sit still while the war is very close just in front of the heavy security door.

Every time the English and the Americans come – or even if they only fly to Bremen or Berlin – the sirens roar and everyone has to run to the shelters. The same happens when the enemy airplanes with the bombs on board fly to Kiel, Lübeck or Hannover – it is always cause for air-raid alarm. And it always happens in the middle of the night when it is pitch-black dark outside.

But as they now enter the street, Maike marvels at the brightness in these early hours of the morning. But the light is different than before, somehow blurred and flickering. And then there is the strange air that is biting in the lungs. And on top of that it is very hot in this late July night, so terribly hot. Very uncomfortably hot. If only she could return to her comfortable bed and curl up for another round of sleep, holding Katinka close to herself...

“Katinka!” Maike gasps in shock.

Just now she has realised that her beloved doll has been left behind. But without Katinka she will not stand the shelter, she knows that. And the brother knows it, too.

Immediately he puts down the suitcases and rushes up into the flat, even though the mother urges them on. Maike senses the mother’s slender body shivering. Every fold of her flowery summer blouse and her long dark-blue skirt is shaking with her. Maike, too, feels a cold shiver running down her spine. It is not the first air-raid on Hamburg, not the first time they have to run over to the house next door. She still remembers that icy cold night at the end of January when they had to leave their warm beds due to sirens’ wail.

And, of course, Maike knows the air-raid practices from school. But she has never known or learned about this horrible air. Up until now she has been under the impression that ice-cold winter air is the worst when running over to the house next door. But this time it is different. The air is hot and like thousands of tiny needles. It stings her skin whenever a gust of wind rips through the street. And it is painful to breath.

With sorrow the mother raises her water-blue eyes to the sky that is unnaturally bright at this early hour. And it flickers. Over there, where the sun is rising in the mornings over the rooftops and church towers of Hamburg, the sky is orange-red. Strange black-grey clouds are hanging there.

“Hurry now!”

The brother is back. He thrusts the rag-doll to Maike and pulls up the two suitcases. Then he runs ahead to enter the house next door just behind Herr and Frau Schneider from across the street. The Schneider-boys are currently in one of the HJ-holiday camps at the Baltic Sea, as Frau Schneider has proudly told everyone who listened. But this is no time for conversations; the married couple is some ten metres ahead. The mother is running, too, as fast as possible with Maike on her arms.

A deafening droning sound is getting nearer and nearer. In between, Maike is able to hear many a hoarse hissing noise that sounds like the over-tuned hissing of thousands of snakes and the whistling of uncountable water kettles. Banging and crashing sounds are coming from close-by, too close.

“Quick, run ahead, Axel.”

The mother is panting now and pushes through the house’s heavy entrance door just after the brother has entered; Herr and Frau Schneider have already vanished in it. The brother takes to stairs at a time while letting the big suitcase slide over the stairs in front of him and the small suitcase trailing behind him.

“We’re nearly there”, the mother whispers when she ducks with Maike on her arms under the door frame and starts down the stairs. “Almost there.”

At that moment there is a rumbling sound coming from below, followed by a curse from the brother’s mouth. Then there is a soft creaking sound and the groaning of an enormous door hinge.

“No!” the mother yells out and jumps down the last stairs into the basement corridor being on backup power supply. “Wait for us!”

“Herr Braun, wait!” the brother yells, too.

But by the light of the naked yellowish lightbulb they see how the thick door of the air-raid shelter is closed before their noses. It is to Maike as if she heard a voice behind that door saying: “Arrive too late, stay outside and wait.” Then there is a malicious laughter, but maybe she has just imagined it.

“Where to now?”

The brother stares at the mother, his eyes opened wide and inquisitive.

“To Frau Steiner’s house”, the mother answers. “But leave the suitcases.”

