

**Marie Lamballe**  
**CAFÉ ENGEL – A New Era**

Sample translation by Alexandra Roesch



**Novel**

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## Synopsis

### Volume I

(1945 – 1946)

The Second World War has ended – Germany lies in ruins. The spa town Wiesbaden has escaped the worst of the damage, but still – the area around the spa has been bombed out, and the spa centre and the theatre are destroyed, as are many of the beautiful old townhouses in Webergasse and Wilhemstraße. American troops are occupying the city.

As if by miracle, the building opposite Wiesbaden’s State Theatre where for many years the Engel family has been running the ‘Café Engel’ – once a watering hole for artists and flamboyant representatives of the higher echelons – has remained mostly intact. Living space is tight, the situation is challenging. Food is difficult to get hold of, there’s no running water, bartering on the black market provides the bare necessities. In these troubled times, **Else Koch** (in her mid 50s) and her daughter **Hilde** (early 20s) are on their own – Hilde’s father **Heinrich (Heinz) Koch**, who used to run the Café Engel, is listed as ‘missing in action’ since his deployment to the Western Front in France.

Hilde, who won’t take no for an answer, pleads with her mother to re-open the café. Its old-fashioned furniture and the numerous photographs of prominent artists adorning its walls make it seem like a relic of a lost world. An island in a harsh reality, and at the same a small, faithful community that lives together, looks out for each other, and tries to make the best of what little life currently has to offer. Thanks to the lively black market, Hilde and Else manage to open the café again with a modest range of goods. But soon the newly achieved peace is threatened by conflict. When Heinz returns from the French prisoner-of-war camp, happiness abounds at first; but soon this is clouded by frustration – he wants to keep his women away from any business decisions. Hilde, who during the war years has been taking all the important decisions together with her mother, finds it hard to resign herself to being demoted to a mere waitress again. Adding to this is the fact that, among the stream of refugees from Eastern Prussia, a young woman turns up at the cafe who introduces herself as Hilde’s cousin **Luisa**. Her pleasant, modest manner wins everyone over instantly. Hilde, whose brisk, direct behaviour sometimes puts people off, is seriously irritated to see Luisa garner so much sympathy. However, she doesn’t know that Luisa is guarding a secret: she is the illegitimate daughter of a Prussian aristocrat and would prefer to keep her shameful provenance

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undisclosed. Now she sees her chance to start anew. But Luisa is not the only one with a secret. During the war, Hilde had a fling with a French forced labourer – a dangerous liaison that had to be kept secret at all cost and that did not remain without consequences.

The café soon becomes a lively meeting place where American soldiers meet German 'Fräuleins' and where rich ladies who managed to save their possessions through the war encounter those who have lost everything. But behind the town's placid facade, a storm is brewing. The young violin player Fritz Bogner, Hilde's heart-throb when she was a young girl, returns from captivity and falls in love with – Luisa...

The author will include various points of view in this story, which is designed to span several volumes. Most chapters will be told from the perspectives of the protagonists, but these will be interspersed with chapters told from select side characters' point of view. This way, the author will paint a comprehensive picture of events; the reader will dive into the story from various perspectives and get close to numerous characters. Another strength the author displays is a highly authentic, vivid description of what life was like in those days. Thus, Café Engel and its staff – including some rather extravagant personas – quickly become a lively, lovely place one is eager to read more about.

## Sample Translation

### HILDE

*Wiesbaden, April 1945*

It's raining cats and dogs. Hilde is sitting at one of the tables inside Café Engel; she has removed the good tablecloth and covered the wood with a piece of old cloth. She is polishing the cake forks and teaspoons, busily rubbing away at the black tarnish; next she wants to tackle the cream jugs, which also have to be returned to a perfect shine. Mother is in the kitchen making a cake for Julia, whose birthday it is tomorrow. It'll probably be a sand cake, with powdered eggs and icing made of marzipan that managed to survive the war in the storage cellar. Julia Wemhöner has registered at the town hall by now, giving her personal details, and she has received a new passport and food ration cards.

'It's a madhouse over there,' she reported excitedly. 'Nobody is in charge of anything, nobody can find any files, and everyone is scared to death of the Americans.'

