

limp body, trying to keep him from lolling back, until she needed to return him to the butchered ground. She did it gently.

Slow. Slow.

“God, Rudy . . .”

She leaned down and looked at his lifeless face and Liesel kissed her best friend, Rudy Steiner, soft and true on his lips. He tasted dusty and sweet. He tasted like regret in the shadows of trees and in the glow of the anarchist’s suit collection. She kissed him long and soft, and when she pulled herself away, she touched his mouth with her fingers. Her hands were trembling, her lips were fleshy, and she leaned in once more, this time losing control and misjudging it. Their teeth collided on the demolished world of Himmel Street.

She did not say goodbye. She was incapable, and after a few more minutes at his side, she was able to tear herself from the ground. It amazes me what humans can do, even when streams are flowing down their faces and they stagger on, coughing and searching, and finding.

* * * THE NEXT DISCOVERY * * *

The bodies of Mama and Papa,
both lying tangled in the gravel
bedsheet of Himmel Street

Liesel did not run or walk or move at all. Her eyes had scoured the humans and stopped hazily when she noticed the tall man and the short, wardrobe woman. That’s my mama. That’s my papa. The words were stapled to her.

“They’re not moving,” she said quietly. “They’re not moving.”

Perhaps if she stood still long enough, it would be *they* who moved, but they remained motionless for as long as Liesel did. I realized at that moment that she was not wearing any shoes. What an odd thing to no-

tice right then. Perhaps I was trying to avoid her face, for the book thief was truly an irretrievable mess.

She took a step and didn't want to take any more, but she did. Slowly, Liesel walked to her mama and papa and sat down between them. She held Mama's hand and began speaking to her. "Remember when I came here, Mama? I clung to the gate and cried. Do you remember what you said to everyone on the street that day?" Her voice wavered now. "You said, 'What are you assholes looking at?'" She took Mama's hand and touched her wrist. "Mama, I know that you . . . I liked when you came to school and told me Max had woken up. Did you know I saw you with Papa's accordion?" She tightened her grip on the hardening hand. "I came and watched and you were beautiful. Goddamn it, you were so beautiful, Mama."

* * * MANY MOMENTS OF AVOIDANCE * * *

Papa. She would not, and
could not, look at Papa.
Not yet. Not now.

Papa was a man with silver eyes, not dead ones.

Papa was an accordion!

But his bellows were all empty.

Nothing went in and nothing came out.

She began to rock back and forth. A shrill, quiet, smearing note was caught somewhere in her mouth until she was finally able to turn.

To Papa.

At that point, I couldn't help it. I walked around to see her better, and from the moment I witnessed her face again, I could tell that this was

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, Meminger.” He’d never called her Meminger before. “You’re an absolute lunatic. Do you know that?”

Liesel agreed as she pedaled like hell. “I know it.”

At the bridge, Rudy summed up the afternoon’s proceedings. “Those people are either completely crazy,” he said, “or they just like their fresh air.”

* * * A SMALL SUGGESTION * * *

Or maybe there was a woman on Grande Strasse who now kept her library window open for another reason—but that’s just me being cynical, or hopeful. Or both.

Liesel placed *The Dream Carrier* beneath her jacket and began reading it the minute she returned home. In the wooden chair next to her bed, she opened the book and whispered, “It’s a new one, Max. Just for you.” She started reading. “Chapter one: It was quite fitting that the entire town was sleeping when the dream carrier was born. . . .”

Every day, Liesel read two chapters of the book. One in the morning before school and one as soon as she came home. On certain nights, when she was not able to sleep, she read half of a third chapter as well. Sometimes she would fall asleep slumped forward onto the side of the bed.

It became her mission.

She gave *The Dream Carrier* to Max as if the words alone could nourish him. On a Tuesday, she thought there was movement. She could have sworn his eyes had opened. If they had, it was only momentarily, and it was more likely just her imagination and wishful thinking.

By mid-March, the cracks began to appear.

Rosa Hubermann—the good woman for a crisis—was at breaking point one afternoon in the kitchen. She raised her voice, then brought it quickly down. Liesel stopped reading and made her way quietly to the hall. As close as she stood, she could still barely make out her mama's words. When she was able to hear them, she wished she hadn't, for what she heard was horrific. It was reality.

* * * THE CONTENTS OF MAMA'S VOICE * * *

“What if he doesn't wake up?
What if he dies here, Hansi?
Tell me. What in God's name will
we do with the body? We can't
leave him here, the smell will
kill us . . . and we can't carry
him out the door and drag him up
the street, either. We can't just
say, 'You'll never guess what we
found in our basement this morning. . . .'
They'll put us away for good.”

She was absolutely right.

A Jewish corpse was a major problem. The Hubermanns needed to revive Max Vandenburg not only for his sake, but for their own. Even Papa, who was always the ultimate calming influence, was feeling the pressure.

“Look.” His voice was quiet but heavy. “If it happens—if he dies—we'll simply need to find a way.” Liesel could have sworn she heard him swallow. A gulp like a blow to the windpipe. “My paint cart, some drop sheets . . .”

—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

Hans Junior and Trudy were born. They grew up making visits to their papa at work, slapping paint on walls and cleaning brushes.

When Hitler rose to power in 1933, though, the painting business fell slightly awry. Hans didn't join the NSDAP like the majority of people did. He put a lot of thought into his decision.

* * * THE THOUGHT PROCESS OF * * *
HANS HUBERMANN

He was not well-educated or political, but if nothing else, he was a man who appreciated fairness. A Jew had once saved his life and he couldn't forget that. He couldn't join a party that antagonized people in such a way.

Also, much like Alex Steiner, some of his most loyal customers were Jewish. Like many of the Jews believed, he didn't think the hatred could last, and it was a conscious decision not to follow Hitler. On many levels, it was a disastrous one.

Once the persecution began, his work slowly dried up. It wasn't too bad to begin with, but soon enough, he was losing customers. Handfuls of quotes seemed to vanish into the rising Nazi air.

He approached an old faithful named Herbert Bollinger—a man with a hemispheric waistline who spoke *Hochdeutsch* (he was from Hamburg)—when he saw him on Munich Street. At first, the man looked down, past his girth, to the ground, but when his eyes returned to the painter, the question clearly made him uncomfortable. There was no reason for Hans to ask, but he did.