

Until the Stars Tremble (Bis die Sterne zittern)

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PROLOGUE

In front of the superintendent's desk lamp, cigarette smoke rose into the air like a will-o'-the-wisp. Harsh light fell on the surface of the desk, while the rest of the room lay in impenetrable darkness. I could see fleshy fingers holding a little book. It was absurdly tiny. 'What we search for is everything' was written on the cover. In the glass ashtray next to it lay a smoking cigarette butt, with the glow making gradual inroads into the stub.

'Sit,' said the head, of which I could see only the outline. The little book motioned towards a chair. I did as I was told, and waited. My eyes gradually got used to the dim light, and I was able to make out some of the interior: tall cupboards, a coat rail resembling a mediaeval weapon, a second desk.

The cigarette went out. The superintendent hadn't taken a single drag on it. For minutes, nothing happened. The man opposite me didn't even leaf through his book. I almost thought he'd forgotten me, and was considering whether to bring myself to his attention somehow or other when he finally began to speak.

'Harro Jäger. Adolf-Hitler-Strasse 157. Age: sixteen. Schoolboy. Right so far?'

'That's correct,' I replied formally.

'You like school? You're a good pupil?' These sounded like statements, not questions.

'I try to be.' The head nodded.

'And your free time, what do you do in your free time?'

'Nothing special,' I said. 'Same as everyone. Physical and mental training. Reading. Sports. Going for walks.' The head nodded again.

‘You joined the Hitler Youth late – only to be discharged early. Why?’ The superintendent’s head edged forward, into the light. The man was younger than I’d thought.

‘Conflicts with my unit leader. Nothing to do with the organisation.’ That wasn’t even a lie. The superintendent showed no reaction and reached for his cigarettes. His lighter was embossed with a swastika that split in the middle if you flicked the lid open.

‘Konrad Weissgerber? That name mean something to you?’ Again, this was more of a statement. Hilma’s brother. I decided to pretend to know as little as possible, and said no. The new cigarette was laid in the ashtray. The smoke began to form weird dancing shapes above the desk.

‘Harry Sommer? Know him?’ I shook my head.

‘The name means nothing to me. Nothing at all.’

‘Big fellow. Can’t miss him,’ the superintendent added. Now I thought I knew who he was talking about. I said no again. The fingers reached for the smouldering stub and knocked off the ash. Then the superintendent took a long, sputtering drag, looked me in the eye and turned the cone of light from the lamp full into my face, making me blink.

‘Heinrich Umrath? What about him?’

‘I’ve met him once or twice. Don’t know him well,’ I said, as neutrally as I could. I couldn’t deny everything, after all, particularly as it was my neighbour he was asking about. The cigarette, which had again been laid in the ashtray, gave off a spark, as if a grain of gunpowder had ended up in the tobacco by mistake.

‘Where?’ asked the superintendent, and when I failed to reply immediately, he continued: ‘Where have you met him?’

‘In the street,’ I said. ‘In the street, once or twice.’ The white light from the lamp was dazzling. I peered out from under the palm of my hand.

‘In the street, once or twice,’ repeated the superintendent. I could hear what a half-baked reply that was. There was a tickle in my throat and I had to suppress a cough. Instead, I shifted around on the chair. The superintendent tapped the desk with his lighter in a slow marching rhythm.

‘The times you’ve met, what have you talked about?’ he asked finally.

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, a little too shrilly. And then everything moved very fast. The superintendent stood up, pulled my left forearm onto the desk and slammed the edge of the lighter into the back of my hand with a hard, abrupt movement, as if chopping beechwood. Incredulously, I stared at skin and blood and yet more blood; the silver swastika hacked against my bones again and again, and then came the pain. I screamed and screamed

and lost control. No matter how thick the walls were, my screams must have been audible out into the street. I tried desperately to free my wrist from his grip. I writhed and yanked, but I didn't have a chance. Finally, the police officer let go of me. I pressed my left hand to my chest, covering it with my right. Soft and hot, the pulped flesh pressed against the root of my thumb. But it wasn't over yet. The next pain came from my left ear. Thick fingers grabbed it, tugging and wrenching it all the way around. Something crunched and cracked inside my head. I howled in blind panic and forgot for a few moments who and where I was. The agony was excruciating.

