PROLOGUE

A Mountain Range of Rubble

in which our narrator introduces:

himself – the colours
– and the book thief

Death and Chocolate

First the colours.
Then the humans.
That's usually how I see things.
Or at least, how I try.

Here is a Small Fact
You are going to die.

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

Reaction to the Aforementioned Fact
Does this worry you?
I urge you – don't be afraid.
I'm nothing if not fair.

Of course, an introduction.

A beginning.

Where are my manners?

I could introduce myself properly, but it's not really necessary. You will know me well enough and soon enough, depending on a diverse range of variables. It suffices to say that at some point in time, I will be standing over you, as genially as possible. Your soul will be in my arms. A colour 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 colour will everything be at that moment when I come for you? What will the sky be saying?

Personally, I like a chocolate-coloured sky. Dark, dark chocolate. People say it suits me. I do, however, try to enjoy every colour I see – the whole spectrum. A billion or so flavours, 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 colours 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 colours. Waxy yellows, cloud-spat blues. Murky darknesses. In my line of work, I make it a point to notice them.

As I've suggested, my one saving grace is distraction. It keeps me sane. It helps me cope, considering the length of time I've been performing this job. The trouble is, who could ever replace me? Who could step in while I take a break in your stock-standard resort-style holiday destination, whether it be tropical or of the ski-trip variety? The answer, of course, is nobody, which has prompted me to make a conscious, deliberate decision – to make distraction my holiday. Needless to say, I holiday in increments. In colours.

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

Which brings me to my next point.

It's the leftover humans.

The survivors.

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

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

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

- a girl
- some words
- an accordionist
- some fanatical Germans
- a Jewish fist-fighter
- and quite a lot of thievery.

I saw the book thief three times.

Beside the Railway Line

First up is something white. Of the blinding kind.

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

A Reassuring Announcement

Please, be calm, despite that previous threat.
I am all bluster –
I am not violent. I am not malicious.
I am a result.

Yes, it was white.

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

As you might expect, someone had died.

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

There were two guards.

There was a mother and her daughter.

One corpse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A small soul was in my arms.

I stood a little to the right.

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

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

Her mouth jittered.

Her cold arms were folded.

Tears were frozen to the book thief's face.

The Eclipse

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

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

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

Some Other Small Facts

Sometimes I arrive too early.
I rush,
and some people cling longer
to life than expected.

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

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

Years had passed, but I recognised her.

She was panting.

* * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

The crowd did what crowds do.

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

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

A final dirty joke.

Another human punchline.

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

You see, to me, for just a moment, despite all of the

colours that touch and grapple with what I see in this world, I will often catch an eclipse when a human dies.

I've seen millions of them.

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

The Flag

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

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

Then, bombs.

This time, everything was too late.

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

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

They were glued down, every last one of them. A packet of souls.

Was it fate?

Misfortune?

Is that what glued them down like that?

Of course not.

Let's not be stupid.

It probably had more to do with the hurled bombs,

thrown down by humans hiding in the clouds.

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

Clearly, I see it.

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

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

Apart from everything else, the book thief wanted desperately to go back to the basement, to write, or to read through her story one last time. In hindsight, I see it so obviously on her face. She was dying for it – the safety, the home of it – but she could not move. Also, the basement no longer existed. It was part of the mangled landscape.

Please, again, I ask you to believe me.

I wanted to stop. To crouch down.

I wanted to say.

'I'm sorry, child.'

But that is not allowed.

I did not crouch down. I did not speak.

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

She dropped the book.

She kneeled.

The book thief howled.

Her book was stepped on several times as the clean-up began, and although orders were given to clear only the

mess of concrete, the girl's most precious item was thrown aboard a garbage truck, at which point I was compelled. I climbed aboard and took it in my hand, not realising that I would read her story several hundred times over the years, on my travels. I would watch the places where we intersected, and marvel at what the girl saw and how she survived. That is the best I can do – watch it fall into line with everything else I spectated during that time.

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

That's when I see them formulate.

THE COLOURS

RED:  **WHITE:**  **BLACK:**

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

Yes, often I am reminded of her, and in one of my vast array of pockets, I have kept her story to retell. It is one of the small legion I carry, each one extraordinary in its own right. Each one an attempt – an immense leap of an attempt – to prove to me that you, and your human existence, are worth it.

Here it is. One of a handful.

The Book Thief.

If you feel like it, come with me. I will tell you a story.

I'll show you something.

PART ONE

The Gravedigger's Handbook

featuring:

himmel street – the art of saumensching – an iron-fisted woman – a kiss attempt – jesse owens – sandpaper – the smell of friendship – a heavyweight champion – and the mother of all *watschen*s

Arrival on Himmel Street

That last time.

That red sky . . .

