

A Boy Named Klaus

It's as if the world chose him and then decided to chip away at him one piece at a time, until, by the time he was four, there was nothing left but the shell of a small boy with little but a glimmer of a promise. By the time he was four his mother was no longer with him. He did not know why, and they never told him. His home was gone, perhaps destroyed, but certainly not his anymore. His father, whom he'd never met, was away fighting a war he understood little of, or maybe that father was dead, as so many fathers were dead, and the only parent he knew to trust was Sister Therese.

The place he called his own was a bed, one of a checkerboard of beds, lined up four down, five across in a room on the third floor of a large stone house in the middle of the city. This bed, with its woolen cover, crisp sheets and one small pillow, was the second in the row that ran along the far wall. While awake one night, as he was on many nights, he had discovered a cavity behind a loose brick in the wall that towered tall over his prone body, and it was here that he decided to hide the one letter he'd ever received.

He could not read yet—although he was one of the best at learning his letters—but he had memorized the handwriting on the letter he kept safe. It was large and fluid and the letters that made up the words in the sentences seemed softer to him than the ones the nuns wrote on the chalkboard. The Ms and Ns were rounder than the pointy ones that looked like little tents, the way he was being taught, the way the nuns wrote them.

In the night sometimes, when the soft noises of boys' sleep floated through the darkness, he thought he could hear the letter whispering to him. It said to stay strong.

Don't worry so much. It gave him a feeling he did not understand. He would come to call it Courage in time.

The letter had a drawing at the end of it. It was that of a reindeer, an animal he had only ever seen in picture books. Its horns were tilted a bit to the side and the reindeer looked out at him as if he were posing a question, and there were four tears falling from his one visible eye. The boy understood this somehow in his secret place, and so he cherished this letter, one blue page folded twice in half with large, smooth handwriting on all four sides and the drawing of a crying reindeer.

Sister Therese told him it had come from his father. It arrived on a day that was so many days ago he wasn't even a boy yet, just an infant lying in a dresser drawer that served as his crib. And because he never doubted anything he was told by Sister Therese, he kept the letter hidden and away from the other boys who might have teased him and told him it was a lie; it wasn't real, because they did not have letters of their own, and they did not know about fathers. The boys were orphans, like Klaus, but Klaus saw himself as different. He said it was because he knew about hope.

The year was 1944 when Klaus was four. The city where he lived was nicknamed by its residents, "The City of a Thousand Fires." This was because smokestacks, narrow, tall, and black that reached toward the sky like demonic steeples, surrounded it. Some were placed so close, one to the next, that the horizon was often obscured by a wall of black and red plumes of smoke. Like blood, Klaus thought, or like shelter, too, because they seemed to hold his city close as if they were giant arms or an enveloping blanket. And the city needed arms to hold it now, because what he knew, too, in 1944, was that there was an enemy, much more frightening than the plumes of a thousand fires. It was an

enemy that could make the sky throw real fire—fire that would burn and destroy and maim and kill, and churches and bakeries, and neighbors and mothers could simply vanish in one night. Sister Therese told him all this.

The real name of the city where Klaus lived was Gelsenkirchen. It was in Germany, near the Rhine River, and the name belied its existence. *Kirchen*, the root word of the name, means “churches” in the German language, and it makes you want to believe what is no longer there: that churches, with their spiring Gothic steeples, were what surrounded and held this city, as surely they did once when Gelsenkirchen was still a part of a region called the Mark, when Germany, as the country it would become, did not yet exist.

It was on a day, then, not unlike any others, that the boys were seated in their classroom, and the Sisters—*die Schwestern*, as the nuns were called—were teaching them their letters and the songs they wanted the boys to know and, in particular, a prayer:

Lieber Gott

Mach mich fromm

Das ich in den Himmel komm.

It was a prayer they would later recite at night, when, with folded hands, they would kneel in their nightshirts, facing their starched pillows, and, with heads bowed and eyes closed, they would pray:

Dear God,

Make me devout,

So I may go to Heaven.

Klaus, under his breath, so quiet not even the boy whose bed was just beside his could hear, added this prayer, as he didn't trust the first one to be quite enough:

Dear God,

Make me smart,

So I can find my mother.

And dear God,

Bring my father back to me.

Eighteen boys, each sitting tall in his seat, hungry because there was little for breakfast at the orphanage—a cup of milk with coffee in it and a slice of bread—watched intently as Sister Therese: kind, and Sister Anna: not so kind, both worked at the blackboard, their long gray habits swaying to the rhythm of the chalk as each wrote her own version of the day's lesson.

Suddenly there was a sound of rumbling off in the distance, one they knew well by now. It was a sound that demanded all boys rise, and all boys quickly move into an orderly line at the door to the schoolroom, and as silently as they had learned to walk to their beds, they had been instructed to now walk briskly, but don't run, to the cellar.

