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The Hands Beneath the Blood

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The Hands Beneath the Blood

by Kasey Bell

Honors Thesis
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Foreword

I love history. Always have, always will. And it's true what they say: history really is written by the winners. Anyone who ends up on the losing side is always branded as evil by the winners. Some deserve it, and some don't. Take the Germans in World War II. Now, I am in no way condoning the actions of the Nazi party, but the important thing to remember is that not everyone in Germany at the time was a Jew-hating, Hitler-loving fascist. In fact, most swore allegiance to the country, not the swastika.

I started thinking about the following story when I was in high school. We were discussing what nationalities we had in our families, as was the popular thing to do, and a strange thing began to happen. Any time I mentioned that I was part-German, the first response I always got was "Oh, so you're a Nazi." It wasn't a question; it was a stated fact. German= Nazi. I began thinking about the German people, wondering if they were still being branded with unfair stereotypes. Then I started to think even more. I looked around at all our culture-- movies, books, TV shows, and even video games-- and any time the war was the subject, the Germans were all portrayed in the same way. They were heartless, hateful brutes devoted solely to Der Fuhrer. Funny, I thought. I didn't know any German people like that, and that's when it hit me. These people were not just characters in a story or figures in history. They were and are people, with feelings, families, hopes, dreams, and fears. I don't think any German joined the army before

World War II with the goal of conquering the world. Combine feelings of retribution stemming from the results of the First World War with anger at the economic state, throw in a leader with a lot of passion and power, and one has a bomb waiting to explode, with the German citizens as victims.

I wanted to try to tell the story of the war and its aftermath from a losing point of view, albeit a fictional one. None of these characters are real, but I have to believe that parts of them existed all over the country. There were families, children, siblings, and couples devastated by the war not by choice, but by circumstance. How does a person live through that? More importantly, how does anyone live with being branded as an anti-Semitic murderer in the view of the rest of the world? It's guilt by association in the worst sense of the term.

To best come to terms with all of this, I had to look back at history from an increasingly shrinking viewpoint. I started by looking at the background, at the First World War, then narrowing to fascist psychology, Nazi party demographics, the appeal of fascism, and finally the real-life stories of soldiers on the front and the tactics of the Afrika Korps itself.

I hope that my readers will realize that the German soldiers were much, much more than just one-dimensional characters in a melodrama. I dedicate this work to the memory of the men and women who have been branded for life for only doing what they thought was right.

January, 1916

Every story begins with either a birth or a death. It is only through the creation or destruction of life that a tale is told. Otherwise, we are left in a void that is only a part of the whole. Fortunately, this story begins with a birth.

Klaus Schroder was born on October 21, 1916. His birth was the same as that of any other average child in Germany at the time because Klaus was, for all intents and purposes, an average child. His mother, Anna, had no reason to believe otherwise. From the moment he took his first breath, Klaus was nothing but joy to his mother, who rarely let him out of her sight or even her grasp for the first months of his life. She had waited far too long and dealt with too much to let anything happen to him.

Anna had awakened one morning in January of that same year with an unfamiliar feeling. It wasn't pain, nor was it illness. Instead, it was just a state of being that, at its core, did not feel right. She slowly pulled off the cream-colored sheets of her brass bed and swung her legs over the side. As she sat up, the feeling went away momentarily, but was instantly back. Anna clutched at her stomach and felt for anything out of the ordinary. She looked back over her shoulder to see an empty bed with sheet and blankets undisturbed. She put her feet on the floor and grabbed her robe off the back of the wooden chair that sat at an angle in front of her vanity. Cautiously, almost for her own concern, Anna pulled herself up and quickly wrapped the cloth robe around her.

Just enough light shone through the bedroom window for Anna to see where she was going. The rays from the soon-rising sun cast the room in an eerie yet relaxing shade of

blue, like a block of ice. Anna looked around the room as she groggily made her way toward the door. The first few steps were easy, as her feet proceeded comfortably on the massive rug that lay beneath their bed and took up most of the room. The rug had been a gift from Anna's mother, and Anna could not have been happier with it. She loved the way it felt on her toes as she walked to her bed each and every night so much so that it seemed to make her drowsy as she prepared for a good night's sleep. The problem was that the rug only took up part of the room; the rest of the room, as well as the house, had a lovely hardwood floor that seemed to shine in the summer months. In the winter, on the other hand, the floor could become as cold as the snow and ice outside. Had Anna remembered this, she would not have jumped as her bare feet made the transition from the warmth of the carpet to the wood near the door. However, Anna was still in a daze, and that one step completely broke her out of it. A jump of shock, a few rapid blinks, and she continued on her short journey to the living room.

This room was brighter than the bedroom had been mere moments ago, mostly due to the four windows in the front of the room, which now funneled the little sunlight in, giving some life to the colors of the furniture and the walls. A small bit of light shone on the floral print armchair that Anna was making her way towards; the rest was scattered throughout, highlighting the small sofa beside the chair, the handle on the door to the kitchen, the frame leading to the main hallway, the elegant white marble fireplace and the painting that hung above it. The darkness hid the rest of the room and the dining room, which was in slight disarray from the night before. Anna dropped herself into the cushy armchair with the multi-colored flowers on it and dragged her knees up underneath her. She stared blankly at the fireplace, full of the ashes and a few glowing embers from the

previous night's flame. Still tired from an early awakening and subconsciously mesmerized from the ticking of the grandfather clock in the corner of the room, Anna began seeing images in the remnants lying in the fireplace. At first, it was just simple shapes, like a flower and a tree, but then they began to advance. She started to see more complex pictures, some resembling buildings and other places Anna had visited in her short life. Finally, the ashes were turning into people, young and old, alive and dead, ambiguous and yet somehow familiar. In fact, one of them looked exactly like--

"Oh," Anna moaned as she again clinched at her stomach. The feeling that had awakened her from her slumber in the first place was back. It had slipped away as Anna moved from room to room, but was back the same as it was when it started. To make matters worse, she became lightheaded as if from a lack of air**.** There was no logical explanation for it, though Anna constantly searched her mind for one. At first, she thought it might have been a consequence of the previous night's dinner. Although the chicken her mother had prepared for her was quite good, and Anna had eaten all of it, she was left with the feeling of a small lump in her stomach as her parents left for the night.

"Maybe… no, that can't be it," Anna thought to herself. She had been ill from eating undercooked or spoiled food before and this was nothing like it.

Trying to distract herself again, Anna turned her focus from the now blank fireplace to the windows. More light beamed through as the sun began to climb higher into the sky, which was a blend of yellow and red light, grey from the clouds and even some deep purple from the fleeting night. Below that, on the other hand, there was only one defining color: white. The all-too-familiar snow that came with each and every winter blanketed everything as far as a person could see, from the homes, apartments, and

businesses throughout the city to the trees of the forest that lay on its borders. In fact, the only colors that stood out from the frost were the black on the spire of the church and the little green that still showed on the forest pines. However, Mother Nature was doing her best to cover these as well, for as Anna shifted over to her side in the chair, the dark grey clouds that littered the sky began sprinkling snow all over the landscape. As Anna watched each snowflake come to rest on the frozen ground, her eyes grew heavy and she once again drifted off to sleep.

This time, her sleep lasted for about an hour and a half before she once again woke with a start to the disturbance in her abdomen. She looked out the window again, seeing that the only thing that had changed since she fell asleep was that there were now people on the streets, poor souls who had no choice but to brave the elements, whether it be for business or uncontrollable pleasure. Realizing that there was no point in just sitting there, for it would do nothing to change her condition, Anna rose from the comfort of her chair. She walked over to the fireplace, placed a few of the pieces of wood that she could comfortably lift into its belly, and lit it. As the wood began to catch, she untied and redid her robe and then began to pace around the house, again hoping that maybe this would provide some relief. She walked past the sofa, the maple end table, the bookcase that was near capacity, and the corner clock, ending at two doorways, one leading to the dining room and the other leading into the kitchen. Anna stopped for a moment, then continued into the dining room. She had not completely cleared off the tablecloth from the dinner she had had with her mother and father; there were still some small messes, but she had already taken the dishes into the kitchen and had thrown out the little remaining scraps. After all, since her mother had been nice enough to come over and

make dinner for the three of them, it was the least she could do to clean up afterwards. She rounded the table, placing a hand on the wooden chair that sat at the end of the table, and looked up at the chandelier that hung above the table. The burned-out candles still dripped a small amount of wax. She continued around the table, passing the only other windows in the house and making sure to avoid accidentally tripping into the china cabinet that sat at an angle in the corner. Inside the cabinet lay her finest china. Anna tried to remember the last time she had ever used it, but the only thing she could think of was when friends had come over for the first time after she married her husband, Hans Schroder. Anna stopped again; she had not been blocking thoughts of Hans from her mind, but the less they were there, the better. In fact, the main reason her parents had come to visit was to keep her mind from Hans and his present condition, for lack of a better word.

Anna regained her composure and continued through the dining room, heading toward the doorway on the other side of the room. She first glanced at the door to the spare bedroom, which was still shut tight, and then at the painting of the Rhine River that hung on the wall opposite the window. Anna had liked the painting since she first saw it and decided it would fit the room perfectly. Actually, there had been another she liked even more, but since it cost almost double the price of this one, she decided that this would make an acceptable substitute. However, that was neither here nor there, and Anna let go of all thoughts on the painting as she trod back into the living room. She would continue this repetitive track for a small portion of the morning. The good news was that the feeling did not come in sharp bursts and was not as severe as she did this. The bad news was that the feeling was nearly constant and dull as she made her rounds. Her mind

started playing tricks on her, and the flowers on the wallpaper seemed to mock her misery as she paced. Finally, not able to take it anymore, Anna decided she had to do something. After quickly running down the list of options in her head, she decided she would have to go to the doctor for help.

Time had flown by that morning. The hands of the grandfather clock were nearing their positions for nine o'clock as Anna headed back to the bedroom. She had to get dressed to go out, but since this was neither a social call nor a business call, she put little thought into planning an actual outfit. Instead, she pulled open her wardrobe and grabbed the first dress she saw. It was simple attire, no different than that of any other respectable woman in the country, grey with no pattern and with white lace frills edged with faded pink around the wrists, hem, and collar. "This will do," Anna mumbled to herself, and she again undid her robe and began to dress in such a hurry that she nearly put the dress on backwards. After donning the bulk of her ensemble, she sat down on the corner of the bed to put on her winter boots. As she clasped them around her ankle, she noticed some smudges of mud on the toe of her right shoe. This was odd, for Anna could not remember walking through anything that would cause her to soil her shoes. In fact, normally when she came to a puddle or patch of dirt, Hans would take off his coat and--

Anna caught herself again. She was letting her mind wander again towards bittersweet memories she couldn't allow herself to bring up at the moment. She had more important things to do now. She finished dressing and proceeded to move from the bed to the vanity to fix her hair. As she turned towards the mirror, Anna looked at herself thoroughly for the first time in ages. Her hair, long and black as a raven's feather, lay in a mess from an almost good night's sleep. A mole, she had noticed, had appeared

sometime recently, flawing her otherwise perfectly pale skin that almost resembled the snow outside. Anna was a person of only two main colors: black and white. Therefore, it was her emerald green eyes that had to draw attention and make Anna stand out in a crowd of otherwise faceless women. Those eyes, which her parents were always fond of, which they always commented on when they showed her off to friends and strangers alike, which would attract envy from Anna's mostly brown-eyed female classmates, and which would also draw several suitors including Hans, were now tired and dull, with streaks of red around the center and dark spots below them. In short, they had begun to lose their once alluring shine. Anna finished with her hair, leaving it down but with some semblance of order, and made her way toward the main hallway and the front door. She had her hand on the knob when she realized she did not have her coat. She grabbed it off the wooden coat rack that her grandfather had made. It was a once lovely red redingote that Anna had gotten great use of during the winter months. As she put it on, she slid her right arm not through the sleeve itself, but instead through a hole in the elbow that was the size of a small peach. The hole had formed a few weeks earlier due to so much use by its wearer. This was also not the first time Anna had made such a mistake either, so it had become more of a minor nuisance instead of a major problem. Anna could have fixed the problem if she had wanted to, for she was an accomplished seamstress, something she had become by watching her mother, and a sewing machine sat in the extra bedroom, ready for use. Truth be told, Anna could have even gone out and bought a new coat. Instead, she just never let it get to her and never got around to doing anything about it. She pulled her arm out of the hole, successfully put it through the sleeve, and again went to walk out the door.

Elmshaven was quite the town. Despite having a population far below that of most of the major German metropolises, its diversity could rival that of Berlin itself. There was an apartment building not too far from the church that housed most of the city's poorer residents, which included a few French immigrants, lower-class workers, and, strangely enough, one elderly Englishman who never seemed to like living there, but nonetheless never complained and paid his rent just like everybody else who could. Not much was known about him besides his being English because no one ever talked to him and he returned the favor. Near the building stood the Lutheran Church, where her father was the minister. The building was the largest in town and was made of tanned stoned and black beams on top. Two rounded windows sat in the center of the church's face, both of them filled with glass colored like a rainbow. Attached to the face, sitting high above the windows, were two spires, one on each side, and a cross on the very top. Birds would often sit atop the cross, since it did provide the best view one could imagine. Anna sometimes wished she were a bird so that she could view the town from above, even thinking that on a clear day, she could see Hamburg, which lay over 64 kilometers away. The rest of the city was more houses similar to the one Anna lived in, some larger, some smaller, another slightly nicer apartment building and several businesses and shops, from the tailor's and the butcher's to bakeries and groceries. The best part of the whole city, at least Anna thought so, was its location. The city was surrounded by pine forests that were almost always alive during the warmer months. The only gap in the forest was on the south side of town, where the main road connected Elmshaven to the rest of the civilized world. All in all, Elmshaven was a wonderful place in which to live and Anna

couldn't be happier living there. She took a breath of the crisp fresh air and continued on her way.

Fortunately, it wasn't a long walk to the nearest physician. Anna trod through the snow, knowing that she would soon reach her destination. As she walked, a few older gentlemen either waved or tipped their hats to her, which she responded to with a smile and a courteous nod. She also watched as a few of the poorer neighborhood kids who couldn't afford to be in school played in the snow, making snow angels and starting a snowball fight. One child took a snowball right in the nose, causing Anna to burst out in laughter. Her happiness was cut short when the unsettling feeling in her stomach returned, as defined as it had been when she awoke that morning. Lucky for her, she had reached the door of the town's doctor, Dr. Wilhelm Schweitzer. If anybody could help her right now, it was he.

Dr. Schweitzer was a kind old man, grandfatherly in appearance. Most people attributed this to the fact that he had no grandchildren of his own, so he turned his love outwards to all the townspeople. There wasn't a person in the whole area whom Dr. Schweitzer didn't know, including their parents' names and pretty much their entire family history. People could set their pocket watches by him as he was extraordinarily reliable. Today, it was Anna who relied on him, and, as usual, he didn't disappoint. She opened the door of his office to find him sitting on his couch, his nose buried in a book. She did not have to say a word for the doctor to notice her entry.

"Ah, my dear, sweet Anna," he said with a smile as he closed his book and stood. Dr. Schweitzer was a rather short man, coming only slightly higher than Anna. His face was round like a pumpkin and warm like the sun. His cloud-white hair was beginning to

recede from atop his head, but moved to his chin as his beard was quite full. Cloudy eyes sat behind eyeglasses with a slight crack in the top of the left lens and faded brassy frames. "How are you today? That's a terrible question. If you were fine, you wouldn't be here to see me, would you? Come with me to the back. Now, tell me what the problem is."

Anna took a seat in the back of Dr. Schweitzer's office as he slid the book into his jacket pocket and explained to him everything she had felt since that morning. He looked on with deep interest and concern, the glasses sliding down to the tip of his nose. After Anna finished her story and after a brief examination himself, Dr. Schweitzer took a deep breath and sighed. "Let me go examine my notes and I will be right back with you," he said, leaving the room and shutting the door behind him.

Anna sat in the cold room alone, tapping her foot in nervous anticipation. What could be wrong with her? Immediately, all of the worst things that could possibly be wrong with her went through her head. Was it serious? Why would he have to leave the room? Why couldn't he tell right away? Was he trying to prepare himself to tell her bad news? What was it? Anna tried to erase the depressing thoughts from her mind, instead trying to convince herself that maybe it was all in her head. That's what it was. That's what it had to be. Anna had made herself believe this, but that thought was shattered when she heard the creaking of the doorknob. She tightened with apprehension.

The look on Dr. Schweitzer's face was not what she expected. There was no grimace or look of serious matters. Instead, there was a smile, bigger than the one he had when she walked in earlier, and showing all of his slightly yellowed teeth.

"My precious Frau Schroder, you have nothing to be worried about," he gleamed. "In fact, you should be very happy. Anna, you are going to have a child."

On the outside, Anna leaned forward gently, trying to catch her breath, blushed slightly and wheezed out a chuckle of disbelief. On the inside, her jaw hit the floor, and her mind began to scream with joy. She was going to have a child! The dream she had as a little girl of having a family of her own was going to come true. Anna regained her composure and turned again to Dr. Schweitzer.

"A child? Me? Are you sure?"

"Absolutely," he grinned. "My dear," he said as he crouched down beside her, "I have been doctoring longer than you've been alive. I have seen countless women in that time, and I know when one is carrying a baby. Why, if it turned out that you were not pregnant, I would retire right now."

Anna managed a giggle at the doctor's joke. At the same time, however, she realized that he was completely serious. This was a major watershed in her short life, and she would soon have a huge responsibility on her hands. She rose from her chair and thanked Dr. Schweitzer for his time. He walked her to the door, saying it was not trouble at all and offered a piece of good advice.

"Try to take it easy. If you need anything, do not hesitate to call on me."

"Oh, don't worry. I will," she said, responding to both statements. Anna left his office and once again stepped back out into the snow.

The door shut behind her, and Anna could no longer hold her true emotions back. Tears sprung from her eyes, rolled down her cheeks, and ended at the corners of her lips, which had formed into a wide smile. She began to laugh and cry at the same time,

causing a few onlooking men and children to stare at her as if she were insane. Anna didn't care though. She was so happy that nothing else seemed to matter. All concerns, all worries, all problems vanished like a showgirl in a magician's act. Even the unrest in her stomach that had started the day and led to her wonderful discovery subsided if only in her mind. Anna could not hold the joyous news to herself; she had to tell someone. Thoughts immediately went to her mother. Only her mother would be as excited as she was over the news that a child was on the way. Anna wiped the tears away from her eyes and checked up and down the snowy street. The usual traffic of horse, wagon, and the occasional automobile were nowhere to be seen, so she crossed the street rather hurriedly, making sure to keep her balance on the icy cobblestone. She turned up the sidewalk again, doing little to hide the grin that was now almost permanently etched on her face.

Anna soon reached her parents' home and, ignoring the idea of courtesy, flung open the wooden door as if something were after her.

"Mama!" she called with joy. "Mama, I have wonderful news!"

Her voice created a slight echo as it went through the house. Her parents' home was slightly smaller than the one she lived in now, but that seemed to make it even cozier and homier. The layout was much the same, but the main hallway was slightly shorter, and the bedroom barely smaller. The bright colors and white of the furniture and the room itself gave off their own light, even brighter than the reflection of the sun off the snow. In the warmer months, just enough sunlight came through the windows to cast beams and make the home appear as if it were out of some kind of utopian fantasy. The poorer population of Elmshaven could only wish to live somewhere like this. It was not extravagant or uniquely elegant, but to Anna and her parents, it was one thing: perfect.

Within a few moments, Anna's mother emerged from her bedroom, still carrying the needles she was using to tailor a rip in the right leg of a pair of her husband's trousers. She was quite an accomplished seamstress, fixing clothes for her family and friends who were not blessed with such a gift. Her short, deep brown hair, speckled with small bits of grey, was in a mess. Her glasses were pinched high on her nose, and the small lenses magnified her chocolate-brown eyes. With the exception of her eye color, however, her mother looked every bit like Anna would in another twenty years. Friends had even teased both of them that if Anna were older or her mother younger, they could easily pass for sisters.