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

Years earlier, the start was snow.

The time had come. For one.

A Spectacularly Tragic Moment

A train was moving quickly.
It was packed with humans.
A six-year-old boy died
in the third carriage.

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

How It Happened

There was an intense
spurt of coughing.
Almost an *inspired* spurt.
And soon after – nothing.

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

Their mother was asleep.

I entered the train.

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

No-one noticed.

The train galloped on.

Except the girl.

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

His blue eyes stared at the floor.

Seeing nothing.

Prior to waking up, the book thief had been dreaming about the Führer, Adolf Hitler. In the dream, she was attending a rally at which he spoke, looking at the skull-coloured part in his hair and the perfect square of his moustache. She was listening contentedly to the torrent of words that was spilling from his mouth. His sentences glowed in the light. In a quieter moment, he actually crouched down and smiled at her. She returned the gesture and said, '*Guten Tag, Herr Führer. Wie geht's dir heut*?' She hadn't learned to speak too well, or even to read, as she had rarely frequented school. The reason for that, she would find out in due course.

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

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

Her brother was dead.

* * *

One eye open.

One still in a dream.

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

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

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

And the shaking.

Why do they always shake them?

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

Stupidly, I stayed. I watched.

Next, her mother.

She woke her up with the same distraught shake.

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

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

In panic, the mother opened the door.

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

What could the girl do but follow?

* * *

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

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

It hobbled in and stopped.

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

They stood.

The boy was getting heavy.

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

An Observation

A pair of train guards.
A pair of gravediggers.
When it came down to it, one
of them called the shots. The
other did what he was told.
The question is, what if the
***other* is a lot more than one?**

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

For two days I went about my business. I travelled the globe as always, handing souls to the conveyor belt of eternity. I watched them trundle passively on. Several times I warned myself that I should keep a good distance

from the burial of Liesel Meminger's brother. I did not heed my advice.

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

Standing to Liesel's left, the gravediggers were rubbing their hands together and whingeing about the snow and the current digging conditions. 'So hard getting through all the ice,' and so forth. One of them couldn't have been more than fourteen. An apprentice. When he walked away, a black book fell innocuously from his coat pocket without his knowledge. He'd taken perhaps two dozen steps.

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

The girl, however, stayed.

Her knees entered the ground. Her moment had arrived.

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

Within seconds, snow was carved into her skin.

Frozen blood was cracked across her hands.

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

A Small Image, Perhaps Twenty Metres Away

When the dragging was done, the mother
and the girl stood and breathed.
There was something black
and rectangular lodged in the snow.
Only the girl saw it.
She bent down and picked it up
and held it firmly in her fingers.
The book had silver writing on it.

They held hands.

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

As for me, I remained a few moments longer.

I waved.

No-one waved back.

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

Both were skinny and pale.

Both had sores on their lips.

Liesel noticed it in the dirty, fogged-up window of the train when they boarded just before midday. In the written words of the book thief herself, the journey continued like *everything* had happened.

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

I think her mother knew this quite well. She wasn't delivering her children to the higher echelons of Munich,

but a foster home had apparently been found, and if nothing else, the new family could at least feed the girl and the boy a little better, and educate them properly.

The boy.

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

How could she walk?

How could she move?

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

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

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

There was the chaos of goodbye.

The girl's head was buried into the woolly, worn shallows of her mother's coat. There had been some more dragging.

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

A Translation
Himmel = Heaven

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

Regardless, Liesel's foster parents were waiting.

The Hubermanns.

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

For Liesel, it was a ride in a car.

She'd never been in one before.

There was the constant rise and fall of her stomach, and the futile hope that they'd lose the way or change their minds. Amongst it all, her thoughts couldn't help turning towards her mother, back at the Bahnhof, waiting to leave again. Shivering. Bundled up in that useless coat. She'd be eating her nails, waiting for the train. The platform would be long and uncomfortable – a slice of cold cement. Would she keep an eye out for the approximate burial site of her son on the return trip? Or would sleep be too heavy?

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

The day was grey, the colour of Europe.

Curtains of rain were drawn around the car.

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

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

A Photo of Himmel Street

The buildings appear to be glued together, mostly small houses and unit blocks that look nervous. There is murky snow spread out like carpet. There

is concrete, empty hatstand
trees, and grey air.

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

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

The fact was this:

Liesel would not get out of the car.

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

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

Outside, through the circle she'd made, Liesel could see the tall man's fingers, still holding the cigarette. Ash stumbled from its edge and lunged and lifted several times before it hit the ground. Fifteen minutes passed till they were able to coax her from the car. It was the tall man who did it.

Quietly.

* * *

There was the gate next, which she clung to.

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

A Translation of Rosa Hubermann's Announcement

'What are you arseholes looking at?'

