

The Intent

J. D. Beck

THE INTENT

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Luise, this is for you...1914–1984



Prologue

It would take several lifetimes to read all that has been written about the incredible sacrifices, madness, and the naked truth of World War II.

Looking back though...it was hell on earth for the approximately three to four hundred million people directly affected during the war and the postwar years. The proverb “War for Peace” remains a blistering slur to those who lost someone close to their hearts. Remarkably, many took refuge in believing their sacrifice was necessary to save the world from evil. In a few short years, yesterday’s enemy is today’s ally. Tomorrow this may change again. The shift of power is fickle and always suspect. Financial gain and corrupt power quickly dislodges compassion and common sense. Whatever the reason, the transfer of power has always been at the expense of Joe Average. Ignorance and fanaticism demand a hefty price. The failure to admit that war can never bring lasting peace proves humanity is still in diapers.

Transferring power secretly, perhaps the oldest pervasive tactic known to implement total control, is implemented by megapowers worldwide. Even the “educated” masses are by and large ignorant; successful indoctrination rules their lives. Have we become what George Orwell called “hollow dummies”?



Chapter 1

Thanksgiving. The church bells of Saint Luke's rang throughout the village, across the cemetery and over empty fields before echoing off the hills and gradually drowning in the gurgle of a cold mountain stream.

To give weight to this special day the elders and the parish priest greeted their flock at the decorated entrance of the church. The pews filled quickly, and the vicar was glad people remembered to give thanks. He looked across the churchyard one more time as if to look for someone, then quickly turned and entered the church as the bells stopped ringing.

On the other end of the village, an old white-haired woman made her way slowly up the narrow road toward the cemetery, where the wind whistled sharply among headstones. Slightly bent, she entered, the only person there. She gave the impression of tiredness. It was not the wholesome tiredness from having worked hard all day but the weariness of trailing a casket one too many times. The fallen leaves made a strange woeful sound below her feet as if to give voice to her mood. Her steps, slower now, were more measured as she neared the simple black marble headstone. Her hands folded in prayer, she looked at the stone and read it as if seeing it for the first time.

As the bells stopped, the wind followed suit, and a silence crept across the cemetery. Her thoughts travelled across space and time,

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and for a brief moment she was young, beautiful, and very much in love. The moment slipped away abruptly as ever-present reality crept into her heart. Ignoring the stillness, she stood in front of the grave for the longest time, and then abruptly, as if wanting to flee, she turned and left the cemetery. Her steps full of life and her posture more erect revealed a transformation. While silently standing at the grave, she had realized it would not be long now. The wait was finally over...the secret, kept for many years, could finally be revealed. Confident a new beginning was hers to cherish, she left the cemetery with distinct buoyancy in her step.



Chapter 2

Summer
1944
Germany

Other than having to dodge isolated thunderstorms, it was a routine mission. The last of the lingering B-17 bombers finished dropping their bombs over the industrial sector in Schweinfurt, Germany. Some of the earlier drops were not as accurate, causing death and destruction amongst the civilian population. Family and neighbours, saved by providence, frequently witnessed the horrible suffering as innocent civilians succumbed to the flames ravaging their homes. Far above the gruelling action, several P-51 escort fighter planes circled above the heavy fortresses. Although out of harm's way for the moment, their mission was not over. A rendezvous with the Luftwaffe was still conceivable. Over the past few months, though, it had been quiet in the skies above the Fatherland; most of the German pilots had bought the farm by now. Nevertheless, one had to be vigilant and react swiftly.

Pompous and self-serving Reichsmarshal Göring was desperate. His more zealous pilots were willing to sacrifice their lives to achieve final victory for the Fatherland by crashing into Allied heavy bombers if ammunition was not available. The myth that to die as a warden of the Third Reich would guarantee a place in Walhalla was very much alive. A ME-109 fighter, seemingly coming out of nowhere, would spoil the day, causing chaos amongst the lumbering bombers if not spotted immediately.

One of the American P-51 pilots, a young raring-to-go captain from New York's Catskill Mountains, appreciated that for the time being the war was way below him; up here, everything looked calm, and fortunately nobody was missing. Below, the crew of the B-17s with bomb bays empty were thankful for their "little friends," a nickname for the P-51 Mustangs. Their compasses showing a heading of 280 degrees, direction England, the mood of the boys improved with each mile closer to crossing the English Channel.

The young aviator felt important, knowing his presence in the European war was vital. Prior to the P-51s' engagement, American and British bombers suffered horrendous casualties; unescorted slow bombers were practically sitting ducks for the fast German fighters. The swift long-range single seat P-51, however, changed the odds notably. Now the allies controlled the airspace over Germany. Casualties for the slow-moving heavy bombers were at a minimum.

The American pilot scanned the horizon steadily from left to right to check for German fighter planes, at the same time keeping an eye on his instruments. All of his previous missions were milk runs, no German fighter planes to be seen anywhere. Intense Anglo-American air attacks during the last twelve months practically decimated Göring's Luftwaffe. Few experienced pilots were now available to face the huge offensive from Allied fighter and bomber airplanes.

From the east, Stalin and his army were moving slowly westward; Germany, caught in a deathly grip, signalled the end of the Third Reich and the insanity of World War II in Europe.

In 1919, at the end of World War I, politicians worldwide did what they do best, deceiving people: "World War I was the war to end all wars, once and forever." Twenty-six years later, when the insanity of the Second World War was finally over, the inclusive death toll was a staggering 55 to 65 million. In addition, 200 to

400 million people grieved for lost loved ones. Unmarked graves scarred the earth, and spilled blood screamed to heaven for revenge and forgiveness.

For the moment, though, flying a P-51 Mustang, powered by a two-stage two-speed supercharged 12-cylinder Packard-built version of the legendary Rolls-Royce Merlin engine, was a rush, a dream come true for the young American flyboy. Easy missions like today's were chalked up as bonuses. The American aviator was nevertheless alert; being carefree while on a sortie was a sure way to ask for trouble. Only total concentration on his surroundings would get everybody back home safely. Even now, the hunter could finish the hunted.



Chapter 3

A gentle yet refreshingly cool rain shower slowly brought him around. Instinctively he knew something dreadful had happened. He was not where he should be. Still, he could not tie events together. His thoughts scrambled and his mind seemed to go blank the harder he tried. It was becoming increasingly difficult to focus. Struggling to no avail, he could not remember what happened. The only reality was excruciating pain in his right leg and left arm. From a gash on his forehead, he tasted blood as it trickled down his face and congealed in the corner of his lips. Eventually the relentless pain, in spite of everything, helped him to concentrate, and for a brief moment earlier events crystallized in his mind. However, as quickly as awareness came his thoughts scrambled again; his brain simply refused to acknowledge a coherent sequence.

After resting for a while, his subconscious will to survive took control. Ever so slowly, almost robotically, he took a closer look at his injuries. Although traumatized and in a state of shock, he grasped the seriousness of his condition. Some thirty feet to his right, partially hidden from his view in a shallow ravine, was the wreckage of his aircraft. Considering his injuries, it was a wonder, if not a miracle, how he freed himself from the cockpit and crawl up the embankment. A severe concussion, in addition to the shock of the crash, was the cause of his sporadic memory.

The rain had stopped by now, and the sun's rays pierced the fleeting clouds. Ironically, the ends of a rainbow—God's promise to never again destroy life by way of a flood—hovered above the wreckage of his plane. Tom Williams, the American pilot, was drifting in and out of consciousness. During one of his more lucid moments, he almost formulated spoken words, thinking, his lips moving, *Thank God I found this field...I must get away from here...did the Germans see me crash-land my airplane? Where are the Germans?* Pictures of the crash gelled in his mind. Descending at some 400 feet per minute, the ailerons, the trim, and the hydraulics busted, it took all of his strength to hold the wings of the crippled airplane level. By the time he stabilized the craft, he was dangerously low, and bailing out was never an option. One choice left, a forced wheels-up landing. A reasonably flat field below seemed like a wish come true. *I made it; why am I not in the airplane?* Grasping that a Hun had shot him out of the sky bruised his very being. The dreadful realization brought a tear to his eyes. *Don't give in*, he at once rebuked himself. The colour of his eyes changed from a bluish grey to a steely blue as resistance to his predicament took over. Purposeful self-will slowly got the upper hand, and he started to recall the events leading up to the crash landing. *Why was I such an easy target?* He remembered turning left, flying south, to avoid a thunder cell directly in front of him. After a couple of minutes, he turned back on his northwesterly course. He wondered if focusing on the weather caused him to not watch his altimeter, possibly losing height, sufficient to be in the range of German ground fire. No German fighter planes were seen anywhere. *Antiaircraft ground artillery must have got me. How could I be so careless?*



Chapter 4

His sortie was to escort and protect B-17 bombers from prowling German fighter planes. The Allies' target was the rustic and attractive 700-year-old blue-collar city Schweinfurt, birthplace of Friedrich Rückert one of Germany's greatest poets, surrounded by enchanting countryside, situated on the river Main, in lower Franconia. In the past Schweinfurt was a proud, independent, free imperial city, dating back to the 14th century, now home to one of the largest ball bearing industries in Germany.

On various slopes surrounding the town right up to the Hassberge and southwest to the old university town of Würzburg, the wine capital of Germany, grapes were harvested and made into mouth-watering wines with such unique names as Rödelsee, Iphofen and Eschendorfer Lump and the region's famous Müller-Thurgaus and Silvaners, enjoyed by locals for a very long time. In times to come, most visitors to Germany would look for wine along the Rhein or Mosel rivers, because Rhein and Mosel wines were exported worldwide. The great Franconia wines were seldom exported; locals would stage an uprising in protest. Germans were often branded as beer-doting jolly Bavarians living in the south or, on the other hand, as austere military-like Prussians in the north, while in the centre, right in the heart of Germany's wine capital, reside the relatively unknown Franks.

Franken (Franconia) was named after the Franks, a proud and distinctive German clan. Franken was annexed by Bayern (Bavaria) over 150 years before. In spite of Bavaria's takeover, indigenous folks maintained their distinctive dialect and their unique characteristic sense of humour. Calling someone a "*Schweinfurter Mee Brunser*" ("a Schweinfurter pissing into the river Main") suggests fondness and moreover a concise acknowledgement that "Mee Brunser" is home-grown. The Franks regard themselves as proud and independent amongst the Germanic tribes, appropriately positioned right in the heart of Germany. Their past is bursting with proof that they were the strongest and fiercest of the Germanic clans. Their lineage is full of remarkable people, both common and blue-blooded.

One of the Franks' powerful rulers was Charlemagne, also known as Charles the Great, sovereign of the Franks for forty-seven years (AD 768-814), serving the last fourteen years of his life as emperor of the Holy Roman Empire. Son of Pepin the Short and grandson of Charles Martel, he was an exceptional warrior and a superior orator, remembered for his intelligence and generosity.

During this ghastly war, ordinary folks with their homes in ruins had to scrounge for food and shelter. This, lamentably, is the norm worldwide when narcissistic power-hungry rulers force ordinary folks into war and eventual poverty. Schweinfurt, a history-rich old countrified city, was by now in ruins due to the determined onslaught by the Allies. This time the fearless Franks could not stop the fire from the sky as they did in 1943. The industrial city was a bull's eye target. The Allies relentlessly continued their bombing raids, tenaciously determined to destroy the factories. If Germany were devoid of ball bearings, its war efforts would soon come to a grinding halt.

At last, the injured American pilot remembered heading west, direction England, before having to make a small detour. The

weather forecast was inaccurate, and isolated thunderstorms in the area forced him to fly around a storm cell. All of a sudden, what felt like a giant hand lifted the rear of his airplane, pitching his nose earthbound. Instantly he knew he was in serious trouble. All hell broke loose, and control of the airplane was lost. The trim and rudder did not respond, and it became increasingly difficult to keep the airplane level.

How long have I been lying here? The thought that he might die in this rain-soaked German field gave him the strength to partially lift himself up and look around. In the chasm to his right was his airplane. The right wing had partially separated from the fuselage, the nose of the plane was completely buried in mud, and the propeller looked more like an anchor from a sand barge from the nearby river Main. A twisted hodgepodge of metal, cables and smoke was all that was left of the tail section.

Hanging on to consciousness, he saw a P-51 make a low pass over the field. Recognizing the markings, he tried to wave to his nineteen-year-old chain-smoking, womanizing, soft-spoken wingman John, a dedicated, naive boy from Minnesota. It was his first combat mission. *What a way to be baptized.* He was trying to signal again, overcome by fatigue and pain, with a tang of blood in his mouth, when everything went thankfully blank.

The P-51 made two more low passes. Seeing people near the crash site, the pilot decided there was nothing he could do. The field was too uneven to land. Gaining height, he continued flying in westerly direction.

The wounded aviator's awareness came partially back when three people stood over him. Someone was speaking to him in a language he had never heard before. It sounded like German, yet he could not be sure. He felt they were arguing amongst themselves.

“Kumm gaeh me g'schwind weg, horch ner do kummt nix draus,”

one of the people said. The three Germans, a young woman and two older men, gathering hay with their horse-drawn wagon, had observed the crash landing from a distance across the fields. Running through a meadow, they reached the crash site. By the time they arrived, the pilot had freed himself from the smouldering airplane and was lying on his back. Evidently he was seriously hurt. There were bloodstains all over his clothing, and his right leg was grotesquely twisted. His uniform was torn in several places, and his handsome face was deathly pale; his pale blue eyes mirrored the shock and trauma of the crash.

Agitated, the Germans constantly looked across the fields to see if someone else was around. Onlookers would offer the two men a way out; rescuing an American was not what they had planned. The young woman, however, was adamant about helping the downed pilot. She pleaded for them to have compassion for the injured American. Reluctantly they agreed, and in typical hands-on German manner, they made a makeshift stretcher out of branches from a nearby weeping willow tree and leather shoelaces from their boots and used a blanket as a cushion on the wood seat of their hay wagon. The woman kneeled beside the injured aviator, holding his hand to provide some small comfort. The recent shower had cooled the air. This, however, did nothing to keep the two men cool, as sweat trickled down their faces and soaked their shirts. They worked fast; rescuing an enemy would be difficult to explain should someone see them.

Bothered by a low flying aircraft, the elderly man who earlier voiced his objection to helping the American tried once more. *“Dos söll mar nur a Warnung sei, kumm g'schwind weg, horch ner do kummt nix draus.”*

Turning away, he implored the others to leave the ill-fated helpless aviator. The young woman, however, was not going to listen. Keenly aware of war's agony, she again insisted on helping the injured pilot.

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For a moment, it looked like the two men were not going to listen to her. Exasperated, disregarding her upbringing to respect her elders, she nearly shouted, “Father, if you must go, then go. I will stay here.”

The semiconscious pilot grasped that the young woman was making an effort to help him. Trying to say something depleted his last strength, and he managed only a groan. A single tear left a trail on his bloody face. The severely wounded American, shot down on his seventh mission over Germany, was beginning to become indifferent to his surroundings. *Am I going to die far from home, in this godforsaken German field?* He was fleetingly surprised it did not shock him; death seemed very gentle, caressing him, slowly extracting life.

Then all of a sudden, from the depths of his subconscious mind, a precious parting gift appeared, a vivid memory of a party at his parents’ home two years earlier. Life was good then, and celebrating his birthday and his promotion to flight lieutenant was a boisterous and happy affair. All of his family and friends were there. He was twenty-one, and the year was 1942.



Chapter 5

The genesis of this war was no different than all the other wars before. Again, naive young men and woman, spell-bound and brainwashed by rhetoric and indoctrination, ready to spill their blood as dumb animals on a sacrificial materialistic altar, were captivated all over the world by the lies and fabricated slogans of their masters, cleverly disguised as devotion to their country: “We must defend...we must expand...we must protect.” These never-ending one-sided self-serving slogans have nothing to do with principles that really matter, such as love, integrity, honour and honesty.

In the thick of war, destiny, so it seems, determines who will live and who will die. Luck and human compassion, handmaidens to karma, can save a man, however. Tom Williams, the American aviator, did not die after all. Innate feminine courage and fierce determination of a young German woman, who had recently lost a twenty-seven-year-old dear-to-her-heart brother on the Russian front, saved the life of the American aviator. Looking after the American was a genuine way to soften the scars of her brother’s death.

Her father, at first, was not pleased with her stubborn tenacity to rescue the American. As time went by his spirit, however, softened towards the helpless American. During sleepless nights, when the agony of losing his first-born son in Russia became unbearable,

he realized that perceiving the young American as an enemy was sheer foolishness. Unbeknownst to him, his daughter's compassion toward this helpless American became an antidote for his own grief.

Looking after the Bergers' household since her mother's death five years earlier, Helga now added extra responsibility to her life. It was a natural thing to do, being a woman. Courageously she carried this new responsibility with a smile on her pretty face, regardless of how horribly the bleak war years spoiled the day. Her mother's words resonated almost daily as she witnessed death and destruction all around. "Smile! Don't let life get you down; things could always be worse. Avoid negative people; they steal your power and make life miserable."

This frequent reminder had its effect. All through her childhood Helga was not your typical small-village pupil. Her interests included topics generally unknown or avoided by children her age. At the age of nine, she once asked her father why he closed the doors when having a bath; did he not have the same body parts as her brothers? Another time, barely six years old, she overheard a neighbour gossip, in derogatory terms, about an old man who periodically had spells of madness. Interrupting the tittle-tattle, she suggested the old man would be better off living in the city. People would not talk about him as they did in the village, and besides, her uncle who was a doctor and lived in the city would look after him. Neighbours forgave her forthright behaviour; it was difficult to chastise a kind heart.

In spite of the absurdities of grownups, the chimes of her inner self forced her to grow up early. Her mother's lengthy battle with cancer ended when Helga was seventeen. Near the end, Helga sat for hours at the side of her mother's bed, holding her hand. A day before she died her mother grasped Helga's hand, looking directly into her soul by way of her eyes. Slowly she started to speak. "Don't

follow in my footsteps, Helga...life can become your prison. Go away, visit different places, do not be afraid of change, but be true to yourself. Happiness comes from finding who you really are. Don't be fooled by thoughts that constantly bombard your mind; try and listen to your inner self. I love your father; he was a steadfast provider and a good father to all of you, yet there were many things I would have loved to do. Your father, however, thought my place was at home in the kitchen, and I obeyed. Trust in God; even though at times we do not understand why things are the way they are, God is in control."

Helga tucked these words into her heart and remembered them for the rest of her life. The assertion that God is in control, however, bothered her for most of her life; only much later in her life did she find peace with this declaration.

During the first week of high fever, Tom hallucinated a few times. On one occasion, he saw an angel with snow-white swan-like wings standing at the end of his bed. The angel broke into a warm smile, and its countenance changed into Helga's face. Tom, eyes fixed on the apparition, wondered who was standing there. The angel gently put a finger on his lips, and like a child he found comfort in this gesture.

When his temperature, on a good day, dropped to near normal, he had a glimpse of his surroundings, and questions plagued his mind. By the end of the second week the fever subsided, and slowly his strength returned. Feeling more comfortable in this serene atmosphere, he looked forward to Helga's visits. Hearing footsteps, being male, he would try to sit up, giving the impression of being much stronger than he really was. When Helga was busy doing chores around the house and barn, he missed her. Tom quickly learned to trust her. In short order, they became friends.

Tom had little experience with women. Sally, a childhood friend, had the courage to show him what pleased her. He was sixteen; she

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was fifteen going on twenty. Sally was the only female he had ever seen in the nude. However, as most men, he possessed an eye for a pretty woman.

His health improving daily, he couldn't believe how lucky he was to survive the crash landing, moreover to be a guest in the home of a *fräulin* who by all counts was a knockout and as far as he could see a person with a very big heart. In a bittersweet way, Helga reminded him of his mother.

Helga, on the other hand, had several boyfriends over the years. Her kind heart was an effortless bridge to her passionate nature. Easily swept off her feet, she found pleasure in someone's arms, a break from the strenuous daily chores as well as escaping effects of the vicious war. Not knowing what tomorrow would hold was a sure way to make the most out of every moment.



Chapter 6

Dr. Herbert Schmidt, family doctor to the Bergers, was also a lifelong friend to Helga's father. He came twice weekly to look after the American. The sixty-five-year-old doctor lived with his wife of forty-one years, Luise, in the old part of the city. His small office and examination room, ideally situated next to the vestibule, which served as a reception area, was open six days a week. A penetrating doorbell would awaken the doctor in the middle of the night for emergencies. Regardless of nightly interruptions, the doctor and his wife would start their day punctually at 7 a.m. She would go to the kitchen and prepare breakfast while the doctor sauntered into his study, where he would read for exactly thirty minutes. At present, he once again favoured Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Periodically he would try to shut out war's reality by reading the New Testament.

Punctually at 7:30, both sat down and enjoyed a hearty breakfast. Despite the war, there was an abundance of food in the doctor's ice chest and basement. Farmers would pay for his services with a smoked ham, homemade sausages and fresh vegetables. He would offset favours by making himself available to anybody for emergencies, day or night, with no expectation of gain. He took the Hippocratic Oath earnestly; the thought of going into medicine for financial gain was shallow and repugnant to him.

After breakfast, a good scrub and a close shave gave his bushy moustache a vital appearance as he opened his office promptly at 10, where he would work right through until 3 in the afternoon with no break for lunch. He would then read again for an hour, conditions permitting. Supper, at times with friends or colleagues, was served punctually at five o'clock. Afterwards a short walk along the river prepared him for house or hospital calls, often lasting until 9 at night. Many of his patients were bedridden. His days were long and tiring, but genuine concern and compassion for the sick and wounded would not allow him to slow down. He was drawn to his profession due to an ancient deep-seated longing, namely the desire to heal and improve life. His wife was supportive; she appreciated his dedication and steadfast character. Besides, she lived a good life, never having to worry where the next meal would come from. Being together all these years did not stop them from showing affection toward each other.

When the ghastly noise of high-pitched sirens warned of an imminent night bombing raid, he would leave home against her wishes, aware that another devastating slaughterers' bombing raid was about to unleash hell on earth. Public loud speakers, placed strategically across the city, blared warnings to seek the nearest bomb shelter. The doctor's wife, however, chose to stay home, believing while he was exposed to danger it would not be right for her to sit in a safe bomb shelter.

Frustrated, he made sure before leaving that she would at least go to the basement. Once outside his front door, he watched the lead bomber's direction; it gave him a reasonable indication of which part of the city was targeted. His doctor's satchel attached to the handlebar of his bicycle, he followed the inevitable illumination created by the instant fires as the bombs detonated. Frequently he would arrive in the midst of Danto's Inferno. Mutilated victims screamed until their voices gave up, dying with a whimper in their

throats. At times the slaughter was so ferocious, neighbours and the fire department, when available, had to work incessantly all night, digging victims from bombed-out homes and basements. As dawn broke, the nightmare continued for the fiercely burned survivors. Bystanders often prayed for a quick ending.

Coming home thoroughly exhausted in the early morning hours, he would be greeted at the door by his wife, who had waited up all night and at once placed a chair under his aching body. "Don't fuss, Luise. Go to bed; I'll be there in a minute." Resolute, she ignored his pleas, pulling his shoes off his aching feet. Finally, he would take refuge in the comfort offered. Looking at her with love and concern, he noticed her brunette hair had lost its lustre; grey strands slowly became the dominant colour.

The doctor mused, "Luise, a chilling wind is blowing across Germany. The infinitely fine strands of fate are doing their incorruptible work. As a nation sows, so shall it reap!"

Their only child, Günter, was exempt from military duty because of being an only child and also a doctor. He lived with his wife and three children in München, the capital city of Bayern. Some of his patients had connections all the way to Hitler. On several occasions, supportive patients cautioned him to distance himself from his father's outspoken rhetoric concerning the *Führer* and the Third Reich. Günter in turn would appeal to his mother. "*Mama Du must mal mit den Vater sprechen seine Zunge bringt uns alle das verderben.*"

His mother, as any good wife and mother would, assured him not to worry. She would speak to the doctor and do whatever she could. "I'll try, but you know your father."

At the right moment, she would bring the subject up. "Herbert, please do not talk about Hitler to just anybody. We don't know any more who our friends are. Günter is young, he has a family, and I worry...one day Hitler's henchman will come and

pick us all up. Please promise you will stop making remarks about Hitler.” Once mentioned, it was immediately forgotten. If the subject came up again months later, she would simply repeat her plea.

Longstanding friends and patients admired the way the doctor and his wife lived. Nobody ever witnessed animosity creeping into their marriage. On the day of their wedding, they had made a promise to each other to never attack each other’s shortcomings but instead uplift each other’s positive traits. This simple yet not easy to keep promise rewarded them with an amiable and happy life. Twice war uprooted their amazing life, but a steadfast character gave them the strength to sacrifice. Diligently they bridged difficult periods, and soon life was again worth pointing out.

While Günter respected his father’s frank judgment concerning Germany’s state of affairs, three young children and a beautiful, vivacious wife made him cautious to act and speak like his father. His primary goal was to ensure that he and his family would survive the war with as little harm as possible. Hoping this “awkward age,” as he called it, would soon end, he considered himself lucky. Secretly he was thankful for being a doctor and an only child. Being exempt from military duty was a windfall he did not want to jeopardize. He thanked God every time he came home from work and his children rushed into his arms. Many evenings he and his wife, Ursula, talked for hours, looking forward to a new and exciting life once this awkward age was over. Their conversation by and large expressed positive expectation; with a little luck, the future would hold a promise more in keeping with being a greatly sought after surgeon. He inherited his father’s love of medicine; a healthy ego made him excel in his field, and, as a result, he was a highly respected and sought-after doctor. Günter’s patients, unlike those of his father, consisted in the main of high-ranking officers, party members, business people, and their families. His skilful hands allowed him to take

advantage of war’s atrocities; it gave him the opportunity to move in upper circles, where he received rewards for his skill as a competent doctor. Notwithstanding the terrible times they lived in, his personal net worth increased yearly. He knew as a doctor he was better than his father, but when it came to calling a spade a spade, he lacked his father’s strength and honesty. Determined to survive this war, he stifled this awareness immediately; this in turn created self-reproach and remorse from time to time.

The next injured soldier was the lucky benefactor. The normal six-week recuperation miraculously extended to twice or three times the expected time allotted. The skilful doctor knew his craft, and as a result, the soldier was never aware of his luck in this act of kindness. The young doctor’s ambition for a better life quickly negated feelings of guilt, and as a result, these acts of kindness were few. To follow his father’s example to the detriment of his wife and children was simply not an option. Young and caught up in his own world, he was however eager for a quick end to the war.

Dr. Schmidt Senior, on the other hand, a veteran of World War I, viewed a soldier in need of medical attention as simply a patient, regardless of the colour of his uniform. He was a doctor first and next, a German. Moreover, he was not a follower of the Third Reich any longer. The “corporal,” as he called Hitler, revealed his true colours in the fall of 1942 by ordering some six hundred and fifty thousand young Germans to their certain death outside Stalingrad, Russia. From this moment on Hitler was to him nothing but a self-indulgent dictator, barren of any human feelings. This opinion got him into serious trouble on several occasions, and only his longstanding service in the community as a very competent and caring doctor, as well as his son’s numerous friends in positions of power, saved him from serious consequences.

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Speaking up against the führer was a death sentence. Being a decorated veteran of World War I was no doubt also in his favour, as the Gestapo was well aware that Hitler was fond of World War I veterans. Others who candidly expressed faults with Hitler's regime were not that lucky. Some finished up in concentration camps; others were hung or shot for their beliefs. Hitler sought complete subjugation; anybody speaking against him was an enemy of the Third Reich.

Visits to the village aroused no suspicion. Doctor Schmidt Senior, a long-time friend to the Berger family, had plenty of opportunities to look after the young American aviator on a regular basis.



Chapter 7

The village where Tom was convalescing was famous for its fertile soil, yielding some of the best farms and gardens for miles around. The Berger farm had been in the family since 1796; over the years, successive generations added land. One hundred and five acres of productive land, a sizable farm by German standards in 1944, mostly vegetable cash crops, provided a secure family income. The actual farmhouse was situated right in the village, as it is the custom in Germany, whereas the workable land was scattered in different parcels of land within a two-mile radius of the village.

The original farmhouse burned to the ground in 1876 and was immediately rebuilt and was again modernized in 1912. A four-bedroom two-storey home, built in the traditional *Fränkische* style, was attached to the barn by a large wood and storage shed in a rectangular fashion, giving the combined structure a U shape. A two and one-half metre high stonewall, with a large double-hinged wooden door in the middle, big enough to allow a team of horses with a fully loaded hay wagon to pass through, secured the multi-use homestead and made the square-looking farmhouse an impressive testimony to the family's wealth.

Tom's clean but sparsely furnished room was located in the basement for security reasons. The only furniture in the room was a painted pine bookcase with only three books, more for effect than

storage, a plain oak bed with pristine white linen, and an old-fashioned hand-carved washstand next to the bed. A hand-carved wooden cross with a suffering Christ was on the wall opposite his bed. The window, facing the enclosed courtyard, was high up on the wall next to the crucifix. White frilly lace curtains covering the small window added a touch of warmth to the room.

“*Guten Morgen*—it means good morning,” Helga said, entering the room. “Are you hungry?” Her English was the typical Oxford high school English that German students would learn from English teachers who never lived for extended periods in an English speaking country. It caused him to have a slight grin on his face; she perceived it as a smile.

In a more serious manner he asked her, “Where am I, and how long have I been here?”

“Don’t worry; I will answer all of your questions in good time. Now you must eat breakfast and rest; you have been very ill.”

“Am I a prisoner? Does anybody know I am alive?”

Forgetting for the moment her stern advice she teasingly replied, “No, you are not a prisoner, at least not officially, and yes, I know you are alive.” Not waiting for a further question she continued more solemnly, “A few people know you are here. But right now you must eat. You need to gain strength; you lost a lot of weight. You must listen to me; I am your nurse.”

“No, no...you don’t understand...I have to contact my squadron and tell them where I am,” he replied. While speaking he lifted his covers and tried to get out of bed, only to realize his strength failed him miserably. Depressed, he sank back into the soft feather pillows.

“Here is how we are going to do this: you will listen to me and use your strength to eat, and I will bring you up to date.”

Now that Tom was fully aware of his surroundings for extended periods, Helga was somewhat intimidated in his presence. While he

was defenceless and in need of care, she easily showed affection. In a flash she realized it would only be a matter of weeks and he would be gone forever. This realization perverted her thinking for a moment, and she wished he would stay sick at least a little longer. Permitting this thought mortified her; ashamed, she forced herself to think of something different. Admitting to herself that she cared for him other than as a patient created confusion and nervousness. Sagaciously obliterating her thoughts and feelings, she continued. “Do you remember you crash-landed your airplane?”

“Yes, I now remember everything. How did you find me?” he replied.

“We were out in the fields. My father, Klaus, our hired hand, and I were gathering hay when we saw you come in for a rather rough landing. The local *gauleiter* (regional party chief) inquired in the village if anyone had information regarding the whereabouts of the American pilot. You created quite a stir in our little village. A rumour was circulated that you parachuted to safety long before the airplane actually crashed.”

She could see that his mind travelled back to the awful moments leading up to the crash. Pretending to tidy up his bed while placing the breakfast tray, she gave him space with his thoughts. Momentarily she continued, her right hand pointing to the cross, left hand on her chest, “You must thank God and the doctor you are alive. Soon you will be better and we can smuggle you out of here.”

“Thank you,” he replied, reaching for her hand and squeezing it in thankful appreciation. To her dismay and surprise, uncontrolled tears welled up in her eyes. Freeing herself rather clumsily from his hand, embarrassed and confused, she left the room hurriedly.

Thinking his impulsive action made her feel embarrassed, he called after her, “Don’t leave! I am sorry to make you feel uncomfortable.”

His plea helped her to regain composure. Wiping away her tears, she returned. "You must eat all of your breakfast. The jam is made with strawberries from our own garden. Sorry, we have no eggs this morning, perhaps tomorrow. The coffee is not real; it is a malt substitute, but it is all we can get these days. Please eat now."

Looking at her closely for the first time for a prolonged period while not under the influence of medication and fever, he noticed how pretty and shapely she was. "What is your name, Miss?" he asked her.

"Helga Berger, and I know you are Thomas Williams," she replied.

"Miss, *Tom* sounds better. Please don't think I am not thankful for what you have done for me, Miss Helga, but I have so many unanswered questions, I don't really know where to start."

"You eat and ask one question at the time, and I will try and answer them for you as best as I can."

"The jam is delicious. It reminds me of the strawberry jam my mom used to make."

"Good! Eat and enjoy, and while you are eating I'll continue to bring you up to date. We brought you home almost three weeks ago. Dr. Schmidt, my father's friend—we call him Uncle Herbert—looked after you. You owe your recovery to God's mercy and the doctor. Uncle Herbert is a wonderful man. Only a handful of people are aware that we are hiding you here on our farm. You are in the basement of our house, in a former storage room. A severe concussion and a bruised left kidney were not the least of your injuries. You fractured your right leg, your thigh is severely lacerated, and you lost a lot of blood. You also broke your left arm; in addition, you have many cuts all over your body. Some of your wounds became infected, and without the proper care from Dr. Schmidt you most likely would have died from the infections. My guess is you lost ten to twenty pounds—so be a good boy and eat.

As soon as you can write a letter to your parents and your girlfriend or wife, we will try to get it to the Americans. Now you must rest; more tomorrow."

"Why is your family so helpful? Why not simply turn me over to the German authorities? By the way, I am not married; nor do I have a steady girlfriend."

With a mischievous smile on her face she answered, "I guess we didn't turn you over because I need someone to practice my English on." Pretending not to hear nor care about him not having a wife or girlfriend, she was nevertheless pleased he told her. As she took the tray off his bed, he again clasped her hand, smiling and looking directly into her eyes. This time she was not self-conscious, and in the twinkle of an eye both felt unblemished, appreciating this precious moment. A powerful longing to be magically transported to a different time gripped them abruptly, and deep within hope broke to the surface. Moreover, for the slightest of moments, both believed changing time and space was achievable. Still, the awareness of their different backgrounds and the wicked times they lived in crept into their hearts all too quickly, and slowly the picture became grey and eventually lifeless, crushing all expectations of better times.

Reluctantly they believed the ghastly age and the circumstances that brought them together were not favourable to falling in love. Young, with unsoiled hearts and never really in love before, they did not grasp that love pays heed to no one and is no servant to time or condition. Nor did they know that love strikes the lucky and the cursed equally, without warning or rules.

Breaking the forlorn silence, she continued in a matter-of-fact voice. "My father will visit you later this evening. Please be patient; he speaks little English. I might have to translate. He is a good father, and without his approval I could never have brought you to our farm."

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The thought of meeting her father made him subconsciously withdraw his hands. Questioning her father's reasons for not handing him over to the German authorities made him slightly uncomfortable. He felt safe with her alone; nevertheless, courageously he smiled at her. "I am looking forward to meeting your father."

"I must go and do my chores. You have a rest. Try and sleep, and I will see you later." She left the room before he had a chance to answer her.

All alone and with his mind clear, for more than a few minutes he evaluated his situation. Doubt, the great spoiler, crept into his heart. *I must find a way to inform my squadron where I am. Why are these Germans so helpful to me?* Again he tried to get out of bed, but his weakened position plus the cast on his leg stopped him as soon as he tried to lift himself up.

I guess she is right; I need to rest and get strong before I can contemplate my next step. The impatience of youth, coupled with a genuine concern for his parents not knowing where he was, left him in a restless state. Tired, he fell asleep. His dreams, however, were tormented by the ordeal of the crash.



Chapter 8

Outside Tom's basement room, the sun, uninterrupted by the devastation that was taking place in Germany and around the world, kept shining as it had for billions of years. Hitler's eagerly anticipated thousand-year reich was on its knees, a pitiful eleven years in its making. A few months earlier General Jodl, one of Hitler's desk generals, aware of Germany's position, nevertheless urged Germans to fight to the end. Hitler clearly approved of Jodl's rhetoric, and the slaughter of human life continued. Jodl, a typical desk general, never had the power to change what Hitler established by edict. Nonetheless, two years later the Allies executed him in Nürnberg for war crimes committed. Hitler cheated the hangman and escaped the wrath of the liberators; the likes of Jodl had to take his place. The Nürnberg trials were just short of a modern-day wrestling match. Anaesthetized American and English crowds nevertheless cheered, not realizing the sinister acts committed by German war criminals were, as always, the doing of smarter criminals who by their intelligence knew how to incite dim-witted people to do shameful things.

The Allies, now fully in control, relentlessly retaliated for Hitler's and Jodl's earlier bravado with concentrated day-and-night bombing raids on fuel plants and industrial centres like Schweinfurt. This attractive blue-collar city was destroyed for the

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third time in its 700-year history. It was a foreshadowing of the indiscriminate slaughter that was to come to Dresden, Bremen and other German cities. Cities like Berlin, Hamburg, Rotterdam and numerous other European capitals were already in full or partial ruins.

The day after Tom's third mission, on the sixth day of June, at 6 o'clock in the morning, Germany's fate was sealed when the U.S. First Army under General Bradley landed at Omaha Beach and Utah Beach in France, while the British Second Army with help from the Canadian Third Infantry Division landed at Gold, Juno and Sword beaches. Celestial laws set the wheels of Germany's demise in motion, preordaining Hitler's end and Germany's surrender. Years later Hollywood glorified this day as *The Longest Day*, and a new indoctrinated generation of naive young men and woman would ogle at the screen, wishing they were part of it.

For thousands of young men, the brutal slaughter started out as an adventure. Going to war, so they were told, was nothing more than a diversion from ordinary life. American and British posters entrapped young men and women by portraying war like a Sunday afternoon picnic, while German posters were geared to portray solidarity and nationalism. Hearing soul-penetrating screams and seeing their comrades literally spill their guts and blood on foreign soil made mournful and tired men out of boys overnight. Some became true heroes; others broke into tears, soiling their pants and calling out to their moms, wishing magic would transport them back to their previously dull lives. Life was never the same for those who survived the hard-hearted bulk slaughter.



Chapter 9

Tom, sleeping, well on his way to recovery, was oblivious that history was yet again unfolding on this 20th of July 1944, a hot and humid day, within Hitler's crumbling empire.

In Berlin, capital of Germany, a temporary German government, headed by anti-Nazi generals, reich president Beck, reich chancellor Gördeler, foreign minister von Hassell and head of the German armed forces, General-Field Marshal von Witzleben, tried once again to end the heartless slaughter by planning another assassination of Hitler. These desperately heroic men, who witnessed the corruption of decency and righteous law in their beloved Germany, impatiently looked forward to ending Hitler's Third Reich. Their attempt to oust Hitler offered a glimmer of light in the midst of chaos and darkness. The well-thought-out plan to get rid of Hitler, however, once again failed. It was baffling, if not mysterious, how Hitler once again survived an attack on his life.

The English High Command was informed by the German underground, in particular by the members of the "Wednesday Club," weeks before the plot to assassinate Hitler but chose to ignore a request for support. It was in Churchill's interest not to destroy the perception that all of Germany was on Hitler's side. Years later, objective students of history questioned the ruthless lack of concern by the English high command and burdened the British with bloodguilt by ignoring the pleas from the

“Mittwochsgesellschaft.” Impartial history of course recognized that antagonism toward Hitler was not new. Beck, von Witzleben, Stülpnagel, Canaris, Fritsch, as well as numerous other high-ranking noble German officers, endeavoured to overthrow or at least oppose Hitler as early as September 1935.

Field-Marshal Rommel was a veteran of World War I. He exemplified himself in France, Romania and Italy as part of the elite Alpen Korps. He quickly gained a reputation for making instant tactical decisions, confusing the hell out of the enemy. Wounded on three separate occasions, he received the Iron Cross, first and second class, recognizing his valour and his strong ability to lead from the front. (He abhorred armchair generals.) To top it off, he also received Prussia’s highest medal, the *Pour le Mérite*. In World War II, his celebrated nickname, *der Wüstenfuchs* (The Desert Fox), was in recognition of his incredibly skilful military campaigns in North Africa. Toward the end of WWII, he was in command of the German forces opposing the Allied cross-channel invasion at Normandy. Without question, he was one of the greatest and most admired of all German generals (not only by his peers, but also by his enemies). Late in his career, toward the end of 1943, he joined the Wednesday Club. Rommel was first and foremost a professional soldier; to support a putsch against Hitler, to whom he had sworn his allegiance, was against everything he believed in. Rommel, however, finally faced facts: Hitler was driven by a grandiose sense of self-importance. His arrogant and puffed-up treatment of senior military staff resulted in enormous strategic blunders. Rommel, a very competent professional general, abhorred unnecessary bloodshed. Hitler, on the other hand, thought nothing of sacrificing blood without distinction, not unlike tyrants in the past and the plutocratic elite of today. When the plot to assassinate Hitler failed and circumstantial evidence incriminated Rommel, two of Hitler’s desk generals knocked on

Rommel’s door and gave him a choice: stand trial for high treason or commit suicide. If he committed suicide, his family would be spared and a state funeral was promised. It was obviously not in Hitler’s interest to expose this gallant, well-known, respected hero as a member of the Wednesday Club. Rommel, who had faced death numerous times in battle, said goodbye to his wife and son without further commotion, entered the car with Hitler’s henchmen, and at once bit into a cyanide capsule. Mercifully, death came quick. Two minutes later, Rommel encountered his maker and no doubt asked the ultimate question: Why? To unbelievers he was simply a minute element of an ephemeral existence. If so, he joined the millions who eagerly laid their heads on the guillotine and by dying never existed, because without a future there is no past.

Some thirty minutes later from a hospital in Ulm the news bulletin came: one of Germany’s heroes had died of a fatal embolism. If Walhalla exists, a banquet awaited Rommel. This highly acclaimed soldier, a gentleman in his treatment of prisoners, was immediately willing to pay the price for his decision to disobey Hitler. Rommel, never a coward, did not beg to be spared. He realized the danger and like a professional soldier was prepared for the consequences. Choosing principles over life established him as a true defender of virtue. Field Marshall Rommel, one of the last genuine medieval knights, moreover one of the greatest architects of modern warfare, was forced to end his life on October 14th, 1944.

The wrath of Hitler was intense. Over a thousand suspects were arrested immediately, many more over the next four to six months. Some followed Rommel and committed suicide. However, most lost their lives by being shot or hung by their necks by the Waffen SS. The führer by divine intervention (as he claimed after each attempt) continued to bewitch his adversaries. Rumour has it that Hitler and his closest circle were into black magic, with

the devil in their corner. In reality, though, malleable people simply allowed evil to enter their lives. The jackals gorged themselves on the ignorance of the mass.

Sound asleep in his cool basement, Tom was unaware it was a beautiful sunny day until late in the afternoon when thunderclouds rolled in. A severe thunderclap jolted him out of his drowsy state. At approximately the same time Oberst Graf Stauffenberg lit a cigarette on his way from the airstrip in Rastenburg to the barracks, where Hitler held a meeting on war-related issues.

Stauffenberg was a descendent of one of the most distinguished aristocratic Roman Catholic families of southern Germany. His father was Alfred Schenk Graf von Stauffenberg, the last *oberhofmarshall* of the Kingdom of Württemberg. His mother was a Uexkuell-Gyllenband, an aristocratic family dating back to the 12th century.

It was the gallant Graf von Stauffenberg's third attempt to kill Hitler in ten days (the first two were called off). He was carrying a bomb in his briefcase, powerful enough, so he was told, to kill every person in the room, including Hitler. The plot was simple. Stauffenberg was to take part in a briefing given to Hitler on numerous war-related issues. Before joining the by-now started session, Stauffenberg went into the wardrobe to activate the bomb. With a pair of pliers, he broke the capsule containing acid, which in turn would lead to the detonation of the bomb in exactly ten minutes.

When Stauffenberg entered the room, General Keitel interrupted General Heusinger, who was briefing Hitler on the eastern front, and explained Stauffenberg's part of the briefing. Hitler nodded at Stauffenberg and turned back to Heusinger to continue. Stauffenberg put his briefcase down against a table leg and left the room a couple of minutes later with the excuse he was expecting an important telephone call from Berlin as part of his briefing. The bomb went off a few minutes later as planned. But Hitler, against

all odds again, survived. Four officers were killed; Hitler had only minor injuries. The anti-Nazi gang seriously believed Lucifer himself was Hitler's guardian. Stauffenberg, without question a hero of the anti-Nazi movement, who could have easily shuffled papers to the end of World War II and ultimately enjoyed the comfortable life style he was born into, was amongst the hundreds who were eventually executed.

Hitler's meeting with Mussolini a couple of hours after the attempted assassination was mesmerizing. He told the Italian dictator that "heavenly guidance" saved him again.

Tom, of course, knew nothing of what took place. His thoughts were with his parents and sister as Helga and her father entered the room in late afternoon. At first apprehensive about meeting Helga's father, he gained confidence from the smile on Helga's face and the straightforward mannerisms of her father. Stretching out his hand, he greeted Mr. Berger. He was trim, of medium height, and his face mirrored intelligence. The cleft in his chin gave him a look of fearlessness. His bluish-grey eyes seemed to fathom Tom's momentary nervousness. A callused hand clasped Tom's hand in a firm handshake.

"Dieter Berger," he introduced himself in typical terse German fashion, almost clicking his heels. His abundant hair was short and snow white; looking closely at his grieving eyes, one could see the scars in his heart. The typical worker's garb was old but clean and pressed.

"Tom, this is my father. You may not remember him; he and Klaus, our farmhand, carried you from your airplane across the fields to the horse-drawn wagon."

Both men looked at each other momentarily, as if to figure out what the other was thinking. It was Tom's turn to break the silence.

"Tom Williams, and I owe you a big thank you for saving my life. Mister Berger, I must confess I don't understand why you did

what you did...but I am grateful for your hospitality and all of the help you have given me. I am forever indebted to you and your family.”

Although the old man understood only a few words, Tom’s easy manner inspired comfort. He asked Helga to translate. When she was done, he looked at Tom with a slight but sincere smile on his face and said, “*Hoffentlich, geht es Ihnen bald besser, Gott sei Dank der Krieg ist bald vorbei, und Sie können wieder nach Hause gehen, ich wünsche Ihnen gute verbesserung.*”

Again he gripped Tom’s hand, gave him a solid handshake, and abruptly left the room.

“My father was saying he wishes you a speedy recovery and hopefully you will be managing to get home soon. The war, he believes, thank God will be over before long. Please understand; he is still suffering from my brother’s death in Russia. Hans was a sergeant in the Sixth Army under General Paulus. I have another brother, Dieter, serving on a U-boat as captain somewhere in the Atlantic. We are very worried about him; U-boats have an alarming destruction rate. Perhaps my father is also at a loss as to why you are here and my brother Hans had to die.”

“You never mentioned your mother,” he replied.

“My mother died five years ago from cancer, and all of us still suffer from this loss. She was the greatest mother anybody could wish for; she was only fifty-four years old. Oh, Tom, life seems so unfair...and this crazy war is not helping. What did we do to deserve all of this?”

Speaking of her mother and the recent death of her brother and witnessing how her father gallantly struggled not to show how hurt he was by his son’s death was all too much to bear. On impulse, Helga sat on the bed, close to Tom. Tears started to fill her eyes; slowly she leaned towards him and her head touched his shoulder.

Tom wrapped his good arm around her, holding her close as she sobbed quietly. Conscious of her pain, he nevertheless kept his emotions in check. Still comforting Helga, several minutes passed when a strange, completely unexpected feeling deep within gave him a jolt. For the first time since volunteering for duty, he was confused about the war and moreover his role in it. The silence, the real awareness within, erupted.

In the evening, Propaganda Minister Dr. Göbbles, Hitler’s capable spinmaster, was at his best: “Hitler was saved by providence. He survived another plot by enemies of the Third Reich. Surely his survival is proof that only his divine guidance will lead the German people to final victory.” Incredibly, in spite of Germany’s depressing state of affairs, scores of brainwashed people believed without hesitation that Hitler was saved to bring final victory to Germany.

Over the next few weeks Tom’s health improved daily. By now he could walk around with the aid of a cane. He succeeded in sending a long and detailed letter to his parents and a much shorter one to his commanding officer. Helga’s Uncle Herman, a brother to her father, drove Helga to a town some thirty-five kilometres from their village, where she mailed the letters in order not to raise suspicion at the local post office. Just in case the letters fell into wrong hands, Tom refrained from providing details of his location in both letters, not wanting to jeopardize Helga and her family.

Vengeance, indifference and ending the war quickly at any cost was the justification the Allies used in demanding total destruction on German soil. As a result Allied soldiers and German civilians suffered horrifying casualties during Tom’s recovery. The barbaric slaughter of German civilians was just as demonic as Germany’s concentration camps.

Deliberately killing civilians was unnecessary for two obvious reasons. One, Germany was on its knees. Killing hundreds of thou-

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sands of civilians did nothing to shorten the war; in fact, it kept it going. Two, if England had assisted the anti-Nazi generals and the followers of the Wednesday Club, this bloody war could have been over in the fall of 1944, and the massacre of millions of Jews and what Hitler and his sycophantic henchmen called “*Undermenschen*” could have been avoided—not to mention the many young men and women on both sides who were lost in this “fog of war.”



Chapter 10

Gradually Tom’s relationship with Helga’s father was based on mutual respect. Evenings were spent comparing life in the United States and Germany. Their favourite subject, however, was the present state of affairs in Germany. During these evenings, Helga’s father increasingly realized that Tom was not a “crazy Ami” but a young man nurtured in a home very much like the household he grew up in. Tom’s straightforward and honest approach to life’s questions confirmed he was raised in a family committed to living a mannerly and civilized life.

Dr. Schmidt participated frequently in these fascinating—particularly to Tom—dialogues. The doctor, with his command of the English language, assisted Helga and Tom with difficult translations.

Tom was by now convinced that he could trust the Berger family. He often in the course of these spirited evenings recalled his father’s favourite saying: “Folks are folks, regardless of colour and race...for the most part, people one on one are honest; the problem lies in the herd.”

Beyond doubt, Tom realized the Bergers, Dr. Schmidt and Klaus, the farmhand, were hardworking, honest and reliable folks, not at all what he was told he would find in Germany. Tom and Helga’s friendship increased on a daily basis; physical attraction, although still concealed, was there from the beginning. Both

looked forward to the evening hours. At about ten o'clock Mr. Berger would bid everybody good night. If Klaus was present, he would immediately follow his master and also go to his room.

Once alone, Tom and Helga would sit in the living room for hours and talk, for the most part about their childhood years, life in general, and the awful war that brought them together. When Tom described his home and neighbourhood, he frequently spoke about an old friend of the family, a Mr. Chen, known to most as "Old Tom."

"Most neighbours avoided Old Tom, because he is of African and Chinese background. People think he is odd. However the few who know him see him as a somewhat eccentric yet visionary character. He was always kind and gentle to us kids."

"Tom, you mention this Mr. Chen often. You obviously like him very much."

