

When the Walls Come
Down

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Chapter 1

Leipzig, Germany: July 1944

Something is different this morning. Something woke me up. It's barely past six—not a time I usually get up voluntarily, unless the sirens are wailing.

Gerda is still sleeping like a log in the bed against the opposite wall. She's lying on her back, her arm bent beside her head like a baby, undisturbed by the narrow strip of sunlight falling on her face from under the blackout shade.

Through the open window, the sound of a car engine is clearly audible, drowning out the early-morning birdsong. Then the sound stops, as if the car has pulled over very close by. I strain to listen. Cars are rare on our street—so rare it jolted me out of sleep. Apparently, I don't sleep as soundly as I used to. Not since bombs could fall on our heads at any moment and every engine noise could signal an approaching enemy plane.

I slip out of bed and tiptoe barefoot to the window. I push the black shade aside a little and peek out. From my room on the second floor, I can look straight into the canopy of the old apple tree in the garden. Its branches are so close to the window that I would only have to lean out and stretch my arm to touch them. Oskar has often escaped through this window into the tree when he's gotten into some kind of

trouble and wanted to get away from our parents. Mama, of course, doesn't like that at all. He could break his neck. But Oskar is tough. If he weren't only thirteen, he'd want to be a soldier.

I peer through the dense branches of the apple tree to the street. A taxi has stopped in front of the Schmidts' house, our neighbors. How strange! Are they having visitors? The taxi driver gets a suitcase out of the trunk and walks around the car to the passenger door. Obviously, he wants to help the passenger get out. But the back door is already thrown open and a boy jumps out.

"I've got it," he says, his voice carrying clear and distinct to my window in the morning stillness.

I know that voice! But I can't see him properly through the thick leaves of the apple tree, only catch glimpses of chestnut-brown hair and brown trousers. But the tall man who gets out on the passenger side and grabs the boy's arm—I recognize him immediately. That's Mr. Schmidt, our neighbor.

I see Mrs. Schmidt—or Aunt Martha, as we've called her since we were kids—open the door and throw her arms around her husband's neck. I have to blink away a few tears myself. When will Papa finally be on leave from the front again?

But Aunt Martha's joy at her husband's return is bittersweet. The black bandage over his eyes is a reminder that Mr. Schmidt has made a great sacrifice for the Fatherland—his sight.

I watch as the boy, whom I can still only see from behind, follows Aunt Martha and Mr. Schmidt into the house. After the door closes, I tiptoe to the wardrobe. Gerda murmurs softly in her sleep. I stop by her bed for a moment and brush

the hair from her forehead. It's so light and fine—like delicate golden silk threads. When she started school last year, she looked far too frail for the huge leather satchel on her back, and she's hardly any stronger now. Mama often worries because food is getting ever scarcer.

I pull my prettiest summer dress out of the wardrobe, made of fine, sky-blue cotton with a lace collar. After all, today is Sunday and a special occasion: Mr. Schmidt is back! In front of the small round mirror next to my bed, I begin to untangle my long blond hair and divide it into two braids. I can't stop thinking about the boy. The voice sounded so familiar! But it's not possible, is it? Did he really come all the way from Silesia?

* * *

"Mama, Mr. Schmidt came home this morning," I announce at the breakfast table while spreading jam on my bread. It's Grandma's homemade currant jam, which tastes worlds better than that indefinable "mixed fruit" jam we get with our sugar ration coupons.

The sun is shining through the thin lace curtains on the dining room window, right onto my spot. I glance past the apple tree to the neighbors' house again, and butterflies flutter in my stomach. I don't know why the thought of visiting Mr. Schmidt makes me so nervous.

"I thought maybe I could bring him a welcome-home gift," I add.

Mama nods. "Oskar, stop rocking your chair! Yes, that's a nice idea. We still have a bottle of good cognac in the cellar. And the plums from the garden. Gerda, please finish your bread, there's nothing else until lunch!" Mama turns to me.

“Give him my best wishes. I’d like to come with you, but I have to go to the Women’s Labor Service later.”

“I know.” I think it’s good that she’s so involved, but it doesn’t leave her much time at home. And then it’s always up to me to look after Oskar and Gerda. And I could really do without looking after Oskar. “But I have to go to my service later, too.”

“Will *Fräulein* Hagebusch tell us stories again, Mama?” Gerda asks, her eyes shining. The corners of her mouth are smeared with jam. There are traces of her jammy fingers on the snow-white tablecloth, too. But luckily I’m not the one who has to wash it.