After the loudmouth Nazi mayor Perkarski decamped, an emergency administration has been formed, headed by interim mayor Gustav Hess. It is supervised by the American military government. The occupying forces take over all the authorities, claiming the rooms, and so some official institutions find themselves unable to perform their duties. On top of this, the town hall has been badly damaged by bomb hits and only parts can be used; many departments have been moved elsewhere.

'Now the Nazis will get their comeuppance.' Addi, who has accompanied Julia, is happy. 'The entire town administration will be screened, and anyone who's found to have skeletons in their cupboard is sent to the internment camp near Darmstadt! To think I would still see the day! And Storbeck, well, they'll get him too!'

Only Mrs Künzel shares Addi's feelings of triumph. Mother and Julia think it's about time no one was taken to any camp any more, and Julia Wemhöner says it would be better to rebuild the theatre rather than lock up people. There's hardly anything she can buy with those generous food ration cards she has received. Most shops are closed; many are afraid and hoard their stuff.

'Not the best moment to re-open a café,' Mother comments from the kitchen. 'Curfew from nine in the morning until three in the afternoon. And you have to be home again by six. Add to that this miserable weather. Have you seen the mutt?'

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‘Upstairs, on our bed,’ comes Hilde’s curt reply as she holds up a cake fork for better light. There are still some black stains; this silver polish made from charcoal and baking soda doesn’t do the job nearly as well as the good old *Sidol*. But that is impossible to find anywhere these days. Like so many things. The post office is also closed, not a single letter for two weeks now. No news about Willi and August, let alone Father. No way even of telling whether they’re still alive at all...

Somebody pushes against the revolving door, and Hilde lowers the stained cake fork. The postman? A guest? Or just Mrs Drews from next door, begging for a cup of flour?

No, it’s Gisela, who finds it hard to be with her grandparents all the time and comes to see Hilde every now and then. She takes off her dripping rain jacket and shakes her hair, which hangs down into her face in wet strands.

‘Horrible!’ she groans. ‘I only set my hair this morning, but it just doesn’t last in this weather. Do you perhaps have some peppermint tea for a poor freezing soul?’

Hilde is happy about this visit. She abandons the forks, wipes her hands and joins Gisela at the neighbouring table.

‘Sure, you’ll get some tea. We even have real coffee, but that is reserved for tomorrow, for Julia’s birthday.’

Gisela is impressed. Real coffee from real beans, that is sheer luxury. Unaffordable on the black market.

‘Julia got a ration from the Americans,’ Hilde explains. ‘She is such a sweetheart. Just imagine, she sewed thick, padded winter coats for the children of Mrs Drews. Made them from some old things still hanging around in the wardrobe. And she tightened a suit for my mother for autumn.’

Gisela agrees that Julia Wemhöner is a wonderful human being. Albeit a little odd. Or rather, dreamy.

Mother appears from the kitchen, greets Gisela and places a cup of tea in front of her, and sugar. There’s even a very small, rather hard biscuit. You have to dip it in the tea, Mother says, that’ll soften it.

‘How is your mother? And your grandparents?’

Gisela shrugs. There’s plenty to be said on this topic, but it is better to leave it unsaid.

‘Well, the flat is very cramped. There’s a lot of quarrelling going on. And Grandfather now also has problems with his heart...’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Please give him my best. I’ll pack a few biscuits for you. They’ve gone rather hard, but they don’t taste half bad...’

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‘Thank you so much, Mrs Koch!’

Hilde knows that Gisela suffers under her own mother most of all. Johanna Warnecke was and still is a die-hard fan of the Führer, just doesn’t want to accept that the German empire that was meant to reign for a thousand years has collapsed. The V2 rocket would still turn the tables in this war, she keeps saying. Then everyone who’s been loyal to the Führer will get their reward, but the others, the unfaithful, they would receive their just punishment...

‘If you like, you could move into August’s flat upstairs. The Storbecks only need one room,’ says Mother. ‘You would just have to share kitchen and bathroom.’

Gisela drinks peppermint tea and nods politely. ‘Thank you. That would be nice. But we don’t want to be a burden on anyone.’