"As far back as I can remember we visited old Tom. My dad has been friends with him for over thirty years. I do like him; he was always very kind-hearted to us kids. Although very thoughtful with children, he was not a man who would easily smile. However, when we asked him a question, his face would quickly change and a smile would appear. As kids we all were a little bit in awe of him; I guess it was respect of sorts. Old Tom, as we kids called him—of course never in front of our parents—was always available to explain things to us kids, things we might not want to ask our parents. When I asked my dad why Mr. Chen knew so much, my dad said, 'Mr. Chen discusses things most people never even think about. He reads a lot of books, and the many years of suffering individually and as a race also increased his horizon.'

"Old Tom's philosophy is a mixture of various Eastern and Western thoughts; he has a remarkable knowledge of ancient sacred writings. My dad honestly believes he is somewhat of a mystic."

"How so?"

"Oh, there are many stories about Old Tom. When I was a kid, maybe eight or nine years old, he healed a young, very poor neighbour girl. She suffered from fits and seizures since birth. Old Tom cured her by laying hands on her; she is now married with children of her own and has never been ailing since. Then there is the story about a widow in our village who was about to lose her home because she could not pay her long overdue property taxes. People claimed Mr. Chen visited her the day before she was to lose her home. The following morning she walked into the township office and paid her outstanding taxes in full. When she also paid her grocery bill at the White's village store, the news spread across the village and surrounding areas like wildfire. Folks said old Tom loaned her the money. My dad, however, said this was impossible; he had just emptied his bank account the previous week to help one of his children with a down payment for a house in Detroit."

"Is his given name really Tom?"

"Yes, it is his American name. In fact, I think my father called me Tom after Mr. Chen, although my mother says I was called Tom after Thomas Jefferson, our third president."

"Wow...how interesting!"

"Yup...old Tom is different. My mom says he is a very spiritual man, but I think she says that only because my dad looks up to Old Tom. I don't think my mom, or for that matter most people, really know him that well. By the way, old Tom was the only person who tried to talk me out of joining the U.S. Air Force. I am so glad I didn't listen to him—I would never have met you!"

"Why do you think he tried to talk you out of joining the air force?"

"I think he doesn't believe in war."

Helga could not sleep for the longest time that night. Finally falling asleep, she dreamed that a Chinese man asked her many questions. When she tried to answer, he was suddenly gone. Next

she was all alone, swallowed up in a very large room with only a desk and a chair. A picture of a hilly landscape suddenly changed into a radiant starry night. Alone and lost in this barren room, at once only a slice of an endless universe, she woke up.

The following evening the doctor visited Tom the patient. Once done, everybody gathered in the living room and enjoyed a rare glass of wine, a gift to the doctor from one of his patients. Soon a lively conversation ensued.

Tom listened intently as Dr. Schmidt and Helga's father talked about their favourite subject, Germany's recent history. The conversation began with the collapse of the Weimar republic in 1933, when Hitler changed the republic into a dictatorship. In its fourteen years the republic survived in spite of severe economic problems (a loaf of bread was 3 million inflated reichsmarks); moreover, anti-German sentiment was prevalent just about worldwide. Eventually the conversation drifted to World War I.

"It was the Kaiser's (Kaiser Wilhelm II) decision to back Austria-Hungary to revenge the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which eventually resulted in World War I and brought about the Weimar Republic," Mr. Berger voiced.

The doctor quickly cut in. "*Incite* is a better term. Firstly, the vacillating attitude of the Kaiser toward his first cousin Nicholas, the tsar of Russia, was, to say the least, reprehensible, and then to take sides with the dying Austrian-Hungarian empire was not only a strategic blunder; it was downright a shame to war against the tsar, who by all accounts was perhaps the last caring autocrat left..."

"Caring, perhaps, but incredibly weak-kneed. While he was on the front, the empress, incredibly void of political sense, was nevertheless determined to be in charge, except she entirely relied on the advice of a bizarre Russian monk named Rasputin, who for reasons of self-preservation appointed and disposed government officials as he saw fit. The damage was done, and the tsar

lost all hope of ever preventing the Russian revolution," Helga's father added.

The conversation finished with a rather passionate discussion about the uncommon rise of Adolf Hitler. The doctor, and to a lesser degree Mr. Berger, acknowledged the rise of Adolf Hitler as a gloomy chapter in Germany's history. Both however admitted how spellbound all of Germany was by Hitler's speeches. Additionally, Mr. Berger declared a fair and impartial examination of Hitler's reign up to 1939, the beginning of World War II, would bring to light that Germany under Hitler was a unique chapter in human history. He continued to emphasize that it would not be far off the mark to admit Germans were perhaps the best-educated people in the world by 1939. Children were healthy and well-schooled. There was order and prosperity through the 30s, and the early territorial expansion orchestrated entirely by Hitler, without a shot fired, was a remarkable achievement. Moreover, Germany under Hitler during the 1930s was without question a rarity. While it was a tyranny, it was a new dictatorship, very different from Communism; all people on all levels prospered significantly. The doctor however stated it was the traditional acceptance of authority, no questions asked, so deeply entrenched in most Germans, that brought about the rise of Hitler.

The doctor and Helga's father agreed that Hitler mesmerized 99 percent of Germans with his passionate speeches. The doctor declared that Germany was missing the Kaiser, and Hitler understood the mood of the crowd and capitalized on this. Mr. Berger on the other hand emphasized that Hitler awoke in the German people a feeling of unity and superiority so desperately needed after their defeat in World War I.

Both agreed that nobody could deny the charismatic energy that was in his message. The doctor mockingly pointed out, "Lucifer, the angel of light, could not do better."

Tom, by now secure and sufficiently comfortable amongst his benefactors, realized that as a race they were still a mystery to him. A lull in the conversation allowed Tom to ask how a resourceful and ingenious nation such as Germany could fall under Hitler's spell.

The doctor immediately and very seriously replied, "We desperately wanted a *führer* [leader], and we sure got one."

Tom could not let it rest there and raised the question about the Jews in Germany. Mr. Berger, who felt the query addressed to him, was shortly thankful he had to relight his pipe several times; not expecting a question of such weight, it provided him with ample time to formulate his answer.

Helga interrupted, trying to change the topic. "Tom, why do we have to talk about these awful things? Can we not simply enjoy the evening? Let's play rummy."

"Indulge us, Helga. Let Tom hear your father's answer. It is a timely question; soon or later we have to face the music anyway," the doctor halted Helga.

His pipe producing clouds of smoke, Mr. Berger eventually continued. "Let me try and answer this complex question." Looking at Tom, he continued in a somewhat solemn tone, "Helga, Herbert, please translate sentence by sentence. I want Tom to understand my answer to his question."

Taking several puffs, almost hiding behind the smoke, his face displaying a serious and contemplative mood, he carried on. "When this war is over, heartless justification for what we have done to the Jewish people will be plain foolishness. Nobody deserves this treatment, regardless of how we feel about them, and even if we believe we are justified, a more human solution would be to our credit."

"Sorry to interrupt; did we not ask several nations to take the Jews off our hands, and nobody except the USA took a very small number?" the doctor added.

Keeping his pipe alive with a new match, Helga's father half-heartedly nodded. Not wanting to lose his train of thought, he dodged the doctor's remark and continued. "The Jews have been part of Germany for several hundred years now; moreover, the Jews with full knowledge of Germans dominated to a large degree Germany's trade, commerce and banking."

Looking at Tom, confirming he understood the translation, he continued. "You have to study Jewish history in order to understand how they became so acclimatized in their chosen country, be it Germany, Spain, or anywhere else for that matter. Jews have been nomads with no place of their own for thousands of years. Becoming experts in adapting to different cultures while staying alive, not only as individual people, but notably as a religious body and a nation within a different religious and political system, is to their credit. Before long, being a resourceful race and understanding the mastery of money, they always found ways to become skilled in the moneymaking components of their adopted countries. Overall, it ensured their continued existence on foreign soil. Partaking in finance and commerce gave them a better chance of influencing people. It was a hedge against resentment."

"Lamentably for the Jews, this conduct backfired, eventually, and invariably it infuriated indigenous people. Soon or later in their turbulent history, it resulted in expulsion from most countries. In other words, in a matter of course, indigenous people became antagonistic towards the Jews. In addition, the German people believe Jews were responsible for the Communist movement that swept Germany after the First World War. Last, our propaganda minister, Dr. Göbbles, made sure it became public knowledge that some Jewish Levite texts are intensely racist against non-Jews; this, of course, only fuelled the fire."

Pausing to relight his pipe while holding up his hand to let everybody know he was not finished, he continued. "There is also

the issue of the Jews being accused of plagiarism. Claiming to be first in believing in a single God is utter nonsense; the whole Orient accepted the doctrine of a single God, and the proclamation the Torah is the oldest book is total fanaticism. Many books are much older than the Torah, for example, Gilgamesh, written about 1700 BCE, and the Iliad in approximately 700 BCE. This gives credibility to the belief that the whole Jewish religious doctrine might be fabricated, or worse, stolen from other ancient sacred writings, changing names and dates to suit their own ends.”

He paused, and Helga seized the opportunity and interrupted her father. “This does not mean you can smash their shops and beat them on the street.”

“Ah, Helga if that was all we are doing, the world would not judge us harshly. I am afraid, though, Germany will be held accountable for numerous monstrous deeds committed in secret against the Jews, and also to other so-called undesirables, as we speak,” Dr. Schmidt interjected.

Tom, listening in silence up to now, asked, “Is there any truth to the rumours of Jewish mass extermination in Germany?”

Sighing heavily, Dr. Schmidt answered, “Hearsay from one of my medical colleagues points towards unspeakable horrors being committed against the Jews and various other so-called *Udermenschen*.”

This candid admission caused a prolonged silent pause in their conversation.

The stillness was suddenly interrupted by pitilessly piercing sirens, forewarnings of approaching bombers, ready to cause havoc without shame or guilt. Several minutes later, the droning sound of approaching bombers caused people in Schweinfurt to quickly seek shelter. War reached the city, and the violent impact of battle echoed across the river.

The brutal impact, echoing across fields and water, produced

an extraordinary moment at the unharmed Bergers’ farm. In a peculiar way, the sound of confrontation created a salient reminder that a vestige of civilization still existed in a little farmhouse in the very heart of Germany. Finishing his glass of wine in one sip, the doctor got up and wished everybody a good night. Helga and Tom walked the doctor out to the enclosed yard, where he mounted his bicycle and left the sanctuary of the farm.

Helga’s father, aware of Tom and Helga’s habit of talking past midnight, also bid good night to Helga and Tom. “Why do you think he left so abruptly?” Tom asked.

“Who, my father, or the doctor?”

“The doctor.”

“Schweinfurt is being bombed, and civilian casualties are getting higher each time. Uncle Herbert will make his rounds to see if he is needed.”

Looking into her eyes while holding her close for the first time since she sat on his bed a couple of weeks before, Tom continued. “Helga, I am sorry for what is happening to your people. I am overwhelmed at your father’s approval and co-operation to let me stay here and take the risk to get my letters mailed.”

Helga, warmly surprised by Tom’s statement as well as by him holding her close to him, did not reply. Instead, she longingly looked at him in complete silence, hoping the moment would be prolonged.

Tom, his mind still on the bombing raid, missed the cue. Slowly releasing her, he continued. “If not shot down a few weeks ago, it could be me up there. It is all so confusing...I don’t know what is right and what is wrong anymore.”

Helga, disappointed by his words and the wasted moment, replied in a desolate voice, “Tom, have we not agreed war is wrong, regardless on whose side you are on? If you tell me now you don’t know what is right or wrong...you are confusing me.”

“Helga, you got me all wrong. I am saying each time I witness your father’s grief, having lost his son at war, I come to terms with war’s wickedness. On the other hand, just as your brothers fought for what they believed in, I did too. I am a captain in the United States Air Force, and only through circumstances beyond my control have I seen the other side of war. Now that I met you and your father, Dr. Schmidt and Klaus, whose blood is running through my veins, I am not sure what is right and what is wrong anymore; that is what I meant to say. I was always so very sure of my beliefs and what was expected of me; my sense of duty was clear-cut and unmistakable. I am, however, beginning to understand the most repulsive form of evil is the perversion of committing evil in the name of good, and I am beginning to believe war is doing just that.”

Comforted by his answer, she moved close and cuddled up.

Above, the stars reflected a compelling majesty. Looking up, Helga nevertheless wondered if the splendour was distance related. Conceivably chaos was even more prevalent in this endless unfathomable universe as here at home, on this fragile negligible planet. A slightly cool invigorating breeze was in the air, a welcome relief after the day’s heat. Observing the powerful searchlights across the river, looking for enemy aircrafts, Helga absentmindedly, as if speaking to herself, still holding on to Tom, queried, “Are these searchlights trying to penetrate heaven and demand an answer to all of this madness?”

“Questions with no apparent or easy answers?”

“Tom, why did we have to meet like this? I am the one who is confused...I am twenty-two years old. If it wasn’t for this ridiculous war, I might be married and have children. The last five years have been just plain horrible. Sometimes, I am glad my mother doesn’t have to see all of this insanity.”

Against the wall of the house was a wooden bench, handmade

by Klaus many years before, a present for Helga when she was just a little girl. Many a morning, after breakfast, she would sit on her bench and watch her father and two brothers harness the team of horses, ready to earn their keep in the surrounding fields for another day.

She could not wait to grow up and help. As the youngest in the family, she was cherished and pampered by everyone; this, however, exasperated her to no end. She would run to her mother, tears running down her little face.

“Mama, I am not a baby any more. I want to work with Papa, like my brothers.” Her mother would reach down, pick her up, take her in her arms, sit on the bench with her, and tell her that soon, when she got a little older, she could look after the horses all by herself.

Recollection of days long gone flooded her mind as she sat holding hands with Tom on her bench. Slowly at first, as if talking to herself, she told Tom of the day when she finally took the horses out for the first time. She was twelve and on top of the world. At fifteen she scored the highest mark in her class in English—a noteworthy achievement, considering there was nobody around to practice with. She spoke of hot summer days, cooling off on Sunday afternoons, going for a swim in the idyllic nearby river Main after church. How her mother refused to change into a bathing suit, sitting there in the sun, protected only by an umbrella. Moreover, Helga’s brothers teasing her about being so reserved. Of bitter cold days tobogganing, until her fingers and nose were numb, coming home to a hot and hearty soup, always ready and waiting for her. Of days when she and Christine, a friend since kindergarten, hid in Christine’s attic, sneaking a quick look into a medical book, snatched from her father’s study, with explicit drawings of human anatomy. Fourteen, wishing they were twenty, yet still giggling about how boys are so different.

Holding hands, Tom and Helga openly showed for the first time how much they cared for each other. Talking about their childhoods, they sat on the bench long past midnight. In the early hours of the morning, they promised each other that regardless of what the future would hold, they would always remain good friends. They were both secretly longing for much more; nonetheless, common sense once more got the upper hand. When they finally decided to say good night, both lay awake in their beds until the sun rose and the cockerel in the yard acknowledged a new day. Helga and Tom paid little attention to the cockerel's call, their minds and bodies stimulated by hidden passion. With their desire unfulfilled, restless in body and soul, sleep finally transferred them to another realm.

The dawning of another day, however, brought no comfort; their spirits could not subdue their frightened and confused hearts.



Chapter 11

About two hours from New York City, in the southeasterly part of New York State, are the boundaries of the Catskill Mountains. Along the mountains south-easterly border on the outskirts of a small village is a small but well-kept fifty-acre parcel of land. The Williams had farmed this land for the past eighty years. There was not enough land to secure a liveable wage; the land, however, provided additional income for the Williams to their regular work. Winning arable land from rocky hills and forests was strenuous work for John Williams, who settled there with his young bride, Edith White, in 1868. He was a blacksmith by profession and a lay preacher on weekends. She was a full-time schoolteacher back in England. In their new home she eventually worked again part-time as a supply teacher.

John and Edith, unknown to each other, had come across the ocean on the same steamship, the *Great Britain*, the first seagoing vessel that was pushed by a screw propeller. They met at Ellis Island after what seemed a dreadful journey. Both braved seasickness, Edith at times believing she would die. She went on deck only once; the remainder of the voyage she was flat on her back, eating and drinking only enough to stay alive. Finally arriving in New York, they had to go through immigration and a physical examination at Ellis Island, a barren rock bulging out of New York City harbour. John, coming down the ramp alongside her, noticed how

she struggled with her heavy luggage and immediately asked if he could help.

Gladly she accepted. In spite of the almost three-week torment aboard the ship, she looked attractive to John. Alone in this vast new city, struggling with being homesick, they decided to get married after only six weeks of courtship. Both worked long hours at any job they could find, saving their hard-earned money. They bought fifty acres of land in the Catskill Mountains for fifty dollars in 1867. One year later, they built a small three-room log cabin and left New York City for good, a decision they never regretted.

Edith, pretty and gregarious, somewhat coquettish at times, was a tiny, almost fairy-like woman. What she lacked in size she made up in abounding energy. Every now and then, her affectionate personality caused needless dismay to her husband, John. His disposition was solemn and prone to melancholy. This profound difference in personality did not stop them from enjoying each other's company. They had four children: three girls—Emma, Mary and Ruth—and one boy, the eldest, named Mark.

Ruth, next to Mark in age, was the closest in looks and personality to her mother. She left home at seventeen. James Flanagan, a young man from California, passing through the Catskill Mountains on his way to New York City, looking for work in his uncle's printing shop, swept her off her feet. When her mom and dad tried to influence her to not make a rush decision, Ruth was quick to point out their own whirlwind romance.

Ruth and her beau stayed in New York only two months. James uncle turned out to be a drunkard, never paying his workers on time. Disillusioned, they left for California, where they got married. It was sixteen years before Ruth saw her family again. With three kids, her husband, and presents for everybody, she arrived Christmas Day in 1887, unannounced.

Emma, the youngest, never married. A tragic love affair in her late teens with a young man who drowned while swimming in a pond at a nearby village caused her to become withdrawn for the rest of her life. She lived at the homestead until she died at the young age of fifty-two. Mark, who took over the homestead, asked his wife, Elizabeth, to become Emma's friend. It was easy for Elizabeth to fulfill her husband's wish; Emma was a quiet, unassuming, and easy-to-live with soul. Elizabeth and Emma remained genuine friends all of their lives. Mary was the smartest of the kids, slightly opinionated; loving her food, she would wear long dresses and skirts all of her life, hiding her copious figure. She married, at the age of sixteen, a neighbour boy named Henry White, a distant relative to her mother. Henry owned the grocery store in the village; it was the White family who had introduced John and Edith to the Catskill Mountains.

Mary and Henry had seven children. Henry, a steadfast Episcopalian, ran the village store in a manner that caused his family hardship from time to time. Turning away someone in need of supplies was difficult for him, and half of the village owed him money. If it wasn't for Mary looking after the books and collections, they would have lost the store a long time ago. Due to Mary's diligence and perseverance, they managed to live off the proceeds of the store for over forty years.

Mark Williams, the oldest, married his childhood sweetheart, Elizabeth, a neighbour girl, when he was twenty-three and she was nineteen. Elizabeth gave him two children, Grant, the oldest, and Edith, named after his mother. Elizabeth, guided by her mother's example of caring for her father, simply could not do enough for her husband. Mark adored Elizabeth all his life; they were still holding hands late in life while taking their grandchildren, Tom and Shirley, for walks in the mountains. Mark worked as a carpenter all his life, earning extra cash, as his father did, while

working the land. Elizabeth worked three days a week in Mary and Henry's store.

Edith became a teacher and soon thereafter moved to New York City. She married James Baker, a lawyer. They lived in uptown New York City, on 56th and Broadway, enjoying the hustle and bustle of a city designated as The Big Apple. Having no children, they enjoyed an unencumbered lifestyle. Edith, however, cherished her roots. Her husband, a workaholic, realized that, in order to compensate for his many hours away from home, he would have to go with Edith on her visits to the Catskills. No Christmas, anniversary or birthday was complete without the Bakers visiting the Catskills.

Grant married Diane Johnson when he was twenty-seven and she was twenty-five. A surveyor by profession, he cherished working the land with his father. Diane and Grant met at a church function when he was sixteen. Grant was the handsomest boy for miles around. Diane immediately adored Grant; Grant, on the other hand, could not recall meeting her earlier when he saw her again at some village function months later. Diane nevertheless knew all along she was going to marry him one day. Wisely, she decided to keep this hidden in her bosom, for fear of being ridiculed.

Then one day in the summer of 1912, they met again, at a corn roast and barn dance. Proceeds were slated for building a fire hall manned by local volunteers. Little did Grant know this unforeseen meeting would be the catalyst for sharing a life with her. She was selling tickets for the dance when Grant approached her table. Diane, recognizing Grant immediately, tried hard not to show her excitement. Her heart skipped a beat, only to make up for it with a double thump. Slightly confused by how his appearance affected her, she looked the other way, pretending not to notice him. Grant had to look twice to recognize her. It had been over a year since he

had seen her last. What a change! He could not believe his eyes. Diane had turned into a shapely and very attractive young woman. Gone were the pigtails, the gangly feet and the flat chest. Trying to remember how old she must be by now, he slowly walked up to her table. Smiling, he said, "Hi, Diane; how are you? I see they got you working. How much are the tickets?"

"Hi, Grant. I am fine. The corn roast tickets are three for ten cents and the dance tickets are twenty-five cents each, forty cents a couple."

"Are you staying for the dance tonight?" she added, immediately wishing she had never asked.

"Maybe...are you working tonight?"

Turning red, she answered, "Why, Grant, are you inviting me?" Recovering quickly, she added in a disarming voice, "Sorry, Grant, I should not ask. You might have other plans."

Grant, fully aware of the moment, replied with a receptive twinkle in his eyes, "Not at all. I would love to invite you to the dance tonight, if you are free."

Over the next five years, Diane and Grant dated on a steady basis. Both knew they had found what they had looked for; other suitors were of no interest any more.

Grant worked with his father on the land while studying in his spare time to become a surveyor. During their courtship, Grant and Diane laid the foundation for a happy and harmonious life. They married in 1918; their first child, Shirley, was born in 1919. Soon thereafter Thomas arrived in 1921. Although they were close in age, Shirley was like a second mom to Tom while growing up. In a sheltered and loving environment, the children quickly recognized the value of living an orderly life. This often time-consuming task was achieved, not only by taking time to explain things, but also by setting an example for their children. Tom and Shirley never recalled their parents arguing. Differences on diverse subjects were

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aired in private. When Tom, at the age of ten, saw his first airplane on his way to visit his Aunt Edith and Uncle Jim in New York, he told Shirley, who immediately told everybody, “Tom is going to be a pilot one day.”

Never losing sight of his childhood dream, Tom received his wings at the age of twenty. His father was on cloud nine, right next to Tom. He encouraged his children, at a very young age, to choose a vocation that was more than a job. “Work at something you enjoy; life is too short to waste time in a boring job.”

On Tom’s twenty-second birthday, family and friends celebrated until the wee hours in the morning. The party also served to celebrate Tom’s promotion to flight lieutenant. Shirley and her boyfriend, Roger, a quiet, shy only child working at the local gas station as an apprentice mechanic, had arranged the surprise party weeks earlier. Soon after the party, Tom left for additional training at an air force base in Savannah, Georgia. Coming home one weekend, he sprang the news: “Finally...I am leaving for England.”

When the day came, Shirley was crying, clinging to him like a mother losing her son. “Shirley, stop crying. I am only going for a little while. I’ll kick butt and be back in time for your wedding...with a chest full of medals, of course,” Tom laughingly said while boarding the bus.



Chapter 12

It was a day of thanksgiving at the Williams’ when Tom’s first letter arrived from England. Everybody read the letter several times; Tom’s mother read it one more time to her husband, Grant, just before going to sleep.

Dear Mom, Dad, and Shirley,

Arrived safely, and getting used to being here. I make new friends every day (say hi to Jimmy and tell him it is a blast, he is missing out). The grub is not bad, but I hanker after Mom’s and Shirley’s cooking. The weather has been lousy, heavy fog all across the English Channel; we are grounded, no kicking butt for time being. Dad, several of the boys, with plenty of time on their hands, play bridge every day. You would clean house; I wish I had paid more attention when you played with mom and your friends. My squadron is 80 percent newcomers, so I fit right in. The pilots who have been here for a while have a fair amount of combat experience. They are real party animals; there is a party somewhere on the base every other day. Our squadron leader is only two years older than I am, a down to earth person, and just one of the lads (as they call us over here). I cannot wait to go flying with him. He has a reputation of being a hotshot pilot, and he only talks

flying. He is from Utica, New York. I hope we become friends; I'd like to invite him to our place once we are home again. When he found out where we live, he told me he loves the Catskills.

English folks speak funny English, but they think the same of us.

Every fourth Saturday there is a dance in one of the hangars. A local band draws girls from miles around. The next dance is this coming weekend. The crew who have been here for a while say when these girls talk amongst themselves, nobody understands a word. But the attraction for different dialects goes both ways. One of the guys in my squadron is from the panhandle of Texas. When he talks, I am told, all the girls hang around him just to hear his Texas drawl. I am trying to get to know him better; maybe some of the girls would like to hear how a fellow from the Catskills asks for a dance.

By the way, do not worry about me. The guys who have been here for some time tell us the worst is over. We are now in complete control of the action. The experienced pilots make a point to rub it in. Sorties to Germany are nothing but milk runs. Will write more and fill you in after my first couple of flights. I am getting anxious to go; sitting around is not much fun.

Say hi to everybody. Stay well; will see you all in six to twelve months. There is talk this war will be over before long.

Bye for now, with love,

Tom

The next morning Shirley asked her mother to read the letter again. Tom, as promised, wrote home faithfully one letter per week. He would enclose a separate page for his dad when there

was news made by the Allies pressing forward, without providing exact details of the advance. Shirley, filling the role of town crier, would take his letters to the village and read them to news-hungry local folks. The villagers lived simple, uncomplicated, honest lives, never fully understanding what was at stake for America in this European war. Getting news directly from a hometown boy, all the way from England, was significant.

Then one day Tom's letters stopped. Shirley was the first to lament. Her parents, particularly her mother, told her not to worry. "Tom likely is very busy right now; no doubt news will arrive soon."

Four anxious weeks went by without news from overseas. Then a letter from the United States Air Force arrived. Tom's father, alone at home, opened the letter, practically tearing it in half, his hands shaking while trying to realize the meaning.

July 14th, 1944

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Williams,

Your son, Captain Thomas Williams, had to make an emergency landing when his aircraft was damaged by ground fire, near the city of Schweinfurt in Bavaria, Germany. From dependable sources, we are positive your son survived the forced landing. However, as of today, we have not been in the position to establish conclusively his whereabouts. He could conceivably be a prisoner of war. I personally share your anxiety and concern; Tom has always been a model officer and a well-respected comrade amongst his peers. I will keep you informed as more information is available. As soon as American infantry is crossing into Germany we can perhaps learn more over the next few weeks.

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My prayers are daily for Tom's safe return.
Sincerely yours,
John W. Hutchinson, Squadron Leader
Eight Air Force Base
Bushy Park, London, England.

Turning pale, robot-like, holding the letter close to his chest, he walked through the open back door out to the garden. The shock caused pain and dropped him to his knees. Head on his chest, weeping as grief struck his very soul, he felt desolate and helpless. His wife, home only minutes later, looked through the house, calling his name. She found him in the garden, still on his knees. Rushing toward him, expecting he was sick or had hurt himself, she noticed the crumpled letter in his hand and saw the insignia of the United States Air Force on the envelope. Now it was her turn to imagine the worst.

"Oh Grant, what is it? Is it our Tom?" she cried out.

Grant, looking right through her, as if not comprehending her question, handed her the letter while brushing tears from his eyes and face.

She hastily read the letter twice, then once again slowly. Unexpectedly she gave her husband a big hug. "Grant, Tom is alive; I know it in my heart. Come inside and lie down for a minute. Do not think the worst. I know he is alive and well. His commanding officer said we could be hopeful. Come, let me help you get up. You have to be strong for Shirley."

In all her years of marriage, she had never seen her husband in such a state; for the moment, she was more concerned about him than for Tom. Being a mother, she knew Tom was alive; it was a clear, unmistakable voice: "Tom is in safe hands."



Chapter 13

The Allied High Command finally faced reality; the war in Europe was not smooth sailing. Millions of Russia's young men and women had lost their lives by now. America and England, having much fewer casualties, nevertheless realized that the cost to carry on was way too high. To end the war quickly, the USAF and the RAF decided to drop bombs indiscriminately on Germany. Now German civilians paid dearly for Hitler's bragging. Four years earlier, Hitler had been ecstatic, spewing rhetoric to jubilant Nazi followers on a soggy September night in 1940 in the Berlin sports palace. Full of piss and vinegar, he imprisoned a brain-dead audience. "I am going to erase English cities, and only total capitulation by England will stop our advances."

By the end of 1944 over 700,000 German civilians had lost their lives, due to daily day-and-night bombings over German cities.

Remarkably, German soldiers, their cities in ruins and with the genesis of imminent defeat, persevered and continued a ferocious and fearless fight on all fronts. Their sense of duty and the individual sworn allegiance to the Führer was still binding for most. Obedience was characteristic for nearly all Germans; it was drilled into them from childhood on.

One evening, just prior to wishing each other good night, Tom told Helga he was eager to make contact with Americans. With

American soldiers only months, if not weeks, from reaching Schweinfurt, Helga realized that Tom would before long leave forever. At first a struggle within Helga ensued. Ultimately though she realized it was essential to believe that Tom's leaving was not only normal but also proper. Helping her was Christine.

"Helga, please be real. Don't lose your head. Tom's love is a heartfelt consequence of being dependent on you while recuperating."

Although Helga appreciated Christine's candour, she nevertheless was of the opinion that Tom's love was genuine. While Helga accepted Tom's leaving, she fervently believed Tom would come back one day.

Jestingly, yet with a serious hint in her voice, she told Christine, "Tom will pick me up one day on his white horse and carry me to his castle in the sky."

Christine, realizing the importance of Helga's dream, nevertheless urged her, "Helga, a shared future is nothing but a lovely dream."

Helga, however, was convinced the chasm that separated their worlds would never be deep enough to put an end to their dreams and future.

Helga, hating Christine's advice, nevertheless decided to test Tom. As he got stronger, she spent less time with him.

Tom, perceptive, wondered why she was avoiding him. One evening as Helga was milking their cow, he approached her.

"Helga, you are avoiding me. Why?"

Turning red, she answered, "Tom, you are leaving soon, and I have to get used to you not being around any more."

"But Helga, the war is almost over. I will come back."

"Please, Tom, don't make promises just to mollify me."

"I don't." Reaching down, he pulled her up with his good arm. For the first time he held her fully in his arms. She pulled back at

first, but surrendering to her heart's desires, she soon cuddled up against his chest. When their lips met, a hunger for life, for love, rushed through their bodies, unlike either one had ever experienced.

Kissing passionately, she allowed his hands to search for intimacy. Aroused, she willingly accepted his advances with ecstasy. The feeling was singular, nothing she had ever experienced. It left her light-headed, jubilant, and confused all at the same time.

Spontaneously he pulled her over to the other side of the stable and gently laid her down in the straw. Once on the floor, the blood rushing back to her brain, she regained her self-restraint and asked him not to continue, for fear that someone might walk in on them.

"Please, Tom, not here; it would break my father's heart if he was to walk in on us."

"Sorry, Helga. I don't know what came over me. All I know is, I love you and I want to be with you always."

"Tom, let's not talk of tomorrow," Helga replied, while Tom assisted her to get on her feet. Brushing the straw from her skirt and buttoning up her blouse, she continued. "Let me finish my chores, and after supper when Father goes to bed I will come and visit you and we can talk more."

Again fully in control of her emotions, she continued. "Please...be a good boy now. Go, and let me finish my chores."

Standing on her toes, she gave him a quick kiss on his lips. Squeezing his hand, she reiterated, "Go now. I'll see you later."

Like a little boy, he made her promise. "Promise to see me later?"

Laughingly she replied, "Yes, I will come and tuck you into bed like I did when you were wounded."

At the supper table Helga was her cheerful self. Unabashedly she gave him revealing looks. Tom, rather ill at ease because Klaus looked at him gob smacked, turned red. Mr. Berger paid no

attention to Helga's playful behaviour, concentrating instead on a lengthy political leaflet distributed by the local gauleiter. Finally finished reading, he looked up, momentarily scrutinizing everybody as if to question what he missed. Then, abruptly turning toward Klaus, he placed the leaflet in front of him and asked him to leave it in the toilet for a better end. Toilet paper was a luxury these days.

After supper, as he would do from time to time, Tom helped Helga in the kitchen. Her father retired to his study. Klaus, aware of the different mood that packed the room, mumbled he had to go to the barn to check on the livestock once more before retiring to his room. He had a habit of listening nightly to Germany's gifted spin doctor, Göbbles', newscast.

Dr. Schmidt was the only person who could tease Klaus about his nightly routine. A doctor was someone to look up to, after all. When Mr. Berger had poked fun at Klaus a few days before for believing everything he heard on the radio, Klaus looked at his boss somewhat amused and responded, "*Wos, Dunnarwatt'r is den dos, I sog's euch, sella blödes, I bin nit so blöd un versteckle an Ami nunter'n in mei Kaller- so erzähl m blos nix mer wos I gläb or net gläb.*" ("Thunder and lightning, what is this? I am telling you, I am not that stupid to hide an American in my basement, so do not tell me anymore what I believe and what I do not believe.")

Mr. Berger, familiar with Klaus's patriotic feelings, dismissively apologized and remarked that he was only pulling his leg. If Doctor Schmidt had made the same remark, Klaus, brought up to believe a doctor is next to God, would sheepishly smile and retire.

In spite of Klaus's patriotic leanings, everybody knew he was a loyal servant to the Berger family. He had worked on the Bergers' family farm since finishing public school at the age of fourteen. Recently Mr. Berger took him out to the local pup for dinner and

drinks to celebrate his fortieth anniversary. Although he lived a very simple life and not blessed with scholastic ability, he was not anybody's fool. He had the opportunity to get married a couple of times, but when push came to shove and his almost fiancée told him to make up his mind, he did, and remained a committed bachelor. The fact he helped to save Tom's life was abundant proof of his faithfulness, not only to the Bergers, but moreover to his cherished surrounding. Never one to fool himself, he knew not to bite the hand that fed him. Besides, in a way, the Berger farm was really his. He had everything he needed, and his wants were easily satisfied. Overall, he was living a blessed life, never a slave to desires beyond his place in life.

Helga and Tom just finished cleaning the kitchen and placing the colourful embroidered cloth on the table when Mr. Berger returned from his study.

"Helga, may I have a few words with you and Tom?"

Understanding sufficient German by now, Tom turned red, pretending to do something at the sink until the colour in his face subsided.

Helga, noticing Tom's reaction, almost broke out laughing. "Sure, Papa," she answered with no anxiety in her voice.

"Helga, be so kind as to make us *ein Ersatz Kaffee* [substitute coffee]. We can sit in the living room. Tom, while Helga makes the coffee, come with me. I want to show you something."

With this, he took Tom by the arm and steered him towards the living room. Tom wondered what would come next.

Once in the living room, Mr. Berger walked over to the antique rosewood china cabinet and removed a family picture. Holding it, he asked Tom to look at it.

"Can you make out Helga? She was nine years old then. On her right is her oldest brother, Hans, he was fourteen then, and next to him is Dieter at the age of twelve. Behind the children, my

wife and I.” He said all of this in German, as if Tom understood the language perfectly.

Tom looked at the picture, trying to fathom where all of this was leading. Straightaway he noticed Helga was already a beautiful young woman at the age of nine. Suddenly thunderstruck, Tom knew she would remain a very important element of his life forever. This awareness abruptly lifted a weight off his chest. The anxiety he felt earlier was completely gone.

He now looked at the picture with different eyes. The family portrait mirrored better times; everybody except Mr. Berger was smiling at the camera. As the head of a household, in keeping with his position, he had a serious look on his face, serving as a reminder to future generations of his fundamental status within the family. His wife, busy raising and keeping a family together, never worked outside the home. Families, back then, would not sacrifice family life in order to keep up with the “Joneses” next door.

Putting the picture back into the cabinet, Mr. Berger motioned, “Sit down, Tom.”

“Thank you. Have you heard anything from your son Dieter?” The question was for the most part genuine, but it also served to establish command of the conversation. His confidence back, he looked Mr. Berger once more straight in his eyes.

What he saw was grief and sadness; being preoccupied with his own foolish guilt earlier, he was now genuinely concerned for the obviously burdened Mr. Berger.

Just then, Helga entered the room. “Would you like your pipe, Papa?”

“Bitte, und Danke schön.”

Helga, pouring the coffee, asked Tom what her father had showed him.

“I saw a pretty girl when she was only nine years old.”

Now it was Helga’s place to turn red. “Papa, why are you showing Tom this awful picture?”

“It isn’t awful at all. You look very pretty. You are taking after your mom; she was also very pretty,” her father replied, slightly irritated. Changing the subject, he continued. “You are probably wondering why I asked you both here this evening. Helga, you know I am not one to make long speeches, so I will get straight to the point. There are several things we have to discuss, the first one being Tom’s return to his own people. I have arranged with your Uncle Herman to pick Tom up and take him as close as possible to the western front, where the Americans are. Dr. Schmidt is coming tomorrow morning to look at Tom one more time; he thinks Tom is strong enough to make the trip. No doubt Tom is eager to get back to his family. The war will be over for him by the time he gets back to the U.S.”

Tom, sufficiently conversant with German, studying most evenings before going to sleep, understood most of what Mr. Berger was saying. Looking at Helga, he saw her dumbfounded, staring into space.

“Papa, why not wait until the Americans are in Schweinfurt? Surely it cannot be much longer. What if he gets caught by German soldiers before crossing into American territory? He would become a prisoner of war, and all of our efforts to get him home would be in vain.”

“Helga, thank you for being concerned, but surly your Uncle Herman will get me close to the front. It will be a cinch crossing the line thereafter.”

Helga could not believe what Tom was saying. Her face showed dismay and surprise. Emotions took over, and she was almost thinking aloud. *Only two hours ago he told me he wants to be with me forever.*

Tom, mindful of her body language, read her mind. “Helga,

let's listen to what your father has to say. Surely he has a good reason for what he proposes. Let him finish."

Mr. Berger motioned with his eyes for Helga to translate.

Helga, still amazed at Tom's readiness to accept her father's words, nevertheless slowly translated.

Once done, Mr. Berger looked at Tom with some relief. "Tom, I know that you and Helga care for each other. I am not blind. I was young once too. I am thankful for the time you spent in our home. It gave me the opportunity to get to know you, and I can see you are a fine young man, coming from a home with values similar to ours."

Sipping his coffee, he took a break, gesturing to Helga to translate.

Finished with the translation, Helga was about to add something of her own when Tom and her father signalled simultaneously to let him continue. Mystified by the co-operation between the two of them, she wondered what was happening. Her father, aware of Helga's bewilderment, nevertheless continued. "Helga, please listen. The war will be over before long. Circumstances brought Tom and you together, nothing out of the ordinary for war times, yet it seems like the stuff out of books and movies. I recognize that unusual times bring about uncommon circumstances..."

Smiling faintly, letting them know he was relaxed and bantering, he continued. "I still do not know how I agreed seven weeks ago to let you talk me into bringing Tom home."

Helga and Tom waited. The momentary silence changed the mood somewhat, and with a more sober expression, Mr. Berger continued. "I guess I saw pain in your eyes when we found Tom...it was the same painful expression when you heard about Hans's death on the Russian front. It was upsetting to see you like this again. I simply couldn't refuse bringing Tom home...seeing the pain in your eyes."

It was the first time since her brother's death that Mr. Berger had talked freely about losing his son on the eastern front. Helga's eyes filled with tears.

In spite of not understanding everything, Tom followed the gist of the conversation and drew closer to Helga. Her expressive beautiful blue eyes added a translucent characteristic to her sad countenance; she now realized something important was about to be told.

"Papa, I am sorry...please continue."

Giving her time, Mr. Berger looked at Tom and continued. "Tom, please don't misunderstand what I am about to say, but it appears someone found out you are staying here with us, or at least they suspect you are here with us. This ridiculous turmoil in Germany generates anxiety in people; the risk for Helga is too great. I do not care about my own safety any more, but I do care about what will happen to her. Consequently, I asked my brother if he could take you close to the western front. Once there, you must find a way to cross over to your own people, and all of this has to happen soon. Paul Vogt, our local grocer who has bought vegetables from us for over thirty years, told me the Gestapo [German secret state police] came to his store and asked him whether he knew anything about the American pilot shot down weeks ago. The way he told me and the way he looked at me, I think he tried to warn me."

Helga translated her father's words, and Tom immediately suggested he should leave tonight. "I must go at once. Ask your father if your uncle can pick me up tonight."

"No, Tom," Mr. Berger interjected, guessing what Tom had said. "We do not have to worry for a couple of days. I heard from very reliable sources the local Gestapo have their hands full for the next few days. They are rounding up suspects in Bamberg, a nearby city, looking for participants who were involved in the July 20th attempt to kill Hitler."

“What if they come earlier?” Tom asked.

“No, the Gestapo is very thorough. My source told me they are very busy, wanting to impress their superiors by beating confessions out of some poor suckers in Bamberg.” Taking a sip from his coffee, he continued. “And now some good news. Helga, your brother is coming home on extended leave, perhaps as early as three or four days from now. His sub is on the way back as we speak.”

Helga’s face broke into a thankful smile. “This is wonderful news! It has been way too long. Oh, I am so happy he is coming home! I cannot wait.”

Her father interjected in a more subdued voice, “Helga, you know Dieter...it would be difficult to justify why we helped Tom. I know this sounds cowardly, but in a way timing could not be better...to be honest, I was dreading the thought of Dieter coming home for quite some time now.”

Helga translated as her father was speaking. The momentary radiance evaporated as quickly as it came. Anxiety took hold of her as her eyes wandered from her father to Tom, and she finally nodded, accepting the inevitable.

Speaking mainly to her father, she continued. “I guess we have to do what is best for everybody. Oh, Papa, I am so happy Dieter is coming home. Yes, you are right, Tom and I care for each other, but we know circumstances are against us. We both hope this insane war is over real soon. Maybe, and only then, will we think about our future.”

Mr. Berger, a man of few words, was relieved, almost pleased, that his words did not offend Tom or his daughter.

Capturing the moment, Tom grasped Mr. Berger’s callused right hand with both of his. Shaking Mr. Berger’s hand, looking straight into his eyes, he said, “Mr. Berger, I am so very thankful for your hospitality and your thoughtfulness. Once this dreadful war is over, you and Helga must come and visit us in the States. I

know my family would be very pleased to meet all of you. I don’t know how I can ever repay you for everything you did for me.”

Helga, prompted by her father, translated as Tom was speaking.

Earnestly looking at Tom, his pale blue eyes serene, yet seeking, he replied, “Tom, all I really ask of you is to have honourable intentions towards Helga. She deserves this.”

Helga, slightly embarrassed, was slow to translate. Her father urging her, she finally translated his words.

“Mr. Berger, on my honour, I am not going to make promises to Helga I do not intend to keep. Hopefully I can come back very soon. And this time without having to hide.”

“Well, I said what I had to say. You are both old enough to know what is right and what is wrong...and with this I say good night.” Shaking Tom’s and Helga’s hands in steadfast German fashion, he bid them both good night and left at once.



Chapter 14

Helga kept her promise. Waiting until she heard encouraging sounds from her father's bedroom, she opened the door to the basement and gingerly tiptoed downstairs. Tom was nervously waiting.

During his convalescence, Tom had spent many hours in meaningful and thought-provoking conversations with Helga, often past midnight. Both frequently questioned the significance of meeting in these unusual circumstances and the bizarre times they lived in. In spite of the obvious attraction, reluctantly they concealed their passion.

This however did not stop them, during playful interaction, from admitting that if times were different, nature would not be denied. This honesty, and conceivably the hazardous times they lived in, formed a solid friendship within a very short period. Sharing the very secrets of their soul, admissions came easy, not being lovers. Spontaneous confessions are nevertheless a two-edged sword; it proved difficult to safeguard their platonic relationship. Helga, more so than Tom, realized wishing for more might spoil this special friendship.

Previous short-lived escapades were pale compared to the comfort she found in bonding with Tom. In the past, she looked for excitement, wanting to live, if only for a few hours, with death and destruction all around, whereas now for the first time she realized

a lover should first and foremost be her best friend. Tom, on the other hand, simply thought Helga's vivaciousness was innocent exuberance. Now standing on the edge of a bridge, they both realized there was no turning back. The abrupt end to their platonic relationship produced a powerful and urgent sensation; necessity stirred their bodies and spirits. Cupid came out of the closet; his arrows were accurate, painful and satisfying all at the same time.

As soon as Helga walked into the room, suppressed passion burst into flames spontaneously. It was a night they would never forget. Come what may, loving each other was whole and without blame, their spirits and bodies caught up in a blissful fire, burning away all shame and pretences. It was paradise recaptured, their nakedness and vulnerability protected.

Toward morning, bodies rewarded and tired, their spirits however were vigorous and radiant, fully aware that last night's splendour was imbedded in their souls forever. This consciousness was not only the satisfaction of sharing their love; it was also, to a lesser degree, the recognition of the capriciousness of the times they lived in.

At sunrise, they were sitting again on Helga's bench, this time openly and madly in love with each other, happy and afraid all at the same time. Admitting their love for each other gave them the strength to forget the crazy and senseless war for a few hours. The despair of having to say goodbye so soon crept into their hearts and spoiled the moment somewhat. Despondency, the dark side of love, demanded its share all too soon. The only reality, so evident to both, was that life from here on in would always be intertwined, for better or for worse.



Chapter 15

Two days later, early in the morning, the sun still hiding beyond the horizon, Tom, his cast removed, camouflaged his restored, clean and freshly ironed USAF uniform underneath a German soldier's uniform. Now that it was time to say goodbye, a strange feeling came over him. He was bewildered by his mixed emotions. Leaving Helga yet going home was a two-edged sword, a dreadful moment.

Helga, subdued, watched while he was getting dressed. Trying to hide her tears, she hugged and kissed him, saying goodbye while still alone in his basement room. She was pale, and a forlorn feeling swept over her. Imploringly she asked again, "Tom, please write. I will count every hour while you are gone. I love you, and I will miss you terribly."

Dressed and ready to go to the yard, where Helga's uncle waited, he held her close, conscious his emotions might get the better of him. Gently kissing away her tears, softly stroking her face with the palm of his hand, he answered. "I will be back soon. Know, and always remember, regardless of what happens, my heart is always with you...always."

He gently broke away, and they walked up the stairs, through the living room and out into the enclosed courtyard. Helga's father, Klaus, and Herman Berger were already waiting.

Once out in the courtyard an eerie, poignant silence gripped

them all—each with his or her own thoughts—but everybody keenly aware of each other.

The plan to get Tom to the Americans had been hashed out in detail the previous evening. Herman was to drive Tom to a small community along the river Rhein southwest of Frankfurt, some 150 kilometres from Schweinfurt. Once there, it was up to Tom to find a way to cross this ancient and historic river. The odds of finding a bridge across were almost hopeless. Hitler had ordered all bridges to be destroyed, to slow down Allied advances into Germany. Tom, a good swimmer, was prepared to swim across; the approximate 200 metres did not scare him. With American soldiers on the west side of the river, there was optimism Tom would have no problem meeting up with American troops eventually. It seemed with vigilance a simple but realistic plan.

Shaking hands one more time with Helga's father and Klaus, he turned to Helga and gave her a short, almost desperate hug. He climbed into the front passenger seat. His eyes focused on Helga as they drove through the opened gate. Turning the corner, he immediately lost sight of her. A lost and forlorn feeling swept over him. He tasted despair on his tongue; it was a metallic, strange taste.

Barely ten kilometres west of Schweinfurt the proposed plan nearly came to a frightful end. German troops on their way to the western front were stuck in a bottleneck traffic jam due to war-damaged roads. Herman Berger, eager to get this trip behind him, almost collided with a retreating military vehicle. One of its occupants, a battalion leader drinking water from an aluminum cup, spilled the water all over his uniform when his driver came to a full stop to avoid the civilian vehicle. Already annoyed by the traffic jam, the officer jumped out of his vehicle and in typical German military fashion demanded to know whom he was shouting at. Herman Berger, his heart pounding, was deathly scared. According to plan, Tom was to feign sleep if stopped. Herman in turn would

provide details about his very tired nephew, just home from the eastern front on a furlough. The near collision, however, made it difficult for Tom to act as if he were sleeping.

“*Sind Sie blind...*What are you up to, driving at this speed?” the officer started to shout at Herman. Luckily, at that precise moment, another army vehicle pulled up alongside. “*Entschuldigen Sie bitte Herr Oberleutnant*, the problem is solved, traffic is flowing freely again.”

“*Machen Sie eine Staubfahne, aber bitte mit mehr Vorsicht.*”

The lieutenant shouted at Herman Berger as he climbed back into his vehicle. Almost sick to his stomach, Herman Berger carefully drove away.

Tom offered him a cigarette, hoping to calm his nerves. Both smoked in silence. Communication was difficult. Herman Berger spoke no English, and Tom, who had started to understand High German, had difficulty understanding Mr. Berger’s Frankonian dialect.

Once out in the country with no traffic around them, both relaxed. When the odd car or truck passed, Tom as planned pretended to sleep.

Road conditions slowed them down considerably. Four hours later they approached the little village. Now it was just a matter of finding the road along the river Rhein and then heading south. After several detours, caused by war-damaged roads, they found a road that ran along the east side of the river.

Once outside the town’s boundary, Herman pulled over. Tom quickly said goodbye and was out of sight by the time Herman Berger had a chance to turn the car around. Some ten minutes earlier, realizing how close they were to the river, they had shaken hands and said goodbye, each in his native tongue. Not understanding the words but fully understanding the importance of their own positions, they wished each other well.

Herman Berger’s ride home was uneventful; he had four jerry cans of gasoline with him, as well as some sandwiches Helga had prepared for the journey. Now alone, the danger behind him, he ate the sandwiches with gusto, followed by a well-deserved cigarette.

Tom, wanting to survey the area, sat by the river for the rest of the day. Leaning or sitting against a tree, he positioned himself so he could see the road as well as keeping an eye on the river. When traffic approached he hid by ducking behind the tall grass. Twice German military vehicles drove by in northerly direction.

Shortly after the sun went down Tom relaxed, planning to watch the activities on both sides of the river for a couple of hours before attempting to cross over. The bridge to the north was damaged and not passable; although close to town, there was no ferry to be seen in either direction. He was hungry and ate the last of his sandwiches.

His thoughts were with Helga as he fell asleep for a short period. Suddenly awake he checked his watch, realizing he had slept for a little over two hours. Across the river, sounds of war broke the silence every so often. Now there was also steady traffic, mostly heading south.