'Am I an idiot?' yelled the superintendent into the twisted ear. 'Am I an idiot?' Again and again. I tried to fend him off, somehow, but it was impossible. I was too small and too weak and felt far too wretched. It was a terribly humiliating situation.

'Am I an idiot? Am I an idiot?' Ten, twenty times, maybe even more. When I came to again, I found myself lying on the floor, coughing. The superintendent was seated at his desk. He'd pulled over a telephone from a dusty corner of the desk and was speaking quietly into the receiver. My left hand was a dreadful sight. With my right, I fumbled towards my ear. For one insane moment I thought it was no longer there. Then I remained lying where I was. By the time I got up, I hoped I'd have awoken from this terrible dream.

The guard who had brought me in entered the room without knocking. First I saw his face in the door opening, then just his shoes. A black sole waggled in front of my nose.

'Come on, get up. I'll show you to your kip.' I got to my feet. It was surprisingly easy, but once I was vertical, stars flashed like a railway signal on the blink. The walls slipped out of kilter. To stop myself from collapsing, I held on to the first thing I could get a hold of. It was the guard's collar.

'There we are,' he said, propping me up a little. 'Easy does it. Here's the way out.' I had no sense of direction and no reserves. It could hardly have been any easier to lead a little lamb away. If I'd nurtured even a slim hope that the guard's 'way out' might have meant 'the way to freedom', that was instantly scotched. A few corridors, a few sets of stairs, and I was in a cell.

'It's best to tell him everything you know,' said the guard before closing the wooden door, which suggested a castle dungeon rather than a modern prison. Was there any sympathy in his voice? Or was this just a particularly dirty trick, to get me to squeal?

The stench of the cell pricked my nostrils. I'm not going to be leaving this place, I thought. Not ever.

1.

My story begins where the finest street in Leipzig ends. The lousy rotten thing about the finest street in Leipzig was that it had had a new name for the past three years. When I was twelve, a man had unscrewed the metal sign from my apartment building – the sign which, up to that time, had shown everyone who went past where they were. In Südstrasse. He was nothing but a blade of grass, that man, his face skew-whiff and wizened. But he'd taken the sign away. The next day he'd come back with his handcart and ladder and put up a new one. Ever since, the finest street in Leipzig had had another name – Adolf-Hitler-Strasse.

It happened on the first day of the summer holidays. At Easter I'd finished the ninth grade in grammar school with so-so marks. At least, they weren't good enough for my parents. They'd have liked me to build a little tower out of papers and books and hide behind it, but I preferred spending my time out in the street.

It was a noisy afternoon at the crossroads down the street from my apartment block. Ivory-coloured trams were unloading loose gaggles of people and taking in others. Each time they braked you could feel the noise all the way through to your back teeth. The sensation was both funny and intensely disagreeable. Every minute, about a million cyclemotors of every kind put-putted along both sides of the street. These things were the latest fashion, even though the din they made was quite out of proportion to their low horsepower. They sounded like a colony of bumblebees being shooed through a megaphone. The concert was completed by dozens of voices coming from the wide open doors and windows of pubs. It wasn't evening yet, but the sun was making people thirsty. On the corner of a side street, a few girls with blue hairbands were playing hopscotch.

And on this particular day, at the point where the finest street in Leipzig ends – the big crossroads known as Connewitz Cross – the flag of the Hitler Youth came fluttering towards me, a black-white-red monstrosity on a long wooden pole. Attached to one end of the pole was a boy of about my age. He wore such a solemn expression that his face seemed to be made of wood too, set and unwavering.

Behind him, like a string of beads, marched a line of Hitler youths. I avoided looking at them too closely, as I didn't want any bother. I stood aside, my hands in my trouser pockets, and pretended I was anywhere but here, between the street and the grey walls. But I wasn't as transparent as I'd have liked.

'Hey, you there!' The back of my neck was burning. I pretended not to have heard anything, although I already had an inkling of what was about to happen. If I'd scarpered, the

day would have ended differently. But I didn't. Whether that was rashness, or fear, or courage, who can tell?

Another whistle. Another yell. And then, suddenly, they were so close that you didn't need particularly sharp senses to realise there was someone on your tail.

