

THE BOOK THIEF

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DEATH AND CHOCOLATE

First the colors.

Then the humans.

That's usually how I see things.

Or at least, how I try.

* * * HERE IS A SMALL FACT * * *

You are going to die.

I am in all truthfulness attempting to be cheerful about this whole topic, though most people find themselves hindered in believing me, no matter my protestations. Please, trust me. I most definitely *can* be cheerful. I can be amiable. Agreeable. Affable. And that's only the A's. Just don't ask me to be nice. Nice has nothing to do with me.

* * * REACTION TO THE * * *
AFOREMENTIONED FACT

Does this worry you?

I urge you—don't be afraid.

I'm nothing if not fair.

—Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A color will be perched on my shoulder. I will carry you gently away.

At that moment, you will be lying there (I rarely find people standing up). You will be caked in your own body. There might be a discovery; a scream will dribble down the air. The only sound I'll hear after that will be my own breathing, and the sound of the smell, of my footsteps.

The question is, what color will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?

Personally, I like a chocolate-colored sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every color I see—the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavors, none of them quite the same, and a sky to slowly suck on. It takes the edge off the stress. It helps me relax.

* * * A SMALL THEORY * * *

People observe the colors of a day only at its beginnings and ends, but to me it's quite clear that a day merges through a multitude of shades and intonations, with each passing moment. A single *hour* can consist of thousands of different colors. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses.

In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

As I've been alluding to, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been

performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style vacation destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision—to make distraction my vacation. Needless to say, I vacation in increments. In colors.

Still, it's possible that you might be asking, why does he even need a vacation? What does he need distraction *from*?

Which brings me to my next point.

It's the leftover humans.

The survivors.

They're the ones I can't stand to look at, although on many occasions I still fail. I deliberately seek out the colors to keep my mind off them, but now and then, I witness the ones who are left behind, crumbling among the jigsaw puzzle of realization, despair, and surprise. They have punctured hearts. They have beaten lungs.

Which in turn brings me to the subject I am telling you about tonight, or today, or whatever the hour and color. It's the story of one of those perpetual survivors—an expert at being left behind.

It's just a small story really, about, among other things:

* A girl

* Some words

* An accordionist

* Some fanatical Germans

* A Jewish fist fighter

* And quite a lot of thievery

I saw the book thief three times.

BESIDE THE RAILWAY LINE

First up is something white. Of the blinding kind.

Some of you are most likely thinking that white is not really a color and all of that tired sort of nonsense. Well, I'm here to tell you that it is. White is without question a color, and personally, I don't think you want to argue with me.

* * * AREASSURING ANNOUNCEMENT * * *

Please, be calm, despite that previous threat.

I am all bluster—

I am not violent.

I am not malicious.

I am a result.

Yes, it was white.

It felt as though the whole globe was dressed in snow. Like it had pulled it on, the way you pull on a sweater. Next to the train line, footprints were sunken to their shins. Trees wore blankets of ice.

As you might expect, someone had died.

They couldn't just leave him on the ground. For now, it wasn't such a problem, but very soon, the track ahead would be cleared and the train would need to move on.

There were two guards.

There was one mother and her daughter.

One corpse.

The mother, the girl, and the corpse remained stubborn and silent.

"Well, what else do you want me to do?"

The guards were tall and short. The tall one always spoke first, though he was not in charge. He looked at the smaller, rounder one. The one with the juicy red face.

"Well," was the response, "we can't just leave them like this, can we?"

The tall one was losing patience. "Why not?"

And the smaller one damn near exploded. He looked up at the tall one's chin and cried, "*Spinnst du?!* Are you stupid?!" The abhorrence on his cheeks was growing thicker by the moment. His skin widened. "Come on," he said, traipsing over the snow. "We'll carry all three of them back on if we have to. We'll notify the next stop."

As for me, I had already made the most elementary of mistakes. I can't explain to you the severity of my self-disappointment. Originally, I'd done everything right:

I studied the blinding, white-snow sky who stood at the window of the moving train. I practically *inhaled* it, but still, I wavered. I buckled—I became interested. In the girl. Curiosity got the better of me, and I resigned myself to stay as long as my schedule allowed, and I watched.

Twenty-three minutes later, when the train was stopped, I climbed out with them.

A small soul was in my arms.

I stood a little to the right.

The dynamic train guard duo made their way back to the mother, the girl, and the small male corpse. I clearly remember that my breath was loud that day. I'm surprised the guards didn't notice me as they walked by. The world was sagging now, under the weight of all that snow.

Perhaps ten meters to my left, the pale, empty-stomached girl was standing, frost-stricken.

Her mouth jittered.

Her cold arms were folded.

Tears were frozen to the book thief's face.