Eventually, Liesel Meminger walked gingerly inside. Hans Hubermann had her by one hand. Her small suitcase had her by the other. Buried beneath the folded layer of clothes in that suitcase was a small black book, which, for all we know, a fourteen-year-old gravedigger in a nameless town had probably spent the last few hours looking for. 'I promise you,' I imagine him saying to his boss, 'I have no idea what happened to it. I've looked everywhere. *Ev*erywhere!' I'm sure he would never have suspected the girl, and yet, there it was – a black book with silver words written against the ceiling of her clothes.

The Gravedigger's Handbook

A twelve-step guide to
gravedigging success
Published by the Bayern Cemetery Association

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

Growing Up a Saumensch

Yes, an illustrious career.

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

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

Upon her arrival, you could still see the bite marks of snow on her hands and the frosty blood on her fingers.

Everything about her was undernourished. Wire-like shins. Coathanger arms. She did not produce it easily, but when it came, she had a starving smile.

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

A Strange Word
Kommunist

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

There were boarding houses crammed with people, rooms filled with questions. And that word. That strange word was always there somewhere, standing in the corner, watching from the dark. It wore suits, uniforms. No matter where they went, there it was, each time her father was mentioned. When she asked her mother what it meant, she was told it wasn't important, that she shouldn't worry about such things. At one boarding house, there was a healthier woman who tried to teach the children to write, using charcoal on the wall. Liesel was tempted to ask her the word's meaning, but it never eventuated. One day, that woman was taken away for questioning. She didn't come back.

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

Why?

The fact that she knew the answer – if only at the most

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

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

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

'*Saumensch du dreckigs!*' Liesel's foster mother shouted that first evening, when she refused to have a bath. 'You filthy pig! Why won't you get undressed?' She was good at being furious. In fact, you could say that Rosa Hubermann had a face decorated with constant fury. That was how the creases were made in the cardboard texture of her complexion.

Liesel, naturally, was bathed in anxiety. There was no way she was getting into any bath, or into bed for that matter. She was twisted into one corner of the closet-like

washroom, clutching for the nonexistent arms of the wall for some level of support. There was nothing but dry paint, difficult breath and the deluge of abuse from Rosa.

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

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

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

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

Some Facts About Hans Hubermann

He loved to smoke.
The main thing he enjoyed about smoking was the rolling.
He was a painter by trade and played the piano accordion.
This came in handy, especially in winter,
when he could make a little money playing in the pubs
of Molching, like the Knoller.
He had already cheated me in one world war, but would
later be put into another (as a perverse kind
of reward) where he would somehow
manage to avoid me again.

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

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

His manner.

The quiet air around him.

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

Some Facts About Rosa Hubermann

She was five foot one inch tall and wore her
browny-grey strands of elastic hair in a bun.
To supplement the Hubermann income, she did
the washing and ironing for five
of the wealthier households in Molching.
Her cooking was atrocious.
She possessed the unique ability to aggravate
almost anyone she ever met.
But she *did* love Liesel Meminger.
Her way of showing it just happened to be strange.
It involved bashing her with wooden spoons
and words, at various intervals.

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

After a few months, they were no longer Mr and Mrs

Hubermann. With a typical fistful of words, Rosa said, 'Now listen, Liesel – from now on you call me Mama.' She thought a moment. 'What did you call your real mother?'

Liesel answered quietly. '*Auch Mama* – also Mama.'

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

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

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

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

The Woman with the Iron Fist

Those first few months were definitely the hardest.

Every night, Liesel would nightmare.

Her brother's face.

Staring at the floor of the train.

She would wake up swimming in her bed, screaming, and drowning in the flood of sheets. On the other side of the room, the bed that was meant for her brother floated boat-like in the darkness. Slowly, with the arrival of consciousness, it sank, seemingly into the floor. This vision didn't help matters, and it would usually be quite a while before the screaming stopped.

Possibly the only good to come out of those nightmares was that it brought Hans Hubermann, her new papa, into the room, to soothe her, to love her.

He came in every night and sat with her. The first couple of times he simply stayed – a stranger to kill the aloneness. A few nights after that, he whispered, 'Shh, I'm here, it's all right.' After three weeks, he held her. Trust was accumulated quickly, due primarily to the brute strength of the man's gentleness, his *thereness*. The girl knew from the outset that he'd always appear mid-scream, and he would not leave.

A Definition Not Found in the Dictionary

***Not-leaving*: An act of trust and love, often deciphered by children.**

Hans Hubermann would sit sleepy-eyed on the bed as Liesel cried into his sleeves and breathed him in. Every morning, just after two o'clock, she fell asleep again to the smell of him: a mixture of dead cigarettes, decades of paint, and human skin. When morning came in earnest, he was a couple of metres away from her, crumpled, almost halved, in the chair. He never used the other bed. Liesel would climb out and cautiously kiss his cheek and he would wake up and smile.