'Are you deaf?' said someone right into my ear. I turned. The house fronts reflected the light, making me blink. A semi-circle of faces approached. You could read a gamut of expressions there: contempt, arrogance, solemn outrage, and, in the corner of every eye, a sense of relief that they weren't in my shoes. My body reacted with a gesture of self-defence that was all but automatic: I raised my hands.

'Hang on,' I said. 'What's up? What have I done?'

The semi-circle didn't move. One of the faces left the group and came right up to mine.

'It's what you didn't do,' said the face. The words came straight through the teeth, with no movement of the lips. The shoulders beneath the face were so massive that they blocked out the semi-circle formed by the others. The belt over the brown shirt was taut.

'You didn't salute the flag.'

'Didn't see it, just didn't see it,' I said. 'No disrespect meant.'

'The flag means more than death itself, you little pipsqueak! Don't you understand that?' No, I didn't understand that. I nodded.

'Everyone has to salute the flag! No matter which side they're on!'

The Hitler youth was clearly unaware that his words had a double meaning.

'If you don't salute, you get punished!' I stepped back a little, as if that would hold off the inevitable pain. The wall I backed up against with my heel sealed my fate.

'Come on, please leave me be,' I stammered appeasingly, not imagining it would help. Like an echo in reverse, I could already feel the slaps in my face. Yet they didn't come.

'Scram, you lot!' yelled a very loud voice. Then I heard a number of people clapping as if to drive away a pack of wild boar. The massive shoulders turned aside, and behind them I saw wild chaos, dozens of arms pushing and shoving. Outraged cries flew through the air.

'Stop! Now!' yelled the boy with the massive shoulders. It sounded like two shots. The crowd broke up and I was able to take in the new situation. Several groups of other lads had forced their way, wedge-like, into the troop of Hitler youths. Their clothes were quite different from standard issue. They were fewer in number, but had a bold look about them.

'Fine by us – no need to mess up our togs then!' said one of them, a big lad with straw-coloured hair that was far too long. His eyes flashed. He reminded me of someone.

For a few seconds, you could have cut the air with a knife. If just one person on either side had made a false move, the Last Judgment would have broken out. The boy with the massive shoulders swallowed his fury with difficulty. If it had been up to him, he probably wouldn't have given in, but the rest of his troop had clearly lost heart. Most of them were looking at the ground.

'About turn! Out of the way!' he said finally, to someone or other. The new arrivals grinned. Their hands raised, they let the Hitler youths pass. The spokesman marched at the back. If looks could have killed, we'd all have fallen like skittles.

The troop moved off. A few passers-by gave us all a curious look; more of them looked severe, but nobody said a word.

'What was all that about?' asked the fair-haired boy. I exhaled deeply, releasing my tension.

'Didn't salute the flag,' I said, shrugging. The fair-haired boy grinned and thumped my chest in a friendly gesture that was as pleasant as a hammer blow.

'Good for you,' he said. 'No need to salute it.' He gave me a probing glance. 'Wouldn't or couldn't?' I crossed my arms and raised my eyebrows. I could play the game a bit too. The fair-haired boy showed his teeth.

'Good for you,' he repeated. Then a thoughtful look flitted over his face. 'Don't I know you? Live near here, don't you?'

Now I knew who he reminded me of. There was a boy in the neighbourhood who delivered coal with his father from a huge old dray like a coach. That was him. I hadn't recognised him because he usually looked quite different in his black working clothes, with soot on his cheeks. I nodded.

'I know you too,' I said. 'Name's Umrath, isn't it? Coal?'

The fair-haired boy pursed his lips as if to whistle.

'The building over there. That's you, isn't it?' he asked, pointing at the corner block, where I lived. It wasn't far away. I nodded again. The boy gave me a wink.

'Well. It was a pleasure.' Again I felt his probing gaze, which he lifted briefly from me, running his eyes over the others before focusing on me again.

'Why don't you drop by,' he said then. Again I crossed my arms and raised my eyebrows. A thumb the size of a small tree stump gestured down the gentle slope of Pegauer Strasse.

'At the flicks. Or the church,' said the fair-haired boy. 'One or the other. Early evening. Every two to three days. Just come by.' He ran a finger through his parting; his

fringe fell to his eyes. A huge hand appeared in front of my nose. I shook it.

