

## Reb Henry

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“Happy New Year, Liebschen.”

“Happy New Year, Friedrich.”

They clicked the crystal glasses of schnapps together. He smiled at her. Gerta had been waiting for that smile. She was hoping for it. Every New Year’s Eve, they had gone to her cousin Sissi’s, and shortly after midnight, said their goodbyes and went home to make love. But this year she had doubts. She could blame it on the war. Most things could be blamed on the war. No one was the same—especially Friedrich.

“Ein prosit,” Sissi was calling. This would be their second drink, champagne, and that would be it. Friedrich was very staunch on his stand on alcohol.

Outside, the snow had been falling for over an hour—just enough to lace the corners of the window and dust the pines. They had snow for Christmas and now there was snow for New Year’s Eve. Nature had played her part beautifully. Gerta loved the snow with a kind of childish glee. It was the one predictable winter event that was still magical.

Sissi still had her Christmas tree up, trimmed and dripping in silver and gold icicles. She was carefully lighting the candles on the tree for a toast. Gerta turned out the lights. The gold tin star at the top reflected the tiny flames.

There was about twenty guests, mostly Sissi’s neighbors—some of them young men in their army uniforms, along with the odd cousin or two, and friends from Saint Lucia’s, the parish church.

“To Peace in 1940,” Sissi toasted.

There was a stunned silence, as if peace were the last thing one should toast in the middle of a war, as if peace were the last thing Germany would want. And yet, it was Hans, the boy Gerta had watched grow up, he used to work summers at Schiell's Pharmacy, now looking resplendent in his uniform, who responded first.

"To peace," he said, and then, as if he had issued a benediction, everyone followed in chorus.

Sissi blew out the candles one by one and waved the wisps of smoke away. Gerta retrieved the pail of water under the tree and held it for Sissi to toss the candles in.

"So beautiful," Sissi said, "I hate to take this down. Why don't you come over on Epiphany for Sunday dinner and we'll light the tree again?"

"A lovely idea, Sissi. I'll make my hazelnut torte."

Gerta called her Sissi, not after the former Queen of Austria, that beloved icon, but after the English word sister, because even though they were only cousins, she knew Sissi was as close as she was going to get to a sister.

Friedrich approached with Gerta's mink coat on his arm.

"Mmmmm," he said. "I can feel my waistline thickening already."

"If I had your waistline, I'd be happy," Sissi said.

"It's all just a matter of control," Friedrich said

"Are you sure you're not a monk instead of a doctor?"

"Yes, Sissi. Monks pray. Doctor's don't." He kissed her quickly. "Let's hope for the best this year."

"With men like you involved," Sissi said, "I know things will improve."

"Danke."

Friedrich slipped the mink over Gerta's bare shoulders. Sissi escorted them to the front door.

"See you in the morning," Gerta said. "And don't get a hangover, Sissi."

"Now who sounds like a doctor?" Friedrich teased.

"Happy New Year," Sissi said with a wink to Gerta.

"Happy New Year," Gerta said with a wink back.

Sissi opened the front door and a cold wind shot into the warm house. Gerta stepped out and looked up. The stars were especially bright in the cold night sky. The snowflakes were coming down leisurely. They melted against the warmth of her cheeks. On the ground, nearly a foot of white had accumulated. Friedrich held her close as they walked. Gerta smelt the cologne on his close shaven face—the stinging smell of bay and rum. He bent down and kissed her.

"Liebschen, it will be better. The new year will be better."

His hand squeezed hers.

"Of course, Friedrich," she said, hoping that this meant he would start talking to Susanne again. Six years ago, their daughter had met Dan Behrman, a German-American pediatrician, while finishing her doctorate in English literature at the university. The political tension that erupted between Dan and Friedrich was immediate and irreconcilable. When they moved to the States, Friedrich made little effort to bridge the distance. The couple settled in Alexandria, Virginia, close to the capital where Dan worked in the hospital as a pediatrician.