"What? What is it Anna?" her mother asked, out of breath.

"Oh mother, you won't believe the news," Anna replied. She ran over to her mother, took her by the hand, and sat her down on the rose-print sofa. Fighting back tears of joy, Anna told her everything that had happened to her that morning and explained that Dr. Schweitzer said she would soon have a child of her own.

Her mother had to hold back from screaming with happiness. She could have let forth a yell that would have caused half of the neighborhood to come running.

"Oh, Anna!" she cried, pulling her daughter tightly to her to the point that Anna could barely breathe. She released her grip but still held onto her shoulders. "You're going to…. That means that I…. And your father…. Oh, Anna! I'm so proud of you! I'm so happy!"

Anna's mother was now going through the same process Anna had gone through when the news finally hit home. She started to laugh, then cry from elation. Anna watched her, trying not to laugh again herself. She realized that this is what other people must

have seen her doing outside Dr. Schweitzer's office, making the situation all the more humorous. Anna let loose a snicker as her mother rose from her seat. She took two steps forward and then turned around as if she had heard a noise coming from the kitchen.

"We have to tell your father right away," she smiled. "Why, I can't imagine the look on his face when we tell him. Well, when you tell him, that is."

"But won't he be busy right now?"

"Nonsense, sweetie, nonsense. With all due respect to your father's work, I think it can wait for something like this.

Anna's mother stepped back into her bedroom to dress, leaving Anna alone to dream. In her mind, she could see her father smiling as she told him. She could imagine friends and other family sending congratulations and offering advice about what had happened when they had children. She knew the next nine months would be hard, but that didn't matter right now. All she could think about was how happy she and her mother were, how she would tell her father and she would tell Hans.

Ah yes, but where was Hans? He was still alive, still married, and still deeply in love with his wife. So, where was he during such an important time? To understand, it was vital to comprehend Hans' own life so far.

Hans, like Anna, was born in and grew up in Elmshaven. Unlike Anna, he had more opportunities in life. His father started a sawmill on the edge of town, and with plentiful forest on every side, the mill could not help but flourish. The Schroders did so well for themselves that many wondered why no one had come up with the idea before. Before long, they were the envy of the common people, building quite the mansion for themselves. They may have only been moderately wealthy in comparison to the rich in

the rest of the empire, but to the people of Elmshaven, the Schroders were very well-off. The budding couple soon produced a son, Hans, who became somewhat of a celebrated figure in his own right. However, Hans would become more known among the female population because of his looks. Even at an early age, Hans was quite a handsome fellow, drawing giggles from his female classmates. Hans could have merely relied on his appearance and become successful. If he were a complete imbecile, women would still fall over for him for his handsome appeal and charm. His shoulder-length, golden-blonde hair, eyes as blue as the North Sea, and flawless smile drove the girls mad.

Hans chose a different path. Hans had never enjoyed working with his hands, so a career at the sawmill was out of the question. He could have moved up quickly and would have eventually run the place, he did not want to hassle with learning the craft**.** Instead, Hans decided to use his mind. Caring more for an education, Hans told his parents before primary schooling had even ended that he wanted to go to Oberrealschule, a secondary school focusing on science and mathematics, and eventually to university. His parents had expected to send him to higher education, but they did not expect him to take such a fervent interest in it. Plus, now they would have to save the money to send Hans to university, the closest of which was in Hannover, which would not come cheap. Still, when it came to something as important as this, Hans' parents could not deny his wishes, and they wouldn't. Hans' idea for his education went exactly as planned. After nine years in Oberrealschule and another four years studying mathematics in Hannover, Hans returned to Elmshaven to begin a career of his own. He soon began work as an accountant for the town bank and became quite secure in his own right.

Although he had been gone for nearly four years, the women did not forget about him. When he returned, they picked up right where they left off. This time, Hans was beginning to become interested in them as well. He could have had his choice of a wife, but Hans felt that most of the people in town did not see him for him. They saw him, but they cared not about him. Lust, he thought, not love was what drove them. If only he could find someone he could connect with.

He got his chance one Sunday morning. As usual, most of the town had congregated at the church, and Hans was among them. He sat through the service, trying his best to pay attention to the pastor's words, but his mind wandered from thoughts of work to his own personal philosophies. When it was over, Hans shuffled to the back, readying to leave. However, with no provocation whatsoever, Hans turned to the front one last time. It was then that his blue eyes connected with a pair of green eyes across the room. Immediately, he knew something was different about this girl. Not only were her eyes different from those of any other girl in town, but the rest of her was different as well. Her face was somewhat mysterious, hiding back emotions that were waiting to emerge. Hans decided then and there that this was the woman for him. He tried to fight his way toward her through the crowd, but she was gone before he could reach her.

Hans met his parents at the front door as they returned home. He told of the girl he had seen and his intentions. At the mention of the green eyes, his parents knew exactly of whom he spoke.

"That girl," his mother told him, "is Anna Kappel. She is the pastor's daughter and a very fine young woman. You would do well to go after her."

Hans did not have to be told twice. The next day, shortly before sundown and after much nervous preparation, Hans dressed in his best suit and walked the short distance to the Kappel household. He knocked on the door, which was answered by her father. Hans introduced himself, but Mr. Kappel already knew who he was. He invited the young man inside and all but forced him to take a seat. Hans explained what had happened the previous morning and why he was there that night. He asked if he had permission to speak with and perhaps to court Anna. Kappel could not help but smile at the request, saying that Hans was too polite for his own good and that someday it would get the better of him. He gave his permission but reminded him, of course, that Anna would have to have the final say. He excused himself to go get his daughter from the kitchen where she was helping her mother. He explained the situation to her, and Anna was stupefied. What could anybody see in her? She walked out of the kitchen to see Hans sitting on the sofa. Seeing her enter, he rose to cross the room and properly introduce himself. On the way, perhaps from nerves, Hans tripped over his own feet, stumbling forward and nearly hitting the floor. This act of clumsiness drew laughter from Anna and her parents, who had now also entered the room. Hans quickly recovered and formally introduced himself. He extended his hand, received hers while making sure not to touch her palm, and gently kissed the back of her fingers. The two elder Kappels excused themselves from the room, leaving the two young adults to what would be important conversation.

The two got along splendidly and almost immediately. Before long, the two were nearly inseparable. They always had plenty to talk about. She could always make him laugh, and he could do the same for her. The courtship was still young before Hans

began thinking of marriage. He loved Anna and knew deep inside that she loved him as well. With both sets of parents approving of the relationship, he had nothing to lose. After discussing the matter with both his father and Anna's father, and after travelling to Hamburg to find the perfect ring, Hans was ready. After a dinner with Anna, her parents and his parents at his parents' home, he took Anna aside. Wearing the exact suit he was wearing when he met her, he dropped to one knee and proposed. Upon seeing the ring and realizing that Hans was serious, Anna gasped. Her hand trembling with delight, she accepted his proposal with great enthusiasm.

After a rather short engagement, the two were married by her father in front of a small crowd that included the parents, two or three extended relatives from each family, and a handful of family friends on August 31, 1915. Both Hans and Anna wanted a small, quiet ceremony, and they got their wish. After the wedding, Hans took Anna to his own home, where they would live for their entire lives. A few gifts, such as the rug and the coat rack, would serve as the decorations for the home. The rest would be figured out as they went along with their lives. For the moment, however, everything was perfect.

Unfortunately, fate has a cruel habit of wrecking people's plans. All of Germany was about to be launched into a tailspin, and the young Schroders could not escape it. The year before they were married, Germany had entered into a conflict that was being called The Great War. Many people had signed up to join the mighty German military, and many were already paying the price. Luckily, the war had not hit so hard in Elmshaven. Sadly, things could not stay that way for long. The war that was only supposed to last for a few months had been going on for over a year, and now German men all over the country were examining their sense of duty to the Fatherland. Was it their duty to leave

and fight for Germany? Of course the government wanted them to think so, but that still left conflict in the minds of the people. One of those people was Hans. He spent many sleepless nights lying next to Anna, wondering what he should do. Could he avoid the conflict while so many others were willing to fight and die for the country? Hans always believed in doing the right and honorable thing, but what was it? He loved his home and was filled with German pride, but was it worth laying down his life? After nearly five months of constantly arguing with himself, Hans made his decision. He came home from work that day and sat Anna down for an important talk. Holding both of her hands in his, Hans told her that he was going to leave for the army. Anna couldn't hold back, crying as the words escaped his mouth.

"Why?" she asked through the tears. "What about us? I can't live without you. How can you leave?"

"Because if this nation falls apart, we have no future," Hans replied in his sternest voice. "I'll be damned if we lose this war and I haven't done anything to stop that from happening. I have to go."

Anna realized there was no point in arguing with him. Hans had made up his mind, and there was nothing she could do to change that. She could only put on her bravest face and deal with it as best she could. She treasured every moment she would spend with Hans for the week before he left. Anna hoped that maybe during that time, Hans would come to his senses. Her wish would not come true. The precious week was soon over and Hans prepared to leave. He rose one morning and grabbed his things. Anna followed after him as he walked out the door. She would have gone with him farther, but he stopped her from leaving the door frame.

"I have to go on my own now," he said.

Anna began crying again, this time harder than when she originally heard the news. Hans put down the suitcase he was carrying and raised Anna's chin with his hand.

"Now, now, my love," he softly said. "I'll come back. I promise. I love you with all of my heart, and I swear on that I will come back."

Hans pulled Anna toward him one last time and gave her a final kiss. Anna did not want him to let her go, clinging tightly at his arms. She could hold him back no more and released him to his destiny. She watched him walk down the street until he turned the corner and disappeared from view. Since then, any time Anna thought about Hans, she could not help but cry again. This time was different though. This time, the weight of her good news outweighed any sorrow. Now she had only to tell him. How would she tell him? It would have to be a letter of course, but how to write how? What could she say?

"All right, I'm ready."

Anna had been so lost in thoughts of her husband that her mother's voice startled her. Without another word, only smiles, the two women left the house and began the short journey to the church.

The sun beamed brightly over the whole town. The slight heat given off turned the fine snow into slush on the roads. Anna and her mother sank more in the frozen mush, with the ice and snow now coming past their boots and closer to the hem with each step. The snow was only regulated to small piles on the sidewalks, however. Storeowners and homeowners cleaned off the space before their doors as they too began their day. No amount of winter's fury could keep the good people of Elmshaven from going about their

daily lives. The winter weather was so commonplace that no one paid much attention to it, not even mentioning it in passing conversation, and Anna's father was one of those people. Every day for the past 20 years, he had either been in his office or preaching his lesson, and today was no exception.

Anna and her mother reached the large wooden doors and at least tried to clean off their shoes before entering. After all, it was a church, and tracking in any type of mud or filth seemed somewhat sacrilegious. The maple doors of the church were opened, casting long shadows of the two visitors on the floor and illuminating the auditorium. Twenty oak pews, ten on each side of a center aisle, each with a small cross etched into both ends, centered the focus of the room toward the pulpit. There stood a podium with a larger cross inscribed on the front. Behind it sat the table of communion, the goblets and dishes still shining as they did the day they were made. At the right time of day, the sun shone through the stained glass above the doors, highlighting the speaker in a shower of red and gold. Anna and her mother passed down the aisle, making their way to the small door at the back of the room that led to the pastor's office. As they approached, they passed under the massive crucifix with the likeness of Christ nailed to it that hung over the pulpit. Anna looked up to it, both to admire it and to acknowledge it as a way of giving thanks, and saw something she had never seen before. The face, streaked with blood and topped with the wounds from the crown of thorns, seemed to look down upon her with a look of sympathy. Anna stopped momentarily to take it all in and wonder if she was just seeing things. She wouldn't have long before her mother grabbed her by the hand and tugged her onwards.

The door creaked open, revealing a room lit by the sunlight flowing through the small glass window at the top of the wall. Pastor Kappel's office resembled a library more than a place of work. Shelves and bookcases were filled to capacity with books and papers, ranging over a broad variety of topics and times. In the corner sat an old cedar desk, worn over the passage of the years. Gracing its top was yet another stack of papers containing only God-knows-what and a now extinguished gas lamp with enough fuel to last maybe another hour or two. Above and behind it on the wall hung a masterful reprint of Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, the typical painting in the office of a pastor or priest anywhere in the world. And there, sitting behind the aged desk and below the picture with its faux-golden frame was pastor Kappel himself. He was a shorter-than-average man, plump in the middle from all his years in the church. After all, as the town's most prominent minister, he was constantly being invited to people's homes for dinner, which he could not refuse out of good conscience. He had his nose buried in his family Bible, which had pages falling out and a worn cover from so many years of use. Once Pastor Kappel got started on any book, especially rereading his Bible, it was hard to get him to stop. In fact, had it not been for the door creaking, he probably wouldn't have noticed his wife and daughter entering in the first place.

"Anna? Martha? My goodness, what are you two doing here?" he asked with pleasant surprise as he rose from his chair.

"Papa, I have wonderful news. I went to see Dr. Schweitzer this morning."

"Are you feeling all right?" he asked, his normally jolly face brimming with concern.

"I am now. He said I am going to have a baby!"

"Anna, why that's wonderful! I can't tell you how happy I am for you!"

Anna's father knew what this meant to her. He knew how much she loved Hans in the first place. He was, after all, the one who had married them. He also knew how much children meant to her. Anna had grown up feeling somewhat closer to her father than to her mother. Sure, she spent more time with her mother, but that may have been the exact reason she felt so close to her father. Since she hardly got to see him between her schooling and his work, every bit of time they did get together was all the more important to both of them. Anna could see in his eyes when he expressed his joy that he was hiding a lot more than he was saying. He, too, may have wanted to jump up and scream for joy as her mother had, but he held it together. That made the moment all the more sentimental for Anna. She knew her mother was genuinely happy for her, but the reserved happiness exhibited by her father meant so much more.

The trio stood chatting about everything from what the baby's name would be to what the baby's room would look like before Pastor Kappel looked at his pocket watch and noticed the time. As much as he enjoyed the surprise visit from his family, there was still work to be done. In fact, as the two ladies left the room, they passed an elderly woman making her way towards the pastor. She looked rather downtrodden and concerned over some unknown matter and was no doubt going to seek the pastor's advice. Whatever her problem was didn't matter right now, Anna thought selfishly, because things were going well for her. She made her way back home through the snow, trying to convince her mother that there was nothing she needed or wanted. She would be fine on her own, and she should just go home. Anna, now home and alone, entered the house's warm embrace and locked the door behind her. She took off her coat and blindly put it on the coat rack, not noticing that she missed it completely and that her coat was lying in a heap on the

floor. She made her way across the floor in a dreamy state, floating more than walking, and sat at the marble-topped writing desk that sat between the doors to the two bedrooms. Producing a sheet of paper and a fountain pen, Anna proceeded to pour her heart out in a letter that read

My beloved,

I have missed you every moment that you have been gone, but today I miss you even more. Mere words cannot express what I would not give or do to have you back during this glorious time. Our wishes are about to come true. Our family is about to grow by one more. You are the only person in this world that I would ever want to share this experience with, and I wish that you could be here in person, but I know that you are here in heart and spirit. All I can do now is count the days until I am able to hold you to me once more, and the three of us are able to start our new lives together. Until then, my love, I will pray even harder for your safe and hastened return. Until then, know that I will love you come what may. Until then…

With deepest love, Anna

Anna put the pen down, and the tears once again resumed flowing freely from her eyes. This time, she could not control herself. She put her face in her hands and sobbed, trying to prevent the tears from staining the letter. After a few seconds, her face re-emerged, bearing a daisy-white smile. Had her mother and father been there, they would have noticed that the emerald sparkle in Anna's eyes had returned.

The next few months would not be easy, and Anna did not expect them to be. It wasn't the burden of carrying the child, the weight gained, or even the constant feeling of nausea she had when she woke each morning that was the main problem; it was the unwanted attention. Elmshaven was not a very large city, so word of Anna's pregnancy spread rather rapidly, much to her chagrin. Anna was never one to draw attention to herself, and even though she knew she would soon be the talk of the town, she didn't plan on its being so big. Every time she walked out the door, someone would ask her how she was doing and if there was anything to do to help. Anna appreciated the caring attitude of the people, but she still wanted some privacy. Relatives from all over the area joined the citizens of Elmshaven either in sending letters or dropping by to offer their congratulations, suggestions, warnings, or some other bit of advice. Even her parents were getting a bit annoying, falling over themselves trying to take care of her. Anna never mouthed a word of discord with anyone, but she definitely thought them. The only person in town whose advice she really paid much attention to, aside from her mother and her experience, was Dr. Schweitzer, whom she went to see a least once a month. He was the only man who could do her any good right now, or at least the only man within reach. By the time October came around, Anna was glad not only that her child had almost arrived, but that she could soon return to a life of somewhat normality.

The one shining moment of her pregnancy came just a few weeks after she had sent her letter to Hans. She waited anxiously every day for his response. She knew he would be very happy, but she still wanted the words there on paper before her. When the letter finally came, she was hesitant to open it. She had waited for what felt like so long that she didn't want it to pass. Much like a child at Christmas, she wanted to hold onto the

feeling. Her senses finally got the best of her and she opened it, holding back the tears as she read:

My dearest darling Anna,

I cannot even begin to tell you of the joy I feel at the arrival of this news. Even as I finish this letter, all I can think of is holding you and our baby, really starting our own family and making our way in this new and changing world. Even if this child is only half as beautiful as you, he will put the angels to shame. I know this time will be hard for you, and I wish with all my heart that I could be there to comfort you. If I were to arrive tomorrow, it would still not be soon enough. However, know that even in the heat of battle, my thoughts are always with you. Take heart, my love, and trust that I will soon take you in my arms again. I just hope that day comes as soon as possible.

Yours always, Hans

Anna closed her eyes and smiled as she finished. She had received many letters from Hans before, but this one was different. This one didn't mention the conditions on the front, events of the day, or even other people there. Instead, there was nothing but pure emotion in it, which Anna took in as she read it over and over. The comfort in Hans's words made her feel that everything would be fine. That calm would help her survive the coming months, even when the words of family and well-wishers fell short.

Anna was expecting the delivery at any time, but when the time came late one October night, she was still taken off guard. Having no time to prepare, she immediately sent for the only three people she could or wanted to have near her at a moment like this: her

mother, her father, and Dr. Schweitzer. It wasn't even five minutes later that the doctor, carrying a bucket of water, and her parents, carrying blankets, arrived, wearing their night clothes with coats over top. Dr. Schweitzer and the elder Frau Kappel ran into the bedroom and shut the door, leaving pastor Kappel alone in the living room. He knew his daughter was in pain, but he was also undergoing his own torture. He took on not only the role of expectant grandfather but expectant father as well. With Hans away, he would be the closest masculine figure in Anna's life right now. He spent the next few hours pacing the length of the room, too anxious to rest, occasionally putting an ear to the door as he waited for a baby's cry. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity to all involved, Dr. Schweitzer exited the room, wiping his hands on a towel. Pastor Kappel rushed across the room and grabbed him by the shoulders.

"Well?"

Dr. Schweitzer removed his glasses, wiped them clean and smiled.

"It's a boy."

The pastor breathed a sigh of simultaneous joy and relief. He brushed past the doctor to find his wife stroking Anna's hair and Anna, covered in sweat, cradling her newborn. He strolled over to his daughter and kissed her on the forehead.

"What's his name?"

"Klaus. Klaus Wilhelm Schroder."

"That's a good name. A good German name. Let's hope he will be a good German boy."

"Oh, don't worry. He will be. He will be."

Spring, 1917

For the moment, life was good. Life outside didn't seem to matter. All that was important was that Klaus was a healthy boy.

Unfortunately, despite our best preparations, things don't always go according to plan.

