

## Wilderness House Literary Review 10/1

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### In the Cellar of the Heaven Street Bakery

**THE OLD SHREW WAS ON A RANT AGAIN.** Inge Kremer fixed her with a narrow gaze but quickly averted it when the aged woman turned and made eye contact. "Yes, that's right. Turn away if you want. But it's those damned swine who have caused all this, and you know it." Frau Gimmler raised a gnarled finger and crooked it for emphasis. "*Gottverdamnte Juden.*" A distant boom echoed as she reached into an apron pocket to remove a dingy handkerchief. After swiping it at a cheek, she sneezed and blew her nose.

Another loud explosion shook the ground overhead, causing the beams to creak and dislodge pockets of dust that fell in thin cascades. Frau Gimmler stared at them and scowled. "*Verdamnte Schweine.*" The old woman shook her head and rubbed a watery eye. Then she gaped at the dusty timbers and waited. When no more sound came, her ire turned on the others in the cellar of the Heaven Street Bakery. "*Diese gottverdamnte Unmenschen. Sie sind daran Schuld!*" One of her eyes, the slightly dull one she had rubbed, appeared to wander a bit. It looked, but it didn't seem to see.

Inge had always wondered about that eye. One day after moving to Himmelstrasse, her family was walking down the street when they met the old woman for the first time. While her father made small talk, Inge had asked what was wrong with Frau Gimmler's eye, but her mother had blushed and led Inge away, claiming the potato soup on the stove needed tending. The whole way home, they scolded Inge for having such poor manners, explaining how it was extremely impolite to point out another person's imperfections. Inge was still a girl then, but now she was grown and ready to finish school, even though the building had been destroyed by a bomb and the members of the dwindling class had to meet at the headmaster's house. Back then, her mother had a spring in her step. Now she sat, listless and hunched, on a crate turned upside down, blond hair streaked with silver and deep lines around her eyes. When Inge reached out and adjusted the shawl that had slid from her mother's shoulders, Frau Gimmler made a dismissive gesture and stowed the wadded-up handkerchief in her pocket.

Across the cramped space, someone coughed and looked up at the ceiling. It was old Herr Schmidt, the baker whose cellar they had been using as a bomb shelter since the air raids began. He shifted his weight on a creaky footstool and leaned back against the wall before closing his eyes. "*Keine Sorgen.* Do not worry. It will be over soon." Although his voice was thick with fatigue, he didn't sound concerned. "Soon the war will be finished and we will have won." A mumbled reply came from one of the men sitting nearby, but other than that nobody spoke.

Inge knew better, however. The bombing raids were getting more and more frequent and rumor had it that enemy troops planned to cross the river any day now. Tonight's raid had been the longest yet and a lump formed in her throat when she thought about the destruction that awaited them all when they emerged from the shelter. If they emerged. During

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the attack several nights before, a bomb had fallen through the roof of the post office on the main square and landed in the tunnel underneath, where more than two hundred people were hiding. One of the survivors reported that it hadn't exploded at first, but then came a loud and solitary tick and before anyone had the chance to flee, a deafening bang filled the whole place up with dust and flames. On the way to school the following day, Inge had seen a neat row of sheet-draped bodies next to the tram tracks as a work detail cleared away the rubble and tried to get to the last of the victims. A dainty pair of tortoiseshell glasses had been laid across the chest of the smallest body. Inge didn't know the little girl personally, but at the headmaster's house she heard that it was Klara Grietke, the youngest of the mayor's three daughters. Although the rest of the family had survived, they were all in the hospital and they didn't think Frau Grietke would last too long.

A sudden boom echoed overhead and a rumble worked its way through the scuffed linoleum that lined the greater portion of the floor. "*Scheiss Juden.*" Frau Gimmler lowered her head and spat. Then she reached out and slapped the wall next to her. With each slap, she repeated the curse and increased her volume. "*Scheiss Juden. Scheiss Juden. Scheiss Juden.*" A child let out a wail, provoking a series of reassuring whispers from its mother, and Inge shot an angry glance in Frau Gimmler's direction. This time Inge did not look away when the old woman saw her. Instead, she held the woman's gaze and patted her mother on the knee. After several moments, Frau Gimmler snorted and turned her head as the child's wails finally subsided into whimpers. At the mother's feet, a small gray schnauzer shivered and pressed itself close to her ankles.

