

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 Müller—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.

* A man known primarily as “Pfiffikus”—whose vulgarity made Rosa Hubermann look like a wordsmith 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, no matter 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 favorite pastime, like professionals, on the street. Soccer. Teams were well set. Garbage cans were used to mark out the goals.

Being the new kid in town, Liesel was immediately shoved between one pair of those cans. (Tommy Müller was finally set free, despite being the most useless soccer player 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 Müller 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 Müller out of goal. No matter whom 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 color 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 100 meters at the local playing 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, Barbara, 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 auda-

cious little bastards who actually *fancied* himself with the ladies. Every childhood seems to have exactly such a juvenile in its midst and mists. He's the boy who refuses to fear the opposite sex, purely because everyone else embraces 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 Müller lives." He realized that Liesel didn't remember 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 soccer."

"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 soldierlike 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 farther.” 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 labeled with yellow stars and anti-Jewish slurs. Farther down, the church aimed itself at the sky, its rooftop a study of collaborated tiles. The street, overall, was a lengthy tube of gray—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 among 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, toward 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."

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

"Come on, you two," Kurt (the oldest of the Steiner children) called back, and Rudy and Liesel walked quickly toward 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 soccer. 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 the real name that belonged to him, 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 "*Geb' scheissen!*" and deteriorated rapidly from there. At first, he leveled 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, where they stood, hands in pockets. The track was stretched out in front of them. Only one thing could happen. Rudy started it. "Hundred meters," 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 lover boy coming out of 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 while 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 soccer."

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 meters from the end.

"Jesus, Mary, and Joseph!" yelled 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 meters toward 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.