The brother pushes both suitcases under the stairs where there is a little space for brooms and snow shovels and the like. Then he takes the mother by one hand and rushes with her and Maike still on her mother’s other arm up the stairs and through the door into the courtyard between No. 18 and the rear house. A strange hissing sound is to be heard when they run through the archway towards the next street where Frau Steiner’s grocery store is located. The same house also holds another air-raid shelter.

“Oh my God!”

The mother stops dead in her tracks and looks over the houses nearby towards the tower of St-Trinity church that is silhouetted slender and bright against the glaring background. The copper-tiled roof mirrors the flickering shine of the burning skies. Maike stares up incredulously – for it looks like as if behind the church tower all of Hamburg is burning!

“Quickly!” the brother yells and pulls the mother onward, along the street and towards the house with Frau Steiner’s grocery store.

A deep droning and booming noise gets nearer and nearer, while the hissing, almost crackling sound increases with every step. The air reeks of burnt wood, of soot and worse things. The stink becomes worse with every step forward they take. The hot wind increases in power while there is the sound of bursting window glass behind them.

It almost sounds like back then in that November night about five years ago when the big building called “synagogue” at Kleine Papagoyenstraße (street in Altona in the 1940s) burned to the ground. The mother and the brother said this synagogue was something like a church for people like the Weiß-family or Katie Gerstenberg and her parents. Maike does not recall much of said night – only that the air reeked of smoke for days, even though the flames did not catch any of the surrounding houses.

This time the fire is much closer.

Maike starts to feel afraid when she realises the houses at the main street leading to the Altona town hall are all ablaze. Still the main street is some four-hundred metres away, but the heat is almost unbearable. It is hard to breath.

“Run ahead”, the mother pants when the brother tears open the house door next to Frau Steiner’s grocery shop door. “And tell them... that... we... are nearly... there.”

The brother races ahead, down the basement stairs made from heavy oak wood, and hammers with his fists against the thick iron-shod door of the air-raid shelter.

“Open up! Please open up!”

Next moment the mother with Maike on her left arm has arrived there and starts to pound on the door with her right fist as well.

“Open up! Please! There are children out here!”

From inside there is the muffled denial to be heard, then the shrill voices of two women of whom one may be Frau Steiner.

“Please!” the mother repeats, louder this time to drown the unstoppable droning sound of the bombers. “Let us in!”

And the miracle happens. The thick door creaks and is opened just a little bit. The beam of some torchlight comes through the crack in the door, illuminating the faces of both Maike and the mother.

“You do not belong here”, grunts the unfriendly voice of the Blockwart Herr Miess who is indeed responsible for both Frau Steiner’s house and all the surrounding houses including their No. 20 in the next street. “Hurry to reach your own shelter.”

“It is locked up”, the brother answers while the house is shaking slightly as if from some distant earthquake. “Please.”

“There is no room in here”, the man behind the door answers and pulls the big handle to close the door.

“No!” the mother yells at the top of her voice. “Frau Steiner! Let us in! Anyone! Please!”

But the heavy door is closed, sealing off the shelter and the gloating grin of Herr Miess. The shrill cries of two women and a few other people are muffled and die down.

A high wheezing sound becomes louder and louder, then there is a deafening bang. The house shakes, while the basement stairs moan. A dark cloud of dust and soot rains in from outside and makes Maike cough. A whiff of hot air comes down on her and takes away her breath for a horribly long moment.

“Get under there!” the mother pants and pushes the brother in between the broomsticks and a shovel that are crammed into the small brick-built shed below the wooden basement stairs. “Heads down.”

Maike feels how she is pushed into her brother’s arms, while there is again this high wheezing, almost hoarse sound. A big bang, this time even closer than before... Shaking all over she presses Katinka to her chest and closes her eyes. A strange dull vibrating sensation shakes for a moment their hiding-place and the stairs above it that start to creak with a moaning sound.

The brother yells. The mother cries out. The staircase bursts, while thick grey stones, wood beams, tiles and roof beams are raining down on it. The dust burns on her whole body, taking away Maike’s breath. She gasps and gags just like the brother does who has wrapped his body around as a shield and presses her cheek into his heavily breathing chest.