Gerta always liked the word Alexandria. It reminded her of the greatness of Alexandria, Egypt.

But tonight, as Friedrich held the car door open for her and she glanced into his sharp blue eyes, there was the reminder of the man she fell in love with. She kissed him back and slid

into the car. She could hear the player piano cranking out Auld Lang Syne from inside Sissi's house. Red and blue lights framed the big window with the Christmas tree.

Even though the drive home would be short—barely over five kilometers down a single road, Gerta drove it often—the last stretch after the synagogue ran through desolate farm land. There were no street lights and the three farmhouses that marked the distance between the synagogue and their house would not have their lights on. (The farmers were early risers and did not make exceptions, even for New Year's Eve.) The last kilometer was lined in pines which were indeed beautiful, but at night, they only made the dark darker.

Gerta latched the top hook of her mink tailcoat and pushed the bottom down to partially cover her calves. Friedrich started the Volkswagen and put on the heat. He got out and brushed the snow off the windows with a thick brush. Some of the snow blew back onto the windshield, and he had to brush it off a second time. He shook his overcoat by the lapel to get off the snowflakes that had attached themselves before returning to the driver's seat.

“Liebschen, I thought you looked beautiful tonight,” he said, putting the gear in first.

“And you, you with that Libra smile of yours—you're nearly devastating.”

He frowned and then laughed as he turned on the radio and searched for a news station.

Leave it to Friedrich to find a news program on New Year's Eve. Gerta was hoping they could be spared the news for one night. Fortunately, the radio was not compliant as there was too much static to find anything. He gave up the search and turned it off.

At home the news on the shortwave was filled with speculations of the U.S. entering the war. Gerta would hate that. Every night she said a rosary for Susanne and Dan. She so wanted to visit them. She threatened Friedrich to visit them on her own. They had a baby last year. Freddy,

they had called him—a name clearly chosen to appease her husband. War or no war, Freddy was their first grandchild. She wanted to see him. Friedrich should want to see him too.

He began humming a sad little song—probably one of those nursery songs his grandmother who lived near the Black Forest sang to him. They were always in a plaintive minor key, and the lyrics, the lyrics were scary. Stories of birds turning into magical rats, princes lost for eternity, princess caught and caged. Friedrich put his hand on her knee and gave a playful squeeze.

“What shall we do tomorrow?” she asked.

“Sleep.”

“Well, I’m going to mass in the morning. Feast of the Circumcision, remember?”

“Circumcision? I’ll stay in bed.”

“And?”

“And make sausages when I get up,” he said.

“And?”

Her eyes rested on his chiseled face. His gaze was set sternly on the road. She was waiting for a different response. No, nothing else was forthcoming. She wanted to say, *maybe tomorrow we could call Susanne*, but she already knew the answer. At first, he would say, *it’s too expensive*, and then he would say, *it was too soon—I’m not ready*.

They were nearing the synagogue. It would be coming up on Friedrich’s side. It was built on the edge of town, the only place the council said they could build the temple. She could feel her body starting to tense. She looked out his window. No, she wouldn’t look. It would be easier. What was left anyway? Three blackened skeletal walls. Only tonight they would be white. That

would make it easier. No, she couldn't look. The snow was picking up. Soon she would be crying. It had become a reflex like Pavlov's dog—if they passed the synagogue she would cry.

Friedrich patted her hand. "Try not to be sentimental, Gerta."

"Sentimental. How do you think I would feel if Saint Lucia's was burnt down?"

"The world's not the same anymore."

There could be no arguing there. Friedrich was close to retirement before he started working for the government. He had bought a small plot of farmland. He was going to retire and raise vegetables. It would be healthier, growing and eating the food directly from the garden. Friedrich had always been a total health nut. But when they moved and settled, and reaped their first harvest, their personal Oktoberfest, Germany began to fracture. Only it didn't look like a fracture, it looked like a healing—a fracture in the disguise of a healing. Friedrich's cousin said every German had to play his part. He said there was a position that was ideal for Friedrich at the government plant that had just opened up.