The unfaltering joy of having a new baby lasted for about two weeks. Everyone in town wanted to see the little boy, and each commented on how much he looked like his father. Pastor Kappel could not help but brag a little to his friends about his grandson. His wife, on the other hand, was quite different. She made no attempt to hide her feelings and made sure that everyone in town either had seen the baby or knew about him. Once that time period was over, however, reality sank back in. The baby was not a piece of furniture or a new painting, something that could be greatly admired for a little while and then left on its own with little or no care. Klaus was a little human being with human needs. He had to be fed, washed, changed, tended to, and watched almost every minute of every day. Anna also had to take care of herself and not let herself get run down. She never once regretted having Klaus, but she didn't think it would be this hard. Sure, her parents were there to help her if she absolutely needed them, but there was still one thing missing: Hans. She had kept up her near weekly communications with him, telling him everything the baby did or tried to do and smiling at his every response. Obviously, it still wasn't the same as actually having him back. Life, Anna thought, was too difficult to try to go through alone.

If things were hard on Anna, they paled in comparison to what Hans, the army, and the country as a whole were going through. This war, that was supposed to be over in a few months with little loss on either side, was now entering its third miserable year and the list of dead soldiers had already passed the one million mark, surpassing that of all of Germany's allies combined. The war was steadily going nowhere, with a seemingly constant stalemate on the western front in France and Belgium where Hans was stationed. The British navy was blockading the country, making it harder to send and receive supplies, and the unrestricted submarine warfare launched by Kaiser Wilhelm II at the navy's urging was creating more problems than solutions. On top of all of that, a new problem was on the horizon. In the spring of 1917, the United States declared war on Germany, making the list of enemies to the empire one name longer. Although it would be some time before the effects were felt, it would be a country's name most Germans would never forget.

In the meantime, all any person could do was be brave and carry on as usual, which is exactly what Anna tried to do. She had to cut back on some of her finer things in order to take care of Klaus. Meals were simpler and clothes were not always their cleanest, but it was a small price to pay to make sure Klaus was well taken care of. Anna even used to kid herself with the sarcastic thought that she only had to last three more years before Klaus could start going to kindergarten and she could finally catch a little bit of a break. *Only* three more years.

This situation would continue on through 1917 and into early 1918. Anna was working as hard as she could to hold things together, while Klaus was growing as nature had intended. He had already taken his first steps, eaten his first real food, and said his

first word (it was *grandpa*, although it came out more like *gwaunpe*). Anna could not help but be proud of her little boy, and the love she felt for him grew with each passing moment. He had become such a fixture in her life in such a short amount of time that she could not think of life without him. As he would turn to her when he was scared, she would turn to him when she needed a reason to keep going.

Anna would need him more than ever on the day of April 20, 1918. It began like every other day had for the past year and a half. Klaus woke up well before Anna and needed to be fed. She made him a small breakfast that looked like nothing more than mush and grabbed an apple for herself. After a few hours of daily chores and playing with Klaus, she put him down for a nap in the crib her uncle had made for the baby. He had just fallen asleep and she had just left the room when there came a knock at the door. Taken by surprise and upset that the sound might awaken Klaus, she rushed over to the door to prevent the visitor from knocking again. She opened the door and found a man from the Feldpost, the German military mailing service, standing with a sack over his shoulder and a letter in his hand.

"Frau Schroder?" he asked.

"Yes."

"This is for you. Have a good day."

The man tipped his hat and left. Anna shut the door and turned back into her home, staring at the letter in bewilderment. She had gotten several letters from Hans through the Feldpost before, but this one was different. First of all, she was not expecting this one. She had gotten a letter from Hans three days previously and had not had time to respond to that one. So, why would he send another one? Secondly, the handwriting on

the outside was unfamiliar. Anna opened the letter, hoping perhaps that Hans was sending good news and that the reason the handwriting looked different was because she had really never bothered to pay attention before. She read down the paper, expecting more of Hans's stories from the front, but she was disappointed. She did not read the whole letter, but took in the most prominent words:

"…regret to inform…killed in action….Ypres, Belgium….April 11, 1918."

Anna dropped the letter to the floor and stood in shock. There was no way this could be real. This had to be some kind of joke, albeit in bad taste. Hans would write her again, or even better, walk through the door at any minute. There was just simply no way Hans could be dead. Not now. Not when everything was going so well. God would not allow something like this to happen, would he? Hans was supposed to grow old with Anna, watch Klaus grow up, and die peacefully as an old man, not in some ditch miles away. This was a dream. That's the only possible thing that could make sense. A dream.

All of these thoughts raced through Anna's head as she tried to deny the truth that Hans was dead and there was nothing she could do about it. She eventually stopped attempting to fool herself and did the only thing she could do. She went back to her bedroom and took Klaus from his crib. Although she had been so careful not to wake him earlier, it didn't matter now. She clutched him tightly, his face on hers, sat down on the bed, and cried. Tears sprang from her eyes like a weakened waterfall. They ran down her cheeks and rubbed off on Klaus's cheeks as well, making it appear that they were both crying from the same source. Poor child. He had no concept of life, death, happiness, or sadness. He had no way of understanding why his mother was crying or

hugging him so closely. The cruel world which had just taken away his father and left his mother a widow kept on moving, with Klaus none the wiser.

The following days were painful at best. Anna had to break the news to her parents. She waited until night when they were at home together so that she wouldn't have to say it more than once. Her parents were nearly as devastated as she was. They had taken a great liking to Hans in the relatively short time they had known him personally. He had become their adoptive son, and Pastor Kappel felt as if he were becoming closer to Hans than even Anna was. It was nice for him to have another man to be able to talk to. But that was all gone now. The family huddled together, with the women crying and the pastor fighting back tears to lead a short prayer, thanking God for the time they did get to have with Hans and asking for protection for the sake of the baby. In that moment, Anna became a little girl again, taking comfort in the one place she knew everything would be better, if only for a moment: the arms of her loving parents.

Again, every time Anna went out in public people would constantly ask her how she was doing and if there was anything she needed. This time, however, their attitudes had changed. There were no more congratulations, only offerings of sympathy. The feeling of joy was replaced by sorrow and despair. Anna hated going out, but not just because of the people. The sunny spring days greatly annoyed her. The sun shining, breeze blowing, and birds singing seemed to mock her anguish. How could the world keep going like this? It should stop turning and mourn like Anna. If she were going to be depressed, everyone else should to. That was unfair, though. Anna knew she wasn't the only person this had happened to, or even the only person in Elmshaven who had lost a

loved one in the war. To act like this case was special was selfish if she thought she was alone. It didn't matter, though. This case was special. This was her husband, her love, and most importantly, her newborn's father.

If the world were falling apart for Anna, things were just as bad for the rest of the country. This simple war that was supposed to be an easy victory that would only take a matter of months was coming to its bloody, conclusion, unbeknownst to the global population, and Germany was on the losing side. Millions of young men all over the empire were dead, leaving countless more to mourn the loss. The remaining soldiers were falling back on themselves. No one could withstand four years of constant fighting with little to no progression. The empire's death knell rang in November of that year in Versailles. Changes come and go, but this one was much more important. Leaders are replaced all the time, but a complete overhaul of the government was something else. Sometimes a transformation solves a country's problems, while other times it adds to them. In Germany's case, it was a mix. For a moment, a split second, things were better. After that, it would descend into chaos that only one man could pull them out of, whether the German people wanted it or not.

For Anna and Klaus, that was far away in time, distance, and thought. They would have to survive the present to make it to that future. They got by for the first few years thanks mostly not to her family, but Hans's. His parents had taken ill a few years earlier, and before their deaths, they divided their wealth between Hans and his younger brother, George, who had taken over the millworks. That inheritance would support the mother and son, at least for the time being. But there would come a time when that money would run out, and they would have to find another way to survive.

Klaus's earliest memory was of when he was about three. He was no longer sleeping in his mother's room. Instead, he was getting his own room with his own bed. He wasn't aware what that meant at the time. He just knew he was going to be alone now. The spare bedroom that had been set aside for guests was going to be his from now until he moved out on his own years down the road. The bed was far too big for him; his feet only reached halfway when he was lying down. He would eventually grow into it, though. Klaus didn't like his room at first. Since it was rarely used, it smelled rather stale, not like the sweet smells that came out of his mother's room. There was no window in the room, so it was much more foreboding and dark. The light of the candle was the only illumination in the room. For a child, it must have been frightening, but Klaus would have to get over it. That was part of growing up, and Klaus was going to have to grow up faster than he knew.

Another two years would pass without incident. Life went on as usual, considering what was usual for the day. Anna spent most of her time at home with Klaus, playing, reading to him, or just watching him sleep. Several people had encouraged her to go out, start socializing or even seeing other men, but she would not hear of it. Klaus was her priority now, and any of her superfluous desires would have to be ignored, not that she ever wanted to see other men. Her heart would always belong to Hans. Her parents fully supported her decision, but they still let her know that if she ever wanted to get away for a little while, they would gladly take care of Klaus. She always told them thanks, but no thanks. While spending most of the time with a child might drive some people crazy, Klaus was the only thing keeping Anna together.

Those first five years went by fast. Klaus was a constantly growing boy; the diapers and baby clothes his grandmother made for him didn't last long before they were too small for him. That bed seemed a little bit more fit now too. Klaus had gotten used to the room as well. He used to stare into the darkness as he drifted off to sleep, pretending that it was the night sky and that he could somehow be out there among the stars and planets. His imagination brought him comfort and relaxation, making life a little bit easier. He liked the way life was going. Mom was spending time with him, he had everything he needed, and he had nothing to worry about. Of course, good situations never last. Anna could testify to that. In the fall of 1922, as Klaus was about to turn six, he would encounter a disruption to his happy-go-lucky daily routine: school.

It wasn't that Klaus didn't like school. He started to enjoy it once he got it into his head that he would have to go and that the first week was not all he was going to have to do. In fact, he came home at the end of that first week and told his mother that he was glad he didn't have to do that anymore. Once reality sank in, Klaus made each day the best he could. He quickly took to being around other children his own age, although he didn't really make any friends right away. It was more companionship of opportunity: "you are stuck here and so am I, so let's make the most of it." Klaus did not feel as if he were there to learn but to have fun, and anything that came with it was fine by him. This is not to say that Klaus was stupid by any means. He was merely average. He kept up with the majority of his class, with the exception of those few students who were especially gifted and those who were not. Klaus was eager, though. Whenever the teacher sat them all down for the day's lesson or for a story, Klaus was usually at the

front of the crowd with his eyes bright and wide and his mouth fixed in a smile. He was mesmerized by the teacher, whose name was Fraulein Rollentz, the best that Klaus could later remember. She was a simple woman, frumpy and holding nothing that made her memorable except for the fact that she was Klaus's first teacher. Their relationship did not go so easily at first, however.

On the first day, Anna dressed her son for only-God-knew-what reason, as far as Klaus was concerned. She walked him the short distance from their home to the school, clutching his hand and trying her best to explain exactly what school was, why he had to go, and why it wouldn't be all that bad. Klaus was fine with the idea, except for the fact that his mother wasn't staying. They arrived at the building, which was fairly new with its red brick shining in the sun, and saw nearly a hundred other children in the schoolyard. "You see?" she said. "You're not the only one." When she kissed him goodbye and told him she would see him later in the day, his little heart sank. He frowned and started to stagger after his mommy before Fraulein Rollentz placed her hand on the little boy's shoulder. Klaus looked up at the woman's gentle smile and must have thought it was the devil himself. In a flash, he began to panic and call for his mother, thinking that she was unhappy with him and had left him to be taken care of by this seemingly ghastly woman. His struggling away from the teacher's grip and cries for salvation were to no avail, and he was quickly escorted into the school building, while other children were either making their own way in or were having similar scenes with their parents and teachers. Once inside, though, he quickly got over all of his fears.

While Klaus may have been enjoying his time, Anna was a nervous wreck. This was the boy she had cared for every day for over five years, even though it seemed much

shorter, and now he was already going to school. She knew she had nothing to worry about. The school was so close. If she stood on the roof of her house, she could practically see inside the windows. Still, she did not like the idea of having her precious little boy so far away. Anna was bored now, too. Every single day of those years was spent playing with Klaus, feeding him, bathing him, making sure he was taken care of and everything else a mother did. With him gone, she didn't know what to do for an entire afternoon, except for the first day. Tired from being tired, Anna walked into the door, into the bedroom, collapsed onto the bed, and fell asleep. She would not awaken until Klaus returned home later that day.

As much as Klaus liked school, just like any other child, he liked his time off even more. Home was where he felt safe, where he felt loved, where he felt special. At school, he was just another student, just another face in the crowd. It put him in a faceless routine, which was repeated day after day, week after week, month after month, and year after year. He would be woken by his caring mother, eat, walk to school (although his mother walked with him for the first two years of his schooling), learn, eat again, learn more, and walk home. The walk to and from school became more and more like a steady march towards some uncertain punishment, even when he had nothing to fear. For Anna, there was a benefit to Klaus's somewhat detached attitude. He didn't notice that the painting that once hung in the dining room had been sold, or that the paint and wallpaper had begun to chip and peel, or even that his nightly dinner was sometimes smaller than it should have been. Although Klaus didn't know it, his family, families in Elmshaven and in all of Germany were going through uncertain, unstable times. No one

exactly had a bright outlook for the future, although some had ideas for surviving the turbulent times. These men, with their suits and heads full of ideas, would spell out what would become of the German people, and not everybody was happy about it. They schemed in their offices and taverns. They plotted how to get Germany back on its feet. Some put the blame on former politicians, other countries, even ethnic groups. Thank God, Anna thought, Klaus was still so young and innocent that he didn't have to worry about such things. That responsibility would fall on her shoulders.

Klaus's ninth year of life would mark some of the highest and lowest moments in his still young life. Klaus would meet his first true friends at school in the spring of that year. It was really a fluke how it happened in the first place.

Recess wasn't necessarily Klaus's favorite part of the day, but he didn't mind it either. He didn't have a regular group of people to hang out with; he usually just fell into what everybody else was doing, whether it was tag, racing or just running around at random. This day--Tuesday, as Klaus would later recall--was one of those random days. He walked about the school grounds, staring up at the trees and the birds as they flew from branch to branch, chasing each other in the year's annual mating ritual. Klaus was snapped out of his daze by loud yells from the other side of the yard, even louder than usual. He ran over to find all of his fellow students huddled together in a solid mass, with two of them at the core. Through the humanity, Klaus could make out people shoving each other and could hear two distinct voices, yelling at each other. One was a rather meek, softer voice, usually responding with childish defenses. The other boy's voice was much meaner and robust and his tirades were full of words that Klaus had never heard

before and obviously did not understand. Anyone else watching the scene could tell that these children were about to have a fight on their hands.

Klaus didn't know why he did it. He had no reason, no thought, no explanation, just an instinct telling him to act. He pushed his way through the crowd and soon found himself in the center of attention, along with the two boys who had started the fray. Actually seeing them, it was easy to see which voice belonged to whom. The softer voice belonged to a boy about Klaus's size but thinner with curly light brown hair. The other was shorter by about two inches, but was round like a Christmas turkey. His nose wrinkled and his mouth curled, as he continued to berate his lighter counterpart. With the smaller boy looking as if he were about to burst into tears, the fat boy let out a sharp cackle and reared his fist back, intent to make contact, when a foreign force impeded his progress.

"Leave him alone."

Klaus could barely believe the words that came out of his mouth as he grabbed the boy's hand. He didn't know why he did it, other than it felt like the right thing to do. Needless to say, he drew a retort.

"What did you say?" the fat boy snarled, wrenching his hand away.

"I said leave him alone."

"This loser? Do you even know what he is?"

"Doesn't matter. You still shouldn't be picking on him."

"Oh yeah? Well, who's gonna stop me? You?"

"Yeah. Me."

Klaus gulped. God, what was he saying? Rationale was telling him to shut up, get out of the way, and go back to being an innocent bystander. Just apologize now and return to his spot along the tree line. Still, Klaus stood firm as the small boy stared up from the ground and his chubby adversary sneered.

"All right. You asked for it," and he again reared his right hand back, but this time another hand stopped him.

"Hugo!" their teacher screamed. "What do you think you're doing to this poor boy?!"

"N-nothing Fraulein Faldenstein. We were just playing."

"Don't lie to me! I know exactly what you were doing! Thank goodness this boy came and told me what was happening," she said, motioning to a taller boy from their grade with black hair and glasses. "Now, you are coming with me. The rest of you, back to class!"

The class moaned, while Hugo looked as if he were about to cry as Fraulein Faldenstein took him by the arm and angrily marched him off to the building. Soon, the whole group was on its way back, except for three: the tall boy with glasses, the small victim and Klaus. They stood in silence for a moment before finally the small boy spoke.

"Th-thanks," he squeaked. "You know, for that."

"No problem," Klaus replied in a faux pride voice, as if it were his intention to save some little runt from being picked on.

"And I guess I should thank you, too," he said, turning to the spectacled boy.

"Well, what was I supposed to do?" he said with a smile. "Hugo was going to kill both of you, so I did the smartest thing I could think of. I got someone bigger." This last comment drew a chuckle from all three of them. Then again, awkward silence.

"My name is Klaus. Klaus Schroder. What's yours?" he asked the boy with glasses, sticking his hand out as he had been taught.

"Gerhardt Weber," he replied, shaking his hand with excessive movement.

"And I'm Maximillian Schneider,' the other boy interrupted.

"Nice to meet you too," Klaus said. "So, what was Hugo picking on you for anyway?"

"I don't know," he replied. "Some people just...do stuff, I guess."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"We should probably get back to class now or Fraulein Faldenstein will let us have it too," Gerhardt piped in. Klaus and Maximillian agreed, and the three of them walked back to the school, aware of the small bond that had made them friends.

For the next few weeks, Klaus was on an emotional high. He looked forward to going to school every day and spending time with his two new friends. These weren't the kind of friends one made during the school year and then forgot about the next; these were possible friends for life, however long that might be. Some days, after school, Klaus would run home and beg his mother to let him go over and play with one of his friends, to which she usually relented.

Whenever he went to Gerhardt's house, Klaus always felt a little bit uneasy. His mother was very strict and always made the boys play outside. Klaus never saw his father, and he never bothered to ask where he was. Max, as the boys began to call him, was different. The apartment his family lived in wasn't nearly as nice as Klaus's or Gerhardt's houses, but his parents were very congenial. They were always nice to Klaus whenever he came over, offering him food and other gifts. Klaus even remembered

hearing Max's mother tell her husband how happy she was that Max had such good friends.

One day, Klaus ran home from school with the intention of asking his mother if he could go over to Gerhardt's before dinner. He threw open the door, slammed it behind him, and called for her, but there was no answer. "Oh well," he thought. "She must be out somewhere. Guess that means I'm staying here."

Klaus sighed and went to put his books away in his room. He walked across the floor, not noticing that he walked through the space where the end table used to be, and opened his bedroom door, expecting to throw his school books on his bed and find something to bide his time until his mother returned. He started to toss his books, but something unexpected blocked the way.

Standing hunched over a suitcase and facing the door was a strange man. He had wiry brown and white hair with a beard to match. His mouth jutted forward almost even with his wrinkled nose, while his eyes sank back the other way. He was a very tall man, seemingly twice Klaus's size, and even more so when he stood straight up. He saw Klaus come in and tried what was apparently a friendly smile, but it didn't work. Klaus backed away in a slight panic, unable to say anything, only stopping when he ran into his mother's leg.

"Oh, Klaus. I see you've met our guest."

"Wh-who is he?" Klaus stuttered.

"Honey, this is Herr Zaricht. He's going to be staying with us for a while, and I thought it would be easier if he took your room while you slept in my room with me."

"But why?" Klaus asked, his eyes never leaving the man in his bedroom.

Because, Klaus," Anna replied as she bent down to him, "Mr. Zaricht is not as fortunate as we are, and being good Christian people, we should do our best to help him. Do you understand?"

Klaus nodded.

"Don't worry son," Hr. Zaricht boomed. "I won't be staying very long. You'll have your room back in no time."

Klaus believed the promise, which made him feel a little better, and he trudged to his mother's room, where he found his clothes and all his other possessions stacked neatly in the corner. Anna smiled politely at Hr. Zaricht as if to say thank you, while he whispered back, "Don't mention it."

Anna, of course, had been lying. The money Hans's parents had left him was beginning to run low, save for a stack she dared not touch. So, to help make ends meet, Anna decided to take in a boarder. She kept her decision a secret from Klaus, mostly to keep him from worrying about it. She had screened several prospective guests, eventually deciding on Hr. Zaricht. Despite his appearance, he was a kind and well-educated man who had just arrived in town to begin work as a manager in the steel mill.