Hilde remains silent. Sure, she would be happy to have her friend here in the house. But Johanna Warnecke, that much has become clear by now, would be very much in the wrong place here. It would cause nothing but trouble.

‘Any news?’ Hilde asks once Mother has returned to the kitchen and her cake.

Gisela nods. The American military government has moved into premises in Bierstädter Straße, she says. Everything is heavily guarded.

‘They are very worried that someone from the Werewolf Organisation might still sneak in and stage some sort of attack.’

Hilde thinks this is nonsense – but sure, there’s no guarantee. There are still enough idiots who believe in the ‘ultimate victory’. Gisela reports that the American have issued strict orders against any form of fraternisation. Even just offering a German a handshake is not permitted.

‘They are not allowed to talk to us or to enter our houses unarmed. Above all, they’re being warned of German girls. Because we’re all supposed to be evil temptresses serving Adolf Hitler’s purposes...’

Hilde joins Gisela’s laughter. It seems odd to them that the occupiers, who showed up here with massive tanks and artillery, are suddenly afraid of German girls.

‘As long as they make such a fuss, we can hardly expect to welcome any American guests here in the café,’ Hilde sighs. ‘And I had really set my hopes on that.’

No, for the time being there’s not much to be done. A few times, when Ms Künzel sat down at the piano and played dance music from the ‘30s, a few neighbours popped in, but they just sat and listened, and Else served them peppermint tea for free. Two American officers passed by on Wilhelmstraße; they stopped and looked across at the café when they heard the music, curious, but they didn’t come in.

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‘They’re looking for German employees,’ says Gisela. ‘Our neighbour does their laundry and irons shirts. There are thousands upon thousands of American underpants and socks hanging on the washing line in our courtyard. My mother freaks every time she looks out the window.’

She starts to splutter with laughter, and Hilde wants to know whether American underpants look different from German ones. Sure, they do, says Gisela. American men wear funny stuff, called union suits, shirt and pants sewn together.

‘They’re also hiring kitchen staff. Cooks and bakers. And boys for running errands. But above all, women for cleaning the offices and the officers’ living quarters.’

‘And... do they pay well?’ Hilde asks, her voice lowered as she squints towards the kitchen door to check whether Mother is listening by any chance. But her mother is firing up the oven and complaining that the damp wood won’t catch on properly yet again.

‘They pay in dollars. And you get tinned food, fruit and meat. Corned beef. Do you know what that is?’

‘Some sort of beef...’

‘Yes, but quite different. A bit like aspic, pretty salty. But it does taste good...’

Hilde looks at her friend, full of admiration. Gisela has a bicycle and zooms around the city, digs up all kinds of useful things among the rubble and ruins, finds out where you can still get this or that and picks up news everywhere. How gutsy she is! And how fabulous that they have revived their friendship. They always hung out together, Gisela and Hilde, were inseparable at school and played all sorts of pranks. Then Gisela fell in love with Joachim Brandt and suddenly turned into someone else. The tenderly loving bride, nothing but her Jo in her head and no time at all for Hilde. Oh, so you’re one of those, Hilde had thought angrily. But then they drafted poor Joachim to the Wehrmacht right after his final school exam, and Gisela hasn’t had any word of him for two years now. That’s when the girlfriends reconnected. The only thing Gisela doesn’t know about is the affair with Jean-Jacques. Hilde isn’t quite as easily trusting any more as she used to be.

‘If you were to serve hard liquor...’ Gisela muses. ‘You can get that on the black market. You add sugar to it, and the peppermint leaves you collected in the forest last autumn. Peppermint liqueur. Yummy. That would draw some patrons...’

‘We’re not allowed to serve alcohol here,’ Hilde stops her. ‘We can count ourselves lucky if we keep the licence for the café. The Americans get their liquor in their own bars.’

She knows that from Sofia Künzel, who has already applied twice for a job as bar pianist with the Americans. No luck so far, because they prefer to play records, but they did take down her name and address. Perhaps it’ll work out at some point.

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‘Come on, a little liqueur,’ Gisela scoffs. ‘That’s more of a digestive. Medicine. Not really alcohol...’

