

Five Days in May

a novel by

Elisabeth R. Hager



Sample translation by Anita Langham

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Five Days in May
(Fünf Tage im Mai)
by **Elisabeth R. Hager**
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A scintillating novel from the tyrol alps about an exceptional friendship and the selflessness of true love

Illy and her great-grandfather couldn't be more different. Whilst Tatka strides speedily towards becoming one of these really old men with wrinkled faces, Illy is just beginning to discover the world. Still, they prefer to spend their spare time together – whether in the old barrel-maker workshop or riding Tatka's ancient moped. With elation and great warmth Elisabeth Hager tells a story of five days in May which cast the dies of their lives anew.

Illy is a tomboy with a keen mind and a great-grandfather called Tatka. He is an obsolescent model: a berserk in the body of an old man, last living barrel-maker in Tyrol, avid stalwart of the late k.u.k.-monarchy and soon to be oldest man in the whole village. When Illy visits him on her free afternoons in his workshop he listens to her reports with his remaining good ear, tells her stories of the perished empire and initiates Illy to the artisanry of barrel-making. She in turn shares her every secret with him, for instance that a funny name is written in the atlas she just received from her school: Tristan Unger. Illy actually falls in love with Tristan a few years later, a newcomer who doesn't really fit into the Tyrolean village idyll. Her parents forbid Illy to meet with Tristan, only Tatka backs the young love. But one day Illy discovers for herself that she has to make a decision. Yet she doesn't suspect that the consequences of this decision will accompany her for the rest of her life.



THURSDAY 8 MAY 1986

Pocket Coffee

Dressed in every shade of white, we stood in front of the yellow church tower: twenty-four doves of peace, poised for flight, casting anxious glances at the throng of people into which our parents had just disappeared. Here and there a tense mother was still tugging at a dress or jamming a hairpin into her daughter's towering coiffure. Smooth shiny backs, delicate fabrics flowing from girls' arms, tufts of hair tied with white ribbons fluttering in the breeze. We were draped in thin little jackets and wore woollen tights under our lace dresses. It was May, but still, you never quite knew. The boys in their dark suits stood off to one side: not as orderly as we were, but at least not as noisy as usual. The sun was warm on my back, but my feet were freezing in their thin patent leather shoes.

I don't always remember smells, but I can still hear the subdued chatter in my ears. And I see the sky above us, a morning sky, with two thin vapour trails crossing the blue.

My friends Fritzi and Barbara looked nice, I thought, with their elaborate hair braids threaded through with flowers. But I didn't think I looked nice. I was wearing a white dress, of course – it even had a hooped petticoat. But to my own critical eyes I didn't make the grade. Markus, who sat next to me in class, always called me 'Peppermint Patty' after the red-haired girl in the Peanuts cartoons. Although my name was and still is Illy, short for Leonore. I thought the Peppermint Patty thing was a compliment, until I saw a picture of her: a chubby know-it-all in a football shirt, whose best friend called her 'Sir'. I was hurt by the comparison, because my seven-year-old self still harboured the idiotic wish not only to be seen as daring, courageous and smart, but also as stunningly beautiful. But I didn't conform to the prevailing idea of a pretty little girl, not like Fritzi, Steffi or Biggi, floating around me robed in white. And my dress didn't really disguise that fact. When I'd gone shopping with Aunt Bea, in my eagerness to look at least something like my idea of the perfect princess, I'd forced myself into a dress that was too small, and claimed it was a perfect fit. Now I was trapped in it and gasping for air. And anyway, nothing could magic away the fact that I was the only one of the girls with short cropped hair.

My parents and Aunt Bea nodded to me encouragingly. The only one I couldn't see was Tatka, my great-grandfather, which struck me as strange – his height made him hard to miss. Papa, with his freshly trimmed moustache, was beaming. My mother's cheeks were flushed with excitement, her eyes resting proudly on my dress. My uncle Martin with his Super 8 video camera whirred around the scene like a satellite. He was a small man with a high-handed disposition. A technology freak, who was only happy when he could disappear behind a camera or some other lens, where he would lose himself in his work in the unshakeable belief that he was creating something enduring. In those days he inflicted his film shows on the family, insisting we watch them in his hobby workshop in the cellar, accompanied by his endless commentaries. Without complaining, as if we hadn't all been



there as well. But I'd never seen the film of my First Communion. Or else I don't remember it. Of course, I could ask my uncle. But I prefer to remember it like this, though it may not be the whole truth. But then – what is the truth anyway?