Klaus hated moving in with his mother. First of all, it made him feel like a little baby again. Secondly, it was hard to sleep in there. Anna often spoke and sometimes cried in her sleep, which would awaken Klaus from his slumber, while the walls only slightly muffled the sound of Hr. Zaricht's train-like snoring.

Most importantly, though, Klaus wasn't in his own room. It wasn't fair, he thought, to be kicked out of his own room to make space for some stranger. Charity be damned: Klaus wanted his room back. But his current situation did provide some surprises.

Klaus returned home from school one spring afternoon to find the house empty. His mother had gone to the market and to visit with her mother, while Hr. Zaricht was off doing God-knows-what. Klaus settled down in the corner of his now-shared bedroom and begrudgingly began bouncing a red rubber ball, cracked from the years and a few really hard throws, across the floor to pass the time. The bounce and return on the sphere mimicked the ticking of the clock in the sitting room. The pattern was thrown off when one throw got away and ended up crashing through a loose floorboard. Klaus ran to it, fearing the worst (for his own sake). He picked the ball out of the hole and was about to replaced the board when he noticed something else. He reached back in and produced an old cigar box, logos faded, almost unrecognizable, and seemingly falling apart. He put it down beside him, carefully opened the box so as not to break it, and discovered a stack of papers. Upon closer inspection, Klaus realized they were letters. He gently picked up the first one, which was beginning to yellow, and read:

My beloved Anna,

I have not been gone a month yet, and still I already miss you. I hope you miss me as well. Still, I feel I have done the right thing. The country needs me. Don't worry; they're taking good care of us boys. We still get fed pretty well, although it's not as good as what you make. We saw our first battle yesterday, and I have to tell you, these Tommies haven't seen anything yet. Talk is the war isn't going to last much longer. We may even be in Paris by summer! The sooner, the better, as far as I'm concerned, because I can hardly wait to see your smiling face again. Until then, I'm your loyal soldier. All my love….

"Klaus!" His mother's cry startled him severely. "What are you doing?"

"I'm sorry, Mama. I accidentally broke the floor board and I found this box of letters. Who are they from anyway?"

Anna stared blankly at her son, mouth agape, taken aback by what she had heard. She looked down at the ground for a moment before she looked back up and meekly replied "They're from—your father."

"I have a father?!" Klaus exclaimed with delight.

"Of course you have a father. Don't be silly. Everybody has a father."

"Well then, where is he?"

Anna nearly broke into tears. She knew that would be his follow-up, but she still didn't want to hear it. "I'll tell you…when you're old enough to understand."

"Mama, I want to know now!"

Anna sighed, sat Klaus down on the bed, and put her arm around him. She knew this day would come eventually; she just didn't think it would be so soon.

"First of all, you must understand that your father loves you very much. That being said, a few years ago there was a war."

"A war? Over what?"

"I don't really remember now. At the time, though, a lot of German people decided to go off and fight for the country, and since your father was a good, honorable, responsible man, he decided to go and fight, too."

"Then what?"

"Then, he never came back. I got a letter saying that he had been killed some place far away. I was so upset, in fact, that I threw that letter in the fireplace. Now, the only things I have to remember your father by are these letters. Do you understand?"

Klaus scrunched his face and thought for a minute. It was hard to have a real emotional connection to someone he never met, so he was neither angry with or sad about his father, although he could tell how his mother felt about it.

"So, what you're saying is that my dad was kind of a hero?" (Klaus had just learned the word, so the concept was rather new to him).

"Yes, he was a hero," Anna grinned as she pulled Klaus closer to her. "Now put these away and promise me you won't bother them anymore. Can you do that?"

"OK, Mama. I promise."

Like his mother, Klaus had lied. He would read the letters every chance he got. He couldn't help but be enticed by them. Here was his only connection to his mysterious father, and now it was being forbidden? No. Klaus began to forgo spending time with his friends so that he could go straight home, praying no one else would be there. If he were alone, he would immediately run to that loose floorboard, pull out the box, and start reading. He skipped over the romantic parts and like most boys went straight to the action. He liked reading his dad's stories of the various battles, the easy victories, the camaraderie of the army, and the glory of fighting for the homeland. To Klaus, it was better than reading any adventure story. Eventually, the time came when there were no more letters. By then, Klaus had learned a lot. Battle could be great, strong men stood up for what was right, and most importantly, his father was a hero.

Fall, 1934

Skip ahead a bit. Say, nine more years. A lot can happen in that time. Two Olympics and two American presidents can come and go, an economy can collapse, and a government can change completely. In Germany, the latter two came true. Like every country in the world, the German economy crashed at the beginning of the 1930s. The time came when the mark was so worthless that a bucketload could barely buy a loaf of bread. Everyone took a hit, from the highest official in the Weimar to the lowest farmer. Enraged at a government that had never been entirely popular since its institution at the end of the Great War, the masses made a decision: the Weimar had to go. The German people sought a change, and they got it in the form of an ex-convict, moustached writer and political revolutionary named Adolf Hitler. For Germany and the nearly 50 million people that would die in the next 11 years, it was more change than they bargained for.

For Klaus Schroder, it was a moment of great decision as well. He had finished all of his primary schooling and was about to embark to university. But what to study? He had enjoyed history and Latin, but he didn't know what to do with them. He also considered being an accountant, but he didn't like math enough to stick with it. Oh, well. He could make up his mind once he got to school in Hamburg. Cost would not be a problem, as the family still had enough money. That stack that Anna dared not touch when facing financial woes that brought in the odd Mr. Zaricht, who was still living in the house in the same room (Klaus started sleeping on the sofa as he got older), was Klaus's college fund, and now was the time to use it.

The one bad part about leaving for college was that Klaus would be leaving an important component behind. Throughout the rest of his primary school years, he had become the best of friends with Gerhardt and Max. The three of them were virtually inseparable; where one went, the others usually followed, which kept jerks like Hugo away. Classmates and even some teachers jokingly referred to them as "The Three Musketeers." When graduation came, Klaus hoped the three of them would be going to school together. He was thrilled when Gerhardt told him that he too would be going to Hamburg. As for Max, he was not so lucky. Max's family was not wealthy enough, and they had no way of sending Max to college. Instead, he would remain in Elmshaven and work with his father as a carpenter. It upset Klaus that he would have to leave his friend behind, but Max promised to stay in touch. Klaus scoffed a little at the statement. He knew all about promises.

The day of Klaus's departure for Hamburg seemingly dawned earlier than it should have, at least for Anna. Klaus woke up early that morning and crammed all his clothes and a few books into his lone suitcase. He would have to travel four miles to the city of Ravenhood where he could get on the train to Hamburg. However, he would not be going alone; his mother would accompany him to Ravenhood. His grandparents wanted to come along as well, but his grandfather had become too weak to take the trip, and Grandmother would have to stay with him. They would have to settle for local goodbyes, while Anna got to go a little bit farther.

They began the long walk down the dirt road around eight o'clock, when a local farmer drove by in his truck and offered them a ride, as he was going to the same place. Klaus lofted his suitcase into the back, which was full of tomatoes and cabbage, and

helped his mother in before pulling himself up. They spent the ride in relative silence, with Anna sneaking glances at Klaus's still young face and smiling proudly to herself. For her, this trip could not be long enough.

It came to an end just outside the Ravenhood train station. Klaus and Anna hopped off the back of the truck, thanked the driver for his help, and walked to the terminal. The hand of the massive clock on the building's brick peak pointed to 9 and 6. Klaus was going to leave on the noon train, but thanks to one helpful citizen, he could easily catch the 9:45. Apart from the two Schroders, an elderly couple, a mangy looking little dog, and a middle-aged conductor, the station was filled only with steam from the waiting train. The conductor anxiously checked his pocket watch to make sure the time on the station clock was correct, which it was. Klaus made his way through the empty queue and bought his ticket from the bored-looking old man in the ticket window. He turned around to find his mother once again holding back tears.

"Mama, what's wrong?"

"It's nothing," she muttered. "It's just that I'm not very good at goodbyes."

"This isn't forever, you know. I'll come back to see you."

"That's what your father said before he…" Anna stopped. She wouldn't let herself continue.

"Mama, this is different. Nothing is going to happen to me. I'll be fine."

"I know you will. Just promise me one thing."

"What?"

"Don't try to make me proud. You've already done that. Make yourself proud."

"I will. I promise."

"All aboard!" the conductor bellowed.

"Klaus, it's time to go. Remember, I love you."

"I know. I love you too," Klaus replied with a grin. "I'll do my best."

Mother and son embraced for what must have seemed like an eternity to both of them. After that, Klaus walked through the steam, onto the train, and took his seat, still holding his lone suitcase. He looked out the window and saw his mother still standing on the platform, face aglow and hand outstretched in a farewell pose. A loud whistle, the pumping of steel, and a minute later, Anna was a speck on the horizon.

Klaus slept most of the way, head resting on the wall in the deserted car. His moments of consciousness were spent staring out the window at the German countryside. The evergreens and summer fields seemed to stretch forever into the hills and beyond. That would soon be gone; city life lay ahead.

The noise from the streets of Hamburg woke Klaus again as the train came to a stop. He slowly rose to his feet and trudged to the exit. Stepping off the train, he found himself in a whole new world. Hamburg made Elmshaven look like a hamlet. Everywhere, buildings rose with glistening windows and shining storefronts. Crowds pushed their way up and down the sidewalks, trying their best to avoid the motor traffic in the streets. Men in brown shirts and round black caps stood attentively on street corners, while the rest of the people either shoved around them or nervously walked around them. Klaus reached into his shirt pocket and pulled out a slip of paper. After reading and rereading the information, he took a deep breath and made his way into the humanity.

Klaus carefully maneuvered through the living mass, suitcase in hand. He could not help but be awestruck by the size and grandeur of the city. Every building, some of

which had to be at leas a century old, seemed to shine anew to the first-time visitor. He gazed up as floors rose higher and higher above the crowds, who took no notice of anything as they were used to it all. A few blocks, turns left and right, and Klaus found himself away from the larger groups in front of a seemingly upscale apartment building, facing a familiar shape and hearing a familiar voice.

"Klaus!"

"Gerhardt!"

Klaus walked to his longtime friend, who was pulling a half-smoked cigarette from between his lips. The two simultaneously shook hands and shared a congenial hug.

"I didn't expect you here so early."

"Well, I caught an earlier train, so here I am."

"Great, great. Go ahead and take your things to the room, and then I'll show you around town."

Gerhardt flicked away his cigarette and led Klaus up the four concrete steps to the front door, and then up two flights of stairs, to the second door on the left.

"Here it is, home sweet home," Gerhardt proclaimed, his silver ring clinking on the knob as he opened the door.

The apartment wasn't exactly big, but it would do. The room was symmetrical, with a bed, desk, small wardrobe, and a window on each side, with a sink in the middle. Gerhardt had taken the left side, so Klaus hefted his luggage onto the tan linen sheets of the bed, then turned and followed Gerhardt back out.

The two young men from Elmshaven spent the rest of the day touring the city that was Hamburg. Gerhardt made sure to point out the most important places, i.e. butcher, tailor, bakery, department store, etc., before they hit a local tavern for dinner and a drink.

"I think you're gonna like it here," Gerhardt said as he finished his pint and put his arm around Klaus. "I've been here a week, and it's already starting to grow on me. I'm just glad I get to enjoy it all with my best friend," he smiled slyly.

Klaus smiled back sheepishly and raised his own glass.

"To us," he toasted.

"To us."

Classes started a few weeks later. Gerhardt would be studying law, while Klaus took to social sciences. He didn't know what they were exactly, but he liked their sound.

The first day, ironically, was grey, windy, and rainy. Klaus woke up to the sound of raindrops hitting the windowpane at full force. He had European history in 45 minutes. He jumped out of bed, careful not to disturb the still snoozing Gerhardt, dressed in the dark, combed his hair, grabbed his things, and snuck out of the room. As soon as the door was shut, however, he bolted for the exit. The last thing he needed was to be late on his first day.

The rain had turned the previously jovial city into a dismal, gloomy mess. At the same time, the scene was very serene, silent but for the steady pounding of the water on the glass and stone. It was the kind of day when it would be perfect to stay in and sleep. Klaus began hurrying across the four blocks he had to go to get to the university's main building, avoiding puddles and the few other people he ran across, some of whom were

lucky enough to be sporting umbrellas. He came to the square that held the University of Hamburg, with its light brown domed roof, bricks now shining from the rain, and crying columns. He ran up the stairs between the columns and through the large wooden front doors, then walked briskly left down one hall, up a flight of stairs, right down another hall, up another flight of stairs, and finally into the appropriate classroom. Out of breath and soaking wet, Klaus sank into the first empty seat he found just as the teacher entered through another door in the back of the room and began his lesson.

Klaus made sure never to be anywhere close to late again. That would be easy on Tuesdays and Wednesdays, since his classes on those days started early in the afternoon. Gerhardt, the lucky bum, didn't have any classes until later in the day on any given day, since that's the only time law classes were offered. He didn't have history, politics, or science every day as Klaus did. At the same time, those law classes probably were harder, Klaus reasoned. If lawyers made a lot of money, the classes must be hard; otherwise, everyone would take them. Not to mention, Klaus did like most of his classes. He liked the subject of history, but the teacher whose class he had almost been late to the first day made him wish he had been late. The man had a voice as appealing and droning as a foghorn. The teachers for his writing and language classes were only middle of the road, with nothing memorable about them one way or another. Biology was the only class he really didn't like; the subject was never one of his favorites, but he had to take it anyway. On the other hand, he absolutely loved his political theory class and the teacher, Dr. Alexander Wolfe. There was something about Dr. Wolfe that Klaus found absolutely

intriguing. Maybe it was the fact that Dr. Wolfe was considerably younger than his colleagues, which made him seem more approachable and easy to relate to. Maybe it was the great energy with which he spoke. Maybe it was the way he connected with all of his students. Or maybe, it was his more involved teaching style that made the subject more interesting. Perhaps, Klaus thought, it was a combination of all these things that made Dr. Wolfe his favorite teacher. He was the kind of teacher that if he said something, it was automatically fact. He provided such a strong argument that he could make a person believe nearly anything.

College started going more smoothly for Klaus after about two weeks. He got into a routine of waking up on time and walking to the same rooms. He was doing rather well in all his classes, even biology, and was beginning to become accustomed to each professor's teaching methods. He began making friends with other people in his classes, but his best friend was still Gerhardt. They still heard from Max every now and then, but those two were as close as ever. Nothing could come between them. However, they did hit a wedge that December.

The early winter snow turned Hamburg into a pristine paradise, glistening across the landscape with nearly a foot of finely packed powder. Something about the snow turned people into children again; everyone, from college students to aged men, could be seen making the best of the snow. The younger would be throwing snowballs at each other, while the older would sit back and admire the scene.

It was on one of these fine white days that Klaus would make an idiot of himself. One of his afternoon classes ended early, so he walked outside to find Gerhardt returning snowball fire with a pair of students some twenty yards away.

"Would you mind giving me a hand here?" Gerhardt yelled, ducking as a ball of slush whizzed by his head.

"Not at all."

Klaus joined in, evening up the odds as the four young men continued their battle. What a way to celebrate the end of a semester! Classes would be done in two weeks' time, which meant he could take some time off and go home again for a while, and here he was releasing some pent-up energy. He spent the next ten minutes avoiding snowballs and building more of his own when something caught his eye. He saw a girl walking past the columns at the front of the university who did not look familiar. He knew he didn't recognize her because she was not easy to forget. Her ruby-red hair hung mostly over one side of her face, giving Klaus only a profile view of a green eye, slightly upturned nose, and lightly freckled face. He was so distracted that he didn't seem to notice the snowball that had just nailed him in the ear. Gerhardt noticed Klaus in his trance.

"What's wrong with you?" he asked, motioning for the others to stop for a moment.

"That girl over there," he said, pointing to her as she stopped to talk to someone. "Who is she?"

"How should I know? I don't know everybody here."

"I've never seen her before, but she's beautiful. I think I'll go introduce myself."

"That, I would like to see," Gerhardt scoffed.

"You don't think I will?"

"My friend, I know you too well. It's just not in you. You're too…nice."

"Oh really? I'll show you. I'm going to go introduce myself to her. Then we'll see who's too nice."

"Good luck."

Klaus marched off through the snow, mustering up the courage to say something. Gerhardt was right; he never really talked to females unless he had to. It made him feel somewhat uncomfortable. He would have to overcome that if he wanted to talk to the mystery woman. But what would he say? Klaus nervously tried to think of a good introduction when he realized he was but a few feet away from his goal. This was it. It was now or never. Klaus stopped for a second, took a deep breath for courage, and took one more step.

The next thing he saw was not the other half of the girl's face. Instead, it was a face full of snow. He had stepped on a patch of ice that had formed under the snow and unceremoniously tripped face first into a snow bank. Pulling his head up and spitting out the mush, he could hear the chuckles and even outright laughter from most everyone around him. He looked up at the mystery girl, who had a hand up to her mouth to prevent herself from laughing as well. Defeated, Klaus stood up, brushed himself off, and shuffled back to Gerhardt, who was trying to console him, but also could not stop laughing. Klaus had never been so humiliated in his entire life.

"It's getting late," he grumbled. "I'm going home."

Gerhardt made sure that Klaus never lived the ice incident down, bringing it up whenever he got the chance. As opposed to bringing Klaus down, however, it made him determined. He would find the mystery woman, get to know her, and see where things went from there. That would show him.

As luck would have it, he got another chance during the last week of classes. Klaus found himself sitting on the university steps, depressingly bored, and thinking about what

lay ahead. He was just about to get up and leave, when *she* walked by again. This was the chance, Klaus thought. There was hardly anyone else around; he was alone, she was alone. He brought himself up and trotted down the stairs. He brushed back his hair with his hand, cleared his throat, and was about to say hello, when once again one of them tripped. This time, however, it wasn't he. Much like Klaus, the girl had stepped onto a hidden patch of ice. Her feet fell out from under her, sending her backwards to certain impact with the ground when a pair of hands caught her underneath her shoulders and helped her back up. She turned around to find Klaus with a boyish grin on his face.

"Thank you," she said. "That ice can be dangerous."

"Tell me about it," Klaus replied, admiring her. She was even more beautiful in person. Long eyelashes fluttered over those green eyes that reminded Klaus of something, but he didn't know what exactly. She smiled as if she were ashamed of showing emotion, but Klaus saw nothing she should be ashamed of. He was smitten.

"You look familiar," she sang. "Have I seen you before?"

Klaus considered telling her what happened for a moment.

"I think so. I was the guy that fell flat on his face in the snow last week."

"Oh, yes. That was terrible. You didn't hurt yourself, did you?"

"Not at all. Just my pride. You see, I was actually on my way over to say hello to you." Klaus couldn't believe what he was saying.

"Me? Now, why would you be doing something like that?" she asked, as if she already knew the answer.

"Well, I saw you across the yard, and you seemed like an interesting person, and well, I like interesting people." He was smiling on the outside, but Klaus was killing himself on the inside. What was he thinking?

"I've been called a lot of things before, but no one has ever said I was interesting, Herr…?"

"Schroder. Klaus Schroder."

"Well, Hr. Klaus Schroder, thank you for the compliment. My name is Katharina Hartmann. I wish I could stay and talk longer, but I have to go back to my room and study. Exams coming up, you know."

"May I carry those, then?" Klaus blurted, motioning towards the books she was carrying.

"Thank you. I'd like that."

The two of them walked slowly towards her house. Klaus learned that she was from Hamburg, this was her first year, and she was studying medicine. Like his father, her parents had died when she was young, so she lived with an aunt in her parents' house until she came of age, and the aunt moved out. He would have learned more, but they came to her door far too quickly for him.

"This is my stop," Katharina said. "Thank you for helping me."

"Don't mention it. I was glad to. I just hope I get to see you again," Klaus said with a hint of hope in his voice.