Mama leans over to her and wipes her mouth with a napkin. “We can certainly ask her, sweetie.”

“That’s boring,” Oskar grumbles. “I wanted to go play soccer with Walter and Karli today.”

“I don’t think Walter will be in the mood for that, with his father having just come home,” I say.

“Yes, you leave the Schmidts alone today,” Mama agrees, leaning back and turning on our radio. It sits on the sideboard right behind the dining table so we can hear the news at any time.

A chill runs down my spine as I remember the news report a few days ago about the assassination attempt on the *Führer*. We were glued to the radio all evening—Mama, me, and Mr. Schlieffer, another one of our tenants. I don’t understand how anyone could do something like that! What will become of Germany if the *Führer* is gone?

Right now, they’re playing a piece from Wagner’s *Lohengrin*. I sigh quietly. Papa promised we’d go to the opera the next time he’s on home leave. I hope he comes soon.

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An hour later, I ring the Schmidts' doorbell. When the door opens, my jaw drops. Standing in front of me is the boy who got out of the taxi with Mr. Schmidt. And he's staring at me, just as speechless as I am. I quickly close my mouth.

"Anton?" I finally manage. "It really is you!"

Anton Köhler. I knew the voice sounded familiar, even though it's gotten deeper. It still has that same calming, melodic tone.

But why isn't he saying anything? Doesn't he recognize me? Is he not going to let me in? He raises his hand, then lets it fall again. My gaze drops to his fingers, beautiful, slender fingers. A musician's hands.

I swallow. "Did you bring Mr. Schmidt home?" I ask. Aunt Martha is really his aunt—his mother's sister from Silesia. He used to visit us often during the summer holidays, but the last time was a few years ago.

He nods. Still not a word, as if he's lost his voice.

"So... can I come in?" I hold up the basket to show him I've brought something.

That finally seems to break the spell.

"Uh, yeah, sure," he says in a hoarse voice and steps aside. As he does, his shoulder bumps the door, making it slam against the wall with a loud bang. I flinch. So does he. We look at each other, and finally the spell seems to be broken. We both laugh.

As I squeeze past him, my heart is pounding in my chest. He's just an old friend. Someone I used to chatter with about anything and everything. But he's changed so much! He's almost a head taller than me now, and he's filled out. Only his eyes haven't changed—still as brown as I remember. And his curved lips, which express his feelings better than his words ever can. I realize I'm staring at his mouth and tear myself

away to go into the Schmidts' living room. My cheeks are burning.

I hand Aunt Martha the basket Mama gave me and turn to Mr. Schmidt. The black bandage over his eyes gives his face a roguish look. A bit like a pirate. The thought immediately makes me feel guilty. He'll never be able to see again!

On impulse, I walk over to him and take his hand, which feels warm and strong, like Papa's. "Mr. Schmidt, I wanted to tell you how much I admire your service. You're a true German hero. If we didn't have soldiers and officers like you and my Papa, who are willing to make such sacrifices..."

My voice trails off. Something in his face has made me stop. The muscles in his cheeks twitch briefly. Is it the eye patch that makes him seem so rigid and distant?

"That's really quite a lot of plums," Aunt Martha says, breaking the silence.

Only when I hear her voice do I realize that everyone in the room is watching us. Embarrassed, I let go of Mr. Schmidt's hand and take a step back. Did I say something stupid? I instinctively turn to Anton. But even he won't meet my eyes.

When Mr. Schmidt asks me about Papa, I slowly pull myself together. I tell him about the injuries he sustained from shrapnel. "As soon as his leg can bear his full weight, he'll surely be deployed again," I conclude. "Will you be returning to the front, too?" No sooner has the question slipped out than I want to take it back.

Mr. Schmidt scoffs. "What are they going to do with a blind soldier?" His voice is hard and dismissive. It feels like a slap in the face.

I lower my eyes. Of course that was a stupid question. I just didn't think before I spoke. That happens sometimes

when I'm nervous. I steal a glance at Anton. He's not looking at me, just staring at the tips of his shoes as if they're the most fascinating thing in the world. What must he think of me now? And why should I care? He'll be going back to Breslau soon anyway! Who knows when we'll see each other again—and if the war will be over by then.

Chapter 2

“Luise, would you please take that old thing down to the cellar? It’s been sitting here for weeks and isn’t getting any prettier.”