Hilde understands her friend, they wink at each other. That could just work. They could add this liqueur to the tea. Or the *Ersatz* coffee. If they can get their hands on some...

‘But we have hardly any money left,’ Hilde says. ‘Any idea what one could trade this for?’

‘Cigarettes would be best...’

Hilde already knows that. But unfortunately, they don’t have any, at best a few old cigars Dad saved for ‘after the war’.

‘Jewellery works too. Or glasses. Sheet music. The other day I saw someone flog his grandfather’s denture.’

Hilde would be willing to sacrifice some of the contents of her jewellery box. There might also be some glasses from her deceased grandparents. But she would have to ask her mother about that, and she’d like to leave Mother out of the picture for the time being.

‘Bed linen is popular. Any kind of fabric, really. Do you still have a camera?’

They should have handed that in to the Nazis, but they lied and hid the thing in the attic. Still, she doesn’t want to sell Dad’s old camera if she doesn’t have to. It was his pride and joy.

‘Or that stuff...’

Gisela points to the teaspoon Hilde has just finished polishing. There’s a little angel’s head engraved in the handle; the parents had had that done for the café sometime in the twenties.

‘But only a few... not all, under no circumstances...’

‘The Americans will go crazy for those. Souvenirs – they love them,’ Gisela says knowingly. ‘You can swap them for cigarettes, and for those you will get the liquor. It’s that simple...’

‘Even when it rains?’

Faced with so much ignorance, Gisela shakes her head. When it rains, it’s easier because the Americans run fewer checks.

In the kitchen Hilde explains that Gisela knows where to get sugar and flour and that she just wants to nip out with her.

‘In this weather?’

‘I’ll put on my anorak.’



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She's pocketed five small spoons and the cake forks to go with them. And why not? After all, this is about saving Café Engel, you have to invest in that. Dad would have done the same.

Gisela has left her bicycle in the hallway and used a chain to lock it. You never know these days. The other day, or so she says, a man was killed for a small bag of flour and a pack of cigarettes. They found him down by the Rhine River, underneath a bridge.

'Don't say something like that,' Hilde grumbles and cautiously installs herself on the rear rack of the bicycle. Gisela has to pedal quite hard to get the bicycle moving, they wobble precariously for a bit, then gather speed and make good progress. Their destination is Langgasse, there's always someone there willing to sell something.

'Will you stop driving through puddles!' Hilde complains. 'My feet and legs are wet from all that splashing!'

'I could go slalom, but then you'd have to hold on really tight...'

'Stop it. Or I'll tickle you... under the arms!'

'Then we'll both land in the ditch...'

They end up getting thoroughly soaked but this doesn't put a damper on their high spirits. It's just like in the old days, when they were still at school and in the afternoons used to zoom around the city on their bikes. In the summer, they would lounge around on the banks of the Rhine with their girlfriends and copy each other's homework. Sometimes some boys would join, Joachim often did, and his little brother Walter.

'Right... this is where it starts. Let's check out first what they have to offer...'

Gisela breaks and gets off the bike, Hilde jumps off the rear rack. They push the bicycle, slowly moving down the street. There are people everywhere; they stand in front of empty shop windows, amble seemingly aimlessly along the pavement, stop and talk to each other. Before showing their goods, they cautiously look around to see if there's any police or, worse, an American military patrol nearby. Then, coats are opened, or something is pulled forth from a pocket, and the bartering begins.

'The prices are rising all the time,' Gisela explains. 'A pack of American cigarettes is already at one hundred Reichsmark.'

They get offers. An older woman has some soap to sell, another one wants powdered milk in exchange for her sugar vouchers, a young chap offers real coffee at a horrendous price.

'The liquor dealers are always from the countryside,' Gisela explains. 'Farmers who distil their schnapps in secret in some old shed. They mostly want clothes because they can't get those in their villages. Sometimes jewellery. Or glasses...'

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The choice of goods is bizarre. Someone has a violin, others offer cookery gear, golden wedding bands, books, buttons and sewing kits; there's a fox-fur stole that is shedding like mad.