"Maybe you will," she said. To Klaus's surprise, she gave him a peck on the cheek, and with that she ran into her house. Klaus stood awestruck for a moment before he realized what had transpired. He walked back to his apartment with a new air of

confidence and pride in his step. One thing was for sure: Gerhardt was going to hear about this.

Klaus would not get to see Katharina again before Christmas break. Once school ended, Klaus caught a train back to Ravenhood. He could not wait to go home and tell his mother about everything that had happened to him. He knew she would be happy, and indeed she was. When Klaus walked in the front door, his mother ran to him and threw her arms around his neck. She looked as if she hadn't had reason to smile in a while. Mr. Zericht was still living there and still working at the steel mill. His grandfather was still in poor health, but his spirits had picked up. Other than that, everything was still the same in Elmshaven. Klaus settled onto the sofa that night, and as he drifted to sleep, his thoughts went to Katharina, and how as much as it would be nice to see her again, right now, it was good to be home.

Klaus kept his Christmas vacation rather busy. He spent time helping his mother around the house or going around town to see how everything looked after he had been gone for a few months. The best part, by far, was running into Max again. The two spent well over an hour talking about what had been going on in their separate lives since Klaus started going to college. Max was still working with his father as a carpenter, and he too had met a nice girl named Sarah, who lived two floors above them. If all went well, they might even be married soon.

Naturally, the time came once again for Klaus to go back to Hamburg once the break was over. This time, he would make the trip to the train station alone. His mother told

him goodbye, but without all the dramatics from the previous time. Now, she was fine with the fact that he would be leaving, and Klaus was too. He had more important things to tend to.

As if by fate, Klaus got to see Katharina again. They both enrolled in the same science class without knowing that the other was doing the same. They ended up sitting together every day, sharing notes to make sure they got everything the teacher said. With each passing day, Klaus became more and more attracted to Katharina, and he hoped she felt the same way. He would find out one Friday after class. He had been thinking of asking Katharina out on a date for some time, but he didn't have the nerve. That Friday, though, something told him that this was his lucky day. Once class was over, he caught Katharina in the hallway and asked her if she would like to go see a movie with him on Saturday night. Expecting her to come up with some excuse as to why not or even flat out rejection, Klaus was thrilled when Katharina said she would love to. They met at her house at 6: 30, then walked to the theater, where they saw a wonderful comedy entitled *Allotria*, and he walked her back home again. At the end of the night, Katharina thanked Klaus for a wonderful time and again pecked him on the cheek, which left Klaus on air. Before she got away, Klaus asked her if she would want to do this again some time, and she agreed. They had not said it, but Klaus knew the truth: they were going steady.

Klaus and Katharina would date for the next three years, through the rest of their first, second, third, and fourth years at school. Any time they weren't in class, it seemed, they were spending time together, doing whatever they could find time to do. Needless to say, Gerhardt was a bit jealous, but he could see why Klaus would rather spend time with

Katharina than him. He had tried unsuccessfully to find a woman himself, but his studies prevented him from having much of a social life. Klaus even brought Katharina home that first summer to meet his mother and the two became quick friends. Something about the two of them just seemed to click, which made Klaus very happy. Another thing that made him very happy was that Katharina seemed to like Elmshaven. She told him it was a pleasant change after a life in the big city. She even said, partially in jest, that she would love to move there after school was over. Klaus could only hope.

While their relationship was gathering momentum, the rest of the world was speeding up as well. Germany was headed towards war, though the rest of the world might not have wanted to admit it. Hitler was grabbing up pieces of land at liberty, leaving the rest of Europe on guard, but otherwise motionless. More and more once free lands were becoming integrated into the growing Reich. By 1939, it had all reached a breaking point. The final solution lay ahead, but no one could fathom the impact.

As for Klaus, that didn't matter right now. Sure, he realized what was going on around him, for the most part. It seemed that that was all they talked about in his political science and history classes. His history teachers rambled on about how it was "fulfilling destiny" for Germany to grow into power again, while his political science teachers went on about how the government was completely right in its actions and that whatever it did was for the good of the country. Even the great Dr. Wolfe fell into this category. Klaus remembered the day that happened very well. Dr. Wolfe walked into class one day minus his energetic atmosphere. As opposed to having involved discussion, he stood at the podium at the front of the class, empty-handed, and spoke:

"I don't know where any of you will be a year from now. I don't know where I will be a year from now, or even if I'll be. The point I'm trying to make is that the world really is changing around us. I know we've talked about it as if it were just a discussion point, but it's real. The question now is how you will deal with it. Will you take part in it, try to make it better? Or will you let it slip by you, pretend it's not happening? Now, I'm not trying to tell you who is right and who is wrong in anything; only you can make that decision. In the end, however, you will have to choose, and for the love of God, I hope you all make the right choice." And with that, he walked back out of the class.

Again, that didn't matter. That speech had happened in February, and now it was May, in the year of our Lord 1939. School was about to be over for good for Klaus and Katharina, and he had a lot of decisions to make. Where would he live? What would he do? How would he make a living? Before he figured that out, Klaus had one more important thing to do. He had been saving up for months from the little bits of money his mother had been sending him, and now the time had come. Klaus had enough. He needed to find a jeweler.

Spring, 1939

Klaus remembered the proposal as if it had been yesterday. It was on May 12, 1939. A Friday. The day of graduation. He had gone to the local jeweler a week before to find the perfect ring. He must have spent an hour there browsing, separating the rings that were too gaudy from those that were too plain until he found the right one. The gold of the band swirled into four separate parts from the back, meeting again to hold a single emerald in place. Perfect. For the week after, the ring beat in his desk drawer like Poe's Tell-Tale Heart, waiting to be brought out at the right moment, which for Klaus, was right after graduation. After the ceremony, Klaus led Katharina to the front steps of the university where they had first met, where he made a fool of himself in the snow. He told her how much she had meant to him and how much he loved her. With that, he sank to one knee on the front step, produced the ring in its black velvet box, and asked the world's most famous question. Katharina gasped in happy surprise before she squeaked the only word she could say: "Yes." Of course, her natural follow-up question was "What will we do?" Klaus had already figured that out. He had contacted some people back home and had a plan set. They would move to Elmshaven and get a small apartment until they could get something better. He had talked to Hr. Zaricht, who agreed to hire him in the steel mill as part of the management until he could find a better job, and Dr. Schweitzer was in desperate need of an assistant, which would be perfect for Katharina. She loved the idea and strongly embraced her husband-to-be, as they stared at the starry night that had risen above all Germany.

The wedding ceremony was sweet and simple on a sunny June morning. Despite his poor health and the fact that he could barely stand on his own, Klaus's grandfather agreed to be the minister, while the old friend Gerhardt and another family friend would serve as the best man and maid of honor, respectively. Other than that, the only people at the church were Klaus's mother, grandmother, Hr. Zaricht, and Dr. Schweitzer. Klaus had hoped to see Max there, but he was nowhere to be seen. Klaus asked his mother if she had seen Max lately, but she said that she had not seen him or any of his family in quite some time. In fact, it was if they disappeared overnight.

Katharina, on the other hand, was anything but simple. She walked down the aisle on Hr. Zaricht's arm wearing Klaus's mother's wedding dress, and Klaus swore he had never seen anything so beautiful before. The white gave her an almost heavenly glow, which made Klaus feel as if he were about to marry an angel.

After the wedding, Hr. and Fr. Klaus Schroder got along according to plan, except for one small detail. When Klaus told his mother about the engagement and their ideas, she was thrilled except for the part about where they would be living. She saw no reason why they couldn't just live with her for a while instead of in some musty old apartment. Hr. Zaricht had (finally) moved out a little over a month earlier, so Anna argued that the couple should just live there. She would move into the smaller bedroom, while Klaus and Katharina took her old room. She even promised to stay with her parents on their wedding night. Klaus ran the idea by Katharina, and she couldn't refuse either. She liked being around Anna, so for them to live together for a while until they got a proper place of their own would be a treat. The young Schroders moved in, and they were shortly at ease with their new lives. Klaus worked long hours at the steel mill while

Katharina was often busy helping the aged Dr. Schweitzer. When they came home, they had a family dinner that Anna had somehow found time to prepare, after which she would leave the couple alone. This marriage was, at least to Klaus, starting off like a dream.

Three months. Their perfect harmony lasted only three months before an outside force invaded their little world on a damp September morning. Klaus woke up that morning, leaving his wife sleeping beside him. He walked to work as he had every weekday for the past few months, but there was something different about that day. He saw a lot of people running around town, newspapers in hand, showing the front page to everyone they came in contact with. Curious, he stopped a filthy-faced boy who was selling newspapers and bought a copy. The headlines said it all. German troops had marched into Poland, destroying any resistance they encountered. It had drawn the ire of France and England, who had declared war in turn. Klaus wasn't exactly surprised at what had transpired. Anyone with eyes could see the growing strength of the Reich; Der Fuhrer had finally made his move. Klaus read on with a I-knew-this-was-coming frame of mind, but he was still a bit awestruck. War had begun, but how long would it last? What would become of the country? What would become of them? Klaus couldn't help but think back to what Dr. Wolfe had said, about the impending crisis and doing the right thing, whatever that might be.

Klaus came home from work that evening, immediately being confronted by Anna and Katharina about what had happened. Anna had taken the news rather well; she had lived through one war, and she would survive this one as well. Katharina, on the other hand,

was nervous. She started asking questions about what was going to happen next, about what Klaus was going to do, and each answer from Klaus was "I don't know." Anna had the answer.

"We will endure," she told them. "That's all we can do, and pray for this to come to a swift end for our sake and the sake of all those involved." Her words comforted the children, but deep down, Anna knew the truth. Wars don't end quickly and painlessly.

Klaus, Katharina, and Anna went about their daily lives the best they could, constantly aware of the world around them. Every day, the papers were filled with more and more news of the war. Each page told of the constant German advance through the rest of Europe, with country after country falling to the massive onslaught. How foolish it was, Klaus thought, to stand against such a force. Then again, wouldn't he do the same thing in the same situation? Absolutely, he decided. He would gladly takes up arms in defense of the Fatherland.

He couldn't escape the war at work either. He watched as the men on the assembly lines went from making pieces of machinery and replacement parts to parts for tanks, cannons, gun barrels, armored trucks, and anything else the army needed. Hands that were used to making farming equipment were now polishing the insides of artillery shells and welding tank treads. Klaus also started noticing new faces on the line. Others had gone off to join the army, being sent to anywhere across the continent at the generals' whims, while some just left town all together.

Every night for well over a year, Klaus tossed and turned in his mind while Katharina slept soundly beside him. All he could think about was the war. Questions raced through his mind. What should he do? Other men were leaving to fight, so why not he? What

would Dr. Wolfe say was the right thing? Who would take care of Katharina? What would his father do? That last question was easy. His father would have left with no question. Did that make him a bad person? No. No, he did the right thing, Klaus thought. His mother had been left on her own, and she was just fine. Was this any different? Klaus's father was fighting for the defense and what was right for the German people. Wasn't this the same thing? Germany had been devastated after the first war, so now they were claiming what was rightfully theirs. Or was this something else? Was this just flat-out aggression? Klaus thought about it all so much that it made his head hurt, and he would eventually fall asleep from mental exhaustion.

Thoughts of Katharina kept Klaus out of the war for a long time. He just couldn't bring himself to leave her all alone. More plainly, he would simply miss her. He also thought about what it would do to his mother. She had always been so close to him, and after her husband had left for the same thing and had never come back, he couldn't put her through the same thing again. Klaus made up his mind. He would stay home.

Those thoughts carried him through to the late fall of 1940. Then, something changed his mind. Coming to work one day, he passed the assembly line as he did every day to go clock in. Looking at the faces that he had become so familiar with, he noticed that one was missing. A man named Brohm was not at his usual spot. Instead, sitting in his place, was a young woman, about Katharina's age. Klaus went over to speak to the woman.

"I don't recall ever seeing you here before," he remarked. "Brohm's been here for years, and as far as I know, he's never missed a day."

"He's not here," she replied with a sigh. "I'm filling in for him."

"And you are?"

"His wife."

"Ah, Fr. Brohm. Very nice to meet you. Where is your husband?"

"He could be anywhere by now. He left to join the army two days ago."

"Oh, I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"Well, it's just that you must be upset that he left you alone to work in this factory."

"Why should I?" she responded, throwing Klaus off. "It's not as if he left me for no good reason. He went to be a part of something bigger than both of us. I felt it was only right to support him in any way I could, and this is how I do it."

"I see. Well then, keep up the good work. I hope your husband returns home soon."

She smiled politely, went back to work, and Klaus spun around on his heel, pausing to think about what had just happened. He stood for a moment before it hit him with full force. He knew what he had to do. Confidently, he walked to his boss's office to tell him he wouldn't be coming in for a while.

He would tell his wife and his mother with no regret as soon as he walked through the door. He would leave the next morning for Ravenhood, catch a train bound for Berlin, and sign up at the first place he could. Klaus kept telling himself this over and over again on the seemingly long walk home.

Katharina had not left yet, so this was the perfect chance for Klaus to tell her and his mother the news. He sat them both down on the couch and took a seat in a chair opposite them. After a deep breath, he told them exactly what he had been repeating to himself.

As expected, Katharina did not take the news too well. She looked as if she had been shot in the stomach. She immediately started shaking her head, mumbling to herself that this wasn't happening and he couldn't do this. She jumped up and stared at him.

"What am I supposed to do? I can't make it without you!"

"Yes you can. I know you can. This is something bigger than you, me, or any of us. I have to do this because it is the right thing to do. I have to help make a better future for us. You are strong, stronger than I am. I'm doing this because I have to. You can make it."

Katharina stared blankly for a moment before stepping outside. Klaus grimaced, expecting the same thing from his mother, but he was shocked when she grinned at him smugly.

"I knew this was coming. You're so much like your father, even if you don't know it. He would have done the same thing in your situation."

"So, you're not upset?"

"Why should I be? You can take care of yourself. Of course I'll worry, but that's because I'm your mother. I may not like it, but in the end, I know why you're doing it, and that's fine with me. Don't worry about Katharina. I'll help her understand. You, on the other hand, need to take some time and enjoy yourself. You've got a long day ahead."

Katharina came to her senses and realized that there was no changing Klaus's mind. She hugged, still sobbing slightly, in a way that said "I'm sorry, but I'm still not fine with this." They went to bed that night, and they barely let go of each other once they got under the sheets. Morning broke and Klaus prepared to leave, much as he had four years

before when he left for college. This time, however, no one would come with him. He made Katharina and Anna promise to stay behind for fear they might overreact. Satchel filled with a few essentials and flung over his shoulder, Klaus hugged his mother and wife goodbye on the front porch. The whole scene was silent, as no one could think of the right words to say. Katharina started to say something, but she couldn't get it out; she just ran back inside and shut the door. Anna looked up at her son and told him the same thing she told him years before: "Don't try to make me proud. Make yourself proud." With that and a motherly kiss, Klaus turned off the porch and never looked back, not knowing if he would ever see them again.

Klaus didn't get the helpful ride he and his mother had gotten the first time he made this trip; he had to walk the entire distance. Arriving at the Ravenhood train station, he noticed that there were at least fifty other men about his age and younger, all prepared to make the journey for the same reasons. Some of them had brought their wives and families, who were very reluctant to let them go, while others stood alone in silence. Klaus boarded the train, finding a seat in the back where he could be alone. He looked at the window, but there were no familiar faces looking back this time. The rest of the men boarded the train, some of their eyes still wet from weeping. Scared children, Klaus thought. They won't make it. The train left in a puff, and Klaus looked around him. Despite being surrounded by a mass of humanity, Klaus was alone. Next stop: Berlin.

Winter, 1940

Basic training was hell, as Klaus had expected. It was a bit of a blessing that he had joined in the winter; otherwise, he would have had to endure the exhaustion of constant exercises along with the pounding heat of the sun. Fortunately, the cloudy winter skies counterbalanced his sweaty work.

Over the course of several weeks, Klaus and his fellow recruits had been turned from men with normal jobs like bankers, farmers, writers, and clerks into trained soldiers with the skill that had become a symbol of fear to the enemies of the Third Reich. Klaus had been run and worked like a pack mule, but its benefits were starting to show. He was in the best shape of his life, not that he was out of shape to begin with, and his hatred of his commanding officer, whose name he had since purposely blocked out, made him focused and determined to succeed. After all that time and training, Klaus's Karabiner 98 felt like an extension of himself; he felt odd without it. He was so confident with that rifle in his hands, he thought he could shoot the ashes off Churchill's cigar from half a mile away without even trying. His commanding officers sensed the readiness and pride in Klaus and all the other potential soldiers. They knew they were ready.

Nearly three months after he had joined up, Klaus completed his basic training. Now, he was ready for the real thing. The constant work and droning messages of his superiors about how the British were the greatest enemy to the Reich and how they must be stopped had sunk in. He was ready for actual combat. His class had been split up to be sent all across the continent. Klaus had been assigned to the 5th Light Division, but he had no idea where they were going. However, he would soon find out. He would have to receive a new uniform for this mission, he learned. This one would be better suited to his

conditions. Klaus immediately had a terrible thought: he was going to Russia. Of course. He would need extra clothing to keep him warm in the late Soviet winter. That made sense. Dear God, not that. The Russians were already furious over having been "betrayed" by Germany, and they would not soon forget it. Klaus had heard the frightening stories about how German prisoners captured by Russians would be tortured and killed and how viciously the Russians fought at the force of their own leadership. That was the last thing Klaus wanted. Maybe joining the army was not a good idea.

Expecting gray with a heavy coat, Klaus was shocked when he noticed his uniform was tan. It was an almost khaki jacket with matching trousers that flared around the knee. Accompanying that were olive and brown boots that laced the entire length of the calf. To top it off, he was given an unusual tan helmet, very similar to a pith helmet. Emblazoned on the front just above the brim was the classic black eagle holding a swastika on a field of red that had come to be an icon for most Germans. On the each side was a palm tree with a swastika growing out of its trunk. Not asking any questions, Klaus pulled on his uniform, taking at least fifteen minutes to tie the boots alone. When he finished, he stole a look at himself in the mirror and couldn't help but smile proudly. Even that helmet, which he thought looked somewhat foolish, seemed to fit with the rest of the uniform. Now, he looked like a fighting man. He was called away from his moment when he and the other troops from his base that were to become part of the 20th were led to a waiting transport plane. The brown and rocky-looking plane's propellers shone in the sun, casting off a reflection every time a blade broke the beams. Klaus trotted around to the back, gear on his shoulder, past the white-outlined black cross painted on the fuselage. He took a seat on the middle left side between two people he

didn't recall ever seeing before. All men secured, the ramp inside raised closed, and the plane began to roll forward. Klaus and the rest of these men were going to Africa.

Klaus had never been on a plane before, and he couldn't say that it was a pleasant experience. Something that large should not be able to float through the air, he thought. He spent the flight hunched over in his seat, nervously clutching his rifle. He overheard other men talking about their destination. Apparently, they were headed for Libya to aid the Italian troops who were unable to advance farther against the locals and the British. Many of them started making jokes about how worthless the Italians really were. The Germans had conquered almost all of Europe in less than a year, and they couldn't even take Greece or the desert of North Africa. It was pathetic. Klaus couldn't help but snicker at their jokes before returning to his own little world for the rest of the flight.

They arrived on the landing strip just as the sun was going down over the Libyan desert. Stepping off the plane, Klaus immediately felt very cold and was thankful for his previously awkward uniform. All around him, beneath the purple hue of the evening sky, was sand and rock as far as the eye could see. In his immediate vicinity, he could make out the silhouettes of tents, tanks, trucks, and a few hundred other men. He walked blindly around the camp, inspecting the conditions, preparing himself for what was surely to come. Not paying attention to where he was going, he bumped into another soldier who was walking the opposite way. He whipped around to apologize, but when he saw the man, he noticed something familiar about him. He couldn't quite place it, but somehow he felt like he knew this person. He noticed his right hand, wrapped around a

pack strap hanging on his right shoulder, and on the fourth finger, there was a silver ring, etched with a cross and a star on either side. Klaus had seen that ring before.