Mama rushes past me, wearing a headscarf and apron, the white-feathered duster in her hand. Before I can say anything, she’s disappeared into the living room. She’s in one of her cleaning frenzies again. Whenever she’s bustling around like that, I’d rather just stay out of her way. But of course, we’ve all been roped into helping. Oskar is in the garden, pulling weeds from the vegetable beds, and as I lean my broom against the wall, I see through the open door that she’s pressing the duster into Gerda’s hand before hurrying into the kitchen.

I walk over to the floor lamp in the corner that Mama talked about. The lampshade is made of red velvet, but it has several holes and burn marks. It’s probably not a bad idea to take it to the cellar. Since it’s an oil lamp, we can certainly put it to good use in case of a power outage during the next air raid, which is sure to come.

I grab the lamp stand with both hands—it weighs a ton—and stumble down the stairs to the cellar. I press the handle down with my elbow and push the heavy steel door open with my shoulder. It’s sticking again and squeals horribly as I throw my whole weight against it. Next to the steel door,

which was specially installed to turn the cellar into an air-raid shelter, another door leads to the laundry room. It's usually left open to prevent mold after Mama has boiled the laundry in the big washtub there.

Musty door hits me. A bare lightbulb bathes the room in pale light. Very inviting. I set the lamp down on the cement floor, panting, and look around. Why should I go right back up, anyway? I'm safe down here for now. Mama is probably so busy she won't even notice if I don't come back. Besides, you can pass the time quite well down here. Little by little, we've stored everything we need for the air raids in the cellar. In the corner, boxes and cartons are stacked up—all the flammable things we had to clear out of the attic by official order. We've spread a tablecloth over a crate of books, so it also serves as a side table.

It occurs to me that the crate might contain my *Nesthäkchen* series, which I was looking for a while ago. They were my favorite books when I was little, and I'd like to read them to Gerda. If Mama and Papa didn't throw them away, they should still be in there.

I pull the tablecloth off the crate and sit down next to it on the cold floor to search through the books. I examine each cover carefully before setting it aside. Maybe I'll find another interesting book while I'm at it. I can already see the bottom of the crate, but still no sign of *Nesthäkchen*.

Then a title catches my eye. It's the second-to-last book I'm holding. *All Quiet on the Western Front*, by Erich Maria Remarque. I frown. The name sounds familiar. I let the thin pages slide along my thumb. The smell of old paper rises from them. I skim a page. It's about a company, about soldiers, about war...

Now I remember! Remarque—I know the name from

German class. A banned author. *Un-German*, our teacher had said, *subversive*. I can still hear his voice: “The attempt by Jewish-Bolshevik authors to undermine the German spirit.” Why did my parents keep this forbidden book? Or do they not know it’s here?

I open to the first page. I just want to read a bit of it. Then maybe I’ll understand why the book has been banned.

* * *

“Luise? Where are you?”

I jump and slam the book shut, just as Mama sticks her head in the cellar door.

“Oh, there you are! What are you doing down here? I’ve been searching all over for you.”

I hastily hide the book behind my back. “I got carried away with the books again,” I say with a guilty look.

Now her gaze falls on the books scattered all over the floor. “What a mess!”

“I’ll put it all in order right away.”

“Oh, never mind that, there’s no time now. I thought you had to report for duty.”

Startled, I glance at the clock on the cellar wall. Almost three already! Oh no! I was so absorbed in the story that I didn’t even notice the time passing.

“I have to go!” I shout and jump up.

Mama puts her hands on her hips. “And I’m supposed to clean up after you?”

I’m already squeezing past her, up the stairs. “Later,” I call back.

I can’t waste any time now. In fifteen minutes, I have to line up on the sports field in full uniform. Luckily, my things are already laid out. The white blouse is—thanks to *Fräulein* Hagebusch—freshly ironed, and the little triangle with our

district name is sewn cleanly onto the sleeve. I quickly pull on the dark blue skirt and the brown leather vest—today only with reluctance, because it’s hot and you sweat so terribly under the leather thing.

As I dash out of the room, I’m still tying the rolled black neckerchief around my neck and threading it through the leather ring that holds it in front. The standard-issue uniform of the BDM—the League of German Girls—is truly not pretty. But I still remember how proud I was when I was allowed to wear it for the first time—back when I joined the *Jungmädels* at ten years old.

I take the stairs two at a time and nearly collide with Gerda. Her big, sky-blue eyes look at me with envy.

“In two years, you can come with me,” I say, quickly ruffling her hair. Then I’m out the door.

