

The sky in Berlin was the color of Papa's old socks, a dull gray that mirrored the rumble in my tummy. Mama said it was HUNGER, a BIG BAD WOOLIE MONSTER living in my belly, rent free. He liked to growl every hour, especially when the smell of FRAULEIN SCHMITT'S SAUSAGE SOUP wafted from next door. But Fraulein Schmitt said HUNGER was "not welcome at her dinner table," even if her soup looked like GOLD COINS swimming in sunshine.

Papa used to bring home GOLD COINS, lots of them, enough to buy enough SAUSAGE SOUP to drown even HUNGER. But then came the BOOM BOMS, loud monsters spitting FIREWORKS in the night. They took Papa away, and when he came back, his smile was lost at sea, replaced by wrinkles deep as the Grand Canyon. Mama said the BOOM BOMS had made Papa "SICK in the head," but I knew better. The BOOM BOMS brought the BAD MEN with PAPERS filled with MEAN WORDS. They took our land, sliced it like Mama's APPLE PIE, and said it was "PUNISHMENT" for the BOOM BOMS.

PUNISHMENT was a new one. It sounded like a prickly CACTUS stuck in your behind, making you WIGGLE and WHINE. The MEAN WORDS said we had to pay them a MOUNTAIN of GOLD COINS, more than all the FRAULEIN SCHMITTS in the world could make in a lifetime. Mama cried when she read the PAPERS, tears BIG like Papa's calloused hands. The HUNGER MONSTER roared with glee, doing jumping jacks in my tummy.

To pay the MOUNTAIN, Papa's factory coughed and died. No more whirring machines, no more men in BLUE OVERALLS singing silly songs. Mama had to sell her PEARL NECKLACE, the one Nana gave her on her WEDDING DAY. It shimmered like moonlight on the Spree, but Mama traded it for a measly sack of FLOUR. The FLOUR made PANCAKES, flat and gray like the Berlin sky, but HUNGER gobbled them up in one bite, leaving only a grumpy rumble.

One day, a MAN with a VOICE like a GRUMPY DONKEY came to our door. He had PAPERS saying Papa owed him MORE GOLD COINS, for the shoes he lost in the BOOM BOMS, for the window Mama had to break when the BREAD ran out. The DONKEY MAN took Papa's GOLD WATCH, the one with the ENGRAVED RABBIT that hopped every hour. Papa cried, big FAT TEARS that plopped onto the floor like raindrops. I hugged his knees, whispering, "Don't worry, Papa. We'll find GOLD COINS in the clouds!"

He laughed, a hollow sound like wind chimes in a storm. "No, my little Liebling," he said, his voice rough as sandpaper. "But maybe, just maybe, we can build something better from these ashes. Something with more HEART than GOLD."

I didn't understand HEART then, but I knew it was important. Papa started a GARDEN in the bombed-out lot next door. He planted CARROTS like ORANGE SUNSHINE and TOMATOES like RED BALLOONS. Mama traded her SAPPHIRE RING for a milk cow, and soon, we had MILK WHISKERS on our noses and BUTTERFLY SMILES on our faces. The HUNGER MONSTER still grumbled, but he wasn't the BOSS anymore.

Years passed, slow as a SLUGG on sleeping pills. The sky in Berlin got a little brighter, like someone had rubbed it with a MAGIC ERASER. Papa's GARDEN blossomed, a riotous tapestry of COLORS and SMELLS. We shared our bounty with Fraulein Schmitt and the DONKEY MAN, who turned out to be a lonely fellow with a fondness for APPLE PIE.

The BAD MEN eventually came back, with new MEAN WORDS on their PAPERS. But this time, we were ready. We sang and danced in the streets, a CHORUS of defiant HUMMINGBIRDS. We showed them our GARDEN, our COMMUNITY, our HEARTS beating strong as SUN DRUMS. The BAD MEN, surprised by the JOY, by the sheer WILL to LIVE, slinked away like shadows in the morning.

I don't know if Germany ever found all the GOLD COINS the BOOM BOMS stole. But we found something more precious: the magic that grows from the ground, the strength that blooms in shared stories, and the unshakeable belief that even the GRUMPIEST DONKEY MAN can be softened with a warm slice of APPLE PIE. And that, my dear, is a GOLD MINE that no PUNISHMENT can ever take away.