

Susanne Abel  
**Stay Away from Gretchen**  
An impossible love story  
528 Pages

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Sample Translation  
by Alice Thornton

ONE.  
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“We’re live in two!” the production manager calls through the studio.  
The cameramen put on their headsets.

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

Anchorman Tom Monderath takes a seat behind his desk.

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

Tom nods, pulls his straw towards him, sips the ice-cold Coke and mumbles the opening lines to himself: “Records are being broken as temperatures reach a sweltering peak. We’ve also had some nasty storms today which have been paralysing large parts of Germany. We must all remember to be careful during this heatwave, especially those of us who are elderly or vulnerable...”

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

“Live in one!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Thirty!”

“I’m so sorry...” stammers Sabine.

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

“Fifteen! Everyone get out the frame!”

The intro music starts playing.

Sabine shakes her head and straightens Tom’s tie.

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

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

Sabine jumps out the frame.

“And five, four, three, two...”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Gremberg, Gremberg.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Take me home, please!”

“And where is home for you?”

Greta thinks. “In Prussian Eylau.”

“And where exactly is that?”

“In East Prussia.”

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

“What's your name?”

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

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

“My grandparents are waiting for me at home!”

The two policemen exchange a look.

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

“Yes, I have a daughter.”

“And where does she live?”

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

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

TWO.

1939-1945

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“The one on the left.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"We all have to do our bit!"

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you like it?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Granny Guste and Grandpa came out of their bedroom.

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

“Get us some hot water, too.”

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

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

He shook his head weakly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Parisian chic,” said Otto, opening the bottle of champagne he had brought especially for this evening.

The children also got a little glass each, and everyone toasted each other. Greta knew how special this gift was, so she kept to herself just how awful it tasted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Greta shook her head.

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

“But what if it snows or rains?”

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

Greta nodded solemnly and wrapped her arms around him.

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

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

“Are you looking for someone?”

“Yes. My family.”

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

In the parlour, china smashed on the floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“And who is that?” he asked.

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

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

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

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

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

After more than an hour, she saw him and ran out of the flat. Greta saw from above how her father crossed the street with a stumbling step and disappeared into their front door. She hurried down the hall, opening the flat door a crack to hear her mother in the stairwell: “Otto. I... I wanted to explain it to you properly, but... I

didn't know that you'd be going there on the very first day.... you have to understand what kind of situation I was in. After all these years, I didn't think you were coming back... and I..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Here's to you being back."

Otto emptied the glass in one gulp.

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

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

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

"Guid night, Grandpa," the little girl said in a broad Baden-Württemberg dialect and offered Otto her hand. He ignored her, filled his glass with another whiskey and downed it.

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

"Grandpa is mean," whispered Marie.

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

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

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

Greta was trembling.

"Where is Granny Guste?" asked Marie.

“In heaven. She'll look after you from there.”

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

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

“Otto!” his father-in-law warned him.

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

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

“Sleep now, little one,” she whispered.

“Is Granny Guste with the stars?” asked Marie.

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

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

“Please, Otto,” Emma begged him.

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

“Otto!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Grandpa continued to roar.

“Where was I? You seriously want to know where I was?”

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

Greta heard a clatter, then a loud thud.

“Keep my father out of this!” Emma begged.

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

The next day, with deep shadows around her eyes, Greta sat with her child and her mother at the youth welfare office. “My husband has returned from a prisoner of war camp, and our flat is too small now,” said Emma, trying to hide her black eye with her right hand.

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

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

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

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

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

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