Hilde eventually manages to get ten cigarettes for the tea spoons and another ten for the cake forks. No doubt the young man who buys the stuff off her will sell it on to the Americans with a serious mark-up. But Gisela says that for twenty cigarettes they can get two bottles of schnapps. Perhaps even three.

And as if on order, it has stopped raining. The houses have a freshly scrubbed look; around here there's been no damage by the bombings. The first tiny, light green leaves are sprouting on the trees.

'There... the old guy with the worn-out shoes...'

As usual, Gisela's instinct is spot on. The old man is looking for good winter boots and has two bottles of schnapps to offer. From Wehrmacht stores, he claims. Hilde guesses that the bottles hold half a litre at most, perhaps even less, in any case those are not the original bottles. But still...

The negotiations go on for a while because Hilde haggles like a market trader. Five for each. Six. No way ten. Seven. Absolutely no more than seven. Given that she has no idea what's in the bottles.

'Hurry up...' Gisela whispers. 'There's two Americans approaching...'

The man with the worn-out shoes is also in a hurry now. Okay. Seven for each. Fourteen in all. Does she know where he could get a pair of good boots? Hilde, keeping the future in mind, says he should drop by the Café Engel at some point. They could always do with some schnapps. And then it's already too late.

'Let me have a look! Where did you get this?'

Two American soldiers stand in front of them, one of them takes the freshly acquired bottle of schnapps from her, Gisela is trying to hide the other one under her coat, but she isn't fast enough.

'You have more?'

'We don't have anything. This is our schnapps. Give it back!'

Hilde's anger encounters cold stoicism. Suddenly the space has opened up around them, the other traders take their goods and themselves off to safety. The Americans inspect the bottles, shake them, one pulls out the cork and sniffs. Nods, satisfied. Replaces the cork.

'Black market is illegal. You know this. *Verboten*. Come with us.'

'But we haven't done anything wrong!'

'Come along...'

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Gisela pushes her bicycle, Hilde trots along next to her. Others watch them from a safe distance, full of pity or glee, some people have already taken up their bartering again now that the danger has passed. The Americans have found some victims and clear out.

‘What will happen to us now?’ Hilde whispers to her friend.

Gisela shrugs her shoulders. It’s the first time the Americans have caught her on the black market.

‘Not much,’ she mumbles. ‘They might lock us up for a night...’

Hilde thinks of her mother, who has no idea what’s going on and will probably fear the worst if Hilde doesn’t return to Café Engel by six. Raped. Kidnapped. Killed. Dear God – Mother will freak!

‘Or perhaps they’ll shoot us...’ Gisela adds with a silly grin.

Hilde doesn’t feel much like macabre jokes. She has given away five silver spoons and five cake forks from the café’s inventory and hasn’t gotten anything in return. On top of which there’ll be a lot of trouble. They are walking in the direction of Rheinstraße, people everywhere stop and stare, Hilde is sure there must be some acquaintances among them. How embarrassing is this. They are being escorted through the streets like criminals. On the other hand, this way her Mother might learn where they end up overnight. She’ll be upset but at least she won’t have to fear that her daughter is lying dead somewhere among the rubble...

At the top of Langgasse, where it merges into Rheinstraße, an army vehicle is parked. They will probably have to get in there. Now that spells trouble for Gisela because she will not be allowed to take her bicycle with her. But if she leaves it here she can be sure that she’ll never see it again...

‘See if you spot anyone who I could entrust my bike to,’ Gisela pleads with Hilde.

Hilde looks and looks; just now she cannot see anyone she knows. But then the two American soldiers suddenly stop and salute two officers passing by. Hilde hears a voice that seems familiar. Quite high but very determined. A short laugh.

‘*Fräulein* Koch... isn’t it?’

Heaven help! This is getting more and more embarrassing. There is that nice officer who saved them from having to move into allotted housing a few weeks ago. What was his name again?

‘Yes...’ she stutters. ‘What a coincidence... You’re well, I hope...’

Is he smiling? No, his expression is severe. There’s something about this man – you never know what is going on inside him.

‘You don’t remember?’

‘Yes, yes, I do... of course ... you ... you know Eduard Graff, the actor...’