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Completely out of breath and with a stitch in my side, I stumble onto the sports field, where the other girls have already formed ranks. Thankfully, most of them are still chatting and don’t pay any attention to me. Only a few give me reproachful looks. I make a guilty face as Gertrud spots me and walks over. Our group leader can scold or praise with a single look. Today, her brown eyes reflect disappointment and incomprehension.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, looking at her pleadingly. I really am sorry. I don’t want to get Gertrud in trouble. She’s responsible for “her girls” in front of the other leaders and has to answer for it if I’m late.

Gertrud’s expression softens. She looks at me intently, then nods toward the others. I quickly take my usual place.

Hannelore nudges me gently with her elbow. “Honestly, Luise, do you always have to step out of line?”

“What do you mean, always? I just—” I break off as our squad leader, Helene, steps onto the field in front of us. Twenty years old, tall and stocky with an angular face, she has always intimidated me. Gertrud is only two years older than us, but she seems so grown-up with her severe bun. We all look up to her—she’s fair to us and believes in Germany.

Helene surveys the girls lined up before her in rows of three and blows her whistle. “ATTENTION! STAND STILL!” she commands, drawing out the last syllables in a soldierly manner.

The conversations immediately fall silent. We straighten up and raise our arms in the Hitler salute. Gertrud steps up to Helene and extends her right arm. “Squad Leader, I report ten BDM girls from BDM Group 1 assembled for roll call.”

The other leaders of our squad make the same reports. Only then does the command “At ease” ring out.

Relieved, I lower my arm and tug down the annoying leather vest. The darn thing is always riding up. I already feel sticky and damp.

“Girls, the afternoon sports session is canceled,” Helene calls out. Everyone lets out an audible sigh of relief. I’m not in the mood for track and field on this hot August afternoon either. Anyway, I like sports afternoons the least of all our activities in the BDM. I much prefer the singing and music evenings. But lately, those have become rarer and rarer, because the war demands sacrifices from us on the home front, too. Today is another one of those days. Helene announces we’ve been assigned to help with the rubble clearing.

As we march to our work site, in step, of course, Gertrud calls out to us: “A song!”

The flag bearer, who walks at the front holding the flag

high in the air, begins to sing: "Our lives belong only to freedom, yes, freedom is higher than death..." Her triangular pennant hangs limply in the still air.

I sing along at the top of my lungs, first this song, then a bunch of folk songs that I like better than the military marching songs. When we sing, time flies. My feet slap the cobblestones as if on their own, while Gertrud's bun bobs up and down in front of my eyes.

The closer we get to the city center, the greater the destruction. The streets are pocked with craters that obstruct traffic. Many streetcar tracks still need repairing. Skeletons of houses line our path. I wonder where the residents have found shelter now. Everywhere, signs are posted forbidding looting. Everyone knows the penalties for that are severe.

"Alright, girls," Gertrud says, finally stopping. We are standing in front of several collapsed houses. The street and sidewalk are covered with pieces of rubble, debris, and dust. A few children are playing hide-and-seek among the chunks of debris.

"As you can see, there's a lot of work for us here. But we all want to pitch in dutifully and thus contribute to Germany's victory. They're handing out wheelbarrows and shovels over there. So then, let's get to work, shall we?"

Now that we're no longer formally marching, we're allowed to chat with each other. The girls take immediate advantage of that. As we head to the tool distribution point, there's an instant topic of conversation. A group of Hitler Youth boys, about our age, is also waiting in line there. Hannelore and Irmgard, the twins we all just call the Inseparables, giggle when one of the boys turns toward us.

"Isn't that Seb, from the other class?" Iirmi whispers to me.

“Could be.” I think he’s pretty dumb, all brawn and no brains. Anton may not be as powerfully built, but he has warm brown eyes you could get lost in.

Anton. Why am I thinking of him right now? He’s been gone for weeks. The last time we met, I played a Mozart sonata for him on the piano. As I played, I thought I could feel that old connection between us again. We had so often imagined what it would be like to make music together—me on the piano, him on the violin, because he loves that instrument especially. But then he told me that his father had died and he now had to follow in his footsteps.

“So you’re going to be a watchmaker?” I asked, barely able to hide my disappointment.

“What about your music? Our shared dream. Remember?”

I saw in his eyes that he knew exactly what I was talking about, but then his gaze clouded over. “I can’t even play an instrument.”

“You could still learn.”

“And who’s going to earn the money in the meantime?”

That’s when I realized that our dream of attending the music conservatory together would probably remain just that—a dream.

“Should I casually join the boys while we’re cleaning up?” Hanni asks at that moment, pulling me out of my thoughts.

“You could pretend you can’t lift the stones by yourself,” Irmi suggests. Everyone giggles.