A colony of German military trucks stopped barely 100 metres south of him. With halted breath, Tom watched the soldiers, prepared to leave his hiding place and disappear into the water should they come closer. A couple of minutes later, their bladders relieved, the young soldiers climbed back into their trucks and drove on to an uncertain future. Tom remembered one of Helga’s sayings: “So young, so naive, so brave, so alive, so dead, so what?”

Having rested for a couple of hours, he felt it was time to cross the river before daylight would break. Slowly he made his way across. The strong current forced him to drift in order to conserve energy. An inflated inner tube from Helga’s bicycle,

wrapped around his upper body, compensated for the extra clothing.

Almost to the minute, as he was slipping into the water, Helga was on her knees at home praying to the holy mother to protect Tom on his journey. Her mother had given her the beautiful hand-carved statue for her fourteenth birthday. The beautifully adorned Mary with the infant Jesus cradled in her arms had a serene smile on her face. Helga was hoping that Mary the mother of Jesus would listen to her prayer: “*Heilige Maria*, please protect Tom on his journey and bring him home safe.” Just to give added importance to her request she recited several Hail Marys.

Her world, already in ruins, now lost even more meaning. The farm, particularly the room in the basement, became a shadowy and lonely place. The moment Tom left, a dark cloud had descended; it left her with an ominous feeling. She missed him terribly and was afraid she would never see him again.



Chapter 16

Tom’s letter finally arrived. His parents and sister were overjoyed. The letter made its rounds and was read repeatedly. The news travelled quickly all the way to New York City. Soon a reporter from the *New York Times* knocked on the Williams’ door to investigate more about Tom’s miraculous survival and his subsequent recovery—in a German home, no less. A story like this would no doubt boost circulation. Mr. Williams, however, was not anxious to talk to the reporter. Tom mentioned in his letter that he did not want to share details, fearing that if the letter was intercepted, the Berger family would have to pay a hefty price.

“I don’t have very much to say to you, young man, except our son appears to be safe and we thank God.”

“Is he still with this German family? Do you know his whereabouts? How long he will have to stay there, or is he already on his way back? Are his injuries serious?”

“I told you we don’t have any more information, other than he survived the forced landing and he seems to be in good hands.”

“Are the Germans your son is staying with American sympathizers?”

“I am sorry; I simply don’t have any answers for you. All we can tell you is Tom is in safe hands and hopefully he will be back home real soon.”

“Please take my card and call me as soon as you hear from your

son. Our readers are very interested in hearing Tom's story...we all love to share a positive story, considering so many of our boys will never come home." Handing his card to Tom's father, the young reporter left reluctantly.

A brief and concise telegram from Tom's commanding officer arrived in late October. "Tom arrived safe in Britain; he might be home for Thanksgiving."

Tom's father, educated and raised in the Episcopalian faith, was nevertheless not a zealous Christian. His approach to life and spirituality were anchored in having a simplistic faith in something greater than himself. Going to church was as much a social commitment as it was an attempt to seek answers to a deeper quest, namely the purpose of existence; nevertheless his lukewarm Christian creed did not jeopardize his belief in a higher order. In fact his trust in God was best expressed by the scriptural text "*Whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap*" (Galatians 6:7, KJV). Relying on the land for a living made this a logical directive. To him God manifested himself daily when the sun came up over the hills, bringing new hope for a better day.

Overall, he was an unassuming man; God was infinite and consequently beyond his grasp. Time permitting, amongst close friends he did however enjoy philosophizing about life and the purpose of man's incredibly short existence. Many evenings he discussed endless possibilities with his old friend Mr. Chen concerning man's place in a world seemingly gone mad. As far as organized religion, he reasoned it was sheer foolishness to profess that a born into or, worse, indoctrinated religious system was the only stairway to heaven. Surely God's compassion was significantly greater than man's foolishness to cling obstinately to narrow-minded homespun beliefs. It was this awareness that stopped him from being a devoted believer. Spirituality was ultimately more appealing than doctrinal religion; besides, the proverb "As you shall

sow so shall you reap," which his friend Mr. Chen called karma, gave rise to the question why Christ had to die on the cross for the sins of the human race. The plausible and time-tested characteristics of karma were a sound and common sense ordinance to him. He almost never discussed his thoughts with his family, or for that matter with his minister. Only old Tom was privy to these thoughts or questions. Recognizing, questioning, or worse, challenging the church on the subject of Christ's death on the cross would eventually force him to leave the church for good. This step however was too radical for his nature; besides, he firmly believed that the essence of Christ's message to do unto others as you would want them to do unto you was central to living a compassionate, spiritual life.

Again he was alone at home when the telegram arrived. For a second time he plunged to his knees, this time though with a prayer of thanksgiving. Tears of joy were mixed with tears of thanksgiving. It was still two weeks to Thanksgiving when the telegram arrived. In the Williams' household Thanksgiving was always a joyful occasion; however this year the meaning was illuminated tenfold.

Tom's mother started to prepare food and baked goods several days before the holiday. The day finally arrived, and the house was filled with the wonderful aromas of homemade pies, roast turkey, pudding and fruit. All of the fruits and vegetables came from their own garden.

There was a mood of thankfulness, not unlike a new birth in a family. The house was decorated with sheaves of wheat and barley. Flowers adorning every nook and cranny and fruit, pumpkins and colourful branches displayed on every windowsill gave the place a festive, almost sacred look.

Years ago, Tom's father had learned from an Italian immigrant how to make wine. Some years it was better than others;

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nevertheless it was always inspiring when the first bottle was finally opened. This year he took extra care; he wanted to have the best wine on hand for Tom's homecoming.

A turkey, kept in a small pen for fear of it getting too much exercise, was hopefully big and plump by the time Thanksgiving rolled around. The turkey, fed three times a day and not aware of its unfortunate role in this day of celebration, seemed perfectly happy, proving ignorance is bliss in certain situations.

As children, Tom and his sister always felt sorry for the turkey's fate. Once Thanksgiving rolled around and the enticing aroma of a turkey roasting in the oven drifted through the house, the agony of the turkey's demise went away bite by bite.

As Tom and Shirley got older, they however convinced their parents to purchase a turkey instead of fattening their own. It seemed less cruel. For this Thanksgiving however, a turkey kept in a small pen in the backyard as in previous years happily consumed three square meals a day.

Thanksgiving was not only a happy time in the Williams' household. All of America was exuberant that their boys and girls were coming home.



Chapter 17

Skepticism came first, then stubborn resistance. Gradually, though, the awareness of approaching doom was evident across Germany. In spite of this knowledge, Hitler's Youth, fourteen, fifteen and sixteen years young, wasted their lives in a fierce battle they could never win. To refuse meant shame, and in some instances children were hanged by the neck by misguided evil underlings, branded as traitors to the Fatherland.

Germany, birthplace of Goethe, Nietzsche, Kant, Schopenhauer, Hegel, Hesse, Mann, was reduced to barbarism. Germany hardened and descended into hell as children's blood was recklessly spilled in brutal rituals.

The dream shared by millions of Germans during the early war years—when German soldiers took Holland in five days, captured half of Belgium in six days, and pushed the French Second Army, crossing the river Meuse—died with a whimper. The confidence in Hitler during the 1930s was buried in unmarked graves scattered across Europe, Africa and Russia.

History repeated itself; Germany was again under enemy control. This time, though, the conquerors came from far away. American Ozark infantrymen were celebrating Thanksgiving in bombed-out German homes in the town of Waurichen. Young men far from home, called into action at the tail end of this

European war, saved by providence, were posing as heroes to the cameras for folks back home.

Stalin, true to his brutish character, with ample encouragement from Roosevelt and Churchill, unleashed the final chapter in obliterating Hitler's Third Reich. From the east, 20 armies, 6,000 tanks and some 8,000 aircraft slowly made their way toward Germany. Dog-tired German soldiers offered a courageous resistance. The brute strength in numbers, however, crushed all opposition. The Allies conveniently closed their eyes to Stalin's ruthless undertaking. Russian soldiers were now only a couple of weeks from Berlin. Most German cities, already reduced to rubble, offered a bleak look into the future. The villainous blanket slaughter in the city of Dresden by American and English bombers however was still three months away. One hundred and thirty thousand civilians, many of them children, died in two nights of bombing. Years later, British, American, and French historians pointed out that the brutal and unnecessary bombing of Dresden was just as satanic as Germany's concentration camps. For reasons conveniently forgotten there is no large international ongoing memoir of this particular war crime as there is for all the inhuman deeds committed by Hitler and his henchmen.

Tom did not make it home for Thanksgiving; he decided to celebrate amongst American and British aviators in England. His crossing of the river Rhine had been uneventful. Once again beneficial fortune was on his side. As he drifted downstream and came closer to the west bank of the river, he heard the unmistakable drawl of a Texan, shouting orders to someone. Tom's heart was pounding as he tried to get to shore as quickly as possible. With two sets of clothing, it was truly a gruelling task. Thank God for Helga's foresight—the inflated inner tube was a live saver. Fighting the current was a great deal easier with the tube wrapped around his upper body. Once on the other side, as soon as he was out of

the water, he got rid of his German military uniform. He cautiously scampered through the bushes back toward where he had heard the American soldiers.

His entrance was almost comical. Fighting his way through the trees and underbrush to reach a large clearing, he was all of a sudden in the middle of, and surrounded by, American infantrymen. They were flabbergasted. Where did this waterlogged flyboy all of a sudden come from? Tom, not wasting any time, at once started talking to the nearest soldier, asking him where his commanding officer was. He was concerned that the soldiers might take him for a German in an American uniform.

The lieutenant, a young farm boy from Oregon, immediately offered Tom some dry clothes to change into. Later, over coffee and a Lucky Strike cigarette, he would say repeatedly, "Well, I'll be darned," as Tom explained the last few weeks and how he finally crossed the river Rhein. When it came to his whereabouts and exact location, he avoided going into details.

The next morning he hitched a ride to Paris, where he caught a flight back to England. Once in England, time slowed to a crawl; military bureaucracy moved slowly. It gave him ample time to go back over the last few weeks. Inexplicably he felt his mind was playing pranks on him. Germany seemed far away one moment, yet the next moment Helga was the only reality. The entire episode of crash-landing his airplane seemed rather remote. Now and then, he felt like he awoke from a slippery and mysteriously elusive dream. A shadowy state of subconscious interaction plagued his sleep and burdened his waking hours, almost being pulled, or shoved, towards a cursory alien and very different phantom world. Waking from these dreams, he felt confused and powerless. Combat-ready once more, he realized it was time to decide his future. His status as pilot demanded that he get ready for action; his heart, however, told him a different story. His stay in Germany,

the many hours discussing war's role in men's disputes, made him realize war was not only primitive but also very counterproductive to lasting peace. Recognizing his dilemma, he was confused, yet anxious, where it would take him.

They were days when he thanked God for the British. They had a matter-of-fact manner about them that comforted Tom. "Stiff upper lip, chaps...You are a soldier—your feelings are your own; we all have our own feelings...times are hard, old chap. Cheerio and God bless the queen...let's get this bloody war over with and we can all bloody well go home."

Tormented and beleaguered by his thoughts, Tom eventually accepted the cause for his turmoil. Not knowing how to face his immediate future was the crux of his state. On the one hand, he was fully aware that there was still a war to fight and he was well enough to fly more missions. On the other hand, the rules he so reverently believed in prior to his ordeal in Germany became vague, argumentative and exceedingly suspect.

The way he imagined the world prior to his crash landing was now difficult to rejuvenate. An eternal question that plagued the minds of man since time eternal was now challenging him. Finally, the question solidified: Should he imagine the world to suit his long-standing beliefs, or should he organize his beliefs to suit the realities of what he experienced? Now he knew the reason for not wanting to go home for Thanksgiving. For the first time in his life, he was confused. Facing his parents and sister in this state of mind was simply not an option. Moreover, he was out-and-out surprised that he missed Helga more than his parents or his sister. This awareness made him happy and confused at the same time. In fact, it added weight to his already puzzled mind. The recognition that someone he had known for such a short period was capturing all of his thoughts came as a total surprise, almost a fright.

Not by any stretch of the imagination did he not look forward going home. He simply was at loss to explain to his family, in particular to his dad, that war and being an air force pilot was not important any more.

His new squadron leader, a Canadian by the name of John, a teacher prior to war, gave him plenty of time to sort things. Tom was nevertheless reluctant to share his innermost thoughts. The squadron leader had left a young bride in Toronto for the opportunity to do some serious flying. He understood the complexities of life's decisions, and consequently he did not ask Tom any questions.

The British debriefing officer, though, was a bit annoyed with Tom not wanting to talk about the Berger family in more detail. "Old chap, take a couple of days off. Visit the English countryside and find yourself some English lassie while we arrange transportation for you to spent a couple of weeks with your folks back home. On your return I expect a detailed written report from you."

Tom saluted and left his office. The report never arrived in England. Alas, ultimately fate asked for it again, this time from the USAF in Savannah, Georgia.

Thanksgiving was a boisterous affair at the Nuthampstead base, home of the U.S. Eighth Air Force, 398th Bombardment Group. Almost everybody got drunk, and on Saturday, a dance was held in one of the empty hangars. Single girls and lonely war brides came from miles around. Much to his chagrin, Tom was hailed a hero by many of his flying buddies. There was no shortage of young and willing women; war had a way of sweeping away minutiae and etiquette. A pretty redhead named Lisa from a nearby village, looking for a break in her tedious existence, asked Tom for a dance. Having heard rumours about Tom's episode, she kept questioning him about his German experience while pressing her curves as tight as possible into Tom's body. The warm, sensuous body felt

gratifying. Breathing in her feminine fragrance eased his troubled state of mind. Her constant chatter, however, spoiled the moment and made him realize how much he missed Helga, and in addition, his mind was on the upcoming trip back home.

Polite, somewhat absent-minded, he escorted her back to her table after only two dances and left the dance soon thereafter.

A bench close to the runway became a secure haven until the early hours of the morning. Thanks to his lambskin flight jacket, he stayed warm. He felt absent minded, yet listening to the music and laughter from the nearby hangar helped him to solidify a clear-cut conviction. Seemingly out of nowhere thoughts about his future started to coalesce. Now he was eager to go home and see his father, whose advice he respected.

The next morning he requested a four-week leave. It was immediately granted. His wing commander arranged for Tom to get a seat on the next flight to the U.S.

A DC-4 heading west, across the pond, left the same afternoon to pick up spare parts from Boeing's factory plant #2 in Seattle, Washington, for damaged B-17 bombers. Tom managed to get a seat right behind the cockpit. On takeoff, the sound of the four Pratt and Whitney 2000 engines caused Tom, for the first time in a long time, to remember the joy of flying. The roar of the climbing engines was like a recital to his ears. He knew aviation would always be an integral part of his life. Once the DC-4 reached operating height and levelled off, the steady purr and gentle drone of the four engines put Tom to sleep. In his dreams, he searched for Helga.



Chapter 18

Dieter Berger, the highly decorated veteran, hardened by almost three years of service in U-boats and recently promoted to *kapitänleutnant* (lieutenant commander), was known amongst Admiral Dönitz's inner circle as a man whose first and last words were dedication to the Fatherland and his fellow comrades. He was revered amongst his mates as a superbly skilled officer. His almost mysterious ability to escape the incessant bombardment of depth charges that were killing young sailors at an alarming rate in other U-boats was legendary. Being a loner by nature did not stop him from lending a hand to any sailor, regardless of rank, when in need.

Outranked by many of his peers in the inner circle, Dieter Berger was a decision-maker when push came to shove. He rarely spoke, but fully aware that his ability to outmanoeuvre death might never be taught at a boardroom table, every person in the room would pay attention when he did speak. It was his inner voice that told him what to do—to move, to sit in hiding, to let his sub slide to depths that would stress veterans. His remarkable endurance was legendary. During World War II Germany built 1,170 U-boats; 863 of them became operational and a staggering 751 were lost in action. Out of 40,000 U-boat sailors, only 10,000 came home. To be part of Dönitz's prestigious Wolf Pack was a hefty price for young men to pay.

The U-boat that Helga's brother commanded was leaving the Bay of Biscay on the coast of France for Bremerhaven, Germany. The *kapitänleutnant* was told all the way from the top to have a thirty-day recuperation-and-rest period; it was high time, after being at sea without lengthy shore leave for over one year now.

His boat was to pick up a replacement lieutenant commander in Bremerhaven and carry on to meet other U-boats off the coast of Spain to intercept a convoy of merchant ships. Kapitänleutnant Berger was not pleased with having to stay away for thirty days; he did however look forward to going home. It was fourteen months since he had visited the family farm. His furlough all arranged, he eagerly looked forward to spending some time with his father and sister.

German High Command, showing appreciation for his leadership and lengthy duty at sea, had a driver waiting for him at Bremerhaven. The young *fähnrich zur see* (midshipman, cadet), on leave for injuries sustained on his last mission, was enthralled to meet someone of Berger's reputation and status. Here was one of Dönitz's wolf packs, a survivor of many sea battles, not to mention the continuously savage North Atlantic. He was a true German hero, admired and respected by everybody who knew him. Surprisingly, to the young sailor, the "sea wolf" was a quiet and conscientious model officer, unlike many of the incredible boisterous submarine officers he had met in the past.

"Herr Kapitänleutnant, welcome home. I am Cadet Karl Wagner, and I have the distinct honour to be your escort and chauffeur for as long as you require my services. It is truly an honour to be of service to you. Please let me take your suitcase and make yourself comfortable in the car."

"Bitte keinen aufwand, Cadet, Ich helfe mit den Gepäck dann sind wir schneller weg von all diese Menschen." ("Please, no fuss, cadet. Let me help with the luggage; this way we will get away quicker from all these people.")

With this, he waved the photographers aside. The young cadet, having stored the luggage, obediently drove away quickly. An SS officer wanting to use the occasion of a hero's welcome to his advantage was somewhat upset with the sudden departure.

Kapitänleutnant Berger, however, was not in the mood to appease an SS officer. His thoughts were with his boat, his crew and the new commander.

The trip home was in two stages. In Frankfurt, Dieter dropped off a collection of letters entrusted to him by a U-boat captain he had met at Bremerhaven to forward to the captain's wife. The captain's wife, her hair tied back in a knot, apprehensively opened the door. The clean white apron complementing her slender figure was hastily removed as she recognized U-boat brass on her doorstep. Shocked by the unannounced visit, she was momentarily aghast as Dieter announced himself. Dieter's mannerisms and easygoing introduction, however, told her the visit was not what she first suspected. Deeply relieved, she pulled herself together and invited him in. The young cadet was to wait for the lieutenant commander in the car.

In the living room, the captain's wife served coffee and placed a bottle of cognac on the sideboard. Notwithstanding the relaxed setting, Dieter felt awkward. The many questions asked about her husband and his missions were simply impossible to answer. Dieter wondered if she was not aware that those on the U-boats suffered awful privations and daily agonizing moments wondering if each day would be the day to die. Surely, she must be aware of the statistics.

"Is it true the Allies are gaining the upper hand?"

Ignoring specific questions, he assured her that her husband was okay. Moreover, he was looking forward to coming home very soon. Several uncomfortable silences made her finally understand that it was not easy for the lone wolf to talk about war. Slowly the

cognac animated the conversation, and one hour later the lieutenant commander left, knowing he was too vague in his answers to her questions—questions he tried to avoid, almost fearing the answers himself.

They stayed overnight just outside the city in a little guest-house, enjoying a home-cooked meal specially prepared for such a distinguished guest. The young cadet made sure the innkeeper and his wife appreciated the important guest at their *gasthaus*. The innkeeper, a veteran of the First World War, had recently lost a son on the Russian front. When he learned the *kapitänleutnant* had lost a brother on the same front, he could not do enough for the two sailors. Two bottles of the best local white wine were placed in their room, compliments of the management. Dieter ordered the timid young cadet to take one of the bottles home to enjoy with his family.

They left very early in the morning. The innkeeper, however, was already up, and the smell of real coffee was inviting them both downstairs to the dining room. With a sound “Heil Hitler,” they departed right after breakfast.

A few hours later, when the Mercedes Benz V 170 Cabrio-Limousine with a *kriegsmarine* officer and cadet pulled into Dieter’s village and stopped in front of the Bergers’ farm, several villagers, openly gawking, made sure the whole village knew within minutes that “Der Berger’s Dieter” and a guest had arrived. Here, the lieutenant commander was only a local soldier coming home. A villager familiar with the insignias and stripes of the *kriegsmarine* quickly enlightened the crowd; a murmur of excitement went through the bystanders. A submarine lieutenant commander was certainly big news, especially someone from the small village.

Helga, hearing the commotion outside their eight-foot-high gate, opened the smaller pedestrian gate and recognized her long awaited brother immediately. Running, flying outside, she jumped

up to Dieter’s neck, tears in her eyes, holding him so tight that Dieter almost could not breathe.

“Dieter, what a lovely surprise! Father thought you might be home real soon. I am so happy to see you. Father, Father,” she shouted, “Dieter has arrived!”

Holding him by her hand and completely ignoring the young cadet, she pulled him over to the stable where Father and Klaus were doing their chores.

“Helga, this is Cadet Karl Wagner, my, chauffeur and—”

“*Ach mein lieber Gott, hier bist Du wirklich, komm her und lass Dich grüssen!*” With these words, Mr. Berger interrupted the introduction of the cadet and rushed to his son. Holding him by his shoulders he intently looked at his son’s face, trying to hide the turmoil and emotions that watered his eyes.

“*Vater grüss Dich, Du hast a paar mehr graue Haar aber sonst siehst genau so aus wie ich Dich es letzte mal gesehn hab.*” (“Father, greetings. You have a few more grey hairs but other than this you look the same as the last time I saw you.”) With this, he gave his father a short but solid hug.

“Father, Helga, ah...and here is Klaus. Grüss Gott Klaus, may I introduce Cadet Karl Wagner. He has been assigned to me for a few days as my chauffeur.”

“Not for a few days, but as long as you need me, Herr Kapitänleutnant. These are my orders right from the old man himself,” the cadet rightly added.

“Wow, what an important brother I have! Come in, come in. Klaus, would you kindly get Dieter’s luggage?”

Once inside the house, Dieter apologized. He would only be a minute. With this he rushed, taking four steps at one time, up to his room.

Closing the door behind him, he immediately sat on the large windowsill, his eyes and mind feasting on the sizeable and still well-

kept garden. Here was his childhood paradise, still the same as always. Unfortunately he realized, with a thump of his heart, that the garden looked smaller the older he got. Thankfully, the ravages of war had not spoiled his Shangri-la.

The many hours in this sheltered, magical childhood paradise, forever etched in his mind, salvaged his sanity when the mind-boggling small breathing space in the U-boat would almost get the better of him. Resting on his bunk in his tiny cabin, his eyes closed, he travelled back in time, and for a few minutes he was a young boy in his parents' garden. Whenever his nerves demanded a break from the hardship of submarine warfare, he relied on this mental exercise.

"Dieter, where did you get to?" he heard Helga call him.

"Let him be, Helga. He is checking out the garden; he will be back in a moment. Don't you remember, the last time he was home he did the same?"

Just then, Dieter came downstairs. Helga again rushed towards him, almost tripping as she hugged him. "Dieter, how long are you going to be home this time? I do hope it isn't such a short period as the last time."

Glancing at the young cadet still standing in the hallway, she quickly changed the subject. "Dieter, introduce us to your driver. He might otherwise think of us as common village folks." She laughed, pulling him back into the living room.

"Well, as I said earlier, Cadet Wagner has been assigned to me as my escort and chauffeur while I am on leave. We never met before; however, we had the opportunity to spend the last two days together. Karl is from Bamberg, and I told him that he could go home and see his folks and come back in a week's time. Cadet, this is my father and my sister, Helga, and our *knecht*, Klaus."

The cadet, slightly embarrassed, greeted everybody with a solid handshake and a sound Heil Hitler and immediately moved again to the background.

"Dieter, surely you are staying longer than just a week." The father, anxiety in his voice, picked up the conversation.

"Father, I was told to take a four-week leave. However, I am not sure that my conscience allows me to be away for such a long period. Let's take one week at the time, and we will see what comes next—"

Helga quickly interrupted. "Dieter, this silly war can go on without you...you have given already way too much of your time."

"Helga, we must all do whatever it takes to bring final victory to the fatherland."

"Dieter, please don't talk like this. I have already lost a brother, and I couldn't face losing you as well. Besides, is it not the law that you, as the only son, or surviving son, do not have to take part in this good-for-nothing war any longer? Surely you of all people must know the war is lost, and thankfully this madness will be over soon. Besides, you are needed here on the farm; Father is getting too old. Why you would want a role in this ridiculous, awful war, I don't understand. I couldn't stand to lose another brother!" Helga almost blared out.

"Children, please, let's sit down and have a drink and something to eat. You must both be hungry. We can talk about these things later," the father interjected in a conciliatory tone.

"Oh, Dieter, you have no idea how we looked forward to you coming home," Helga added in an appeasing tone.

The cadet stood by the kitchen window talking to Klaus, hoping not to be drawn into the conversation. His opinion about fighting a war that was already lost was much closer to Helga's point of view than that of his superior. Being with the lieutenant commander for only two days was, however, sufficient to realize that it was not wise to discuss Germany's position in front of his superior. The cadet was entirely aware that the *kapitänleutnant*, this highly decorated hero and stalwart believer in the Third Reich, was

a firm believer that Germany should never give up. Briefed prior to meeting the *kapitänleutnant* on the lieutenant commander's resolute philosophy regarding a soldier's duty, the cadet realized that being on the losing end in this war was even more reason for the *kapitänleutnant* to remember the individual oath given to the *führer*.

Taking advantage of a pause in the living room, the cadet captured the moment and asked the commander if it would be okay if he were to continue on to Bamberg, as it was only a couple of hours from the village.

"Yes, yes, of course, but join us for a bite to eat and then you may leave."

"Thank you, Herr Kapitänleutnant, however your family has not seen you for a long time and to be truthful I would love to get home before it gets dark. With your permission, may I leave?"

"Of course, I understand you are anxious to see your family. Take the car. I have no need for it, but return in a week's time, and I will give you further instruction."

"Heil Hitler." The young cadet smartly saluted, his heels touching, giving a cheerful smile to Helga as he left.

"Heil Hitler," they all responded. Helga's *Heil* was barley audibly.

Once the cadet left, the old man went down to the basement. Coming back he waved a bottle of French cognac, as if to say "welcome home" once again. It was the last of six bottles procured just before the war started.

"Come to the living room and let's sit down and have a 'welcome home' drink. I have saved this last bottle for your homecoming. We have so much to tell you, Dieter. I am so happy to see you. You...you...will be surprised and hopefully agree when we tell you who our guest was this summer."

Several days prior to Dieter's arrival Helga's father had brought

the subject up. "Dieter must find out about Tom as soon as he arrives. I don't want him to hear the news from anybody else."

Fully anticipating Dieter's reaction to the forthcoming news, Klaus glimpsed longingly at the cognac and reluctantly left. He mumbled something about having to check livestock in the barn and made a hasty retreat.

Dieter, a master of human behaviour and body language, having lived for the better part of three years with thirty-six to forty-six men in tiny submarines, knew immediately that something of importance was coming his way. However, never in his wildest dreams would he imagine what he was about to find out.



Chapter 19

A leisurely forty-minute walk from the Williams' homestead, off the main road, picturesquely placed in a luscious little valley, was an abandoned schoolhouse. The locals called it Hungry Hollow School; its real name was lost over time. It was one of the earliest schools in the district, and no official record as to the actual date of construction was available. The date on the school bell, however, suggested the school was built on or about 1763. Long before there was a village, a few early settlers, consisting mostly of farmers, loggers and trappers, built the school to provide an education for their children, something most of them never had themselves. Tom's grandmother, Elizabeth, was a teacher there for several years. Now the old schoolhouse was abandoned, and an unreadable 'for sale' sign was hanging crookedly from a neglected fence. A larger schoolhouse built many years ago, centrally located in the village, took its place.

Hungry Hollow's schoolyard was overgrown with weeds, giving the whole place a noticeably run-down look. The inside of the schoolhouse, however, was still in reasonably good shape. Solid stone walls protected the interior. The pride and joy was its school bell, donated by an English gentleman, a member of the gentry named Halliburton. He had been brought up among the aristocracy and wealth of England and educated by private tutors trying to inspire him to be a leader and warden of England. While he was

leader of sorts, being a warden was way too cumbersome. He would rather travel the world. One of his favourite travel destinations was the Catskill Mountains. Several times during his life he took pleasure in visiting the natural beauty of this rugged part of the new world. Cherishing its abundant wildlife, he would hunt for fowl during the day. In the evening amongst locals he was always a welcome guest. His laughter was hearty and contagious, his appetite and thirst ferocious. "Drinks for all" was customary. Being of exceptional size, particularly around his abdomen, never stopped him from going on extended hikes. Walking up and down hidden pathways and side roads in search for wild turkey, pheasant and grouse became a daily pleasure.

On one of his visits, he stumbled, resulting in a severely sprained right ankle. Immediately his foot swelled up like a balloon; luckily, he had two local hunting guides with him. They applied cold water from a nearby mountain stream to his grotesquely swollen ankle. Making him as comfortable as possible, they told him to sit and wait while getting additional help. One hour later, they arrived with a stretcher and two more local farmers. Slowly the four Samaritans carried him to the nearest settlement, where a veterinarian administered first aid.

On their way to the hamlet, the four helpers, sweating like marathon runners on a hot summer's day, stopped at the Hungry Hollow school construction site to take a well-deserved break. The English gentleman, being of an inquisitive nature, disregarded his injury for the moment and immediately asked several questions regarding the purpose of this building, considering it was built in the middle of nowhere. When he learned it was a school, he at once offered to participate in the financing, as a token of appreciation to his helpers and the local country folks. True to his word he donated a very generous sum of fifty pounds and instructed the locals not to purchase a bell for the steeple,

promising he would ship a school bell from England as soon as he returned back home.

Six months later a beautiful bell arrived in New York harbour, made by none other than London's famous White Chapel Foundry.

The inscription on the bell read as follows:

1763

May the sound of this bell remind us compassion
amongst men starts with an unwavering faith in God and
our duty to teach children right from wrong!

Several generations listened to the majestic sound several times a day for miles around. These days, though, the bell was silent.

Years after the school closed, occasionally hunters and farmers would pause for a moment from their daily chores, listening and wondering who was ringing the bell. The clear, penetrating, yet pleasant sound shortly interrupted the tranquillity of the surrounding hills, as if to remind folks of its charisma, so carelessly forsaken.

Mostly children, gaining access to the school through an open basement window, activated the bell. Ringing the bell was a test of bravery. The word spread, and before long kids from neighbouring counties would hike to Hungry Hollow to prove their courage. A few folks added suspense, claiming the school was haunted. A young girl, so were the rumours, had died at school, and apparently the cause of death was never explained. Local historians, however, rejected this claim, as there was no evidence to be found anywhere in the sparse records of the school.

In his early teens, Tom Williams and his friends, spurred by peer pressure, also demonstrated their bravery every so often. At the age of fifteen Tom and his buddy Jimmy O'Brian and their mutual (more or less) girlfriend Sally Robinson were there together

for the last time. Tom, never shy to confirm his position as a leader, immediately climbed through the basement window, while Jimmy and Sally waited anxiously for the sound of the bell. Tom, showing off, rang the bell for five long minutes. Jimmy later claimed it was more like twenty minutes. Fully aware that he had to save face, Jimmy had to ring the bell at least once. Impatiently waiting for Tom to come back, he reluctantly climbed through the basement window and quickly made his way through the almost dark interior of the school. Once in the vestibule, where the bell's rope hung through an opening in the floor of the steeple, he only rang the bell once and hightailed back. The trio ran through the forest as if the devil himself was after them. Once a safe distance away from the school, they stopped and broke into hysterical laughter. Being exhausted from running and all the laughter did not stop Tom from bragging about his supposed daring act in front of Sally.

"Jimmy, what a chicken, ringing the bell only once!"

"Sure, you ring the bell for twenty minutes, and if I was to follow suit somebody would for sure catch me in the act...and no doubt you guys would be long gone. Besides, if I would have gone first and rang the bell as long as you did, you wouldn't even go in and try it once."

Sally, fourteen going on twenty, never showed fondness to either one, at least not in front of the other. She enjoyed being dazzled by Tom and Jimmy for the time being, realizing though that one day she would have to decide who would be her beau. Not wanting to take sides on this day, she kissed both spontaneously, very quickly, on their lips.

Later that day, Tom and Jimmy, being best of friends, solemnly agreed they would never fight about Sally. "Swear you will never be mad at me if Sally and I go steady?"

Jimmy, not daft, immediately replied, "I will, but you must also promise never to get mad at me if she picks me."

Tom immediately agreed. Life was full of adventure, untold expectations, and effortlessness between good friends.

Over the years, the novelty of ringing the bell wore off. Lately, however, much younger kids would from time to time go up to Hungry Hollow and resurrect the tradition.

When Tom arrived in Albany, New York, on a Friday morning, a week after Thanksgiving, his entire family, as well as Jimmy, Sally, and several of the village folks, were on hand to greet him as he stepped of the airplane. They all started to clap as Tom made his way down the portable steps pushed against the airplane. Tom felt slightly uncomfortable when he saw how many people were present. He was hoping only immediate family would be there. Everybody hugged him and shook his hand until he thought his arm would drop off. When it came to Sally's turn, she kissed him on his lips as she had so many years ago. Everybody present applauded again.

Finally the hullabaloo started to quiet down. Now the questions started.

"How was Germany? Who looked after you while you were convalescing? Are you going back to Germany?"

Shirley, as well as Sally, noticing Tom's awkwardness with the questions, finally commandeered him away from the crowd. Pretending to desire him all for themselves, they slowly moved him towards Shirley's fiancé's car, a 1942 dark green Nash. Everybody followed suit and piled into their cars. As previously agreed they would all drive home together, just like a procession, its hero in the centre.

Shirley's fiancé could not be part of the welcome party, as he was away on a course pertaining to his work. Tom slipped into the front beside his dad, who drove his future son-in-law's car. His mom, sister and granddad occupied the back seat. Sally drove back with Jimmy and several other friends.

The ride home was crammed with more questions. Shirley was leading the way. "Tom, in your letter you said that a German family took you in and cared for you. Tell us about this family. Why did they help you?"

One question led to another. Surrounded by his own family, Tom felt a weight had dropped from his shoulders. For the first time since leaving Germany he could share his story without leaving Helga out. Gradually he described in detail what led up to the crash landing and his subsequent recovery at the Bergers' farm. While he felt comfortable telling his story, not leaving Helga out, he still had difficulty revealing how he felt about his forthcoming role in the war. Amongst the chatter, he once again become conscious he needed to speak to his father before making his feelings known to everybody.

"Tom, you are something else. Being injured didn't stop you from meeting a *fräulin*," his sister quipped.

Turning slightly red, he answered, "Helga looked after me on a daily basis, and we became good friends."

"Is that all?" his sister continued.

Mrs. Williams, the perpetual peacemaker, quickly cut in. "Shirley, give him time. He will tell us all about Helga later."

After a short pause, unrelenting, Shirley continued. "Sally will be disappointed. Why only yesterday she told me how much she missed you and how she was looking forward to you coming home."

Tom, for a split second uncomfortable, wished Shirley would stop. His facial expression and body language alerted Mr. Williams, who with a sideways glance looked at Tom. "Tom, don't worry about a thing right now. Relax, and in a couple of days the world will look different again" was his gentle yet reliable advice.

Changing the subject, he continued. "Tom, how is the war going? Is it really coming to an end, as the papers tell us?"

Tom's thoughts drifted for the moment, wondering if his family and friends would understand how he felt. Was it wise to talk about the war at all? "We are winning, but it comes at a hefty price, not only for our own soldiers but for everybody involved in this...war"

He wanted to say "crazy war" but bit his tongue, not willing to share his feelings just yet. All at once, he experienced a powerful yearning for Helga. Tom's father, still in tune with his son's feelings, changed the conversation again, this time to family and friends in the village.

Aware of how his father noticed his hesitation to go into details regarding the war, Tom felt slightly awkward. The moment, however, passed quickly, as Tom joined the laughter when told how famous he was in the village. It seemed amusing to him, how people congregated in the village store to read his letters, learning firsthand how the war was going.

Sally, sitting next to Jimmy in the front of his car, with three friends in the back seat, remarked how good Tom looked in his uniform and how she looked forward to Saturday night, Tom's homecoming welcome party. She realized now was the right moment to reveal how she felt about Tom.

"I am so happy Tom is home. The truth is, I missed him terribly."

Aware of the triangle relationship since high school, the trio in the backseat waited for Jimmy's response. The momentary silence amplified Jimmy's awareness that it was up to him to comment; three pairs of eyes were staring at the back of his head. A quick glance at the rear-view mirror confirmed that six questioning eyes expected him to speak up. "Does that mean I am cut out?"

Sally, also waiting, did not lose a beat. "You are never out...you will be our best man and always our best friend."

Throughout their teenage years, she had been flirtatious with Tom and Jimmy alike, never really knowing where her heart would

take her. But the moment Tom stepped from the airplane, the years of uncertainty were over. Without hesitation, her beau came home. Although long coming, it was a decisive moment.

For miles around, friends and kinfolk came to Tom's welcome home dinner and dance. Tickets were priced merely to cover expenses, and the community hall was full to the rafters. Sally and Shirley, with help of several friends, had decorated the hall. The American flag was prominently displayed across the head table, befitting a hero's welcome. Shirley arranged the seating; Sally was sitting with Tom and his family.

Tom, weary and somewhat perplexed by all the fuss, nevertheless valued the efforts of the community and made his rounds to thank all his friends and relatives for coming out. Throughout the evening his thoughts ignored space and time. He missed Helga, wishing she could be there with him.

"Tom, you are not yourself; what's on your mind?" Sally asked, while dancing to Dinah Shore's hit "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To."

"Nothing, really. I guess it's being home again," he added, almost like an afterthought.

"Let's walk to Hungry Hollow, as we used to. It might do you a world of good to talk about your horrible experience in Germany, and perhaps you will feel better."

"It wasn't horrible. To be honest...if it wasn't for this German family helping me, I would have died over there."

A pivotal pause ensued. Sally, aware that Tom was preoccupied with his thoughts, waited.

"Sally, you have always been a good friend. Yes, I need to talk to you. Give me a couple of days to settle, and we can go for a leisurely walk up to Hungry Hollow and talk." Hoping to emphasize his words, Tom squeezed her hand.

"Yes, I would like that very much." Sally, blessed with an

uncanny sixth sense, had premonitions of having to hear unpleasant things. This, however, did not stop her from asking Tom for every other dance. Tom, not wanting to spoil Sally's lively mood, agreed.

Close to midnight, most folks started to leave. Some had to do chores very early in the morning; others left to not miss early mass. Saying good night to Tom and his family, all invited Tom to drop by in the near future. Tom's close friends, however, stayed well past midnight. Shortly after 1, Harry, the disc jockey, a friend since high school days, played once more "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To" as he was packing his records. Sally, who requested the song, made sure the last dance was hers. Cuddling up to Tom, she prized being in his arms. Tom, feeling slightly uncomfortable, was looking forward to going home.

The party was a huge success; folks recollected the occasion for years to come. Some of the locals, knowing Tom since childhood, noticed Tom's restlessness. On their way home they remarked, "Tom is not the same. He must have gone through a very difficult time over there. Let's just hope he'll get over it soon."

On their way home, Mr. Williams asked Tom if he was tired. If not, perhaps they could talk for a while.

"You have all day tomorrow. Let Tom sleep; he must be tired, with the time difference and all the excitement tonight," Tom's mother interrupted.

Tom, waiting for the opportunity to speak with his father, put his mom at ease. "Mom, I'm okay. I am not at all tired, and to be honest I would love to talk with Dad for a while."

Once home Mrs. Williams asked if there was anything she could get them. Perhaps hot chocolate? Both declined. She excused herself, aware that there were father-and-son things to discuss.

"I am off to bed. Goodnight. Don't be long; I am sure Tom must be tired." With this, she gently kissed Tom on his forehead.

"Tom, we are so happy to have you back with us." Giving her husband a kiss on his cheek, she went off to bed, bidding both a good night again.

Once alone, Mr. Williams lit earlier placed logs in the fireplace. Before long a roaring fire warmed the room. The temperature had dropped, winter was looming in the air, and soon the hills and valleys would shed their fall garments, sliding into a snow-white blanket. A brisk wind picked up speed, scattering the clouds. The moon spread a silver tinge across the hills and meadows.

Opening a bottle of homemade red wine, sipping slowly while appreciating its taste, Mr. Williams started to talk. "What is bothering you, Tom? I know something is. If you are ready to talk, I am ready to listen."

Tom was relieved that his father had brought up the subject. Thankful, and not at all surprised that his father was aware that something was bothering him, he looked into his father's eyes and answered, "Dad, in a nutshell, my biggest misgiving is going back to active duty. I am doubtful that we have a right to drop bombs on people who don't like this war any more than we do."

Expecting the unexpected, Mr. Williams immediately answered, "Tom, it is a natural feeling. A German family nurtured and kept you hidden at significant risk to themselves. You witnessed their despair...but Tom, surely you agree Hitler must be stopped. You have seen the evil of war first-hand."

"Yes I have...and that is precisely the problem. Killing innocent civilians, children and old folks is wrong. I guess I never thought about it before. Dad, you have no idea of the devastation our bombs create—"

"Tom, we didn't start the war. Hitler invaded Poland; then he dropped bombs on England, France, Europe and Russia. He declared war on America. Surely you must realize he is a despot, if not outright mad, to say the least."

“Dad, I am not defending Hitler, or for that matter the German people. My hesitation to go back to active duty is much deeper. I guess I do not know how to say it any other way. I am beginning to believe all common folks—here at home, in Germany, in Russia, in Japan and China, in fact all over the world—are fighting wars triggered by well-off and power-hungry manipulators. We, the little people, go to battle and die, for what? To make the rich richer and more powerful. Dad, without beating around the bush, I don’t want to play their games any more.”

The silence was altogether intense. Tom’s father, a man with a sincere desire for a better world, needed time to think. He sat slumped in his chair, head bowed as if in prayer, his left hand clasping his right shoulder and his right hand on his forehead. Deep in thought, he slowly formulated words that agreed with his thoughts.

“Tom, it is the intent of our hearts that matters—nothing more and nothing less. War never was a pleasant portrayal of human spirit, and surely, it never will be. Let us not judge quickly. We must be honest to examine, to challenge, the intent of our hearts when it comes to war...moreover, when it comes to living day by day. You are not responsible for other people’s action, or their objectives. Political affairs are at the best of times difficult to understand. It takes courage to have faith in our leaders. We can only hope, perhaps pray, that they see a larger and more clear-cut picture. We, the little people, as you call us, generally only catch sight of the very small part we are asked to play.”

Open to his father’s words, Tom all of a sudden remembered old Tom saying whenever someone’s action was suspect, “What is the intent of the heart?”

“The intent of the heart...isn’t that what old Tom used to say?”

“Yes, it is old Tom’s saying, and knowing old Tom as I do, he

says what he means and means what he says. The intent of our hearts is crucial when faced with making decisions that matter.”

Refilling their glasses, he changed the subject for the moment. “How do you like the wine? You remember the Italian lady who attended church in the village for a while? It was her husband who showed me how to make wine, using grapes all the way from California.”

“Its great wine, Dad. Don’t tell mom, but it beats the hot chocolate. You have to show me some day how to make wine.”

Adding a couple of logs to the fireplace, Mr. Williams, picking up the earlier conversation, continued. “Tom, it is almost 3 in the morning. In short, the intent of the heart is having the courage and hopefully the wisdom, with a little help from above, or within if we listen to our consciences, to arrive at a decision that ultimately empowers our lives. Go and visit old Tom. He would love it if you dropped by. He is much more qualified to expand on this topic. We can nonetheless talk more tomorrow. After breakfast, perhaps you could give me a hand to sort and cut last year’s wood. It should be good and dry by now, and winter is knocking on the door. We can talk while working.”



Chapter 20

There are moments in a person's life when absolutely nothing can prepare him or her for what lingers around life's next bend.

Dieter Berger, the highly decorated model officer, the unwavering pillar of German ideology, was genuinely stunned when Helga tried to justify Tom's stay at the farm. Ignoring Helga for the moment, he turned toward his father, his tone sarcastic and laden with accusation. His facial expression demonstrated confusion and frustration all at once. "Father, how could you allow this to happen?"

Mr. Berger and Helga were of course not surprised by Dieter's resentment. What startled them was his offensive tone of voice. Silent and rather shocked, they were at loss as to how to support their position.

Dieter, fuming and frustrated, continued, his tone now deliberate and cutting. "Father, are you not aware of the consequences of this hideous act of foolish chivalry? How am I to explain this? I, who demand total obedience from my crew, particularly when it comes to questions regarding the merits of this war—Father, I don't understand how you could allow this to happen."

The gloomy silence weighed heavily on everybody.

Cautiously, Mr. Berger finally answered, "Dieter, how could I question the moment? Besides, sometimes a moment seems like

eternity. The plane crash happened while we were cutting hay over on the lower five. Helga saw the American as a person in need of medical attention, and frankly so did I. Perhaps she saw your brother there, dying, no one to help...maybe she was hoping her actions would ease the pain. I do not know. I could not refuse her; your brother's death on the Russian front was too much to bear. Helga and I fear daily for your life. You ask why? Why, why, why do we help someone in need? Is this not our Christian duty?"

Now it was Dieter's turn to be silent. His silence however was not a sign of agreement, or worse capitulation; he was simply stunned, not at all prepared to agree with his father's excuse for this horrendous breach of security, nor with his sister's sentimental fancy.

Mr. Berger, misreading his silence, continued, hope in his voice. "Why are you not staying home? Have you not done enough? There is no need for you to go back. Am I to lose another son?"

Dieter still did not respond. His father, now confident his words were falling on fertile soil, looked straight at his son and spoke gently, a father giving advice to his son. "This war is almost over, Dieter. Stay home. The Americans are on the other side of the Rhine. It can't be long now, and this nonsense is coming to an end, thank God."

"Father, the war is not over. The Americans with their money and armaments are killing our soldiers." Trying to show respect for his father's plea, Dieter continued in a more consolatory, rational voice. "Father, you have committed a most serious war crime. Assisting the enemy—it is punishable by death, Father. I just don't understand how you could put us all at risk."

With a fatigued voice, almost whispering, as if speaking to no one in particular, he continued. "I am risking my live daily to

defend Germany. I also want this war to end. Father, you harboured an American pilot who hunts down our submarines and airplanes. Please, I don't want to hear any more. I...I...I never heard any of it..”

Helga was in tears by now. Silent, except for the odd sob, she watched the disastrous exchange between her brother and father. She knew her brother's words were true and fully grasped his predicament. While her heart went out to her brother, she knew on the other hand that she could never give up what she believed in. Walking up to Dieter, she grasped his hands, hoping to make him see her line of reasoning. Nervously she pleaded, “Blame me, Dieter. I made Father do it. He asked me not to get involved, but I begged him to let me take care of the injured pilot. I am guilty, not Father, but you might as well know I have no regrets. I am absolved from this insanity, this awful war, inasmuch as I helped a soldier go home to his family...”

Dieter, was surprised, calling to mind a little sister he loved. He fleetingly looked at Helga as if in agreement with her appeal. Helga, taking advantage optimistically, with newfound clarity and conviction, continued. “Never again will Tom be part in this frightful, insane war. I know he will never come back and bomb our cities or shoot down our airplanes. By the time he left, he scorned war as much as I do. Tom and I became good friends. We spoke for hours, thrashing out every aspect of this dreadful war, and you might as well know, we came to the conclusion that war can never bring lasting peace. Don't you see that our egos have been nourished, making us believe we are instrumental in creating a new world order, whereas in reality we are nothing but someone else's puppet? Don't you recognize the absolute madness of it all?”

Dieter, again himself, interrupted her by withdrawing his hands and waving his right hand, index finger extended, in her

face, as if scolding a child. He gave her a mocking smile. “Helga, please, must you also subject me to your naivety?”

Folding his hands behind his back, he started to pace the room without looking up. This lasted several minutes. Helga and her father remained silent. His scolding nevertheless hurt Helga, who was trying to understand her brother's point of view.

Someone pulling the manual bell on the courtyard door interrupted Dieter's stride. “Go and see who it is, Helga,” her father asked.

Helga walked out into the yard and opened the door. Two strangers dressed in grey suits, white shirts and brown ties, with greenish beige raincoats folded over their arms, stood there, giving the impression they owned the place. “Heil Hitler.”

Barely audible, Helga replied, “Heil Hitler.”

“Is this the Berger residence?” one of the men asked, flashing his Gestapo (Secret State Police) identification badge at her.

“Yes.”

“Müller, Gestapo. We would like to speak to you and everybody else who is living here.”

Without being invited, they sidestepped Helga and moved into the courtyard.

Helga's knees felt like buckling. She wanted to call Dieter or her father, but her voice gave out. Her thoughts raced. *Is it Tom? Did they capture him?*

Just then, Dieter stepped into the yard.

“Heil Hitler.” Both of the men saluted. Their faces showed no surprise when they saw a highly decorated submarine captain in front of them.

“Heil Hitler,” Dieter replied. He had overheard part of the conversation and realized who they were. Authoritatively, his expression stern, he asked them, “*Wie kann Ich Ihnen helfen, meine Herren?*” (“How can I help you gentlemen?”)

“Gestapo. We are here to question the Berger family.”

“You can start with me. I am *kapitänleutnant* Dieter Berger, adviser to Admiral Doenitz, and how can I be of help to you?”

“A routine question, that’s all, captain, just routine. An American airplane was shot down in the vicinity of the village and the pilot was never found. A rumour circulated that the American survived and someone is hiding him. We are asking everybody in the village to help us. Most likely just a rumour.”

“By all means! We have heard nothing. My father’s house is of course open for your inspection, but I can assure you once we hear something or find out more, I personally will contact you. Good luck in your search.”

With this Dieter turned toward the house, letting them know the meeting was over.

“Thank you, Herr Captain. May we just quickly ask your father a few questions? It won’t be more than a moment.”

“I am sorry, I have to decline your wish. My father still convalesces from the loss of my brother on the Russian front, and he is not feeling well. Perhaps some other time.”

“Perhaps,” they both echoed. “The young lady, she is your sister? Has she heard or seen anything?”

With a slight edge to his voice, Dieter replied, “Like I said, we have heard nothing, but I will be contacting your office as soon as we know or hear something. Heil Hitler.”

The two Gestapo officers knew their investigation was over. This could easily become political, Dieter being a U-boat captain close to Admiral Doenitz. Regardless of their ruthless appearance, deep down they were only fanatical sycophants. They decided to get advice on how to handle this matter before going any further.

“Heil Hitler. Sorry to disturb you. Have a well earned holiday, Herr Corvette Captain. Perhaps we meet again. Heil Hitler.”

“Heil Hitler.”