But for the sounds of shifting bodies or the scrape of a sole on the gritty floor, it grew quiet again. On the other side of the dog, a small red-head held a magnifying glass over an opened book in her lap and studied an illustration. Inge made a soft kissing sound with her lips and the dog's ears perked up. It stopped trembling and took a few steps in her direction, but its leash pulled taut and the dog sat back on its haunches. The girl with the magnifying glass looked up with an exaggerated eye, and the schnauzer stood and slowly wagged its tail. Inge was about to rise and reach across to pet it when a momentary whistling punctuated the silence and ended in a roar that shook more dust from the rafters. The baby started to wail again and the little dog scampered back to the safety of its owner's skirts. They all sat still, heads slightly ducked, and waited to see if more would follow. When it seemed that the worst of it had missed them, someone cleared his throat and chuckled nervously before speaking. "*Um Gottes Willen.* That one was a little too close for my liking."

It was elderly Professor Gruber, sitting next to the gray-haired Baroness von Anhalt, whose family had owned the huge estate south of town. Gruber was Inge's English teacher at the Himmelstrasse Gymnasium, before the bombs destroyed it. Because he was still relatively young, he had been conscripted into the Volksturm after the bombing, but he had sustained an injury during training and now relied on a crutch. Since then he hobbled up and down Himmelstrasse most nights, carrying out the duties of air raid warden and making sure no light escaped from the blackout shades on the doors and windows. One day at the chalkboard, he

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had told the class that *Himmelstrasse*, the name of their street, was *Heaven Street* in English, and ever since Inge had tried to translate the signs she saw around her.

A framed poster with an address at the bottom hung on the wall across from her. Dressed in a white smock and a beret, the figure of a painter stood before an easel, daubing his brush at a large blue eye in the middle of a canvas. Above it were the words *Cafe Kunstauge - Haben Sie ein Auge fur Kunst?* Inge didn't know how to translate *Kunstauge*, but she could decipher most of it: *Cafe Kunstauge - Do you have an eye for art?* Growing up, she always heard about the famous coffee house where all the artists congregated, but it had closed soon after the war started.

Inge wondered how many artists were left nowadays. Last year they had come and dragged Maximilian Schiller from his studio and forced him into the back of a truck. She had stood at the living room window and watched him struggle and kick, but a thug in a leather trench coat smashed him over the head with a club and that was that. When Inge asked what the young man had done and why they had mistreated him, her mother had shooed her away from the window, saying they had their reasons. Nonetheless, Inge noticed the worried look as her mother hid behind the curtains and watched the truck drive away. Standing in line the next morning for a half dozen Brötchen, Inge's mother heard the details from Frau Gimmler, who told how the jackboots had gone back up the stairs and destroyed all the young artist's paintings and sketches. "*Dreck! Es war alles lauter Dreck!*" The old woman had rubbed her hands together and smiled during the proclamation. *Filth. It was all pure filth.* The first thing Inge had done when they returned from the bakery was sit down for Saturday breakfast and look up the word *Dreck* in the *Englisches Wörterbuch*. Then she used a knife to open one of the rolls and slather it with butter.

A dull pain niggled in her stomach. How she missed those rolls with their crusty exteriors. And the sliced salami and wild raspberry jam that always accompanied their weekend breakfasts. But meat of any kind was impossible to come by and there had been no white bread for over a year now. Only those with connections could find sugar and butter, and the ersatz coffee tasted nothing like the real thing. Inge looked over to where Herr Schmidt squatted on the footstool, his arm resting on a large burlap bag with the word *Mehl* printed in thick black letters. *Flour*. The only problem, she heard, was that the flour nowadays was coarse and cut with sawdust and meal ground from wild chestnuts. Even if it still looked like the rye bread they used to get at the bakery above, the new loaves didn't taste the same. At least it was filling, though. Eyes still closed, the baker started to yawn and raised a hand from the sack of flour, perhaps to cover his mouth, but then his arm went limp and fell back. Next to him, a little boy in short pants picked up a telescope resting across his knees. In one fluid motion, the child extended it, lifted it to his eye and scanned the small crowd of faces cramped together in the cellar.