“Girls, you’re acting like a bunch of silly geese, just because of a few little boys,” says Gertrud, who suddenly appears beside us. She shakes her head, but I see the smile in her eyes. I can only silently agree with her.

“Don’t forget, we’re here to work,” she adds. “For Germany.”

“For Germany,” comes the half-hearted echo from my comrades.

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The sunlight slants into my eyes, and I blink hard as sweat runs down my forehead. Evening is approaching, which means we’ve been toiling away here for several hours. It’s usually two girls and two boys working together, since many of the pieces of rubble are simply too heavy for us to move alone. I have joined Gertrud and have been working side-by-side with her, mostly in silence. Now I sink onto an overturned fire hydrant to rest. I took off the leather vest long ago and wrapped it around the handle of the wheelbarrow, and I’ve pushed up the sleeves of my blouse, now grayish-brown from the dust. I pull off the thick leather gloves, too, and let them fall.

“Good work, Luise,” says Gertrud, standing in front of me.

I smile. “So you’re not mad at me anymore?”

“I can never stay mad at you for long,” she replies, pulling off her own gloves. A black streak of dirt runs across her cheek, but I’m sure I don’t look any cleaner. She sighs. “If only you didn’t always have your head in the clouds. You have so much potential, I’ve told you that many times. You could be a group leader...”

“I know.” I scuff the ground with the toe of my dusty shoe.

“Then why don’t you want to be?”

“It’s too much responsibility.” And then I wouldn’t have enough time left to practice the piano, or for school. Even though I’m willing to do a lot for the Fatherland, my willingness to sacrifice ends when it comes to playing the piano. But of course, I can’t just tell Gertrud that.

“But our youth needs girls exactly like you.”

I shrug. The scent of potato soup and sausages wafts into my nose. On a meadow some distance away, diligent helpers are preparing dinner in a large field kitchen.

“Should we go eat?” I ask.

Gertrud agrees.

Armed with a soup bowl and spoon, I find my spot on the hydrant again a little later, slightly apart from the group of other girls. I’m not in the mood for their childish chatter right now. I just want to rest and eat the hot soup. It feels good. I watch Margot and Franzi, who dare to stand with the boys and joke around with them.

Then I hear a soft whimper behind me. At first, I think I imagined it, but there it is again. I set the soup bowl down on my lap and turn around, squinting against the sun. What is that pitiful creature? Half crawling, half hopping, it moves through the rubble, letting out soft whimpering sounds.

A dog! But both of his hind legs are half missing. The stumps of his legs leave a trail in the dust. Again and again, the snout hits the ground as he crawls forward. His fur is so caked with dirt that its original color is no longer visible.

I feel tears welling up in my eyes, and suddenly my hunger is completely gone. Did his owners abandon him, or are they dead themselves? Maybe he smelled the food and that’s why he’s coming toward me. I set the bowl down in front of the dog. He greedily licks up the soup and swallows the half sausage in one gulp. His ribs are clearly visible, and he makes a rattling sound when he swallows. I turn away. I can’t look at this misery without bursting into tears.

“Luise, is everything all right?” Gertrud approaches me, her expression worried.

I can only point to the creature at my feet. Gertrud

glances at the animal, then puts an arm around my shoulder and pulls me away.

“But we have to help him,” I protest, pulling away from her arm.

“We can’t,” she replies calmly.

“Take him to a vet or something,” I insist.

“Luise, we barely have enough doctors for our wounded soldiers. How can we possibly—a stray dog—”

“But he’s suffering,” I force out.

“It’s alright. We’ll take care of it.”

“How?”

“Wait here!” She speaks in her commanding voice, which I can’t defy, and steers me over to the other girls. I’m too upset to answer their worried and curious questions. I watch as Gertrud speaks to a nearby policeman and points to the dog. Is she asking him to take the animal to a doctor?

When the policeman draws his pistol, I freeze in horror. I want to run to him and grab his arm, but I can’t move. A gunshot shatters the air. Many of the girls scream, but I barely hear it. My eyes are dry because they’re open so wide. I can’t see the animal from here, but I don’t need to.

Gertrud comes back to us. “Don’t panic, girls,” she says, and then to me, placing a hand on my arm, “It’s been taken care of now.”

I stare at her as if seeing her for the first time. Gertrud, our beloved Gertrud! How can she be so heartless?

Chapter 3

Summer vacation is over. I'm looking forward to seeing my school friends again and get a change from the BDM routine and the monotony of war. Oskar is less enthusiastic about the return to discipline and the end of summer's glorious freedom.