Dieter Berger stayed home for two weeks. During this time he

avoided the subject of Tom’s stay. Shortly after the captain’s return to duty, the two Gestapo men came back to the Berger household, only this time they wanted to speak to the Berger’s hired hand, Klaus.



Chapter 21

The Catskill Mountains, tiny compared to the Rocky Mountains, are nevertheless formidable hills with beautiful walkways through dense forests and sloping fields. They are an ideal escape for searching city folks. Pristine, unpolluted, untamed mountain streams lure visitors off the trodden path, and before long they enter into a world of magic. Natural unsoiled splendour slowly invigorates the soul of the solitary wanderer. If receptive to nature's charm, the traveller's spirit is soon cognizant of the oneness of it all.

By the late 19th century, the Catskills had become a very fashionable target for urban dwellers leaving behind crowded and already polluted cities. Holidays in this newly discovered wilderness paradise were suggested by travellers for healthy living and in some cases for curing tuberculosis. They attracted not only the sick but also the healthy. Quickly hotels and inns staffed with guides, who pointed out wildlife and ample fishing holes, sprang up to cater to affluent, tired city folks.

The hills, including the rocky peaks, were covered with an adequate amount of fertile soil, giving life to an amazing variety of tall trees. The colour of dying fall foliage and the explosion of new growth in the spring was witnessed year after year, the most extraordinary manifestation of loss and rebirth. On gentle slopes, pastures and fields laboriously carved out of thick forest by callused

immigrant hands, the sweat, blood and tears of several European generations forever mingled with that of native Algonquian Indians. The Iroquois Indians called this area "ha-de-ron-dah," meaning bark eaters, later changed to Adirondacks.

The majority of people living in the Catskills were in tune with the ruggedness of the land. They became resilient as strenuous work and a harsh climate shaped their bodies and souls. After several generations, they became an integral part of the land, like the trees, rocks and pristine mountain streams. Regardless of background, soon new roots were fixed firmly to the hills.

The few who could not live without the comfort of a city eventually left. Folks who stayed became part of the land.

There was an abundance of wildlife. Each family had at minimum one hunting rifle in their closet or handily stored behind the seat of their pickup truck. Supplying fresh game during season was effortless; fowl, rabbit and deer were practically around every bend. Not always co-operative, however, was the weather. The climate in the Catskills could be very unpredictable at times. While Blackhead Mountains to the north were covered in light snow, at their southern boundaries an Indian summer day would entice people to go for a walk along the construction sites of the man-made Rondout Reservoir.

Reservoirs were built for the growing population of New York City, in constant need of clean drinking water. As early as 1905, New York State legislators passed a law that would drive out whole villages and turn mountain streams into large water reservoirs. It was an example of the frequently bandit-like American justice system. First natives lost their land, and now white settlers lost their homes. Egalitarianism became dubious, if not twisted. Sacrificing few for many was, however, a dream come true for self-serving politicians. Realizing that votes of the many would count, re-election was in the bag. The many advantageously erased the plights of

the few from their consciences, not realizing their turn was imminent. It was a breach of the spirit of democracy. Slowly but steadily, the American dream shifted toward a shameful capitalistic system, an arrangement without social conscience. The American dream over time was sullied; the rich became richer, always at the expense of ordinary, hard working, honest, naive Americans. Americans in the past fervently believed hard work would bring them closer to the American dream.

At the turn of the 20th century, unspoiled land was still available, and each year thousands of tourists continued to visit the many roads and hidden trails throughout the Catskills. Depending on weather, visitors would come as early as mid April and stay as late as Thanksgiving to enjoy the magic of the fall foliage. Women mostly provided the manual labour in the inns, supplementing the often-meagre income their husbands earned logging, trapping or farming the land. Folks living in the Catskills earned less than city dwellers; nevertheless, the tranquil and uncorrupted lifestyle provided a setting to raise children properly instead of subjecting them to the viciousness of street gangs in New York City. Hard-working, honest rural America largely was still free of decay. In large cities, on the other hand, decency and unyielding old-fashioned morality slowly started to give way to a hedonistic way of life where keeping up with the Joneses became a way of life.

Tom's family, securely settled, appreciated the authentic nourishing rural lifestyle. Mr. Williams received job offers in New York City from time to time, always with significantly higher wages. Whenever the opportunity arose, a mini family conference decided the outcome. Everybody quickly agreed that the honest and simple lifestyle in the Catskills was more important than the fat paycheque in the city.

Going to bed late made no difference to Tom's father. His day always started at 6:30 a.m. Tom, affected by a six-hour time difference,

wrote his sixth letter to Helga since leaving Germany at 3 in the morning. He awoke just before 9 when the aroma of freshly brewed coffee caressed his senses. Although anxious to mail his letters, he kept them neatly bundled, not wanting to mail them until assured that U.S. soldiers had crossed the river Rhein and liberated Schweinfurt. In lengthy and descriptive letters he shared day-by-day accounts of where he was and what he was doing. Other times he would expand on subjects they discussed when he was in Germany. His letters always ended with the promise to see her again soon, letting her know how much he missed her.

"Good morning, Tom. You are up! What would you like for breakfast?" his mother, busy in the kitchen, asked him as he stepped into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes to fully awaken.

"Good morning, Mom. How about a coffee first and then some homemade bread with butter and lots of jam? Where is Dad?" he added.

"You know, long before I get up, he putters around the garden every morning. Go and tell him to come in and have breakfast with us; he only had a coffee earlier."

Tom walked out to the wooden deck leading to the garden. All at once, his thoughts drifted effortlessly to when he was a child. Glancing at the tree house that his father had built in a large old apple tree so many years ago, he bid him good morning. Instantly he remembered it had become his first home away from home and how he found fault with having to share his Shangri-La with his sister, Shirley. Undeviating to her nature, she forever managed to alter the tree house into a dollhouse. He remembered how Jimmy and other school friends made fun of the white lace curtains covering the windows and the rug that covered the plywood floor, how he appealed to his father, and how his father told him he must learn to share, and how he finally, although very reluctantly, admitted to the boys that the tree house also belonged to his sister.

Taking his dad's words to the letter, he felt comfortable in the knowledge that the tree house also belonged to him. At the first opportune moment he transformed the dollhouse back into a cabin Tom Sawyer or Huck Finn would have been proud of. Now it was his sister's turn to lament.

The struggle of the sexes went on for the rest of the summer. In the fall, Mr. Williams, having been an adjudicator once too often, realized it would make his life easier to have two separate playhouses. A man resolute in turning ideas into reality, he asked Tom to help him build a shed next to the henhouse for Tom's exclusive use. The shed, more in keeping with a boy's lifestyle, now became the hangout for Tom and his friends. His sister, convinced she had won the battle, was ecstatic as she turned the tree house back into a make-believe home. Tom did not mind at all. The shed was out of eyesight from the house and quickly headquarters for all kinds of make-believe adventures, as well as a place where Tom and his friends would concoct real trouble at times.

Tom was startled how these memories suddenly flooded his mind. He remembered how he and Jimmy influenced a neighbour girl, Katherine McColeman, to let all the boys kiss her on her fourteenth birthday. How Katherine and he, playing Indians and cowboys, matched participants with the aim of finishing in the tree house alone with each other. Katherine, nervously looking out the window making sure no one was coming, would allow Tom to touch her small, firm breasts on the outside of her blouse while kissing him. Within minutes, Tom shared his conquest with Jimmy O'Brian; between them, they convinced Katherine to let Jimmy also feel her covered but unmistakably budding breasts.

"Jimmy saw us, and unless you let him have a go, he will tell all the other boys."

Katherine, aware Jimmy could not have seen anything, nevertheless pretended to go along. It was a way to experience touching

while remaining a good girl. Tom and Jimmy had endless conversations, for days thereafter, about how it would feel to touch her bare breast. Finally, it came down to making a bet on who would be the first to touch her bare breast. Nobody won; Katherine and her folks moved away that summer. Regardless of Katherine's disappearance, for Tom and Jimmy it was a summer of discovery, their imagination working in the fullness of its appointed time. Abruptly, girls became, lock stock and barrel, as interesting as going hunting with the boys. Now his sister's tree house, with her girlfriends hanging out, was okay for Tom and his friends to visit at least once a day, and if invited, more often.

Tom found his father in the woodshed, sorting logs for the fireplace. "Good morning, Dad."

"Good morning, Tom. Why are you up already?"

"Oh, I had enough sleep. Besides, the smell of Mom's coffee and fresh baked bread was hard to ignore. Mom wants you to come in for breakfast. Let's split these logs after we eat."

"Okay, sounds good to me; I am starving. Let's go."

"Shirley just woke up; she will join us in a moment. Tom, it is wonderful to have us all sit down for breakfast again. You have no idea how much we missed you."

"Well Mom, it sure feels good to be home again," Tom replied. His thoughts however quickly travelled across the pond, longing for Helga to be with him.

Before long Shirley, wiping remnants of sleep from her eyes, found her way to the breakfast table. Breakfast in the Williams family was a time to plan their day, a happy occasion with a lively discussion about what to do and sometimes, on a rainy day, an admittance of "Today, I am going to curl up in front of the fireplace with a good book and read all day."

This particular morning, like in days gone by, was no different. Mr. Williams, in keeping with being the head of the household,

started the conversation. “Tom agreed to help me this morning with the firewood.”

Shirley interrupted, looking first at her dad, then to Tom. “Dad, Roger, Dave McDermott, and his younger brother, Bill, were hoping Tom would join us for a hike to the cabin Roger and the guys are building up in the bush, behind the McDermotts’ farm. David just turned eighteen, and he wants to talk to Tom about joining the air force.”

Before Mr. Williams had a chance to reply, Tom cut in. “Shirley, I would love to go, but I promised to help Dad sorting and splitting wood this morning, and to be honest I would not be the right inspiration for David right now. In fact, Dad and I talked last night about duty, the military, and such things, and we are planning to continue this conversation this morning. Give me a couple of days, and I will meet with Roger and his buddies. By the way, please thank Roger again for the use of his car the other day. I really appreciated him loaning the car to Dad.”

“Tom, you talk so different, so smart. What happened to all of this talk about kicking butt? Are you okay?” Shirley replied in a concerned and questioning voice.

“Tom is fine. He lived through difficult times, and he just needs a little time to adjust to being home again,” Tom’s mother, quickly interjected, and soon the conversation drifted again to everyday discussions. Tom felt relieved. He appreciated the thoughtfulness of his family.

Before long the conversation drifted to the previous night’s bash and how Tom’s friends attempted to sing German military songs, changing the words to hilarious and silly rhymes, while walking around the hall with their left index fingers under their noses, extending their right arms upwards in a mock Hitler salute.

Once breakfast was over, Tom and his dad left for the woodshed. Mr. Williams immediately continued with the previous

night’s conversation. “Tom, concerning our chat last night, I want you to know that your mother and I are supportive of whatever you decide, and I am confident I can say the same for Shirley. We all know you went through a lot over the last few months, and we realize life will look differently from here on in. I am, however, convinced the entire experience will benefit you in the future; often a close brush with death brings out an entirely new outlook on life. Life becomes more precious, and I think that is what has happened to you. Let me suggest something. Unwind for a couple of weeks, put your feet up; the rest will do you a lot of good and the world will look different again.”

“Dad, you are absolutely correct. Regardless of what I decide, I know I look at life differently than I did six months ago.”

Swinging the large axe and splitting a sizeable hardwood log with one blow, Tom continued. “Dad, I, like most people, go through life never asking questions concerning military action or, for that matter, political events. We all obey without asking why. The experience I gained in the last few months forced me to think, and I came to the conclusion that most of us are like sheep. We are told to jump, and our only response is ‘How high?’”

“Tom, for the most part folks have to labour day in and day out, just to put food on the table. They are tired, and there is not enough time and energy left at the end of the day to understand or get involved in events most of us don’t identify with anyways. We have no choice but to hope the actions taken by our leaders are, in the end, for our own good.”

“Surely you remember, we talked many times about this while you were growing up. People are divided into two groups: a privileged few in command, and the rest are followers. It seems a typical development in human evolution. In fact, I agree with old Tom. He believes it is a law: the defenceless and vulnerable are attracted to the strong. Only one person can

become president of the U.S., just like there are many more soldiers than there are generals.”

“Dad, I don’t question my role in this war. I love being a pilot, and I have been told countless times my input is helping to end evil...and if convinced I am helping to make this world a better place, I would go back to active duty immediately.”

“Tom, I don’t understand. Are you questioning Hitler’s evil ambition to destroy all of Europe? Surely you admit he is one immoral SOB.”

“Dad, I lived with a German family for seven weeks who are of the same mind as you. We all know the world is a better place without this tyrant, but again, I don’t believe bombing the hell out of civilians, children and old folks is a desirable way to reform the world.”

“Tom, remember we talked about Germany before you left for England, and we all agreed Hitler took power deviously in 1933, and how the press and mega industries were enslaved and sullied to the position of mouthpiece and profiteers. And how the German people applauded Hitler’s nationalistic views, deliberately closing their eyes, suspending morality for ideology, nationalism and a larger bread basket. Surely you must see they are also responsible.”

“Dad,” Tom interrupted, “two wrongs don’t make a right.”

“True enough, but look how the German people scoffed at the world when it became evident where their *führer* was taking them. Has history not proven, time and time again, that there is a collective price to be paid when people become indifferent to the actions of their leaders? Not only in Germany, but anywhere in the world.”

“Dad, I am not convinced that the people are responsible for the action of a dictator. In fact, you must have heard the news, while I was convalescing a group of senior military officers tried for the umpteenth time to assassinate Hitler.”

Tom waited for his father to answer. Not getting a response, he

continued. “Dad, war is not the answer to this world’s problems. You, Mom, Granddad, and Grandma have always taught us that life is precious and all people have a right to live—”

“Yes, Tom, but this also means we have the right to defend our beliefs and values.”

Aware of his son’s genuine anguish, Mr. Williams valued the opportunity to have this conversation. He spoke slowly and deliberately, with no convincing undertones, allowing Tom to consider his replies. While talking, Tom’s father continued to cut wood to length and Tom, with youthful exuberance, continued to split the logs. By now they had a sizeable pile, ready to store for the upcoming winter.

“Tom, like I told you last night, it is the intent of the heart that counts, nothing more and nothing less. Let me clarify what I mean. You are responsible for your thoughts and your actions; I am responsible for mine. A president in the final analysis is judged by impartial history if he was a good or bad president. As commander in chief, he is of course ultimately responsible for the actions and fate of his men. Politics at the best of times is ambiguous, and we can only hope and pray our leaders have the moral fortitude to make right decisions, trusting that honesty and integrity are their guides. We, however, must not forget that they are also only human. Ask this question: Is evil a conscious thing in itself, like our concept of a devil, or is evil a consequence of free will?”

“To find the answer, we should be in accord. Evil is evil, regardless of its source. Hence the responsibility to decide what is right and what is wrong comes right back to us. Each time we face a dilemma or for that matter make what seems at the moment a simple decision, we have to consider the consequences of our undertaking. Decisions, good or bad, are at the core based on the intent of our hearts. Evil, as well as goodness, therefore lives in our hearts. Unfortunately, we allow ego to control behaviour, and since ego

evolves from unconscious fear, our ego does not concern itself with good or bad. Consequently, all too often we cannot, or will not, see actions as evil. Let me simplify it more. If I had to kill a man in order to stop him from harming our family, would I be justified in my action? I believe self-defence is justifiable; do you agree?”

“Yes, but if I follow, you suggest our egos, which act on fear, control our actions.”

“True, acting on fear can be a positive thing; undoubtedly it helped in our evolutionary journey. Nevertheless, if we go through life on fear alone, we constantly feed our egos and live exclusively by the consequence of our egos.”

“Okay, now let us suppose I am not home when someone hurts my family. Stalking and killing the perpetrator, would my action still be justified?”

“I suppose so—well, I am not sure. Perhaps the law should be involved, or maybe it would depend on how you kill him.”

“Tom, how I kill is not important in this example. Why is significant. In the first instance I killed out of self-defence. Stalking and killing was done out of anger, hate or revenge. All of these emotional patterns kill pious awareness within, and the intent becomes suspect.”

“Everything we do or feel—love, hate, lust, jealousy, anger, joy, pleasure, hurting or, on the other hand, helping someone—in short, every thought or act we take part in is stored, examined and judged by celestial laws imbedded in our hearts, or spirits. Now, if these actions are a consequence of living by the advice of our egos, instead of living with awareness, the intent of our hearts is likely inappropriate. We have a choice, to evolve over time or to make the same mistake repeatedly. Our egos in opposition to awareness slow down spiritual progress. Somehow, creation set the wheels in motion, but we are the drivers. This is a perpetual law. We must realize we are responsible for our own mistakes; it is the law of

reciprocal action. Creation gave us free will. It is, however, the intent of our hearts, while feeding our needs and wants, that affects our spirits. In other words, if we cause harm to someone else by satisfying our own ends, we only hurt ourselves. By the way, confusing need with want is often responsible for the problems and wrongdoing in our daily life.”

“Tom, this is a universal law, commonly known as ‘what goes around comes around.’ The Buddhists call it karma. Christ said, ‘As you shall sow so shall you reap.’”

Tom, taking a break splitting logs, was waiting for his dad to continue.

Grateful for his son’s attention, his father continued. “To do unto others as you want them to do unto you is more than a command; it is an enormously serious warning. Whatever you do to someone else you are actually doing to yourself. Can you now understand what I mean when I say it is the intent of our heart that counts?”

Tom, listening intently to his father, answered immediately. “I know what you mean. Simply put in my case...if I drop bombs because I sincerely believe my action fights evil, I am acquitted. Alternatively, at the very least, my action becomes neutral if I believe in our leaders’ wisdom and foresight. In other words, believing their directive is appropriate. But on the other hand, if my action is based on hate, profit, intolerance, then the intent, or the motive of my heart, is immoral and therefore evil.”

As an afterthought Tom continued. “But Dad, surely you agree, if I am a pawn in the game of someone else whose intent is questionable and I continue without investigating, I become guilty by association.”

“Tom, we don’t always get answers to our questions, but we always have a choice. I recognize answers to our questions are for the most part slow coming. Consequently, making the right deci-

sion becomes difficult. I do, however, believe if we listen without compromise to the beat of our heart, sooner or later we know what is right and what is wrong. But you are absolutely correct; not examining motives is a sure way to fool ourselves into believing we have nothing to do with other people's action. Visit old Tom, with a bottle of our new wine, and delve into this topic in more detail."

After a chilly night, it was an unseasonably warm and pleasant day. A small number of cumulus clouds added a touch of refinement to the otherwise naked light blue sky. It felt like a spring day. A brisk but warm breeze freed the few remaining leaves from trees and bushes, sending them on a swirling dance toward earth, decomposing to provide nourishment for new life in the spring.

The door and windows in the woodshed were open, taking advantage of the few remaining days of mild weather. A sound coming increasingly closer from somewhere outside and above was at once recognizable to Tom. He stepped outside. His father followed, and both looked up towards the sound of a Bell P-39 single engine trainer as it spiralled towards earth. Just then the pilot, on a training mission, selected the opposite rudder, applied full power, and brought the craft out of its incipient spin to continue on its easterly course.

His father's pensive words still ringing in his ears, Tom listened to the sound of the airplane's engine, recovering from its spin. The brilliant blue sky somehow miraculously fused the moment into an enigmatic revelation. All at once Tom's dilemma unravelled like a messy spool free-falling, and by sheer force of gravity the knots and entanglement gave way to a continuous straight line. He knew without hesitation the direction he needed to go.

His dad noticed Tom's momentary concentration. Slowly, even as he watched, he recognized a steely determination creeping into Tom's face. It reminded him of a time when Tom was seven or eight years old. His dog Kip had died, and Tom was unwavering in his

decision to bury the dog by himself. He wanted no one to help him, not even his sister. Finally, they all gave up and left him alone, figuring he would soon come to his senses and ask for help. Nevertheless, he persevered and dug the grave all by himself. His hands were bleeding from several blisters; only when he planted a crude wooden cross on his dog's grave did he allow his folks to participate.

"Dad, thanks for the talk. Let's have lunch, and then I need to write a letter."



Chapter 22

By now, Rumania and Bulgaria had acknowledged Germany's hopeless position and conveniently, if not wisely, reconsidered their allegiance and declared war on Germany. It opened the eastern front, and the Russians could move all the way to Hungary with almost no casualties.

In the west, France already liberated, De Gaulle and Churchill walked victoriously through the Arc de Triumph in Paris on November 11, 1944. The allies, realizing the importance of finishing this war as fast as possible, continued their unrelenting bombardment of German cities. Germany's V1 and V2 surprise weapons mercifully came too late and consequently had little effect on the outcome of the war, although some of the huge twelve-ton V2 rockets made it all the way to London, England.

The carnage of man and material during these last months of the European war reached an unprecedented level. On the 11th of September, ninety-six days after landing in Normandy, a few soldiers from the 85th U.S. Reconnaissance stepped onto German soil. All throughout the summer of 1944, the Russians engaged in significant battles along the eastern Prussian front. Consequently, the allies anticipated that the Russians would be first to reach Germany. It was not to be. The Morgenthau Plan, named after Henry Morgenthau, U.S. secretary of the treasury under Roosevelt, was made public in the fall of 1944 but backfired. It ignited within

the German people the strength and purpose for a ferocious final battle. By now, most Germans had lost the apparent vision of Hitler and the Third Reich. Henry Morgenthau's plan, however, fuelled the hatred against the allies once more; as a result, the German people were determined to die with guns in their hands as an alternative to this dim-witted plan.

The hideous Morgenthau plan offered premeditated extermination of the German race by means of dismantling all of Germany's industries, large and small alike, and demoting the German people back in time to cattle- and shepherders. The American proposal died when Churchill, Eden and De Gaulle vetoed the plan.



Chapter 23

By the end of September, Helga knew for sure she was pregnant. She could not bring herself to talk about it, not even to Christine. Lonesome, burdened with shame, guilt and an uncertain future, she was propelled towards despondency for the third time in her young life, the first two times being her mother's and brother's early deaths. During Dieter's stay, she avoided him as much as possible. While she cherished Dieter coming to her and her father's defence during the Gestapo's visit, she hardly talked to him while he was home. Dieter never brought the subject up again. Helga, pregnant and rejected, suffered immensely; she always loved her brothers and was deeply hurt by Dieter's callous attitude.

Helga's father, concerned about her well-being, one morning over breakfast asked her, "Helga, what is bothering you? Go and see Uncle Herbert for a checkup. You worry me."

"No, Papa, it isn't necessary. I am just out of sorts. I put Dieter and you in danger. I will be okay once this dreadful war is over. Tell me, Papa, it can't last much longer now...can it?"

He knew she needed his support. Since entering high school, she had addressed him as *Father* instead of *Papa*; *Papa* was used when something bothered her.

"*Nein mein Kind*...three, maybe four months, this madness should be over. Helga, all the same, I want Uncle Herbert to have a look at you."

"Please, Papa, Uncle Herbert is already so very busy. I don't want him to work while visiting us."

"I was thinking you could ride your bicycle to Schweinfurt and visit him and Aunt Hilda. Please do it for me; go there tomorrow. Aunt Hilda would love to see you, and it would make me feel much better. Go tomorrow, but careful with all these potholes along the way."

The following day Helga made some excuse about having to do laundry and ironing but promised her father she would go and see Uncle Herbert soon.

Although Tom had told her he would not write until he knew for sure no danger would befall her and her family, she missed him terribly and checked her mailbox daily. Being pregnant added to her torment. Dreadful thoughts made her believe she would never hear from Tom again. Her characteristically positive attitude and outgoing personality were gradually wearing away.

Weeks went by, and she wondered if it was only a wartime fling, two lonely people seeking love in a cruel and vicious world. Auspicious dreams, however, gave her encouragement that life would improve. In her dreams everything was beautiful. Tom was by her side, and the war was over. Days were filled with wonderful routine occurrences, and their nights were spent making love. Sometimes she would wake up after having such vivid dreams, and her desire for Tom was so powerful she satisfied her physical cravings before going back to sleep. This compelling lust was new to her. In the morning, she would go on her knees and ask God for forgiveness. "*Lieber Gott*, what is the matter with me? I am with child, from a man who I might never see again, yet I cannot control my desires. I am behaving like a harlot. Please forgive me..." Her prayer finished with pleading to let Tom come back very soon. Guilt over her physical yearnings now added another burden to her already troubled mind. Nobody had taught her

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that physical yearnings, particularly during lonely periods, are natural and not a barrier to spiritual deliverance. Years would go by before she realized keeping your body chaste while defiling your spirit was ultimately more harmful.

As a little girl, she was confident all her prayers would be answered one day. As a teenager she prayed for her mother's recovery; the opposite happened. When her brothers went to war, she asked God to look after them; before long she was told that one of her brothers was killed in Russia. Now pregnant, the father of her child thousands of miles away, with no real hope of him coming back, she began to believe that her prayers fell on deaf ears. Her daily life became indecisive and her disposition frail. Having a baby out of wedlock in Germany in those days was deemed shameful. Hypocrites would cast the first stone and call her a sinner, particularly in her small village. Having a baby from an American soldier, to boot, would certainly bring shame, not only to her, but also to her entire family. Facing the future alone, the wretchedness of her position became noticeable. At times, she would not leave her room for days. At last, her father summoned Dr. Schmidt to examine her.



Chapter 24

Following the Gestapo's interrogation of Klaus the farmhand, weeks went by and nothing came of it. Klaus was at his predictable best, mimicking a simpleton, pretending not to understand any of their questions, caused the two Gestapo agents to leave frustrated and disgusted, with nothing to show for their efforts. Gestapo headquarters decided to put this problematic investigation on the back burner. Germany was on its knees, dying slowly with a whimper. The accusations against the Berger family were swept under the rug. After all, who was going to implicate an adviser to Admiral Dönitz in a time like this? The investigation into the whereabouts of the American aviator was of no importance anymore. Life was too hectic for Admiral Dönitz to pay credence to unsubstantiated Gestapo nonsense.

After his holiday, Dieter became chief instructor in the naval academy in Kiel. It was a well-deserved position. The academy desperately needed someone with his experience; Germany was running out of seasoned submarine commanders. Recently promoted Korvettenkapitan Berger, the steadfast defender of the Third Reich, however, argued that precisely for this reason he should go back to sea. Still Naval Command, by orders of the old man, insisted on his transfer.

Dieter's boat, under the command of its new captain, sank only eleven days after leaving harbour. Everybody on board died a

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horrible death as the boat sank to its watery and permanent grave at the bottom of the Atlantic. Forty-two men, averaging twenty-one-years young, lost their lives a few months before this ghastly war ended. Grieving family members asked why, but the answer never came. The new posting gave Dieter time to compile his war memoirs. Years later they were hailed by the new German navy as a textbook on submarine warfare.



Chapter 25

Christmas 1944 was the unrelenting consequence of Germany's own volition. Destitute, hungry and disillusioned people huddled in the basements of bombed-out homes around sparsely decorated Christmas trees, shedding tears while singing "*Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*" ("Silent Night"), a song that would eventually capture the emotions of people worldwide. Sadly though, in due time, this simple but powerful message of Christ's birth was replaced by shopping sprees and Rudolph the red-nosed reindeer. Santa Claus replaced Christ, and expensive gifts eased the minds of distressed shoppers.

Suddenly, without warning, three days after Christmas Mr. Berger died. Helga was by his side when a massive heart attack took his life. She ran across the street to the local pub, where Dieter, home for Christmas, was having a beer with Dr. Schmidt, friends and neighbours. The doctor worked incessantly, sweat running down his face, but to no avail. His attempt to get the heart pumping precious blood failed.

Helga was completely shattered. Dieter, who just learned about Helga's condition, immediately attributed their father's death to Helga's pregnancy. A few days after the funeral, Dieter had to leave. On his way out, he shouted at Helga for the first time in his life. "I want you out of our father's home by the time I return!"

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Helga was devastated. The pain of losing her father and her brother's unwarranted callous accusation caused her to have a nervous breakdown, crying for several hours every day. Dr. Schmidt and his wife, fearing for her life, decided to move her to their home, hoping she would recover with proper care.

Eventually the tears stopped, replaced by indifference to her surroundings. The days were without beginning and end as she stared into space for hours. Daily routine activities ceased abruptly and with them her desire to seek a better tomorrow. The dreams of Tom returning ended. After convalescing at the doctor's home for several weeks and feeling a bit better, at least physically, she decided to go back to her father's place.



Chapter 26

Tom, taking the bull by its horns, resolutely implemented changes in his life. A letter to Air Force HQ resulted in an immediate transfer to the closest air base to obtain his instructor's rating. The accident and subsequent recovery in Germany became the reason for his request. Air force HQ personnel saw it as a necessary step to achieving complete physical and mental recovery. For Tom, HQ's reason to grant his request was unimportant. The end justified the means; he was not ready to discuss his beliefs with his superiors or his fellow pilots. Training to become a flying instructor began the first Monday in January of 1945 at the Syracuse airport.

Very few people knew how Tom really felt. Sally, adamant about turning dreams into reality, was to some extent privy to Tom's plans. Several times over the last few weeks they had gone for long walks out to Hungry Hollow, discovering once again the splendour of the Catskills' back country. During these outings, Tom innocently, conceivably somewhat naively, shared how he was looking forward to bringing Helga back to the U.S. as his bride.

Sally, a poised, even-tempered, moreover astute young woman, encouraged Tom to talk freely. Coveting Tom's heart, she was counting on time and distance being on her side. She was, however, not being insidious by encouraging Tom to talk about his feelings;

in fact, when the opportunity arose, she easily and freely let Tom know how fond she was of him.

During these long walks and conversations, it became evident that Tom was a different person. His attitude toward life made her realize that he had grown up. This realization increased her desire to make Tom her beau. A week before Christmas, Sally succeeded in persuading Tom to spend a few days with her at a friend's remote cabin. She insisted it was her treat and she would look after all the arrangements. Tom's mother, still harbouring a hope that Tom would eventually forget Helga and Germany, encouraged him to enjoy the outing. His father, however, noticing Tom's disinclination, voiced his concern. "I don't think Tom really wants to go away with Sally."

"What bothers you about Tom going away with Sally? Surely Tom is old enough to know what he is doing," his mother asked.

"Nothing is worrying me; it just seems Tom is not keen on going away."

Mrs. Williams would never oppose Tom's choice should he bring Helga home. She was simply afraid of the unknown.

Christmas was a continuation of Thanksgiving, a festive, thankful atmosphere with plenty of food and gifts for family and friends. The abundance of the season made Tom wonder while giving thanks before dinner how Helga and her family fared, knowing how dreadful Christmas must be in Germany. A week before the holidays he bought an engagement ring for Helga, hoping to place it on her finger in the near future. He kept it a secret; Helga should know about it first.

Boxing Day arrived. Tom, previously reluctant to go away with Sally, could not bring himself to let her down at the last minute, knowing how much she looked forward to this outing. Moreover, in a moment of fondness he had made a promise, and promises are to be kept. Once his mind was made up, he looked forward with

enthusiasm to spending a couple of days in a secluded part of the hills.

Sally noticed his eagerness and was delighted when he picked her up in his father's 1938 Ford pickup truck. Encouraged by Tom's mood, she was determined to use the couple of days and let Tom know how much she was in love with him. Surely the magic of this hideaway would help to make Tom realize what he came home for. Half of the pickup truck was loaded with dry wood for the fireplace. Sally brought enough food to last a week, hoping to convince Tom to stay longer than the intended two days. Knowing Tom liked red wine, she had safely stored five bottles of California merlot and three bottles of white cabernet, as well as a bottle of aged Kentucky bourbon, in her luggage. Now she was looking forward to an enchanting couple of days, hoping the wine and the ambiance of the place would help Tom relax and put Germany and Helga behind him.

The ride to the cottage was only one hour, and upon arrival they were both busy doing their respective chores. Soon Tom had a roaring fire going, and Sally set the table with food she had already prepared ahead of time. The choice of food was overwhelming. Roasted succulent wild turkey, four different types of cheese, salads, homemade bread, and dumplings in gravy fit for a king were spread across the table. Fruit and cakes finished the feast. "Sally, what are you doing? You'll have to roll me out of here. I stuffed myself yesterday, and now all of this..."

"Tom, let's have a drink. Please open a bottle of wine and make a toast to spending a couple of days in this beautiful place. I am really happy we decided to come here. Isn't it awesome? So remote and private." Looking through the large bay window, they noticed large snowflakes dancing in the wind, only to eventually abandon their ballet and fall to the ground, blanketing the terrain very quickly in a bed of snow-white feathers. Some of the large flakes

caught in the trees and bushes, painting a picture of frosted blossoms hanging there delicately, yet appearing to be stable, prepared to last forever.

Abruptly the surroundings changed, and a unfathomable winter panorama unfolded in front of their eyes. A fast moving mountain stream next to the cottage was home to an abundance of speckled trout. When in season, these lively and colourful fish offered themselves as a mouth-watering delicacy to select anglers. The brook, although covered with ice and snow, still managed to bring forth a gurgling sound as the water rushed downstream to a larger river. The owners of the cottage, friends of Sally, had decorated the walls with several historical prints of the area. The rustic furniture and the huge fireplace on the north wall transformed the space into one of bygone days. A spiral staircase unfurled to the second floor, where two bedrooms and one washroom completed the upstairs under a slanted roof. The open hallway to the bedrooms was a balcony covering the entire length of the cottage, overlooking the dining room and living room with its massive fireplace. "Tom, come and pick your bedroom. Look out the window. It is absolutely wonderful; what a view from up here!" Sally shouted downstairs.

"Go ahead and pick whatever room you want. Air force personnel on leave must come last," he laughingly replied.

"Now that you brought up the subject, when are you leaving for duty again?"

"I am reporting to the Syracuse flying school the first Monday in the new year."

"Tom, I am so happy for you. Let's talk some more while we go for a walk to get rid of the food. Not far from here is a deer feeding site; maybe we will be lucky and can observe them for a while."

Walking briskly, they arrived shortly at a junction leading to a

small valley. Sally, realizing they were getting close, asked Tom not to make any noise. Walking slowly and in complete silence, they reached the almost hidden entrance to a small sheltered valley. Making their way down a narrow path, they stepped into the clearing. A large feeding crib put up in the middle of the open space hosted a herd of deer. Heads and tails high, the deer, alarmed by the infringement of their space, faced Tom and Sally for a brief moment before bolting into the bush.

Quietly Tom and Sally waited, but the deer never came back. Getting cold, they decided to walk back to the cottage. The sun slipping beyond the horizon covered the forest in twilight. Not far from the cottage, a missed fork in the road covered by heavy snow could have given rise to serious consequences. Fortunately, after barely ten feet, they simultaneously realized their mistake, turned around and found the road to their cabin.

On their walk back Tom talked about his upcoming transfer to Syracuse. Sally, sympathetic to his need for support, listened intently. Momentarily, Tom stopped talking. Patiently waiting, she seized the opportunity and asked him a candid question. "Tom, is your decision to give up combat flying based on feeling indebted to Helga and her family?" Before he could answer, she continued. "Let's say for a moment that your damaged airplane had made it to the English or American side; would you in all honesty hold the same view today?"

"I don't know. Perhaps not. The way I see it though is this, the whole ordeal was a wakeup call, and I am convinced hate will only attract hate. War is not the answer; in fact, I believe war is a scheme for cold-blooded individuals to obtain power and money, all at the expense of common folks. To be blunt, it would not surprise me if American lowlifes would take advantage during this ghastly war and sell weapons to Hitler to kill their own people."

"Tom, surely now you are stretching things a little."

“No, Sally. Let me be more specific; selling weapons is one of the most profitable businesses in the world today. In fact, history will prove me right. Dynasties were created from the enormous profits made dealing in arms during this war.”

Sensing his serious mood, she took his hand and with a sincere smile, she replied, “Tom, perhaps you are right. All I know is, I am extremely happy you came home safe, and you have my support regardless what you decide in the future. We have been friends for many years. Surely you know I care about you, and if there is anything I can do to help you forget this awful experience, please let me know.” Ending her talk with a mollifying expression, she stretched up and gave him a quick kiss on his lips.

“Yes, Sally, we’ve been friends for many years, and I would not be a good friend if I did not let you know how serious I am about Helga. I am hopeful that she will be here before long. I am sure you will like her; maybe the two of you can become good friends.”

Tom, suddenly grasping the effect his words had on Sally, waited for a response while walking on in silence.

Aware of how Tom felt, Sally broke the brief awkward hush. “Tom, are you really in love with her, or do you simply feel indebted, or deeply thankful, for her nursing you back to health? You know this is a well-known fantasy. Numerous soldiers have fancied they have fallen in love with their nurses, only to find out too late that their perceived love was thankfulness or merely infatuation.”

Tom, fully aware he had to be truthful, carefully chose his words. “Sally, Helga was more than a nurse. We became good friends, but to be honest I don’t profess to know much about love. The way I miss her, though, it must be awfully close to love.”

They arrived at the cabin, and Sally, having other plans for the evening, wisely changed the subject. “Tom, you look after the fire and I will make us a drink. Are you hungry? I am hungry again; how about you?”

“Yes, surprisingly I am. It’s hard to believe with all the food we ate in the last few days. I guess the walk brought back the appetite. Can I help you with anything? The fire only needs a couple of logs to come back to life again.”

With an unmistakable urge in her voice, she looked at him and said, “Yes, Tom, help me...to help you...to help us. Let’s not talk about the war and all these things any more. Let us enjoy the time we have together, just you and me, in this charming hideaway.” Her heartfelt words and persuasive eyes gained entry to his heart, and for the first time since coming home, he realized how much she really cared for him.

Suddenly he was aware of her expectations. “Sally, I don’t want to hurt your feelings. Yes, I care for you. You and Jimmy are my best friends, and I hope we will be friends forever, but you must know that I promised Helga I would come back to her.”

His straightforward manner confused her for the moment. Catching her breath, she decided to go for broke. *Never mind all of this Helga stuff, he is mine, and he only needs to be reminded how fond he was of me before going to Europe. Did he not mention how much he missed me, and how pretty I looked at his homecoming party?* Gathering confidence, she remembered how Tom had told her the day he left for England to not marry Jimmy while he was overseas. Remembering his words, she decided it was time to cast caution to the wind and show him how much she missed him. Convinced that he only needed a nudge, she excused herself, went upstairs to her bedroom, and returned in a few minutes, temptingly dressed. Filling two glasses of bourbon almost halfway, she walked toward Tom. “Okay, Tom, let’s have a drink like old friends. For a couple of days you are mine; what you do afterwards is up to you.” Acquainted with Tom’s traditional beliefs, Sally wondered for the briefest of moment if seduction, a proven method to capture the fascination of practically all men, would backfire and work against

her. Still, Cupid, forever eager to release his arrows, was whispering in her ear: “Time-tested, highly gratifying natural lines of attack are a breathtaking method to a great ending.” Her conscience, reminding her to preserve friendship, also spoke up. “Precious radiant chastity should not take a back seat to self-indulgence.” Quickly assessing both sides, she remembered reading somewhere “The spirit is willing but the flesh is weak.” This did it. Almost thinking aloud she made up her mind. *These few days are mine, and if sex is what it takes to get him back, so be it.*

Tom had little knowledge of women’s ability to clutch life, quickly bringing into play men’s weakness. The aged Kentucky bourbon had a way to warm body and soul, and within a couple of hours, in front of a roaring fire, Tom felt unshackled. A large bear rug strategically placed close to the fireplace beckoned two inebriated friends to enter into that enchanted land called “Lustful Love.” Delightful accommodating feminine offerings, digested by two or more senses simultaneously, make it difficult for any man to withstand the gift of a woman. Tom was no exception.

The next morning, while shaving, he cut himself, as he had difficulty concentrating on what he was doing. Looking at his face in the mirror, into his own eyes, he saw uncertainty. Sober, it scared him.

Breakfast was a subdued occasion. Sally finally broke the silence. “Tom, are you sorry about last night? I need to know how you feel.”

Red faced, Tom replied, “Sally, I don’t know how to answer you. I cannot lie. It felt good making love, but in a way, I wish it never happened. I am confused. Making love last night felt like the right thing to do. This morning, though, I feel guilty.” Quickly he added, “Can we remain friends regardless of what will happen?”

Sally stood up, walked around the table, and asked him to stand up. Tom, wondering what was up, nevertheless stood.

Standing in front of him, she put her arms around his waist. Holding him close and looking directly into his eyes, she replied, “Of course we can, Tom. I love you, and I want you to know I feel good about last night, and I am prepared to wait until you know what you really want. Take your time. I am always here if you need me. I waited a long time for you to come home; a few more weeks are not going to matter.”

Tom, pleased by her words, realized after a few minutes the significance of what she was saying. Nevertheless, the day turned out surprisingly well. In the early afternoon, they went again for a long walk, and upon their return, they enjoyed another opulent meal. Mellow wine and soft music from an old record player completed the ambience. Toward evening, Sally opened another bottle of red wine. Tom, swayed by the ambience of the flickering flames and the effects of the wine, decided to relax in front of the fire. It was an open invitation for Sally to stretch out beside him. Before long, Bacchus and Cupid, collaborators for hundreds of years, took control. Captivated by the moment, Tom questioned why he had misgivings in the morning about the previous evening. Making love to a good friend shouldn’t be judged harshly.

Waking up in the very early hours of the morning, the sun not yet up, Sally naked beside him, Bacchus and Cupid long gone, Tom encountered one of the sober, introspective moments when life looks frail, if not fleeting. Grasping the importance of this, he wondered if he was lost, drowned somewhere in a lifeless, alien, far-away continent. It confused the hell out of him. He decided to leave and go back home.

After breakfast, they cleaned the cabin and left for home. Sally, observing Tom during the morning, realized the inspiring previous two nights simply fulfilled Tom’s primal requirement, satisfying a fleeting need like hunger or sleep. She realized he was not hers, at least not for time being. Being pragmatic, she took refuge in the fact

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that losing a battle does not mean losing the war. When Tom dropped her off at home, she thanked him for having a good time, casually remarking she was looking forward to spending more time with him.

Tom, not knowing how to answer, said nothing. She took his silence as a good omen.

By the middle of February, Tom passed his exams with distinction. A new chapter in his life was about to begin. The news from the European front was encouraging. The allies crossed the river Rhine, and now it would be only days before the Americans advanced into Helga's neighbourhood. Tom finally felt safe parcelling all of his letters. A pilot heading for England was to deliver Helga's letters to appropriate army personnel overseas and forward the parcel directly to Helga when convenient.

Tom met Sally twice after their getaway. On both occasions, he treated her like an old friend, with no indication of pursuing the relationship further. Mrs. Williams mentioned to Tom when he came home for a weekend that Sally had dropped by and inquired how he was doing. Tom shrugged his shoulders, no comment.



Chapter 27

The European inferno finally came to an end. Germany fought its last major offensive in Hungary against Russian forces, which outnumbered the Germans four to one with tanks and airplanes to spare, courtesy of America. Germany's fate was sealed. Burned out cities and utter despair was all that was left of Hitler's dream. His prediction—and consequent adoration by countless Germans—to conquer all of Europe, Russia, and conceivably the world is an example how logical people fall prey to the hallucinations of a tyrant. History has a propensity to repeat itself; once again, decency was tarnished, owing to the evil will and dynamism of foolish men. Transgression entered the world en masse through the volition of one man; millions perished because indoctrination ran its course without interference. On May 7, 1945, the insanity of World War II in Europe ended.

Helga, with the help of Klaus, had presided over the farm since her father's death. By now, she could not hide being pregnant. The contemptuous stares and rude remarks behind her back by presumptuous village folks stopped her from leaving the farm. Ashamed and lonely, she asked Christine to do look after her errands on a regular basis.

On the 11th of April, 1945, U.S. soldiers drove through her village, heading for Schweinfurt. Helga, physically and mentally

rundown, a mere shadow of her former self, was working in the barn when American soldiers were at the outskirts of her village.

Preoccupied and tired, Helga tried to ignore the doorbell, hoping Klaus would answer. Whoever rung was persistent; eventually Helga answered the door. It was Christine. “Helga, the Americans have arrived. Let’s take a look. Come...come, Helga.”

The news momentarily pierced Helga’s already fragile soul. Feeling woozy, she leaned against the door for support, her body quivering, and her mouth too dry to speak. Christine, noticing her sickly pale appearance, was alarmed. “Helga, are you okay?”

“I am fine. It’s just...well, you know, Tom mentioned...never mind. I am okay. You go and watch...I am not interested.”

“Helga, you mustn’t let yourself go. Why do you insist you will never hear from Tom? Come with me; let’s walk to the village square. Did Tom not say he will contact you once the Americans are here?”

“Thank you, Christine. I cannot go. The people in the village will laugh at me, standing there pregnant and waiting for a miracle. You go, come back and tell me all about it.” With this, she gave Christine a quick hug, fighting tears. Turning abruptly, she went into the house.

Christine, confused, not knowing what to do, shrugged her shoulders and left to witness this historical moment.

People from the village and surrounding area stood on the side of the road and watched mostly in silence as the American convoy drove by. Some of the old men watched with clenched fists and tears in their eyes. Overall it was a sober, demoralizing experience. Not so for the young children; they sheepishly smiled as young American soldiers waved to them.

All of a sudden the convoy came to a full stop. Covered in dust, a tall master sergeant climbed out of his jeep. Holding a small parcel in his hand, he walked up to the nearest group of Germans.

Singling out an older man, he waved the parcel while trying to communicate something. The elderly man, not understanding the sergeant, looked around helplessly, shrugging his shoulders, as Christine made her way over to the American.

“I speak a little English,” she cautiously interrupted the conversation.

The mid to late twenties American soldier, dressed in a battle-worn uniform on his lanky frame, turned to Christine, waving his package like a trophy. “Miss, I have mail for a Miss Helga Berger, who is supposed to live in this village. Can you show me where?”

Christine almost snatched the package out of his hand. “Yes, she is my girlfriend. I will give it to her.”

“Sorry, miss. My orders are to deliver the mail personally. Maybe you can show me where her house is.”

At once the crowd was silent; you could hear a pin drop. But as the American followed Christine to Helga’s house, the mob in tow became boisterous. Negative conclusions and foolish babble spilled from their mouths. Not aware of their ignorance, they followed the American and Christine as if it was their God-given right to hurl rocks.

By the time they reached Helga’s house almost the whole village was following close behind. The gossip reached a feverish pitch, and Christine was now thankful Helga was not with her. “The pregnant hussy, how disgraceful. I wonder what they want from her?” Was the remark from an old woman loud enough to goad the crowd?

Christine rang the bell, and this time Klaus, just coming from the barn, opened the door. “Please call Helga. There is someone who wants to talk to her.” With this, she signalled the American to step into the yard and closed the door behind her.

Outside on the street the muttering became louder, and the same old meddlesome woman who slandered Helga earlier tried to

open the door. Christine quickly closed it again, and this time she positioned the latch so nobody could open it from the outside.

The American, amused by the commotion, knowing some of the details and background of his mission, however kept a straight face. Just then Helga, red faced, her hair hastily arranged in a bun, emerged from the house. Shaking like a leaf, she approached the American and Christine. Klaus stood off to one side, his ear elevated to ensure he could hear the entire conversation in order to rehash the story at the local pub that night. Surely it would warrant two or three pints of beer on the house. People had had enough of war; juicy local gossip about Americans looking for the Bergers' Helga was momentarily more important than the collapse of the Third Reich.

"Hi. Are you Miss Helga Berger?" the American asked, smiling while holding Tom's sealed package of letters in a way so Helga could see Tom's name and address on the small parcel.

For a moment she wondered if the American and Christine could hear her heart pounding. Tears in her eyes, almost choking on her words, she gestured to the American to come in. "Yes, thank you, I am Helga. Would you like to come in and have a coffee? I don't know what to say...I am so grateful."

"Don't mention it. I am only doing a favour. A friend of mine asked me to forward this package to you."

"Are you a friend of Tom's?"

The soldier replied, "No, Miss Helga, these letters went through ten or twelve different hands. I am glad to have found you. Sorry, but I cannot stay. We are on our way to Schweinfurt. We may stay in the area for a while, and if it is okay I will take a rain check on the coffee; perhaps some other time."


"Thank you, thank you, any time, please...you are welcome." Tears flowing freely she gave him a hurried handshake as he unlatched the door.

"Bye, bye, Miss Helga. I hope you have good news in those letters."

Once the American left, Christine and Helga spontaneously danced and hugged each other, laughing and crying at the same time. Klaus, watching from across the yard, mumbled something; shaking his head he left to finish his chores in the barn.

Helga read Tom's twelve letters at least seven or eight times, alternately crying and laughing. As she was reading, every cell in her body started to rejuvenate. It was instant recovery. The sun's rays penetrating the living room curtains lit up the room. Helga, born again, noticed the splendour of a promising spring day. Opening the window, she noticed a flock of birds flying from branch to branch, full of hope, signalling a new beginning. Everything was different.

Helga kept reading the letters over and over again. Several times she read them in order of the dates. She then selected the letters that expressed the future in wonderful unmistakable terms and read them once again before falling asleep. In her dreams Tom was holding her in his arms, strong and determined never to let her go. The baby, cognizant of a transformation, kicked a few times, as if to give thanks.



Chapter 28

On Tom's side of the world, Americans were grieving. Their thirty-second president, Franklin Roosevelt, died on April 12, 1945, in his home in Warm Springs, Georgia. His secretary, Bill Helsey, had just left the president's office, leaving him to sign various documents. The renowned New York artist Elizabeth Schoumatoff was by chance also in attendance, taking sketches of the president for a portrait she was commissioned to do. She witnessed the president collapsing in his chair while mumbling, "I have a very bad headache." The president's personal African American butler, Arthur Prettyman, dedicated to his position, was always close by; he picked the president up and carried him to his bed. One hour later, the president died from massive bleeding in his brain.

To the American people his death came as a surprise. Vice President Harry Truman, however, had already been told back in March to prepare himself for taking over the presidency, as Roosevelt was given only a short time to live.

Taking over the presidency at a crucial time like this was a major concern not only for Truman but also for most of Roosevelt's inner circle. Truman was not privy to the various veiled political conversations Roosevelt had with his advisors and his most trusted cabinet members. Not only was Truman's knowledge of international politics negligible, he had absolutely no knowledge of the "Manhattan Project."

Two hours after the president's death, Harry Truman was sworn in as the thirty-third president of the United States. A short cabinet assembly followed. After the meeting Henry Stimson, the secretary of defence, stayed behind and informed the new president that the U.S. was setting precedence by having the first true weapon of mass destruction, unlike anything ever seen on earth. He explained how the research and work for the first atom bomb started quietly back in 1941. In a country that prides itself in exemplifying democracy, the research and completion of this ghastly weapon was done without knowledge of the American people, the United States Congress or Harry Truman.

Tom enjoyed his new position as a flight instructor immensely. With only two more years left in the air force, he was looking forward to securing a job as a pilot with American Airlines, who just celebrated its twelfth anniversary.