Gerta tearfully reached in her sequined clutch for a handkerchief.

"How can you be so cavalier after what Hannah did for us?"

"Hannah was a good woman. An exceptional woman. She was an exception."

When Gerta had her baby, she was so depressed she couldn't get out of bed. She couldn't bear the light coming from an open window. She wanted to take care of Susanne and yet it was beyond her. Friedrich wanted to hire a professional nurse to come and help out. But they lived in the center of the town and Gerta feared the stigma. Their neighbors would know. They would know that she couldn't take care of her own baby.

Friedrich then remembered a woman they had met at the market, a farmer's wife who sold produce. She had a good natured way about her. He recalled a pleasant interchange on

winter squashes between the two women. After some inquiry, the farmer's wife said she would be happy to find some time in the morning and in the early evening to help out. Naturally, Friedrich paid her well. One had to say that about Friedrich. He was always fair.

Hannah behaved as if there was nothing unusual about Gerta, as if all new mothers were incapable of changing their baby or eating a decent meal. She chided Friedrich for not knowing about Gerta's condition. She had seen it several times, even with her own daughter. Hannah taught Gerta everything she needed to know. She cooked, she cleaned, she talked. She laughed and sang songs to the baby. She did so many things and then more. She saved Gerta's life. She could never thank her enough for that, even if they parted ways.

Gerta still hadn't recovered from the latest shock. After the synagogue was destroyed, Hannah and her entire family disappeared. First the women and children, then days later, her husband, the rabbi.

"Jesus," Gerta whispered, as they drove into black expanse ahead of them. "Please, may they have escaped. Please, let them be safe."

Friedrich leaned forward in the driver's seat. He was the most careful of drivers. Other than the headlights, the only light was from the stars, which the fast falling flakes caught and reflected. The windshield's visibility existed only in the small frame the wipers had created.

The wind was playing a dissonant duet with the air chugging from the heater. Gerta could hear the tires rolling along the road, the winter chains around the tires clicking and crunching into the snow.

From behind them, came the dull roar of an army truck. She had come to recognize the growl—there were so many army trucks these days. Friedrich put on his high beams and slowed down. Gerta turned her head and watched as the truck appeared out of the dark. It was going too

fast—they always went too fast. The road was only two lanes and the truck weaved from side to side, probably due more to alcohol than snow. Friedrich slowed down further and stuck his hand out the window and waved for them to pass. The truck accelerated in reply, merged into the oncoming traffic lane, and began to pass them.

A soldier leaned out his window and saluted them with a bottle of wine. Cheers erupted from inside the truck. The national anthem broke out among them.

*Deutschland, Deutschland, before everything.*

*Before every other land.*

The truck swerved in front of them, wobbling before straightening itself out. Carousing was fine, they were young men, but on a night such as this, Gerta worried that they could easily end up stuck in a ditch or worse.

In the near distance, she saw a figure in black approaching the road with a determined gait. Who could be out in this weather? Maybe someone was going to fetch wood for their fire. But now the figure was running. He looked like he was going to meet the army truck—as if this were a prearranged event.

And then there was a loud hard thud. Seconds later, in front of them, a man was rolling on the road.

“Jesus Christ,” Friedrich said, applying his brakes. “They’ve hit that man.”

Their car slid as he forced the steering wheel in the opposite direction. Mercifully, the car came to a stop before reaching the man. Up ahead, the truck continued without slowing and disappeared into the invisible.

Friedrich ran out of the car and Gerta followed. The cold wind hit her face.



The man was writhing in the middle of road. His long winter coat was open. He was dressed entirely in black. The pant legs were torn and his legs were horribly bruised—patches of deep purple colored his calf. There was no bleeding. He was completely conscious.

Friedrich bent down. The man stared at him. His eyes bulged in the glare of the headlights.

“I’m a doctor. I’m going to try to help you.”

“Who are you?” the man asked.