Just when Maike believes never to be able to breathe again, a hot wisp of wind swooshes through the basement and brushes away the heavy dust. The burning air stings in her lungs, but Maike is able to breathe again, more or less anyway.

Slowly she raises her head and gazes around. The brother, too, lifts his gaze and stares out through a little crack in their hiding-place. Nothing much is to be seen, as there is a mountain of caved in walls, roof beams and bricks that block the way towards the air-raid shelter.

The basement ceiling towards the next house is gone; the same is true for most of the flats above it. Here and there some bedpost or stove pipe sticks out. The house’s wall is gone, too, and the roof.

In between the clouds of smoke, Maike is able to see just a little bit of the starry sky where, like a smiling mouth, a thin scimitar moon is hanging. Her feeble

light cuts through the grey-red of the smoky sky and points towards the spot where, just moments ago, the basement stairs have been.

Maike's heart skips a beat. The stairs are gone, too. Instead there are splintered oak beams and heavy roof tiles. And between them...

"Do not look", the brother croaks hoarsely and presses Maike's face into his heavy pounding chest. "Close your eyes, Beetlely."

But Maike has seen it all: the distorted body in the flowery blouse, almost buried under the debris; the bloody cut on the forehead; and the horribly motionless water-blue eyes.

The hot air makes Maike's tears evaporate before they are even half-way down her cheeks. She senses her neck becoming wet. The brother is crying, too. His arms cling to her so closely it hurts. But Maike hardly notices it.

Hands are stroking her back. Arms are softly rocking her. A rusty voice is singing softly words in a foreign language: "*Bájuschki bajú...*"

Even before opening her eyes, Maike knows it to be the thin man Juri who tries to comfort her. Where is the brother? Has he still not returned? What is keeping him so long?

"Good, child", Juri whispers after he has finished his soft singing. "No fear."

"My brother", Maike returns in a whisper. "Where is he? Why is he not here?"

"Not know", Juri murmurs. "We wait, yes?"

"Something bad must have happened", Maike answers, swallowing.

Juri drapes the thin woollen blanket closer around her and comfortingly strokes her blond hair that has become tousled from her lying down. Maike pulls up both of her plaids and carefully takes off the thin leather bands holding the lower ends. The leather bands used to be laces in the winter shoes of... the mother.

Slowly Maike opens her plaids, brushes with her fingers the blond strands as well as it gets and then plaids her hair again. Juri gets up on his hands and knees and crawls over to the corner with the enamel pot. A soft dabbling sound is coming from the corner that Maike wills herself to not hear. She hears, though, how Juri closes the lid again to keep the sourly-sharp stench within the pot. Then he crawls back, but past the mattresses towards the door.

A moment later he returns to her and pushes some bread into her hands. He does not light a candle, but keep the dark as sound as it is. Maybe there are Nazis up there above them in the house?

While consciously chewing every bite a few times and swallowing with as much saliva as possible, Maike listens to Juri's voice. With quiet, a little croaking and sometimes halting speech he whispers something that almost sounds like a fairy-tale:

"Was man and woman. They – no child. They wish child... One day – winter. Man and woman see: children make man of snow. Man and woman make child of snow, girl of snow... girl live, name *Snegurotshka*. Man and woman love girl, love much. Man and woman happy... *Snegurotshka* go in forest, meet Baba Jaga. Baba Jaga bad woman, witch... Baba Jaga say: *Snegurotshka* stay with Baba Jaga. *Snegurotshka* work in house, work for Baba Jaga long time. One day – *Snegurotshka* meet big animal, good animal. *Snegurotshka* run away, away from bad Baba Jaga. *Snegurotshka* search man and woman, run long time. *Snegurotshka* find man and woman. All happy. All luck."