"Put that away! There's nothing to see here." Pointing a crooked index finger, Frau Gimmler glowered at the boy's mother. "*Was will er denn?*" In return, the woman grumbled something unintelligible and gently re-

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turned the telescope to the child's knee. Shaking her head, she shot Frau Gimmler a disdainful look and turned away. Before anyone could say anything, a low drone caused the walls and ceiling to vibrate and there was a sharp intake of breath. They all waited, and when no explosion came, shoulders began to relax and someone released a long sigh. Eyes welling with tears, the boy with the telescope looked down at the floor and then gave in to a soft crying.

"*Ruhe! Was gibt's zum Weinen?*" As she scolded the child again, Frau Gimmler slapped the stone wall behind her for emphasis. "*Maul halten! Maul halten!*" Her admonishments, however, only startled the child and provoked more annoyed stares when the sobs intensified. The boy's mother reached out and smoothed his tousled blond hair, then pulled him close until the crying stopped.

Inge tried to remember the woman's last name, but failed to come up with it. She and the boy had arrived two years before, moving into the apartment house down at the end of the block, near the Glockenspiel on Alexanderplatz. *The carillon on Alexander Square.* The lady's husband had been killed at Stalingrad and they said she rarely left the apartment nowadays. The Kleins used to live next door, in the big house with green shutters, until they and the other Jews on Himmelstrasse were rounded up and forced to march away one winter night in a single file as Inge returned from the movies. Snow had just fallen and their feet kicked a neat trench down the middle of the road. From her hiding spot behind the frozen lilac bushes, Inge watched them disappear as a pit of dread ignited in her stomach. Just several weeks before, during the class outing to ice skate at Müller's pond, Rudi Klein had led her behind an enormous larch tree and kissed her where nobody could see. Rudi Klein with the soft brown curls and gentle eyes. She had removed a glove and raised a hand to his face and traced her fingertips over his long lashes. The next time they saw each other, at the headmaster's New Year's Day party, Rudi gave her a small brass pig for good luck. Smooth and shiny, the Glücksschweinchen fit snugly in the palm of her hand and she had grasped it tightly as Rudi and his family marched away with the others. Inge wished she had run after him and put the charm in his hand, but fear had paralyzed her. Since that distant November night when the mob had run up and down the street smashing the windows of all the Jewish-owned shops, anxiety had become a regular part of life. Flames from the new synagogue had shot up into the night sky, illuminating the rooflines of the buildings along Himmelstrasse and tingeing the air with the scent of charred wood and ashes. Now it seemed to be a normal smell, one they didn't even notice anymore. It all seemed so long ago to Inge.

Frau Gimmler coughed and leaned forward, elbows resting on her knees. A coarse wool skirt drooped down to her shins and from one hand dangled a felt hat decorated with a pheasant feather. Inge recognized that hat. Frau Gimmler had been wearing it the night they rounded up the Jews and marched them away. Watching them fade from view, the old woman had stood on the stoop and clapped her hands together in a loud and satisfied gesture of finality. "*Good riddance! Die sind wir gottseidank los.*" Then she threw her arms up in the air and brought them down as if she were casting away the Jews of Himmelstrasse forever.

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Once the street had cleared, Inge ran up the stairs to their second-floor apartment and asked where they were taking the Kleins and the other families. Her father had only given a sad shrug, though, and said he didn't know for certain. Her mother said not to worry about such things, going to the kitchen and returning with a cup of steaming tea and a piece of apple cake. But Inge couldn't eat a bite and that night in bed she lay awake, the good luck pig clutched in her hand under the pillow. The next day at school the geography teacher told them all the Jews were headed to Madagascar, and Inge wondered if Rudi and his family would be near a sandy beach with palm trees. She had almost come to envy the Jews of Himmelstrasse until one night, when getting up to go to the bathroom, she heard her parents arguing in the kitchen. Leaning against the doorframe, she fought back a sense of queasiness as her father insisted he had first-hand knowledge that the Jews weren't being sent off to Africa. A photographer for the army, he had been dispatched to the local camps and knew exactly what happened there. Everybody knew what was going on. Her mother had not wanted to listen, however, and changed the subject to whether or not they should have soft-boiled eggs with their breakfast the next morning. Not too long afterwards, her father's unit was ordered east and now more than a year had passed without any news of him. Last they heard, he had been taken prisoner, but nobody knew whether he was dead or alive.