THE ECLIPSE

Next is a signature black, to show the poles of my versatility, if you like. It was the darkest moment before the dawn.

This time, I had come for a man of perhaps twenty-four years of age. It was a beautiful thing in some ways. The plane was still coughing. Smoke was leaking from both its lungs.

When it crashed, three deep gashes were made in the earth. Its wings were now sawn-off arms. No more flapping. Not for this metallic little bird.

* * * SOME OTHER SMALL FACTS * * *

Sometimes I arrive too early.

I rush,
and some people cling longer
to life than expected.

After a small collection of minutes, the smoke exhausted itself. There was nothing left to give.

A boy arrived first, with cluttered breath and what appeared to be a toolbox. With great trepidation, he approached the cockpit and watched the pilot, gauging if he was alive, at which point, he still was. The book thief arrived perhaps thirty seconds later.

Years had passed, but I recognized her.

She was panting.

From the toolbox, the boy took out, of all things, a teddy bear.

He reached in through the torn windshield and placed it on the pilot's chest. The smiling bear sat huddled among the crowded wreckage of the man and the blood. A few minutes later, I took my chance. The time was right.

I walked in, loosened his soul, and carried it gently away.

All that was left was the body, the dwindling smell of smoke, and the smiling teddy bear.

As the crowd arrived in full, things, of course, had changed. The horizon was beginning to charcoal. What was left of the blackness above was nothing now but a scribble, and disappearing fast.

The man, in comparison, was the color of bone. Skeleton-colored skin. A ruffled uniform. His eyes were cold and brown—like coffee stains—and the last scrawl from above formed what, to me, appeared an odd, yet familiar, shape. A signature.

The crowd did what crowds do.

As I made my way through, each person stood and played with the quietness of it. It was a small concoction of disjointed hand movements, muffled sentences, and mute, self-conscious turns.

When I glanced back at the plane, the pilot's open mouth appeared to be smiling.

A final dirty joke.

Another human punch line.

He remained shrouded in his uniform as the graying light arm-wrestled the sky. As with many of the others, when I began my journey away, there seemed a quick shadow again, a final moment of eclipse—the recognition of another soul gone.

You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the colors that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies.

I've seen millions of them.

I've seen more eclipses than I care to remember.

THE FLAG

The last time I saw her was red. The sky was like soup, boiling and stirring. In some places, it was burned. There were black crumbs, and pepper, streaked across the redness.

Earlier, kids had been playing hopscotch there, on the street that looked like oil-stained pages. When I arrived, I could still hear the echoes. The feet tapping the road. The children-voices laughing, and the smiles like salt, but decaying fast.

Then, bombs.

This time, everything was too late.

The sirens. The cuckoo shrieks in the radio. All too late.

Within minutes, mounds of concrete and earth were stacked and piled. The streets were ruptured veins. Blood streamed till it was dried on the road, and the bodies were stuck there, like driftwood after the flood.

They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of souls.
Was it fate?

Misfortune?

Is that what glued them down like that?

Of course not.

Let's not be stupid.

It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs, thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds.

Yes, the sky was now a devastating, home-cooked red. The small German town had been flung apart one more time. Snowflakes of ash fell so *lovelily* you were tempted to stretch out your tongue to catch them, taste them. Only, they would have scorched your lips. They would have cooked your mouth.

Clearly, I see it.

I was just about to leave when I found her kneeling there.

A mountain range of rubble was written, designed, erected around her. She was clutching at a book.

Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. In hindsight, I see it so obviously on her face. She was dying for it—the safety of it, the home of it—but she could not move. Also, the basement didn't even exist anymore. It was part of the mangled landscape.

Please, again, I ask you to believe me.

I wanted to stop. To crouch down.

I wanted to say:

"I'm sorry, child."

But that is not allowed.

I did not crouch down. I did not speak.

Instead, I watched her awhile. When she was able to move, I followed her.

• • •

She dropped the book.

She knelt.

The book thief howled.

Her book was stepped on several times as the cleanup began, and although orders were given only to clear the mess of concrete, the girl's most precious item was thrown aboard a garbage truck, at which point I was compelled. I climbed aboard and took it in my hand, not realizing that I would keep it and view it several thousand times over the years. I would watch the places where we intersect, and marvel at what the girl saw and how she survived. That is the best I can do—watch it fall into line with everything else I spectated during that time.

When I recollect her, I see a long list of colors, but it's the three in which I saw her in the flesh that resonate the most. Sometimes I manage to float far above those three moments. I hang suspended, until a septic truth bleeds toward clarity.

That's when I see them formulate.

* * * THE COLORS * * *

RED: ███ WHITE: ○ BLACK: ✎

They fall on top of each other. The scribbled signature black, onto the blinding global white, onto the thick soupy red.