The house is buzzing with early-morning activity for the first time in ages. Oskar packs his satchel looking as if he were headed to his own execution. Mama reminds Gerda one more time not to walk home alone, but to wait for *Fräulein* Hagebusch.

I'm making sandwiches for myself and Oskar.

"Maybe the school isn't standing anymore," Oskar says hopefully as he puts his sandwich away.

I give him a flick on the nose. "You should be glad our school is still here. Learning is a privilege, especially in these times."

He makes a face, but I pretend not to see it and suppress a grin. He shoulders his satchel, and I pull him outside by the strap. Mama and Gerda say goodbye to go to Gerda's elementary school, while we turn in the other direction.

"And if there's an alarm, you run to the nearest air-raid shelter immediately," Mama calls after us.

The walk to school takes a good thirty minutes, but on a sunny September morning like today, I don't mind. Our high school has one wing for girls and one for boys. The beautiful

brick-colored Art Nouveau facade has actually survived intact. In the schoolyard, several groups of girls and boys have already formed, standing together chatting and celebrating their reunion. The younger ones are running around wildly. When Oskar spots his classmates, he immediately runs over to them. I join the Inseparables, Hannelore and Irmgard, who are also in my BDM group along with Margot.

“Hey, Luise, not late for once,” Hanni teases.

I give her a playfully mean look.

“Oh, girls, it’s so great to be back!” a bright voice calls behind me, and Ursula flings her arms around my neck with a laugh.

“How was the countryside?” I ask her after she’s let go of me.

“Oh, it was great. Not a single bombing raid out there, can you believe it? You can’t even picture that here anymore. And fresh air and good food.” She laughs again, her round face always looking friendly and open.

“It seems to have done you good,” I say. She’s really gotten some color and filled out a little. We’ve always gotten along well, even though we’re always competing for the top spot in class.

She links her arm in mine and pulls me up the entrance steps. “Everything as usual?” she asks in her bubbly, irrepressible way.

“We had to haul rubble all summer. You managed to wriggle out of that one nicely.”

“Yeah. But I’m also glad to be back home. And to be going to school with you all. I wonder if all the teachers are still here?”

“I wouldn’t mind if Scheiber never showed up,” I mutter. “He manages to make music the most boring subject, and he’s

nasty on top of it. But I'm looking forward to Mr. Steuzelrather and Mrs. Hamm."

We climb the stairs to our usual classroom in the right wing.

"Welcome back, Class 9a!" is written on the blackboard. Mr. Steuzelrather, our homeroom teacher, isn't here yet. The noise in the room is loud enough to make any drill sergeant proud.

Ursula shrugs and we sit down in the front row, as always. The girls keep trying to outdo each other in volume and pitch. It's so shrill I want to cover my ears. After all, I don't want to go deaf like Beethoven, especially not at fifteen.

My gaze sweeps over the girls. There are more of them since the summer holidays. Around forty students, if I haven't miscounted. Some faces are completely unfamiliar to me. Like the stocky girl with the flushed face and pale hair. She's standing at her desk, and several others are gathered around her, listening to her piercing voice. Over all the noise, I can't understand what she's saying.

In the far back corner, another girl catches my eye. She's sitting alone by the window, and it looks as if a bubble has formed around her, a kind of void that separates her from the others. The girls chattering cheerfully next to her pay her no mind. Her dark brown hair is very long and falls halfway across her face like a shining curtain. She's hiding behind it. All I can make out is that she's wearing glasses. She stares stubbornly at the desk, her narrow shoulders tense.

The door opens and I turn back around. When I see Mr. Steuzelrather, I jump up immediately, and Ursel with me. He walks calmly to his desk and sets his leather briefcase on it. Without saying a word or even glancing around the room, he opens the clasps and takes out a pencil case and a folder. Gradually, the other students notice his presence. The noise dies down.

Mr. Steuzelrather has an aura that commands respect without him having to do much. When we all stand and have quieted down, he smiles at us. His gray mustache and expressive eyebrows lift a little. When he decides he's waited long enough, he greets us.

"Good morning, Mr. Steuzelrather," rings out in response, before everyone sits down.

"As you may have already heard, our class has been merged with students from the neighboring high school, which was heavily damaged in an air raid in July, so classes can only be held there on a limited basis. It's a miracle and a blessing our school's still standing, and we can teach and learn here. Therefore, I expect all of you to tackle this new semester with zeal and diligence. I will now read out the names and ask each student to stand up so that we can all get to know one another."