I should have been pleased at the little committee that was gathered in front of the church just for my sake. But instead, I was missing Tatka. Whenever I saw his face, weathered by the years, I felt secure. Because Tatka liked me, even if I didn't look like a princess.

Frau Häusler, the class sergeant major, appeared on the scene and gave the order in her strident voice: 'Form two lines! Then into the church – as we rehearsed!'

We diligently followed her instructions. The girls formed a line, one behind the other, and waited for their appointed partners to find them. I didn't need to look very hard to find mine. Markus was the tallest in the class. He broke away from the cluster of boys and trudged over with his slow, awkward gait. His face was long like a salzstangerl loaf. Mine was round like a bread roll. No doubt about it, we belonged together.

'Why're you looking so gloomy, are you ill?' I asked him.

He didn't answer. Instead, he took my hand and stared determinedly in front of him, like a soldier preparing to enter a war zone. My parents and Aunt Bea grinned and nodded encouragement at him, while my uncle captured the scene for future generations. Markus' hand was clammy. I glanced at Vroni's French braid, caught a whiff of gel from my short hair and sighed. Then I remembered what Tatka always said. 'Keep your chin up!' Even if I was the strangest-looking girl ever to receive First Communion.

'Come on!' Markus hissed suddenly.

I jumped so much that I crashed into the satin-clad back in front of me, setting in motion a juddering surge that ran through the couples in front of us and only subsided when it reached Katrin and Hansi at the head of the line. After a moment the procession recovered its equilibrium and pushed through the church door like a swaying centipede, to the accompaniment of the first chords of organ music. Inside we were enveloped by cool marble and the smell of sweet despair. The walls were overrun with stucco work. Statues of the saints, weary of life, stared down at us from the ledges above, as we proceeded down the aisle with tiny ceremonial steps. At the time I often wondered why nobody stole the gold from the church. We'd learnt in class that there was poverty in the world and about the unequal distribution of wealth. The gold gleaming in front of me belonged to the good Lord. But He didn't need it, because of course He only had to click his fingers to get anything He wanted. So why didn't someone just give it to the poor, who were too polite to take it for themselves? The good Lord surely wouldn't mind.

Boy, girl, boy, girl, in turn, we stopped at the first pew, made a bow or a curtsy, and then one by one took our seats. For the first time I saw the benefits of my white crinoline dress. I had to lift it up like a hula hoop in order to get into the children's pew, and I felt like a duchess in an old black-and-white film. I heard a long, drawn-out hissing. My aunt's warning signal. But as she'd forbidden me from turning around to look at the family during the



service, I felt duty-bound to ignore her. Instead, I lifted the skirt a little higher, slid into the pew and plopped myself down on the seat next to Markus. Kicki and Franz Josef from Class 2a, whom I had never even spoken to before, filtered in behind me.

No sooner had we sat down than the priest entered from the vestry accompanied by a train of altar boys. Everyone stood – even the music rose – and the Mass began. The priest’s embroidered robe, his voice, the beautiful ring on his finger. Many of my classmates had only been to church a few times, but I knew my way around. As far back as I could remember, I’d come here every Sunday with my parents. I loved the drifting clouds of burning incense, the Christmas tree decked with tinsel, the bonfires at the Easter Vigil. But most of all I loved the chorus of voices, the sound of hands folding in prayer, the tread of a hundred feet, the automatic rising up and sitting down, the swift gasps of breath at the end of every verse of the Rosary. All of that happened without anyone, or any person at least, giving the order for it. When I thought about the Mass my pulse quickened and the blood raced more swiftly through my veins.

The wooden pews creaked. Then the congregation stood, sweeping the newcomers along with it. Moments later a murmuring began, which I’d heard countless times before, but only now understood for the first time – *I confess to almighty God, and to you, my brothers and sisters*. Hundreds of voices, low, perfectly synchronised – except for one: Norbert, a red-pimpled local man with Down’s syndrome and a straggly beard like a catfish, who repeated each word exactly one beat too late. *In what I have done and in what I have failed to do*. The thought went through my mind – ‘What was it I was supposed to have done?’ *I have greatly sinned – Sinned*, croaked Norbert. *In my thoughts – Thoughts. In my words – Words. And in my deeds – Deeds*. Ahh. *Through my fault*. A hundred clenched hands. Beating down on a hundred breasts. *Through my fault. Through my most grievous fault*. When they beat down for the third time, it dawned on me: I actually had sinned! Six months before, at Communion, I’d opened my beak with an expression of innocence and misled the priest! When he’d put the Host in my mouth, I’d behaved as if everything was normal. The Host sticking to the roof of my mouth. Tasting of life without joy. Yes, I had sinned. Those words were meant for me. *Therefore I ask blessed Mary ever-Virgin, all the Angels and Saints, and you, my brothers and sisters, to pray for me to the Lord our God – God*.