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‘That’s correct,’ he says and turns away to talk to his colleague and the soldiers. In English, of course, you can’t understand a word.

‘Do you know him?’ Gisela whispers.

‘Yes...’ Hilde breathes.

Gisela is clutching the handlebar of her bicycle. Both women just stand there, trying to understand what is being negotiated. Curious passers-by point their fingers at them, shake their heads. Hilde feels like she’s back in the middle ages, being pilloried. And all that for two measly bottles of home-distilled booze. How could she have been so stupid!

Now the officer turns back to them. He gives them the once-over and then issues his command: ‘You may go.’

Hilde looks at him with big eyes; she can hardly believe it. Gisela starts removing her bicycle from the danger zone. The officer nods curtly at Hilde and then continues with his colleague. The soldiers follow them.

‘They’ve bagged our schnapps...’ Once they are at a safe distance, Hilde voices her anger. ‘Well, cheers then!’

‘So sweet...’ Gisela says dreamily.

‘The schnapps?’

‘Course not. The officer. Looks so very serious, but he’s hot...’

‘Oh really?’ Hilde mumbles.

‘And he fancies you...’ Gisela continues.

Hilde is not listening. She wonders what to tell her mother, who may already know what happened because some neighbour or acquaintance has been gossiping. Damn! It’ll probably be best to tell the truth.

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## LUISA

*Rostock, February 1945*

It is dark and cold. The last, sparse bits of evening light filter through the opening of the underpass. It doesn't reach them. Nothing can reach them anymore.

'You cannot stay here!'

She does not answer him. Tenderly strokes her mother's cheek, pulls her woollen headscarf tighter, takes her icy hands and tries to warm them.

'You'll freeze to death, Miss. Please, come along...'

Why is this man bothering her? Doesn't he know that she has to take care of her mother? Without her daughter, Annemarie is helpless. She must take care of her and get her to the West, where the Russians cannot harm her...

She hears someone next to her heave a deep, annoyed sigh. It doesn't reach her. This young man's concerns are nothing to her. All that matters to her is...

'Please be reasonable! You cannot help your mother any more. But surely your mother would not have wanted you to freeze to death here, next to her!'

Pain wants to enter her; a deadly arrow is trying to pierce her chest. But she wards it off, she is wrapped in armour of ice, nothing can get through. Mummy has to rest a bit, that is all. She's asleep, peaceful, her face is all relaxed. She will sleep for a few minutes to gather her strength. Then they will both go to the town and find a warm room. Something to eat. A hot drink.

'It'll be dark soon, then we won't find the way anymore. Come with me now! Damn it, why are you so stubborn? Your mother is dead!'

The arrow pierces her, she bucks and screams at him: 'No! She's not dead! Mummy isn't dead! Not... dead...'

Her desperate screaming morphs into sobbing. She throws herself across her mother's body, embraces it, crying. And then she feels it. The absence of life. Not stiff yet, but there is no pulse, no breath. Death has long since taken her mother in his arms and carried away her soul. What's left lying here is just an empty shell.

'It's all right,' someone whispers close to her ear. 'All is well. She's home. In a place where there is no more suffering and misfortune. Come with me now. Please!'

Someone takes her by the shoulders and pulls her off the dead woman, supports her as she tries to get up and realises that her legs are numb. Holds her for a while and talks about having to leave quickly, there'll be a black-out in the city because of the air raids, in a few minutes it will be pitch black night out there.

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‘Come. I’ll help you. Be brave. Together we will make it...’

She can vaguely make out his face, the light bandage across his eye, the mouth that won’t stop uttering encouraging words. Step carefully. There’s a steep bit coming, it’s icy, she had better hold on to him. There, that’s better. There’s Rostock over there. It’s not far now. There are the first houses. She should not let go of his hand, he says, under no circumstance...