This cellar was entered from the back yard through a door that was level with the ground, adjacent to the rear wall of the stone house. The cellar door was large and square, and its white paint had become chipped with time; its handle was made of a knotted piece of rope. A Sister, any Sister, the one who arrived first, would lift the door with that rope, exposing a stairway that led to the dank darkness below. Here were benches pushed up against the four sides of a dirt-walled room. Two bare light bulbs hung from the ceiling

and Klaus always noticed the one strand of a spider's web that connected their two black cords.

Calmly, as calmly as possible, the Sister holding the door would speak softly, "*Schnell. Bitte schnell.*" And she would count each boy, so that in the end, eighteen would have entered the cellar. "*Eins, zwei, drei...bitte schnell...vier, fünf...schnell, schnell...*" And when they had all taken their seats, the Sister holding the door would scurry down, a bead of sweat slipping down from beneath her wimple. She would carefully close the cellar door above her head, search for the light switch—it was a switch she never seemed to find without some murmuring and stumbling and words the boys thought could have been curses had she been allowed to say them—and sit with the boys and the other Sisters who all bowed their heads and prayed. *God in Heaven, Hold us now in your Almighty Arms. May this Evil pass over us. May You keep us safe and our neighbors safe. Protect us from...* and, as would happen, the words would be drowned out by the roar from the outside, sounds made by things Klaus could only imagine, because he had never seen the outside when this noise arrived. *A thousand sticks of fire* was how he imagined these noisemakers, this Evil the Sisters prayed would leave soon, and he hid his head in his lap and pressed his hands tightly over his ears.

Not as in times before. It was not how they'd done it the many other times the roars came. They did not pray until a Sister said, "It is done." This time, no Sister said, "It is done." Instead, the roar grew louder, and it grew until it hovered right over the stone house as if the Evil were about to lift it right from its foundation. Sister Therese prayed louder and she prayed faster, repeating and repeating her plea, "Hold us in Your Almighty Arms, Hold us in Your...Hold us, *Hold us...*" and the other Sisters whispered,

“Have faith!” And each of them huddled closer, taking a boy, or two, or three, in her arms.

Sister Therese’s arm pulled Klaus’s small body into hers. He was her favorite and she always sat near him and held him close in times like this. Klaus felt her arm stiffen, suddenly, and he heard her breath make one loud sigh in his ear. He wanted to cry out with fear, because this time was not like the others. This time the Thousand Sticks of Fire must have been right in the yard, because in one instant the cellar door flew open and a wind blew in so fierce that an armchair, and a bicycle right behind it, blew in through the opening.

A crash so loud, it was like Heaven Itself had fallen from the sky. Klaus heard one scream, one solitary scream, like the last scream on earth. It came from Sister Therese who had only moments ago held him tight, and, as she screamed, she threw her body onto his, and together they fell to the floor, his face now smothered by her wimple. There was more crashing and the sound of many more things falling. The upper floor crashed down upon the next, and beds and school benches fell, although Klaus could not see that this was happening. He was hidden beneath Sister Therese’s gray habit, the smell of her soap still fresh in his nostrils. Silence, and then something like the thud of metal, what sounded like the Sisters’ locker, where pencils and chalk were kept, and then something like a rain of pebbles.

And then there was silence.

And the silence didn’t go away.

Klaus took in a slow breath. Then he let it out and whispered, “Schwester?” He waited, but he heard no response. He said it again with more force, “Schwester?” but this

time there was panic in his voice, because Sister Therese always answered him when he asked to be called upon. Klaus was a good boy.

But Sister Therese did not say, “*Ja*, Klaus.”

“*Hallo*, Schwester?!” Klaus pulled his face out from beneath the gray linen, wanting to wake her, to see why she wasn’t speaking. What he saw around him looked to be fog. Billows of gray dust and one lone ray of sunlight glaring angrily through the opening where the cellar door had only minutes ago blown open. The bicycle that had flown in lay on top of a mound, its front wheel bent strangely backwards. Off, near the door, he saw his friend, sitting, staring, and not moving. “Johann?” Klaus said, barely a whisper.

“*Ja?*” Johann replied, his eyes big. Then he cried, “They’re not moving, Klaus. They’re not *moving*! Sister Anna isn’t moving. Look! And look over there! Michael, Stephan, Jürgen, Wolfgang...” And, indeed, they were all there, but all looked as though they had fallen asleep, and, covering each one of them, was a thick layer of dust.

Klaus began to cry, although, years later, when he would tell his father about this day, he would leave this part out. But he did begin to cry. He cried, then he wailed, because he understood one thing: Almighty God had forgotten them. He had not heard their prayers this time. Perhaps they were not said loud enough, or, perhaps it was he. Perhaps, because he had asked for more, because he had asked to find his mother and he had asked for his father, his prayers, perhaps spoken too loudly, had negated all the others and now they were all dead. All but he and Johann.

Klaus had learned what death was. The Sisters had taught the boys about it often in their catechism classes. It was when all was over, when you could not walk anymore, or think anymore, or talk, then you were dead.

“I’m hungry,” Johann began to mumble through his sobbing as if there was nothing else he could think to say. Klaus, now feeling to be the older of the two, although they were probably the same age—perhaps Klaus was the taller—said, “Let’s go out and find something for you. Come.”