Yes, often, I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt—

an immense leap of an attempt—to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.

Here it is. One of a handful.

The Book Thief.

If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story.
I'll show you something.

PART ONE

the grave digger's handbook

featuring:

himmel street—the art of *saumensching*—an ironfisted
woman—a kiss attempt—jesse owens—
sandpaper—the smell of friendship—a heavyweight
champion—and the mother of all *watschens*

ARRIVAL ON HIMMEL STREET

That last time.

That red sky . . .

How does a book thief end up kneeling and howling and flanked by a man-made heap of ridiculous, greasy, cooked-up rubble?

Years earlier, the start was snow.

The time had come. For one.

* * * A SPECTACULARLY TRAGIC MOMENT * * *

A train was moving quickly.

It was packed with humans.

A six-year-old boy died in the third carriage.

The book thief and her brother were traveling down toward Munich, where they would soon be given over to foster parents. We now know, of course, that the boy didn't make it.

* * * HOW IT HAPPENED * * *

There was an intense spurt of coughing.

Almost an *inspired* spurt.

And soon after—nothing.

When the coughing stopped, there was nothing but the nothingness of life moving on with a shuffle, or a near-silent twitch. A suddenness found its way onto his lips then, which were a corroded brown color and peeling, like old paint. In desperate need of redoing.

Their mother was asleep.

I entered the train.

My feet stepped through the cluttered aisle and my palm was over his mouth in an instant.

No one noticed.

The train galloped on.

Except the girl.

With one eye open, one still in a dream, the book thief—also known as Liesel Meminger—could see without question that her younger brother, Werner, was now sideways and dead.

His blue eyes stared at the floor.

Seeing nothing.

Prior to waking up, the book thief was dreaming about the *Führer*, Adolf Hitler. In the dream, she was attending a rally at which he spoke, looking at the skull-colored part in his hair and the perfect square of his mustache. She was listening contentedly to the torrent of words spilling from his mouth. His sentences glowed in the light. In a quieter moment, he actually crouched down and smiled at her. She returned the smile and said, “*Guten Tag, Herr Führer. Wie geht's dir*

beut?” She hadn’t learned to speak too well, or even to read, as she had rarely frequented school. The reason for that she would find out in due course.

Just as the *Führer* was about to reply, she woke up.

It was January 1939. She was nine years old, soon to be ten.

Her brother was dead.

One eye open.

One still in a dream.

It would be better for a complete dream, I think, but I really have no control over that.

The second eye jumped awake and she caught me out, no doubt about it. It was exactly when I knelt down and extracted his soul, holding it limply in my swollen arms. He warmed up soon after, but when I picked him up originally, the boy’s spirit was soft and cold, like ice cream. He started melting in my arms. Then warming up completely. Healing.

For Liesel Meminger, there was the imprisoned stiffness of movement and the staggered onslaught of thoughts. *Es stimmt nicht.* This isn’t happening. This isn’t happening.

And the shaking.

Why do they always shake them?

Yes, I know, I know, I assume it has something to do with instinct. To stem the flow of truth. Her heart at that point was slippery and hot, and loud, so loud so loud.

Stupidly, I stayed. I watched.

Next, her mother.

She woke her up with the same distraught shake.

If you can’t imagine it, think clumsy silence. Think bits and pieces of floating despair. And drowning in a train.

• • •

Snow had been falling consistently, and the service to Munich was forced to stop due to faulty track work. There was a woman wailing. A girl stood numbly next to her.

In panic, the mother opened the door.

She climbed down into the snow, holding the small body.

What could the girl do but follow?

As you've been informed, two guards also exited the train. They discussed and argued over what to do. The situation was unsavory to say the least. It was eventually decided that all three of them should be taken to the next township and left there to sort things out.

This time, the train limped through the snowed-in country.

It hobbled in and stopped.

They stepped onto the platform, the body in her mother's arms.

They stood.

The boy was getting heavy.

Liesel had no idea where she was. All was white, and as they remained at the station, she could only stare at the faded lettering of the sign in front of her. For Liesel, the town was nameless, and it was there that her brother, Werner, was buried two days later. Witnesses included a priest and two shivering grave diggers.

* * * AN OBSERVATION * * *

A pair of train guards.

A pair of grave diggers.

When it came down to it, one of them called the shots.

The other did what he was told.

The question is, what if the *other* is a lot more than one?

Mistakes, mistakes, it's all I seem capable of at times.

For two days, I went about my business. I traveled the globe as always, handing souls to the conveyor belt of eternity. I watched them trundle passively on. Several times, I warned myself that I should keep a good distance from the burial of Liesel Meminger's brother. I did not heed my advice.