Some days, Papa told her to get back into bed and wait a minute, and he would return with his accordion and play for her. Liesel would sit up and hum, her cold toes clenched with excitement. No-one had ever given her music before. She would grin herself stupid, watching the lines drawing themselves down his face, and the soft metal of his eyes – until the swearing arrived from the kitchen.

'STOP THAT NOISE, *SAUKERL*!'

Papa would play a little longer.

He would wink at the girl and, clumsily, she'd wink back.

A few times, purely to incense Mama even further, he also brought the instrument to the kitchen and played through breakfast.

Papa's bread and jam would be half-eaten on his plate, curled into the shape of bite marks, and the music would look Liesel in the face. I know it sounds strange, but that's how it felt to her. Papa's right hand strolled the tooth-coloured keys. His left hit the buttons. (She especially loved to see him hit the silver, sparkled one – the C major.) The accordion's scratched yet shiny black exterior came back and forth as his arms squeezed the dusty bellows, making it suck in the air and throw it back out. In the kitchen on those mornings, Papa made the

accordion live. I guess it makes sense, when you really think about it.

How do you tell if something's alive?

You check for breathing.

The sound of the accordion was, in actual fact, also the announcement of safety. Daylight. During the day, it was impossible to dream of her brother. She would miss him and frequently cry in the tiny washroom as quietly as possible, but she was still glad to be awake. On her first night with the Hubermanns, she had hidden her last link to him – *The Gravedigger's Handbook* – under her mattress, and occasionally she would pull it out and hold it. Staring at the letters on the cover and touching the print inside, she had no idea what any of it was saying. The point is, it didn't really matter what that book was about. It was what it meant that was more important.

The Book's Meaning

1. The last time she saw her brother.
2. The last time she saw her mother.

Sometimes, she would whisper the word Mama and see her mother's face a hundred times in a single afternoon. But those were small miseries compared to the terror of her dreams. At those times, in the enormous mileage of sleep, she had never felt so completely alone.

As I'm sure you've already noticed, there were no other children in the house. The Hubermanns had two of their own, but they were older and had moved out. Hans Junior worked in the centre of Munich and Trudy held a job as a housemaid and childminder. Soon they would both be in the war. One would be making bullets. The other would be shooting them.

* * *

School, as you might imagine, was a terrific misery.

Although it was state-run, there was a heavy Catholic influence, and Liesel was Lutheran. Not the most auspicious start. Then they discovered she couldn't read or write.

Humiliatingly, she was cast down with the younger kids, who were only just learning the alphabet. Even though she was thin-boned and pale, she felt gigantic amongst the midget children, and she often wished she was pale enough to disappear altogether.

Even at home there wasn't much room for guidance.

'Don't ask *him* for help,' Mama pointed out. 'That *Saukerl*.' Papa was staring out the window, as was often his habit. 'He left school in fourth class.'

Without turning round, Papa answered calmly, but with venom. 'Well don't ask her either.' He dropped some ash outside. 'She left school in *third* class.'

There were no books in the house (apart from the one she had secreted under her mattress), and the best Liesel could do was speak the alphabet under her breath before she was told in no uncertain terms to keep quiet. All that mumbling. It wasn't until later, when there was a bed-wetting incident mid-nightmare, that an extra reading education began. Unofficially, it was called the midnight class, even though it usually commenced at around two in the morning. More of that soon.

In mid-February, when she turned ten, Liesel was given a used doll that had a missing leg and yellow hair.

'It was the best we could do,' Papa apologised.

'What are you talking about? She's lucky to have *that* much,' Mama corrected him.

Hans continued his examination of the remaining leg while Liesel tried on her new uniform. Ten years old meant Hitler Youth. Hitler Youth meant a small brown uniform. Being female, Liesel was enrolled into the junior division of what was called the BDM.

EXPLANATION OF THE ABBREVIATION
It stood for Bund Deutscher Mädchen –
United German Girls.

The first thing they did there was make sure your *Heil Hitler* was working properly. Then you were taught to march straight, roll bandages and sew up clothes. You were also taken hiking and on other such activities. Wednesday and Saturday were the designated meeting days, from three in the afternoon until five.

Each Wednesday and Saturday, Papa would walk Liesel to the BDM headquarters and pick her up two hours later. They never spoke about it much. They just held hands and listened to their feet, and Papa had a cigarette or two.

The only anxiety Papa brought her was the fact that he was frequently leaving. Many evenings he would walk into the living room (which doubled as the Hubermanns' bedroom), pull the accordion from the old cupboard and squeeze past in the kitchen to the front door.