The war was now behind him. In his spare time he started to read American, Russian, and German classics. His father introduced him to the simple but courageous philosophy of Elbert Hubbard. "To do a certain amount of useful work every day, and not trouble about either the past or the future, is the highest wisdom." Amongst his favourite books were Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov* and Hesse's *Rosshalde*. Hesse, the German master of prose, had just completed his masterpiece *Das Glasperlenspiel*, *The Glass Bead Game*. Tom heard about the book and immediately searched for a translation in English. The librarian in Kingston told him not to hold his breath, but she would notify him as soon as a translation was in stock.

Tom was hopeful to learn German one day, not only to speak and understand the language of Helga, the woman he loved. He realized during his short stay in Germany that the German soul was, to say the least, complicated, if not restless. The clarity and insight of the German people, so evident in their precise, unflattering language

and their balanced way of life, did not seem to fit with their failure to see how Hitler's undertaking was morally wrong and unattainable. This disparity, many times the topic of conversation with Helga, was a challenge to Tom. Being of inquisitive nature, he was hopeful that studying German classics might help him to one day understand more of the German mentality. Now that his letters were gone and hopefully in Helga's hands, his mind was at peace. He could not wait to go to Germany and ask Helga to be his wife.

About the same time that Helga received Tom's letters, Tom received a letter from a Lieutenant Colonel Swartz at the Savannah, Georgia, air base, asking him to brief the USAF on his stay in Germany. Tom, not attaching high priority to this request, thought it was a waste of time. Following orders, nevertheless, he asked his chief flying instructor, Gary, an easygoing Minnesotan of Norwegian background with whom he had developed a close friendship, to contact the lieutenant colonel and suggest he was indispensable at the base, at least for the foreseeable future. He hoped the meeting could be postponed to a later time and that, with the end of the war in sight, the request might eventually be lost in the shuffle.

The chief flying instructor, also a captain by rank, was privy to Tom's opinion regarding war. This was, however, of no concern to the CFI. The only importance was Tom's proficiency as an instructor. Besides, he was pleased Tom was a genuine buddy to all his students. When a slow learner needed additional training, Tom was always available after hours. The CFI, however, asked Tom not to discuss his opinions about the war with his students. Tom readily agreed; teaching them to fly was uppermost in his mind.

"No problem, Tom. I'll see what I can do; of course you understand he is a lieutenant colonel and we are only captains, but I'll try."

"Thanks, Gary, I owe you."

"Don't worry. I am accumulating the favours, and one day you will owe me big time," Gary laughingly replied.


With two weeks of holiday coming his way late in the summer, Tom spoke to his father concerning his intention to go to Germany and ask Helga to be his wife.

Tom's father and moreso his mother were hoping Tom would forget Germany and Helga. Tom's mother was openly hoping Tom would eventually fall in love with Sally.

"Tom, you have to be really certain of what you are doing. America is an unfamiliar place for Helga. She will miss her family; moreover, you must examine your feelings and be scrupulously honest with yourself. Personally I think you are rushing things. You knew her all of seven weeks, and most of this time you were ailing. Why not correspond for a while, get to know each other better? Besides, like I told you before, you and Sally seem to be a perfect match. Why not give her a chance?"

"Mom, Sally is a great friend, and that's all. As far as knowing Helga, and I know this sounds ludicrous, if I was to know her for a million years, I would not know her better than I know her now."

"Tom, it doesn't sound ridiculous. It sounds like you're in love...I am just concerned that you are caught up because she saved your life, and yes you owe her a great deal, but you don't owe your life to her. Tom, I want you to know, however, whatever you ultimately decide, your father and I will support you, and should you decide to bring Helga over here and make her your wife, we will be here for the two of you."



Chapter 29

By the middle of April 1945, the Allies' mission to eradicate Hitler and his Third Reich was at long last accomplished. It had taken four and one half years and untold frustration and sacrifices, not only for the soldiers, but also for the countless civilians left behind, wondering if one or more member of their immediate families would ever make it back home again. Not to speak of the hundreds of thousands of civilians killed or, worse, crippled for life.

Although Germany was on its knees and absolutely without defence, in April of 1945 American and English bombers decisively ended the war with brutal strikes against civilians, chiefly orchestrated in Berlin, Dresden, Chemnitz and Leipzig. Official history clearly shows that Churchill was instrumental in this operation, known as "Thunderclap."

Later, when the atrocities of bombing Dresden became public, Churchill, responsible for these war crimes, tried to distance himself from this cold-blooded slaughter. Nobody really knows the exact death toll of this foul act, killing mostly woman, children and old folks during the dying days of the war. Conservative estimates range in the hundreds of thousands.

Hitler, on the other hand, acted as the catalyst to start this insane massacre by invading Poland in September of 1939, fantasizing about conquering not only Poland but all of Europe, part of

Africa and all of Russia. An unbiased study of the European Second World War would give weight to the suggestion that Hitler in all probability could have attained this goal if he had listened to the likes of Rommel, Fritsch, Beck, Witzleben, Speidel, Stülpnagel, Paulus, Manteufel and many other level-headed officers. Hitler's incredibly successful early campaigns were in fact immensely helpful to the Allies. Hitler, now of the opinion his *Blitzkrieg* strategy was fail-safe, became monstrously overconfident. His inner circle was henceforth comprised of minions instead of seasoned battlefield generals.

Götterdämmerung came, not to the Allies, as prophesied by Hitler, but to his own country. Germany was in chaos. The last few days in Berlin and Dresden were out of Dante's Inferno. The streets and ruins were covered with mangled bodies of both sexes and all ages; mortally wounded people, suffering unbearable pain, would beg passersby to kill them. Constant shelling and bombings created fires everywhere. It was hell on earth.

Hitler finally faced defeat. Aware that the pinnacle of his dream was lost forever, he supposedly committed suicide on April 30 at 3:30 p.m. in his bunker in Berlin. After the war, rumours circulated that Hitler didn't commit suicide but somehow made his way to Spain or South America. These rumours were supported by Dr. Robert Dorion, Director of Forensic Dentistry for the Ministry of the Solicitor General of Quebec, Canada, who claimed he found obvious inconsistencies between the photographs of the corpse's teeth and the thousands of open-mouth shots of Hitler. The corpse was in fact the body of Hitler's double, a Mr. Sillip from Austria. While several of Hitler's aides, including Traudl Jung, one of his personal secretaries, insisted Hitler took his own life, Stalin, who definitely had a mole very close to Hitler inside the Third Reich, immediately claimed that Hitler did not commit suicide but escaped. More importantly, no remains of Hitler's burned body nor

that of Eva Braun was ever found. (A recently published book by H. D. Baumann, *Hitler's Fate*, makes an extremely convincing argument that Hitler did in fact escape and most likely lived in Argentina until he died of natural causes.)

On the 7th of May, 1945, Germany unconditionally surrendered. The slaughterer's European segment of World War II was over. In the Pacific, the ghastly carnage of civilians in Hiroshima and Nagasaki orchestrated by America was still a few months away. When the final curtain fell on World War II, Japan was saturated with atomized souls screaming murder. The "Land of the Free," the peace-loving United States, will forever have the dubious distinction of unleashing the first atomic bomb in human history, killing almost exclusively Japanese civilians in August of 1945. Japan, who indisputably killed hundreds of thousands of Chinese civilians in cold blood earlier in the war, surrendered. The madness of the Second World War was finally over.

No sooner was the war over then disagreement over splitting the booty caused the first serious conflict between the USA and the Soviets. Animosity and distrust crept into their relationship very quickly. The rift in the coalition was the beginning of an atomic arms race between these two giants that would span the next forty-five years, introducing moments of catastrophic dimensions to the world. *Armageddon* became a household word during these years. Naive politicians, teachers, and parents alike told their kids to hide underneath their desks in the event of a nuclear attack. The Cold War had started.

Man, in truth, had not learned anything. To purify the world of a man like Hitler was at first applauded. As time went on, Churchill, like a farmer who has more pigs in his stable than he can handle, said, "We killed the wrong pig."

Many questions have never been satisfactorily answered regarding this dark period of human existence. What was the real

reason behind World War II? Did the oil transport route from Baku to the Suez Canal have anything to do with this shameful period in man's history? What role did the Rothschilds play in the Jewish genocide? What was the real reason for the Armenian genocide? Why was Hitler supported financially by several American and British businesses?

Fatigued, dressed in rags, the German people, regardless of impediment, restored bombed-out homes one brick at a time. Stretching their physical and mental wherewithal, they soared from the ashes like the mythical bird the phoenix, who died in the flames but rose from the dead. It was one of Germany's greatest moments. The past served as a stark reminder to never again fall prey to the rhetoric of one man but collectively in true democratic fashion decide their future. In spite of their tenacity to rebuilt, several years would go by before the scars of war finally vanished.

Schweinfurt became the home of the barracks of U.S. Ledward, part of the Second Brigade, First Infantry Division. They were originally built in 1935-36 for Panzer Regiment Four and named the Adolf Hitler Panzerkaserne. The German eagle, minus its swastika, remains on the building beside the main gate to this date.

Helga had the embarrassing distinction of being the first German woman to have a baby out of wedlock from an American soldier during World War II. A great number followed over the years, as thousands of young Americans were stationed in Schweinfurt and other German towns and cities. Tom's letters gave her the strength to confront this alleged shame with as much grace as humanly possible.

When Dieter came home towards the middle of April, the first time since his father's death, his abrasive attitude towards Helga nearly crushed the self-confidence she had gained since Tom's letters arrived. He wanted her off the farm. Tradition in

Germany bestowed the homestead to the oldest child, subject to compensation to younger siblings, generally in the form of a lump sum payment or living space in the ancestral home for a prolonged period.

Germany's trade and commerce was in chaos. The Allies, with the help of German civil servants, industry leaders and banks, would still require a couple of years to establish accustomed German orderliness. Obtaining financing to pay out Helga's share was therefore no easy task. With savings depleted and no prospect of mortgaging the farm in the near future, Dieter had no recourse but to let Helga stay on the farm. Providentially, Helga's father had the foresight to protect Helga in his last will and testament.

They hardly talked to one another. Helga tried a few times to appease Dieter. His response however, in divers ways, was always the same. "How could you be so foolish and get yourself pregnant? From an American to boot! The shame you brought over this house will stay with us forever."

Helga finally had enough of these thoughtless comments. Mustering sufficient nerve, she raised her voice, almost shouting. "In all your years of service, you have never been with a woman? No, do not answer...I can see how much of a hypocrite you really are. Without fail, it is okay for you to go and sleep with a woman—your mates will even compliment you on getting your own way—but in your eyes, women are always whores."

Deep down, he knew she was right. Without answering, he simply walked away. His inflexible stance and obstinate self-control, caused by his ego, would not permit sympathy. False pride and foolish angst about what the neighbours might say stopped him from being a brother.

On April 23, Helga visited Dr. Schmidt; two days later, she went into labour. And on April 25 at 1:05 in the morning, young Thomas sluggishly started life's challenging journey. Due to meticulous

German bureaucracy, the birth certificate stated that baby Thomas was born out of wedlock to Helga Berger.

Helga had not heard anything further from Tom since receiving his letters. The letters were in her handbag during her stay in hospital.

Dr. and Mrs. Schmidt and Christine were the only visitors. Christine brought American chocolate, acquired through the black market, sprung up overnight courtesy of resourceful Germans and young enterprising American soldiers.

Helga, mostly alone in the hospital, started once more to feel abandoned. To make matters worse, rumours as to who the father of the baby was resulted in Helga's castigation by several staff members. Only Dr. Schmidt's intervention controlled the abuse.

The baby weighed almost eleven pounds. He was born with pneumonia and pleurisy, and his weight was conceivably a lifesaver. Three days after birth, the baby's condition deteriorated, and everybody expected him to die during the night. A priest administered last rites. The doctor, moved by compassion for Helga's predicament, remarked it might be best if the baby would die. His wife, however, reminded him that it is in God's hand who will live and who will die.

Although Helga's belief in God was by now sparse, she nevertheless prayed incessantly the better part of the night. By morning there were concrete signs of improvement. Quickly the news that Helga had prayed the baby to better health spread through the maternity ward. The slanderous remarks died that day.

Young Thomas, so named for most of his early years, was determined to live. Helga's prolonged prayers, as well as the doctor's dedicated care and the root of existence, namely the will to live, contributed toward recovery.

A drawn-out, tiresome and tormenting week went by before Dr. Schmidt thought the worst was over. The stress of coping with a

sick child jolted Helga's emotions once again. One moment she was exalted over being a mother; the next instant she slipped to earlier lows. Not hearing anything further from Tom added to her struggle to maintain a mental balance. But regardless of her doubt about the future, the baby gave her the will to carry on. Her daily prayers for the baby's recovery, as well as beseeching God for comforting news from the baby's father, helped her to live one day at a time.

Leaving the hospital, back in the comfort of her own home, she mailed a lengthy letter to Tom. Considering the present turmoil in Germany, she was worried it would take weeks, if not months, before her letter would arrive. In her letter she mentioned young Tom's birth and her father's death.

Weeks turned into months, and still there was no reply. Plagued by the baby's ill health, she added misery to her day-to-day life, wondering if Tom had reconsidered. As summer gave way to fall, she wondered if Tom's promise, so convincingly portrayed in his delightful letters, was sincere at the time of writing. Not hearing anything further, she began to suspect he had all but forgotten her. In her mother's sewing box, she found a pretty ribbon, tied all of Tom's letters into a neat bundle, and placed them in a shoebox for safekeeping. With a baby to look after, she was determined not to relapse; her pragmatic side told her that the dream of a future with Tom was nothing but wonderful breathing space in a world gone mad.



Chapter 30

Most men consider shedding tears a sign of weakness. This, of course, is foolishness; tears are the echoes of the heart. Thus, it can be said quite rightly, no tears, no heart. Physically speaking, only tears can wash our eyes, and with all the filth in the world, tears are a prerequisite to seeing farther and more clearly.

In spite of Germany's disarray, Tom received Helga's letter in late August of 1945. Learning he was a father moistened his eyes, producing a few precious tears. For the first time in his life, he decided to take a day off work and celebrate. Two of his cadets, slated for advanced aerial training, and Gary, the chief flying instructor, were the lucky benefactors of this exiting news. A liberal amount of assorted bubbly, served with many light-hearted jokes about being a father, completed the day and most of the evening.

Tom recalled how ecstatic he was at earning his wings years ago; the news of being a father, however, eclipsed that exceptional day. His desire to go to Germany within the next couple of months now increased tenfold.

Home on the weekend, he bought the only two boxes of cigars the village store had in stock and handed out cigars to everybody he met. The news spread quickly. Some folks were genuinely puzzled; others were amused. "What about Sally? Did he really get a girl in trouble while he was in Germany?" The fickleness of human

nature was in his favour. Hometown heroes were permitted trespasses; it was looked upon as a symbol of accomplishment.

His parents, shocked at first, allowed his elated feelings to sweep over them before long. The word continued to spread quickly, and friends and family visited the Williams' open house all weekend.

Sally heard the news Saturday morning from Tom's mom at the local hair salon. Poised as always, she maintained her composure and implied she was happy for Tom. In truth, a dagger pierced her heart, leaving her desolate and wondering what to do next. Mrs Williams, fully aware how Sally must feel, nevertheless asked her to drop by. Sally graciously declined, saying that she had to catch up on some long overdue housework.

Once home, Mrs Williams told Tom she had invited Sally to drop by. "Tom, you know Sally hides her feelings very well, but I could see she was very disappointed."

Tom, caught in his own awe-inspiring world, was too preoccupied to pay attention; true to his gender, he was naively hoping Sally would understand and drop by anyway.

Back to work on Monday, with time to spare in the afternoon, Tom mailed two more letters to Helga. These letters never arrived; presumably they were lost in the widespread confusion still gripping Germany.



Chapter 31

By the summer of 1945, the horrifying atrocities of Germany's concentration camps caught worldwide attention. The savage killing of millions of Jews, as well as Gypsies and other so-called *Undermenschen* (subhumans), created a stigma, not only for those responsible, but for all Germans.

After the war, most German civilians claimed to not have been aware of these repulsive transgressions. In fairness, this is likely true. However, acting as an ostrich burying one's head in the sand hardly mitigates responsibility. Common folks had to be mindful to a greater or lesser extent, as Jews, Gypsies and the disabled were transferred to somewhere. Where to was, however, of no importance to most Germans, considering the frailty of their own state.

The world at large, with possibly the exception of the USA, has to share the blame. Many countries, for example England and Canada, turned away Jews who tried to immigrate prior to World War II. Millions of people could have been saved from brutal torture and eventual death. Powerful Jewish families may also share responsibility in this horrid chapter. Having the opportunity to influence the world, for reasons conveniently lost in the past they looked the other way.

Helga was daily pondering the baby's future. Not hearing anything from Tom, looking after a sickly child, and putting up with her brother's open hostility made life very challenging.

By mid August, Dieter had managed to acquire sufficient funds to compensate Helga for her share in their father's farm. It was a sizeable sum, allowing her to purchase an intact flat, close to Dr. Schmidt's home in the old part of the city, bordering city hall, on a narrow street called Judengasse (Jews' Alley). In the not too distant future, Helga would be astounded by how fitting a name this old street once again became, considering there were no Jews to be seen anywhere. The flat, situated close to the river Main, allowed her to take the baby for long walks on a regular basis along the riverbanks.

In the city, not a soul was concerned about who lived next door. Numerous women now lived alone with their kids as being a widow was very common. No stares and hurtful words from village yokels was a definite relief. Helga, however, missed Christine. Friends since kindergarten, they effortlessly shared the secrets of their souls; moreover, daily conversations, at times light-hearted, other times momentous, were an important part of their lives. Helga and Christine were by all definitions best friends, comforting each other daily, particularly during challenging teenage and war years.

Life was not easy for Christine. Her father, a paraplegic veteran of the First World War, found relief in cheap wine, and morphine when available. In his drunken stupor he called Christine, at a ridiculously young age, a *Nutte* (whore), because she used red crayon as pretend lipstick. Eventually his constant rancour allowed Christine to become a nonconformist at a very young age. This step was not thought out due to some self-exploratory drive within but simply a result of being sick and tired living in a home deprived of normal family contact, where disintegration of family values was norm.

Christine, while sensitive to her father's wretched existence, nevertheless subconsciously responded to his sickly behaviour by

debasement herself willingly. Since her father was incapable of hurting her physically, she exacerbated the situation by using an abundance of lipstick in her teenage years. Christine's mom, living a life of quiet desperation, accepted her mediocre life as permanent and unchanging, never defending Christine from her husband's verbal abuse nor chastising Christine for wearing lipstick or coming home in the early hours of the morning. Tired, weak and resigned, she simply avoided all conflicts.

Christine loved her mom, recognizing that she was as much a casualty of war as her father was. Laden with responsibilities, duties and obligations, she never expected more. Christine's only sibling, Peter, four years older, conquered his fears early in life and left home at the age of sixteen. He joined the merchant marines, and the last time they heard from him was back in 1941, when a postcard from Argentina arrived, saying hello from South America, but nothing else.

As Helga was getting ready to move, she made Christine promise to visit her at least once a week. Christine, who would miss Helga as much as Helga missed her, cheerfully agreed. "Helga, not far from your flat is a bar frequented only by Americans. The music is so different, loud, and the melodies unlike ours, yet the lyrics have a transparency very much like our own songs. More importantly, the place is full of single soldiers. We should go. Perhaps we will meet some real American cowboy who aims to ride my saddle. I can then go home and let my father know that I finally graduated as a whore."

"Christine, what will I do without you? You make me laugh. How do you know they are all single? Maybe they have wives and kids back home."

"They are too young to be married. Most of them are our age, or younger. Besides, we won't go there to get married. We'll listen to the music, have a dance or two, and have fun. Ask your Aunt

Luise to babysit. You need to go out and enjoy yourself. Sitting at home, day in day out, is boring. Besides, it's simply not good for you to surrender to your feelings."

Helga reluctantly agreed. "Well, I don't know...we'll see. Maybe we could drop by for an hour or so."

Germany was hungry in the truest sense of the word. The food shortage was overwhelming. People lined up at state run slaughterhouses for hours on end in order to get their rations of meat. It was not uncommon for one family member to start lining up at midnight, someone else taking over at 7 or 8 in the morning, and a third member relieving the second person at midday, to finally stand in front of the meat counter at 2 or 3 in the afternoon. On a horrid day the master butcher would come out around lunchtime and tell everybody that all the meat was sold, better luck next time. Families standing in line for twelve hours or more left quietly. Wasting energy was useless. "Maybe better luck tomorrow; let's go home and work on the house."

Dieter tried hard to come to terms with the demise of his beloved Third Reich. He wondered daily what the immediate future would hold for him. An American intelligence officer came twice to call on him. On both occasions Dieter was with friends, rehashing wartime stories at the local pub. On his second visit, the American soldier left explicit instructions with Klaus for Dieter to contact the American headquarters in Schweinfurt.

Used to living on the edge for the previous few years, Dieter was not overly concerned about meeting the American's request. There were more important rows to hoe. His mind was back in time, reliving nerve-racking, chilling, yet exhilarating moments, and the adjustment to mundane daily chores proved to be more difficult than dodging depth charges in the Atlantic.

Alone at home in the evenings, he missed his family. Soon he questioned his attitude toward Helga. The doctor, visiting on a

regular basis, naturally had a hand in all of this; no visit would go by without him taking advantage of a suitable moment to admonish Dieter. "Dieter, think back when you were all kids, how well you all got along. Helga is not a bad girl; she never was. Besides, she really needs you now more than ever."

The doctor's words gradually found fertile soil. Dieter realized, moreover acknowledged, that Helga was his only close remaining family link. Soon this awareness caused twinges of remorse. Easing his conscience, he told the doctor to let Helga know she had first pick of their parents' furniture. Feeling this was not enough, he promised to arrange delivery.

Helga, overjoyed by his offer, was hopeful that a new page in their relationship was imminent.

Little Tom, four months old by now, started to gain strength, and Helga witnessed how strong willed he was. Getting his way wilfully when something bothered him quickly became routine.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into months. Helga increasingly expected to never hear from Tom again.

Untying the bundle of letters from time to time, still hoping, she would read his letters, allowing her mind to travel. Reading the letters was however a two-edged sword. Tears of joy often turned into tears of despair. The neatly bundled letters were placed again into a shoebox, loneliness took hold of her, and life became bleak. She now even missed the farm, wishing to once again visit the space she had shared with Tom.



Chapter 32

One weekend in early September, looking forward to his trip to Germany, Tom was dumbfounded when his father handed him a letter he had mailed to Helga back in May. It was marked “*Adresse nicht vorhanden*” (no such address). To say he was troubled would be an understatement. His mind did cartwheels. What happened? Knowing how bombs frequently missed their target by miles, he immediately thought a disaster befell the Berger’s farm.

Not wanting to wait till Monday, he returned to base on Sunday, hoping to meet with his CFI to arrange an immediate leave.

Gary was however away for the weekend. All day Sunday Tom, anxious and feeling helpless, wished he had stayed at his parents’ home.

First thing Monday morning he met with his CFI, but before he could talk, the CFI interrupted, handing Tom a typed notice from HQ.

“Congratulations, Tom! You are promoted to chief flying instructor. I just received telephone confirmation this morning.”

Tom, reading the order, was dumbfounded; it was an immediate transfer to a base in the Pacific as a CFI. Looking at Gary with bewildered eyes, he handed the order back and in a quiet but firm voice said, “Gary I am pleased about the promotion...but I am not going.”

“Tom, I realize this transfer comes as a shock. I was just as flabbergasted as you are, and in fact HQ called a few minutes ago and asked to speak to you directly. HQ is anxious for you to hop on the next plane. You realize refusing an order can have serious repercussion to your career.”

“The war is over. Japan surrendered. Why do we need a CFI in the Philippines? Our boys are coming home. Surely there must be a mistake. Maybe the order was drafted before Japan surrendered.”

“Tom, I was told a squadron remains in the Philippines for good measure, at least for the next few years. Part of this squadron is a flying school. God only knows the reason; the lieutenant I spoke to from HQ also had no idea. Just following orders was his remark.”

Lighting up a cigarette and inhaling deeply was a manly way to give them time to think. Tom was first to break the silence. “Gary, what do you think would happen if I flat refused to go?”

“Well, that’s hard to foresee. You are an all-American hometown hero...that carries a lot of weight...but honestly, I don’t know, possibly a demotion to lower rank. Why don’t you go to Germany, bring your *fräulin* back here, get married, and take her with you to the Philippines?”

Tom’s face lit up like a Christmas tree. “Gary, sometimes you make a lot of sense. Let me call HQ and suggest I am ready for a transfer, in let’s say four to six weeks from now. I am not going to elaborate on my immediate plans, and when I come back from Germany with Helga, I will spring the news on them.”

“You owe me big time. Good luck. I hate to see you leave...but I guess that’s life in the air force. Let me know how things work out. I have to make changes to our schedule; I guess I have to chip in until I get a replacement instructor.”



Chapter 33

Unanswered questions following a tragedy seem to support and amplify the irony of life. Disasters, regardless of origin, nevertheless obey a natural order. No explanation why misfortune comes our way can satisfy our finite minds. Routine or, worse, thoughtless condolences never fill the void; they only beg further questions. Predominantly hidden, what seem to be the convoluted workings of providence elude our troubled minds.

Advanced human spirit, however, knows that no deviation from laws set in motion before time existed is sanctioned. This awareness eases sorrow only to the few who accept the inevitable. Cause and effect, in a three-dimensional world, works toward an unwavering regularity. Indefinable reality, simply said, is on a much higher plateau. Detached from this higher reality, three-dimensional consequences, experienced by our five senses, cannot fathom truth. Subsequently catastrophe, on a much deeper level, may fulfill or execute laws of reciprocal action. Tragedy might set free distinct, yet mysterious, connections. This knowledge was conveyed to men long ago but unfortunately lost in the effect of our own doing. Simply stated, disaster evidently forces us to question the meaning of life, in an otherwise self-centred materialistic environment.

Tom's phone call to HQ was easier than expected. He was told to report to Savannah, Georgia, for a briefing on his new post.

Thereafter he could take his holiday and report for duty in the Philippines. He was elated by the way his plans crystallized. The trip to Georgia was nothing but a necessary step in his quest to meet Helga.

He boarded the airplane on his way to Savannah, Georgia. An experienced senior captain piloted the DC-3. Tom looked forward getting a ride in this legendary airplane, which had already captured its place in aviation history. The aircraft, certified airworthy, had recently passed its mandatory inspection. The flight itself was to be relatively short and routine.

Immediately after takeoff the right engine stuttered. Within seconds it quit. No reason for alarm; a DC-3 can fly on one engine. Pilots are trained for this type of emergency: fether the prop of the affected engine, compensate with the opposite rudder, and land the craft—a standard procedure mastered by professional pilots during extensive initial and ongoing training.

The pilot handled the engine failure in a routine professional manner. However, a minute later the remaining engine quit. Now the outcome became critical and uncertain. Time was of the essence: check for a suitable landing field, keep an eye on the air-speed, don't stall the plane, check switches, and try to start the engines, hoping not to run out of airspace before finding a place to land.

As in life, so it is in flying: the higher the altitude, the more time to prepare for a crash landing. Lamentably, the DC-3 had just reached 3,500 feet when engine number two quit. Fate started to leave its footprints in the sands of life. The pilot banked the airplane, nose down in order not to stall, to the left, trying to reach the threshold of a runway 90 degrees to the runway he took off on. But as soon as the remaining engine ceased, the airplane dropped like a stone, and in no time the left wing hit the ground. The wing snapped like a dried twig, and the cockpit partially separated from

the hull. Everyone died on impact. Subsequent investigation laid the blame on fuel starvation, in both engines, due to a residue in the fuel tanks. The findings of the investigation provided no comfort to those left behind. Words of condolence sounded hollow.

Tom's family was utterly heartbroken, not coming to terms with how he survived Germany only to be killed in such an unpredictable, ridiculous accident.

Mrs. Williams gradually withdrew from daily activities, and for the first time in her life she could not share her pain with her husband. Tom's dad lay awake at night for weeks on end. With little sleep, he would nevertheless go to his garden in the early hours of the morning and often stay there until lunchtime.

Shirley, working in the local drugstore, came home for lunch, hoping to convince her parents to have lunch with her. "Mom, Dad, come and join me for lunch. You ought to eat...not eating properly will only make things worse. I am still here, and not looking after yourself would only anger Tom."

The spirited conversations at the kitchen table were absent. Prolonged silence was the norm. Sometimes Mrs. Williams would get up and leave the kitchen, not wanting to cry in front of the others. Now and then she tried to talk, sharing grief, but once Shirley returned to work, Tom's parents generally went their own way for the rest of the day. This lull in communication was due to not wanting to increase each other's pain.

Questions as to why this senseless accident happened were on everyone's mind. The whole village was in a state of shock. Strangers travelling through, not knowing the reason for the subdued demeanour, put it down to morose mountain folks. Shirley, to be married in December, asked her fiancé to postpone the wedding until next spring. He understood and agreed immediately.

The day of Tom's funeral, every store, including the post office and the office of the local municipality, closed its doors. People

from all over the county, as well as the few who had missed the homecoming party, not wanting to miss out again, made sure they paid their last respects.

The funeral home was crowded, and speakers were set up outside for folks who could not gain access. The ritual funeral ceremony was solemn. Moist eyes and at times intense wailing made it difficult for the members of the service to carry out their function.

Three air cadets, Gary the CFI, Jimmy and Roger, were chosen to be pallbearers. Sally was invited to speak. Standing next to the closed coffin, fighting for words, she started to cry. Turning, she sat down without saying a word.

Old Tom was asked to eulogize Tom. Composed, with a gentle voice, he started with words fitting for the grieving listeners.

"It isn't difficult for all of us to remember Tom as the brave and exceptional young man he was. We could speak for days about how he loved life and how he amused us from time to time with some of his antics. Why he was chosen to meet his maker so early in his young life escapes our understanding. His life was cut short by a tragic accident, but we must never forget the gift that was bestowed on us when he came home from Germany. Ironically, the compassion of a German family made it possible for Tom to come home to us. Likely we never would have known of his fate, only to be told months later he was missing in action. To die so young, with so much to live for, is difficult to grasp. We can never understand a tragedy like this. Our hearts are sad, because we will miss him dearly. Questions as to why this had to happen only confound us more. Now is the time to be strong and take comfort that life everlasting is promised to us all. Tom has entered a place where there is no pain, no sorrow. He can spread his wings and fly in a heavenly squadron, where love is the order of the day. Let us never forget that life on earth is nothing but a flyby. The real abode awaits us all one day, when our final landing brings us to a realm of bliss unlike

anything we can imagine. Tom, for reasons we don't understand today, was asked to go before us, but we should take refuge in the knowledge that when it is our turn to say goodbye to this temporary place we call home, Tom will greet us. Let us lay his physical body to rest and always remember that Tom's spirit lives with us forever. Let us say goodbye to Tom with joy in our hearts for the time we spent together. May God give us the strength to cope with our grief."

Agonizing, painful days followed the funeral. Mr. Williams, who had always looked younger than his years, turned completely grey within weeks of Tom's funeral. Subdued and solemn, his days were spent in the garden putting around, doing things mechanically and without passion. His lifelong cheerful mannerisms died with Tom. Months went by before he could speak to anybody about this tragedy. Mrs. Williams sought refuge in prayer and contemplation in the local Episcopalian church. She also aged considerably. A slight curvature of the spine forced her to walk with a slight forward bend in her body.

Then one day, months after Tom's death, Mr. Williams brought up the subject everybody had avoided since Tom's funeral. Looking at no one in particular, he stated, "We have to let Helga know what has happened. Shirley, go through Tom's things, look up her address, and write a letter. We must inform her of Tom's death."

Shirley, sensitive to her father's pain and feeling guilty for failing to write a letter to Helga right after the funeral, blamed herself immediately. "Oh, Dad, I should have done this a long time ago. Tom will never forgive me. I will write a letter this evening."

"Shirley, no need to blame yourself. I should have asked you the day after Tom's accident, but to be honest I just couldn't bring myself to talk about it."

Searching for appropriate words to convey this ghastly news

was not easy for Shirley, putting pen to paper past midnight, mindful of how Tom would have approved of her writing. In the end, after several attempts, she wrote from her heart, woman-to-woman, aware that Helga would have become her sister-in-law if fate had not delivered this devastating blow. She mailed the letter the next day.



Chapter 34

Living in the city for a few months, Helga, with ample help from Christine, recognized that a new chapter in her life was inevitable. It was the end of her youth, moreover the end of naivety.

Accomplishing this change, she promised Christine, “From this day forward I alone will determine what is meaningful in my life. Feelings are at best temporary and fickle, and I will never live by feelings alone. No man will ever hurt me again.”

Christine was convinced Helga’s monumental resolution was because of not hearing from Tom as well as her brother’s failure to stand by her during these difficult times. The real reason, though, was accumulated pain. Not hearing from Tom and her brother’s callous attitude were instrumental. However, losing her mother, her father, and a brother over a relatively short period was the real reason for this phase in her life. Not hearing anything from the father of her child, as well as the mindset of her remaining sibling, was simply the straw that broke the camel’s back. Cultivating numbness was the antidote to deal with life’s upheaval over the last few years. Her resolute new outlook on life was short-lived; it came to a bitter and completely unforeseen end.

The American sergeant who had dropped Tom’s letters off appeared at Helga’s doorstep. When she opened the door and asked him, “How did you find me?” he at once realized by her mannerism

and tone of voice that a different person than the one he remembered had answered the door.

“Your hired hand gave me your new address,” he replied in a compliant, surprised tone of voice.

“He is not my hired hand any longer. My brother made sure of that. Come in. Don’t stand in the doorway; otherwise my reputation will soon find a home here as well.”

“I don’t want to cause any trouble, Miss Helga, just dropped by to say hi and see how you are getting on. The last time I saw you, you were not feeling well, and I thought it wouldn’t hurt to find out how you are.”

“I’m fine, other than having a baby from an American pilot who doesn’t remember who I am, and my brother calling me a whore, but otherwise I am okay.”

The American, remembering the crushed yet instantaneously rejuvenated young girl he had met a few months before, wondered why she had this profound change in behaviour.

“Miss, I am sorry for what you have been through. I just wanted to say hi. Perhaps there is something you need for the baby, or yourself, and maybe I can be of help in some way...”

Thanks to Christine, Helga was aware of the flourishing black market in Schweinfurt. The American could provide essentials not found in any German store. This realization put a smile on her face. “What is your name, soldier? You know mine, and it would help to know yours.”

“I am so sorry, Miss Helga. I am Pete Rosenzweig, all the way from Santa Monica, California, making Schweinfurt my home for the foreseeable future.”

By his surname Helga knew she was talking to an American Jew. The smile changed to a grin. Having an American soldier, a Jew to boot, calling on her would add ammunition to people’s gossip. Despite this certainty, she was prepared to take advantage of

the offer. Obtaining food and clothing, and more importantly medicine for the baby, was ultimately more important than being labelled “*Eine Ami Hure*.”

“Can I offer you that coffee I promised a few months ago?” Going against German etiquette, she added, “Please don’t call me Miss; my name is Helga.”

Pete, tall, skinny, and rather pale-faced, was a soft-spoken man. His brownish-red hair was army style, short cropped. He was not handsome by any stretch of the imagination; in a crowd nobody would notice him. His deep blue eyes, however, made up for the plain facial features. He looked directly into Helga’s eyes as she spoke, and she was struck by how his eyes revealed intelligence and sincerity. His nose lacked the genetically characteristic hook so evident in Jews from southern Russia.

Familiar with German etiquette, he turned red, like a schoolboy, as Helga asked him to address her by her given name. “Thank you, Helga. I gather you had your baby. Is it a boy or a girl?”

“A boy, and he is already four months old. Thank God his health is improving daily. He is sleeping right now. Come in, sit down and let me make you one of our ghastly coffees.”

“Thank you. I am not a coffee connoisseur; I am sure whatever you make will taste okay.”

“How do you take your coffee?”

“A little sugar and a little milk.” Remembering how difficult it was to get milk or sugar, he quickly added, “Black will be okay.”

It was a dreary day, and low clouds hanging over the city signalled rain. As Pete made himself comfortable in one of Helga’s large upholstered chairs, the clouds finally burst and the rain came down in buckets. With the curtain half drawn, the eerie darkness transformed the living room into a shadowy place. The semi-darkness intuitively forced Pete to look around the room. Once his eyes

adjusted to the twilight, he admired the antique solid oak furniture he had overlooked when he first stepped into the rather small living room, crowded with large, bulky furniture.

“Oh my, why not put the light on? Look at the rain; I guess it was coming,” Helga said, bringing the coffee. Just then a monstrous thunderclap shook the whole house. Little Tom, startled, started to cry. Helga placed the coffee on the table and rushed to his crib. Holding him close to her chest, she brought him into the living room.

As she stepped into the living room, Pete, on impulse, walked toward her, stretching out his arms to hold the baby.

“I think I better change him first; that unmistakable odour tells me it is high time.”

While Helga changed the baby, Pete continued to examine the intricate ornamental carving on the oak sideboard, a hand-carved masterpiece dating back to the 18th century, in the Berger household for four generations. Amongst all the outstanding antique furniture in the Bergers’ household, this sideboard had been the pride and joy of Helga’s mother. Helga was delighted when Dieter agreed it was hers to keep. Mindful of her mother’s fondness for this unique piece of furniture, she was determined that it would never leave her possession, and perhaps one day she could pass it on to one of her children.

The sturdy yet graceful legs were finely crafted angels, their bodies entwined around what appeared to be a massive grapevine, arms stretched upward to assist holding up the cupboard. On the doors and sides of the massive cabinet, shapely angelic beings encircled what looked like Bacchus, the god of wine, while clusters of grapes were tucked between the angels.

“Do you like this sideboard? I saw you look at it earlier. It has been in our family for over 100 years.”

“It is a beautiful piece of furniture and truly an antique. Do you know its history?”

“Not really. All I know is my great-grandfather purchased it with some other pieces of furniture when he got married from some eccentric penniless count named *Von Reisig* in Würzburg, a nearby city.”

Changing the subject, she continued. “Do you still want to hold this little stinker? Now all cleaned up, with a full tummy, he should be okay for a couple of hours.”

Pete nodded, and she handed little Tom over to the American. Teasingly, she looked right at the baby. “Take a look...here is someone who is an American like your papa.”

Pete, endowed with a sensitive nature, realized that people use humour to express their emotional state. “Have you heard from his father?”

Helga, realizing the vulnerability of her remark, made amends. “Other than the letters you delivered I never heard anything further. I guess now that he is home, his life returned to normal, we are too far away for him to take care of us. Anyway, it was foolishness on my part to look forward to a future...there are too many obstacles in the way. I should have known.”

“I am sorry things did not work out. Perhaps you will still hear from him; give it time.”

Helga did not reply to Pete’s remark. Alert to her feelings, he dropped the topic. He stayed for the better part of one hour, and their conversation was largely about Schweinfurt’s history and the geography of the surrounding area.

“Helga, thank you for the coffee. I have to return to the barracks. May I drop by from time to time? Perhaps, as I mentioned earlier, I could get some supplies for you and the baby. Anyway, I really enjoyed talking with you. If you have some time perhaps you could show me Schweinfurt. I would love to learn more about the history of this city and the surrounding areas.”

Helga nonchalantly answered in the affirmative.

Several days later Pete came back with two cans of Maxwell House coffee, a box of assorted chocolates, and a couple of jars of Vicks Vaporub. He knocked at the door several times and was about to leave when Helga opened the door only a couple of inches, hoping it was Christine.

Eyes red and swollen from prolonged crying, Helga saw Pete standing there. “Oh, it’s you. Sorry...it isn’t a good time. Can you come back some other time?” Tears rolling down her cheeks, she tried to close the door.

Pete, though, quickly handed her the coffee sideways through the partly opened door. Her hesitation allowed Pete to ask her, “Helga, what is the matter? What has happened? Is there anything I can do?”

“No, please...just leave me alone. Right now is not a good time.”

Pete, genuinely concerned, realized something was seriously wrong. Helga looked as pale and sickly as when he had met her for the very first time. “Are you okay? What about little Tom? Can I help with anything at all?”

Helga, hearing Tom’s name, broke down. Uncontrollable deep sobs shook her body violently. Piercing the air, her lamentation rose upward, questioning and condemning God for her lot in life. Then abruptly her voice changed pitch to a whimper, denouncing life itself. By her dreadful cries Pete knew something serious had taken place. He heard the name *Tom* amongst her whimpers, but he could not make out what she was saying.

By now the door was wide open. Pete, taking this as a sign to enter, closed the door gently behind himself.

Helga, preoccupied with grief, endured Pete’s determination to stay. She slowly walked across the room and sat on the couch, her hands intermittently covering her red face, blowing her nose and wiping away tears.

Pete noticed a torn envelope on the coffee table with a folded letter beside it. From the postage stamp he knew the letter was from the U.S. Giving Helga time to compose herself, he jumped to conclusions, assuming Helga's pitiful condition was due to a "Dear John" letter from Tom. He was astonished at seeing her like this; only a few days before she had given the impression that not having heard from Tom was a disappointment but not the end of the world. *Women*, he thought, *how can we ever know them?*

Helga, as if reading his thoughts, picked up the letter and handed it to him.

Pete, still believing it was an "I am sorry but..." letter, was now even more dumbfounded. Why would she share a humiliating personal letter? Nevertheless, he took the letter and started to read it.

November 28, 1945

Dear Helga,

I am Shirley, Tom's sister. I am writing this letter with sadness in my heart, and I recognize that I am not at all qualified for being the bearer of bad news. Yet I am aware there is no pleasant way to forward dreadful news.

Helga, I am so very sorry to inform you, Tom and four other air force personnel were killed in an airplane accident on September 14, 1945. Tom was a passenger on a military airplane, on his way to Savannah, Georgia, when both engines failed immediately after takeoff.

We are all heartbroken and asking why, particularly after surviving the accident in Germany. Incidentally, my parents and I should have thanked you long ago for nursing Tom back to health. Please accept our sincere apologies for not expressing our thankfulness earlier.

Tom was on his way to Savannah, Georgia, to obtain details of a new assignment (he was promoted to chief flying instructor and was to be stationed somewhere in the Pacific in the near future). He was making arrangements for his upcoming vacation when this dreadful accident happened. He had planned to come to Germany prior to leaving for his new assignment and ask you to be his wife, hoping you would agree and come with him to the Pacific. Helga, I feel like I know you. Tom told us how the two of you met, and it was obvious to everybody how much he was in love with you. He was so excited when he received news that he was a father; you should have seen it. The whole village found out within a few hours, as Tom handed out cigars to anybody he met. I hope we can meet real soon. You are part of our family, and sadly we are strengthening our bond by sharing the pain. I know how you must feel when you read this letter, and I wish I could have met you in person, instead of writing this letter.

We are so pleased you named the baby Tom. How is he? Mom and Dad are asking if you could send us some pictures of the two of you, if at all possible. From Tom's description we know your immediate area is devastated and in ruins, so if the pictures are not obtainable we understand. Tom had some life insurance privately and through the military. Mom and Dad would like to set up some type of fund in his memory for the baby. As soon as we know details how to do this, we will let you know.

Helga, it would be wonderful if you and the baby could come and spend time with us. Please let us know if this is possible. Don't let finances be a hindrance. We are ready to assist; just let us know when you could come and we will make all the arrangements.

There are so many more things to say, but to be honest, I am tired, and it's past two in the morning. I wrote this letter several times, not really knowing how to convey this awful news. I wish you were here and we could share the pain, as I cannot communicate my grief to my parents. Tom told me how strong and level-headed you are.

Some of the letters Tom mailed to you came back, address unknown. Hopefully you will receive this letter. I will save his letters, hoping to give them to you in person one day. However, once mail delivery is back on track, I can also forward them. Let me know.

Please stay in touch. Mom and Dad are shattered by Tom's death. Seeing or hearing from their grandchild would help them immensely. Thank you for understanding.

Hoping to hear from you real soon, I remain, with love, your promised sister-in-law, Shirley.

Pete, slightly ashamed of his earlier guess, was speechless for several minutes. This was ghastly news. Being compassionate, he instantly shared Helga's pain. Seeking to say something to ease her pain, he realized for the moment there was nothing he could do or say. Genuinely concerned, he simply whispered, "Helga, I am so sorry. Please let me know if there is anything I can do."



Chapter 35

Like a precious vase falling from a great height and breaking into a thousand pieces, so did Helga's recently attained outlook on life shatter at the news of Tom's death. Moreover, she felt like her soul was only fastened by the flimsiest of thread to her body, slipping away, trying not to break off altogether.

Her laboriously collected beliefs vanished in an instant. An evil magician moved his wand, and Helga's world crumbled, like a house built on sand. The oppressive demon called "guilt" (caused by thoughts she harboured about Tom not caring for her any longer) invaded her already torn soul as well. Each shattered piece of her soul seemed to have a life of its own, and the agony multiplied a thousandfold. Bottomless grief zapped her strength.

On a particularly bad day, she was ready to call it quits. Standing by the riverbank, where the current was swift and furious, she fought a battle to stay alive. Mercifully, a deep-rooted claim to motherhood forced her to abandon this cowardly action. Ever so slowly, this resilient urge to live for her child found a bridge to safer grounds.

During the next few months she read Tom's letters daily. His words helped her to stay on this narrow path to survival. It was at best a road full of bumps, curves and many T junctions, forcing her to once again look at life completely differently. Being a mother was the shaping catalyst to carry on.

November 23, 1944

Dear Helga,

Words can never convey how much I miss you. Words are simply an expression, whereas feelings transport us to a realm of new length, height, width and breadth. Meeting you makes me want to jump for joy, and looking back, I realize my life was empty prior to falling in love with you. You are on my mind first thing in the morning and last thing at night. Neither war nor nationality can keep us apart.

I cannot wait until we meet again and share our love daily without having to worry what the next day will bring. I cannot wait to hold you in my arms again. You are my destiny. I am part of you, and you are part of me. Knowing you feel the same makes the wait almost bearable.

I realize each day my chances of surviving the crash in Germany would have been nil. Only your determination to rescue me, against your father and Klaus's wishes, saved my life. That surely proves that fate brought us together. Do you recall one of the many conversations we had about the possibility of a soul migrating from one life to another? Although our time together was only a few weeks, I believe we have known each other for a very long time. Space and time, as we know them, are limited to our own perception. Who really knows the mysteries of life? Be that as it may, I am looking forward to a long life and growing old together. I now understand old Mr. Chen (my father's friend I told you about). He always told us that love is the strongest force in the universe.

The fragrance of your body still lingers. The passion you ignited in me will stay with me for as long as I live. I am yours forever. Distance is meaningless, and nothing can

change this. I miss your wonderful smile, your pretty face, and your beautiful blue eyes. I look at your picture a thousand times a day, and every time I do, I consider myself lucky to have met you. Remember the cockerel in your father's yard, waking us up to a new day after we made love the first time? To me this sound was like an omen. A new day, the cockerel shouted. To me it was the first day of a new life.

I constantly talk about you, and all of my close friends and family know how much I love and miss you. Hopefully they will soon share in our happiness. Helga, like I said earlier, words can never express what I really want to say. Just know that I love you with every breath I take. My life is meaningless without you. You are my destiny; surely fate has brought us together.

Till next time, all my love, take care, see you soon.

Yours forever, wishing you were here with me,

Love always,

Tom

Say hi to your father, Dr. Schmidt and Klaus.

December 3, 1944

My dearest Helga,

How are you? How I wish you were here with me today. I had a wonderful day and need to quickly share it. You recall me speaking about Mr. Chen (old Tom). Well, I spent the better part of the afternoon with him, and by the time I left, the burden I carried related to my role in the war completely disappeared.

It all came about when I had a conversation with my dad regarding my qualms about war in general. My dad talked

about a belief of Mr. Chen's called "the intent of the heart." While I understood most of it, my dad thought I should see Mr. Chen, as he would do a much better job explaining it.

You remember how we examined, often till late at night in your living room, the many reasons why men go willingly to war and are even proud to be part of it. And how we came to the conclusion that the reason is, men simply don't think deep enough before making a choice. In other words, they get caught up in the rhetoric and excitement of the moment. Well, in a way we were not far off. Here is how Mr. Chen explained it to me. (I'll give you the summary version.)

Firstly he talked about the law of love. How love is everything, dependable and pure in its essence. And since this law is embedded in the law of creation, it is only intuitive perception that can guide us to remain pure in our hearts. Unfortunately, the majority of people today are not guided by intuitive perception but by their egos. The innate bearings of the heart play second fiddle. In other words, feelings are dimmed and debased, and so-called logical worldly ideas shape decisions. He then gave me what I at first thought to be a very trivial example. You are about to pull into a parking lot when you see someone else having the same intention. The other person, although a fraction of a second ahead of you, reacts slower. You take advantage of the delay and occupy the parking spot. When I voiced the triviality of this action he looked at me with concern in his eyes. After a brief pause, his face again serene, he explained to me that killing intuitive perception lies precisely in the fact our egos make us believe, very early in life, that these small violations of our spirits are nothing

but a triumph of the fittest. In other words, our feelings are squashed by the power of our egos. Every time we face a decision, a battle inside of us ensues. Our hearts (intuitive feelings) battle the instinct of self-preservation. And before long the intuitive gift bestowed to us by our creator is considered foolish and old fashioned. The term *duty* (which should first and foremost be the duty of living a harmonious life with others) has now a new meaning.

When I told him how I nowadays feel about war, he shook my hand and told me not to be concerned about the past. When I asked him why, he simple said, "Examine the intent of your heart. In other words, first it was the love of flying and secondly it was the thought of conquering evil. Now the intent of your heart has changed, and you look at life differently. So let it be. Your inner conviction is now harmonized with the law of love. Changing course triggered by your heart is never wrong."

Helga, I wish you were there; it was so uplifting. You and I are living proof that there is a law of love. Soon this war will be finished and we can be together for the rest of our lives. I cannot wait.

Have to say goodnight now—it is past midnight. Know that I go to sleep and wake up with you always. My thoughts are with you every minute of the day.

Love you, take care, and hope to see you soon.

Love always, Tom.



Chapter 36

Pete, in time, became a good friend to Helga. All through Helga's difficult phase, she frequently neglected to look after her daily housework. It was never beneath Pete to help her with chores around the house, and in the evening they would play cards or go for long walks in the Wher, a park south of the river Main. It was a wholesome friendship; Pete was there whenever she needed comfort, never asking anything in return. The platonic friendship, as well as the encouragement Christine extended, was undeniably a great help to Helga. Little by little she regained some of her former self.

One evening while Helga and Christine reminisced about days gone by, Helga abruptly changed the subject. Looking at Christine with eyes of expectation, she told Christine that Pete's friendship was important to her. Christine was genuinely pleased to have an ally in her quest to help Helga get back on her feet.