From miles away, as I approached, I could already see the small group of humans standing frigidly among the wasteland of snow. The cemetery welcomed me like a friend, and soon, I was with them. I bowed my head.

Standing to Liesel's left, the grave diggers were rubbing their hands together and whining about the snow and the current digging conditions. "So hard getting through all the ice," and so forth. One of them couldn't have been more than fourteen. An apprentice. When he walked away, after a few dozen paces, a black book fell innocuously from his coat pocket without his knowledge.

A few minutes later, Liesel's mother started leaving with the priest. She was thanking him for his performance of the ceremony.

The girl, however, stayed.

Her knees entered the ground. Her moment had arrived.

Still in disbelief, she started to dig. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't be dead. He couldn't—

Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.

Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.

Somewhere in all the snow, she could see her broken heart, in two pieces. Each half was glowing, and beating under all that white. She realized her mother had come back for her only when she felt the boniness of a hand on her shoulder. She was being dragged away. A warm scream filled her throat.

* * * A SMALL IMAGE, PERHAPS * * *
TWENTY METERS AWAY

When the dragging was done, the mother and
the girl stood and breathed.

There was something black and rectangular
lodged in the snow.
Only the girl saw it.

She bent down and picked it up and
held it firmly in her fingers.
The book had silver writing on it.

They held hands.

A final, soaking farewell was let go of, and they turned and left the cemetery, looking back several times.

As for me, I remained a few moments longer.
I waved.
No one waved back.

Mother and daughter vacated the cemetery and made their way toward the next train to Munich.

Both were skinny and pale.
Both had sores on their lips.
Liesel noticed it in the dirty, fogged-up window of the train when

they boarded just before midday. In the written words of the book thief herself, the journey continued like *everything* had happened.

When the train pulled into the *Bahnhof* in Munich, the passengers slid out as if from a torn package. There were people of every stature, but among them, the poor were the most easily recognized. The impoverished always try to keep moving, as if relocating might help. They ignore the reality that a new version of the same old problem will be waiting at the end of the trip—the relative you cringe to kiss.

I think her mother knew this quite well. She wasn't delivering her children to the higher echelons of Munich, but a foster home had apparently been found, and if nothing else, the new family could at least feed the girl and the boy a little better, and educate them properly.

The boy.

Liesel was sure her mother carried the memory of him, slung over her shoulder. She dropped him. She saw his feet and legs and body slap the platform.

How could that woman walk?
How could she move?

That's the sort of thing I'll never know, or comprehend—what humans are capable of.

She picked him up and continued walking, the girl clinging now to her side.

Authorities were met and questions of lateness and the boy raised their vulnerable heads. Liesel remained in the corner of the small, dusty office as her mother sat with clenched thoughts on a very hard chair.

There was the chaos of goodbye.
It was a goodbye that was wet, with the girl's head buried into the

woolly, worn shallows of her mother's coat. There had been some more dragging.

Quite a way beyond the outskirts of Munich, there was a town called Molching, said best by the likes of you and me as "Molking." That's where they were taking her, to a street by the name of Himmel.

* * * A TRANSLATION * * *

Himmel = Heaven

Whoever named Himmel Street certainly had a healthy sense of irony. Not that it was a living hell. It wasn't. But it sure as hell wasn't heaven, either.

Regardless, Liesel's foster parents were waiting.

The Hubermanns.

They'd been expecting a girl and a boy and would be paid a small allowance for having them. Nobody wanted to be the one to tell Rosa Hubermann that the boy didn't survive the trip. In fact, no one ever really wanted to tell her anything. As far as dispositions go, hers wasn't really enviable, although she had a good record with foster kids in the past. Apparently, she'd straightened a few out.

For Liesel, it was a ride in a car.

She'd never been in one before.

There was the constant rise and fall of her stomach, and the futile hopes that they'd lose their way or change their minds. Among it all, her thoughts couldn't help turning toward her mother, back at the *Bahnhof*, waiting to leave again. Shivering. Bundled up in that useless coat. She'd be eating her nails, waiting for the train. The platform would be long and uncomfortable—a slice of cold ce-

ment. Would she keep an eye out for the approximate burial site of her son on the return trip? Or would sleep be too heavy?

The car moved on, with Liesel dreading the last, lethal turn.

The day was gray, the color of Europe.

Curtains of rain were drawn around the car.

"Nearly there." The foster care lady, Frau Heinrich, turned around and smiled. "*Dein neues Heim*. Your new home."

Liesel made a clear circle on the dribbled glass and looked out.

* * * A PHOTO OF HIMMEL STREET * * *

The buildings appear to be glued together, mostly small houses and apartment blocks that look nervous.

There is murky snow spread out like carpet.