As he walked up Himmel Street, Mama would open the window and cry out. 'Don't be home too late!'

'Not so loud,' he turned and called back.

'*Saukerl!* Lick my arse! I'll speak as loud as I want!'

The echo of her swearing followed him up the street. He never looked back, or at least, not until he was sure his wife was gone. On those evenings, at the end of the street, accordion case in hand, he would turn round, just before Frau Diller's corner shop, and see the figure who had replaced his wife, in the window. Briefly, his long, ghostly hand would rise, before he turned again and walked slowly on. The next time Liesel saw him would be at two in the morning, when he dragged her gently from her nightmare.

Evenings in the small kitchen were raucous, without fail. Rosa Hubermann was always talking, and when she was

talking, she was *schimpfen*. She was constantly arguing and complaining. There was no-one to really argue with, but Mama managed it expertly every chance she had. She could argue with the entire world in that kitchen, and almost every evening, she did. Once they had eaten and Papa was gone, Liesel and Rosa would usually remain there, and Rosa would do the ironing.

A few times a week, Liesel would come home from school and walk the streets of Molching with her mama, picking up and delivering washing and ironing from the wealthier parts of town. Knaupt Strasse, Heide Strasse. A few others. Mama would deliver the ironing or pick up the washing with a dutiful smile, but as soon as the door was shut and she walked away, she would curse these rich people, with all their money and laziness.

'Too *g'schtinkerdt* to wash their own clothes,' she would say, despite her dependence on them.

'Him,' she accused Herr Vogel from Heide Street. 'Made all his money from his father. He throws it away on women and drink. And washing and ironing, of course.'

It was like a rollcall of scorn.

Herr Vogel, Mr and Mrs Pfaffelhürver, Helena Schmidt, the Weingartners. They were all guilty of *something*.

Apart from his drunkenness and expensive lechery, Ernst Vogel, according to Rosa, was constantly scratching his louse-ridden hair, licking his fingers and then handing over the money. 'I should wash it before I come home,' was her summation.

The Pfaffelhürvers scrutinised the results. '*Not one crease in these shirts, please*,' Rosa imitated them. '*Not one wrinkle in this suit*. And then they stand there and inspect it all, right in front of me. Right under my nose! What a *G'sindel* – what rubbish.'

The Weingartners were apparently stupid people with a constantly moulting *Saumensch* of a cat. 'Do you know how long it takes me to get rid of all that fur? It's everywhere!'

Helena Schmidt was a rich widow. 'That old cripple – sitting there just wasting away. She's never had to do a day's work in all her life.'

Rosa's greatest disdain, however, was reserved for 8 Grande Strasse. A large house, high on a hill, in the upper part of Molching.

'This one,' she'd pointed out to Liesel the first time they went there, 'is the mayor's house. That crook. His wife sits at home all day, too mean to light a fire – it's always freezing in there. She's crazy.' She punctuated the words. 'Absolutely. Crazy.' At the gate, she motioned to the girl. 'You go.'

Liesel was horrified. A giant brown door with a brass knocker stood atop a small flight of steps. 'What?'

Mama shoved her. 'Don't you what me, *Saumensch*. Move it.'

Liesel moved it. She walked the path, climbed the steps, hesitated and knocked.

A bathrobe answered the door.

Inside it, a woman with startled eyes, hair like fluff, and the posture of defeat stood in front of her. She saw Mama at the gate and handed the girl a bag of washing. 'Thank you,' Liesel said, but there was no reply. Only the door. It closed.

'You see?' said Mama when she returned to the gate. 'This is what I have to put up with. These rich bastards, these lazy swines . . .'

Holding the washing as they walked away, Liesel looked back. The brass knocker eyed her from the door.

When she'd finished berating the people she worked for, Rosa Hubermann would usually move on to her other favourite theme of abuse. Her husband. Looking at the bag of washing and the hunched houses, she would talk, and talk, and talk. 'If your papa was any good,' she informed Liesel *every* time they walked through Molching,

'I wouldn't have to do this.' She sniffed with derision. 'A painter! Why marry that *Arschloch*? That's what they told me – my family, that is.' Their footsteps crunched along the path. 'And here I am, walking the streets and slaving in my kitchen because that *Saukerl* never has any work. No real work, anyway. Just that pathetic accordion in those dirt-holes every night.'

'Yes, Mama.'

'Is that all you've got to say?' Mama's eyes were like pale blue cut-outs, pasted to her face.

They'd walk on.

With Liesel carrying the sack.

At home, it was washed in a boiler next to the stove, hung up by the fireplace in the living room, and then ironed in the kitchen. The kitchen was where the action was.

'Did you hear that?' Mama asked her nearly every night. The iron was in her fist, heated from the stove. Light was dull all through the house, and Liesel, sitting at the kitchen table, would be staring at the gaps of fire in front of her.