Soft rumbling underfoot, Inge looked over at her mother's listless form. A shudder ran through the ground and the single bulb hanging down from the ceiling gave a light bounce and swayed. The woman raised her eyes and cast a brief look around, then let her head sink. From her perch in the corner, Frau Gimmler released a sigh and shook her head. "*Judenschweine.*" She snorted and ran her hands around the brim of the hat. "*Die sollen verrotten, the Jew pigs.*" The young girl to the left of Frau Gimmler turned and gave the old woman the shoulder, and Inge's upper lip curled into a slight smile. It was Lotta Weber, Inge's classmate at the Gymnasium. They had been very close once, but then it got so they hardly ever talked unless it concerned homework and other things during the school day. Instead of walking home with her friend like usual, Lotta started saying a quick good-bye at the old iron gate in front and then would rush down the sidewalk to join her mother in the apartment. Since the bombing of the school, Lotta rarely showed up for lessons in the makeshift classroom at the headmaster's house, and when she did, it was in a distracted state. Nobody really blamed her, though. Not very long after they rounded up the Jews on Himmelstrasse, someone contacted the authorities and denounced Herr Weber for allowing the two oldest Rosenblum boys to hide out in the back storeroom of his book shop. The next day they arrested the soft-spoken man and took him away. Frau Gimmler proudly announced to those standing in line at the bakery that she had turned the bookseller in herself and that they didn't need any Jews on Himmelstrasse. "*Saukerl. Hier brauchen wir keine Juden!*" After making the declaration, the old woman promised to keep an eye on everyone else and warned them to stay in line. Inge had watched the color drain from her mother's face and sensed things would somehow be different.

From then on they never stopped to make small talk with Frau Gimmler and instead paid frequent visits to Frau Weber and her daughter, taking along a packet of tea or a tin of cookies whenever possible. Although

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the bookseller's wife seemed to appreciate the considerate gestures, it didn't do much good, as far as Inge was concerned. Lotta seemed to shrink before her very eyes. Often during these visits, Lotta would sit in a high-backed chair, silent and transfixed by the kaleidoscope that had belonged to her father.

*"Ja, Herr Schmidt. Sie haben Recht."* Frau Gimmler had put the hat on her head and clapped her hands together as if to rid them of dust. "You're right, Herr Schmidt. This will all be over very soon and then they'll see." After giving the baker a generous nod, the old woman glanced around the small crowd of faces, most of which refused to meet her gaze. "You all will see. He will uncover the secret weapon they have been working on and we will be victorious." The old woman rocked from one buttock to the other and beamed, the one eye screwed slightly to the wall. Her smile vanished, however, when a loud crash shook the ceiling. The yellow bulb jerked and danced at the end of its cord and a soft groan emanated from the rafters. Dust motes filtering the dim light, people stopped moving and silence settled in as their eyes turned to the beams overhead. After a stiff minute, the spell was broken by the scrape of wood on linoleum and Herr Schmidt pushed his bulk away from the wall and leaned forward.

Lowering her gaze, Frau Gimmler spat at the ground and curled her pale lips into a scowl. *"Verdammte Judenschweine! Sie sollen—"* With a start, Inge rose and crossed to the old woman, who slowly stood and spoke, her brow wrinkling in suspicion. *"Was wollen Sie hier? Ich sehe keine—"* Before the sentence was completed, Inge lifted a hand and slapped the stooped figure hard across the face. A wave of scarlet rage coloring her cheek, the old woman mustered a moldering glare and inhaled her indignation before speaking. *"Du wagst es, die—"* But Inge pulled back and struck the shrew again, this time with twice the force. The old woman's head snapped to the side, and a sudden and sharp crack resounded as something struck the linoleum and skittered to the wall. It bounced back and clattered to the center of the floor. There, staring up at them all, was Frau Gimmler's glass eye.