"Gerhardt?"

"Klaus?"

By an act of God, fate, or pure dumb luck, Klaus and Gerhardt were once again brought together. It was as if one had been sent to the other to help him through the days. Klaus screamed over the whirring of the plane's dying propellers that it was good to see him again and asked how he got to be there. By some strange turn of events, Gerhardt had left school and ended up in Munich before he too joined the army and was sent to Africa. What a coincidence. The two stood catching up before a call came for all men to pitch their tents and get to sleep. They had a long day ahead of them. Klaus bade his friend farewell, found his own little patch of dirt, and tossed out his gear. It took him a few minutes in the dark, but he eventually got his tent to where it would stand up. Exhausted, Klaus barely managed to get his boots, helmet, and uniform jacket off before he unfurled his bedroll and fell asleep.

A bugle call and yelling indicated that morning had come, unfortunately. It seemed that Klaus had just fallen asleep before he had to wake up again. Alarmed at the noise, but still groggy, Klaus pulled on his boots and helmet, threw on his jacket (he did not have time to button it), grabbed his rifle, and ran out of the tent. He noticed that most of the other men were having problems getting up as well. Most were emerging without some vital part of their uniform, whether it be a shoe, helmet, or even their rifle, or a

combination of the above. They would not have time to fix that before the call to attention rang out, and all the men fell in three even lines.

A tan half-track had pulled in front of them, looking as if it had already seen a little bit of combat. The iron cross-adorned door to the cab swung open, and a man in full grey military regalia stepped out. He was a tall man in clearly excellent shape, despite being somewhere near the age of 50. His eyes slanted downward under his officer's cap and the goggles resting on the brim and focusing in on his nose, lined perfectly with the cleft in his chin. He exuded authority not only in the way he looked but also in the way he walked, as he confidently stepped to the front of the lines. The men waited nervously, but the officer only looked at them and grinned confidently before he spoke.

"Good morning. My name is Colonel-General Erwin Johannes Eugen Rommel, and I am your commanding officer. I know many of you are wondering exactly why we are here, and the answer to that is very simple. We have been ordered to help our Italian allies in this area, and that is exactly what we will do, to the best of our abilities. It is not a man or even a country we serve, but a duty. Your success is my success, and your failure is my failure. I will be as much a part of the glory and harshness of war as you will because we are all a part of this. This is war, but that does not mean we cannot be civilized, and you will be. This is a war without hate, as far as I am concerned. That being said, we have a lot of work to do, and I know you will do it well. I look forward to leading you men as far as I can. Dismissed."

The order had been given, but few of the men could actually move. The man who wielded power with his appearance and his stride did the same with his words. They were still in awe of the man as he returned to his previous position. Yells came out from

the other officers to get moving, and their trance was finally broken. For all these troops, especially Klaus, Rommel was definitely something special.

Within minutes, the full division was dressed, armed, and in motion. That uniform that had kept Klaus warm the night before was now roasting him in the hot desert sun. He found Gerhardt sitting on the side of a tank, and he hoisted himself up beside him just as the steel beast fired up and began rolling forward. Klaus stared down the horizon, not seeing a single thing that distinguished one spot from another. It was as if they were not moving at all. Finally, after nearly half an hour, Klaus could make out a few specks ahead and could hear gunshots over the roaring of the tank treads. As the noise got louder and they got closer, he could make out the uniforms of typical Italian soldiers, crouched down in the sand. Farther on, he could see the shapes of other soldiers firing back at them, but he could not tell if they were British regulars or were local fighters. The tank Klaus and Gerhardt were on came to a stop amidst the chaos. They and the few other men riding along with them hopped off, and they had no sooner hit the ground, than the tank fired its main cannon and began rolling forward again. Klaus didn't expect the loud blast and nearly fell over on an Italian fighter, who began to yell at him, but upon seeing he was German, began rambling on incoherently in Italian at him. Ignoring him, Klaus hit the ground and aimed his rifle at the enemy's side, looking for a clear shot, but he didn't have one. He picked himself up and looked around for Gerhardt, but he had lost him. So, Klaus ran and caught up with that same tank and took cover behind its left tread, sneaking behind it as it kept going forward. He occasionally looked out from behind it, seeing if he was close enough to start firing, but returning as machinegun fire rained on the popular target. They passed a burned-out Italian truck, and Klaus saw his

chance. He dove out from behind the tank and landed behind the blackened hull. He took a position behind one of the wheels where he could still get a good shot off but could not easily be seen. This was it. His first chance at real combat. He aimed the rifle down the field of battle and took aim. Through his sights, he saw a British soldier (he could tell he was British from his slightly rounded helmet and shorts) running perpendicular to his position. Klaus took a deep breath in and gently squeezed the trigger. The running man fell forward suddenly, with a spray of blood shooting from his chest, and never moved again. Klaus didn't know how to feel at this point. He had been training to do this for some time, but now that the real thing had come, it was completely different. This was not a paper or wooden target. This was a man. He had a home, parents, a job, maybe even a wife and children, but that was all gone now. Somehow, though, that didn't matter.

Adrenaline took over at that point. Klaus stayed where he was for a little while longer before more fire came his way. He moved on to another point before moving to another and another and another. It was the same everywhere. He took cover wherever he could get it, whether it be from a vehicle, natural embankment, or even the body of a dead soldier, and took aim. He didn't know how many people he hit, but it wasn't nearly as many as he missed. He wasn't a deadeye by any means, but he could still hold his own. He panicked when he emptied a clip, reached down to reload, and found he had no more ammunition. He jumped around in the sand heaps, looking and screaming for ammo, all the while avoiding bullets. Finally, another man dropped by with a handful of clips, and Klaus picked up where he left off, this time being more careful with his shots. This seemed to go on for a matter of minutes, but was in fact taking much longer. The sun

moved through the sky over the battle, leaving all below completely unaware. Finally, the sounds of battle grew quieter. The British forces had begun to retreat, with Klaus and his counterparts in hot and eager pursuit. Some men managed to make it away, while others simply threw down their guns and put their hands in the air, while others were just stopped short of salvation. Eventually, the order came to end the pursuit, and a loud cheer came out of the crowd of victorious German soldiers. They all began to huddle back to a spot to set up camp for the night. Tents set, many grabbed their dinner and sat around one of the campfires that had been built, while others took theirs back to their tents before going to sleep. Klaus stood around the food line looking for Gerhardt before he saw him walking sluggishly toward the rest of the group. They each grabbed a plate and a cup, pulled up a seat around a fire, and began telling each other what had happened to them that day. Gerhardt had kept on running when Klaus had fallen over the Italian man, and never looked back. He couldn't afford to. While they were eating, Klaus noticed that Colonel-General Rommel had arrived, with no fanfare, and was walking around talking to most of the men. He came by their group and told them how proud he was of their excellent work on their first day. The fire began to die out and Klaus headed back to his tent. It wasn't until he sat back down that the day's event finally hit him. This was his first bit of combat, and it had worn him out. He was drenched in sweat from running all day in the sun and was covered from head to toe in dust. His eyes were burning from the sand that had gotten in them, and his pants leg had specks of blood from someone that wasn't him. He was completely exhausted as his head hit his pillow, but after that he was wide awake as the excitement from the day and the idea of coming days

took over. The Afrika Korps was born. He couldn't wait to write and tell everyone at home about this.

The next month proceeded almost exactly as the first day had. They would wake up, dress, and move into action. This time, they were moving with the Italians, not catching up to them. Some of their officers tried to act as if they were really the ones in charge, but every German troop knew who the real commander was. Every day, the army advanced even farther across the country, devastating everybody and everything that stood in their way. There were some days when the Korps would stay where they were to rest, refuel, and reinforce, but the soldiers would still have exercise to keep them in shape and a variety of duties to keep the area secure. Klaus was surprised to see Colonel-General Rommel out there every morning along with the troops taking part in all of their daily tasks. When he said that they were all in this together, he wasn't kidding.

Finally, a little over a month after they had set out, the Afrika Korps came to the coastal town of El Agheila, an Italian camp that had been taken by the Allies. The Germans were excited because it was the first moderate sign of civilization they had seen in a while, which wasn't saying much as the town was little more than a few stone and clay huts. After a rather quick and decisive battle, the Germans and Italians moved into the city, with the British running farther east. They were all happy to learn that they would be staying in the city for a few days before they moved on any farther. Klaus decided to take advantage of some of his downtime and get around to writing his wife and mother back home in that beautiful little town of Elmshaven. Before going to bed one night, Klaus rustled up a piece of paper and a pen. Tent lit by his lantern, Klaus began to write. He told Katharina and Anna about how exciting it was being a part of the

front. He told them about all the action he had seen, how Gerhardt had ended up being part of his division as well, and about Erwin, as the troops began to call him. He told them how he and all the other troops had begun to idolize their commander and how important he was to their morale. He even told his mother that he thought Erwin was a lot like what his father might have been like. In closing, he told them all how much he loved them and that he would most assuredly see them again.

A little more than a week later, the Afrika Korps arrived at their next target destination of Benghazi, another city farther up the Mediterranean coast. They had hoped to spend a few days resting in town as they had before, but that would not be an option this time. They would have to keep going, as an important target lay ahead of them. Tobruk, a major Allied port, was the next city on the Germans' list. Taking this port would greatly shorten German and Italian supply lines and would allow Rommel to continue his attack forward into Egypt without worrying about being attacked from behind. Slightly upset about not getting another break, but realizing the importance of the situation, they pressed eastward along the coast towards the port of Tobruk. Unlike their previous encounters, this one would not be so easy.

One part of the Afrika Korps would try to hit Tobruk head on, while another would circle around and try to flank them. This strategy worked on the outlying troops, but did not work on the city itself. To Klaus's surprise, the British put up an exceptionally strong fight. The city did provide them with a strategic foothold, and more importantly gave them the ability to gain extra attacking power from the British navy. Shells from British ships came raining in upon them, while they all tried to force their way into the city, but to no avail. With no progress forward by either side, Rommel gave the order to hold the

position and besiege the city until they surrendered. Part of his army, which had now grown well into the tens of thousands, would stay and hold the city in check, while the rest would come with him and continue the campaign. Unfortunately for him, Klaus was one of those set to stay behind.

The next few months would be miserable. Summer was approaching, and although it seemed impossible, the Libyan Sahara had gotten even hotter as the months went on. Much like most of the other troops stationed in the area, Klaus took a note from the British and modified his uniform. He ditched that goofy-looking, cumbersome helmet a few days in, rolled up his tunic sleeves, usually kept the top three or four buttons undone, and cut off the legs of his trousers right above the knee, turning them into shorts. He and all the other men who had been assigned to stay around Tobruk spent the days that they weren't being shelled or shot at taking sanctuary in sports, reading, writing letters home, or sleeping. The Italians usually remained with each other, and the Germans did the same, unless a good sporting match was needed. It went on for so long that all the days seemed to run together, with the monotony being broken with news from the active front farther to the east. Rommel and the rest of the Afrika Korps had moved forward, trampling all that stood in their way. They had taken the Halfaya Pass on the eastern border and had worked their way into Egypt. Maybe, Klaus thought, they would make it far enough that the enemy encamped here in Tobruk would realize that all hope was lost and would surrender, letting all these restless men get back to the action. Klaus got a little more hope in August when word came that the combined Italian and German armies would be properly supplied with armor and more troops and would be reformed as the

German Panzer Group Afrika under the command of the beloved Erwin Rommel. Still, the army never moved.

There were, however, two days that stuck out in Klaus's mind. The first, a morning in July, was aesthetic, but still so meaningful. A special shipment had come in the night before, and its contents were about to be shared with all. The crates were opened, and inside, there were several pieces of green fabric. The call came out that any member of the Afrika Korps who had been in Africa for more than two months was to receive one, and Klaus was one of those lucky men. He received his piece, and he saw that it was an armband. It was dark forest green with edges of tan and silver. Woven across the center in silver block letters were the words "AFRIKA KORPS." Klaus slid it on his right sleeve and admired it for a moment. For him, this was as good as any medal or award. This was something that he had earned, and no one could take that away from him. If he were going to lose that armband, he would have to lose his arm as well.

The other night, however, was much more important. For one reason or another, Klaus couldn't sleep that night, so he took a lone seat around a dying fire. He stared silently back and forth at the glowing embers and the star filled-sky, mesmerized by the sight of both. He became so entranced that when Gerhardt took a seat beside him, it startled him.

"Can't sleep?"

"No. You?"

"No."

"Any reason?" Klaus asked.

"I just wasn't very tired. That's what happens when you don't feel like you're doing anything."

"I know how you feel. I can't wait until we get out of here and get back to real action."

"Exactly. That's the main reason I signed up in the first place. I wanted action and I wanted to be a part of the machine. What about you?"

Klaus started to answer but stopped. He thought he knew the answer, but for some reason he couldn't get the words out. He had joined because that was the right thing to do, wasn't it? His father had gone off to war, too, so it was almost as if it were in his blood to take part in this war. He didn't want to be the best marksman or rise through the ranks and get a lot of power and influence. He just wanted to do his part for the sake of the country. However, his time out in the desert was beginning to turn him into a different person. His thoughts went back to that first day of battle and the adrenaline rush he got from diving for cover and taking out as many enemy soldiers as he could. He was developing a little bit of a bloodlust. He took no pleasure in killing, but he clearly wasn't against it either. It came with the job, so he might as well enjoy it. Wait a minute. That didn't sound right, Klaus thought. That line of thinking made him seem like a murderer, not a soldier. He focused on the original question again. Why had he joined? Why did he keep going? Maybe it was the ghost of his father whispering in his ear. Like a modern-day Hamlet, he was going on because he had too much of his father in him. Puzzling himself, he gave Gerhardt the only answer he could think of.

"It was the right thing to do."

"Well, if you say so. I don't care about right or wrong. All I know is that as long as we're winning, we're right, and so far, we're right."

"You make a good point."

The two friends looked on a little longer as the fire burned out completely, leaving them in near total darkness. Gerhardt eventually stood, stretched, and went back to his tent. Klaus did likewise, with Gerhardt's question still spinning in his head. He never did come up with a real answer.

December arrived, with the eight-month anniversary of the siege looming. The winter had brought cooler days, but had also brought much cooler nights. Klaus went back to keeping his sleeves rolled down and shirt buttoned, and kept warm with the great coat that he had been given. He prepared for the month ahead, expecting it to be the same as the previous ones, only colder, when the word finally came that they were going to be moving. Unfortunately, it would not be in the right direction.

The members of the units that had stayed behind were surprised to learn that their commander and the remaining troops that had gone with him would be coming back. They had made it into Egypt, but they did not get far enough before the British mounted a successful counterattack, although the first attempts had failed. The enemy would be making its way to relieve the siege at Tobruk, so it was of the utmost importance that they returned to defend the city.

They had hardly been back long enough to rest when the British caught up with them. It was a morning attack that most of the officers knew was coming, but many of the regulars did not. They all jumped out of their tents and grabbed their weapons with the

sounds of British rifle and tank fire close approaching. Klaus instinctively tried to take the offensive, but realizing that his fellow soldiers were falling back, he decided to do the same. He saw many men falling down around him as the British were soon upon them. Some had tried to be brave and go forward, while others retreated at full speed, but they all met the same fate. Klaus took shelter behind a wall of sandbags, sticking his rifle around the side and firing at anything that moved. He could only last a few moments at a position before he was forced back even farther. Eventually, he ran out of ammunition, but this time, there was no angel to give him more. He had to make do grabbing the guns of the dead and dying soldiers around him, most of which only had a few shots remaining. One soldier manning a mounted MG42 took an Enfield round to the head, so Klaus decided to take up his position. He hunched down so low behind it that he could only barely make out any targets in front of him. He took out three soldiers that were a few feet in front of him, which gave Klaus a little bit of breathing room. He stood up a little bit more and began letting off short bursts at each successive target that fell at the power of the massive weapon. With this gun in his hands, Klaus felt powerful. He also got a little cocky, letting off more and more bullets at each man and truck he came across. The gun could not take that much pressure and began to overheat. Klaus kept pulling the trigger, but nothing happened. Realizing his error, Klaus immediately dropped behind the sandbags. He huddled tightly as bullets whizzed around him, but that was the least of his problems. Amidst the chaos, he heard a thud in the sand in front of him and saw a small metal egg-shaped sphere with raised ridges. Time slowed down. Klaus panicked and tried to back away, forced to choose between certain death from a grenade and almost certain death from gunfire. Resigned to his fate, Klaus prepared for the worst

when out of nowhere, a voice screamed in his ear and a pair of hands pushed him to the ground. That was the last thing Klaus remembered before the grenade exploded.

"Am I dead? I don't hear anything. I must be dead."

Klaus lifted his head off the ground and spit the sand out of his mouth as the shock wore off and his hearing returned. He was still alive. Somehow, some way, he was still alive. He rolled over to check for wounds, but found none. He was covered in blood, but it wasn't his own. He looked at where he had been moments before, but now there was only a blackened and burnt crater in the ground, with bits of cloth and flesh scattered about it. Klaus crept closer when he noticed something lying in the sand. It was a finger, a ring finger from a man's right hand, and around it, there was a silver ring with two stars and a cross.

Time stopped. Everything around him went quiet. Klaus lost sense of everybody nearby and focused solely on the ring. His childhood, his college years, and his wedding all flashed through his mind. For a moment, just a single second, he was alone, but that would not last.

Klaus flew into a blind rage. He grabbed his rifle, and noticing a British soldier running by, swung it with full force into the man's face. Even when he was on the ground, Klaus continued ramming it where the man's mustached nose and upper lip had been. He only stopped when one of his fellow Korps members grabbed his arm and hurried along the retreat. They managed to catch on the back of a supply truck as it sped off into the west.

The Afrika Korps spent the next three weeks on the run from the attacking British armies. By the end of December 1941, the army and the front lines returned to El Agheila. No one was happy about it, least of all Klaus. He was still upset over the loss of his best friend. He decided the best way for him to relieve some of his tension was to write a letter home, and he could communicate his feelings to someone who would listen. He sat down one night as he had done several times and began to write, but he had no sooner put his pen to the paper when it hit him and he stopped. His father had lied to him. Through all those letters he had written home, his father never spoke of war being so cruel or so brutal. His father's was fun; it was an adventure. It was something to speak fondly of, but there was nothing good about this. His best friend was dead. Surely his father lost friends during his war, but why then did he never talk about them? Klaus looked over all those letters he had read as a child in his mind's eye and dumped them all into the fireplace. He was angry. The army had retreated. His best friend had been blown to bits trying to save him. He wasn't going home any time soon. War wasn't fun anymore. His father had lied to him. "Happy New Year," he murmured to himself as he crumpled the piece of paper into a ball and tossed it into the night wind.

1942 dawned, and every member of Panzer Group Afrika had the same thing on his mind: retribution. The army had gone from nearly taking over half the continent in less than a year to being forced back where they started. Now, with fresh supplies and troops, lines of armor, and an iron resolve, the stalwart commander Erwin Rommel was ready to march forth to reclaim what they had lost. All of his troops shared in his enthusiasm, especially Klaus. He had a hunger to get back in the fight, to make the enemy suffer. They had taken away too much, and now they had to pay the piper. He brooded for the

first three weeks of the new year, keeping mostly to himself, waiting for things to pick up again. He got his chance when the commander launched his second offensive on the 21st. This time would be different. Rommel knew what kind of enemy he was dealing with now, and he would not underestimate them. Using all of his might and his cunning strategy, he and the army plowed ahead, taking back the cities of Agedabia and Benghazi in less than two weeks. Klaus gladly marched along with them for every bit of the way, with a stride in his step and a sneer on his face. He was part of the most dominant force on the face of the Earth, and there was no stopping them. Then they came back to Tobruk, that city that has caused them so much grief the previous year and the city where Klaus spent several miserable months. This time would be different, however. Rommel did not try a direct approach to the city as he had before. Instead, he established a front line between the nearby towns of Bir Hakeim and Gazala, where the British troops and their imperial counterparts readily met them. That was in February. The two sides exchanged fire over this area for three and a half months before Panzer Army Afrika made its move. They attacked seemingly full force on the front line, beginning an all-out battle over the once worthless pile of sand. What the British didn't know was that Rommel had a plan. He had only put a small part of his force on the front line itself, enough to hold its own long enough. The rest of the army, of which Klaus was a part, circled around and flanked the enemy. Outmatched, the British fought as much as they could bear, but they would not succeed. Just short of a month after the Battle of Gazala started, they withdrew from the field of battle, and the German-Italian force marched forward and took the port of Tobruk. It was a momentous occasion. Outnumbered in terms of armor and troops by well over 2 to 1, Rommel's men had taken the city. The

Fuhrer was so pleased with the commander that he was quickly promoted to field marshal. Rommel was flattered but realized that there were far more important things to deal with. The battle had taken its toll on them, as they had lost a significant number of tanks that he desperately needed to drive the British out of Africa. He asked for more, but Berlin denied his request. He seemingly knew this would come back to haunt them, but his men were none the wiser. Their beloved commander had received a great honor, and now all the Reich knew of their successes. Klaus could imagine his family back home reading the newspaper and reading about them on the front page. Needless to say, it made him proud that word of their victory would not only reach home but the enemy's ears as well.