'What?' she'd reply. 'What is it?'

'That was that Holtzapfel.' Mama was already out of her seat. 'That *Saumensch* just spat on our door again.'

It was a tradition for Frau Holtzapfel, one of their neighbours, to spit on the Hubermanns' door every time she walked past. The front door was only metres from the gate, and let's just say that Frau Holtzapfel had the distance – and the accuracy.

The spitting was due to the fact that she and Rosa Hubermann were engaged in some kind of decade-long verbal war. No-one knew the origin of this hostility. They'd probably forgotten it themselves.

Frau Holtzapfel was a wiry woman, and quite obviously spiteful. She'd never married but had two sons, a few years older than the Hubermann offspring. Both

were in the army and both will make cameo appearances by the time we're finished here, I assure you.

In the spiteful stakes, I should also say that Frau Holtzapfel was thorough with her spitting, too. She never neglected to *spuck* on the door of number thirty-three and say '*Schweine!*' each time she walked past. One thing I've noticed about the Germans:

They seem very fond of pigs.

A Small Question and its Answer

And who do you think was made to clean
the spit off the door each night?
Yes – you got it.

When a woman with an iron fist tells you to get out there and clean spit off the door, you do it. Especially when the iron's hot.

It was all just part of the routine, really.

Each night, Liesel would step outside, wipe the door and watch the sky. Usually it was like spillage – cold and heavy, slippery and grey – but once in a while some stars had the nerve to rise and glow, if only for a few minutes. On those nights, she would stay a little longer and wait.

'Hello, stars.'

Waiting.

For the voice from the kitchen.

Or till the stars were dragged down again, into the waters of the German sky.

THE KISS
(A Childhood Decision-maker)

As with most small towns, Molching was filled with characters. A handful of them lived on Himmel Street. Frau Holtzapfel was only one cast member.

The others included the likes of these:

- Rudy Steiner – the boy next door who was obsessed with the black American athlete, Jesse Owens.
- Frau Diller – the staunch Aryan corner shop owner.
- Tommy Muller – a kid whose chronic ear infections had resulted in several operations, a pink river of skin painted across his face and a tendency to twitch.
- And a man known primarily as Pfiffikus, whose vulgarity made Rosa Hubermann look like a word-smith and a saint.

On the whole, it was a street filled with relatively poor people, despite the apparent rise of Germany's economy under Hitler. Poor sides of town still existed.

As mentioned already, the house next door to the Hubermanns was rented by a family called Steiner. The Steiners had six children. One of them, the infamous Rudy, would soon become Liesel's best friend, and later, her partner and sometime catalyst in crime. She met him on the street.

* * *

A few days after Liesel's first bath, Mama allowed her out to play with the other kids. On Himmel Street, friendships were made outside, regardless of the weather. The children rarely visited each other's homes, for they were small and there was usually very little in them. Also, they conducted their favourite pastime, like professionals, on the street. Football. Teams were well set. Garbage bins were used to mark out the goals.

Being the new kid in town, Liesel was immediately shoved between one pair of those bins. (Tommy Muller was finally set free, despite being the most useless footballer Himmel Street had ever seen.)

It all went nicely for a while, until the fateful moment when Rudy Steiner was upended in the snow by a Tommy Muller foul of frustration.

'What?!' Tommy shouted. His face twitched in desperation. 'What did I do?!'

A penalty was awarded by everyone on Rudy's team, and now, it was Rudy Steiner against the new kid, Liesel Meminger.

He placed the ball on a grubby mound of snow, confident of the usual outcome. After all, Rudy hadn't missed a penalty in eighteen shots, even when the opposition made a point of booting Tommy Muller out of goal. No matter who they replaced him with, Rudy would score.

On this occasion, they tried to force Liesel out. As you might imagine, she protested, and Rudy agreed.

'No, no,' he smiled. 'Let her stay.' He was rubbing his hands together.

Snow had stopped falling on the filthy street now, and the muddy footprints were gathered between them. Rudy shuffled in, fired the shot, and Liesel dived and somehow deflected it with her elbow. She stood up grinning, but the first thing she saw was a snowball smashing into her face. Half of it was mud. It stung like crazy.

'How do you like that?' the boy grinned, and he ran off,

in pursuit of the ball.

'Saukerl,' Liesel whispered. The vocabulary of her new home was catching on fast.

Some Facts About Rudy Steiner

**He was eight months older than Liesel and
had bony legs, sharp teeth, gangly blue
eyes and hair the colour of a lemon.
One of six Steiner children,
he was permanently hungry.
On Himmel Street, he was
considered a little crazy.
This was on account of an event that
was rarely spoken about, but widely
regarded as, 'The Jesse Owens Incident',
in which he painted himself charcoal-black
and ran the hundred metres at the
local sporting field one night.**

Insane or not, Rudy was always destined to be Liesel's best friend. A snowball in the face is surely the perfect beginning to a lasting friendship.