She stomps through the snow, barely feeling her feet. It is as if she were floating, there is a whistling noise in her ears, a few times her legs give way. He is there, he holds her upright, so she doesn’t just sink into the snow. He even lifts her into his arms and carries her a bit until she says, in a feeble voice, ‘It’s all right.’ He carefully puts her down again, waits a moment and slings his arm around her waist as they continue. After a while her pulse steadies, she feels her strength return, but now there is a stinging pain in her feet. She clenches her teeth to hold in a groan. Go on. Don’t stop. The white snow cover that has been keeping some of the light alive is now going grey with fearsome speed, loses itself in the growing dark. The first houses – dark, shapeless shadows appearing before them – turn out to be a bombed-out train station. This is no place to spend a winter’s night, there are only piles of stone, burst steel girders, broken beams.

‘There’s a train carriage over there,’ she says. ‘Perhaps it’s not locked.’

She has the advantage over him, can see better than he does, because of his injury.

‘We’d better not,’ he says. ‘They always aim the bombs at train stations. A few more steps. We’ll make it. There must be some houses nearby...’

They can hardly see anything anymore in the darkness. Under their feet, they feel a paved path, cleared of snow. They drag themselves forwards with what little strength they have left, don’t stop, just move on, don’t break the rhythm, that would be the end.

‘I can’t go on!’

He sees that she has reached her limits. She is trembling with fatigue, and he is too exhausted to carry her, he can barely manage his rucksack.

‘Over there... there’s something there, isn’t it?’

‘Wait here... I’ll be back with you in a moment.’

He disappears into the night, and she is alone. Fights against the desperate wish to just sit on the ground and go to sleep. Never to wake again. Not to feel that arrow stuck in her chest. The arrow of death. Mummy is dead. It’s her fault. She didn’t take care of her... Who was it who’d said she had to do that? The old medical officer Greiner, who had taken her in his arms so tenderly and then run off so quickly.

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'I found something,' someone says. 'It'll have to do for a few hours. Careful now. There's a lot of debris here. Take my hand...'

She clammers across snow-covered rubble, her foot gets stuck in some obstacle, she would have fallen if he hadn't been holding her. Then her hands feel a door, its hinges creak as he opens it.

'Wait...'

A small light flares up, the flame of a lighter, he holds it up to look around, up, then extinguishes the light again. They are in a small room, two windows with broken panes, smashed furniture everywhere, a small potbelly stove... However, the ceiling above them, supported by beams, seems to be intact.

'I'll try to get a fire going... if you can find any dry wood on the floor, please give it to me...'

The thought of warmth from the oven gives her new strength. How odd, she thinks as her hands cautiously feel around on the floor. I don't even know his name but talk between us is all familiar.

'Here's some paper too... and more wood here...'

A small rectangle lights up in front of her, flickers, there's a crackling sound, a biting smell spreads through the air. The fire burns, she holds her stiff fingers close to the oven, feels the warmth, she is trembling all over.

'The flue isn't working properly, it's probably blocked,' he says. 'But it's unlikely that we'll suffocate from the smoke, what with two open windows...'

In the flickering light of the oven she can see him smile. There is an adventurous look about him, his face is reddened and full of soot, his eye patch is dirty, his dark blond, straight hair hangs into his face.

'What's your name?'

'Friedrich Bogner... you can call me Fritz if you like. Your name is Luisa, right?'

He has heard her mother call her that. This afternoon, on the train. When Mother was still alive...

'It's dreadful, she lies down there all alone now...'

He adds another piece of wood to the fire and has to think for a moment before answering.

'She is not alone, Luisa. Your mother will never be alone again. Because now she is with all the people she loved who have gone before her...'

Luisa nods and wipes the back of her hand across her wet cheeks. Considers too late that now her face is all smudged with dirt, but then, that doesn't matter anymore.

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‘Tomorrow we will look for help,’ he promises. ‘Then we will go and get her so that she can have a good Christian burial. Do you want that, Luisa?’

‘Yes,’ she whispers. And then, immediately, ‘Fritz? Why do you do all this for us?’

He gets up, goes to the windows and boards them up with some of the planks lying around. Then he kneels down in front of the oven again and feeds the fire with more wood. If only they had coal, that would last longer. But even so, it is wonderful to feel the oven’s warmth. It finds its way through her fingers into her body, it gets the blood to circulate, brings back life.

‘Why?’ he says after a while and shrugs his shoulders. ‘Don’t know. Just because.’

[END OF SAMPLE]