“I’m a doctor. Try to stay calm. You’ve had a terrible shock. You’ve been hit.”

Gerta looked at his face. The man trembled. Was it from pain? Was it fear?

Friedrich gently squeezed the man’s forearm to steady the shaking.

“Gerta, fetch my bag from the trunk. I’m going to try to move him.”

Gerta took the keys out of the ignition and hastened to find the bag in the trunk.

Friedrich lifted the man from under his arms.

“I have to move you. Otherwise, we all might get hit.”

The man screamed in pain.

“Who are you?” he shouted.

Friedrich got him to the side of the road.

“You’re going to be okay. You’re legs are broken. Do you have other pain? Chest pain? Nausea? Anything? Tell me.”

“No, no. I don’t think so. I don’t know.”

“I am going to help you.” He rapidly searched for a shot and loaded it with a solution from a vial, holding it up to catch a beam of light from the headlights. “This is going to help you with the pain.”

Gerta knelt down and helped her husband turn the man half way over. Friedrich lowered the trousers and administered the shot in the hip. The man whimpered miserably.

“It will work. It will work soon,” Then looking the man in the eye, he said, “Do you live near here? Where’s your home?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know where my home is.”

“It’s all right.” Gerta said. “You’ve been in an accident. You’re going to be all right.”

Friedrich stood up and squinted fiercely, scanning the land off the road. “Gerta, there’s a farm house.”

Gerta, could see the outline of a house just up ahead.

“I’m going to see if someone’s home. Maybe it’s his home. Get the car off the road and stay with him.”

He headed towards the house.

Gerta looked at the man. He was in the middle of middle-age. His face was surely a kind face when he wasn’t in pain.

“What’s your name, Sir?”

The man did not respond.

“Why are you out in this weather? Do you remember?”

The man’s breathing was slowing down. The medicine was taking effect.

“I’m going to move the car off the road. I’ll get you a blanket from the backseat.”

She started to get up, but he gripped her hand.

“Frau,” he said. “I think I know you.”

She knelt back down, startled.

“Do you?”

“Yes.”

He didn't look like anyone she could think of, but then again, it was difficult to see. He had a full beard that was going gray. Did she know of anyone with a long beard? It wasn't the style.

“Listen, sir. I've got to get the car off the road before there's another accident. I'll be right back.”

She walked carefully to the car. She was wearing heels and feared slipping. In the distance, she saw a light go on in the farmhouse. The front door opened. Under the wind, she heard the faint voices of her husband talking with another man.

Gerta moved the car as far to the side of the road as she could without nearing the slope of a ditch. She grabbed the blanket from the backseat, took off her shoes. It was too treacherous to keep them on at this point. The snow burned her feet as she walked back to the man. Her husband and the farmer, a large beefy man, were approaching, the farmer carrying what looked like a rolled up carpet runner—a make-do stretcher.

Gerta went to where she had left the man and stopped.

He wasn't there.

There wasn't even an indentation in the snow where he should be. Frantically, she looked about. The snow was thickening, the flakes becoming larger.

Friedrich hurried to meet her.

“Where is he?”

“I don't know.”

“I thought I told you to stay with him.”

“I just moved the car. That was all.”

Wrapping the blanket over her head and shoulders, she walked around the car, looking for any movement across the layered surface. Friedrich searched the ditch by the side of the road.

The farmer rested the carpet runner on the hood of the car.

“This is this some kind of joke, ja?” the farmer asked.

“No, no, I told you I was a doctor.”

“Well, what did he look like? Maybe I know him.”

Friedrich did his best to describe the man.

“He was dressed all in black,” Gerta added.

The farmer buttoned the overcoat he had thrown on over his pajamas.

“Dressed all in black? You mean, like a Jew?” the farmer asked.

“Not exactly,” Gerta said. “I mean he wasn’t wearing a Jewish coat or hat. He had a beard but none of those sidecurls.”

“That’s not a much of a description. A beard and dressed in black.”