A few days after Liesel started school, she went along with the Steiners. Rudy's mother, Barbra, made him promise to walk with the new girl, mainly because she'd heard about the snowball. To Rudy's credit, he was happy enough to comply. He was not the junior misogynistic type of boy at all. He liked girls a lot, and he liked Liesel (hence, the snowball). In fact, Rudy Steiner was one of those audacious little bastards who actually *fancied* himself with the ladies. Every childhood seems to have exactly such a little juvenile in its midst and mists. He's the boy who refuses to fear the opposite sex, purely because everyone else chooses to embrace that particular fear, and he's the type who is unafraid to make a decision. In this case,

Rudy had already made up his mind about Liesel Meminger.

On the way to school, he tried to point out certain landmarks in the town, or at least, he managed to slip it all in, somewhere between telling his younger siblings to shut their faces and the older ones telling him to shut his. His first point of interest was a small window on the second floor of an apartment block.

'That's where Tommy Muller lives.' He realised that Liesel didn't recall him. 'The twitcher? When he was five years old, he got lost at the markets on the coldest day of the year. Three hours later, when they found him, he was frozen solid and had an awful earache from the cold. After a while, his ears were all infected inside and he had three or four operations and the doctors wrecked his nerves. So now he twitches.'

Liesel chimed in. 'And he's bad at football.'

'The worst.'

Next was the corner shop at the end of Himmel Street. *Frau Diller's*.

An Important Note About Frau Diller
She had one golden rule.

Frau Diller was a sharp-edged woman with fat glasses and a nefarious glare. She developed this evil look to discourage the very idea of stealing from her shop, which she occupied with soldier-like posture, a refrigerated voice and even breath that smelled like *Heil Hitler*. The shop itself was white and cold, and completely bloodless. The small house compressed beside it shivered with a little more severity than the other buildings on Himmel Street. Frau Diller administered this feeling, dishing it out as the only free item from her premises. She lived for her shop and her shop lived for the Third Reich. Even when

rationing started later in the year, she was known to sell certain hard-to-get items under the counter and donate the money to the Nazi Party. On the wall behind her usual sitting position was a framed photo of the Führer. If you walked into her shop and didn't say *Heil Hitler*, you wouldn't be served. As they walked by, Rudy drew Liesel's attention to the bullet-proof eyes leering from the shop window.

'Say *Heil* when you go in there,' he warned her stiffly. 'Unless you want to walk a little further.' Even when they were well past the shop, Liesel looked back and the magnified eyes were still there, fastened to the window.

Around the corner, Munich Street (the main road in and out of Molching) was strewn with slosh.

As was often the case, a few rows of troops in training came marching past. Their uniforms walked upright and their black boots further polluted the snow. Their faces were fixed ahead in concentration.

Once they'd watched the soldiers disappear, the group of Steiners and Liesel walked past some shop windows, and the imposing town hall, which in later years would be chopped off at the knees and buried. A few of the shops were abandoned and still labelled with yellow stars and anti-Jewish slurs. Further down, the church aimed itself at the sky, its rooftop a study of collaborated tiles. The street, overall, was a lengthy tube of grey – a corridor of dampness, people stooped in the cold, and the splashed sound of watery footsteps.

At one stage, Rudy rushed ahead, dragging Liesel with him.

He knocked on the window of a tailor's shop.

Had she been able to read the sign, she would have noticed that it belonged to Rudy's father. The shop was not yet open, but inside, a man was preparing articles of clothing behind the counter. He looked up and waved.

'My papa,' Rudy informed her, and they were soon

amongst a crowd of various-sized Steiners, each waving or blowing kisses at their father, or simply standing and nodding hello (in the case of the oldest ones), then moving on, towards the final landmark before school.

The Last Stop
The road of yellow stars.

It was a place nobody wanted to stay and look at, but almost everyone did. Shaped like a long, broken arm, the road contained several houses with lacerated windows and bruised walls. The Star of David was painted on their doors. Those houses were almost like lepers. At the very least, they were infected sores on the injured German terrain.

'Schiller Strasse,' Rudy said. 'The road of yellow stars.'

Further down, some people were moving around. The drizzle made them look like ghosts. Not humans, but shapes, moving about beneath the lead-coloured clouds.

'Come on, you two,' Kurt (the oldest of the Steiner children) called back, and Rudy and Liesel walked quickly towards him.

At school, Rudy made a special point of seeking Liesel out during the breaks. He didn't care that others made noises about the new girl's stupidity. He was there for her at the beginning, and he would be there later on, when Liesel's frustration boiled over. But he wouldn't do it for free.