‘Heinrich.’

‘Harro.’

2.

The front of my apartment block was adorned by bow windows, and the raised entrance was flanked to the left and right by shops, one on either side. On top of the building, on the corner, there was a small dome that looked rather out of place. Above this was an open turret. If you ignored the injunctions not to play on the roof, you could even climb up into the turret, let the breeze tousle your hair on windy days, and enjoy a splendid view over the city.

Opposite the building was a small park containing the local shower-bath, a public amenity for anyone who didn't have a boiler or water heater at home. As the son of two teachers, both of whom were in work, I wasn't among them.

Immersed in a book – not one from school, but a novel by Karl May – I lay on my bed. The closed window kept out the sweltering heat. The story was gripping, but my thoughts kept trickling away to the experience of a few days ago, like the paint in a watercolour that was far too wet.

Who were these boys? With the benefit of a little distance, I realised I'd already come across one or two of them. Their style, the way they dressed, was just too offbeat to go unnoticed.

It must have been some time in spring, in front of the Central Theatre at one end of Bornaische Strasse. Two of these boys were there, wearing Lederhosen shorts and blue jackets, with brightly coloured checks peeking insolently from below the jacket hem. After that, I kept seeing the same get-up, or something similar. It was like a red marble in a huge sack full of grey ones. Conspicuous, but not that much, as there were so many others.

And now I'd been invited to drop in on the red marbles. Did I want to? Of course I did.

I slipped a bookmark into my novel, set it aside and got up. Making an appearance in neatly creased trousers and a white shirt didn't appeal. I definitely needed an outfit that wouldn't make me lose face completely.

The wardrobe in the hallway was three metres high by three wide, or at least it seemed like that to me. As always, the hinges on the right-hand door protested. I plunged at random into heaps of fabric. Linen jackets, braces, suits – nothing looked suitable. My glance fell on a pair of knickerbockers; I hadn't worn them for years, but they were better than nothing.

From the waist up, it was even trickier. There was nothing at all that didn't scream Little Goody Two-Shoes. At some point or other I resigned myself to this, rolled up my shirt

sleeves, stuck out my lower lip and turned to look in the mirror. My reflection smirked back at me, falling a mile short of the desired effect. Oh well, that's just the way it is, I thought to myself. After all, they'd made me an offer, not the other way round.

Now the sultry heat was creeping in through the window crevices after all. It was one of those evenings when you wait for all hell to burst from the sky – or for the storm to pass by superciliously without shedding a single drop.

I went out into the street. In the middle of the big crossroads stood a tall stone pillar with the city's coat of arms and an image of a cross. Something historical – I wasn't quite sure what, but at any rate it had given Connewitz Cross its name. As I passed the pillar, I patted the rust-red porphyry. That was supposed to bring luck.

There was no need to think about which of the two cinemas I should head for first. From the pavement running past the Union Theatre in Pegauer Strasse, Heinrich's shock of hair gleamed, as fair as a bushel of barley ears. Approaching him slowly, I had enough time to observe him more closely. Again I was startled at how different he looked when he wasn't covered in coal dust. White knee-length socks, chestnut-coloured laced shoes, Lederhosen shorts, a red and black checked shirt – the transformation was impressive. He'd rolled his shirt sleeves up too, which I found reassuring. He gave me a smile as wide as a window.

'There you are! Everything all right? On holiday, are you?' Raising my shoulders, I nodded. A handful of other lads gave me the once-over, and I could tell from their expressions that I was the only one with summer holidays. I changed the subject swiftly.

'Harro,' I said, holding out my hand at random to one of the boys in the circle, an angular, sunburned lad who'd been there a few days ago. His handshake made me yell inside, but I kept my cool.

'Willi,' he said, continuing to observe me in a not unfriendly manner.

'One of our canoeists,' said Heinrich. 'Here's the other.' He laid his paw like an enormous spider on the shoulder of the lad next to Willi. The lad grinned.

'Richard,' he said. We shook hands. It went better this time; I was prepared.

The round of introductions was interrupted when Heinrich started to laugh. He laughed and laughed and smacked his right fist into his left palm with a sound like a belly-flop in the swimming baths.