Erwin Rommel quickly became a legend among his own troops and the opposing troops as well. Word spread among the Allies of his tenacious resolve and cunning strategy. He became a fearsome specter to them, capable of overcoming any odds laid before him. No matter how hard they tried to stop him or how much they planned to outthink him, he was once step ahead. That was how he earned his famous nickname, "The Desert Fox."

Halfway through the year, six months after the second offensive began, the mighty Afrika Korps was closer to its goal than they had ever been before. They stood in the shadow of El Alamein, the last great obstacle. Take this city, and they could take the great port of Alexandria. Take Alexandria, and Cairo was virtually theirs. Take Cairo, the British jewel of North Africa, and control of the Mediterranean and the rich Middle Eastern oilfields would fall to them. However, they still had to take El Alamein. The British had nowhere to run, no hope of salvation, and Germany had all the momentum. Anybody who thought this would be easy, though, was sadly mistaken.

Much like the rest of Africa, El Alamein was a desert wasteland, save for a few trees that littered the landscape. It was a familiar sight for the German army as they began the attack in late June, and by now, Klaus had become used to the whole process. The British would dig in and fight their hardest, but they were no match for the mighty onslaught. Klaus settled into this role perfectly. He had given up on being angry, as it had made him careless and sloppy and had nearly gotten him killed on more than one occasion. Instead, he would be efficient, professional, clean, a soldier devoid of any emotions whatsoever on the battlefield. Maybe, just maybe, if he kept that attitude, he might survive.

The battle was not what anyone expected it to be. The light infantry began the attack, but the Panzer divisions, one of which Klaus was a part of, were delayed by both blinding sandstorms and the superior British air power. They eventually did break through at the last possible moment, finding the 90th Light on the brink of destruction. Joining their counterparts, the attack could move forward, but the damage had already been done. After five days of endless fighting, bombing, and surviving as best they could, the British finally took a step back. Instead of capitalizing on the situation, however, the Desert Fox could not move on with such an exhausted and damaged army. As opposed to chasing the British off the field of battle as all the men were hoping for, the Afrika Korps dug into the sand, preparing for the absolute worst.

July 1942 for any member of the German Panzer Group Afrika can best be summed up in one word: hell. The summer heat was bad enough back home in Germany, but being stuck in northern Libya, it was far, far worse. The sweat on Klaus's body made the sand stick to him like glue, and even the torn pants and open shirt he wore were too

much. The heat made fighting tiring and hopeless, which was hampered even more by the fact that they weren't moving anywhere. The army had dug into their positions, while the British launched attack after attack, trying to loosen them from their foothold, but to no avail. Hours became days, days became weeks, weeks became a month. Every day, Klaus hoped that they would move forward. The hope turned into prayers, and then the prayers turned to begging. Even a retreat would be a welcomed sight at this point. At least then, they would be out of this God-forsaken area, not that anyone could tell. Farther west or farther east, it was all sand and sun. At this point, it would be better to be anywhere but here. "Maybe tomorrow," Klaus told himself as he went to sleep every night amidst the occasional machinegun and tank fire. "Maybe tomorrow."

Tomorrow finally came in the fall. In late August, the Desert Fox devised a plan to end this stalemate. He would take part of his army to the Alam el Halfa ridge in the south and try to flank the enemy. Unfortunately, Klaus would not be part of this force. He and several thousand other men would have to wait for the news. Each day, they waited anxiously for the word to advance against the equally beaten and exhausted enemy and take them for all they were worth. Klaus could imagine the battle. He could see Erwin on the frontline, where he always was, with his trademark English goggles sitting on his cap, leading his men to glory. How he wished he could be a part of it. Luckily for him, he wasn't. For on one September afternoon, a massive shape appeared on the sun-drenched horizon. It moved as one at first, but as it came closer, it broke into several pieces. Klaus could tell what it was. It was the group that had gone out a week before, but there was something wrong. Four divisions had gone out, but there were not four divisions coming back. They were missing far too many men, guns, tanks, and vehicles.

Klaus watched as each man passed by, and they all looked the same: dejected, gloomy, and barely alive. They didn't look up as the passed, looking at the footprints and sand in front of them. The passing gave Klaus an uneasy feeling. What had happened at that ridge? What could have stopped such a mighty group of fighting men?

The answer to that question was a revitalized and rejuvenated British army. Much like Rommel had done so many years before, the British had received a new, awe-inspiring leader: the rat-like, proper traditionalist Bernard L. Montgomery. Klaus and the other men did not know it at the time, but Montgomery would soon become the British counterpart to their own beloved commander as a source of morale and cunning strategy.

The German lines finally moved in November of 1942, but not in the way that they had hoped. Fully recharged and with a new life, the British launched a devastating attack on the German lines at El Alamein. It had been difficult to hold the line before, but now it was hard to hold even the same spot on the ground that one had been lying in just a minute before. This new onslaught fell upon the Afrika Korps like a Libyan sandstorm from which there was no escape. They tried to hold, but with all the punishment and losses they had endured over several months of constant fighting without aid from home, it was futile. On November 5, Guy Fawkes Day for the British, they broke the lines at El Alamein. Klaus could remember it all very vividly. When it became clear that they could hold no longer and the word came to retreat, many men were too spent even to do that. Many just threw down their rifles and raised their hands in the air, only to be cut down by advancing rifle fire. Others tossed their weapons aside and ran as fast as they could, ducking and dodging along the way. To describe the scene as chaotic and horrific would only be an understatement.

It would also not be the last such scene. El Alamein had been the high point for the German Army in Africa, and the only way now was back. For weeks, they marched back through cities and territories that had once been theirs but had to be left behind. Klaus felt a strange case of déjà vu going through these places, as each rang slightly familiar despite being virtually the same. There was one main difference. Before, they had awakened to find the sun rising before them. Now, when they slept, if they slept, they faced only the sunset as one by one, their cities fell. Tobruk, Benghazi, and every other city that once flew the German flag fell back under British control. Compound that with the fact that more Allied forces, this time led by an American, had landed on Africa's northwest coast and were now marching their way, and Klaus and his fellow soldiers slowly realized what no one else wanted to admit: they were doomed.

But Panzer Army Afrika was anything but dead. In spite of being outnumbered and outgunned, they would still not surrender, and yet the Desert Fox himself evaded total defeat. Word reached the men that even in retreat, Rommel's forces were becoming the bane of the entire Allied war effort. Knowledge of this fact, albeit more psychological than anything, made life a little bit brighter. It made the men think that maybe they still mattered, they still had a chance, and they still might survive.

History had other plans, however. With the arrival of 1943, there was not much change from the second half of 1942. The German forces made the occasional stand and counterattack, but they all amounted to nothing. Time was running out for the army, and the question now was when the end would come.

Time was running out for Klaus as well. He watched as his fellow soldiers surrendered and were taken away or tried to keep fighting and died. He began

questioning his own motives and his own strength. How much longer could he himself go on? He had been a part of this campaign for nearly two years now and had been running virtually nonstop for months. How much more could he take? Why should he keep fighting? Should one give it his all today so he could die in another hole tomorrow? What about surrender? If he did that, he might never see home again. These prison camps might be terrible places, but if they were anything like the ones he had seen and even kept watch over at times, it would not be that bad. No, he had to keep going. He had to get home. Klaus struggled with the decision for a long time. Finally, he made up his mind.

March 23, 1943. Klaus had been assigned under a new commander, one Colonel-General von Arnim, to meet American troops at the Kasserine Pass in Tunisia. They had run all the way from Egypt to Tunisia in less than a year. Their army had met the American troops shortly before this encounter with great success, but the Americans had changed their tactics and were trying to advance again. The two sides met at the nearby oasis of El Guettar, a precious source of water in an otherwise barren landscape. During the battle, Klaus was assigned to one of many squads whose goal was to eliminate the American artillery overlooking the German positions. The plan was a total disaster. Of the 100 men who had been sent to carry out this task, twelve returned intact, four returned with injuries, and the rest did not return at all. With what they had left, the survivors tried to make a position in one of the hills, but it was no good. The Americans had learned a lot in a very short time, and were quickly advancing. Seeing that there was no hope left, the highest ranking soldier in Klaus's remaining squad ordered the retreat. Klaus watched as they ran and tumbled down the hill, and he started to follow suit, but

stopped. He looked over his shoulder and saw a group of American soldiers advancing. They seemed like average young men. Klaus could tell that they were all still in their youth; the oldest one looked no older than 21. Klaus looked down the hill at his comrades again, but he just couldn't muster the energy to follow them. He was tired of running, tired of fighting, tired of killing to survive. He took a piece on bandage from a dead soldier, mostly red with small bits of white cloth still coming through from under the blood, put down his rifle, and with the cloth in his left hand, cautiously raised his arms over his man-made defenses. He hadn't been shot at again, so that was a good sign. Slowly and shaking nervously, he stuck his head barely over the small wall. He could see the group of men with their rifles focused on him, but none of them was taking aim. With a little more confidence, he rose higher until he stood fully before them, arms bent at the elbow and hands in the air, offering himself to them.

The four young men looked at each other before one of them crept towards him, rifle still ready to fire. He reached into Klaus pockets, looking for a weapon and throwing aside any extra ammunition before he decided he was clean. Klaus put his hands behind his head and the man shoved him over to his three waiting partners. They looked at each other for a minute longer, saying something in English, before they made up their minds. Two of them kept going, while the other two stayed with Klaus. Using their rifles as prods, they forced him back towards the way they had come. It was a good mile-long hike through the sand before they reached the American HQ. Klaus could see more and more of these American troops moving into action. As they got even closer, he could see a large transport plane with its gigantic propellers spinning on a makeshift airfield. Behind that, there was a small square of sand, set off by a barbed wire fence, filled with

another 40 men, all of whom were wearing German uniforms. Klaus was led over to the group of his fellow captured soldiers and was thrown in with the rest of them, as one of his captors screamed "Got another one for ya!" to his fellow soldier. Klaus and the other men were lined up to face the rear of the plane as its large cargo door began to lower. They were all quickly hurried onto and sat down on the plane before more soldiers came by and placed cheap handcuffs on all of the captives. Without a word, all of the Americans got off the plane, and the door shut behind them. Klaus could feel as the plane took off and headed into the sky. As they leveled out, it finally occurred to Klaus what had happened. He was leaving Africa. His war was over.

Klaus spent the long plane trip in total silence, occasionally looking around at his fellow captives, but mostly looking back at his own thoughts. Everything began to sink in. No more fighting. No more desert. No more miserable sand and dirt. He didn't know where he was going, but it would be far away from there. He knew it would be far when the plane slowed and refueled. God, where were they going? The negative started to set in now. Where were they going? Would Klaus ever get to go home again? What would happen to him here? What about Katharina and his mother? What would happen to them? It all ran through his head as they continued along. It was a long flight, but Klaus couldn't sleep.

Several hours, seemingly days, after they took off, the plane began its descent somewhere over the continental United States. Klaus could see that it was dark outside, so he could not tell exactly where they were. Not that it would matter, as he couldn't tell one part of America from another in the first place. The plane touched down, and before

the door was even completely open, they were all herded off the plane. They were sent through a line where they were examined, recognized, and given a number, before being sent like cattle into one large, empty-looking building. From the hanging incandescent bulbs, Klaus could make out lines of beds and a shower room at the far end. Once they were all in, one of the guards yelled "Welcome home," and shut the massive doors behind them. He was right. This was going to be home for a long time. While the other men looked blankly at each other and at their surroundings, Klaus took advantage of the situation and claimed a bed for himself. While the others followed suit, Klaus purposely ignored them and lay down to sleep. He was too tired to care about them or where he was for that matter. Right now, it was time to rest.

Klaus found out quickly exactly where they were. Come daylight, they were in the fields. They had been taken to a POW camp in a place called Hattiesburg, Mississippi, which could best be described as humid and flat. All the prisoners were called out of their barracks and taken outside at least a mile or two away. There, they were all given shovels and hoes and put to work in a cotton field, planting and harvesting the crop. It was miserable work, and none of the men had done anything like it, as there were not exactly many cotton fields in Germany, but at least they were alive, Klaus thought. That was the most important thing.

That attitude quickly changed as the summer months came along. They were still working in the fields of cotton, as well as a few other crops, and it was as if they hadn't even scratched the surface. Now the days were getting longer and they were getting hotter as well. It wasn't nearly as hot as it had been in the African desert, but the

humidity in the air and the sticky feeling of spending all day in it made them about equal. They all took solace in their breaks, during which they got water and "food," if one could call it that. Klaus didn't feel too bad about the food because he could tell from the way they acted, the Americans didn't much like it either. He started picking up on their language and their mannerisms. After a while, he could make out a few words and figure out what they were talking about, which was helpful in learning what was going on in the rest of the world. He hoped he would hear news about their release, or even better, the end of the war, but he had no luck. At times, he would fall into a trance watching them talk, before one of them would notice him watching and not working and would quickly fix that problem.

As much as Klaus hated working out in the fields, he hated time in the camp even more. Every so often, all the prisoners would be taken to one big room with chairs and a screen in front of them. Klaus and his fellow captives watched as the screen was filled with images of death and destruction. Pictures and video clips were shown of mass graves being unearthed, the bodies of women and children being thrown into fires, and innocent civilians being executed. They were told that these were the doings of their precious Third Reich, that they were a part of this, and that they were just as guilty by association. Klaus did not want to watch this anymore. He averted his eyes and instead focused on the other men in the room. Some were doing the same; others were holding back tears or openly weeping, and some, including the guards, looked as if they were going to be physically ill. It was a dreadful scene, one that Klaus hoped he would never have to see again, but he wasn't so fortunate. This did not make sense to him, though. In all his time in the army and in Germany, he never saw anything like this. He had never

killed any innocent people, and he knew that none of his officers would ever have handed down such an order. Maybe this was some kind of trick. Maybe the Americans had forged these images to make the Germans look like mass murderers. No, that was impossible. These were all authentic all right, but how? Something just didn't sit right.

A year passed, and every day was pretty much the same. Wake up, go to work, eat, work some more, be told that you were a killer and your government was evil, eat again, go to sleep, and repeat. They got a reprieve from field labor in the winter months, but that was replaced with some other mindless task designed to keep them busy and productive. Klaus began to block out any type of emotion. So long as he didn't care, didn't know, didn't feel, then maybe, he could make it through this. He watched as other prisoners came and went. Some did the same and tried to become emotionless zombies, while others simply couldn't take it and took solace in a bed-sheet noose. Klaus didn't care anymore. Survive by any means necessary. That was all that mattered.

One day, in the spring of 1944, the remaining prisoners were huddled once again into a large room full of chairs. This time, however, there was no screen. There was a chalkboard. As they took their seats, a short, balding man made his way to the front of the room and stood beside the chalkboard. "Guten tag," he told them; his German was very good, and he had not butchered it as many of their other captors had done. He went on to say that unlike their previous experiences, this would be a learning experience. He said that over the next few weeks, he would be teaching them about America, American government, and American history. The goal, he said, was to show them that America

was a great country based on values and was not the great enemy that they thought they were. Many scoffed at this as an attempt at more propaganda, but they would soon be proven wrong. Over time, the man taught them a variety of things. He told them about democracy, about the Constitution, about the presidency, about the Bill of Rights, and about freedom. He told them about great people like George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Abraham Lincoln, and many, many more. As he had probably expected, some blew off his words as if they were nothing, but others took them to heart, including Klaus. Klaus hung on the man's every word during these lessons. He was fascinated by this history of a land that he barely knew existed. These ideas of freedom, democracy, free speech, rebelling against a tyrannical government all seemed to ring true as somehow proper and essential to Klaus. Maybe this America wasn't so bad after all. Maybe there was hope here yet.

Klaus kept this American ideal with him as he went out in the fields every day. To distract himself from the misery, he began thinking about what it would be like to live in America. He could imagine himself, his wife, and his mother all living in their own nice little college somewhere cool with their own large piece of land. It became a mental paradise for him. Maybe, he thought, once this was all over, he could move them all to America. It wouldn't be a bad place to live. What would Katharina and his mother say? What would his father say? Were Anna and Katharina still alive? Klaus was snapped out of his daydream by this horrible fact. What if his wife and mother were dead? No, they couldn't be. Klaus would not allow himself to think about that. They were still alive, they just had to be. Klaus couldn't allow them to die. They had to go on so that he could go on. They had to survive.

During his second year at the POW camp in Mississippi, Klaus began to pay more and more attention to news of the war from gossiping GIs. He heard about how the Americans had made advances in the Pacific. He heard that the war in the desert was over, that the German- Italian alliance had failed, but that Rommel had escaped. He heard about Allied invasions of France and Italy, and that Italy had fallen, and that they were now marching on Germany itself. All of these things bounced off Klaus like rubber. He didn't care who won the war anymore, as long as it ended and his loved ones were still alive. On event, however, did hurt. In October, 1944, word reached Mississippi that Erwin Rommel, the great Desert Fox and leader of the Afrika Korps, had been implicated in a plot to kill Hitler and had taken his own life. Klaus was silently inconsolable. Rommel had stood for everything he had believed in: his father, the war effort, courtesy and dignity. When Rommel died, for Klaus, all of that seemed to die as well. In his own private funeral service, Klaus walked out of the barracks into the yard and found a proper spot. He dug a small, shallow grave with his bare hands, reached to his right arm, and pulled off his armband. He stared at the precious cloth, the armband that stood for everything he fought for and everyone he fought with. Even when the order came from Hitler himself to change the armband, Klaus and many of his fellow veterans refused. Klaus felt the cloth in his hand one last time before he dropped it into the hole, and in one sweeping motion, covered it with dirt, never to be seen again.

Klaus awoke one day in May to find that the American GIs were in a much better mood than usual. Listening around, he found out why: Hitler had apparently killed

himself, the Soviets had taken Berlin, and the German government had surrendered. The war was over. "Finally," Klaus screamed in his head. He had survived, and now, he would get to go home. Sure enough, in June, Klaus and his fellow prisoners were put on trucks heading for the Mississippi coast. There, they would board a transport ship that would take them home to Germany. Klaus took his seat on the ship, completely oblivious to his fellow passengers. As the ship sounded its horn and left the dock, Klaus leaned his head back against the wall, closed his eyes and smiled. It was over. He was going home.

Spring, 1945

Klaus stumbled home from the Ravenhood train station, gazing around at his beloved country like a drunk. The once beautiful countryside had been turned into a warzone. The ground was riddled with craters from dropping Allied bombs. Forests showed clear signs of being burned, as once mighty pines were now little more than smoldering ash. He thought he heard gunshots every now and then, but that was just his imagination. The war was over now, and it was time to go home, if home was still there.