The multitude seated themselves. *Have mercy on us, O Lord*. I glanced at Markus, who had relaxed and was staring straight ahead without a care. *Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy*. I tried to distract myself. I looked at the priest, who was just intoning the Gloria. He bobbed around the altar like a boxer. Each movement was light-footed, precise. I liked what the priest did – his work, his proximity to the dear Lord. A short while before, I’d told my great-grandpa that I’d like to become a priest. The benefits were obvious: when the priest spoke, everyone listened. He had a silver microphone and could talk to God and Jesus whenever he liked, and to the Virgin Mary, and all the angels and saints. Tatka looked at me askance, and said I should go into politics if I was so convinced of my calling. Those words flitted through my mind now – ‘convinced of my calling’. Along with the question of whether that was that a good thing or not.



The congregation stood once more. I faltered, however, out of step. The next moment a hundred mouths issued the same prayer, while I alone sat dumb in my row. And then – *Amen. Amen*, croaked Norbert. *Am-e-e-e-n*, I croaked, long after all the others had sat down. I tried to feel part of it; I wanted to be one with this body of people, speaking with many voices, standing up, sitting down, being given solace and receiving forgiveness. I too had to have that, should have it. Shouldn't I?

Frau Knolle, our religious education teacher, stepped forward and read a parable from the Bible. I listened hard, but in the whole story, in every sentence, only one thing stood out: my guilt. All of a sudden, I felt the Host, which I'd fraudulently obtained months before, now sitting like a stone in my stomach. And along with it, the pressing question: what other sins had I committed?

A wave of nausea rose up in my chest. As it passed, I gasped for air. My dress could burst open at any minute. I threw Markus an anguished look.

'I feel sick.'

Embarrassed, he kept looking resolutely ahead. I didn't want him to feel embarrassed, I wanted him to help me. I tried again, more urgently.

'Hey, I'm going to be sick.'

Silence.

'Hey!'

I tugged at his jacket. At first, he acted as if he hadn't heard, but then he had mercy on me.

'Con-cen-tray-on-a-poin-in-the-diss-tance-un-til-ew-fill-etter.'

Markus could speak without moving his lips. But in spite of that, he glanced anxiously behind him now, to see whether his mother had caught him talking, while I attempted to follow his advice. The brightest point in the distance was the ring on the priest's hand. It shimmered like an early morning dewdrop on a branch. The priest was speaking in a gentle voice, a voice I really liked. Aunt Bea said that my voice also had potential. And – it should be developed. Yes, yes, I guess so, my mother had said. And cake every day would be nice too.

I stared at the ring, which at that moment was dancing up and down and left and right. The next minute it took two ninety-degree turns, did a nose-dive and landed in a golden goblet. I had less than ten seconds' respite before it shot up again. An image of the pressure cooker at home sprang into my head, the most perilous pan in the whole house. My mother always said, 'Stand clear, we're having potatoes.' The pressure cooker had a little red valve that rose and rose as the potatoes cooked. When two red bands were showing, then the pan had to be taken off the hob immediately, otherwise it would explode and red-hot potato would fly into your face. That's what my mother said.

I felt the second little band on the pressure cooker inside me making its way inexorably up to the top, and looked around for an escape route. There were four children on the other side of Markus. To my right were Franz Josef and Kicki. I tried for a moment to fight it, then there was no holding it back.



‘Out, let me out, Franzl,’ I whispered.

But Franz Josef was also staring at the priest’s ring as if in a trance.

‘Excuse me. Excuse me!’