The countless supplies Pete brought Helga absolutely surprised her. Cigarettes, coffee, chocolate, clothing for the baby and various dry goods not easily found in German stores started to accumulate in her apartment. Christine told her to "get with it" and sell the goods on the black market.

Helga, emotionally still struggling, gave most of the goods away. Friends, neighbours, the doctor and his wife, her Uncle Herman and his wife, Clara, who had four daughters and nine

grandchildren, were the benefactors. Making other people happy was a way to overcome desperate moments. In spite of the attention and care lavished on her by Pete, Christine, the doctor and his wife, Helga's heart was slow in healing. Thankfully though, a cyclical daily rhythm slowly dulled the pain. Throughout these months, Helga never encouraged Pete to be more than a friend. Pete, always the gentleman, never took advantage of Helga's vulnerability.

This platonic friendship, however, came to an abrupt end. One evening after declaring a perfect rummy, Helga spontaneously walked over to Pete's side of the table and gave him a hug for being a good friend. Deep within, both were starving for physical contact, and the impulsive, seemingly harmless embrace was the genesis to let Pete become Tom. Caught up in an altered state of consciousness, Helga sailed past the point of no return without noticing it. Pete, on the other hand, was fully aware of the speed and direction, having waited graciously for this breakthrough.

While making love, Helga insisted on no lights. Other times she asked Pete not to talk to her during intercourse, and on at least two occasions, catching her breath, she told Pete to leave and go home. Pete, no novice when it came to women, was in spite of her strange behaviour entirely pleased. The attraction, lock stock and barrel, was Helga not being afraid of her own sexuality. This was new to him; based on his experience, American women defined relationships in daily living instead of the bedroom. Candid pleasure-seeking sex was a dream comes true; it represented the ultimate dialogue between consenting adults. In fairness this was not a superficial characteristic; it was simply based on his belief that controlling basic desires of the body was a Western folly. Sexual stimulus, to Pete, was simply a normal step in realizing the fullness of the human body. Looking into Helga's eyes while having sex enlightened him more than any textbook on human behaviour ever

could. It was absolute honesty, and as such completely spell-binding. His placid personality, as well as his fascination with Helga's liberal lovemaking, allowed the continuation of her surreal games during and after sex. Pete was, however, unaware that Helga often endured remorse after making love to him. The reason was twofold. While making love her mind was on Tom. Furthermore, she questioned how she could have intercourse with someone else so shortly after Tom's accident.

Regardless of remorse, sex promptly became the reason to meet. Playing cards and long walks served as a prelude to their lovemaking. Their desire to take sex to a higher, if not hidden, plateau ignited breathtaking passion. Helga soon realized Pete was aching to become her sex slave; tossing aside pretence opened doors to a new world. Willingly he retreated and became her apprentice. To recover his manhood he thought of it as innovative sex. This in turn gave Helga a lofty feeling, previously not experienced. The playing field was now even. Helga looked forward to Pete's visits, sharing details only with Christine; it was a natural continuation of looking at books in the attic.

The relationship now entered a new phase. Being unconditionally honest with each other she admitted sex was a vehicle to reach emotional stability; making passionate love numbed the pain for a few hours. Pete had no problem with her reasoning. Living for the moment was upright, considering the slaughter he witnessed in the Italian campaign. Happily devoted to each other, each for his or her own reasons relished the moment. Pete, not being a fool, of course knew Tom was still, and might forever be, in her thoughts. Cognizant of her past, he was prepared to be patient and take her devotion to a higher level. For now though, being entirely male, physical gratification was a windfall not to free himself of.

Away from the bedroom, on long walks along the river, Pete would hold her attention with his remarkable knowledge of ancient

civilizations. "Did you know that some of our people believe the lost tribes of Israel may have multiplied abroad in the west? The name 'Celts' was nothing but a label given to those people who came out from the same geographical place where the 'Lost Tribes of Israel' had vanished in an earlier period of world history and settled in the British Isles and the coastal region of Spain and France. Living in the coastal areas they became very adept in ship building, and from there they sailed across the Atlantic long before the Norsemen and Scandinavians arrived in North America. The same holds true for the Phoenicians, they were known for their ability to travel by sea long before the Scandinavians were roving the sea. By the way, the term 'Phoenicians' also includes the Israelite tribes of Dan, Asher, and Zebulun."

"How interesting. Pete, you have talked very little about your parents. Are they the reason for your interest in ancient civilizations?"

"How odd that you ask this of me. What prompted you to ask if my parents have anything to do with my hobby? That's really all it is...a hobby. Since being a child I have been interested in ancient civilizations—the Egyptians, the Greeks—and when you read about one particular civilization, it always leads you to other civilizations. No, my parents in fact tried to discourage me. They wanted me to go to university and get a degree in accounting or some other business-related topic. My father is adamant that I take over the family business one day. When I enlisted in the army he was very disappointed. In fact, he offered me a very lucrative position if I would reconsider. My cousin Rachel got the job, and I left for boot camp, much to the mortification of the family."

"You never mentioned any of this before. What type of business is it?"

"Clothing—men's, ladies', kids', wholesale and retail. My

father is a workaholic, but I have to give him credit. He started with nothing and built up a small clothing empire.”

“Tell me, Pete, what would your parents say if they knew you were seeing a German girl?”

“You are really inquisitive today. What’s with all these questions?”

“Nothing, really. I just wondered.”

“Helga, tell me what’s on your mind. Surely something prompted all these questions.”

“No, not really. It’s just that I always tell you everything about me—my family, my interests, about Tom—so I thought maybe I should know a little more about you. The truth is, I know very little about you or, for that matter, your family.”

“Well, I hope you know that I really enjoy your company. You are a very special person, and it will be very difficult for me to say goodbye to you one day. Helga, we have always been completely honest with each other, and it was you who demanded that. From day one you have been calling the shots in our relationship, and to be completely honest it wasn’t always easy. There were many moments when I was hoping you could get over Tom and look at me with different eyes, but I understood, just as you understood without ever bringing up the subject that for me to go home with a German girl would be awkward, to say the least. Yes, to answer your question, it would be difficult to let my parents know I had fallen in love with a German girl.”

This forthright statement warranted a pause, both preoccupied with their own thoughts.

Pete would always wear civilian clothes when he visited Helga; she insisted on it. “This jacket and the pants you are wearing, are they from your father’s store?”

“Yes, of course they are. Do you like them?”

“I do. You have a flair for matching style and colour. You

should listen to your father and work with him; I think you would do very well.”

Pete, somewhat surprised by her remark, remained quiet. Helga continued. “I hope you took that as a compliment. It was meant to be one.”

Pete, a boyish grin on his face, answered, “Helga, who knows what the future will bring? Circumstances neither one of us looked for brought us together; perhaps extraordinary conditions will decide our future.”

“Please don’t say that, Pete. It was extraordinary circumstances that brought nothing but grief into my life. What I need is a normal conventional future, without anything extraordinary to come and spoil the day.”

“You are right. Extraordinary has a negative impact in your life, but who knows? Things can change.”

“Pete, one more question. Do you believe in God?”

“Helga, forget all of this heavy-duty talk. Let’s go home and make love. That is when we are both in sync and words become meaningless.”

“Answer me, do you believe in God?”

“No, I don’t. Are you shocked?”

“Shocked, no; surprised, yes. Why not?”

“Helga, do we have to get into this? It’s a demanding subject, and to be frank, I had too many conversations with my family on this subject. It only creates strife, but I see by your look, you insist. In a nutshell, I believe we all have the right to our own opinion, and we have no obligation, or for that matter no right, to force our opinion onto someone else. It’s a very personal matter.”

Helga, contemplating, remained silent.

Pete, misreading her silence, continued in a jovial voice, “How did we get from ancient civilizations to this subject?”

“I guess it’s my day to ask questions. Besides, all ancient civilizations

believed in some type of god, or gods. Surely you must have considered this fact before you came to your conclusion that there is no God.”

“I guess you are not going to give up. Okay. Well, firstly I did not say there is no God; I said I don’t believe in a God, certainly not a God that is made in our image, like the Jewish or Christian God.”

“How is the Christian God made in our image?”

“Helga...do I have to?”

“Yes, you do!”

Just then a large bird flew from a nearby bush, almost colliding with Pete. “You see, one of God’s creatures is telling you to smarten up.”

“Helga, this type of comment gives me the shivers.”

“Pete, humour is one of God’s attributes, my mother always told me.”

“Okay. I’ll go into details with one condition. When I am done it is the end, no follow-up, no more questions, and above all, no quarrelling.”

“Pete, you are a chicken. Okay, I’ll agree.”

They walked, both with their own thoughts, in silence, the river to their left. Before long they reached the third Wehr forest. Helga, remembering this place from her youth, instantly changed the subject. “Pete, you see this small lake over here...we call it the Black Hole. There is a legend; would you like to hear it?”

“Sure, anything other than you questioning me about my beliefs,” he laughingly replied.

Helga, remembering the gruesome story her father had told her when she was a young girl, ignored Pete’s jokes and told him to sit down and listen to her. Leaning against a large oak tree, Helga told the story. “Many, many years ago there was a castle on the shores of this lake. A very old water ghost lived there with his three

cheerful and beautiful daughters. For many years they lived happily with their father, but slowly they became impatient and bored with their surroundings. Then one evening they listened to joyful sounds coming from our village. There was music and laughter. The people in the village celebrated the annual parish fair. By Sunday afternoon the three girls finally found the courage and asked their father if they could go to the dance at the fair that evening. The father was not at all pleased with their request and, with a face to scare even the strong of heart, he denied their appeal. The three girls nevertheless knew how to manipulate their father, and before long he agreed that they could go to the dance; however, they had to be home by eleven o’clock. He warned them if they were not home by eleven, severe punishment would be theirs. Full of joy, the three girls promised to be home on time.

“At the *Gasthaus zur Traube* there was laughter as everybody was kicking up their heels when the three beautiful, strange girls walked in. The musicians, caught by their beauty, like everybody else in the room, stopped playing momentarily. Questions as to who these stunningly beautiful young ladies were were left unanswered. Soon the musicians carried on with their craft, and all the young men stood in line to ask the three beauties for a dance. And dance they did. Time flies when one has fun, and before long it was almost eleven o’clock. The three beauties, ready to leave, told their dance partners they had to be home by eleven and made a quick exit.

“Once home, and on time, they immediately asked their father if they could go one more time to the dance the next evening. The father grudgingly agreed. He however reminded them again to be home by eleven o’clock; otherwise rigorous punishment would be theirs.

“Upon their arrival the next evening, the three sisters were enthusiastically welcomed by the young men. All the young men

were determined to dance at least one dance with each of the three sisters. Before long the musicians took a well-deserved rest, and one of the young men took this opportunity to set the clock back one hour. As soon as the music started again, the three sisters were up on their feet, having the time of their lives. With one eye on the clock, the three sisters felt the evening lasted longer than the previous night; nevertheless, they carried on dancing, enjoying every minute. One hour in the overall scheme of things seems to make little difference, and all of a sudden the clock showed again almost eleven o'clock. Hastily the three lovely young maidens left the *gasthaus* and rushed home.

The young man who had turned back the clock, captivated by the three beauties, decided secretly to follow them in order to find out where they lived. Amazed, he realized the young ladies had gone across the fields toward the pond known as the black hole. Once there, he heard a splash and witnessed the three sisters jumping head first into the pond. Immediately, monstrous waves danced across the pond, eventually resting against the shore line. Finally the waters calmed down, and at this precise moment three very large blood bubbles surfaced. The authoritative, vengeful father had killed his three girls."

"What an awful story!"

"Don't I know! As a little girl I held my father's hand very firmly whenever we walked by here."

"Helga, it is stories like this that exemplify our desire to understand, if not nullify, questions as to who we really are. Okay, let's clarify...Is the father of your story not more compassionate than the father of your Christian religion?"

"How so?"

"At least he deprived his daughters of free will and warned them to expect severe punishment, whereas the Jewish or Christian God gives us free will, but, by the way, don't screw up; otherwise

you'll be in hell forever. On a more serious note, religious beliefs, regardless of origin, have in many instances caused tragedy and suffering. Bashing the other guy's head in because his belief is in a different manifestation of God is a weird way to do unto others as you want them to do unto you. Why all this wickedness? No decent human being would create an environment where strife is the norm; consequently, I have no choice but to believe that, if there is a God, it's a devil masquerading as God, and this idea is even more ridiculous than to believe in an all-compassionate God. Therefore I choose not to believe in God at all. If you must know how I manage to go to sleep at night, with no problem. Here is what I believe. The human race has evolved from a very unseemly existence. It's our nature to fight and claw to the top. Perhaps in another million years, providing we have not killed each other off, we might have learned living in peace is essentially not a bad idea. If we must flex our muscles, let's go to bed more often. Kidding aside, I believe people who toil day in and day out, keep peace with their neighbours, and use common sense to turn vinegar into wine are closer to the kingdom of God than most preachers."

Laughing, Helga replied, "Pete, I will miss you."

Helga enjoyed these moments; it reminded her of talking to Tom. She knew intuitively that it was important to hang on to something other than sex; otherwise the shattered pieces might never come together. Making love to Pete allowed her to open her body while slamming shut her tired mind; interesting conversations, however, helped to balance some of the inner turmoil.

Every now and then, guilt so expertly implanted by her church at a very young age forced her to go for confession.

The priest, a kind old man, having seen and heard it all, adhered to Christ's command to do unto others as you would want them to do unto you. Effortlessly he encouraged her to speak up. His devoted kindness transfigured the sanctuary into a holy place.

Moved to tears, Helga confessed her sins. “Father, I have a child out of wedlock from a man who wanted to marry me, but he was killed in an accident. Yet I cannot let him go. I will always have love for him in my heart. My father recently died, my brother died on the Russian front, and my mother died five years ago. I do have another brother; he believes I am a wayward woman, because I have a baby out of wedlock...”

Crying, she blew her nose. The old priest patiently waited.

“I met another man, who is kind to me and my baby. Sometimes I sleep with him. I know it is a sin. I know I should be strong, but the desire to have someone close makes it very difficult to leave him. Please forgive me, Father. Life is so bleak sometimes, I don’t know how I can face tomorrow...”

The priest, a man well beyond three score and ten, was accustomed to the frailty of the human spirit. Without reprimand he absolved her of her sins. “Child, your sins are forgiven. Pray daily to the holy mother of our Lord and Saviour. She will give you strength. Remember, our Lord died on the cross for our sins. Don’t be scared to believe in his mercy. Go in peace, pray daily, and ask for strength to overcome your desires.”

Confession eased the guilt and made her feel better. While scrupulously honest with Pete, she never told him about going to confession. This was the one secret she kept; it was, in a peculiar way, keeping in touch with Tom.

Six months after the first letter another letter arrived from Tom’s sister. Not answering the first letter, Helga felt guilty and full of shame. For weeks, if not months, after receiving Shirley’s letter she was too numb to find the energy to reply. Later, once a relationship with Pete began, she simply couldn’t bring herself to answer Shirley’s letter. The thought of having to talk to Tom’s family made her feel awkward. How could she talk about Tom while having a relationship with Pete so soon after his death?

The letter was basically a repeat of the first. Shirley feared the first letter had never arrived. A couple of days later Helga collected her thoughts and managed to write a very short letter.

June 1946

Dear Shirley,

I feel guilty not answering your first letter; now that I received your second letter I must write at once. Please forgive me, I am ashamed. First of all, thank you for your letter. It helped knowing Tom was planning to come for me, although I am still trying to cope with his death daily. I am honoured by your family’s offer to bring little Tom and me to the U.S. for a visit. Perhaps in the future; right now, it is still too early. The baby was sick from the day he was born. I almost lost him too. I thank God he is getting stronger by the day. I will forward a picture of us both very soon. Thank you again for your lovely letter. I promise to write a more detailed letter in the near future. Please say hello to your parents. I hope they are okay. My heart goes out to all of you.

With best wishes, to you, and your family,

Helga



Chapter 37

The first heavy snowfall signalled Christmas was around the corner. While everybody was relieved the brutal human slaughter was at last over, it was not a joyful Christmas. Germany's economic conditions were worse than at the previous Christmas. The brutal wretchedness of bombed-out cities, not sufficient food, and many homes missing one or more family member ushered in a very bleak Christmas. To add insult to injury, Germans had to tolerate the heinous rules and fury of its conquerors, while living in makeshift shelters, rebuilding their bombed-out homes. The very first measure introduced by the Allies was to carve Germany up like a pig on a butcher's block into four parts.

The four zones agreed upon and supervised by the Allies' applicable military authorities were as follows. In the west, France carved out a sizeable piece; north Germany was given to the British; and the southerly and easterly parts, representing the lion's share of Germany in terms of land mass, were divided almost equally between the Americans and the Russians. For the next three years life was absolutely ghastly in all four zones. In the eastern zone, governed by Russia, life was however mediocre, if not dreadful, for the next fifty years.

Early postwar years were just as difficult as the war years. Germany was flat broke, caught in a gaping chasm; the only consolation was, it would be difficult to sink any lower.

Human nature can cope with incredible hardship, always hoping for a better tomorrow. This is as true of individuals as it is of a community. Germany reached an undeniably desolate level of awareness as the final

statistics of Hitler's thirteen-year reich started to sink in. Over five million men did not make it home, and the approximately two-million-plus fortunate enough to be alive came home only to finish up behind barbed wire fences, where approximately one million died a horribly shameful death. The American and French army, by orders of Eisenhower, violated international law by literally starving German prisoners of war. In an incredibly well researched book, by Canadian historian James Bacque, Stoddart Publishing, a Col. Earnest F. Fisher, Ph.D., former lieutenant, 101st Airborne Division and former Senior Historian, United States Army states: *"Starting in April 1945, the United States Army and the French Army casually annihilated about one million men, most of them in American camps...Eisenhower's hatred, passed through the lens of a compliant military bureaucracy, produced the horror of the death camps unequalled by anything in American history...an enormous war crime."* Not to speak of the approximately 300,000 men who died a horrible death in Russia's mines and labour camps. There was no music, no hero's reception. The chimera of the Third Reich died with Hitler.

America, perhaps for altruistic reasons, tried to accelerate normality and introduced the 4-D program in their domain: demilitarize, de-Nazify, deindustrialize, and democratize Germans. An actual handbook was in circulation, and every American officer had a copy of it in his day-pack. The American journalist and author Edwin Hartrich called this approach the de-Teutonization of Germany in his exceptionally well written and researched book *The Fourth and Richest Reich*.

The genesis of what eventually would be known as the Cold War between Russia and the USA put an end to the ultimately inefficient and unworkable Morgenthau plan. The revamped plan, a far cry from the dimwitted Morgenthau suggestion, nevertheless provided hardship for the German people. In three bitterly horrid years, thousands of children died due to malnutrition. Some of the Allies candidly stated that the Germans had it coming. The USA, pragmatic in their judgment, however, assisted West Germany toward a new beginning.

Throughout these three years the German people had plenty of time to reflect on what really happened to their beloved country. The insanity of it all served as a reminder to almost all Germans to never again follow someone whose political beliefs are suspect. The new Germany, led by two of Germany's great leaders, Chancellor Adenauer and Professor Erhard, rose once again from the ashes of defeat. This time, however, it was much more prudent and cautious than after the First World War. An all but forgotten American four star general with visionary capabilities, by the name of Clay, was instrumental in working with Adenauer and Erhard to heal a burdened nation. A model of democracy and capitalism, with a socio-economic conscience, was arduously worked out over the next few years.

Pete, part of the original Italian war campaign, was slated to go home. A unique point system rewarded American soldiers with extensive combat duty who had been away from home for a prolonged period of time with an end to their sojourn. The arrangement was not courtesy of the American High Command for its soldiers. Defiant American soldiers in the Pacific had enough of war. Quickly, verbal mutiny spread the word, "We want to go home." This uprising promptly spread across Europe. To end the rebellion, the U.S. Army decided to begin transporting mutinous soldiers back to America. Pete had ample points to qualify. Slated to leave in March of 1946 from Hamburg, Germany, he was attentive to Helga's economic needs. Generously, prior to leaving he stockpiled cartons of American cigarettes and other items not found in German stores. Helga, a significant factor in Pete's life by now, made it difficult to say goodbye. Time, no slave to man, was however running out, and at last, only two short weeks before boarding, he found the courage to tell her he was leaving. Helga, aware of the rules of the game, tried with considerable difficulty to prepare herself, knowing the day would come. A few days before he left she told him, "Once you are gone I will have to move to another street."

Pete nonplussed, by her remark, sheepishly asked why.

"Pete, all of the times you visited us, did you never realize the street was named after you? Don't you know what *Judengasse* means?"

Picking her up, he kissed and held her close for the longest time.

"Helga, I will miss you more than you will ever know. I wish you the best always, and thank you for reinforcing my belief that not all Germans hate Jews."

The last few days went by all too fast. When Pete dropped by to say goodbye, Helga's tough exterior broke down like weather-beaten stucco from a bastion. Clinging to him, she cried her heart out. It was saying goodbye to Pete and Tom all at the same time.

Holding her tight, he whispered, "Helga, I will never forget you and little Tom. Again, thank you for making my stay in Germany so meaningful. I will miss you. I hope we meet again. Should you ever decide to go on with your life, let me know. And if you visit the baby's grandparents, promise to look me up. Promise...here is my telephone number and address. Take care of yourself and the baby."

With this, he placed a handwritten note into her clenched hand.

Helga managed to smile while wiping her tears. She was determined not to let him see how much his leaving bothered her. "Yes, yes, I promise. Go now, before you change your mind. Take care, Pete. You have been a good friend...I hate to see you go."

He gave her a hug and left without looking back. Walking away was not easy; it was a most depressing moment in his life. Conscious that he would miss her, he cursed himself for not having the grit to stand up to his family. Tradition, this venerated, often questionable arrangement, stopped him from entering a verboten path. With all his consideration for others, little did he know that to stray from a path with heart was a violation against his own spirit. Hard to please, clear-cut family expectations prevented him from entering a path with heart. A massive mental barrier, too large to overcome, acted like a drawbridge, shutting Helga out of his world back home.



Chapter 38

Pete's leaving changed Helga's world once again into a lonely and forsaken place. Christine, expecting Helga's reaction to Pete's leaving, asked if she could move in with her. The alleged reason for leaving home was that her father made life unbearable. Helga, desperately lonely, agreed at once. Solitary, and wondering what the next day would have in store, she once again found a haven of refuge in Christine's friendship. Within a few weeks Helga again battled emotional storms; at times the onslaught almost got the better of her. Deep within she was disillusioned, losing Tom, and now Pete, was walking a fine line. Perverse impulses, contrary to her character, invaded her well-being.

Never shy about giving advice, Christine implored Helga, "Helga, listen to me. Forget about Pete. Agreed, he was a good friend and considerate, but he had no balls. He'll never find another woman like you. What a fool to go home and allow his parents to tell him how he should live his life. He'll wake up one day and realize he lost seventh heaven; and while I am lecturing, one more thing. Forget about all this karma, schmarma, mumble-jumble Tom filled your head with. There is no great secret to life. Pete was right in this one respect, there is only today, and the only importance is to get through the day with as much joy as possible. I insist you are coming with me every weekend, and we will dance

all night. It's fun listening to this crazy American music, and I will not take no for an answer, okay?"

Helga's emotions were up and down, like a ship sandwiched between two giant waves. One moment she never wanted to hear or see an American; the next day she told Christine how she missed the easy-going attitude of Americans. With conflicting issues, she was slow in taking Christine's advice, sitting at home for the next couple of weeks and feeling depressed, abandoned, and concealing how humiliated she felt.

Christine, in spite of her direct appeal, realized that Helga needed time and space. Her empathy eventually paid dividends.

One Friday evening, Christine, busy transforming herself from an average village girl to splendour, ready to enjoy a night of fun, noticed that Helga was watching. This was unusual; generally Helga would go to her bedroom and not come out until Christine was ready to leave. All of a sudden Helga spoke up. Words rushed out of her mouth, like water from a busted dam.

"Okay, I'll come along, but if I don't like it, you have to promise to come home with me."

Christine, not making a promise, taking advantage of this sudden break, urged her to quickly get ready. With babysitting promptly arranged, they walked the short distance, arm in arm, to the "American Gasthaus." The evening turned out, as always, to be fun for Christine and a massive breather for Helga. They were dancing almost every other dance, and by the end of the evening Helga realized Christine's down-to-earth hedonistic way of life was without doubt, at least for the time being, the answer to her troubled mind. It was almost as good as having Pete with her; she was free of angst for several hours.

The American pub quickly became a way of life. Helga was unchained. Living in a split world, she quickly realized, meeting people and the thrill of being wanted, helped to achieve a desperately needed

state of mind. While dancing and drinking the night away she felt comfortably numb. Gone were Tom and Pete; gone was her brother's untimely death; gone were her mother and father; and gone was Dieter's cold-hearted attitude. The extraordinary weightlessness of being was balm to her troubled mind. Now she could not wait for the weekend and to throw herself into the arms of American soldiers. Sex, she told Christine, relieved her angst-ridden mind.

Christine smiled and simplified the issue. "Jumping into bed, as many times as you do, tires you out. There is no energy left to feel sorry for yourself."

Christine's tongue in cheek observation was not far off the mark. If ever proof was needed that the middle of the 20th century was instrumental in throwing out conventional courtship, Helga became the model. The Second World War was without question furthering woman's liberation; moreover, it was the inauguration of a sexual revolution, changing the way men and women interacted. The mating ritual became hedonistic and addictive. It was easy for Helga to offer her body. There was never a shortage of users, but if a lonely soldier looked for more than sex, her inner self was untouchable. Flippantly she snubbed her lovers. "Don't tell me who you are; neither do I want to know where you come from or where you are going. And don't expect more than I am willing to give. Moreover, don't be surprised if tomorrow I will not remember you."

The majority of soldiers of course had no problem with this arrangement. In a perverse way, this only hardened Helga's attitude toward her lovers. In time, her affairs were painted with an abrasive brush.

Months went by. Helga now encouraged Christine to visit the Gasthaus at least twice throughout the week. Fridays and Saturdays were a foregone conclusion. Christine now became genuinely con-

cerned as Helga's life became a blur, frequently being drunk for several days. One evening, Christine cautioned Helga, "Helga, I am worried. When we set out the odd weekend to have some fun, it was enjoyable, but I believe you are asking for trouble. You drink too much, and the way you treat men is dangerous. Sooner or later this will backfire. You know I love you. As your friend I need to tell you that I am worried. Besides, I am not convinced you are really having fun. I think you are caught up in something that scares the hell out of me. You are trying to drown the past, and frankly I think all you are doing is creating more problems for yourself."

Helga, not at all prepared for this conversation, was not in the mood to be told she wasn't happy. "Christine, you of all people are familiar with my past life. I, at last, found a way to have pleasure without some asshole going to tell me he has to go back home. I give to get what I need, without giving my heart—what's wrong with that? It comes off as expected, and as far as happiness is concerned I was happy once, and regardless how long I live, I'll never be that happy again."

"Helga, you are throwing the baby out with the bathwater. Don't be silly. You are young and pretty. This crazy war brought suffering to all of us, not just you. Don't be so melodramatic; life still has a lot to offer. Germany will recover and life will get back to normal, our escapades will come to an end, and we will find good husbands and become what our mothers expected us to be. In other words, there is no need to live for the rest of your life feeling sorry for yourself. Hundreds of thousands of women lost their husbands in this fucking war. You don't see them screwing up their lives. Sorry, Helga, but as a friend I have to tell the truth."

Pausing for a moment, waiting for Helga to respond, not getting any feedback, Christine continued, in more appealing terms. "Helga, I know what you are doing, shutting yourself off, is a defence mechanism against getting hurt again. Don't you see? You

are achieving exactly the opposite. Every time you give yourself to some guy and then dump him, you are forcing another goodbye. Besides, what bothers me most is the amount of alcohol you consume. I see my father drunk almost every day, and you have to believe me, it's a road to nowhere."

Helga, of course, knew Christine was right. Nonetheless, all of the king's horses could not change her ways. For better or for worse, she climbed the zenith of free will; the gift, the curse, was hers to balance. Reasoning, although clouded, was still part of the equation, never questioning that sex without affection was a treadmill, always finishing in the same place she started, with little hope of ever getting off. For the moment, though, she made up her mind; alcohol and sex offered temporary relief. Christine, powerless to help, witnessing Helga's absurd behaviour, nevertheless hoped sooner or later Helga would come to her senses, and in time, the self-indulgent lifestyle would serve to create a new identity.

Helga, looking down from her imaginary mountaintop, decided to ignore Christine's advice, aware that if push came to shove she could still count on her. Throughout this time, the baby was looked after by the doctor and his wife and by a widow who had two school-age children, living upstairs in the same house as Helga. Helga would repay the widow with American coffee and cigarettes. The two children, a boy age nine and a girl eleven, would find any excuse to come downstairs to visit Helga and Christine, knowing there was always some American chocolate to be had. Christine and Helga enjoyed these visits. They brought back childhood memories of days when aunts and uncles would visit and life was sweet and simple.

The doctor's wife became a surrogate mother when the widow, supplementing her meagre widow's pension, was not available. The widow, who had lost her husband early in the war on the western front, worked every other weekend as a coat girl in one of the

Americanized pubs where Helga and Christine were regular patrons.

The doctor, although not pleased with Helga's way of living, had fond memories of a gentle and well-behaved young girl with an inquisitive mind, her heart always in the right place, prior to this horrifying war. Sensitive to the times, as well as Helga's history, and aware of the economic, social, and emotional changes in Germany and never losing awareness of Helga's pain endured during the last six years, he found it very difficult to chastise her. Loving her like his own child, he was hopeful she would realize the foolishness of her ways. Looking after the baby was, however, more than helping Helga; it was also paying homage to his old friend Dieter Berger. The doctor's wife encouraged Helga to attend church, hoping she would meet new friends and break her cycle of transgression. Helga, trying to please her aunt, did go to church the odd Sunday, but as it happens often in life, a ray of light blinds the seeker, and quickly Helga decided she was powerless to change her life, at least for time being. Her Aunt Luise, distressed and helpless, told Helga several times, "God's mercy and forgiveness are the beginning of a new life."

Years would go by before Helga absolved herself from living this reckless existence, and by forgiving herself, she eventually realized God's forgiveness was the cornerstone of her own pardon. Once this step was taken, she acknowledged these turbulent times were born out of a need to cut off the past in a most sweeping fashion; it was radical surgery to stay alive. To survive she needed to say goodbye to her past. Pete, and all the other men, were simply a means to an end. In a way it was a denunciation of all men; men who started this ego-driven war; men who gave their lives, leaving widows and children poor and homeless; men who managed to flourish because of this war; and men who simply accepted war as a normal part of life. Tom, tucked away and living on a pedestal, was sheltered from this allegation.

For now, though, this awareness was buried, hidden in a rut, its rim out of reach. Nevertheless, deep within, there was a flicker of hope that Christine was right and one day life would get back to normal, and perchance Tom, living in someone else's body, would awaken the wonderful feelings she so desperately tried to reproduce and at the same time tried to forget. For the time being, though, it was a definite eclipse of the heart.



Chapter 39

Although most Germans were busy rebuilding their homes and lives, without a watchful eye on neighbours, Helga's questionable reputation was eventually talked about in the immediate vicinity of her new home. When Helga picked up the baby one Sunday evening at the doctor's home, he asked her to sit down and have coffee.

"Helga, I owe it to you, and your father, to let you know you how risky, dangerous and ultimately careless your life has become. You are asking for real problems. Several sexually transmitted diseases are spreading like wildfire in the city, and it will be only a matter of time before I'll be treating you as a patient. Please think of your parents. Think what you are doing to yourself, and think of your child. You must stop this self-destructive lifestyle immediately before serious harm comes your way. Helga, you are smart, and surely you know this self-indulgent lifestyle is a dead-end street. Why are you not in contact with the baby's grandparents? Surely they would be delighted to hear from you. Go and visit them for a while. Give yourself a break and straighten out your life. Surely you know your Aunt Luise and I love you, and it hurts to see you making these wrong decisions in your life."

Although not blood related, Helga had always loved and respected the doctor. He was her favourite uncle for as long as she

could remember. Being reprimanded touched her, and tears of remorse filled her eyes.

The doctor, responsive to how his counsel distressed her, assured her she and the baby were always welcome in their home. “Young Thomas is resting comfortably; let him sleep and pick him up tomorrow.” Although Helga called the baby little Tom, the doctor and his wife always referred to him as young Thomas.

“Uncle Herbert, you and Aunt Luise are so good to us. Sometimes I think little Tom feels more at home here than at my place. Thank you for looking after him. I know you and Aunt Luise are worried. I know my life is upside down. Please don’t let Dieter know how I live; he already thinks ill of me.”

Pushing a wooden tea wagon covered with coffee and homemade pastries, the doctor’s wife overheard Helga’s remarks as she entered the room. “Helga, we love young Thomas to be with us. Our son seems so busy, we don’t see our grandchildren very often, and it’s enjoyable to have the baby around...”

Helga, still affected by the doctor’s warning, with her eyes to the floor and her brow puckered, replied, “I know I am not as good a mother as I should be. People on the street look at me with hate in their eyes.”

Dr. Schmidt gestured to his wife to sit down and join in. “I just talked to Helga; I think it might be helpful if you could join us.”

Turning to Helga, he continued. “Remember the many wonderful conversations we had at your father’s place? How Tom and you eagerly demonstrated that the two of you embraced the same philosophy? And how your dad—by the way, I miss him terribly—was always so careful and reserved in his deliberation? Those were lovely evenings. Let us have a stress-free conversation, like the ones we used to have. Don’t be alarmed, Helga; we simply want to help you get your life in order. It is agony to see you living like this, and we know you are hurting. Tom was a man of his word, and it was

obvious he loved you. I could see it, not only on his face. It was also apparent in how he followed every thought you had. We understand if it hadn’t have been for Tom’s tragic accident, life for you and young Thomas would be very different...”

Helga, all of a sudden animated by what the doctor said, interrupted. “Could you really see how much he loved me, Uncle Herbert?”

Before the doctor could answer, his wife spoke up. “Of course he could. When your Uncle Herbert came home from your father’s place, he said time and again, “That Helga and Tom, they seem to get along very well.”

Helga, remembering back when her life was meaningful, full of promise, softly whispered, “I miss him terribly...and I know it is wrong to get involved with Pete and all the other Americans.”

Taking advantage of the change in her mood, the doctor continued. “Helga, many things are wrong in the last few years. These are not normal times we live in. We know Pete came into your life trying to help you heal. I only met him once, but I believe he was a decent man. You mustn’t blame yourself. You went through hell the last few years, losing your mom, your dad, a brother, and now Tom, and I admit, Dieter’s attitude toward you didn’t help. Oh, by the way, I forgot to let you know the Americans are holding him under house arrest.”

The news about her brother shocked her. “No! When did that happen, and why?”

“Last week. He is ordered to appear as a witness in front of a tribunal in a couple of weeks, concerning Admiral Dönitz. Until then he was placed under house arrest.”

“Uncle Herbert, do you think they will detain him?”

“Helga, I really don’t know. These are bizarre times.” As an afterthought, and to get back to their conversation, he continued. “Helga, please realize life is difficult enough right now. The degree

of uneasiness makes everything more complicated. It is time to think about your and young Thomas's future. Living day by day with no concern for tomorrow is not the answer. You have experienced highs and lows in your young life, and surely you are acquainted with the consequences of the lows. Helga, you have a child to think of. Germany is in a sad state of affairs, and it will take several years before we get back to normal. Just imagine this: I was asked yesterday by the Americans if I was a Nazi follower. Perhaps they will take my licence to practice medicine. Many doctors are now day labourers—"

"Uncle Herbert, if the Americans label you a Nazi, they are really stupid and misinformed," Helga interrupted.

"Helga, I have heard that the *gauleiter* has been found blameless, yet we all know that the local *gauleiter* was a Nazi's Nazi, and to emphasize my point, recently rumours circulated that a simple but good-hearted pig farmhand was arrested by the Americans for being a Nazi. I believe Germany will suffer for quite a few years before things will get better. These types of blunders will get worse before they get better."


Taking a sip of Maxwell House coffee, courtesy of the ever flourishing black market, he continued. "Helga, in a nutshell here is what I propose: I want you to consider visiting Tom's family. I think it would do you a wealth of good. It would also give a boost to Tom's parents to finally meet their grandchild; I am sure they are devastated by Tom's tragic accident. Germany has nothing to offer, at least not for a while. If I was your age I would consider seriously visiting, and perhaps immigrating to, America...or maybe Canada. I believe it will take several years before Germany will recuperate from this ghastly war, and who really knows what the future will hold for any of us? Go and visit Tom's parents. Based on how they raised Tom, I believe they are decent and good-hearted people."

Listening to the doctor, Helga slowly started to cry. The doctor's wife, a woman with compassion to spare, eased her mind while holding her hand. "Now, now, my precious child, don't cry. Otherwise you'll get me going. We have cried enough during the last few years. Now that this awful war is over, we must be strong and look forward to a better tomorrow."

Helga, comforted by the doctor's wife, regained her composure. "Pete frequently said that I should visit Tom's parents, and to be honest, lately I've been thinking I should write Shirley a letter. Perhaps the invitation still stands. No doubt it would be of help to Tom's parents to meet their grandchild...and it might help me to get back on my feet."

"Of course the invitation still stands! There is no doubt in my mind; they would be delighted to have you and young Thomas visit them," the doctor's wife replied, ignoring the second part of her statement.

For the next hour, they made provisional travel plans. Little did they know providential circumstances would come to Helga's aid in her quest to visit America.



Chapter 40

The American colonel, a recently graduated lawyer plucked from civilian life, was getting frustrated. The interrogation with Dieter Berger was going nowhere. It was a delicate matter. The U.S. military government devised five categories to label Germans with in their effort to eradicate and penalize Nazism. Class 1 was a major offender; class 2, an offender; 3, a lesser offender; 4, a follower; and 5 was a person exonerated from any blame for what took place in the Third Reich. Dieter Berger, without question, was class 1, or at least class 2. In their effort to incriminate and punish top-ranked Nazis for war crimes committed, either category would mean prosecution and most likely result in extended imprisonment. On the other hand, there was this story about his sister helping an American pilot who was shot down over Germany to get back home.

The young, inexperienced American colonel, trying to overcome his lack of expertise, continued in a harsh voice. “You were a submarine captain, a member of Hitler’s Nazi party, yet you claim you only fulfilled your duty to your country. Killing innocent merchant marine sailors, is that what you call duty to your country?”

Dieter Berger, entirely in control of his emotions, slowly lifted his head, staring at the colonel with open contempt, and finally answered. “I am convinced my duty to my country is just as appropriate as the duty of your pilots who dropped bombs on civilians,

killing thousands of children. I at least, only killed men aware of the danger of transporting material and weapons from your country.”

The colonel, frustrated, bellowed, “This attitude will not help you. It was you ‘Krauts’ who started this bloody war; don’t ever forget that!”

Subdued, the *Korvettenkapitän* answered. “Yes, it was us who started this war. However a colonel should understand that professional soldiers give their oath, and they do what is expected of them. I did what I had to do, nothing more and nothing less.”

The colonel’s official assignment was not only to assess Dieter’s category but also to probe further into Admiral Dönitz’s inner circle. Realizing his highhanded approach will not get him anywhere, he changed his tone, handing a cigarette to Dieter Berger. “Here, try one of these. They have become very quickly favoured around here.”

Allowing Dieter to inhale a couple of times, he continued. “Look, we are not here to start a witch hunt; we simply want to expose those responsible for the atrocities committed and stop resistance by underground Nazis who still continue their fight.”

Dieter Berger grinned at the colonel while blowing smoke toward the American. “The *führer* was responsible, but he is dead. As far as resistance is concerned, open your eyes and look around; what do you see? Old men, old woman, and kids. Don’t make me laugh. People are starving to death. Don’t talk about atrocities we Germans committed; you are just the same, perhaps worse. Under the banner of humanity you dropped bombs just a few days before war’s end and killed hundreds of thousands of innocent people. Surely you have to admit we are all the same...all of us.”

Destroying what was left of his cigarette, he continued. “As far as any questions regarding Admiral Dönitz, why not ask the old man directly? His beliefs about duty and honour most likely are the

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same as those of Eisenhower. I personally have nothing but the highest regard for the old man. Dönitz is a remarkable person; I would serve under him again tomorrow, if given the opportunity.”

“Captain, words like this are nothing but trouble. If I were you, I would not talk like this. Surely, you want to go home to your farm. Let’s change the subject for a moment and talk about something more pleasant. Your sister, Helga, according to our intelligence reports, has helped one of our pilots shot down over Germany get back to America. What you can tell me about this? This might mitigate things...and perhaps you could be a free man.”

“I had nothing to do with what my sister did. Talk to her about this matter. If you think I’ll bring into play my sister’s naive action to defend my record, you are mistaken. I am proud of having served in the German navy, and I am not about to blemish my impeccable record by taking advantage of the adolescent conduct of my sister.”



Chapter 41

Helga’s letter was received with expectation, joy, and, to a much lesser degree, concern. For the first time since Tom’s funeral, Mr. Williams’s eyes had a smidgen of his former sparkle.

Since Tom’s tragic accident, the Williams had lived a withdrawn and quiet life. Mr. Williams spend less time with his old friend Thomas Chen, and philosophical discussions lost importance. The importance of establishing the world as a rational whole died with Tom. His outlook on life and his previously held philosophy that “each day is the first day for a new beginning” changed considerably. He now wondered if there ever was fundamental truth in his philosophy. Perhaps all of it was only make believe. This awareness was almost as much of a shock as losing his son.

Mrs. Williams reaped sustenance from daily devotional Bible readings, as well as spending many hours at church. Her friends and family were genuinely worried she was losing her desire to live. Mr. Williams nonetheless noticed a slight change in his wife’s attitude after she read Helga’s letter. Her posture was a little more erect when walking. Moreover, she became more talkative, and surprising to everybody, she began grooming herself again in more detail. This brought immeasurable comfort to him. Part of questioning why his lifelong belief that each day was a new beginning

had lost substance was the dreadful realization that he could not help his wife with her sorrow.

Shirley, concerned about her parents' well-being, shared her grief only with her husband. At home she carried on as well as circumstances would allow. She was overjoyed to hear from Helga.

Tom's room was faithfully kept exactly the same as on the day of his fateful trip. Mrs Williams would once a week quickly dust and vacuum and leave the room as quickly as she entered it, never spending time to look at anything in particular. Mr. Williams, on the other hand, when alone at home would sit on Tom's bed, allowing his thoughts to travel back to better times. The knick-knacks, pictures and posters Tom had collected since childhood, however, often acted like a double-edged sword. While wonderful memories eased the pain momentarily, a piercing realization that only memories were left abruptly intensified the pain. Hastily he would leave the room, tears in his eyes.

"Mother," as he had started to call his wife since Tom's death, "should we use Tom's room for the baby when they arrive? Helga can stay in the guest room; what do you think?"

"Don't fret about who is staying where. Let them come, and make them feel at home. Everything will sort itself out. I am looking so forward to meeting Helga and the baby, I cannot wait. Besides, Tom's bed is way too big for a baby. We should get a small bed for him and let Helga decide what to do."



Chapter 42

Helga, in spite of Dieter's unforgiving attitude, was concerned that he was under house arrest. The investigation concerning his status and connections to Admiral Dönitz could prove to be extremely harmful. Knowing her brother's attitude toward Americans, she was genuinely alarmed. Then one morning the doctor's wife dropped by to let her know Dieter was asking if she could visit him at the farm.

Dieter, with help from a local butcher, slaughtered a pig. Using the doctor as a messenger, he asked Helga to come to the farm and pick up some homemade sausages and various cuts of meat. Helga was thrilled to hear that Dieter had invited her. Not wanting to waste time, she asked the widow to look after the baby, and she bicycled to the farm on the same day.

Upon arrival, she noticed that while Dieter was still trying to hide behind his usual standoffish manner, there was a change toward her. Ready to say goodbye, her knapsack full of sausages and meat, she had a moment of uneasiness. Instantly Dieter's true character surfaced. Looking at her for the first time in months with sympathy in his eyes, he shook hands in typical German fashion and asked her to come back when she needed more supplies. And just as Helga mounted her bike, he told her, "Helga, it might be a good idea to visit the baby's grandparents. If you decide to go, let me know. Our father's luggage is in good shape; Father hardly ever used it."

The trip back to Schweinfurt, although she was burdened with a heavy knapsack, was effortless. Her heart was full of joy; perhaps Dieter's behaviour was a step toward reconciliation. She had always loved and respected his determination and intelligence. Now she was optimistic; mending bridges looked promising. Dieter was, after all, her only immediate family besides the baby.

The colonel who had interrogated Dieter Berger rang Helga's doorbell, interrupted her preparing lunch with the precious home-made sausages.

"I am looking for Miss Helga Berger. Would you perhaps be Miss Berger?"

Aware of the American High Command's position regarding soldiers fraternizing with German *fräulins*, Helga was somewhat fearful of the American officer, wondering if they were investigating visits from American soldiers to her home. Meekly she replied, "Yes...what can I do for you?"

"Sorry to disturb you. May I drop in for a moment?"

Noticing Helga's forlorn face, he quickly added, "If it isn't convenient I can come back some other time."

Helga, familiar with how most Americans carry their hearts on their sleeves, immediately relaxed. The visit was perhaps not what she suspected.

"Come in quickly, before someone will see you. My reputation is already suspect around here."

The American colonel, somewhat surprised by this statement, entered her apartment. Once inside Helga excused herself, asking the colonel to take a seat. She quickly arranged her hair, making sure she was presentable. Emerging a minute later from her bedroom, she again asked the colonel what she could do for him.

"I am here to obtain some additional information, Miss Helga, regarding one of our pilots, a captain by the name of Thomas Williams; we have information that you were instrumental in

nursing him back to health and then helped him to get back home."

Helga, not expecting questions about Tom, was noticeably shaken. "Are you a friend of Tom's?"

"No. I am with American Intelligence, and intelligence sources informed us you helped Captain Williams get back home, for which we would like to officially thank you."

Helga's mind did cartwheels. Immediately she questioned why now, after Tom's death. Her face showed surprise. Slowly it changed to sadness. She replied, almost whispering, "Thomas Williams, the pilot you referring to, is the father of our child. I was glad to help him get back home. In hindsight, it would have been better if he had stayed in Germany."

Now it was the American colonel's turn to have a blank look on his face, not aware a child was involved, also wondering what she meant by it would have been better if he had stayed in Germany.

"I am sorry, Miss Helga. I wasn't aware that there is a child. Does Captain Williams know about the child?"

Helga's gut momentarily wrenched. Did the colonel not know Tom had died? Trying to stay calm, she replied, "Yes, he knew."

For the briefest of moment, she had an extraordinary feeling of *déjà vu*; someone in the past had asked the same situation. Was it the colonel? The feeling of experiencing this eerie moment, however, quickly disappeared. Later she thought the feeling of *déjà vu* was due to being asked similar questions during her intimate encounters.

"Are you still in contact with Captain Williams?"

Now her reflective and sad mood quickly changed to annoyance. Raising her voice slightly, she looked at the colonel. With slight scorn in her voice, she replied, "You ask me about Tom. Are you not aware that he died back in America in a plane crash?"

The American, dumbfounded, realizing his enormous blunder, was openly apologetic. Still on a mission, he quickly checked himself and continued in a most apologetic tone. "Miss Helga, regretfully our information is obviously not up to date. I apologize; these are difficult times, and with so much to do here in Germany I guess we neglected to check back home. Again, I am so very sorry. How did you find out about the captain's death?"

"Tom's sister sent me a letter and told me what happened." Helga, not at all prepared to discuss Tom's death, experienced a profound mood swing. Sadness replaced annoyance. The colonel thoughtfully asked her if he should come back another day or, if she would like to go to the U.S. barracks, he could arrange for a driver to pick her up at her convenience.

All at once, though, Helga managed to control her inner turmoil. The warmth and honesty in the colonel's voice had a soothing effect. Moreover, an unexpected, almost mysterious revelation took hold of her, and she was conceivably for the first time aware that her circumstances were no different than millions of others who had suffered as much or more in this horrific war. Although this electrifying awareness brought to the forefront a feeling of "Weltschmerz," it also brought comfort. She was not alone. This recognition somehow helped her to look at Tom's death for the first time in a different light. Tom was a casualty of war; so was her younger brother, as well as her father, even though he died of a broken heart. Likewise, she acknowledged that her frivolous and dangerous lifestyle was also a consequence of this horrific war. All of us are victims of circumstances; we are all in the same boat, a boat tossed about wildly, with no one at its helm. Inexplicably she knew all of this in the blink of an eye.

Looking at the American, again completely in control of her emotions, she replied, "No, no, I understand. Go ahead and ask any question. I have nothing to hide. Tom was going to marry me.

He was coming back to Germany to take me to the States, but then the accident happened."

One hour later, the colonel left Helga's apartment with more information than he had hoped for. Back at his office, he confirmed Helga's story about Tom's tragic death and updated the Williams' file. He also had someone in the U.S. visit Tom's parents, confirming Helga's upcoming visit to America. Being sensitive to the need for co-operation with Germans, he appreciated the importance of public reaction. Concerned about possible conflict, he believed the matter should be brought to a speedy conclusion. During the exhaustive discussion he had with Helga, the colonel eventually brought the subject around to Dieter and inquired what Dieter's reaction was when the Gestapo visited the farm many months before.

Grasping the importance of the question, Helga at once told the colonel that Dieter lied to the Gestapo, hence helping Tom to get back home.

The colonel was pleased with what he heard. He had not been looking forward to further discussions with the unfaltering Captain Berger. Now he had sufficient justification to quickly close the file.

Dieter Berger's speedy acquittal from the American tribunal was a surprise, not only to him, but also to anxious bystanders waiting for the outcome of the trial. The Americans, in their quest to subdue any reckoning within the German population, kept the details of their decisions hidden from the crowd. Dieter was never given the opportunity to speak during the tribunal; his release was simply granted, with no reason or explanation. The hearing was over in less than ten minutes.

Dieter suspected the acquittal was due to Helga's meeting with the colonel. The doctor, visiting Dieter immediately after his exoneration, confirmed that it was Helga's story that secured his freedom. Being a lifelong friend, moreover an adopted family

member, to the Berger family, the doctor was delighted with the outcome. He was eager for Dieter and Helga to put the past behind and start life anew. With Helga soon leaving for the U.S., the doctor was optimistic; time apart might prove absence breeds a tender heart.

Two weeks later the colonel visited Helga again and told her the USAF was pleased to offer her and the baby a return flight to the USA. Helga was elated and immediately visited the doctor with the good news. Jointly they made plans for her upcoming visit to America. Remembering the doctor's words, she now agreed the time was right. Germany was not the same place she fondly remembered. The simple, sweet childhood years were gone forever. Now she was hopeful that the extended holiday would not only benefit her but moreover bring joy to Tom's parents. In addition she was resolute that on her return, life would be normal again.