As Elmshaven came into view, Klaus expected to see smoking ruins of a once quaint city, but it was the complete opposite. Elmshaven looked no different now than it did the day he left. His spirits picked up some as he drew closer, but then he noticed the sad truth. Just outside the city, there was a makeshift cemetery, littered with a variety of graves. Names of civilians who had died because of the war, old and young, those who had died of starvation, and even those of soldiers who had died far away and had never come home graced the centers of the wooden crosses. Klaus bowed his head as if in silent prayer as he walked by. Walking into the city, faces of other people turned to shock as if they had seen a ghost. Klaus stared back at hem, examining the village as it all came back to him. Mercifully, he found, most of the city was still intact. He could see the corners of some buildings had become to crumble, either from battle or from pure old age, but the bulk was still the same. Best of all, his family's little house was still in prime condition, which he saw as it came into view. His long journey was almost at an end. He picked up a little speed as the brick abode came closer and closer. Then, the door swung open, and Katharina emerged, shaking out a dirty blanket. Klaus wanted to

scream out to her, but he never got the chance. She was about to turn back in when she looked up and some him coming. Her face froze in a look of shock as her husband slowly made his way home. She wanted to run out to him, but was still so amazed; everything didn't quite register. Instead, she cautiously stepped off the porch and walked toward him, matching his steady pace exactly. They approached each other like two long-lost friends who were not sure entirely who the other was. They were a foot apart when Katharina was positive it was her husband that stood before her. Simultaneously, she and Klaus threw out their arms and wrapped the other in a vice, never wanting to let go. Klaus took comfort on his wife's shoulder, listening as she wheezed and held back the tears. "I thought you were dead," she murmured. "For a while, so did I," he replied.

The two of them walked back to the house, each with an arm wrapped around the other. Klaus felt an enormous weight slide off his shoulders. He could finally stop, at least for a while. They crossed the threshold inside, almost like starting life anew, to find his mother in the kitchen, dirty dishes in her hands.

"He's alive," Katharina cried, and Anna emerged with a confused look on her face, but when she saw her son standing before her, still mostly in one piece, she dropped the plate to the ground and watched as it broke into a hundred pieces.

She stepped over the remnants and joined her children. The three of them locked arms into a living mass. They were a family again. Klaus was home. They led him back to the living room and forced him to have a seat on the couch, which Klaus did not mind in the slightest. They sat in silence before Anna finally asked the all-important questions. "How?" "Why?"

Klaus leaned back and began his story. He told them about landing in Africa. He told them about battle. He told them about each city they took, about Gazala, Tobruk, El Alamein, El Agheila, and all the others. He told about the triumphs, the defeats, the joy, and the pain. He told them about Gerhardt, about sacrifice, about fatigue, and about morale. He told them about Rommel, leadership, and revenge. He told them about surrender and Mississippi. He told them about horror and about learning. He told them of the return. He told them everything. All the while, they were entranced by his storytelling, still unable to fully grasp that he was back with them. He finished, and they did not hound him further. They could tell he was exhausted. They took him to his bedroom that he had not seen in nearly four years and all but forced him into bed. Anna pulled off his boots, while Katharina undid his jacket. They made him as comfortable as they could, while Klaus kept repeating that this was unnecessary, but his request fell on deaf ears. He got a kiss from both his wife and his mother before they left him alone. The door shut, and he could hear them whispering for a short while before he quickly fell asleep.

Klaus spent the next few days trying to readjust to civilian life. The steel mill was still there, and it had returned to pre-war production, but Klaus would not be working there anymore. His spot had been filled, and he wasn't exactly keen on returning there in the first place. He had bigger plans.

One day, while walking around town, he returned to the makeshift cemetery he had encountered upon his return. He started looking at the names and was greatly impacted by the number of them. Each cross had a name, a date, and a location of where the person had been killed. Klaus read off the places to himself: Egypt, France, Belgium,

Russia, and many more. He wasn't quite prepared for the next one, however. Staring back at him from one well-kept marker were the words "Klaus Schroder. March 1943. Africa." Immediately, a chill ran down Klaus's spine. Ironically, right next to his own, was a cross painted with "Gerhardt Weber. December 1941. Tobruk." Klaus half expected to see Max's name on the marker next to theirs, but it was some poor boy who had died in France. Klaus walked through the cemetery, searching for Max or even one member of his family, but with no luck. Then, he thought back to his time in the prison camp, to the pictures and films, to all the dead bodies, and suddenly, he knew. He slowly backed away from the chilling scene and went back home. He had a few questions to ask his wife.

"I found my grave today," Klaus declared ironically to Katharina. "Why is it there?"

"I told you, we thought you were dead. When we didn't hear from you anymore, we had to assume the worst. We only knew that you were in Africa, so that's what we put. It was the hardest thing I have ever had to do in my life."

"Well, don't worry. You won't have to worry about anything like that for a long time," he promised. "Now come on, and I'll help you get ready for dinner. I have something important to tell you afterwards."

After the three of them finished, all eyes turned to Klaus and his big announcement. Calmly, he moved his utensils aside, folded his hands on the table and began.

"I have been doing a lot of thinking recently. As good as it is to be home again, I don't think there is anything left here for me or you either. It's time we picked up and started our lives again, try to make it safe and simple again. This country will not have

that for a long time to come. That's why, after a lot of consideration, I want the three of us to move to America."

The two women's jaws hit the table.

"You're telling me," Katharina said in amazement, "that after being stuck in a prison camp in that country for two years and finally coming back home to your family, you want to go back there?! Why ?"

"Because there are things there that we will not know here. In the time I have been back, everywhere I look, there is death and destruction. This country is going to be miserable in the coming years, and do you really want to raise a family in all this? There is freedom, safety, calm, brotherhood there. I have seen it just from being around those people for a short time, and I tell you that life will be better for us there. It will take time for this country to get back to the way it was, and even now, I'm not so sure that will even happen. We have to think about our lives and our future. Trust me, this is for the best."

"I agree," Anna spoke up, surprising the younger two, "except for one thing. I'm not going with you."

"But you have to, Mama. This is just as much your future as it is ours."

"No, it is not. Listen to me very carefully. I have already had my chance at life, and from that I have two of the best people any woman could ever hope to have, but my time is over. I would not be able to fully enjoy this bright new future, but you two still have a chance. My life and my legacy are here. You can still make yours. I am begging you, please take this chance."

"It's settled then," Klaus proclaimed, paying no attention to his wife. "We are leaving for America."

Over the next few weeks, as they prepared to leave, Klaus eventually warmed Katharina up to the idea of a new life in America. They still had a decent sum of money from his soldier's pay, and once they arrived, he was sure he could get a job. He had picked up a small amount of English during his time in the prison camp, but it would be enough to get him by until he could learn more, and he could teach Katharina what he knew. They could find an apartment in one of the cities, which would suffice until they had enough money to get a house of their own. Klaus talked about it so much that they were both becoming very excited about the idea, as was Anna. Their date of departure came in early January of 1946. It was a new year and a perfect time to start a new life. Anna was still a little upset and even a little jealous that they were leaving, but she knew it was for the best. She bade them a fond farewell and made them promise not to ever look back, to which they both obliged. They left for the train station, leaving Anna as only a memory to both.

The couple took a train to the port city of Bremerhaven, where they boarded a former warship bound for the United States. They took comfort in seeing that many other people would be coming with them, whatever their reasons might be, but they still relied on each other for moral support. They spent the voyage in relative silence, speaking only when spoken to and keeping mainly to themselves.

One foggy morning, Klaus awoke from their cabin bed, and looking out their small, round window, could see the outline of a large statue with a raised arm towering over

them. Klaus shook Katharina from her slumber. They had arrived. They dressed, grabbed their luggage, which consisted of two large bags and one small bag, and ran to the top deck, just as the horn sounded to announce their arrival to New York City. Klaus and Katharina looked pleasantly at each other, then up at the city skyline that stretched far above their heads. The ship pulled into harbor, and they were two of the first people off the boat. Their feet hit the New York pavement, and they knew that their journey had now truly begun.

First things first, they had to find somewhere to live. They spent quite a while searching around this monstrous metropolis, which made Hamburg look like a hovel and Elmshaven even smaller, before they found what they were looking for. There was a small apartment available on the fourth floor of a fairly nice building in the Queens section of the city. The building's owner was from a German family that had moved to the city nearly 50 years before, and he was so happy to see other Germans moving in to the building that he gave them a nice price. That out of the way, the couple settled into their new, minimally furnished yet still livable space. The next day, Klaus would have to find a job.

Klaus woke with a feeling of hope and promise. They had gotten lucky getting a place to live. Maybe he would be that lucky getting a job.

He bought a newspaper from a man on the corner and immediately turned to the want ads, making mental notes of jobs he thought he could do. The first one he found was perfect: steel worker. Klaus started on his way.

The factory he came to was not much different from the one he had worked at back home. He would be a perfect fit. He found the man in charge and told him he was

interested in the job. The man was not exactly hospitable about the prospect, however, as they walked back to his office.

"What's your name?"

"Klaus Schroder."

"I see, Mr. Schroder. And what do you do, Mr. Schroder?"

"I worked in a steel mill very similar to this back in Germany," he said, in his best but still broken English.

"Okay, well let me see," the man said, shuffling through some paperwork. "Nope, I'm sorry. We don't have anything for ya."

"I'm sorry, but your ad said.."

"Look, you filthy Kraut, I told ya we ain't got nothing. Now get outta here!"

Klaus was angry and shocked as he turned and hurried out of the building. That was certainly not a pleasant experience, he thought. Maybe, things will get better the next time around. Unfortunately, he was wrong.

Klaus went through four more opportunities. Each one turned him down, each with a new insult to add. "Murderer. Kraut. We kicked your ass once, I'll do it again. You killed my brother. Butcher. Nazi." Each one took Klaus back a step. By the end of the day, he had nothing left as he stumbled back to his new apartment. Katharina met him at the door, expecting to hear the good news about how he had gotten a job, only to find him with a sad and aghast look on his face. He told her about everything that had happened to him that day. She was just as shocked as he was.

"I thought these people were supposed to be different, nice, accepting," she said.

"So did I."

Afraid of going through the same thing again, Klaus had to put his emotions aside and try again the next day. New York City would give him exactly what he expected. Each rejection hurt a little bit less than the last, as Klaus became used to it all. He even tried hiding his accent and going by Will, a shortened version of his middle name, but it didn't work. To many of these people, he was still an outsider.

Klaus was prepared for another slap in the face when he went to apply with a carpenter named Tom Laird, who was looking for a man competent enough to sand a few boards and apply a few coats of paint. He could do that, provided the boss would have him around. Almost defeated, he walked into the shop, which happened to be three blocks from where he lived. He asked around for Mr. Laird, but the man he found was not the aged man he was looking for. Mr. Laird was only a year or two younger than the 29-year-old Klaus, but was still clearly in charge, with the way he overlooked the operation from his second-level balcony office through his small, square glasses. With nothing to lose, Klaus made his way into the office.

"Mr. Laird?"

"Yes, may I help you?"

"My name is Klaus Schroder. I came to ask about the job you were offering."

"Ah, yes. Please, have a seat Mr…"

"Schroder. Thank you." Klaus was surprised. He hadn't been turned down or yelled at yet. Maybe things were turning around for him.

"So Mr. Schroder, do you have any experience doing this kind of thing?"

"No sir, but I am willing to learn. I'll do anything you need me to."

"So, what have you been doing for the past few years?"

Klaus almost didn't want to answer the question, but he had to. He folded his hands together and looked at the ground.

"I was in the war. I was a steel worker in northern Germany before I signed up and was stationed in Africa. After the war, my wife and I moved here."

"I see," Mr. Laird replied with a look of interest. "I had a cousin who was in the war as well. He was stationed somewhere in the Pacific. Oh well. What's done is done, I suppose. Now, on to business. I think I can get you a job starting at $1.50 an hour. How does that sound?"

"Wonderful," Klaus replied, not fully realizing how much that was. He was still thrilled that he was actually being offered a job.

"Good. Be here at 7:30 tomorrow morning, and we'll get you started. I look forward to working with you."

"Thank you very much, Mr. Laird," Klaus said, extending his hand. "I promise you won't be disappointed."

Klaus walked home with a spring in his step. He didn't know exactly what he'd be doing, but he had a job, and that was all that mattered. He threw open his apartment door and swept Katharina off her feet as he told her the news. She too was overjoyed. Suddenly, the future seemed a little bit better, and that bright promise that a better tomorrow offered in America seemed a little bit closer at hand.

The job was a little awkward at first, but Klaus got used to it pretty quickly. He learned that Mr. Laird had a business degree from the University of Virginia and had

inherited the shop from his uncle who had died and did not have any children of his own. He was young, but he had a lot of business sense. In less than a year, he had more than tripled the company's clientele and was also in the process of striking a deal with a local restaurant chain to help them build two new locations. This was surprising, considering that not many people worked there. Apart from Klaus, there were only about 25 other people who did a variety of tasks, from designing and shaping to construction and shipping. Klaus got along well with most of them, except for one: a man named Alan. Naturally, on his first day at work, Klaus was the center of attention for his coworkers. They asked him a variety of questions about his background and his hobbies, but Klaus didn't like to talk about it. He only gave them short answers about his time in Germany and where he had been in the war. When word got out that he had been in the German army during the war, everyone began to treat him with a bit of silent apprehension, except for Alan. Alan, who was one of the designers, treated him with outright hostility. He didn't like the idea of having to work with some anti-American bum who had just walked in off the street and had gotten a job. Something about that just didn't sit right with him. Maybe he had some hidden anger issue, but whatever it was, he took it out on Klaus. He constantly called him out and picked on him, making some parts of the day simply miserable. All the other workers stood by as Klaus endured the verbal blows the only way he could: with complete silence. Eventually, Alan would let up. The jokes and comments he made weren't as good as they used to be. Men that used to ignore it all now stood up for Klaus when Alan said something. Alan would make a comment, and someone would respond with a "knock it off" or a "cut it out." After a while, no one liked Alan, and he could tell. He left to find a new job, leaving the rest of them in peace.

Klaus loved his new life, over all. He had a steady job, a nice apartment, and his lovely wife. That wouldn't be all, as he would soon find out. He came home after work, tired from a hard eight hours, to find his Katharina in an abnormally pleasant mood.

"Oh Klaus, I have wonderful news!"

"You won the lottery, and I don't have to work again?"

"Better than that. Klaus… I'm pregnant."

The two words Klaus hadn't expected to hear, but couldn't be happier about. He looked up through the ceiling to the heavens and said a silent prayer of thanks before giving out a fully audible cheer that God could hear as well. This was the best thing that could happen to him, no matter what. He immediately thought of all the things that he would get to do with his own son or daughter that he had never gotten to do with his father, but the list was so long that he couldn't comprehend it all.

"And I've already picked out a name for him."

"Him? How do you know it's a boy?"

"I don't know. I just have a feeling."

"O.K., Katharina, what name did you have in mind?"

"Robert Kent Schroder."

"Robert? That's a very American name, don't you think?"

"So? Don't you like it?"

"I love it," Klaus replied, taking his wife in his arms. An American name in an American world. It worked. Klaus couldn't be happier. His son hadn't even been born yet, and already, his American dream had fully and finally come true.

Fall, 2001

Fifty-five years passed after they moved to New York City, and not a lot changed. Klaus and Katharina never moved out of their fourth-floor apartment in Queens, although their neighbors came and went. Robert was born in September of 1946, a healthy and happy boy, but quickly grew up, married, and had two children of his own when he and his wife moved to Pittsburgh. Klaus never stopped working for Mr. Laird, but he did get promoted. He picked up skills from some of the other men he worked with and made good use of them, becoming one of the specialized craftsmen, working on some of the company's special projects. He spent another 40 years working as a carpenter in the same shop, retiring only two years after Mr. Laird himself called it quits. His history was rarely if ever brought up again, unless one of Robert's friends asked about the subject for a history paper or just to hear the stories, but that did not mean he didn't think about it.

Klaus only went back to Elmshaven one time after he left, and that was in 1972. He had gotten the call that his mother had taken ill, and for the only time in his career, he took time off of work and took Katharina back home. It was surreal going back home. The country had rebuilt itself, or at least that area had. Elmshaven was still in West Germany, so Klaus could not vouch for the East. It was much different from the smoldering, crumbling rock pile Klaus and Katharina had left behind so many years before. There were paved roads, cars, and electricity in places where there was once no sign of technology or civilization whatsoever. The whole city had changed, except for one little house in the middle of town that Klaus knew all too well. Coming home was

bittersweet. It was the first time he had seen his mother in many years, but the woman he found in the bedroom could not have been his mother. She had grown older than she had in the first half of her life. The color had gone entirely from her hair, leaving it short and ivory white. She had become small and feeble, barely able to pull herself out of bed when her guests arrived, and her skin hung off her bones like a wet towel. The only things that still identified her were her green eyes, still shining faintly like a candle in the night. Klaus and Katharina were almost afraid to touch her for fear they might break her, but Anna mustered up her strength to give them both the biggest hug she could. Then, she broke the news. The doctor had come by a few days before and had not given her long. Klaus offered to take her to a hospital or even a different doctor, but Anna would not hear of it. She knew that her time had come. She only wanted the two people closest to her near in her last moments. Klaus and Katharina spent nearly a week staying with her, each running out to get anything Anna needed to make her more comfortable, hardly eating or sleeping themselves. On Thursday night, Klaus stayed up late, watching his mother sleep as Katharina dozed off in the chair beside him. He was about to nod off as well when his mother slowly opened her eyes. She looked over at him and lifted her hand, beckoning him over to her. She took his hand and stared at him, almost as if she wanted to say something, but she never said a word. She only smiled at him sadly, squeezed his hand, and closed her eyes one last time. Klaus sat in silence as his mother's spirit seemingly left the room, sad that she was gone, but happy that she was at rest and would get to see her husband again. The funeral was two days later, and apart from Klaus and Katharina, only the ghosts of the past attended. She was laid to rest in the cemetery that years before had not held any hopes of Klaus's return.

The biggest change came to Klaus and Katharina themselves. They also succumbed to the ravages of time. She aged much the way Klaus's mother had, while Klaus got himself a little bit of a gut and all but lost his hair. Neither was in the shape that they had been in years before. Both were slower and neither was as before. Katharina used to spend her spare time drawing, but her hands had become so sore that she couldn't hold a pencil for long periods of time anymore. Klaus had loved to do the crossword puzzles in *The New York Times*, but his mind had started to go. Nowadays, he could only get about half the puzzle done before he didn't know any more of the answers. They both spent their time enjoying each other's company, which was spent either watching TV or reading any book that they hadn't already read. They happened to be watching TV on a sunny September morning in 2001 when the New York City skyline came on as it had so many times before. This time wasn't happy. This wasn't the normal skyline that they had seen so many times before. There was something wrong. They watched after the first plane, the second plane, the third and fourth planes, and the collapse. They looked out the window and could hear the rumbling and see the smoke on the horizon. They looked back at each other and then back out the window, staring out the window with feelings of mild déjà vu.

A week later, with the country full of shock, anger, and die-hard patriotism, Klaus was leaving his apartment to go down the four floors, out, and down a block to the store for a gallon of milk. He had just shut the door when he saw two men standing at the end of the hallway. One was an average guy, a little over six feet tall, wearing a white shirt under a flannel shirt with ripped sleeves, jeans, and a Knicks hat on backwards. The other man was slightly shorter and was entirely different. His skin was dark, almost the color of

chestnut. He was clearly older than the first man, as was evident by the grey streaks in his long, otherwise black beard, which stood in stark contrast to his white and gold tunic. They were arguing. Klaus couldn't make out everything they were saying, but he picked up a few words and phrases. "Murderer. Killer. Terrorist. It's your fault. You people. You killed them. You all deserve what you get." The second man nervously tried to escape the scene as the first man continuously berated him. Klaus only watched on in shock before the first man shoved the other and went on his way. Klaus turned around, jumped back into the apartment, and slammed the door. Katharina popped her head out of the kitchen. "Back so soon?" she asked, but Klaus didn't say anything. He shuffled over to his chair, plopped down in it, put his face in his hand, and began to sob. His entire life, the full 84 years, ran through his mind like a screaming train. School, friends, training, his wedding, battle, death, prison, moving, working, children, retirement, and the last five minutes all appeared so vividly. Katharina came and stood right beside him. "What's wrong?"

Tears in his eyes, Klaus looked up at her and replied, "I was. We all were."

THE END

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