I watch intently to see who the new girls are. The girl from the back row stands up from her seat only very briefly, keeping herself hunched over. But now that her hair isn't hanging quite so much in her face, I can see she has intelligent dark eyes that dart about behind her round glasses. Her name is Ilse Matuzek. As she sits down, she catches my eye. Although she immediately looks away, I still see a dark blush spread across her cheeks.

Later, Mr. Steuzelrather hands out our schedules and tells us a few stories. That's what I love about his class. He manages to turn everything into a story.

During recess, we all stream out into the schoolyard to eat our sandwiches. As usual, Ursel heads for the group of our friends, who are standing in a loose circle with their heads together. They seem to be whispering about something.

Ursula boldly pushes her way into the circle. "What's going

on here? Did we miss something? As class representative, I have the right to know everything.”

Some of the girls giggle. Only one looks at her with an undisguised challenge. It’s Erika Weidenpesch, one of the new students, the one whose loud voice drowned out almost everyone else earlier. I don’t know exactly why, but I don’t like her. Maybe it’s her surly expression.

“It’s about Ilse Matuzek,” Erika says, looking as smug as if she knew a big secret and the rest of us didn’t.

My eyes automatically search for Ilse. She’s walking alone across the yard some distance away, looking at the ground as she nibbles on an apple.

“What about Ilse?” Ursula asks.

“Well, her father’s a Pole.” Erika pauses for effect, staring at us with her chin thrust out.

My friends’ eyes go wide. I look over at Ilse, concerned. I’ve often seen Polish laborers on the streets who have to wear a badge pinned to their clothing: a purple P on a yellow background, meant to identify them as Poles. Once I saw a few Hitler Youth members insult them and throw stones at them, and no one did anything about it. Does Ilse’s father have to wear a P like that, too?

“How do you know that?” Ursel asks.

“I saw it with my own eyes in her family tree. Both of her paternal grandparents were Polish. Even if her father wormed his way into German society by marrying a German woman, he’s still a Slav and always will be.”

I try not to let on that she has unsettled me. Gertrud’s warning about inferior races comes to mind—that they are parasites who enrich themselves at the expense of upstanding citizens. At the same time, I think of Papa’s words, that all people are God’s creatures. Besides, Ilse doesn’t look like a

parasite at all.

Erika's way of talking and her smug attitude rubs me the wrong way, and somehow I feel obligated to defend Ilse, even though I don't know her.

"Yeah, so?" I ask.

Erika's eyes narrow as she sizes me up. "The Poles are our enemies. They attacked us and started this war in which our men are now dying."

"That's not Ilse's fault."

Erika crosses her massive arms over her chest and pierces me with her gaze. The way she drums her fingers on her forearms... fingers that look like they could snap a branch as thick as my arm. I cross my arms, too. I can't let someone like that intimidate me.

"Besides, Ilse has a German mother," I add. "That makes her German."

"Looks like someone didn't pay attention in racial science," Erika sneers. "Good thing biology is our next class. You can ask again then."

"If Ilse is allowed to go to our school, then it must be all right," Ursula chimes in, trying to mediate as always.

Erika stares at me for another moment, then lets her arms fall. "Well, I would stay away from her," she grumbles. It sounds like a threat.

The bell for the end of break rings before I've eaten a single bite of my sandwich. Everyone streams back to the building. On the way there, I hang back from the others to intercept Ilse. At first she ignores me, but when I fall into step beside her, she can no longer pretend I don't exist.

"Hello," I say and smile.

She barely meets my eyes.

"I'm Luise."

“I know,” she murmurs. Despite the noise of the chattering students around us, I can hear that she has a deep, melodic voice that doesn’t fit her delicate appearance at all.

I study her up close, but try not to be too obvious about it. “Why didn’t you come stand with us?”

She hesitates to answer. A slight wrinkle appears on her forehead. “I don’t think,” she says haltingly, “that the others would have wanted that. Especially... Erika.”

“She’s a cow,” I blurt out.

I’m rewarded with a look from Ilse. Her eyebrows are raised, then she has to grin, and I grin back.

When we reach our classroom, Ilse gives me a fleeting nod without looking me in the eye, and then slips like a fish through the crowd to her seat in the back row. I sit down next to Ursula and only half-listen to her prattling on. Ilse seems like she’d rather be left alone. But somehow I don’t believe that. I turn around to her one more time. She has that bubble around her again, making her unapproachable. A paper wad flies across the room and hits her on the side of the head. It came from Erika, of course. I shake my head. Where are we? In kindergarten? Ilse pretends to be absorbed in her book.