Chapter 43

“Miss Berger, you may leave at your convenience. Kindly give us a couple of weeks' notice, and we will make all the arrangements. By the way, how long are you planning to stay in America?”

“I am not really sure until I get there” was her answer to the American lieutenant who signed the letter of invitation on behalf of the American High Command. She visited him as arranged, in the former Third Reich Panzer Kaserne, now home to American infantry battalions.

“No problem, Miss Berger. Your visa to the United States will be granted for six months. Should you need to extend it, just contact the nearest immigration office and I am sure we can assist you further. By the way, do you have a passport?”

“No, I only have my personal German ID card. Do I need a passport?”

“Yes. This way we can get you a six-month visitor's visa, and if you decide to stay in America you can apply for permanent admission as a landed immigrant. Apply for a passport as soon as possible and come back once it is issued.”

The passport office was temporarily in the basement of the Schweinfurter city hall. The lineup for service was unusually long; the exodus from Germany was gaining momentum by the hour. Helga had to wait in line for six hours. To get a passport was not

easy. Every application was scrutinized, not only by German officials, but also by the Americans. Helga had to endure many personal questions from the hackneyed German official. Aware that she was a single mother wanting to go to the USA, he looked at her in a condescending manner; his demeanour was typical of a staid and boorish bureaucrat.

“Miss Berger, in order for me to include the child on the passport, I need to know who and where the father is,” he proclaimed in a haughty, crotchety voice, loud enough for all to hear.

Almost losing it, Helga snapped back, “The father is dead.”

Not accustomed to getting flack from a single mother, he continued in his pompous manner. “I don’t care if he is alive or dead, I still need to know who the father was.”

Helga, visibly upset by his arrogant manner, stood up and waved the American official letter, welcoming her to the USA, in front of his face.

“I have an invitation to go to the United States of America, from the office of the American military governor here in Germany. However first I need a passport, and if you cannot help me I’ll just go back to the Americans and tell them you are making it difficult for me to obtain a passport.”


The pretentious bureaucrat turned beet red and muttered something unrecognizable while shoving the application across his desk. “Sign and come back in six weeks.”

Helga, aware that she had found his Achilles’ heel, slowly signed the application in her best handwriting. Once done, in a loud but impersonal tone, not looking at the frustrated German official, her eyes fastened on the American corporal who stood a few feet to the right of the bureaucrat’s desk, she answered, “No, six weeks is too long. I am planning to leave in two weeks’ time.”

The young American corporal, on duty as part of an American observation team in every German government office, listened to

the altercation. Realizing it was his turn to get involved, he asked Helga to show him the document. When he had read it and confirmed Helga was a guest of Uncle Sam, he saved the day. “Don’t worry, Miss. I am sure we will have your passport ready in a week or so.”

The German bureaucrat gawkily agreed and told her to come back in ten days. That night, over supper, he angrily updated his wife: “Harlots have now more clout in Germany than government officials.”



Chapter 44

Early in April of 1948, on a damp, cold Monday afternoon, Helga said goodbye to the doctor, his wife, and Christine. Tears and hugs helped her to take this giant step as she left for Frankfurt in an American army vehicle. The ride was long and bumpy. Little Tom, wrapped in three blankets, slept most of the way. The jeep's heating system was not sufficient to combat the damp, almost frigid, air. The flight to America, scheduled to leave Frankfurt at 7 that evening, was on time.

Christine had spent the whole weekend with Helga, reminding her numerous times not to stay too long and not to forget to send postcards from America at least once a week. Dieter dropped by on Saturday and wished her a safe journey. For the first time since little Tom was born, he inquired about his health. Helga was pleased he made the effort to visit; she gave him a quick hug and thanked him with tears in her eyes for dropping by.

As if aware that something extraordinary was taking place, little Tom was more animated than usual. He laughed while helping his mum pack his clothes and toys for the trip.

Now that the time had come to take this huge step in her life and visit Tom's parents, Helga was having mild anxiety attacks. She was first and foremost concerned that meeting his family might open wounds barely healed. Further, she was fearful that the visit might bring to light how she had been entangled in this

extraordinary lightness of being during the past few months. The reasons for her self-imposed fluffy existence was a topic she would rather not share with the grandparents of her son.

For the first time in her life, she stepped into an airplane. Thinking of Tom's tragic death left her with a strange feeling; she was not afraid of flying, but walking into the airplane brought back a flood of memories. Tom had promised he would teach her to fly once the war was over. Prior to meeting Tom, the idea of flying had never crossed her mind. His obsession with mastering unseen, frequently turbulent air currents made her, however, wonder what the attraction was all about. Listening to Tom's passionate tales of aerial exploits, piloting and exploring the vastness of the open sky sounded like something to look forward to. Besides, she was of the opinion that as a thoughtful partner it was only common sense to find out what the excitement was all about.

Nevertheless, as she walked up the stairs to the aircraft, her spirit was briefly confused. Holding little Tom very tightly, she thought, *Only God knows the reason for all of this to happen. Yesterday I was a young and innocent village girl; today I step into an American military plane with a son from an American pilot in my arms. How did all of this happen? What am I doing? What does this trip have in store for me?*

She remembered her father's words: "This relationship is the stuff motion pictures are made of." Then abruptly her mother's words echoed in her mind: "Helga, don't follow in my footsteps."

Almost thinking aloud, she ruminated, "Oh, Mama, if you only knew how far off my footsteps are from yours."

Slowly the melancholy mood subsided and her thoughts drifted to the upcoming visit. She was sincerely hoping the stay in America would help Tom's family with their grief. She was convinced little Tom would be a source of pleasure and bring happiness to their life.

The plane that carried Helga across the pond was full of U.S. soldiers heading home. Some of the young soldiers never saw combat. Their lack of battle experience, however, did not stop them from bragging about events only known second-hand. Many were uneducated young Americans, joining the army to learn a trade or to take advantage of a chance to visit Europe. The noise in the airplane confirmed that everybody looked forward with considerable eagerness to going home.

Tom, Pete, and most of the American soldiers that crossed into Germany during the war never bragged about war and death. Bragging about war-related achievements was adolescent foolishness; the brutality of war had a way of making men out of boys. Listening to the babble of these young soldiers, Helga's thoughts travelled back to her favourite hangout in Schweinfurt, a *Gasthaus* situated only steps from the river Main. This pub quickly became the favourite hangout for American soldiers. Most establishments in this straight-talking, hard-working, blue-collar city tried rigorously to erase the scars of war. The native "Gemütlichkeit," so desperately needed after these heart-wrenching years, was taboo to Americans in almost all pubs in Schweinfurt; perhaps, considering the times, rightly so. How would an American nurtured in the hills of Tennessee, or for that matter in the Bronx of New York City, understand this centuries-old way of life? This unique colloquial atmosphere, a product of hundreds of years of plain spoken, honest, yet thorough dialogue, was not easily shared; only locals would understand the humour, so unique, even in all of Germany. For this reason most pubs asked American soldiers to refrain from entering; however, a small amount of owners and managers were simply antagonistic toward Americans.

As the airplane sliced through the sky, Helga recalled how the doctor and her father, in one of their many conversations, remarked that World War II was the beginning of an age with

diminishing expectations, not only in Germany but worldwide. Way above normal breathing space, her thoughts drifted; soon she recalled how one night, on her way home from the "American" pub, she echoed this sentiment to Christine. "Life as we experienced as kids is gone forever."

Christine agreed. "*Jah schau uns an...was ist aus uns geworden!*" ("Yes, look at us...what we have become.")


Millions of people worldwide only much later reiterated this profound feeling. Christine and Helga, their skins exposed, understood this grave revelation much earlier.

Helga barely acknowledged the gawking soldiers. She had dealt with enough ogling during the past year. Moreover, boisterous talk was usually nauseating and most certainly boring to her. Conscious of how war had robbed her of living a normal life, bragging about it was never a means to her favour, much to the disappointment of macho soldiers. Without thinking, protecting her inner self, she preferred to share her body with the quiet, almost introvert types. Every so often tough, liberal amounts of alcohol robbed her of making the right decision, and a typical all-American hero found a way into her bed. Once sober, realizing with whom she had bunked, she would quickly mitigate her mistake, taking pleasure in dropping the hunk like a slab of meat, letting him believe his maleness was questionable. Thinking back, while cruising way above the Atlantic, she was thankful for the help and ongoing kindness the doctor and his wife had extended her during these turbulent times.

Determined to turn over a new page in her life, she was nevertheless fearful that this trip might turn out to be another dreadful mistake in her already upside-down life. Her failure to overcome these spontaneous mood changes were entirely the after-effects of the horrifying war years, as well as her remorse for the frivolous postwar escapades. Losing her mother at an age when a mother would have made a difference, as well as the tragic death of three

men she loved, hurled her to lows, at times for the slightest of reason, as she desperately sought an answer to her question—why? With no answer forthcoming, she deliberately chose to dull her senses with alcohol and physical excitement, hoping it would stultify the pain so she could face another day. At times she wondered if her daily life was any different from that of a hamster in a cage, facing the absurdity of living on a treadmill without hope of ever getting off. While she loathed war, she respected and accepted seasoned soldiers. This, at first glance, paradoxical belief was partly due to the fundamental nature of her race to obey the unchallengeable laws of compliance when one has given allegiance to a greater cause. Moreover, she was convinced that, in spite of their chosen profession, most experienced soldiers were mindful of the enormous tragedy of war. Pleasing a soldier who understood war's agony while anaesthetizing her mind was thus a fair exchange. Money never changed hands. American soldiers, aware of Germany's economic situation, shared easily.

Christine baptized newcomers as “toy soldiers.” She however laughingly admitted that in bed the difference between a real soldier and a toy soldier was fast forgotten. Unlike Helga, Christine just wanted to have fun. She liked the easy, almost naive way of life that young American soldiers portrayed; moreover, she once told Helga the smell of their chewing gum was a pleasant change from Germany's odour of decay. Both, for their own reasons, allowed sex to be acceptable and simply effortless. Being light and frivolous, they concluded that making love without pleasure would have been crossing the line.



Chapter 45

With Helga's arrival imminent, Shirley noticed a profound change for the better in her parents. There was evidence of renewed interest in mundane daily chores. Moreover, from time to time, simple conversations were once again part of their life, and existence seemed to surpass essence. Looking for confirmation, she asked Sally, who still visited the Williams regularly, if she had noticed a change.

“Odd...I was just going to ask you the same question.”

Giving Shirley an expectant glance, Sally added, “Let's hope this visit will turn out to be a blessing for your parents.” Both agonized secretly that the visit might have the opposite effect.

Shirley continued. “Since Tom's accident, Dad has practically become a recluse. The only person he visits from time to time is old Tom, much to the exasperation of his other friends and the rest of the village. If I did not insist he join us for lunch, he would stay out in the garden all day, but since we had confirmation of Helga's arrival, some of his former self is noticeable. Yesterday he almost made me chuckle. He asked me to clean the house so Helga wouldn't think we live in a dirty place. Can you imagine?”

“Oh my, that is funny...did your mom hear him say that?”

“Thank God she was not back from church; imagine what she would say to him.”

“I was really getting worried about your mom.”

Jürgen Beck

“So was I. She has aged since Tom’s death. I believe if it wasn’t for Dad, she might have given up.”


Changing the subject, Shirley asked Sally in an inquisitive, yet gracious manner, “Sally how do you feel? Helga coming for a visit...does it bother you? I know you were hoping Tom would forget about Germany, and to be honest, so were we, all of us, each for our own reason.”

“Yes, regrettably I couldn’t win Tom over. I was hoping time would change things. He might be alive today.”

“Sally, you must never again say such a silly thing! Tom’s accident had nothing to do with any of us. His trip to Savannah was unavoidable—he had to report for a briefing on his upcoming move to the Philippines.” To add meaning to her words, she spontaneously hugged Sally.

When the plane finally landed in New York, Helga’s heartbeat increased as she gathered her belongings to leave the airplane. Troubled to meet Tom’s parents, moreover, the hubbub on the tarmac bothered her. How would she ever link up with Tom’s family in this hectic and colourful crowd?

Nevertheless, as she walked down the stairs of the DC-4 holding little Tom in her arms, she noticed a young woman forcing her way through the crowd, shouting, “Helga!” The moment Tom’s sister embraced her, with a hearty “Welcome to America,” the feeling of uncertainty vanished, and she felt secure and welcome. Tears ran down her cheeks as a warm feeling swept her entire body. For the slightest of moments, she was nonplussed; the sensation was almost numinous. She was quickly tugged back to reality when Shirley interrupted her thoughts. “Helga, come and meet my parents. They cannot wait to meet you and the baby!”



Chapter 46

Not far from the Williams’ farm, two concessions north on a gravel road, considered back country, was a small but neatly kept house on a five-acre lot where old Tom lived with his wife, Bessie. The large lot, separated from a sloping meadow on one side and virgin woods on the other sides, was cordoned off with cedar rail fencing. In the past, the parcel of land was home to various animals. In recent years, the mules and horses made way for an assortment of birds.

The Chens were of African American and Asian origin. Old Tom, as everybody called him, looked more Asian than African American, whereas Bessie looked more African American. Moving to the Catskills from California some forty-five years before, and being the only African-American-Asian family amongst white folks in the surrounding vicinity, they were an oddity to most locals. Their children, two boys and a girl, had left for Detroit City right after finishing high school to search for full-time employment, hoping for a more prosperous life. Not long after settling in Motown, they encouraged their parents to sell their belongings and join them. Mr. Chen was however quite content staying in the Catskills. His wife, on the other hand, who visited the children regularly for extended periods, was hoping her husband would change his mind some day. Being raised as a compliant wife by her parents and grandparents, she never pressed the issue. Their daughter,

Chantal, was married to Rufus, a handsome black factory worker who earned his keep in an honest fashion in the automobile industry, a job he treasured considering steady paycheques were hard to come by for black folks.

Bessie loved visiting her daughter. She treasured the opportunity to look after her two grandchildren and take care of the house while her daughter and husband were at work. James, the eldest son, never married. He became an auto mechanic in a small auto repair shop. Sam, the artist in the family, was trying to become a full-time musician, a difficult task for a black Asian. He played the trumpet as skilfully as, or better than, most Caucasian musicians; nevertheless, he had to work part-time in a Chinese laundromat to supplement his meagre earnings as a part-time musician. Their paternal grandfather had been an educated scribe from a northern province in China, where he worked for the local government. After immigrating to the land of the free, he had to endure hard physical labour to survive. Building railroad tracks in California almost killed him. Only his steadfast belief in a better future and his unyielding will to not give up kept him alive. He was impervious to defeat; many of his countrymen were not that lucky. Thousands of Asian died due to the inhumane working conditions. Mules were often treated better than a Chinese immigrant laying tracks for the privileged white class, who would eventually ride in magnificent luxurious trains across the vast country. Sitting in their plush seats, they quickly forgot the ill-fated poor immigrants who gave their lives to complete this monumental task.

The Williams, and only a few other neighbours, were fraternizing with the Chens. This neighbourly socializing was largely due to Mr. William's established friendship with old Tom. Mr. Williams and Mr. Chen were down-to-earth simple folks in their daily lives. Living a simple life did not stop them from adhering to an enlightened code of conduct. African Americans, Orientals,

native Indians, and white folks were all the same to the Chens and Williams. This realization, based on the fundamental conviction that all men are equal, was unquestionably a certainty in their daily lives.

Unfortunately, this alleged cornerstone of the American constitution, "equality for all," became all too quickly a thorn in the eyes of the ruling white class. Equal rights were swept under the rug. The great majority of white Americans never safeguarded Thomas Jefferson's model. Racism was acutely flourishing in the U.S. Segregation, particularly of black people, was dreadfully evident in 1948. As a result, some white folks could not figure out how the Williams were capable of maintaining a friendship with a "Chink" who had a "nigger" for a wife. Mr. Williams, when provoked by ignorant village folks, was quick to point out that the charter of rights provided equal rights to all. Folks just shook their heads or quickly changed the subject, not admitting that they contributed to this ugly sickness. Imitating the behaviour of ostriches when faced with having to make a decision was more convenient. Mr. Williams, a firm believer in saying what he meant and meaning what he said, paid no credence to other people's gossip. Being a friend to old Tom long before his son was born was the deciding factor in baptizing him as Thomas after the two Thomases he knew and respected, one through years of friendship, the other Thomas Jefferson, the third president of the USA. The American hypocrisy toward blacks, Asians and natives was remarkably obvious. White politicians and lawmakers, with ample help from the mainstream media, collectively convinced the masses that "niggers, Chinks and Indians" were second-class citizens. As a result, not only was segregation acceptable, but most white Americans thought it was their God-given right to abuse minorities.

In fairness to American history, not all Americans stooped this low. Clarence Darrow, a white lawyer, as early as 1926 defended a

black man by the name of Henry Sweet. Sweet was charged with killing a white man while defending his family and his home from an angry white mob that was trying to evict them from a predominantly white neighbourhood in Detroit. The ever-growing automobile city attracted many black workers from the south. The Ku Klux Klan, a bigoted, brain-dead assembly of white losers, stooped as low as burning homes to stop black families from moving into the more affluent white neighbourhoods. Clarence Darrow, in his seven-hour defence speech, won an acquittal for Henry Sweet. Unfortunately, this victory for equality was a rarity in America. Only Clarence Darrow's incredible oratory skills and his steadfast belief in justice for all saved the life of one single black American. Thousands were not that lucky.

Old Chen, who had the patience of a saint, would never allow himself to be provoked by stares or unkind remarks. He would simply say, "In time to come, hatred will simply shift, when it suits the policies and intentions of the ruling class. Hate will move from one race to another. We mustn't be troubled, though. A nation's karma is just as prevalent as our own individual karma. One day in years to come, the U.S. will harvest what it sows. There always is an equalizer. It is a fundamental law of God's first creation."

Some locals believed old Chen had a third eye; rumour had it that he could look into the future. Little did they know, building cabinets for a living, and not being preoccupied with greed and immoral self-indulgence, gave him time to ponder life. Being an avid reader in his spare time helped him while joining wood to consider the things he read. This daily, mostly joyful pastime connected him to a much greater picture.

The Williams, an established solid middle class family in the region, were not concerned about people scowling behind their backs due to their friendship with the Chens. The camaraderie was no secret and often acknowledged by Mr. Williams when having a

soda in the village store. Much to the mortification of some villagers, Mr. Williams would loudly proclaim, "Old Tom has more sense and character than most of white folks I know."

Unbeknownst to the Williams family, they were forerunners of a gradually growing worldwide group of people who, in spite of ongoing global unrest created by money- and power-hungry scum, realized that while conflicts between individuals and race are unavoidable, in a civilized and social democratic environment, intolerance toward people of different cultures or mindsets is in the end counterproductive.

Over the years, Mr. Williams valued the advice of his old friend Mr. Chen on numerous occasions when faced with making important decisions that might affect the well-being of himself or his family. Old Tom's outlook on life, treasuring each day, regardless of circumstances, with joy and goodwill in his heart, allowed him to face a dilemma head-on. With no axe to grind, his advice was far-sighted and predictive. In all the years Mr. Williams only ever saw him mad once. This was many years before, when his youngest son took a whip to their stubborn mule.

"Don't beat the mule! How would you like to change places? With your temper your destiny might be that of a stubborn mule one day." With this, he took the whip from his son and broke it in half over his knees.

It might be thought that living as a Africa-American-Asian family amongst Caucasian folks could hardly bring comfort to old Mr. Chen, but this most certainly was not the case. He was a much sought after cabinetmaker, and with good sense and a remarkable constitution he learned to watch his pennies. As a result, he accumulated enough money over the years to allow him to advance his children down payments for their homes. Many folks were envious. "How can this Chink living with a nigger have a better life than us?" This resentment came from people who would squander their

hard-earned money in bars, gambling places, and with women smarter than themselves.

Mr. Williams, prior to his son's death, somewhat of a "*strick-strumpf*" philosopher, was in awe of how old Tom would constantly come up with pearls of wisdom regardless of how difficult it was to live in a bigoted community. Mr. Chen, however, did not look at colour; he believed in goodwill while applying common sense. Moreover, he never questioned the existence of something greater than himself. This foundation stopped him from bending like a willow in the wind. Contained by his values, he was released from hurtful racial thoughts. The few who had the privilege to know him considered him a sagacious human being, or at least wiser than most people they knew. Having black, white, yellow, or red skin was just a manifestation to old Tom. Principally he acknowledged that all men were alike, and it was this self-evident characteristic that allowed him to move freely amongst white folks. Not being a slave to base powers, he enjoyed a freedom unlike folks who lived a hypocritical, hollow material life.

His wife, brought up in a very poor traditional black servant family, could not identify with her husband on many occasions. Yet, treasuring his clever mind, she more importantly loved his gentle nature and was enthralled by his incomparably interesting ideas about life. She was happily at ease playing second fiddle. Coming home from visiting her daughter in Detroit, she sometimes objected to the gawking and aloof manners of white folks. He would simply admonish her gently. "Don't fret. Be assured people will soon or later get what they hand out. It is the law of reciprocal action. You are liberated from their abuse once you understand and believe it isn't up to you to judge people. It is non-resistance we must practice." Over the years, she slowly came to appreciate his philosophy, learning not be bothered by prejudices any longer.

A few days before Helga arrived in the USA, Mr. Williams paid

a visit to his friend of many years. Quickly he brought up Helga's imminent coming. Tom gently interrupted him and, in his placid, apologetic yet straightforward manner, asked him why he was afraid of Helga's visit.

Mr. Williams was not surprised old Tom knew already what troubled him. "Well, Tom, since you have a habit of coming right to the point, let me tell you what is on my mind."

Before Mr. Williams had a chance to continue, Mr. Chen again interrupted. "Allow me to be bold and tell you what bothers you. To begin with, Helga's visit is opening wounds you are desperately trying to heal. Further, you are scared she might not like it here. Moreover you are worried she is not what you expect her to be."

"Tom, you are something else. Three out of three. How do you always know what troubles people?"

Mr. Chen, a twinkle in his eyes, replied, "Knowing what troubles people isn't at all what it is made out to be."

"You and Bessie must come next Saturday night to Helga's welcome party." Pausing shortly, he reiterated, "Don't forget...I want you and Bessie to meet Helga."

"You know you are going to upset some folks," old Tom laughingly answered.

The welcome party was a relatively quiet event; amongst tears and sparse laughter, Helga and little Tom were welcomed into the Williams family. Everybody was to some extent aware of the uncertainty this visit could bring. This regrettably subdued the party somewhat. The mood was reminiscent of a town hall meeting where everybody was waiting for someone else to set the tone.

Sally eventually saved the evening. Standing, in order to catch everybody's attention, she raised her glass of wine and to everybody's amazement took the floor. Shirley, knowing how Helga's visit might cause trepidation to Sally, was momentarily caught off guard and concerned as Sally proposed a toast.

“Helga, on behalf of the Williams family, as well as all of us present, welcome to America. We are so very happy you decided to come and visit Tom’s parents, and we sincerely hope this visit will bring as much joy to you as it will bring to all of us.”

Helga, turning red, not at all prepared to be the centre of attention, nevertheless stood up, thanked Sally, and reciprocated by saying, “Thank you for your lovely words. I am delighted to be here. Thank you so much for the invitation.”

The toast and Helga’s straightforward mannerism as she spoke broke the ice. Soon a relaxed and much more animated conversation filled the room. The baby, as everybody called young Thomas, however, captured the evening, and before long everybody genuinely fussed over him. It was an appropriate and accepted way to compensate for the earlier restrained mood. The consensus was the baby looked like his father; accordingly, the welcome party for Helga and little Tom became also a tribute to his father.

Notwithstanding the time difference of six hours, Helga could not go to sleep until the early hours of the morning. While genuinely pleased by the truly warm welcome, she found no peace. Her thoughts in turmoil, she lay awake until the early hours of the morning. It was loneliness that bothered her. For the first time away in a country utterly alien, with people she hardly knew, it was perhaps all too much to bear. Finally falling asleep, she questioned in her dreams if this new relationship came with a responsibility she might not be able to honour.



Chapter 47

The next morning, after breakfast, Mrs. Williams asked Helga if she would like to visit Tom’s grave. Helga, of course, realized this trip was inevitable. Still, it was troubling to her. While she agreed that visiting Tom’s gravesite might provide a long overdue closure, it was a cup she would rather not drink from, at least not for the time being. Shirley, not going to work until after lunch, offered to watch little Tom.

The cemetery was situated on the other end of the village, butting up against a rather steep hill. There were tall trees, evenly spaced, giving the place a naturally peaceful setting. Mrs Williams, cognizant of how this visit might affect Helga, tried to make small talk about the flowers on Tom’s grave. “Now spring is almost here it will be a lot easier to look after the grave. I really don’t know what flowers Tom liked. It was something we never talked about. His dad looked after the flower beds in the garden, and Tom only helped from time to time, but in a couple of weeks we are going to plant a rosebush. Sally thought Tom might like a rosebush—you remember Sally, it was she who welcomed you last night with a toast. Sally is a school friend of Tom’s; they grew up together. Not living far from us, she is also friends with Shirley, and over the years she became part of the family.”

Helga noticed a slight difference in Mrs. Williams’ tone, facial expression, and body language and suspected there were more to

Sally than just a school friend. Quickly she curbed her thoughts; casting a stone while living in a glass house was sheer foolishness. “Yes, I think a rosebush would be wonderful.”

Just then they reached Tom’s grave, and momentarily a faintness overpowered Helga as she read Tom’s name on the black marble gravestone. Briefly scared she would lose her footing, she held on to Mrs. Williams.

“Helga, are you okay?”

“Yes...yes. I guess I am still weak from all the excitement and the time difference. Yes, thank you, I am okay now.”

“Oh Helga, we don’t really understand why our Tom was called home at such a young age, but we must trust in God and look forward to live everlasting. But it is so difficult to let go...we all miss him so very much.”

Helga, weak, knees wobbly, could not answer. To say anything would cause a breakdown. Accepting the naked truth of the white chiselled words in black marble was shocking, concrete attestation to an irreversible situation. Time, moreover the moment in time, somehow felt naked and meaningless. Standing there, feeling stripped and utterly alone, she suddenly remembered one evening back at her parents’ farm. Tom, proud of his ability to remember his days in high school, quoted Hamlet’s soliloquy, “To be, or not to be: that is the question.” Slowly she turned from the grave and walked toward the entrance of the cemetery.

Over the next couple of weeks, Shirley introduced Helga to almost everybody in the village. Everyone Helga met was exceedingly courteous and hospitable, yet an odd feeling of uncertainty wrapped itself around her. She wondered why unprovoked negative vibrations assaulted her. Without warning sudden uncontrolled grief would get the better of her. While it was difficult to be gracious during these moments of misery, Helga nevertheless coped. Reaching to pull up her socks, she managed to hide her feelings.

Most nights she would have dreams of Tom. In one of these dreams, she saw him standing on the wing of an airplane. He was calling her, his arms waving as if to emphasize something urgent. She at last realized the motion of his arms told her to come and join him. Her legs, however, would not move. Terrified, she tried to get closer to the airplane while holding young Thomas by his hand. Then all of a sudden her son, now a young man, was clinging to her, not wanting to be left behind. Fatigued, she felt a pain in her midsection, as if being pulled apart. Abruptly the young man disappeared, and she was standing on the wing of the airplane. She walked closer to Tom, who was still urging her, with a solemn facial expression, to follow him. As she moved gradually toward Tom, he too disappeared. Now all she saw was heavy fog all around her. Tom was nowhere to be seen. Next she was back on the ground. An old woman walked up to her, clutching a baby close to her chest. Alarmed, she woke up.

Frightened and confused by the bizarre dream, she lay awake for a long time before going back to sleep. In the morning, feeling all alone, still haunted by her dream, she longed to be home. Thinking of Christine and knowing Christine would simply say “Don’t pay attention to these silly nightmarish dreams...think of something pleasant and go back to sleep” made her almost smile. Over the next few days, the anxiety attacks disappeared, and soon she returned to her former self.

Helga, slightly aloof one afternoon, wandered into the Williams’ garden; there she found Mr. Williams turning over soil around a gooseberry bush. Helga asked if she could help. Delighted by her offer, he asked if she loved gardening.

“We had a large garden at my parents’ farm. Now that both of my parents are gone, it is up to my brother to look after it. But when my mom was still alive I would help her to get the garden ready every spring.”

“Helga, how would you like to come with me and visit Mr. Chen’s aviary? You remember Mr. Chen from our get-together the other night? He is the Chinese looking man. Our Tom loved to visit Mr. Chen’s aviary. In fact, people from all over the Catskills and beyond visit old Tom’s bird sanctuary. Considering he has no formal education, he has an amazing knowledge about birds. Perhaps we could go tomorrow after breakfast. I am sure you will enjoy the visit.”

Helga, remembering the many times Tom talked about Mr. Chen, immediately agreed. “Tom talked a lot about him. I would love to visit him and his wife. At the welcome party I was too tired to carry on a conversation.”

Mrs. Chen was only the second coloured person Helga had met up close. The first time was back in Germany, hanging out at her favourite waterhole with Christine and another girlfriend named Inge. They were dancing and carousing the night away with three white American GIs when a lone black GI asked Christine for a dance. A fight nearly erupted when one of the white GIs told the black American that no “niggers” were welcome in the bar. Christine, forthright and always ready for a bit of gritty action, reminded the white GI that he had no business telling her with whom she could or could not dance, particularly in a German bar. The weak-kneed manager of the pub sided with the white GIs and told the African American that there was a bar at the other end of town that welcomed blacks. Unfortunately, all too often Germans quickly adopted the derogatory term *nigger* and forced coloured GIs to be segregated. The love for the American dollar nevertheless opened doors, and as a result at least one bar in Schweinfurt welcomed “Schwarze.”

The moment Helga walked into the Chen residence, she felt comfortable. Recalling her early childhood, she remembered this feeling of something good coming her way when visiting the

doctor and his wife. The Chens’ home, although old, with furniture that showed years of usage, was clean and comfortable. Moreover, a peaceful, almost celestial ambience seemed to inhabit the entire house. The many family pictures, a variety of traditional Chinese knick-knacks, the abundance of potted plants and the colourful carpets on a yellowish pine floor gave the place extraordinary character. The pleasing smell from the kitchen added to the charm of the house. Within minutes of arriving, Helga felt magically transferred to an entirely different continent. The living room reminded her of a favourite picture book from her childhood, page after page pulsating with colourful pictures of little boys and girls dressed in their native Chinese costumes, mandarins with sparse but lengthy moustaches, drawings of fierce dragons, and buildings so different from anything she had ever seen before. The ambience of the place reached her heart, and before long she felt immediate affection for the Chens. It was a whirlwind reaction, like nothing she had ever experienced when meeting someone new.

Bessie, Mr. Chen’s wife, took Helga by the arm and showed her through the house. She took care to point out who was who in all of the pictures in the hallway and living room. Her wedding picture, although in black and white, showed how exceptionally good looking she was in her younger years. Mr. Chen, on the other hand, looked frail and rather common; however, looking up close you could see a warm-hearted, intelligent twinkle in his eyes. Mrs. Chens’ background was truly diverse. Her father and his parents were African American, whereas her mother was of Chinese, African, and North American Indian background. The wedding picture confirmed how this blend of nationalities produced a remarkably pretty and exotic woman. Now in her seventies, she still looked attractive.

“This is our daughter’s room, and if you ever visit us for more than an afternoon it is yours while staying with us.” The frilly white

curtains and the numerous colourful and stunningly dressed dolls assembled on the bed looked alive, wondering who entered the room. Perfume bottles filled with coloured water and toiletries gave the room a very feminine touch.

Helga, surprised but pleased with the implied invitation to stay over, replied, "Thank you. This is so pretty. I hope I am not putting you out, visiting so unannounced."

"Oh, you are silly for saying this. We are happy that you visit us. We don't get many visitors."

Back in the kitchen, Mr. Williams was sitting at the table chatting about last year's deer hunt with old Tom. A hearty lunch served with lots of laughter and questions about family on both sides made time fly. All of a sudden, it was three o'clock, and Mr. Chen asked Helga if she would like to see his aviary, as it was time for his usual afternoon rounds. At once Helga told him that her father also kept several peacocks around their farmyard for most of her younger years. Old Tom, detecting sincere interest, was delighted to take her to the aviary and unveil his pride and joy. Walking through the garden toward the aviary, he told her, "Man has a self-centred view of the world; we could learn much from nature. It is therefore very important to be kind to these beautiful creatures."

While speaking he looked directly in Helga's eyes as if to weigh her answer to his remarks.

"We always loved birds; in our garden we have bird feeders all over the place."

Mr. Chen stepped inside the very large and expertly constructed aviary. "Come, come inside. These birds will love you; they perceive a gentle nature instantly."

Hundreds of birds, not at all panicked, flew around. Some of the small finches and chickadees flew very close to Mr. Chen's shoulders and head. "When I am alone, or once they get used to

someone else being with me, they land right on my shoulders, arms, and at times right on my head. When they see someone new, they are always a little jittery for a short time." A midday shadow was spreading across half of the aviary, as it was surrounded by trees and brush. Forethought in the design however ensured the birds would catch, in at least one part of the aviary, the sun all day.

Mr. Chen motioned to Helga to follow him. "Birds evolved from a group of reptiles some 150 million years ago. It was in your country that we first learned about their history. A bird the size of a crow was found in Germany, and scientists tell us that the remains have been preserved some 150 million years."

Before Helga had a chance to digest his remark, he continued. "Do you ever wonder where we come from, what this experience we call life is all about?" When he asked the question, he again looked deep into her eyes, evaluating whether she took his question seriously.

Turning slightly red, she nonetheless answered in a firm voice, "Well, I am not sure. The Bible tells us that humans have been around for only some six to seven thousand years, but I always thought this didn't make any sense. Tom and I had several conversations about this subject."

"And what was Tom's answer to these questions?" Again, he looked at her as if earnestly waiting for the answer.

"I know he believed in a higher power, but his God was different than the God of the Bible and the New Testament."

"How so?"

"He never really defined it, but he always thought if there is a God, he would be more merciful than people. The concept of heaven and hell didn't seem to make any sense to him. He thought heaven and hell were right here on earth."

Old Tom gently caressing a finch, who found a resting place on

his outstretched arm, with the tip of his finger. He gave his undivided attention to this little feathered creature; his questions and Helga's answer were not important, at least for the time being.

After the little finch flew away, he continued his walk through the aviary, Helga following closely behind. "Here is something very remarkable." He pointed to his prize possession, a ghost owl, also known as a barn owl, perched on a tree stump in a separate spacious compartment of the large aviary. "This species of owl is different than most owls. They have much longer legs and long talons, yet their eyes are small and very dark. They dislike daylight and rely on their incredible hearing in order to hunt their prey at night. I let him go every so often, but he comes back every time, although I know the day will come when he will leave for good."

The owl spread his wings as if to say "Look at me now." Old Tom continued talking, more to the owl than to Helga. "Who knows, perhaps we meet again someday, maybe in a different far-away place, another time." Looking again at Helga, he carried on in a subdued voice. "When I found him, he had a broken wing. I helped to get him well again. Now he thanks me by staying here every so often. I guess I shouldn't expect more."


Helga was amazed by how old Tom interacted with his birds. She remembered how the peacocks flocked around her father at feeding time. However, what she witnessed here was wonderfully different; the birds flew to Mr. Chen, landed on his outstretched arm, said hello, waited for his gentle touch, and then flew off again, with a joyful sound saying thank you.

As they walked silently back to the house, Helga's thoughts shifted to Mr. Chen's earlier question regarding Tom's beliefs, hoping he would get back to this topic. Once back in the house the conversation was however general in nature, and soon they had to leave. Mrs. Williams had planned supper for five o'clock.

Mr. Chen and his wife walked Helga and Mr. Williams to the

car. At an opportune moment Mr. Chen signalled Helga. "When you found Tom, he also had a broken wing. If it wasn't for the accident, he would have come back to you. Please visit us again; I would love to talk more about Tom and how the two of you met."

Helga quickly entered the car. Collecting herself was difficult, as tears welled up in her eyes. On their way back home, Tom's father, who had overheard old Tom's remark, gave Helga space, so the ride home was quieter than normal. On previous outings Helga was always made aware of how places they passed were connected to Tom.



Chapter 48

To be human is to belong to something or someone. *Belong* we could say is associated with *being* and *longing*. True belonging, though, does not mean to belong *to* each other but *with* each other.

Over the next two weeks Helga and Mr. Williams visited the Chens two more times. On the last visit, Mrs. Chen asked Helga if she and little Tom would like to spend a couple of days at their home. Helga looked at Mr. Williams, weighing his reaction. Later, she wondered what made her seek his approval. Noticing her concern, Mr. Williams, though, eased her mind at once. “Helga, please don’t worry about us. If you like to stay for a few days, we understand. It will give you a break from our routine, and you can leave little Tom with us. I am sure Mother will take good care of him.”

Helga, absolutely delighted by the invitation, was eagerly looking forward to having some time alone with Mr. Chen. During the previous visits no opportunity had presented itself, since she spent most of her time with Mrs. Chen while impatiently waiting for Mr. Chen to talk about Tom. The conversations with Mrs. Chen reminded her of days long gone when her mother spoke about issues neither her father nor two brothers were part of. Quickly she agreed to accept the invitation. A couple of days later Mr. Williams dropped her off. Little Tom stayed with the Williams

family.

The Chens lived a simple but harmonious life. Helga realized that not even the doctor and his wife, Luise, lived in such accord. Mr. and Mrs. Chen never had to ask each other for anything; both knew at the exact moment what the other needed. While she loved and missed her parents, she could not recall them living in such harmony.

To Helga, this was remarkable, if not magical. The Chens’ way of life touched her, and the totality of it all made Helga break into tears as they asked her to sit down for dinner that evening.

“Please forgive me. I am not crying because...omigod, I don’t even know why I am crying. Sorry. I am so happy you invited me. I should not be crying...”

Mr. Chen, with empathy in voice and gesture, replied, “Helga, crying is good for you. It doesn’t bother us at all. You have been through much in your young life. Most people would never have the courage you have. Be kind to yourself...you deserve it. Tomorrow we will go for a long walk if the weather co-operates, and we can talk if you are up to it. You must find a way to heal and put aside these dreadful years. Perhaps we can help.”

Mrs. Chen, changing the subject, cut in. “Try these sweet potatoes from our garden. They are good for you, full of vitamins and minerals.”

Helga, slightly embarrassed, ate in silence. The Chens thoughtfully followed suit, and dinner was not interrupted by further talk.

“Thank you, Everything is so delicious. I don’t think I have eaten so much in a long time.”

“Perhaps you would like to come with me and visit the aviary. But if you are tired or like to have time for yourself, Bessie has made up our daughter’s room. Feel free...make our place your home, and do whatever your heart desires.”

“I’d love to come and visit the birds, and I must tell you I feel at home here. The truth is, I have not felt this comfortable in a long time.”

“Good. We are very happy you like to spend some time with us old folks; we seldom get company staying over,” Mrs. Chen simply replied.

Visiting the aviary, Helga was again amazed at how the birds circled and eventually sat on Mr. Chen’s outstretched hands, shoulders and arms.

“Hold out your hand; let’s put some seed in it. Have patience, and they will come to you.”

Helga was downright thrilled when after a few minutes a chickadee, after making a few low passes, chirping in its distinctive voice, came and ate from the palm of her hand. “It is amazing how tame they are.”

“Some birds are set free every spring. Many will return in the fall once it gets cold. I have banded most of them, and this way I can keep track of who comes back.”

As soon as they had filled the feeders with a mixture of corn, sunflower seeds, peanuts and wheat, Helga asked, “Can I visit the owl again?”

“Of course.”

Helga was hoping he would again talk about Tom, as he had when he mentioned the owl’s broken wing. Reading her thoughts, he said, “Tomorrow we will talk about anything you like. I know you have many questions. Perhaps we can find a way to ease the pain you feel.”

“You read my thoughts. I am not surprised...you are an amazing man, Mr. Chen.”

“No, no, not amazing, just trying to help, if I can.”

Once back in the house, over several cups of tea Helga shared details of Tom’s rescue, his injuries, and his recuperation in her father’s house.

Mr. Chen interrupted from time to time, asking questions about Helga’s family, the village she lived in, and Tom’s injuries.

Helga was astonished by how easy it was to talk about Tom. With the Williams, she found it difficult to discuss her relationship with Tom. Moreover, the tragic accident was a topic she would rather avoid, partly so as to not open wounds, as well as suffering pangs of conscience due to her wild and reckless life so shortly after Tom’s death.

In the evening, the Chens showed her pictures of young Tom Williams and the Chens’ children playing in the backyard. The pictures somehow troubled Helga. The realization that she had to raise young Tom alone brought forth once again the question, why? *Why, Tom? Why did this terrible accident have to happen?* The desolate awareness of the need to raise the child by herself and the realization that no answer to her question would ever be satisfactory once again triggered something deep inside, and in the blink of an eye the pain changed again to anger. Anger with Tom, her mother, father and brother; anger for having to live during those horrible war years; anger for living a frivolous life and looking for love in all the wrong places. Mostly, though, the negative emotion that surfaced as anger was rooted in recognizing that her belief in a just God had slipped away, one death at a time. Suffering was a way of life, not only for her, but for everybody. One thought chased another. *Perhaps, in reality, we are all alone. Is life in the end only a road to emptiness?* She realized the danger in following this line of reasoning. *How can I change my life?* No more partial conquests, no more uncertainty, an immediate commitment that being prepared to travel a lonely narrow road was essential to maintaining sanity.

All of this went through her mind in a flash, not in precise sequential sentences but altogether. An inner feeling flooded her essence, more precise than words could convey.

Mrs Chen realized the strange effect the pictures had on Helga; she invited her to come to the kitchen, asking to help her make more tea.

“Something is bothering you, Helga. Let’s have another cup of tea. Perhaps talking about it might help?”

The short-lived yet intense feeling changed from anger to relief. Slowly she started to cry.

“Dear me, it is okay to cry. Let it all come out. You mustn’t worry. We understand...we know how difficult life can be.”

“I don’t know where to start. It’s all so very clear one moment, yet confusing all the same, and I thought I was over the worst, but sometimes I get so angry...”

“Come into the living room. Let my husband talk to you. He is much better at this than I am.”

“No, it’s okay. I don’t want to be a burden to anybody—”

Mr. Chen, overhearing the last remark, walked up, took her hand into his own and said, “You are never a burden, Helga. We are all on a difficult journey. To live life with joy in your heart day in and day out is not easy...it takes lots of willpower.”

Notwithstanding the emotional roller coaster, Helga intuitively trusted the Chens. Slowly at first, hesitating at times, she began to tell her story. How heartbroken she was when her mom died, and how she hid her feelings by taking her mother’s place on the farm. How this dreadful war interfered and destroyed her life as a young woman. Haltingly she talked about her brother’s death on the Russian front and how her brother Dieter, whom she always admired, labelled her a whore once he found out she was expecting a child from an American soldier. How she established common ground with Tom, particularly when it came to war-related issues, and how Tom was truly the only man in her life, reaching all of her heart. Fighting tears, she talked about her father’s sudden death and how Dieter blamed her for his sudden demise. Finally, face down, embarrassed, yet knowing the importance of it, she confessed how she had lived since Tom’s death. She spared nothing.

“I know you must think badly of me. My life was uncertain and confusing. There were moments I felt I was nobody, like a piece of driftwood floating, believing nothing will ever change...just floating from one wave to another, only to be tossed eventually onto a deserted beach somewhere. Moments when I did not know who I was, where I was, what I needed, trying to reduce the past to nothing. Wondering if my life will ever be normal again. Even now, while I realize only I can change my life, I don’t know if I will ever find the strength.”

The Chens never interrupted. Mrs. Chen, holding Helga’s hand from time to time, encouraged her to continue when speaking became awkward. Mr. Chen would also be of assistance during these moments of hesitation.

“Helga, yearning for change is the first positive step toward a new beginning. Stop reprimanding yourself. You lived a normal, decent family life until this sickening war hurled you into this unruly way of living. You have no accusers. Those who accuse you are hypocrites. Now that you have made a decision to change your life, continue with this positive step, and one day you will find happiness again.”


“I don’t know how to start.”

“Helga, you started already. Look at your courage, visiting Tom’s parents, the courage to share your story with us.”

During the evening Helga drank several cups of Mrs. Chen’s homemade herbal tea. Slowly, the tea, the mood, and the unguarded conversation relaxed her, and by the time she went to bed, she felt like a weight had lifted from her shoulders. Everything, at least for the moment, somehow had changed. The bars, the copious amount of alcohol, the reckless need for making love in the dark, all seemed far behind her, almost like another life. She slept for the first time in a long time like a baby, no nightmares disturbing her sleep.

Jürgen Beck

In the morning, awake and looking at life in a more clear-cut way, she asked Mrs. Chen if there was a public phone in the village.



Chapter 49

The weather in Santa Monica, California, was a balmy 72 degrees Fahrenheit. The sky above the Pacific Ocean was endlessly blue, with only faint wisps of white cirrus clouds high up in the stratosphere. A single sailboat some two kilometres off shore completed the postcard picture.

The Rosenzweigs lived in an upscale part of town overlooking Santa Monica beach. It was their 35th wedding anniversary. Overall, the marriage was as good as, or better than, most. Ben Rosenzweig learned early in his relationship not to pay attention to his wife's frequent whining concerning petty matters. In fact, he decided not to pay attention to anybody unless it was related to business. He nonetheless loved his wife in spite of her incessant talk about matters of no interest to him. She, on the other hand, quickly realized that business was the only important pursuit in her husband's life, and while at times this would cause a strain on their marriage, she put up with him being a workaholic. More to the point, his eagerness to expand business allowed her to live the lifestyle she was accustomed to. Born into a prosperous Jewish Orthodox family, as an only child, established that she was born to live the life of a "Jewish princess."

Mr. Rosenzweig's dedication and long hours building his business paid off. Starting with only sweat and chutzpah, selling clothes out of the back of his station wagon, thirty years later he owned a

whole and retail sales clothing empire with sales in excesses of ten million dollars per year.

Mrs. Rosenzweig consoled herself during his often lengthy business trips by spending huge amounts of money on clothing, jewellery, furniture and anything else she fancied for the moment. Being the only child and spoiled equipped her to live a lavish, at times superficial life; this was to some extent mitigated by her goodwill toward less fortunate people. Frequently she would give money and clothing to various non-profit organizations.

The anniversary party was at their spacious weekend home north of the city, high up in the hills, with a breathtaking view over the Pacific Ocean.

The party was in full swing when Pete snaked his way up the steep serpentine driveway in his brand new Porsche 356 Roadster. The car was a welcome-home present from his father when he returned from Germany after receiving an honourable discharge from the military.

Driving up the driveway, he briefly considered turning around and leaving before anyone saw him. This was, however, impossible. Everybody at the party watched his car as he came up the steep hill, once he turned off Highway 1 below. Driving slowly up the winding road he was thinking, *I am not in the mood to rehash stories about my stay in Germany. Perhaps I could fake not feeling well and leave shortly.*

Climbing out of the car, he saw his father, with his uncle in tow. "Pete, I am so glad you finally arrived! Your Uncle Harvey wants to ask you some questions about the concentration camps in Germany."

"Dad, please give me a break. I don't know any more than you do. Read the papers; they have the story covered in detail. I was stationed in a completely different part of Germany, and besides, this is such a beastly thing to discuss on your anniversary."

His father, realizing Pete's reluctance to speak about the holocaust, continued in a more subdued voice. "Okay, let's forget about Germany for the moment. Tell your Uncle Harvey what your plans are. We are waiting for you to make up your mind. We need you in the family business."

Pete cringed, realizing this was like jumping from the frying pan into the fire. Nevertheless, good humouredly he answered. "Hi, Uncle Harvey. Would you help me convince my dad that my place is not in business? I'm planning to go to university to study history and anthropology. I am not cut out for business. Surely you recall the time I worked six months in one of the wholesale warehouses before I joined the army, and how you both constantly lectured me not to give things away?"

"Ah, that was then," his father cut in. "Now you are a man! They have no doubt taught you in the army that there is a need for people in charge. Well, business is the same. No business can survive unless it makes a profit." Somewhat aware that his statement lacked appeal and logic, he looked around to see if there was support from someone else. Everybody, however, including Uncle Harvey, was already on to something new.

Pete, taking advantage of the ambience of the party, said, "Dad, let's not talk business today. It's your anniversary! Where is Mom? I have something for the two of you."

Since leaving the army, life was not how Pete had envisioned his future. His parents frequently badgered him to join the family business and forget this ridiculous fad of going to university, concentrate on business and take over the complete operation with help from his cousin Rachel. Rachel, six years older than Pete, had given her life to the Rosenzweig family business several years before. Unhappily married, trying to raise two children while working long hours, she was not optimistic that Pete would reconsider, fully aware that Pete was marching to the tune of a different drummer.

In order to maintain a courteous relationship with Rachel, whom he liked and respected, Pete had several long talks with her in confidence after coming back from Germany. He was not only letting her know his heart was not in business, he also needed someone willing to listen when he talked about Germany and Helga. Rachel, fond of Pete, quietly admired him for not yielding to his parents' pressure. Furthermore, living in a heartless relationship, married to a man her parents chose, she was pleased Pete had the guts to follow his own dreams.

Pete's growing years were spent reading books about ancient civilizations. In particular, he was enthralled by the Phoenicians, Egyptians and Mayans. One of his dreams was to visit southern Mexico and spend months exploring the arts, the written language, and the mathematical and astronomical achievements of this ancient and dynamic Mayan civilization.

What really intrigued him, though, was how history lost its traces in the sands of time. Archaeological fragments pointed to remarkable ancient civilizations. Unfortunately, the blank pages of history could not tell the whole story. The largest part was missing; it made him wonder how many records of previous civilizations were lost or destroyed forever. The new physics of Werner Heisenberg and Max Planck also kindled his curiosity. Although his knowledge was cursory, the little he knew was sufficient to burn a desire in his heart, and he was determined to learn more about this almost mystical new science at some point in the future. Being a veteran qualified him to enrol at a university courtesy of Uncle Sam's GI Bill. Not having to ask his parents to assist him financially left him hoping he could at least find moral support. Not wanting to hurt them, he spent countless hours contemplating how to break the news. Ultimately, he was determined to enrol in university with or without parental blessings; the difficulty was to convey the news to his father.

Then one day out of the blue, sitting down for supper, his father in a jovial mood due to securing a large retail contract, Pete finally found the courage to bring up the subject. "Mom, Dad, I decided to enrol in university this fall."

His mom, wanting to soften the blow, immediately answered before her husband had a chance to reply. "Oh, Pete, that's great, but you must promise to take up a subject that will benefit the business, like accounting."

"Mom, I told you and Dad many times, my interest is in history and anthropology. I am not good in business."

"Pete, be concerned about today. Who cares what these illiterate people did thousands of years ago? Concentrate on business and forget this nonsense. I worked hard all of my life to pass something of value on to my only child. Why can't you appreciate this opportunity?"