'I don't believe it! Women in shorts! Whatever next? A woman Chancellor?' I followed his gaze. A girl with a dark brown bob, the ends curling around her eyes, was coming up the street. She wore an expression that demanded respect, although she was only my age at most. She looked as if she knew just what she wanted – and as if she knew others

knew it too from the way she looked.

But it wasn't so much her body language that grabbed my attention. What grabbed my attention was an item of clothing. A pair of breeches. Short breeches. Lederhosen shorts. Just like the ones Heinrich wore, which gave him quite a rakish air. The girl came closer and went straight up to him. I thought she was going to hit him, but then she stopped half a metre from Heinrich and gave him a hug. I was startled.

'Terrific! They look terrific on you, my old Lederhosen!' said Heinrich, continuing to hold the girl by her shoulders, and gazing at her.

'Can I introduce you? This is Hilma,' he said finally, turning to me. I held out my hand. The girl he'd introduced lifted her chin till it was above the level of her eyes.

'Harro,' she repeated, rather as if she doubted whether that was really my name. I nodded and gestured towards Heinrich.

'We're neighbours,' I said. I didn't quite know what that was supposed to explain, but nothing else occurred to me.

'Neighbours,' she repeated, tilting her head. 'Fine. Well then. Welcome!' A handshake followed the delay. Then she tugged at Heinrich's sleeve.

'Come on, let's go for a walk. There's something I have to tell you.'

Suddenly I was alone in the circle. A slight boy with a white sailor collar took pity on me just before it would have become embarrassing.

'I'm Edgar,' he said simply. 'What's brought you here, Harro? Is it just that you're neighbours? Or is there something else?'

I scraped my foot over the asphalt, stuck out my lower lip and looked into Edgar's eyes. Depending on the light, they looked sad or friendly.

'I'm always out in the street anyway,' I said. 'And it's always good to have new friends, isn't it?' Edgar's nod was no more than a breath of wind.

'I'm at the bottom of the pile at work. Dad was in the Communist Party. My foreman takes that out on me. I have to give him the Nazi salute each time he comes into the workshop or leaves it. If I'm not quick enough, there's overtime. That sort of thing.' He twisted the clasp on his belt. Its smooth metal glittered in the sun. 'Just for me, of course. Not for the others. That's one of the reasons.'

'How does it work with apprenticeships?' I asked. 'Any chance of getting a placement somewhere else?'

'Sometimes there is,' said Edgar 'But not for me. Elementary school, lousy marks, no contacts. And my parents are Communists.' He flicked his fingers against the gleaming metal

clasp. 'What's that nice expression they have? Just be thankful you've got anything at all. And you're still at school, are you?' I nodded, burying my hands in my pockets.

'But that's fine,' said Edgar. 'That's great. That's something to be thankful for. Isn't it?'

'School's a pain in the arse,' I said, after a brief pause. Edgar raised his eyebrows. He was very slight indeed.

'Is there any way you could pack it in, your apprenticeship?' I asked, changing the subject again. Edgar laughed, but not in a way that made me feel like an idiot.

'No chance,' he said. 'Dad's on benefits, that's all. Mum works at HASAG, and the pay's rotten. And who knows how much longer she'll have her job for? And there's my little sister too. No, no chance, we need my apprenticeship allowance.' I don't know if my face looked understanding enough. Distant lightning ran over the red tiled roofs on the houses opposite. The thunderstorm was still undecided.

3.

At the same time I was getting to know the gang, there was a conversation with my parents that was about as much fun as a hole in my back tooth. I wasn't fond of these conversations anyway, because they always made me feel like a little kid. This one was particularly hard to stomach.

My father, who'd been a member of the Social Democrats and the Reichsbanner¹ till 1933, was seated in an armchair in the sitting room, as big, heavy and motionless as an ancient Egyptian statue. Opposite him sat my mother, her body forming a letter C, between books, writing paper and well-thumbed files.

Our sitting room wasn't a cosy place. It was the room where my parents prepared and followed up their lessons. And on this particular day, it was the room where a parent-son conversation was already grinning out from between the bookshelves before anyone had uttered a word.