The Only Thing Worse Than a Boy Who Hates You
A boy who loves you.

In late April, when they'd returned from school for the

day, Rudy and Liesel waited on Himmel Street for the usual game of football. They were slightly early, and no other kids had turned up yet. The one person they saw was the gutter-mouthed Pfiffikus.

'Look there,' Rudy pointed.

A Portrait of Pfiffikus

He was a delicate frame.
He was white hair.
He was a black raincoat,
brown pants, decomposing
shoes, and a mouth – and
what a mouth it was.

'Hey, Pfiffikus!'

As the distant figure turned, Rudy started whistling.

The old man simultaneously straightened and proceeded to swear with a ferocity that can only be described as a talent. No-one seemed to know his real name, or at least, if they did, they never used it. He was only called Pfiffikus because you give that name to someone who likes to whistle, which Pfiffikus most definitely did. He was constantly whistling a tune called the Radetzky March, and all the kids in town would call out to him and duplicate that tune. At that precise moment, Pfiffikus would abandon his usual walking style (bent forward, taking large, lanky steps, arms behind his raincoated back) and erect himself to deliver abuse. It was then that any impression of serenity was violently interrupted, for his voice was brimming with rage.

On this occasion, Liesel followed Rudy's taunt almost as a reflex action.

'Pfiffikus!' she echoed, quickly adopting the appropriate cruelty that childhood seems to require. Her whistling was

awful, but there was no time to perfect it.

He chased them, calling out. It started with '*Geh' scheissen!*' and deteriorated rapidly from there. At first, he levelled his abuse only at the boy, but soon enough, it was Liesel's turn.

'You little slut!' he roared at her. The words clobbered her in the back. 'I've never seen you before!' Fancy calling a ten-year-old girl a slut. That was Pfiffikus. It was widely agreed that he and Frau Holtzapfel would have made a lovely couple. 'Get back here!' were the last words Liesel and Rudy heard as they continued running. They ran until they were on Munich Street.

'Come on,' Rudy said, once they'd recovered their breath. 'Just down here a little.'

He took her to Hubert Oval, the scene of the Jesse Owens Incident, and they stood, hands in pockets. The track was stretched out in front of them. Only one thing could happen. Rudy started it. 'Hundred metres,' he goaded her. 'I bet you can't beat me.'

Liesel wasn't taking any of that. 'I bet you I can.'

'What do you bet, you little *Saumensch*? Have you got any money?'

'Of course not. Do you?'

'No.' But Rudy had an idea. It was the loverboy coming out in him. 'If I beat you, I get to kiss you.' He crouched down and began rolling up his trousers.

Liesel was alarmed, to put it mildly. 'What do you want to kiss *me* for? I'm filthy.'

'So am I.' Rudy clearly saw no reason why a bit of filth should get in the way of things. It had been a while between baths, for both of them.

She thought about it whilst examining the weedy legs of her opposition. They were about equal with her own. There's no way he can beat me, she thought. She nodded, seriously. This was business. 'You can kiss me if you win.

But if I win, I get out of being goalie at football.'

Rudy considered it. 'Fair enough,' and they shook on it.

All was dark-skied and hazy, and small chips of rain were starting to fall.

The track was muddier than it looked.

Both competitors were set.

Rudy threw a rock in the air as the starting pistol. When it hit the ground they could start running.

'I can't even see the finish line,' Liesel complained.

'And I can?'

The rock wedged itself into the earth.

They ran next to each other, elbowing and trying to get in front. The slippery ground slurped at their feet and brought them down perhaps twenty metres from the end.

'Jesus, Mary and Joseph!' yelped Rudy. 'I'm covered in shit!'

'It's not shit,' Liesel corrected him, 'it's mud,' although she had her doubts. They'd slid another five metres towards the finish. 'Do we call it a draw then?'

Rudy looked over, all sharp teeth and gangly blue eyes. Half his face was painted with mud. 'If it's a draw, do I still get my kiss?'

'Not in a million years.' Liesel stood up and flicked some mud off her jacket.

'I'll get you out of goalie.'

'Stick your goalie.'

As they walked back to Himmel Street, Rudy forewarned her. 'One day, Liesel,' he said, 'you'll be dying to kiss me.'

But Liesel knew.

She vowed.

As long as both she and Rudy Steiner lived, she would never kiss that miserable, filthy *Saukerl*, especially not this day. There were more important matters to attend to. She looked down at her suit of mud and stated the obvious.

'She's going to kill me.'

She, of course, was Rosa Hubermann, also known as Mama, and she very nearly did kill her. The word *Saumensch* featured heavily in the administration of punishment. She made mincemeat out of her.