There is concrete, empty hat-stand trees, and gray air.

A man was also in the car. He remained with the girl while Frau Heinrich disappeared inside. He never spoke. Liesel assumed he was there to make sure she wouldn't run away or to force her inside if she gave them any trouble. Later, however, when the trouble did start, he simply sat there and watched. Perhaps he was only the last resort, the final solution.

After a few minutes, a very tall man came out. Hans Hubermann, Liesel's foster father. On one side of him was the medium-height Frau Heinrich. On the other was the squat shape of Rosa Hubermann, who looked like a small wardrobe with a coat thrown over it. There was a distinct waddle to her walk. Almost cute, if it wasn't for her face, which was like creased-up cardboard and annoyed, as if she was merely tolerating all of it. Her husband walked straight, with a cigarette smoldering between his fingers. He rolled his own.

• • •
The fact was this:

Liesel would not get out of the car.

"Was ist los mit dem Kind?" Rosa Hubermann inquired. She said it again. "What's wrong with this child?" She stuck her face inside the car and said, "Na, komm. Komm."

The seat in front was flung forward. A corridor of cold light invited her out. She would not move.

Outside, through the circle she'd made, Liesel could see the tall man's fingers, still holding the cigarette. Ash stumbled from its edge and lunged and lifted several times until it hit the ground. It took nearly fifteen minutes to coax her from the car. It was the tall man who did it.

Quietly.

There was the gate next, which she clung to.

A gang of tears trudged from her eyes as she held on and refused to go inside. People started to gather on the street until Rosa Hubermann swore at them, after which they reversed back, whence they came.

* * * A TRANSLATION OF * * *
ROSA HUBERMANN'S ANNOUNCEMENT
"What are you assholes looking at?"

Eventually, Liesel Meminger walked gingerly inside. Hans Hubermann had her by one hand. Her small suitcase had her by the other. Buried beneath the folded layer of clothes in that suitcase was a small black book, which, for all we know, a fourteen-year-old grave

digger in a nameless town had probably spent the last few hours looking for. "I promise you," I imagine him saying to his boss, "I have no idea what happened to it. I've looked everywhere. Everywhere!" I'm sure he would never have suspected the girl, and yet, there it was—a black book with silver words written against the ceiling of her clothes:

* * * THE GRAVE DIGGER'S HANDBOOK * * *
A Twelve-Step Guide to
Grave-Digging Success
Published by the Bayern Cemetery Association

The book thief had struck for the first time—the beginning of an illustrious career.

GROWING UP A SAUMENSCH

Yes, an illustrious career.

I should hasten to admit, however, that there was a considerable hiatus between the first stolen book and the second. Another noteworthy point is that the first was stolen from snow and the second from fire. Not to omit that others were also given to her. All told, she owned fourteen books, but she saw her story as being made up predominantly of ten of them. Of those ten, six were stolen, one showed up at the kitchen table, two were made for her by a hidden Jew, and one was delivered by a soft, yellow-dressed afternoon.

When she came to write her story, she would wonder exactly when the books and the words started to mean not just something, but everything. Was it when she first set eyes on the room with shelves and shelves of them? Or when Max Vandenburg arrived on Himmel Street carrying handfuls of suffering and Hitler's *Mein Kampf*? Was it reading in the shelters? The last parade to Dachau? Was it *The Word Shaker*? Perhaps there would never be a precise answer as to when and where it occurred. In any case, that's getting ahead of myself. Before we make it to any of that, we first need to tour

Liesel Meminger's beginnings on Himmel Street and the art of *saumensching*:

Upon her arrival, you could still see the bite marks of snow on her hands and the frosty blood on her fingers. Everything about her was undernourished. Wirelike shins. Coat hanger arms. She did not produce it easily, but when it came, she had a starving smile.

Her hair was a close enough brand of German blond, but she had dangerous eyes. Dark brown. You didn't really want brown eyes in Germany around that time. Perhaps she received them from her father, but she had no way of knowing, as she couldn't remember him. There was really only one thing she knew about her father. It was a label she did not understand.

* * * A STRANGE WORD * * *
Kommunist

She'd heard it several times in the past few years.

"Communist."

There were boardinghouses crammed with people, rooms filled with questions. And that word. That strange word was always there somewhere, standing in the corner, watching from the dark. It wore suits, uniforms. No matter where they went, there it was, each time her father was mentioned. She could smell it and taste it. She just couldn't spell or understand it. When she asked her mother what it meant, she was told that it wasn't important, that she shouldn't worry about such things. At one boardinghouse, there was a healthier woman who tried to teach the children to write, using charcoal on the wall. Liesel was tempted to ask her the meaning, but it never

eventuated. One day, that woman was taken away for questioning. She didn't come back.

