

Ein Weihnachtslied

He closed his eyes, ran fingers along the wall that shared its narrative of war. Here a missing chunk, with uneven, rough edges. Raid of 28 January, he surmised. Or possibly late '44. His fingers continued, reading the language of violence, a reversed braille engraved in stone by bullets and bombs.

He turned the corner.

Before him lay the Weihnachtsmarkt in the Schlossplatz, a Christmas tradition for hundreds of years. He had last come here, when was it? 1938? This year the market was as emaciated as those selling their trinkets and trash. The Neues Schloss, the old New Palace, continued its watch over the platz, the tall façade appearing to deny that its innards had been decimated by the victor's B-17s. Rubble still trimmed its base, rough spheres of rock like strings of grotesque Christmas baubles.

We are all façades, he thought. We look like people from the outside, going about our daily business. Inside, the war has carved out an empty space.

The platz was littered with defeat personified. Occupation soldiers. His land had become the pariah of Europe. One that confused time itself, its past to be rewritten in the words of strangers, its future placed on probation. The now, just another battle. The snow had not even bothered to come to Stuttgart this year.

He willed his feet to move, his mind no longer registering the hunger that had taken up permanent residence. He knew he had to do this for her.

Everything, now, was for her.

The Weihnachtsmarkt was really just a regular black market for this, the so-called Peace Christmas. Friedensweihnachten. Everywhere were signs of the new currency, now the Reichsmark was useless. Lucky Strikes. Camels. Chesterfields. His large brown bag contained things his family once treasured – father's cuckoo clock, his long-dead wife's jewelled ring and iron earrings – one by one exchanged for new treasures. Real eggs, a stick of bread, an apple and orange, sardines. A little butter. He did not have enough for sugar, as he had hoped. Inge would have liked sugar.

He closed the bag, moved to get home before curfew. The edge of his eye noticed the bisque doll.

He walked over to where she sat, leaning against a lonely stone that once had a more useful role in a building. She seemed untouched by the surrounding devastation and dirt, blonde hair, in perfect plaits, pinned over her head, bright blue eyes staring right back at him. Looks just like Inge, he thought. And her mother.

'Guten Abend, old man. Would you like the doll? Very good condition, good present.'

'She's beautiful. But I have nothing left to trade.'

The woman eyed his dark coat. It was well-worn, a little tattered at the hem, but thick, well crafted. A doll would not keep her warm this winter. 'I'll take that.'

He imagined the light in Inge's face on Christmas Eve, finding her miniature likeness under the bough that served as a Christmas tree.

He imagined winter without his coat. Without a coat he would freeze. If he was cold, he would become ill. If he was ill, he would likely die. And then what use would a doll be to Inge?

He shook his head, resumed the journey along the Königstrasse, towards the home that was now much less than it was.

He was stopped by a group of children, walking single file across his path. They entered a hall filled with tables and chairs, accompanied by well-dressed women carrying food and foreign soldiers carrying sacks.

Orphans.

At the end of the line was a man in red cap and white cotton beard, holding a young German boy. Santa had returned to Deutschland, though now he was American and dressed in khaki.

Maybe he should give Inge to the occupation forces. She would get cookies and sweets and presents from American Santa. A vision of Inge's mother appeared before him, from a different Christmas, before the war and nothingness. She was posing with her new doll, in front of a fir tree covered in candles, carved wooden ornaments and thin silver tinsel. Now his daughter was gone, lost to a raid, 5 September '44.

No, Inge was all he had left.

'Well, well, what do we have here?'

He looked up to see a new obstruction. Americans.

'Where do ya think you're going, huh?' the paler one asked.

'C'mon Joe, leave the old guy alone.'

'Shut up Wash. What's ya name, ya old Kraut?'

'I. am. Carol.'

'Say what? Did ya say Carol? That's a goddamn girl's name!'

The paler soldier laughed, momentarily losing balance. 'No wonder these stupid Nazi Krauts lost the war. Bunch o' bloody women.'

'Not girl's name. Means "free man".'

Joe laughed even harder. 'Not so freakin' free now, are you Heinie? Hey, Caroline, I'm gonna give you a break. You sing for us, I'll let you pass thru with ya bag full o' goodies there.'

'Aw c'mon Joe, let's just go.'

'I said shut-up! Now let's see, I think Caroline should sing a Christmas Carol. A carol from a Carol. Whadoya think Wash?'

'Joe...'

Carol watched Joe, staring back, fingering the weapon resting near his hip. His voice emerged, crackling, more like static than song.

Stille Nacht, Heil'ge Nacht
Alles schläft; einsam wacht-

‘Speak American you stupid Kraut. Don’t ya know you’re a democracy now?’

The darker one pulled Joe away, ducking to avoid a swinging fist. But Joe’s eye caught a new distraction.

‘Hey pretty Heidi, wait up for me, I’ll see you home awright.’ The paler one tripped, saved himself, resumed his pursuit.

Wash walked towards Carol. ‘Sorry bud, but he had a pretty tough war. Drinks way too much.’

He patted Carol’s back, shook his hand. ‘You have a nice Christmas now.’

Carol felt the shape of something left behind. Looked down at his hand.

A Hershey’s bar.

The darker man was already in the distance. Carol felt his face shift in forgotten ways.

And smiled, at the night.

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