'Come in and sit down, please,' said my father by way of introduction, though I'd rather have done the opposite. I took a seat. My mother became a letter L, an L with the curly hair on the left side of her forehead swept into a roll. She wasn't vain, but that didn't mean she was indifferent to fashion. Her fingertips rested on an exercise book, like those of a pianist just before a performance. She looked at me over the rim of her spectacles. My father cleared his throat.

'For a long time, your mother and I were against you joining the State Youth,' he said, emphasising every single word. A nasty little shudder ran over my back. My parents weren't in the Party, but they were shielded from awkward questions by their membership of the National Socialist Teachers' Association. Where my father, in particular, was concerned, I had a feeling it wasn't going to stop there.

'We've been discussing the matter. And we've come to a decision. We're giving our consent for you to join.' My father saw I was about to open my mouth and cut me off. His voice was loud.

'We have to think about what to do in future. We'll have to adapt to circumstances. Move with the times. You'll have heard about that already. There aren't many university places, especially if you don't have the right papers. We don't want you to have to suffer the consequences!' With each sentence, my father had inched closer to me. Now he slid back into

¹ The Reichsbanner was an organisation that sought to defend parliamentary democracy during the Weimar Republic. It was strongly associated with the Social Democratic Party.

the armchair. A Harro behind me retorted that he just wanted to avoid suffering the consequences of having a son without a university place. The real Harro had difficulty in replying at all.

‘But you both know I don’t want to join any more,’ I said. ‘I did at one time, maybe. Because everyone was joining. But not now, not since ... since Paul!’ The name echoed from the walls as if the room were a crypt. My father’s mouth was a thin line.

‘Harro.’ My mother’s voice laid itself around my shoulders. ‘Paul isn’t here any more. You mustn’t neglect your own future on that account.’

‘Maybe,’ I said. ‘Maybe that’s true. I don’t know. Anyway. I’m not interested.’

‘Nonsense!’ my father shouted, raising his hands abruptly. ‘I don’t want to hear any more!’ He had no patience, especially not with me.

‘Your application statement is already completed,’ he put in, and ended the conversation by unfolding his newspaper.

That was the end of that. There was no point in any further discussion at that point. I’d have to look out for myself. As I’d been doing for a long time now anyway.

Long before next Sunday I’d put the conversation out of my mind; it was tucked into a little box in my head, which was overshadowed by another, larger box, the one with my new gang.

Sunday, the day of blessings, bathed Connewitz Cross in tranquil light. Sunday dresses and smart double-breasted suits filled the streets. There were only a very few people in front of the Union Theatre. I didn’t see any faces I recognised. I said hello.

‘Heinrich or Edgar, have they been here today?’ A fellow with a dark expression on his face blew the smoke from his cigarette skywards.

‘Who wants to know?’ His voice was like two sheets of sandpaper rubbing together. The look he gave me crushed me like an old potato.

‘Harro,’ I said. ‘Harro Jäger. I’m ... I’ve b... I’ve been here several times already. I’m Heinrich’s neighbour.’

A new puff of smoke rose into the air; the corners of his mouth followed. His upper canines were missing. He looked like a vampire after a tooth extraction.

‘Church,’ he said. It sounded about as friendly as ‘Get lost’.

The local church wasn’t far away; to be more precise, it was just around the corner. Its name, ‘Paul Gerhardt Church’, was still pretty fresh. The outer walls, plastered in white, were framed in light red porphyry, the volcanic stone often used in our area. The entrance was decorated in mosaic. An imposing tower punctured the clouds. The church was surrounded

by a small park.

Towards the rear of the side staircase, perched at different levels like notes on a scale, the people I'd been looking for were grinning at me. Hilma and Edgar gave me a nod. Next to Heinrich was another girl who I didn't know. The blue fabric covering her skin was flecked with yellow and orange leaves. Her curls were neat and very blonde, her lipstick carmine red, the powder on her cheeks a delicate pink. She looked as if she'd stepped straight out of a painting. I'd never seen anyone like her.

The girl's expression was neutral. I could see in it nothing that suggested either like or dislike. The subtle changes of expression that usually take place when two people meet for the first time – a slight smile, perhaps, or a tiny frown – were absent. If anything, her expression was that of an examiner sizing up a candidate. Yet it made the grass under my feet feel even softer.