"That is beautiful", Maike whispers. "All that about the bad witch in the forest; it reminds me of Hansel and Gretel. Do you know that tale?"

"Xhann-sel and Gret-tel? Not know."

"I'll tell you the tale."

The weak flame of the candle flickers one last time before dying with a soft hissing noise. Maike swallows, presses her eyes shut in the darkness and concentrates. Hansel and Gretel, what was is about again?

The brother has read the fairy-tale to her many times when she was just a little girl. The big book with the beautiful pictures is called *Kinder- und Hausmärchen der Gebrüder Grimm* (Children's and Household Tales, collected by the Brothers

Grimm). It contains many wonderful, sometimes a little scary tales that Maike loves – despite or because? – of their scariness.

It pains her that the big book had to stay at home. How she loved to look at the pictures and hear in her head the calm voice of the brother narrating the tales to her. Maike well remembers the picture of the two children – Hansel and Gretel – in front of the witch’s house made from gingerbread and many a sugary sweet.

“Once upon a time...” she whispers and senses the pleasant sensation tingling her spine when repeating those magical words: “Once upon a time...”

Oh, how she does love fairy-tales! There are brave princes and beautiful princesses, good children and bad witches, magic and love. And at the end, Good always triumphs. But before that there are a lot of adventurous, often dangerous things happening. There are bad wolves to be outsmarted; spiteful sisters and wicked stepmothers to be suffered from; good fairy-godmothers and bad witches whose magic opposes each other.

Juri listens attentively as Maike quietly and in a mysterious voice tells him how the wicked stepmother persuades the father to leave Hansel and Gretel in the dark forest – because they have not enough food for the four of them. She proceeds how Hansel marks the way home with little stones and finally with breadcrumbs. But as the birds pick up the breadcrumbs, the children get lost in the woods and arrive at the witch’s gingerbread house.

“Nibble, nibble, gnaw”, Maike croaks in the witch’s voice. “Who is nibbling at my little house?”

“The wind, the wind...” Maike answers softly for the children, “the heaven-born wind!”

Juri gasps in shock when Maike tells him how the bad witch gets hold of the children, locks them up in her house and fattens Hansel to be her next Sunday roast, while poor Gretel is forced to be a handmaid.

Just when Maike is about to tell how clever Gretel outsmarts the near-sighted witch with a chicken-bone and pretending Hansel not being fat enough yet to become a roast, a soft creaking sound meets her ears. Terrified she stops talk-

ing and glares over at the door. Juri, too, is motionlessly listening, every muscle in his thin body in ready attention. Are they found?

There are three silhouettes to be seen in the dim twilight of the ante-chamber. Uniforms with silver lightning-runes at the collars... they do not wear. But two of the three are wearing coat and hat.

Maike shivers. Are they those horrible men of the Gestapo who are allowed to break legs whenever they want to?

The silhouettes seem menacing, almost like spectres from her nightmares. All of the three are carrying something that Maike cannot make out at first. But when they get nearer she notices two suitcases and a thick bundle of clothes.

The door is closed carefully so that the darkness becomes complete for a moment. Then there is a match lighting up and shining upon the face of Red Hein. A silent sigh escapes Maike.

"Candle", a female voice whispers and immediately the small match lights a thick candle.

Only then Maike is able to recognise the third person to be... the brother! Her heart leaps forward, jumping up like herself and running towards him. But he reaches her first. Two wide steps it takes; then he sweeps her off the mattress and into his arms.

"My brave Beetlely", he whispers into her hair. "I am so proud of you."

"Where have you been?" Maike whispers, fighting the tears back that well up in her eyes even though she is happy to have him back.

"Little detour", the brother murmurs grimly. "Almost ran into Herr Braun and a few of his uniformed buddies. Hein said they have just arrested Sebastian and his friends..."

Hein nods solemnly. Maike shudders as she remembers the SS-Berger's men and the overheard conversation. For it was not Sebastian being looked for by Berger and his buddies, but the brother...