When Liesel arrived in Molching, she had at least some inkling that she was being saved, but that was not a comfort. If her mother loved her, why leave her on someone else's doorstep? Why? Why?

Why?

The fact that she knew the answer—if only at the most basic level—seemed beside the point. Her mother was constantly sick and there was never any money to fix her. Liesel knew that. But that didn't mean she had to accept it. No matter how many times she was told that she was loved, there was no recognition that the proof was in the abandonment. Nothing changed the fact that she was a lost, skinny child in another foreign place, with more foreign people. Alone.

The Hubermanns lived in one of the small, boxlike houses on Himmel Street. A few rooms, a kitchen, and a shared outhouse with neighbors. The roof was flat and there was a shallow basement for storage. It was supposedly not a basement of *adequate depth*. In 1939, this wasn't a problem. Later, in '42 and '43, it was. When air raids started, they always needed to rush down the street to a better shelter.

In the beginning, it was the profanity that made an immediate impact. It was so *vehement* and prolific. Every second word was either *Saumensch* or *Saukerl* or *Arschloch*. For people who aren't familiar with these words, I should explain. *Sau*, of course, refers to pigs. In the case of *Saumensch*, it serves to castigate, berate, or plain humiliate a female. *Saukerl* (pronounced "saukairl") is for a male. *Arschloch* can be translated directly into "asshole." That word, however, does not differentiate between the sexes. It simply is.

"*Saumensch, du dreckiges!*" Liesel's foster mother shouted that first evening when she refused to have a bath. "You filthy pig! Why won't you get undressed?" She was good at being furious. In fact, you could

say that Rosa Hubermann had a face decorated with constant fury. That was how the creases were made in the cardboard texture of her complexion.

Liesel, naturally, was bathed in anxiety. There was no way she was getting into any bath, or into bed for that matter. She was twisted into one corner of the closetlike washroom, clutching for the nonexistent arms of the wall for some level of support. There was nothing but dry paint, difficult breath, and the deluge of abuse from Rosa.

"Leave her alone." Hans Hubermann entered the fray. His gentle voice made its way in, as if slipping through a crowd. "Leave her to me."

He moved closer and sat on the floor, against the wall. The tiles were cold and unkind.

"You know how to roll a cigarette?" he asked her, and for the next hour or so, they sat in the rising pool of darkness, playing with the tobacco and the cigarette papers and Hans Hubermann smoking them.

When the hour was up, Liesel could roll a cigarette moderately well. She still didn't have a bath.

* * * SOME FACTS ABOUT * * *
HANS HUBERMANN

He loved to smoke.

The main thing he enjoyed about smoking
was the rolling.

He was a painter by trade and played the piano
accordion. This came in handy, especially in winter,
when he could make a little money playing in the pubs
of Molching, like the Knoller.

He had already cheated me in one world war but
would later be put into another (as a perverse

kind of reward), where he would somehow manage to avoid me again.

To most people, Hans Hubermann was barely visible. An un-special person. Certainly, his painting skills were excellent. His musical ability was better than average. Somehow, though, and I'm sure you've met people like this, he was able to appear as merely part of the background, even if he was standing at the front of a line. He was always just *there*. Not noticeable. Not important or particularly valuable.

The frustration of that appearance, as you can imagine, was its complete misleadence, let's say. There most definitely *was* value in him, and it did not go unnoticed by Liesel Meminger. (The human child—so much cannier at times than the stupefyingly ponderous adult.) She saw it immediately.

His manner.

The quiet air around him.

When he turned the light on in the small, callous washroom that night, Liesel observed the strangeness of her foster father's eyes. They were made of kindness, and silver. Like soft silver, melting. Liesel, upon seeing those eyes, understood that Hans Hubermann was worth a lot.

* * * SOME FACTS ABOUT * * * ROSA HUBERMANN

She was five feet, one inch tall and wore her browny gray strands of elastic hair in a bun.
To supplement the Hubermann income, she did the washing and ironing for five of the wealthier households in Molching.
Her cooking was atrocious.

She possessed the unique ability to aggravate almost anyone she ever met.

But she *did* love Liesel Meminger.

Her way of showing it just happened to be strange. It involved bashing her with wooden spoon and words at various intervals.

When Liesel finally had a bath, after two weeks of living on Himmel Street, Rosa gave her an enormous, injury-inducing hug. Nearly choking her, she said, "Saumensch, du dreckiges—it's about time!"

After a few months, they were no longer Mr. and Mrs. Hubermann. With a typical fistful of words, Rosa said, "Now listen, Liesel—from now on you call me Mama." She thought a moment. "What did you call your real mother?"

Liesel answered quietly. "Auch Mama—also Mama."