“He was middle-aged,” Gerta said. “Shorter than average.”

The farmer shook his head. “I can’t say I know who he is.”

“Do you have a phone?” Friedrich asked.

“No, Elsa has been after me to get one, but who am I going to call?”

Gerta realized that she must get back in the car to warm her feet. And yet, how could she abandon this man? Dear God, where did he go? If he got lost out here he would not be found—he would be buried. The cold without the snow would suffice to kill him. The two together made it inevitable.

“Hey, hey, where are you?” she shouted. She knew she sounded ridiculous. She couldn’t care.

The headlights shone on a snowfall that now resembled billowing smoke. Her feet were starting to numb. The road beneath her was turning to ice. It was growing increasingly dangerous to drive, even in the solid Volkswagen, even with steady, reliable Friedrich.

“This is lunacy,” Friedrich said, raising his voice to combat the noise of the wind. “I don’t know what to say. He was here a moment ago. His legs were mangled. He couldn’t possibly walk like that.”

“That doesn’t make any sense.” the farmer said.”

“Damn,” Friedrich said. “I know it doesn’t. But please, keep an eye out for him.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll call the police as soon as I get home,” Friedrich said.

Gerta took a last look, hoping that the man would magically appear.

Once inside the car, she started the engine, put on the heat, and wrapped her feet in the car blanket. She could see Friedrich’s breath blowing white as he spoke to the incredulous farmer.

“There’s no one else around here, not a soul,” the farmer said, picking up his carpet runner. “I think the next farm is over a kilometer away.”

“Danke, Danke, sorry for getting you up at this time of night,” Friedrich said.

The farmer nodded. “Gute Nacht,” he said, and headed back.

Friedrich got into the car.

“My god, what is happening?” Gerta asked. “People don’t just disappear.”

“I don’t know, Gerta. I don’t know. I know we can’t stay here. We’ve got to drive straight home or we are going get stuck on this road. All I can do now is call when we get home.”

He shifted the gear to first and accelerated slowly on to the road.

Gerta watched the tiny glow of light in the farmhouse go out.

They were alone in a vast canvas of blanketed fields. The wind let up its pace and the snow seemed to pause. A deep quiet entered the landscape.

Then there was a jolt. A harsh thudding impact to the roof of the Volkswagen. The entire vehicle shook violently.

“It’s a limb—it’s hit the car,” Friedrich said, slowing to a halt.

But then there were the pounding of fists, human fists, furiously hammering.

“Blessed Jesus, that isn’t a tree limb,” Gerta said.

They could hear a man whimpering in pain. He was dragging his body across the roof, scraping his belt buckle against the metal of the car.

“Jesus Christ,” Friedrich said.

The whimpering became louder and gave way to groaning. Then a human cry and words that matched the slicing wind. “Why—why have you killed me?”

Friedrich put his hand on the door handle, his fingers trembling.

Gerta lunged over and stopped him.

“Friedrich, please don’t open the door.”

“I’m opening the door, Gerta.”

“Friedrich, be careful. Please.”

He slowly opened the door. A small drift of snow slipped into the car. Friedrich stood up. The wind screeched like a mad man. It was unlike any sound Gerta had heard in the thirty years she had lived here. A howl of unfathomable darkness.

“No one is here,” Friedrich said.

“Are you sure?”

Friedrich walked to the front of the car and then to the back.

A new horror dawned on Gerta. A new understanding.

“Come back, Friedrich,” she shouted.

Friedrich got back into the car. He was shaking, terribly shaking.

“I think our nerves have gotten the best of us,” he said. “I think we both have had a terrible shock with that man.”

“Friedrich, please let’s get home. I’m frightened.”

“Yes, yes. We’ll be home in no time.”

The next ten minutes Friedrich drove at a determined snail’s pace, holding the wheel firmly in his hands. The road was plunged in white drifts coming in at sharp angles. They could barely see beyond the car. Gerta had to remind herself to breathe.