Holding up the hooped skirt like a blunt white weapon, I pushed past him and Kicki, who was looking daggers at me, out into the aisle – and then began to run. With each step my patent shoes echoed on the marble floor. My heart was racing. Dozens of pairs of eyes flew in my direction, understood, and turned away. My aunt’s startled hissing rang in my ears like turbulence. Midway through my flight to the main entrance, which seemed to be miles away, another whistling sound, sharp and military, caught my attention. I turned my head and standing there in the shadowy side entrance, I saw Tatka, half-hidden by the heavy curtain. His tall figure leant slightly forward and his arms reached out towards me like the branches of a tree. Without hesitating for a moment I changed course, ran straight to him and leapt into his arms. He staggered back under the impact of my weight, lifted me up a little higher, then loaded me over his shoulder like a sack, put his grey felt hat on his head and trudged out.

‘Reintei freintei,’ he exclaimed, as he always did when surprised or alarmed. ‘Not int graveyard!’

With firm strides, Tatka cut through the few rows of graves surrounding the church and headed straight for the public toilets at the other end of the main square. Tatka had started whistling almost before we had set off, as he always did. He whistled the loveliest tunes and I thought for a long time that he’d made them up on the spur of the moment. Even now in a classical concert I’ll still recognise a short melody, and every time my heart contracts for a few moments – I miss him so much. As I was lying there over his shoulder, his whistling didn’t sound very melodic, more like a wheezing, an exhaling of air through pursed lips. We reached the toilets just in time and I let it all out.

When I emerged, Tatka offered me a drink of water in his cupped hands. They reminded me of tree bark; the veins had taken root under the dark brown skin and with every movement they stood out. The stump of his missing finger rose up out of the gnarled web like a lopped-off branch. I drank from his hands and marvelled at how soft the damp skin was against my lips. And then we wiped the vomit from the toilet seat. Tatka in his suit. And me in my dress, which was thankfully still white.

‘Let’s get a bit of air in there,’ said Tatka, when we sat down on the bench in front of the church, and he unzipped the back of my dress a little and laid his heavy suit jacket over my shoulders. The feeling of being sheltered in his jacket, which was still warm, made me forget about feeling sick. But then I heard the organ music, and recognised the tune which had played in the rehearsal as we’d marched up to the altar to receive our First Communion. I now pictured in painful detail every moment of the ceremony we’d been told about in the run-up to the day. I looked over at the church door, its dark wood gleaming in the sun. The sight of it upset me – we were on the outside, and the door was shut.

‘Lissen – that’s the Communion now,’ said Tatka quietly.

In spite of his broad shoulders, he suddenly looked small in his white shirt and ancient fawn-coloured braces. He scratched his chin a little sheepishly, and stared for a long time at



the stone pavement in front of us. For weeks there had only been one topic of conversation in my family, in class and with my friends: the First Communion. Now I was sitting here outside the door, having to listen to it instead of taking part. It felt as if I was standing, breathless and in disbelief, as the train I wanted to catch slowly left the station.

A crow settled on the pine tree by the graveyard gate. The slender branch swayed under its weight. The crow hopped about indecisively a couple of times, and then flew away. I followed its small black figure with my eyes, until it disappeared from view behind the wooden balcony of the *Zur Post* tavern.

In my stomach I could feel the Host, which I'd surreptitiously obtained months before. Something not so easy to spit out – a stone made of flour and water, become flesh.

'Actually, it would have been my second Communion,' I said at last, as casually as I could. Then I laid my small hand on top of his larger one. Tatka raised an eyebrow and the corner of his mouth went up.

'Ahh, then ye know how it goes.'

With his free hand he smoothed down the leg of his suit, then reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a small brown packet wrapped in cellophane.

'Never eaten anythin' like that, have ye?'

'Is it a sweet?'

'Certain it is. A *Pocket Coffee*. Very fine. But mind now: it has a *Liquid Centre*. *Liquid Centre* – that's English. D'ye understand?'

I didn't understand, but I nodded like crazy and didn't take my eyes off the sweet. Tatka took it between his thumb and forefinger and placed it in my open palm. I took the little packet carefully and turned it this way and that. Then I undid the layer of cellophane and the gold wrapper, put it in my mouth and cautiously began to suck. First came a dark chocolate coating, then soon after a crisp sugar shell, followed by a bitter liquid that assaulted my tongue and made the corners of my mouth turn down. If I'd been on my own, I'd have spat the disgusting lump out. But with Tatka there I didn't dare, so I tried to swallow it down as fast as I could.

'There now. It's only coffee,' said Tatka, grinning.

Coffee? I'd really had coffee in my mouth? That black stuff that my parents drank whenever they had the chance and that had been denied me until now? My expression brightened. I had tasted coffee! Now I was one of the grown-ups. Holding the gold foil in my hand like a trophy, I let the bitter taste settle in my mouth. I snuggled up to Tatka and suddenly it didn't seem so bad, sitting outside the door: at least he was sitting there with me.