The door opens and Mr. Beck, our biology teacher, enters the classroom. The tumult of voices doesn’t die down immediately. Mr. Beck always reminds me of a gray mouse—small, with grayish-brown hair and gray eyes that glint above his pointed nose. His entire posture is timid, as if he’d rather not be seen. No wonder most of my classmates don’t notice him at first.

Even when he asks for quiet in his squeaky voice, hardly anyone turns their head. I nudge Ursula, who has turned around and is flipping through a BDM magazine with Hannelore. When she sees the teacher has entered the room,

she jumps up and calls out loudly, "Settle down, everyone! Mr. Beck is here!"

Mr. Beck clears his throat and sets his briefcase on his chair. Then he clasps his hands behind his back and steps around the desk.

"Now then, I have something special for you today," he starts in his dull, sleep-inducing voice. "Since we have some new students, this is a good opportunity to demonstrate how we determine a person's race these days. First, a brief refresher of your knowledge from last school year. We designate the Nordic race as the most valuable of our related races. It distinguishes itself through the noble beauty of the Nordic person, but also through their special intellectual abilities, their heroic, combative spirit. That is why care is taken to keep this particular race as pure as possible. This is referred to as *Aufzordnung*. To counter the danger of the Nordic race's degeneration, the Nuremberg Laws were enacted, which forbid racially pure people from mixing with foreign races. According to these laws, an Aryan may not marry a Jew or a person belonging to an alien race."

I feel my face growing hot as I think of Ilse. Does Mr. Beck have any idea who he has in his class?

He takes a measuring instrument out of his bag and holds it up. "With this device, I can determine facial measurements like nose width, forehead height, et cetera. The sum of all characteristics allows for conclusions about the primary race. Of course, there are mixed-race subjects, in which case it must be decided on an individual basis which heritage is dominant. Now, I'd like to ask for volunteers to come to the front."

The room remains silent. I look at Ursula uncertainly. Who'd want to find out if they're from an inferior race?

"Luise, what about you?"

I jump. Mr. Beck is standing in front of my desk and looking down at me, even though standing, he's barely taller than I am sitting. For the first time, I regret having a seat in the front row. Reluctantly, I get up and walk around the desk. He motions for me to sit on the chair he has brought out from behind the teacher's desk. I feel like I'm on display.

He places his strange measuring device on my nose and moves the two calipers so they rest right against my nostrils. Then he reads the value from the ruler and notes it in a chart. It continues like this with the length of my nose, the height and width of my forehead, my mouth...

"Eye color," he mutters, looking into my eyes. I stare back. "Blue. Hair color, light blond," he scribbles again. "Overall appearance... slender."

My cheeks grow hot. When will this finally be over? I feel like a show poodle being judged.

Finally, Mr. Beck smiles, satisfied. "Thank you, Luise." He turns to the class. "Luise is clearly a prime example of the Nordic race. I assume that in your family tree there are only people of pure Aryan descent."

"Um... I think so." Like all Germans, my parents had a family tree made to prove their pure Aryan descent. I fiddle with the folds of my skirt. I notice Erika's gaze. Her mouth is twisted as if she's bitten into a lemon.

Ursula is next. After lengthy measurements, Mr. Beck certifies that she belongs to the Western race, because of her slender figure and dark hair. "Even though you don't belong to the master race, the Western race is characterized by liveliness and cheerfulness," Mr. Beck consoles her. I have to admit that describes Ursel quite well.

"Ah, would you like to be next?" Mr. Beck asks.

My gaze travels to Erika, who has stretched her arm high in

the air. She lowers it and stands up.

“I have a question,” she says.

Mr. Beck blinks and looks for her name on the seating chart. “Erika Weidenpesch?”

“Yes.”

He isn’t used to us asking him questions, but now he visibly straightens up. “So, what would you like to know?”

“What about the Slavic race? That’s Poles and Russians and all those types, isn’t it?”

“That is correct.” He begins another monologue, folding his hands in front of his chest. “The Slavic or East Baltic race is stocky and short, usually has an upturned nose and a flat forehead, and is characterized by a lack of character and fickleness. It is born only for menial labor. One should avoid associating with members of those races.”

Erika looks at me triumphantly and then at Ilse, who makes herself even smaller in her corner than before. Although her hair hangs in her face again, I can see that she has turned beet red. I know just how she feels. But to be honest, she doesn’t resemble the description Mr. Beck provided one bit, and even Erika has to admit that. Luckily, the class ends before Mr. Beck can get around to measuring her, too.

Read the whole story [here](#).