Finally they reached their home and turned into their driveway. Friedrich got out and grabbed a shovel to clear the snow that had mounded at the front door and made a quick path back to car. Gerta slipped her heels back on and hobbled out. Friedrich opened the front door, went to the kitchen, and poured himself a brandy. Gerta threw her mink on the banister before heading up the stairs.

She went into Susanne’s room, which she had turned into a prayer shrine. She had a statue of the Blessed Mother put on the side table the week after Susanne left. She knelt before it and listened to Friedrich in the hallway downstairs.

“Operator, could you place a call to the police? Yes, this is Doctor Grune.”

At the base of the virgin, *Mater Misericordiae*, was written. Mother of Mercy. The young lady looked like she was sorry for the whole world.

“He’s was dressed all in black. Run over. Broke his legs. Maybe he escaped from the plant.”

The plant was the euphemism for the government center where Friedrich worked. Gerta heard his voice suddenly drop. She strained to catch the words.

“I don’t know. You could do a count, see if one has gone missing.”

The rest of the conversation was too muttered to understand.

Then he hung up.

Gerta crossed herself. Friedrich came up the steps and into the room. She lit a small candle and put it into a red glass votive holder. She turned and looked at Friedrich. The flame flickered, creating a repeating pattern of ruby and shadow across his face.

“Do you think they’ll find him?”

“I’m sure they will. He won’t get far with those legs.”

Gerta looked at the still handsome face of her husband. Her family objected to her marrying a man who was fifteen years older than her. She had no objections. Friedrich would always be fit and healthy, healthier than anyone she knew for that matter. He loved her passionately, and that was enough. But now, she was on a precipice, and she feared that what she would say next would change things between them irrevocably, and yet she must say it.

“I know who he is.”

“Tell me,” he said.

“Reb Henry.”

Reb Henry was the rabbi at the synagogue. He was also Hannah’s husband. In the evening when Hannah was done helping Gerta with the baby, he would come by to drive his wife home. Sometimes she would see him in town and she heard the other Jews call him Reb Henry—



usually with a great deal of affection. Once when she had walked Hannah out to the car, and the rabbi opened the door for his wife, she said, "Thank you so much for bringing Hannah here, Reb Henry."

An immediate awkward silence followed accompanied by a stare from the rabbi. The stare was nearly unbearable. Then the rabbi broke the tension with a loud laugh. She had gone further than she should. She belonged to her world and he belonged to his and she could not cross over, no matter how well intentioned.

Gerta picked up Susanne's childhood doll from off the bed and shook the dust from it. She stood looking at the window, her back to Friedrich. The ice on the glass had thickened to a point where nothing was visible.

"What do you mean, Reb Henry?" he asked.

"You know very well who I mean."

"Hannah's husband?"

"Yes," Gerta said, and sat in the window seat.

"It couldn't be him."

"Why?"

Friedrich's face hardened.

"Because Henry Weisselman is dead."

Gerta got up.

"How would you know?"

"I know from my job."

"Blessed mother," she said, half swearing, half in prayer. She rued the day Friedrich let his cousin talk him into working for the government, just when his retirement was in sight.

Friedrich had scrimped and saved. Good Lord, they had need of nothing. They could have a quiet life even if the country was at war. Besides, who would want to fight a battle in this town? There was nothing to fight over here. She knew her husband was a good man. He treated everyone who came to him, regardless of whom they were or what they did.

“What is your job—exactly?” she asked.

“I thought we had agreed not to—”

“That was all right for awhile but not anymore.”

“Why? Why put yourself through that?”

“Because if that man were Reb Henry,” she started.

“It couldn’t be,” Friedrich said.

“People don’t just disappear.”

“Between the pitch dark and the white out snow they do.”

Gerta wanted to believe this. It would be easier, a way out even, but what she believed was far more horrible.

“That man was a dybbuk. Hannah told me about them.”