"Well, I'm Mama Number Two, then." She looked over at her husband. "And him over there." She seemed to collect the words in her hand, pat them together, and hurl them across the table. "That Saukerl, that filthy pig—you call him Papa, *verstehst?* Understand?"

"Yes," Liesel promptly agreed. Quick answers were appreciated in this household.

"Yes, *Mama*," Mama corrected her. "Saumensch. Call me Mama when you talk to me."

At that moment, Hans Hubermann had just completed rolling a cigarette, having licked the paper and joined it all up. He looked over at Liesel and winked. She would have no trouble calling him Papa.

As the years passed by, the Jews were being terrorized at random throughout the country, and in the spring of 1937, almost to his shame, Hans Hubermann finally submitted. He made some inquiries and applied to join the Party.

After lodging his form at the Nazi headquarters on Munich Street, he witnessed four men throw several bricks into a clothing store named Kleinmann's. It was one of the few Jewish shops that were still in operation in Molching. Inside, a small man was stuttering about, crushing the broken glass beneath his feet as he cleaned up. A star the color of mustard was smeared to the door. In sloppy lettering, the words JEWISH FILTH were spilling over at their edges. The movement inside tapered from hurried to morose, then stopped altogether.

Hans moved closer and stuck his head inside. "Do you need some help?"

Mr. Kleinmann looked up. A dust broom was fixed powerlessly to his hand. "No, Hans. Please. Go away." Hans had painted Joel Kleinmann's house the previous year. He remembered his three children. He could see their faces but couldn't recall their names.

"I will come tomorrow," he said, "and repaint your door."

Which he did.

It was the second of two mistakes.

The first occurred immediately after the incident.

He returned to where he'd come from and drove his fist onto the door and then the window of the NSDAP. The glass shuddered but no one replied. Everyone had packed up and gone home. A last member was walking in the opposite direction. When he heard the rattle of the glass, he noticed the painter.

He came back and asked what was wrong.

"I can no longer join," Hans stated.

The man was shocked. "Why not?"

Hans looked at the knuckles of his right hand and swallowed. He could already taste the error, like a metal tablet in his mouth. "Forget it." He turned and walked home.

Words followed him.

"You just think about it, Herr Hubermann. Let us know what you decide."

He did not acknowledge them.

The following morning, as promised, he rose earlier than usual, but not early enough. The door at Kleinmann's Clothing was still moist with dew. Hans dried it. He managed to match the color as close as humanly possible and gave it a good solid coat.

Innocuously, a man walked past.

"*Heil Hitler*," he said.

"*Heil Hitler*," Hans replied.

LIESEL'S LECTURE

Exactly what kind of people Hans and Rosa Hubermann were was not the easiest problem to solve. Kind people? Ridiculously ignorant people? People of questionable sanity?

What was easier to define was their predicament.

* * * THE SITUATION OF HANS AND * * * ROSA HUBERMANN

Very sticky indeed.
In fact, *frightfully* sticky.

When a Jew shows up at your place of residence in the early hours of morning, in the very birthplace of Nazism, you're likely to experience extreme levels of discomfort. Anxiety, disbelief, paranoia. Each plays its part, and each leads to a sneaking suspicion that a less than heavenly consequence awaits. The fear is shiny. Ruthless in the eyes.

The surprising point to make is that despite this iridescent fear

glowing as it did in the dark, they somehow resisted the urge for hysteria.

Mama ordered Liesel away.

"*Bett, Saumensch.*" The voice calm but firm. Highly unusual.

Papa came in a few minutes later and lifted the covers on the vacant bed.

"*Alles gut, Liesel?* Is everything good?"

"Yes, Papa."

"As you can see, we have a visitor." She could only just make out the shape of Hans Hubermann's tallness in the dark. "He'll sleep in here tonight."

"Yes, Papa."

A few minutes later, Max Vandenburg was in the room, noiseless and opaque. The man did not breathe. He did not move. Yet, somehow, he traveled from the doorway to the bed and was under the covers.

"Everything good?"

It was Papa again, talking this time to Max.

The reply floated from his mouth, then molded itself like a stain to the ceiling. Such was his feeling of shame. "Yes. Thank you." He said it again, when Papa made his way over to his customary position in the chair next to Liesel's bed. "Thank you."

Another hour passed before Liesel fell asleep.

She slept hard and long.

A hand woke her just after eight-thirty the next morning.

The voice at the end of it informed her that she would not be attending school that day. Apparently, she was sick.

When she awoke completely, she watched the stranger in the bed opposite. The blanket showed only a nest of lopsided hair at the top, and there was not a sound, as if he'd somehow trained himself even to

sleep more quietly. With great care, she walked the length of him, following Papa to the hall.