Pete, having heard his father's remarks once too often, replied, "Dad, please, give me a break. You built this business up first and foremost because you had to do it...and it was *your* goal, *your* dream, *your* destiny. Please allow me to live *my* dream!"

The subject was from here on avoided, each hoping the other would eventually see his line of reasoning. In spite of his father not supporting his wishes, Pete loved and respected his father's stamina; nonetheless he was hoping the hasty and haughty remarks, which left him often depressed and restless, would eventually end.

Not having the stomach to bring the subject up again, Pete was living quietly with his dreams. His father, on the other hand, could not comprehend how his only son was willing to bypass this wonderful opportunity. Since retirement was still a few years in the future, Mr. Rosenzweig realizing time was on his side, chose to let sleeping dogs lie.

Pete, living with his father's silence, had fluctuating emotions. One moment he had pangs of conscience, remembering how hard

his father worked, remembering when, as a little boy, his father lifted him on his knee, telling him that one day all of this was his. The next day he felt like shouting, “Dad, I admire what you achieved, but the clothing business is terribly boring to me.”

Harangued by circumstances, Pete frequently asked himself why he had left the army. In retrospect, his life in Germany after the war was almost everything he wished for. Leaving Germany was not without pain. Daily he would muse about Helga; the few months he spent with her opened his eyes to a new world. Moreover, Helga, by sharing childhood stories, amplified something Pete was well aware of, how his family guarded and controlled every thought and move all throughout his adolescent years. In retrospect he was aware his protected upbringing was to shield him from life, in particular beyond Jewish traditions. On the whole, anything unrelated to the Jewish way of life was considered not kosher and to be avoided. Pete, in contrast, was of the belief that while it was a parent’s duty to guard and care for children, children should nevertheless be given the right to find their own road to fulfillment and moreover learn from their own mistakes. Searches, vast or small, would benefit children; it would foster greater earnestness toward life.

Leaving Germany, he was certain once he arrived back home he would tell his father how he felt life is to be lived. In spite of his determination, weeks turned into months before Pete found the appropriate moment. Back home now for over a year, he realized how much he missed Helga. The incredible frank and sometimes far-reaching conversations still preoccupied his thoughts. Not being a fool, he was aware of, and accepted, his unique role in their relationship but always hoped that Helga would let go of Tom’s memory and perhaps one day get in touch with him. He was, however, determined to not make the first move. Now it was her turn to ask for the dance. Only then could he ask for, and expect, his

role as a band-aid lover to be replaced by genuine love. A common future had to be all or nothing. Anything else was a charade to him; one sham in his life was more than enough.

Two hours into the party, the guests’ bellies filled with sumptuous surf and turf, complemented with plenty of Napa Valley wine, the earlier vibrant mood slowed down. Soft music and relaxing in comfortable lawn chairs in a semicircle decelerated the previous animated conversation. Relaxed chitchat, for the most part about business, kept the subdued party alive however. By now, the sun had slipped past the curvature of the endless Pacific, and darkness blanketed the boundless ocean. Here and there, suns in distant galaxies became visible as twinkling stars.

Mrs. Rosenzweig suddenly remembered the phone call earlier in the day. “Pete, some woman with an accent called you this morning. The connection was poor, and I could not make out her name. She left no phone number. If I understood her correctly, she mentioned she was calling from someone’s phone in the Catskills.”

Overhearing his wife’s remarks, Mr. Rosenzweig interrupted in a booming voice, “Pete, who was that? What are you hiding from us?”

Pete, of course, immediately knew it was Helga. A hot surge grasped his body, leaving him briefly breathless. He recalled Helga talking about visiting the baby’s grandparents sometime in the future. For Pete this visit was a hope at best. Now that it was real, he had difficulty sharing his euphoric feeling. Pretending to be in a hurry, looking at his watch, he sprinted from his chair toward the car, quickly making his goodbyes. “Mom, Dad, everybody...I have to leave. Sorry...thank you all for coming. It was nice to see all of you again.”

Before anybody had the time to object, he was in his car and backing out of his parking spot.

“What’s the hurry?” his father shouted after him. Pete was already gone.

Jürgen Beck

Once home, he went through his notes and looked up the name of the village where Tom had lived. The next morning he booked a return ticket to New York City with Northwest Air for the following weekend.



Chapter 50

Helga woke up feeling like she was stranded on an island called “Hope,” comfortable and stress free. A good night’s sleep, triggered by her candid talk and confession, gave her not only renewed strength but also the first traces of taking back her former self. Although an overcast sky ushered in a drab morning, Helga eagerly looked forward to a new day. Thinking about last night’s conversation, she could not wait to ask Mr. Chan if she could help feed the birds right after breakfast.

During the feeding, old Tom said very little. Helga, aware that the old man would only talk if he felt the time was right, patiently waited. However, old Tom finished his chores in silence other than chitchat related to feeding the birds.

Returning from the aviary, the weather was not agreeable to go for a walk as planned. Mr. Chan, pointing toward a leather chair, invited Helga to get comfortable near the fireplace. The old but incredibly soft leather chair took hold of Helga and separated her from the rest of the house. A cozy, almost supernatural feeling surged through her body, culminating in a weird and wonderful image. For a split second, she was in her mother’s womb.

Mrs. Chen already had a fire going, and soon converted energy delivered welcoming warmth, and the morning dampness evaporated quickly.

Sitting across from Helga, old Tom, now ready to talk, reached toward Helga and asked, “Helga, let me look at your left palm; I am curious about what it reveals.”

Helga, somewhat surprised, agreed all the same. “What can you tell?”

“Your past, perhaps your future, and more importantly, your state of health.”

Holding her hand while studying her palm, he asked if Tom ever talked about karma.

“Many times. One of his favourite sayings was “What goes around comes around.” At first I didn’t know what he meant, till he explained. We call it *Schiksal*.”

“I see. Helga, I am going to share something with you, and you might as well know it will not be easy for you to accept what I am about to tell you.”

He added, in a quiet voice, almost impossible to hear, “Only my wife has knowledge of what I am going to share with you, and it would not make sense for anybody else to be privy to this.”

He paused for a moment, still scrutinizing her palm, as if to contemplate whether sharing his secret was appropriate. Then an inner voice, long established, told him it was okay. Looking directly into her eyes, he continued. “I knew Tom would die at a very young age.”

Instantly Helga’s feeling of security left. Her eyes confirmed her surprise, annoyance, sadness, and confusion all at the same time. Upset, she wanted to get up and walk off this bewildering information. Old Tom, keenly aware of how she felt, held her hand tight and said in a sombre, yet gentle, matter of fact voice, “Telling Tom what I saw would not have stopped the accident, Helga. Moreover, it would have made his life unbearable. As you know, Tom’s father is my very good friend. I nevertheless could not even share this terrible discovery with him. You see, Helga, although

palm reading if done meticulously is quite accurate, and not the pseudoscience heralded by folks who never took the time to study it earnestly, the future is not always predictable. In fact I believe predicting the future should not be practiced, particularly not for profit. While the past and a person’s state of health is generally easy to read, the future is not accurately identifiable. The threads of karma are constantly changing, forever part of a separate if not fleeting dimension, hence complex and difficult to read, even by the most knowledgeable palm reader.”

Still holding her hands tight, waiting for the jolt to subside, he finally continued. “Secondly, Tom would have died in Germany if it wasn’t for your help. Saving Tom’s life, you conceivably paid a karmic debt; it does, however, confirm the two of you had to meet.”

Helga, still shaken, nevertheless wondered what he meant by paying a karmic debt. The mixed emotions sweeping her body, however, stopped her from asking.

Old Tom, waiting for a moment, fully aware Helga was slightly traumatized, finally continued. “When I look at your hand I have two choices. One, I tell you what I see, and two, I only give you an overview of what I see. In other words, I tell you what I think you can handle.” Waiting for her to respond, again not getting a reply, he continued. “More often than not, I only share generalities. Based on intuition I decide what is prudent to share; disagreeable truth only burdens most people. Fortunately, almost everybody has at least one future event in their life, one occasion, that brings joy. This I share easily. The unpleasant or sometimes downright dreadful future is best not told.”

Remaining silent, searching her face and body language, now relaxing his grip, he waited for her to answer.

At this moment, Mrs. Chen walked in and interrupted in a most jovial manner. “Helga, just imagine being married to him.”

Her remark broke the sombre mood, and laughingly Helga replied, "At least you would know if the marriage is going to work out."

The Chens laughed at her witty remark.

Collecting her thoughts, she continued. "I really don't know if I would like to know my future. It would be like living in a house with doors to rooms that transfer me to another dimension. The ones we often visit in a dream, hauntingly real...and upon waking reality and dream are fused. And for the rest of the day, sometimes longer, life is subjected to this shadowy existence. In other words, knowing my future may lead me to do a state of mind I try to avoid; I've been there, and it wasn't fun."

A radiant warm smile appeared on old Tom's face. "Helga, I knew the moment I met you, you are hungry for truth."

"How so?"

"Well, it's an intuitive feeling. However, I like your answer. The example of the room is quite clever. Now we can have a real conversation. Let me first apologize for shocking you earlier with my remark about Tom's early death. It was not fair, but I had to verify what I sensed about you."

"Yes, you scared me for a moment, so please no more shocks. Tell me only in general terms what you see in my future."

"Helga, if you don't mind, we will do this some other time. I now feel comfortable to share with you a much bigger picture. What I am about to say might help you to find a road to travel on."

Helga, once more relaxed, answered at once. "I don't think I want to see me my future. Sharing my life last night and having lived the consequence of wrong decisions, I believe decisions I make from here on in will determine my future. Isn't that what karma is all about?"

"Yes, you are absolutely correct, the choice we make today will determine future events, but regardless of how resolute we are, we

always have to first harvest what we scattered previously. Not only in this life, but we are obliged to pay a karmic debt from previous lives. Natural laws, or perhaps better said God's law, does not bend for human folly, regardless of what we like to believe. At first glance, this vision may give us the notion we do not have free will; this, however, is incorrect. Yes, thankfully, we do mitigate karma by making right decisions. However, this is where it becomes complex. Living in a three dimensional world, hampered by our five senses, leaves us at a disadvantage. All of us shed our bodies some day, and since we are not alert to life's illusions, we are scared to die. Our souls, if fostered throughout our lives, have by intuition and experience a much stronger connection to the next dimension. They are telling us with a gentle voice: The howl of earthly pleasures are nothing but perception, and perception is usually illusion. In today's world, for reasons locked in antiquity, a large number of souls are lamentably hardened; the drips of living a materialistic life altered their souls into stalactites, and only God's mercy can bring them back to life. Simply stated, a fading soul loses the ability to recognize the spiritual pulsation in Creation. For reasons too lengthy to explain, humans prefer pleasing their egos. This always finishes up in physical gratification. This interferes with the advancement of your soul, the real you. You might ask what all of this has to do with looking into the future. Clearly, we must acknowledge that free will frequently changes human personality...a new play thing, a new diversion...whereas the law of reciprocal action never changes. There are signs offered, all through our existence, for the explicit purpose to rise above the entanglements caused by erroneously made decisions. The Christ spirit appeared in many different forms during man's journey offering a glimpse into the future. We should not waste the opportunity to take advantage of this special gift. It is, however, imperative to be on familiar term, not only with the signs themselves, but moreover

with the laws, or foundation, of this three-dimensional habitat we call Earth. All of it so cleverly engraved billions of years ago in stardust, our birthplace. Being able to look in the future is a gift; however like all precious gifts, if used incorrectly the consequences may be grave.”

Old Tom, cognizant of how all of this touched Helga, sat back in his chair, giving her time to digest it.

Helga, needing to reflect on his homily, changed the subject. “I slept last night like I was a baby. Tell me your secret; what was in the tea?”

“It is a combination of various herbs...chamomile, kava, lemon balm, passionflower, hops, skullcap, and some valerian. It soothes the nerves and lets you sleep without interruption. The renaissance your body enjoys balances the yin and yang in your body.”

“The...what?”

“The yin and yang....I’ll be happy to tell you all about it some other day; it is a rather intricate Chinese insight into how things work, not only in our body but in the whole of creation.”

Sipping his tea, he looked at Helga; her facial expression confirmed she was eager to hear more. “Well, I guess a quick synopsis of yin and yang will not take too much time. Yin and yang are two distinctly different energies that create a sense of infinity, yin to yang and yang to yin, a never-ending cycle of exchange. Yin is a negative force, whereas yang is positive, in some circumstances reversed. To be in a harmonious state we require yin, and yang completes harmony. The two opposing forces are necessary in a seamless universe. If our body is sick, the yin and yang are not in balance. Controlling your emotions with natural herbs can help to restore the balance. There is of course more, but this has to wait for another day.”

“Very interesting...yes, I’d like to learn more about it someday.”

Helga’s quest for knowledge was genuine. Even as a small child her questions often exasperated her parents. At present, though, she was fascinated where this lecture would lead to. It started out by looking at the future; now it turned into a discourse she felt not qualified to take in.

Mr. Chen, reading her thoughts, not at all convinced, continued. “May I ask you a question?”

“Of course.”

“I can see you believe in God. I am interested in how you see God.”

Again she was baffled, not expecting another shift in the conversation; nevertheless, she at once answered. “I was brought up in the Roman Catholic Church. we believe in God as a Holy Trinity. But to be honest, when I see the wretchedness of this insane war and my life over the last few years, I am confused. What kind of God allows all of this to happen?”

Almost as an afterthought, Helga asked, “Why are you asking how I see God?”

“It helps me to expand what I like to share, but firstly, God has nothing to do with the way we live or the things we do to each other. Allow me to clarify; at the outset, we should acknowledge God’s creation of this physical world was not his first creation. When we truthfully look at God’s words, as given to us in the Christian Bible, but conceivably in more detail in other ancient writings, we quickly realize God’s first creation was a spiritual world, or better said, a foundation of things to come. God is perfection, and the world we live in is a long way from perfection, as you have witnessed by this brutal and senseless war. The way I see it, the first beings created out of God’s perfection must have been spiritual beings, not humans. I do however believe humans have a unique role in God’s breathtaking design; he created man after his own image. What does this mean, ‘his image’?

It means that we humans have the ability to become co-creators. Men were given both intellect and intuitive perception. The intuitive insight, not to be confused with our feelings, comes from God and is therefore timeless and spaceless, whereas our intellect is a product of our evolving brains, forever bound to a material world. Intellect serves us only while we are on earth. In other words, intellect should be our wheels, whereas the intuitive perception should be the steering wheel. We can never understand and comprehend God by intellect; our intellect grew out of evolution and is therefore chained to time and space. God, I believe, created man's special nature as a link between the spiritual and material worlds and to partake in the further development of the whole creation. In other words, man could participate in the pure source of God's light and fetch it downward to earth, realize its magnificence and let it bounce back to heaven in a well-balanced give-and-take action. Man has the opportunity to be the crown of God's creation, all done within the divine act of God's will. Here, however, comes the puzzle. In order for man to become a vital faultless link between the spiritual and physical world, God had to allow man to have free will. Unfortunately, our lesser intellect, with all of its manifestations of greed, lust, and love of power, manoeuvred our free will away from our intuitive God-given nature, and as a result we are, at least for time being, chained to this three-dimensional, five-senses material world. In addition, when things go wrong men speak of undeserved fate, because man has a habit of spinning responsibility away. In defence of the human plight, this of course is the mystery. God, being omnipotent, had to be aware of man's addiction to this three-dimensional world we live in, and this is where I agree with what your Christ said: What a man sows, so shall he reap. Unfortunately, the Christian church neglects to expand on this."

Taking a sip from his cold tea, he looked at Helga. Confirming her interest, he continued. "This is the law of reciprocal action. Karma is but one aspect of this law. This law was there from its earliest beginning, intertwined with enormous never-ending evolution. Look at our bodies, how nerve strands interact and support our continuous movement. So it is with God's supreme creation. The law of reciprocal action supports and animates continued existence, not only in a three-dimensional world. Moreover, the invisible spiritual component proliferates our material existence. Long before there was a material world, this law was the foundation of God's will. The mystery, why we are created with God's concurrence as imperfect beings, might be unravelled once we recognize that life after proliferating life, constant evolution, not only physical but evolution within our souls, might give us the answer. This of course still begs the question, why, why do we have to go through these seemingly imperfect cycles? Again, the answer lies in men's special purpose within God's plan. Angels on the other hand are magnificent creatures who serve without free will. The entwinement of God's unalterable give-and-take action in the whole of creation will remain a mystery until we understand that God's mills grind slowly but unquestionably extremely judiciously. The Christian Church, however, forbids this thought of rebirth; it is much easier to scare people. The fear of death and what comes thereafter has always given the Christian Church power over its followers."

It was lunchtime by now. The smell of fried chicken and Mrs Chen's comment interrupted the conversation. "Okay, Tom, enough for now. Lunch is ready. If Helga wants to hear more, you can continue later. Helga, please forgive him. He hardly has anybody who shows curiosity. Most people only want to talk about hunting or their crops in the field or, worse, gossip, so when he has someone who will listen, he will go on forever."

Helga was glad for the interruption. Mr. Chen's sermon left her with several questions, not to mention a lightheaded feeling. She was also slightly disappointed the conversation took a different turn than expected. To her surprise, for reasons not clear, Helga was, however, more inclined to find out what her future held in store. After lunch, she decided to check on little Tom and make a phone call. "I'll be back in a couple of hours. Perhaps you can convince me to peek into my future."



Chapter 51

The Williams were overjoyed to have little Tom all to themselves. The young boy furnished a much-needed get-up-and-go to their lives once more. As they showered him with love, young Thomas reciprocated with joy. Mr. and Mrs. Williams, as well as Shirley and her husband, Roger, hoped Helga would stay for an extended period.

Mrs. Williams was eagerly beseeching her husband to speak to Helga. Perhaps he could convince her to stay longer or to leave little Tom with them for a few months, at least until Germany had a stable environment again. Nobody, however, not even Shirley, who quickly became a good friend to Helga, had the courage to bring up the topic. It was, after all, a very delicate matter and required patience, as well as the right moment.

When Helga unexpectedly arrived to check on her son, Mrs. Williams, convinced her husband would never ask, seized the moment. "Helga, why not stay with us for an extended period? It is such joy to have you and our grandson here. Or if you agree, perhaps little Tom could visit us, every so often. What I mean to say is...Germany being in ruins and all, maybe it would be better for both of you to stay here until things are back to normal over there."

Noticing Helga's puzzled look and not wanting to be misunderstood, she continued. "Helga, please don't get the wrong impression. We don't want to offend you or hurt your feelings, but

little Tom has brought so much joy into our lives. We will miss him a lot once he is gone.”

“No, no, it’s okay, I understand. I just don’t know if I could ever leave him for more than a few days. How was he while I was gone?”

“Oh, Helga, he is just like his father. Such a good little boy, so undemanding. We just love to have him around. The truth is, having him here helps us all.”

Before Helga had a chance to reply, she continued. “I guess it is very selfish for me to ask this of you. Please don’t think bad of us; we just miss Tom so very much, and having his son here makes life a lot easier.”

Helga, no stranger to grief, quietly answered, “No, I understand. I lost my parents and a brother whom I loved dearly...and when I received the news about Tom, the pain was simply too much to bear.” For the briefest of moments, she wanted to share how she needed someone after learning about Tom’s accident, but she could not bring herself to talk about it.

Realizing the awkwardness of the moment, she changed the subject. “How long have you known the Chens?”

“For a very long time. My husband is very fond of old Tom. How did you enjoy your visit?”

“Just wonderful; they are such lovely people. Mr. Chen is quite a thought-provoking thinker, yet he has a very easygoing personality. I feel very comfortable around them; they asked me to stay for another day, if it is okay with you.”

“Of course it is! Stay as long as you like; we love to look after little Tom. Oh, by the way, before I forget, a Mr. Rosenzweig called this morning to ask if you are still here. He is planning to come and visit you this coming weekend.”

Turning red at hearing Pete’s name, she quickly turned, pretending to adjust her sweater; however, realizing there was no need

to feel ashamed, she quickly recovered. Looking directly into Mrs. Williams’s eyes, she replied, “Pete Rosenzweig was the soldier who delivered Tom’s letters. Later he helped us with various supplies so desperately needed for the baby and myself.”

Mrs. Williams, above gossip, looked at Helga and replied without beating around the bush, “Helga, anybody who helped you and the baby is welcome in our home.”

Helga was thankful; there was no platitude. Looking directly at Mrs. Williams she replied, tears filling her eyes, “Thank you. The truth is, if it wasn’t for Pete, who knows...he brought medication for the baby and helped me cope with Tom’s accident.”



Chapter 52

As planned, Pete arrived at the Williams' residence the following Saturday. Helga was noticeably nervous. After all, she was about to meet the man she had shared her bedroom with soon after the death of her child's father, in whose home she was now a guest. The anxiety was, however, unfounded. Pete had a way with people. Pete introduced himself to Mr. Williams with a solid handshake and a genuine smile on his face. Helga, watching from the upstairs hallway, felt relieved.

"Good afternoon, I am Pete Rosenzweig. Would Miss Helga Berger be in?"

"Hello, Pete. Yes, she is here. We all expected your visit; please come in. Helga told us you delivered Tom's letters to her and helped her with supplies for the baby. We would like to thank you for all of this."

"Don't mention it. Tom's letters passed through many hands. I just happened to be at the end of the line, and as far as helping Helga and the baby, it was my pleasure to help a little...and my condolences regarding your son. What a tragic accident, particularly after his recovery in Germany."

"Thank you. We still have difficulty understanding all of this, but we know life must go on, and now that we have little Tom here, it helps a lot. Come in; oh, here is Helga now."

Although the fear of meeting Pete in Tom's home was almost

gone, Helga nevertheless walked downstairs with mixed emotions. On the one hand, she was looking forward to seeing Pete, but on the other hand, she wondered if calling Pete was the right thing to do.

"Hello, Pete; you found me. How are you?"

"Hi, Helga. I am okay; how are you?"

Pete stayed for dinner. The Williams offered to put him up for the night, but Pete had already made reservations in a small inn, just outside the village.

"Thank you, the supper was awesome. It is such a treat to have a good old-fashioned home-cooked meal. My mom never gets around to cooking anymore. Thank you for the hospitality; perhaps you come to California one day and allow me the pleasure to reciprocate."

Chitchat, about the military, California and Pete's plans to go to university, rounded out the evening. Helga, pleased by the genuine hospitality and the ease of the evening, felt relieved.



Chapter 53

Helga's many questions resulting from old Tom's assertion had to wait. Pete's arrival changed everything. On Tuesday Helga and Tom left for California.

The Williams encouraged Helga to invite Pete again for supper Sunday evening. After dinner, over coffee and cake, Pete thought it was a good time to bring up the subject. "Mr. and Mrs. Williams, would you be offended if I was to ask Helga to visit California for a week or two?"

The surprise question caught everybody off guard, but mostly Helga.

Before anybody had a chance to reply, he continued. "We, of course, can take Tom with us. However, if it is okay with Helga and you, he can stay with his grandparents."

Helga, catching her breath, quickly cut in. "Pete, you could have asked me first, and of course we cannot ask Mr. and Mrs. Williams to babysit."

"Helga, of course you can ask! You go enjoy your visit; we are delighted to look after the baby," Mrs Williams at once announced.



Chapter 54

Helga was astonished at the affluence the Rosenzweigs enjoyed. Never in her wildest dreams did she expect to see such a stately home and setting. Every nook and cranny, filled with lavish ornaments from all over the world, voiced affluence. A large Japanese garden, with a waterfall, added a touch of prominence. Behind the garden, a full-grown Autumn Cherry forest, approximately 100 by 150 metres, served as a natural divider to another smaller property, where the gardener and his wife, who cleaned house for the Rosenzweigs, lived.

"Pete, you never told me how rich your parents are. Your home is a villa, and the garden is simply stunning."

"Sorry, I didn't think it was important."

"Well, no, it's not important...I am just surprised. I can now understand why you wanted to go come."

Helga slept in one of their spacious, luxuriant guest rooms. Pete's parents treated Helga in a cordial yet reserved manner. Helga had no problem with the aloof conduct; after all, you could not blame them for being of two minds toward someone from Germany, considering how Germans treated Jews.

Pete's mother arranged to be alone with Helga on the third day of her visit. "Helga, I would like to give you a book by Rabbi Hyman Goldin, titled *The Jewish Woman and Her Home*. Read it from cover to cover. It is a textbook on what is expected from a Jewish woman."

Helga, rather amused, yet indecisive about how to react to this unusual present, spoke up. “Thank you, Mrs. Rosenzweig. I shall read it...I must, however, in all honesty let you know it is very unlikely I will become a Jewish woman one day.”

With a faint smile on her face, Mrs. Rosenzweig continued. “Pete made it very clear to us last night that he will ask you to be his wife. Moreover, since you insist on being straightforward with me, I want to be honest with you as well. We believe he is rushing things just a bit. However, should he insist, his father and I would expect you to convert to our faith. Failure to recognize the importance of this request would make things very stressful.”

“Please, Mrs. Rosenzweig; stress has been routine in my life, and I don’t need any more. Pete and I are good friends. I am, however, convinced neither one of us is ready to get married. I have a son, whose father died in an accident, and my life is just getting back to normal, so getting married is not a priority. Pete invited me to California for a change in scenery; moreover, he never mentioned marriage to me.”



Chapter 55

Timing, without question, is an important factor in business, warfare, and for that matter also in love. Time, this fleetingly, precious aspect of our life, is significant not only on a daily basis. Time itself gives the impression to be compartmentalized, and each compartment has a shelf life all of its own. Pete and Helga’s timing reached its peak during Pete’s stay in Germany. Once Pete left, time slipped into another slot. A new shelf shaped by circumstances was ready for examination.

California was different from anything Helga had ever seen or felt before. In part it was the amazing scenery. Driving north on Highway 1, the Pacific to the left, the hilly landscape of the Santa Monica mountains, dotted with beautiful homes, on the right, was simply awe-inspiring. Meeting Pete’s family and a few of his friends, as well as strangers acting as if they had known her for many years, utterly surprised her. It was easy for Helga to love California.

The Catskills were to some extent reminiscent of Germany. Folks were hardworking, simple people; whereas in California there was a new order. People acted differently, not restricted. The salty breeze from the Pacific seemed to add spice to their lives.

The week went by all too fast. The evening before Helga caught a flight to the Catskills, Pete made reservations at a Sunset Boulevard restaurant and nightclub. After dinner, in a simple, straightforward manner, he asked Helga to be his wife.

“Helga, how would you like to stay with me in California and be my wife?”

Helga, although tipped off by his mother, was nonetheless overwhelmed. Blood rushing to her face left her speechless.

Pete patiently waited.

Helga, at last, answered quietly. “Pete, please don’t talk marriage. Let’s make love. I have been here for one week now and you have not even been close to me. Talk to me about anything but getting married. Your family will never agree, and to be honest, the book your mother asked me to read, how to be the perfect Jewish wife, is out-and-out cheek on her part. Your mom wants me to be your wife as much as she wishes for a daily migraine. I was seventeen when my mother died, and I miss her daily. I don’t want to come between you and your family. To be truthful, I need to be part of a family. Also, you might as well know, when you left Germany my world once again collapsed. Don’t get me wrong; I don’t blame you for leaving, but after you left I went off the deep end, and in order to dull the pain, I found comfort in drinking and screwing around.”

This candid confession triggered a momentary silence. Pete, although not overjoyed by what he heard, gave Helga time to continue.

Looking up, appreciating Pete’s gentle eyes, gave her confidence to continue. “Surely you know how special you are in my life; you forever understood where I came from, and I loved you for it. Pete, marrying you would solve most of my problems, but it would be selfish. You are exceptional; you deserve someone who can be a good wife to you while safeguarding ties to your family. While I was not pleased with your mother’s overt insinuation, I saw a mother desiring what she thought was the best for her son. Marriage will not work, at least not for the time being. A historical quagmire almost beyond healing has spoiled the timing. Don’t you see the complexity of it all?”

“Helga, I must be naive. I thought love conquers all. When you called me, I was on cloud nine. Not a day went by since leaving Germany that I did not wonder how you were. The truth is, after I got home I realized how much you mean to me.”

“Pete, why did you never write or call? And since money is not an issue, why did you not visit me...if you missed me so much?”

“Helga, when I left you still could not let go of Tom. The truth is, I need to be number one in your life. You made it clear that I was only there to wipe away the tears, while I was forever hoping you would love me for who I am.”

“Pete, I do love you for who you are. That’s why I called...and to be honest, since visiting the Williams and witnessing their grief, I am coping with Tom’s death much better, but I also know I will never forget him.”

“Helga, not to forget someone isn’t a problem, but you are killing the moment by living in the past. Tom, unfortunately, died, and nothing will bring him back. You are reducing your future to absurdity, particularly while having a relationship with someone else. You are caught in a self-centred web, with no hope of ever getting free, unless you let go of the past.”

Just then, the band, back from their break, appropriately played Dick Haymes hit “I Wish I Didn’t Love You So.”

“Come and dance with me, instead of talking about these things. After the dance let’s find a nice place, for old time’s sake. Tomorrow is another day...”

They danced for two hours, happy to allow their bodies to communicate with words not found in a dictionary. A large king-size bed, in one of the swanky hotels just off the boulevard, offered a make-believe paradise for the better part of the night.

Walking through the gate to board the airplane, Helga turned and shouted loud enough for all to hear, “Stay in touch, Pete.”



Chapter 56

The day after Thanksgiving, the old woman made another trip to the cemetery. Like the previous day, she stood at the grave for the longest time, strengthening her belief that it was appropriate and moreover not too late to put things in order, finally coming clean with a secret kept for many years. At ease, she talked to the deceased in a quiet voice as if he were next to her.

“Tom, should I really let him know after all these years?” As if waiting for an answer she stopped, looked around for a moment, and continued.

“It was old Tom and your parents who recommended I stay away. Back then I thought it was the right advice, yet for many years a weight, akin to a millstone, hung from my neck. Oh, Tom, now that I am old, with only a short time left, it will seem merely the wish of an old woman to ease her conscience. Yet I only want to ask him for forgiveness.”

The answer came again, just as it had the previous day. “Yes, go and make peace. Settle the things that are important to you. Do not be afraid...it’s never too late...”

With renewed spirit she left the cemetery.

On her way home she made a stop at the local bank, emptied her safety deposit box, closed her savings account, and walked home to her small one-bedroom cottage, not far from the former Williams residence. Once inside, slowly, as if handling a prized

object, she unlocked a handcrafted rectangular red cedar box, which when not in use served as a nightstand. Rummaging through the box, she leisurely looked at treasured pictures from days long gone by; eventually she pulled from a neatly bundled stack of mail the odd letter, now yellow and wrinkled with time. Reading some of the letters as well as select pages from her diary, time stood still; the antique clock in her kitchen mimicked, by its perpetual ticking sound, one of God’s biggest secret, namely that time melted into a singularity; the past, the present, and the future were all the same. Eventually, though, the splendorous mystifying moment vanished; intrusive pragmatism took hold of the moment again. Placing all the items again carefully into the cedar box, she sat at her desk to write a letter.

November 28, 2008

Dear Tom,

My name is Helga Berger. I am your biological mother. Please forgive me for coming into your life so unannounced and for presuming that you might want to hear from me.

A few weeks after your third birthday, your grandparents on your father’s side, your mom Shirley, who, as you know, is your dad’s sister, and I, your biological mother, decided to take steps to guarantee a safe, comfortable and proper future for yourself. The determination to give you up was slow coming, and only after weeks of contemplation, weighing pros and cons, I agreed to leave you in the care of your grandparents and Shirley, who eventually adopted you. This decision haunted me for most of my life. Now that I am an old woman and you are nearing this temporary space called senior, I realize words are either meaningless or easily

excused, particularly since we did not live on parallel footing. Allow me to elaborate. When I decided to leave you with your grandparents and your dad's sister, I was a shell of my former self. Everything was out of control. One day life was great; the next day I was ready to give notice to the world. You have to know, though, it wasn't always like this. I grew up in a home, prior to this sickening Second World War, where love was the order of the day. My father tended fields; my mother took pride in mending my father's clothes while making sure she also looked after my two brothers and me. We were a happy family. We believed in God and tried to live by his commandments. I was seventeen when my mother died, and for the first time in my life, I was angry with God for not listening to my prayers. Right after my mom died of cancer, Hitler, with support from big business, lived his monstrous dream and started this ruthless war. Three years later, in 1942, I lost a brother on the Russian front, and two years later my father died of a massive heart attack. And then the final blow, your dad died in an accident. As far as I was concerned, God was dead; it was all too much to bear, and the enormous psychological struggle left me emotionally crippled for years to come. I know you experienced war in Vietnam, where 58,000 young Americans came home in body bags, so there is no need to elaborate to you how cruel war really is. (Tom, you have no idea how I worried about your life while you were flying missions in Vietnam.) Your dad undoubtedly would have been proud of you flying these steerable airborne rockets; you should however know your dad was against war by the time he left Germany. Details of this you can find in his letters and my diary. While you were in Vietnam Shirley was kind enough to keep me informed,

and when you finally arrived home and started your new job with the airlines, I was overjoyed. Your dad was also looking forward to flying for an airline, once his term with the USAF was over. The name of the airline escapes me for the moment, but if your dad's letters and my journal are of interest to you, you can find out what airline it was. Unfortunately the tragic accident changed everything. When I agreed to leave you with your grandparents and Shirley, we decided in concord that it would be best to tell you that your biological mother brought you to America because she could not look after you and all contact was lost thereafter. The truth is there was candour in this scheme, for two reasons. One, my life was truly upside down; moreover, back then we were under the impression that saving you from details would avoid unnecessary emotional problems in your later life. Merely a few years later I realized it was my failing to give you up. By this time, though, you were six years old, a strong and healthy boy, living in a home filled with love. Removing you from this loving environment and taking you back to Germany to an uncertain future seemed not fair. Having said all of this, I would not blame you if my plea to forgive me would fall on deaf ears; know, though, I paid a huge price. The regret for walking out on you has been with me all my life. Trying to fall asleep at night, wondering what you were doing and how you were, waking up in the morning only to guess what your day would bring was untold punishment, and the odd moment when joy came my way it was immediately taken, because I could not share it with you. I am not telling you all of this to put myself in a better light. I just want you to know that giving you up was the most difficult thing I ever did.

Your father's airplane was hit by ground fire in World War II in June of 1944, while on a mission over Germany, close to the village I grew up in. He survived the ordeal, and with the help of my father and our hired hand I hid your dad in our basement until he recovered. A friend of my father's, doctor by profession and embraced uncle to my brothers and me, looked after him. Taking care of your father was challenging; it could conceivably cost us our lives. Hitler and his henchmen would have no mercy, knowing we assisted the enemy. (If it wasn't for the doctor, your dad would have died from injuries sustained in crash-landing his airplane.)

Since I was the ringleader in rescuing your dad, it was my duty to take care of him on a daily basis. Before long your dad and I fell madly in love, and you are the confirmation of our love. Eventually someone in the village found out we were hiding your dad in our basement. Fortunately by then he was well enough to leave Germany before the SS came knocking on our door. His leaving, on a very desolate morning, is still imprinted on my mind after all these years as if it were yesterday. For years I had nightmares related to saying goodbye on this ominous morning.

I never saw your father again; he was killed in a freak aviation accident shortly after returning to America. He nevertheless dominated my thoughts for the rest of my life, and to be honest there were moments I hated myself, and your dad, for not letting go. Years later I realized it was I who held on. Amongst the bits and pieces I leave you, there are self-explanatory letters from your father, showing he was planning to come back to Germany and take us both to the U.S.; his death shattered my life. Being a single mom in Germany in 1945, with a baby from an American

soldier, was not an easy road to travel. Feeling sorry for myself, I tried to drown my grief by living a frivolous life, off and on for years to come. It was my Uncle Herbert (the doctor who looked after your dad) who convinced me to accept an invitation from your grandparents and your dad's sister to visit them in the U.S. On a damp April morning in 1948, you and I left Germany on a U.S. military airplane. The Williams family absolutely loved and adored you. Their love was genuine; your presence restored your grandparents' will to live. Losing a son, particularly after the horrible ordeal in Germany, was a major setback for your grandparents; you were a life saver. I would be amiss not to mention that during moments of complete despair, the only consolation was the fact that I knew you were treasured. The Williams loved you as much as they needed you; furthermore, you could never have found a better surrogate mother than Shirley. In retrospect the visit to America was a blessing and a curse, a blessing because you found a home I could never offer you, at least not for years to come, and a curse because visiting your dad's grave opened wounds barely healed.

After we smuggled your dad out of Germany in 1944, I met another American by the name of Pete Rosenzweig in the spring of 1945; it was he who delivered your dad's letters to me. Pete quickly became a supplier of much needed goods, predominantly medication for you, as well as coffee and cigarettes, exchangeable for goods and services, both not available in postwar years. (Ill health plagued you for the first few months of your life, and I almost lost you as well. Thankfully you recovered.) I visited Pete in California during my stay at your grandparents; he asked me to be his wife. Pete's family, orthodox Jews, were not

amused; the thought of their only son marrying a girl from Germany seemed particularly absurd.

Considering the times we lived in, I could understand their lack of enthusiasm to accept me into their family. While I did not marry Pete, I did however live with him and three other couples, for almost two years, in perhaps the first hippie commune in California. We were young and rejected conventional social and political values and promoted worldwide peace and love, each for our own reasons, although back then we all believed we were united by the same cause. What we didn't realize, though, was that the marijuana and rose-coloured wishful philosophy only clouded our vision. We never changed the world; in fact after living this careless, yet seemingly liberating life for a couple of years, I left Pete, and California, and returned to Germany in 1951. I saw Pete thereafter, off and on, for several years. While there were many suitors I never married, come what may I could never let go of your dad. The years that followed are best described in my diary, which I leave for your unqualified use. Perhaps the absolutely honest day-by-day journal will be of interest, perchance even of assistance, to someone one day. When I visited your dad's grave yesterday, I knew the time was right to send this letter to you. Why now, after all these years, is difficult to explain. There is of course one obvious reason: knowing I don't have much time left, I ought to do what I should have done years ago, namely to ask you for forgiveness. There is however a further explanation, and only years later I saw the wisdom in it. When I first visited your grandparents in 1948 I was introduced to a friend of your granddad's named Thomas Chen. No doubt you knew him, and I believe he died when you were perhaps fifteen

years old. Well it was old Tom (as everybody called him) who advised me to break all ties and allow you to grow up in a stable and loving environment. Shirley was already engaged to a local young man called Roger at the time of your dad's accident; you grew up knowing him as your dad. From the little I know, he was a loyal and dedicated husband and a good father to you and your two step-brothers. Mr. Chen's advice for me to fade into oblivion was not only based on making life easier for you. He had an ability to look into the future; accordingly he advised me not to reveal my identity to you until shortly before my death. I still remember asking him before leaving California to stay with Pete and friends, how I would know when this time would come to pass. He told me it would be revealed one day when visiting your dad's grave. I of course questioned him about the significance of waiting so long. His answer was that the importance would only be understood by you. So optimistically, I hope you do. Old Tom had a habit of talking in riddles, and to be honest with all that was going on back then, and aware of his sage-like status in the community, I did not question any further. However, as time went by I often wondered if his counsel was nothing but a means to prevent me from interfering in your life. By the time I was in my early-forties it was, however, given to me that the time-frame was in keeping with Romans 6, chapter 6. Prior to this time I was a slave to sin, and if you would have grown up in this surrounding, who knows what your life would have been. Today I am watchful that even the tiniest desire is crucified and hopefully buried for good. All love for self (ego) and the attachment to the absurd times we lived in was finally conquered. Old Tom, as far as I could tell, was

not a Christian, at least not in the orthodox sense (although in his day-to-day life a Christ-consciousness was evident), and I believe the hand of God touched his spirit. I often prayed that Mr. Chen's time frame was in tune with God's time frame. Not knowing what your beliefs are, I feel nevertheless compelled to tell you I now believe all the pain and suffering, and being stripped of spiritual effectiveness for a significant part of my life, was God's will. (I do not believe all Christians live a wonderfully blessed existence, so carelessly preached by some of your American evangelists.) Being human, the whole concept of virtue versus vice, so quickly judged by some and so completely neglected by others, is flawed. (Human nature by its very essence is cramped, to the point of bursting, with virtue and vice; the power to let one surface and keep the other buried rests in the knowledge that one without the other could not exist; moreover, presumed virtue may at times be nothing but subtle vice, and presumed vice may at times be nothing but hidden virtue. Years ago I was told the separation of vice and virtue depends on the intent of our hearts.) Be that as it may, I am thankful God's mercy is a billion times more real than the compassion we humans have for one another. Again, much more detailed information on this topic is in my diary. (We are moving toward the constellation of the southern hemisphere, between Pisces and Capricorn, commonly known as the Age of Aquarius; maybe this has something to do with this new notion: One and all are right!) Whenever a perceived major shift occurs in our open-ended existence, we mustn't let vice go on masquerading as virtue. So on our knees, we pray for wisdom. Swallowing every new philosophy coming our way hook, line and sinker may prove to be difficult to digest. This does

not mean spiritual evolution should be swept under the carpet; however, the ultimate test is, does it rest on the foundation of God's golden rules? Any deviation from God's laws is vice masquerading as virtue. At the time of writing this letter, most folks find it difficult to know heaven from hell (right from wrong); this is due to believing we are on the edge of infinite knowledge.

On several separate occasions I visited the Catskills and observed you and your family from afar, and on one occasion you entered a restaurant in Cauterskill at the same moment I left the place. I almost fainted; you looked exactly like your dad, and we looked at each other momentarily like two strangers who for the briefest of moments wonder if they know one another. It startled me. Luckily there was a bench just a few feet from the restaurant. I quickly rested my wobbly knees, and deep systematic breathing calmed my nerves. It was difficult to remain composed for several days.

When you sold the Williams' residence and farmland a couple of years ago and moved to Florida with your family, I decided to move back to the States. I bought a small cottage, not far from your father's homestead. (I have landed immigrant status but never gave up my German citizenship.) You may ask, why make this move so late in life? I cannot explain why. Perhaps the notion to be buried in the same cemetery as your father has weighed heavily on my decision to move to the U.S. Ironically, when I read pages of my diary today I came across an entry dated April of 1951, while visiting Mr. Chen, prior to returning to Germany, where old Tom foresaw I would live the last couple of years close to your dad. Yesterday at your father's grave, my prayer was answered; I now know my days are

numbered and it is time to write this long overdue letter. My last will is amongst various other legal papers; everything I own, including the cottage and the approximate sum of \$40,000 is yours to do with as you please, perhaps a legacy for my grandchildren, from a grandma whose virtue and vice may best be judged by our maker. Oh, one more thing: there is a very old antique sideboard, dating back to the 18th century. It has been in our family four generations. When I moved to the U.S. I especially had it crated and shipped over here; if by chance you don't like it, or wish not to be the fifth generation, kindly give it to Sally. In closing, know that I loved you and your dad all of my life. I would be a liar not to admit there were days when I desperately tried to forget the past and start a new live. But every time I consciously tried to stop thinking about the past, the opposite happened, and losing your dad was amplified; every new twist and turn that came my way made me wonder what he would do if he were here with me. In my late thirties God thankfully subdued my will, and the ceaseless chatter of my ego was eventually conquered. I went back to school and studied contemporary history and political science. After graduation, I worked in the media for several years, only to be ultimately disillusioned by how mega corporations and the corporate-controlled media practise the subtle science of persuasion and how the average person is being lied to on a daily basis, all with the full knowledge of those who are supposed to guide us economically, politically and spiritually. With great anticipation I hope the day will come when the entire, moreover accurate, history of the 20th century is at last written, and the criminal aspect of plutocrats who had no shame or remorse in their quest to become filthy rich on

the backs of ordinary trusting people will finally be exposed. In my diary there is sufficient information, gathered over fifty years, to assist anybody who wishes to expose these power-hungry low-life moguls. For now, though, it is evident the times we live in are morally bankrupt. The majority of people in the western world have been subjugated by the aforementioned tycoons to the point that they are more interested in who will win the next major sports event than in what their leaders are up to. More importantly, the moguls of finance have, with ample help of corrupt politicians and the media, enslaved the people by instilling that keeping up with the Joneses is the American dream. What I perceived as easygoing and liberating when I lived with Pete in California was in fact the genesis of a slow growing cancer that will eventually destroy the genuine American dream. Again, more about this in my diary; in a nutshell, though, the captains of American and western European societies claimed "Equality for all" was the cornerstone of the capitalistic system. Eventually I discovered that whenever someone claims to represent equality, you can bet your last dollar they are as far away from pursuing equality as we are from our creator. Once I was aware that falsehood in politics and the unscrupulous lies of the mainstream media were the order of the day, I changed course and became a social worker. This was in keeping with the merciful light of the only truth, namely, "Do unto others as you want them to do unto you." At long last there was peace; the tyranny of an ego-driven world held no promise and was kept at bay for the most part. My newly recovered devotion to live life unencumbered (reminiscent of when I was a young child) conferred stillness, and the healing hush gave me the enthusiasm to look at life anew when the sun

came up each day. Looking in the mirror was once again joy. It helped immensely to know your life was settled and you were the foundation of a very happy family, perhaps the greatest achievement we can hope for. Sorry for rambling, but there is so much to say...that should have been said years ago. Take care; don't be afraid to have faith in God. Give my love to all who are worthy of your love and to all who love you. Forgive me...I am confident we will meet again.

Your loving mother

Seven days after writing this letter to her son, Helga Berger passed away peacefully in her sleep at the age of eighty-six. Sally, her only friend and confidant for the last two years, followed Helga's last wishes and contacted retired American Airline captain Thomas Berger, as well as a few select friends and neighbours.

There were no immediate family members or friends to contact in Germany. Helga's brother, Dieter Berger, who never married, committed suicide in 1952. Dr. Schmidt and his wife, who died soon thereafter, told Helga that Dieter was suffering from a non-defined war disorder. Simply stated, his life's purpose ended in May of 1945. Nothing thereafter could match his years at sea. Smitten by history, life became mundane and meaningless. Christine married an American GI from Kentucky in 1951; they moved to the U.S. in 1953 and had two children. She divorced her heavy-handed husband in 1956 and returned to Germany, where she died in 1960 of ovarian cancer. Her children stayed in the U.S. with their father and never saw or contacted their mother again.

Amongst the guests at Helga's funeral was a very well dressed old gentleman. On his expensive and immaculate suit collar, a small, but nevertheless noticeable, star of David was visible. A

young man with blue eyes and blond hair, in his mid thirties, assisted the old gentleman.

The funeral was a peaceful event. After the interment Sally, who was also blessed with living way beyond her three score and ten, was not bound by her promise any longer. Soon the whole village knew who this old German lady was and moreover why she had purchased a little home in their village a couple of years before. Helga, the little old lady from Germany, as she was called by locals, managed once more to cause a stir in this quiet little mountain village.

Thomas Berger attended the funeral with his wife, children, and grandchildren. Recently retired, he stayed at the cottage for several weeks. His wife, aware of the unexpected, intense effect all of this had on him, gave him space to digest the huge amount of written information Helga left behind. Without delay, at times startled, other times laughing out loud, he travelled back in time and pieced together the amazing trail to his beginning. The timing could not have been better; since the death of his adoptive parents he had found himself troubled by questions he had avoided most of his life.



Epilogue

Sixty years have come and gone since World War II. Have we learned anything? The answer regrettably is a resounding no. Incredible short-sightedness, insane self-seeking, craving to live only for today with no regard to future offspring have multiplied by a thousand. Since World War II, economically driven wars are as common as prostitutes on a Friday night in Soho. We are on a slippery road to nowhere, plunging deep into a quagmire, triggered by intellectual dwarfs masquerading as leaders. One would surmise that the mind-boggling haste and brutality of the Third Reich would serve as a warning to future generations, not only in Germany, but worldwide, to never allow unscrupulous schemers to interrupt and destroy the life of innocent, hardworking people. Yet only three generations later, the viciousness of Nazi Germany is merely another page in man's sordid history.

The genesis of what eventually would be known as "The Cold War" between Russia and the USA put an end to the ultimately inefficient and unworkable Morgenthau plan. The revamped plan, a far cry from the dimwitted Morgenthau suggestion, nevertheless provided hardship for the German people. In three bitterly horrid years, thousands of children died due to malnutrition. Some of the Allies candidly stated Germans had it coming. The USA, pragmatic in their judgment, however, assisted West Germany toward a new beginning.


Throughout these three years the German people had plenty of time to reflect on what really happened to their beloved country. The insanity of it all served as a reminder to almost all Germans to never again to follow someone whose political beliefs are suspect. The new Germany, led by two of Germany's great leaders, Chancellor Adenauer and Professor Erhard, rose once again from the ashes of defeat, this time, however, much more prudent and cautious than after the First World War. An all but forgotten American four star general with visionary capabilities, by the name of Clay, was instrumental in working with Adenauer and Erhard to heal a burdened nation. A model democracy and capitalism with a socio-economic conscience was arduously worked out over the next few years. Unfortunately this incredible, forthright, equal-to-all political structure never served as a model to the rest of the world. The frantic logic of global capitalism conquered instead the imagination of the world during the next fifty years. By the turn of the 20th century, democracy, so vital to the growth of the human race, was reduced to sustain a dishonest money-making scheme for the privileged wealthy. Money hungry, self-centred scum, quickly learned how to use the capitalist system to exploit the weak. Taking advantage of the powerless is once again considered the norm. This comprehensive socioeconomic change took place with the full knowledge of corrupt politicians, money-grabbing news media, and a shady legal system, collectively in the pockets of incredibly wealthy people. Ordinary folks, hoodwinked as always, were captured by the lies and propaganda of large corporations and their paid sycophants. Soon the average working man was subjected to intimidation by concentrated powers, whose explicit goal is to ensure the "stupid and ignorant masses" cannot interfere with the ongoing programming to turn us all into milking cows.

The American dream over time has been sullied; the rich became richer, always at the expense of ordinary, hard-working,

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honest, naive Americans. At the time of writing this book, this is as plain as the noses on our faces. Today vast numbers in America have to work at two or three jobs just to meet expected living expenses. At the very minimum, 20 percent of Americans live at or below the poverty line today. Sixty to seventy percent have lost hope and are living paycheque to paycheque. These are the working poor, who live to work instead of working to live, while captains of corporate America earn yearly incomes that could feed, on average, 1,000-plus families per year. Under President George W. Bush a further six million working Americans fell below the poverty line.

At the time of writing Helga's journey, Hollywood idols are more important than the suspect doctrines of movers and shakers of the 21st century. This superficial lifestyle is particularly noticeable in North America. Countless ordinary folks, aware that life has become shallow, stay away from voting booths, sick and tired of the lies and corruption of elected officials. Sadly, this capitulation plays directly into the hands of politicians. When only 50 percent of the population is prepared to vote, brainwashing or giving lip service to a fashionable fringe, representing 10 percent, election is in the bag.



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