"I am so glad you're here", she whispers into his windswept blond hair. "I..."

“I know”, he interrupts softly, pressing her even closer. “I’m sorry. I know how much you hate basements. But we’ll not stay here for much longer, Beetlely. It is almost time. In a few days we will move on.”

“Where to?”

The brother smiles mysteriously.

“I won’t tell just yet. But you will like it. No basement, I promise.”

A muffled creaking sound focusses Maike’s attention onto the woman holding the flickering candle. The haggard face is almost as pale and greyish as Juri’s. Her short brown hair is silver-webbed.

“You will enjoy being there”, she says in a warm voice and smiles, while placing the candle carefully onto the three-legged stool. “I wished I could accompany you. But that would be too suspicious.”

“Speaking of suspicious”, Hein adds softly and pulls something small and shimmering from his coat pocket. “It is time for a change.”

A moment later Maike sees the little pair of scissors glimmering in the woman’s hand while Hein rummages inside the bundle of clothes.

“Your plaids, Maike”, he says. “You will need to say goodbye to them, I’m afraid.”

“They will grow again”, the woman adds. “When all this is over.”

“From now on you need to be a boy”, Hein says gravely. “Or at least look like one. Will you be able to do that for us?”

Maike is confused. Why should she disguise herself? Why should she sacrifice her beautiful blonde braids that already suspend all the way down over her shoulders?

“It is safer, Beetlely”, the brother quietly says to her. “Where we are heading to, it is better that they think you are indeed a boy.”

“But, of course, you may take with you your Katinka”, Red Hein says smiling. He has pulled something from the bundle of clothes that appears to be a swap or floor cloth, made from brown wool, at first glance. By closer look Maike notices

it to be a shaggy bunny-figure made from grey-brown cloth with lopsided woolen floppy ears and a blue-grey ribbon around the neck.

“She is called Felix now and is your lucky-charm bunny”, Hein says. “But inside, there she is still your one and only Katinka.”

“And just like that”, the brother adds softly, “you will now become my little brother Carl. But inside, there you will still be my one and only Beetlely, alright?”

Maike nods slowly and lets herself be placed onto the sofa next to the woman and the three-legged stool. Maike sits down, closes her eyes and feels how the cool pair of scissors is positioned close behind her ears.

“You are so very brave”, the woman says softly. Then there is the sharp snapping sound, twice, and something soft falls down onto the worn cushions. Suddenly Maike’s head is unaccustomedly light. Her neck is cold and somehow elongated by the new haircut the woman gives her with a few well-placed cuts here and there – a shaggy boys’ haircut.

“You might have become an artist, Inge”, the brother says with a smile.

“Yes, absolutely great”, Hein nods and smiles broadly at Maike. “Now let’s play fashion parade. Try this pair of trousers.”

He offers her a shaggy pair of men’s trousers made from grey-brown winter flannel, accompanied by a dark brown leather belt with a brass buckle. Maike climbs into it and is able to pull up the trousers almost all the way to her shoulders, before she adjusts the belt under her skirts. The brother rolls up the legs to the appropriate length and grins.

“Well, how does it feel?” he asks.

It does not feel so different than before, only the belt is pressing on her hipbones. But the trousers’ legs are so big that they move around with every step – almost like a skirt made from steady cotton cloth.

With a heavy heart Maike hands over her blue-white striped linen dress and is helped into a wide men’s shirt made from dark red linen. On top of that she is dressed into a knitted jacket made from dark green wool and finally a dark grey short coat for men that almost reaches her knees. Her feet are attired with

thick grey woollen socks so that the worn boys' shoes are not too big for her. Her petite blue summer sandals are carefully placed by Hein into a small suitcase, accompanied by her other girls' clothes.

"Great", he then says and glances at her from head to toe. "Carl, you look amazing. Walk a few steps for me, please."