For the first time ever, the kitchen and Mama were dormant. It was a kind of bemused, inaugural silence. To Liesel's relief, it lasted only a few minutes.

There was food and the sound of eating.

Mama announced the day's priority. She sat at the table and said, "Now listen, Liesel. Papa's going to tell you something today." This was serious—she didn't even say *Saumensch*. It was a personal feat of abstinence. "He'll talk to you and you have to listen. Is that clear?"

The girl was still swallowing.

"Is that clear, *Saumensch*?"

That was better.

The girl nodded.

When she reentered the bedroom to fetch her clothes, the body in the opposite bed had turned and curled up. It was no longer a straight log but a kind of Z shape, reaching diagonally from corner to corner. Zigzagging the bed.

She could see his face now, in the tired light. His mouth was open and his skin was the color of eggshells. Whiskers coated his jaw and chin, and his ears were hard and flat. He had a small but misshapen nose.

"Liesel!"

She turned.

"Move it!"

She moved, to the washroom.

Once changed and in the hallway, she realized she would not be traveling far. Papa was standing in front of the door to the basement. He smiled very faintly, lit the lamp, and led her down.

• • •

Among the mounds of drop sheets and the smell of paint, Papa told her to make herself comfortable. Ignited on the walls were the painted words, learned in the past. "I need to tell you some things."

Liesel sat on top of a meter-tall heap of drop sheets, Papa on a fifteen-liter paint can. For a few minutes, he searched for the words. When they came, he stood to deliver them. He rubbed his eyes.

"Liesel," he said quietly, "I was never sure if any of this would happen, so I never told you. About me. About the man upstairs." He walked from one end of the basement to the other, the lamplight magnifying his shadow. It turned him into a giant on the wall, walking back and forth.

When he stopped pacing, his shadow loomed behind him, watching. Someone was always watching.

"You know my accordion?" he said, and there the story began.

He explained World War I and Erik Vandenburg, and then the visit to the fallen soldier's wife. "The boy who came into the room that day is the man upstairs. *Verstehst?* Understand?"

The book thief sat and listened to Hans Hubermann's story. It lasted a good hour, until the moment of truth, which involved a very obvious and necessary lecture.

"Liesel, you must listen." Papa made her stand up and held her hand.

They faced the wall.

Dark shapes and the practice of words.

Firmly, he held her fingers.

"Remember the *Führer's* birthday—when we walked home from the fire that night? Remember what you promised me?"

The girl concurred. To the wall, she said, "That I would keep a secret."

"That's right." Between the hand-holding shadows, the painted words were scattered about, perched on their shoulders, resting on their heads, and hanging from their arms. "Liesel, if you tell anyone about the man up there, we will all be in big trouble." He walked the fine line of scaring her into oblivion and soothing her enough to keep her calm. He fed her the sentences and watched with his metallic eyes. Desperation and placidity. "At the very least, Mama and I will be taken away." Hans was clearly worried that he was on the verge of frightening her too much, but he calculated the risk, preferring to err on the side of too much fear rather than not enough. The girl's compliance had to be an absolute, immutable fact.

Toward the end, Hans Hubermann looked at Liesel Meminger and made certain she was focused.

He gave her a list of consequences.

"If you tell anyone about that man . . ."

Her teacher.

Rudy.

It didn't matter whom.

What mattered was that all were punishable.

"For starters," he said, "I will take each and every one of your books—and I will burn them." It was callous. "I'll throw them in the stove or the fireplace." He was certainly acting like a tyrant, but it was necessary. "Understand?"

The shock made a hole in her, very neat, very precise.

Tears welled.

"Yes, Papa."

"Next." He had to remain hard, and he needed to strain for it. "They'll take you away from me. Do you want that?"

She was crying now, in earnest. "Nein."

"Good." His grip on her hand tightened. "They'll drag that man up there away, and maybe Mama and me, too—and we will never, ever come back."

And that did it.

The girl began to sob so uncontrollably that Papa was dying to pull her into him and hug her tight. He didn't. Instead, he squatted down and watched her directly in the eyes. He unleashed his quietest words so far. "*Verstehst du mich?*" Do you understand me?"

The girl nodded. She cried, and now, defeated, broken, her papa held her in the painted air and the kerosene light.

"I understand, Papa, I do."

Her voice was muffled against his body, and they stayed like that for a few minutes, Liesel with squashed breath and Papa rubbing her back.

Upstairs, when they returned, they found Mama sitting in the kitchen, alone and pensive. When she saw them, she stood and beckoned Liesel to come over, noticing the dried-up tears that streaked her. She brought the girl into her and heaped a typically rugged embrace around her body. "*Alles gut, Saumensch?*"

She didn't need an answer.

Everything was good.

But it was awful, too.