The dybbuks—the great unhappy possessed dead, haunted, tortured, evil. Unlike the Christian ghosts, they were always malevolent. Reb Henry’s kind, good spirit had become possessed, surely, of a horrible evil.

She knew the idea was perfectly ridiculous—the stuff of Black Forest fairy tales. Her faith forbade such foolishness. But the reality of a wounded man disappearing as soon as she turned around didn’t come any closer to reality. There was another reality—another world. There had to be.

“A dybbuk? You mean a ghost?” Friedrich asked.

She nodded her head.

“Superstition and nonsense.”

“There is no other explanation,” she said.

Friedrich took off his jacket, loosened his tie.

“Gerta, I’m tired. This has been frightful for the both of us.” He unbuttoned the top of his shirt. “I need to go to bed. Let’s go to bed. Maybe, we can make some sense of it tomorrow.”

“No. I won’t be sleeping.”

How could she sleep? Reb Henry was out there wandering, looking for his wife and daughters.

“Look,” Friedrich said, “either the police will find that man soon or he will die from the cold. It’s gruesome—terribly gruesome, but you know that as well as I do. I’ve done all I can.”

The wind beat relentlessly against the house.

She looked at Friedrich. Every month he had worked for the government he’d become more distant, more detached, as if he needed to become harder to do what he was asked to do. Friedrich was always indomitable, even invincible. How had they made him submissive? Tonight, she saw the way Friedrich shook when he returned to the car. She had seen the fear. That was not like him.

“How do you know Reb Henry is dead?” she asked.

“Because he was executed last week.”

“For what?”

He ran his hand worriedly through his graying hair.

“For being a Jew?” she asked. “Is that it?”

“How can I expect you to understand? You’re a woman.”

“Ridiculous! What happened to Hannah and the daughters?”

She turned and faced the statue of the mother of the world.

“They must have escaped. There’s no trace of them.”

“Thank you, thank you,” she said, going to her knees.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be a man today, even a decent man, afraid of other men like you’ve never been afraid all your life.”

“Reb Henry was a decent man.”

“I know, I know,” he said, his voice fading.

Tell me, Friedrich, what is it you do?”

“You’ve already asked me that and I’m not going to answer.”

“You *are* going to answer.” She raised her voice. She had never done that before.

Friedrich backed up to the doorway. He was nearly in the hallway.

“Experiments. I conduct medical experiments”

Gerta stood up.

“On who? On animals? Is it animals? Tell me it’s animals!”

Friedrich walked into the hall. She followed him. He stopped and looked at her. His face was the face of sorrow. The man of sorrow—the lines in his forehead etched indelibly in angst.

“I know who,” she said. Then taking stock of the suffering in his eyes, she added, “You don’t have to say anymore.”

“I didn’t know it was going to be this bad. I would never have gone there.”

She watched as he walked into their bedroom. And then she heard what could only be sobs. She had never heard them before. She wanted to go comfort him but she couldn’t. Gerta went back into Susanne’s room and lit another candle. She sat in the rocking chair and rocked

herself for a long time. This was the chair where she used to rock Susanne. A line from a Walt Whitman poem her daughter had sent her came to her. *Out of the cradle endlessly rocking*. There was always suffering somewhere. Friedrich's sobbing dissipated into whimpering. The whimpering yielded to silence, and eventually, the even breathing consonant with sleep set in, then gave way to a soft snore. Once he began snoring, he never woke up.

Gerta never bonded with the women in town. She was not from here. She was from the city and would always be regarded as the stranger. Even at Saint Lucia, where she found whatever solace could be found, she was still regarded as other. Hannah was her friend, but even with her, the time came when Gerta found the confidence to take care of Susanne, and then the dictates of the day returned. It wasn't what Gerta wanted or Hannah wanted. It was what had to happen.

The year after Susanne was born, Sissi moved to town—she had devised a transfer for her husband so she could be closer to Gerta. Once again the world shifted for Gerta. She was no longer alone.