'Why weren't you in church?' I asked him after a while. For the first time that day I looked straight at him, and knew the answer in a minute. He replied anyway:

'I couldn' find mi teeth.'

Most people outside our family were afraid of Tatka. At least, that's how it seemed to me when I walked through the village holding his hand. I wasn't sure why people found him so scary. When it came to old people, he was the only one I knew.



If I thought about my grandparents on my father's side, what came to mind weren't loving, smiling faces. Instead, I saw the finely curved lines of the inscription carved in granite, next to a weathered cross – my grandfather's name. Over the years the lettering had become etched deep into the headstone, gradually becoming darker and more prominent against the light-coloured stone. And my grandmother's inscription underneath, which seemed newer in comparison because she'd been buried forty years later. My grandfather was a young man when he died, shortly after the Second World War, before he had even had a chance to hold his baby in his arms – the baby that was to become my father. My grandmother, who by all accounts was a beautiful, headstrong woman, stayed true to her husband her whole life. She died of a serious illness shortly after I was born and was laid in the grave alongside him, fulfilling her last wish. Since that time they had both been together in death. And in the same way as their names were darkening together on the headstone, so in my head the two of them formed a single entity carved in stone, in spite of the forty years my grandmother had outlived her husband.

My mother's parents were still alive, and sent postcards and expensive gifts, but we only saw them for a few hours every year when they visited for my birthday. They lived in a large villa in the east of Austria, but spent most of the year on cruise ships, lying on deck in the sun, tanning their retired bellies, freely spending the fortune they'd amassed during their working lives, to my parents' slight dismay.

But Tatka I saw every day. His blue eyes, which changed colour according to what he was looking at or thinking, were always there to meet mine. His wiry body was always close by. And wherever I went with Tatka, to the fields, the forest or the local council offices, he always wore his flecked grey felt hat, which seemed to me like a faithful guard dog, protecting not only him but me too. Although he was already over eighty, Tatka still worked every day making barrels. After lunch I'd often sit with him in his workshop, doing my homework, while he talked away to himself, planing the barrel staves, bending them in the lye bath to the exact curvature he'd calculated, weaving baskets from willow, or striking a glowing-hot piece of iron on the anvil, making sparks fly everywhere. We pottered about separately, without paying too much attention to what the other was doing. But whenever I laid down my pencil or started staring into space, Tatka would stop his work, turn his head towards me and ask, 'What is't, Illy? Shall I help ye?'

As a child I thought that people were afraid of Tatka because he was so strong. And that was true, too. Although he'd reached the age of eighty-one, and so was generally considered old, he still fizzed with energy. If you saw him chopping wood, you'd think there were three men inside him. And if he got worked up about something and started gesticulating and talking loudly in his deep voice, those he was talking to would often step back in alarm, for fear he might break someone's nose with his massive hands. But Tatka was not only the strongest man in the village. He was also the last of his kind. He'd outlived everyone in our family: my mother's grandparents, his wife and even his own son, my grandpa. And while there had been several barrel-making workshops in the Tyrol when Tatka was young, and wherever you went there would be someone who could make you a half-



decent cask, their numbers had dwindled in the twentieth century. The heavy work, which demanded massive strength, and the precision and mathematical ability required, meant that very few wanted to take it on. A large wine cask would take Tatka several weeks to make. Ready-made barrels were cheaper and also quicker to produce. The barrel-makers throughout the country gradually started carving Nativity figures and making turned wooden candlesticks. But Tatka remained true to his trade. As far back as I could remember, he was the last barrel-maker in the province. I only realised later how much it pained him to think that his beloved craft would die with him. Perhaps that's why he passed on his knowledge so tirelessly. As a master barrel-maker, he'd trained apprentices right up to his eightieth year. I got to know the last one, Blasius, when I was still a young child. He was a wiry youth with a loose tongue and flaming red hair, who'd come all the way from the Czech border to the Tyrol to learn the craft of making barrels from my great-grandpa. Because of the enormous age difference between them, Blasius called him Tat'ka – little papa – a name which seemed to me so wonderful that I took it for my own. Since then I'd always called my great-grandpa 'Tatka', while my parents called him 'grandpa', and to the rest of the world he was Korbinian Hofer.

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