Carefully Maike wiggles through the room, trying not to trip over her own feet in the big shoes. When she turns at the wall to make her way back to the sofa, Red Hein says: "Walk lower by bending your knees slightly and drag your feet a little. You may even slouch your shoulders a little bit. Boys don't walk, they shuffle along."

He grins when the brother demonstrates a few overdone shuffling movements towards her, returned with her to the sofa.

"We will practice", the brother says to Maike.

"And don't forget", the woman adds with a smile. "From now on you don't care about becoming dirty. Boys are untidy."

With these words she pulls at Maike's jacket, making one tail of the red shirt below it fall out and over the belt. Then she grabs Maike's hands and presses them into the dust on top of a pile of bricks next to the sofa. One moment later Maike's tidy and shortened fingernails are almost black and the backs of her hands are as dirty as if she has not tidied herself up for days.

With a swift movement the woman puts some dust onto Maike's head and ruffles her short strands with her fingers until Maike's new hair sticks out dusty and untidily towards all directions.

"Very good", Hein commends, "but something's still missing..."

Slowly he pulls something from his pocket and carefully places it on top of the shaggy-dirty hair on Maike's head. It is a flat dark blue cap with a short rim under a thin twisted dark blue cord.

"This belonged to your father", Hein says quietly and professionally adjusts the lopsided position of the cap. "No one is now to recognise you."

“Carl Bernatzky from somewhere around Gdansk”, the woman smiles and winks at Maike who is only able to stare back, lost for words. The cap belonged to her father. A treasure she will guard with her life and never ever give away – just like the shaggy bunny called Felix that Hein now presses into her arms.

“Get some more sleep”, he says and nods at the mattresses where Juri sits, all the while watching Maike’s change with wide eyes. “Tomorrow you’ll need to practice – being a boy.”

He grins at her impulse to twitch her nose unappraisingly. Caressingly he places a kiss onto her cheek, close to her dusty right ear. Maike sighs and nods into his prickling chin. She will be a boy, if she has to be one.

“I’ll try to get some sleep now as well”, the brother murmurs and softly pushes Maike, who was just about to lie down on one of the mattresses, back onto the sofa.

“Do you need another blanket?” he asks quietly, when Maike lies down on the sofa and he spreads the woollen blanket from the first mattress over her and her new male clothes. She nods.

Red Hein hands the brother another blanket from the shelf, nods at the woman and bids his farewell to Maike with a soft “take care, Carl”. The woman, too, smiles at Maike, waves at the brother and Juri and follows Hein through the door. The hidden door creaks softly when the brother closes it carefully.

He takes a blanket for himself from the shelf, wraps himself in it and pulls his mattress close to the sofa. Then he spreads the second blanket over Maike, softly strokes her dusty hair and starts to sing in a low voice:

*“Dear Moon, you go so quietly
through the evening clouds.
You are so calm, and I feel
that I am restless.
My sad gaze follows you
on your calm and light way.
O how painful is the knowledge
that I cannot follow you.”*

With the bunny that Katinka now is, Maike snuggles up on the sofa and listens to the brother's voice. The candle flickers when he continues with another verse:

*“Moon, you friend of pure feelings,
softly glide into her chamber;
tell her that I love her
that she alone is my pleasure,
my joy, my lust, my everything;
that I am with her in her sorrow
when her eyes overflow with tears...”*

Juri listens, too, curled up like a ball and wrapped into the thin blanket on the other mattress, his half-closed eyes glittering. Before the brother blows out the candle, Maike is able to see Juri looking at her with a friendly smile and winking amiably. She winks back at him.

As a girl, she would never have dared to do so. But boys do things like that. She has to start being accustomed to it. From now on, she has to do everything differently than before. Following a sudden urge, she whispers to the brother in the darkness: “And what do I do when I need to pee?”

A soft chuckle meets her ears. The brother's voice sounds amused, when he whispers: “Where we will go to, there will surely be something like our little room half way down the stairs, no worries.”

***** End of Reading Sample *****

By the same author:

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