Gerta woke up in the morning to the sound of a snow plow scraping the street clear. Farmer Grau, who lived a half mile down the road, cleared the roads out of courtesy. It would be another day before the town sent someone down their road. Gerta had no intention of falling asleep, but she must have dozed off anyway. The candles were burning low in the votives, and the ice had melted from the windows. Friedrich's snore hummed from their bedroom.

She walked quietly down the steps in a dazed state, repeating a routine she knew and could reduplicate. She found a pair of boots and an overcoat. She opened the front door. Several feet of snow lay like silk sheets and glistened in the sun. She picked up the shovel and cleared a path to the road. There was still enough time to change before Sissi came.

They always went to mass together on New Year's Day.

She snuck into the bedroom and changed. Friedrich did not stir. She looked at him sleeping. Was this the man she married? How could this be Friedrich? How could she live with him after last night?

When Sissi came by at ten o'clock, she stopped her car on the street, not daring to enter the driveway. Gerta emerged from the house and walked cautiously down the path, stuffing a handkerchief into her coat pocket. She opened the car door.

"God in heaven, what's going on?" Sissi asked, looking slightly hung over, a bit of red lipstick awry at the corner of her mouth.

Gerta settled in and shut the car door.

"Please drive, Sissi."

"Something's wrong. You've been crying."

"I was crying all morning but I've decided to stop."

"It's something between you and Friedrich, isn't it?" Sissi shifted the gear into first..

The road was banked by snow draped pines on either side. It was a living Christmas card.

What could she say to Sissi? The truth? She couldn't even say the truth to herself. It was too much to take in. Still she had to say something.

"You know the old argument," she began. "I want to go to Virginia and see my daughter and granddaughter. Friedrich and his politics. We are all slaves to politics these days, aren't we?"

"Politics! Who needs them?"

"Truly."

Gerta took out her compact and checked herself in the small mirror. She took out a small bottle out of her purse, steadied herself against the uneven rocking of the car, and dropped a drop of solution in each eye—a prescription given to her by Friedrich which always got the red out.

“Sissi, I’m going. I’m going to see my daughter.”

Sissi did not look surprised. “Money?” she asked.

“What about it?”

“Do you have enough?”

“My dear, I’ve always had a nest egg hidden in the pantry.

Sissi’s driving was growing slower and slower. She held her right hand to her temple, massaging that soft round indentation, as if she were trying to hold down a headache.

“What about you and Friedrich?”

“I don’t know,” Gerta said, bringing out the handkerchief then stuffing it back in her pocket. “The war, it’s killing us.”

“Are you leaving him?”

Gerta took a breath. She could not reconcile the two Friedrichs into one—the one she knew, the one she didn’t. “I can’t say. I need to get away for a while and try to think. All I know is I’m going to Alexandria to see Susanne.”

“They say it’s getting harder to leave the country.”

“Well, if I can, I’ll get out through Berlin, and I don’t know why I shouldn’t, my husband’s now an officer, I’ve got my papers. Everything is in order. But if I can’t, I’ll go to Switzerland and stay with our cousin.”

“Fritzy?”

“Yes, Fritz. They won’t stop me from going to Switzerland. And from Switzerland I can go anywhere.”

“When?” Sissi asked.

“I don’t know. Hopefully as soon as I can.”

Sissi stopped the car. “Are we still going to church?”

Gerta considered the question. She had every intention of going to mass, it was ingrained in her, but so much had changed in the last ten hours. She was lost in the middle of one of those songs from the Black Forest. Hansel and Gretel could not find their way back. All the crumbs they had dropped were eaten by the crows. Sissi was her lifeline, just like Hannah. She would miss her. She would miss both of them terribly.

“Yes, I definitely want to go to mass. I need to go to mass,” she said.

“Good because my venial sins are adding up,” Sissi said, with a quick smile, pushing the gear in second.

Gerta turned and looked at her home, frosted like a child’s birthday cake, retreating slowly behind her.

There would be so many souls to pray for. Souls without rest or peace. The hunted and the haunted. The possessed.