'So this is the Sunday place, is it?' I asked, picking a spot for myself in the pattern of notes.

'Josephine's place,' said Heinrich, jerking his head towards the mysterious, colourful girl. 'If you like, yes - the Sunday place.'

'Josephine,' I repeated. 'I'm Harro.' Now I thought I saw a slight shift of expression in her face. She nodded.

'I'm at work the rest of the time,' she said. 'I'm only here on Sundays. Don't feel like meeting down there at the flicks.'

'She has to keep out of sight,' Hilma added. 'Parents. Regular customers. Too much of an audience.'

'Regular customers?' I asked. Josephine took a packet of cigarettes out of her bag; *Eckstein* was the brand name. I gawped even more than before. I'd never seen a girl smoking before. And in public, too.

'Regular customers,' she repeated. The cigarette smoke floated along the sleeves of her dress. 'Reinhardt and Company, heard of it?'

'The grocer's in Bornaische Strasse? Of course. I know it. Everyone does.' Josephine nodded again.

'It belongs to my father.'

'Classy shop. Best chocolates in Connewitz!'

Josephine smiled, rather too thinly for the compliment.

'I know,' she said. 'My father. A big businessman.'

She stubbed out the cigarette on the steps, far too early. I gave her a quizzical look,

but it was already clear that the relationship with her father was a bad one. It must be, or she wouldn't be hiding here.

'She'll tell you the story some time,' said Hilma, noticing my expression. She grinned. 'At least, if you decide to join our odd crew.'

There was nothing I wanted more.

The rest of the day passed in the blinking of an eye. A black box on the stone steps, Hilma's big brother's Decca gramophone, played music for us until well past nightfall. We listened to Benny Goodman's 'Goody, Goody' and 'Sometimes I'm Happy' on it dozens of times. And we smoked. I smoked too. The Ecksteins tasted foul, but marvellous. I was happy.

4.

Each day I came home later. My parents were used to me spending my time out of doors; maybe that's why they didn't notice the change. Perhaps they thought this was a temporary phase: the exhilaration and elation of the summer and the holidays. On the other hand, maybe they were just trying to avoid seeing the change. At any rate, my mother asked few questions about how I was spending my days, and I always evaded them. There were none at all from my father.

The realities of my new friends' lives were very different from mine, but for most of them that didn't pose any kind of problem. I seemed to be the one with the problem, if anything. I felt I could never say the right thing when Hilma, for instance, told me that the money coming in from her casual jobs didn't go far enough. But she herself, and Heinrich, above all, just laughed at me on such occasions. They didn't want any charity. Not that I had all that much money, but the odd coin or two did come my way.

'If you've got any dosh, let's spend it on something worthwhile,' said Hilma one day, pursing her lips in a silent whistle.

'*You're suggesting something worthwhile?*' I teased, and was rewarded with a slap on my upper arm.

'You got it. Something worthwhile. We'll buy you a new outfit. That'll save you from running around looking like like a little boarding-school boy.' She pranced around me, grinning, but I didn't rise to the bait.

'Why not,' I said. 'Where from, though?' Hilma stopped and stuck her fists on her hips.

'The Youth Outfitters, of course. In Nürnberger Strasse. Oh, please don't tell me you don't know the place.' I shrugged my shoulders.'

'Heard of it.'

'Heard of it, heard of it.' Hilma mimicked me and started prancing around again.

'You got a bike? Got a bit of spare time tomorrow?'

'Yes, and yes,' I said. 'What time?'

'Four, at my place? Hermannstrasse 1, above the restaurant. Ring the bell for Weissgerber, got that?'

'Fine,' I said in an exaggeratedly bored tone, and earned a second slap on my upper arm. We grinned.

The next day I was there at the agreed time. The bell was stiff and stuck into my

thumb like a blunt nail. By way of compensation, Hilma was standing in front of me in next to no time.

‘The *Golden Crown*,’ I said, referring to the restaurant on the ground floor. ‘Nice place. My parents like to dine out there.’ Hilma nodded busily. Her bicycle was far too big.

‘Yes, it’s not half bad. Sometimes there’s even something left for us, from the kitchen.’ She winked. ‘Shall we get going then?’

We cycled off. Along the way, we chatted with each other. It was forbidden to cycle two abreast. We couldn’t have cared less. We were Hilma and Harro.

Just behind the Bavarian Station, we reached our destination. ‘Youth Outfitters’ said the sign above the swing door, which was big enough for a cathedral. You could only guess at the original colour of the doorknobs. Millions of girls and lads must have spent their last few pfennigs here.

The staff were probably used to quite a bit. But if there’d been a prize for crazy customers, Hilma and I would have been among the top contenders. Peplum jackets, checked shirts, neckerchiefs, pilots’ caps, nothing was beyond our reach. We tried on the lot. By the end, I’m sure there was nothing in the whole store that hadn’t been through our hands.

Out of breath from gales of laughter, I eventually chose a combination of a checked shirt, Lederhosen shorts with a flap at the front, and white socks. I kept the clothes on and felt like a king, though a rather poor one, as there wasn’t enough money for the thick-soled shoes I’d wanted; I couldn’t even pay the whole price of the Lederhosen upfront. But what did that matter?

‘You look grand,’ said Hilma, clicking her tongue. For that, I’d have been ready and willing to go even further into debt.

It took less than half an hour to discover the downside of the new outfit. Up to now, Hitler Youth patrols had only given me the once-over and it had been rare for them to pester me directly, as had happened at Connewitz Cross. But now it was open season. Two cars hooted at us on the way back; I didn’t take it in at that stage. But alongside my school on Alexis-Schumann-Platz, something flickered in the corner of one eye, and just as my head was about to turn in response to an odd presentiment, something heavy and dark flew past me, nearly taking part of my nose with it. It wasn’t a stone, as I thought for a second, but an ugly big apple that smashed on the tramlines. I identified the marksmen: a pack of boys in uniform, at least one of whom wore the black-and-gold cuff band of the Hitler Youth Patrol Force.

‘Bastards! Scum! *Bündische* swine!’ They were giving us all they’d got. Clearly they

were out of any other kind of munition. I waved, but made sure to speed past them. Hilma raced on ahead of me, an arrow with a neat behind in Lederhosen.

We cycled. We flew. Finally, once we'd passed Connewitz Cross and got behind the church, gravity pulled us off our saddles. We panted. We sweated. Then we started to laugh, shaking and throwing ourselves into the grass.

'Did you see the one who was digging into his rucksack?' giggled Hilma. I shrugged, but Hilma wasn't looking. She laughed and laughed.

'Like a monkey! Except he didn't have any apples left!' She chuckled and chortled and didn't seem about to calm down any time soon.

'All right, that's enough,' I said at some point, half-joking, half-serious, and Hilma started all over again. Finally, she wiped the tears from her eyes with her sleeve.

'What was that they were yelling, those louts?' I asked. '*Bündische* swine? Did you get that? They don't even exist any more, the *Bündische* Youth.'

Like every boy, I'd heard of the youth movements of the Weimar Republic. But I didn't have any real knowledge, at most a few bits and pieces I'd picked up. Which group stood for what, that was something my father might have known, but I didn't. All I knew was that all these groups had been banned. The Hitler Youth, or illegality – nothing else existed now.

Hilma plucked at the grass and let it rain green matchsticks.

'You'll have to get used to it,' she said. '*Bündisch* – they don't even know what that means.' She propped herself up on her elbows and looked at me. 'They saw we don't belong to them. That's enough for types like them.' A pair of eyes scrutinised me closely. 'If you're interested in the subject, I may have something for you,' she said. 'My brother ...' She paused briefly and looked around.

'My brother belonged to the Autonomous Boys' Movement, Hilma continued, once she'd satisfied herself that the only things listening besides me were trees and bushes. 'He still reads their books and magazines. I can borrow them any time I want.' There was audible pride in her voice. 'Why don't you come round and have a look some time? But you'll have to be careful; it's a crime to own the things and to pass them on to other people.'

The last words were said in a whisper. A gentle breeze played in the leaves around us. Just come round to the home of a girl I hardly knew, and read banned writings - that sounded completely normal coming from Hilma, but for me it was beyond crazy. A minute later, we were pushing our cycles down the street together.