Two four-year-old boys climbed out of their hole to find what they could not understand. A city that was no longer there; streets, however, that they recognized: *Gartenstrasse*—Garden Street—and *Hochstrasse*—High Street—and Mozartstrasse. Together they walked, holding hands most of the time, both wiping their snot with the other fist, both trying to be “men” the way the Sisters had taught them to be: polite, quiet unless spoken to, mannerly, and, above all, respectful to adults.

“I want to find my mother,” Klaus announced. It was, after all, the only logical direction for their wandering, although neither boy knew where that mother would be, or even if she would be anywhere. She could just as easily be dead, as all the other boys and the Sisters back at the orphanage were dead.

So, Klaus and Johann wandered—as Klaus remembered the story—for days. They slept in abandoned cars, many of them charred from fires that always burned just after a bombing, and they took apples from trees and asked women in the streets for bread. Some were kind and did reach into their apron pockets for a dried piece of something, but others turned away and said only “*Pfeu*,” wrinkling their noses in disgust. Klaus saw many boys who were like them, boys who wandered in the streets, and girls

too, although the girls seemed often to be walking alongside women, perhaps hoping they could adopt a surrogate mother.

Gelsenkirchen had been bombed numerous times by the Allies, because Gelsenkirchen was the heart of Germany's coal industry—the coal plants giving the city the reason for her nickname: the City of a Thousand Fires. The Allies wanted to weaken the German power, Hitler's power, by destroying the country's industry, but, also they hoped to destroy the German spirit. And so, three-quarters of the city was decimated, and several thousand people, mostly women and children, were killed by bombs during the years 1943 to 1945. As a consequence, the streets of Gelsenkirchen became home to hundreds of parentless and homeless wandering children, Klaus and Johann being two of them.

Klaus was strong, he said when he recalled these stories. By contrast, Johann was weak. Klaus would find food; Johann would wail. When other boys got in the way, Klaus threw rocks at them, even at their heads and didn't care if he hit them in their eyes. In this way, Klaus and Johann made the streets near the orphanage on Mozartstrasse their personal domain. "You must stay strong, Johann. Don't you remember what Sister Anna told us the day the fires came the first time? That we must stay strong and God will take care of the rest? Do you not remember, Johann? Now, stop your crying."

In time Johann and Klaus were separated, the details of which Klaus could not tell you. He couldn't remember Johann leaving or Johann being saved by anyone, or Johann maybe even dying. Boys died, Klaus remembered; everybody died.

It was on one morning when he was no longer with Johann, that a man dressed in a felt overcoat approached Klaus and told him he had a place for a young man such as he

to live. A home with heat and food and other children to play with. It would be on a farm and there would be plenty to eat, as there was a cow that gave milk and goats and chickens, and there would be eggs. Klaus had not had an egg in a long, long time, and so he eagerly put his grimy hand into that of the man in the overcoat and walked with him to a car that seemed to have been there all along, waiting, and together they drove off to the farm.

Klaus did not like the man in the overcoat, nor did he like his wife. One morning, the man's dog, a skinny black dog, a sad dog, as Klaus remembered her, gave birth to a litter of black squiggly little things with thin tails and pink tongues. The man's wife told Klaus to stay away from the puppies. "They won't be around much longer," she said, "so don't get attached to them. Leave them. They are nothing but rubbish anyway." Klaus wanted to obey, but there was one puppy, the smallest one, the one the mother dog kept pushing away, who ran, happily, tail pointed straight up, to Klaus's waiting hand whenever he visited the muddied blue blanket under the porch steps.

"You little thing, you delicate child. I wish I could take you somewhere with me. Somewhere where we can be safe and away from this farm, a place like the orphanage in Gelsenkirchen where there was a stove in the kitchen and we would never be chased away, or called dirty *Buben*," Klaus whispered to her when he felt safe that the farmer's wife wasn't listening.

"Miescha" he named her secretly, and, secretly, he visited her every day after his breakfast of bread and jam with a cup of milk-coffee. He always kept the crust, the best part of the bread, to give to Miescha, because he knew the mother would not care for her.

Then one day, the *Frau*, the farmer's wife, came tromping down the porch stairs, her steps as heavy as cinder blocks, and bent down, not even saying, "Hello dear," when she passed by Klaus, and took the puppies. One by one, she pulled them by the skin on the back of their necks and dropped them into a sack she held in her other hand.

"Where are you going with that sack?" Klaus asked, politely, as he never spoke to her, an adult and a woman he did not like, unless he had to.

"It doesn't concern you. We have no food, and certainly not enough to feed another pack of mongrels. So, get on now." Peering at Klaus as if seeing him for the first time, she repeated, "This doesn't concern you."

But it did concern him, and he followed where she went, staying a safe distance behind, so she wouldn't know he was there. The memory of what he saw then horrified him for the rest of his life. Even as an adult, he remembered this scene: Frau Farmer's Wife, throwing the puppies, one after another, overhand, into a pond. Each one yelping as he left her hand, each one paddling as hard as he could until he could no longer and finally disappearing under the surface of the water. The last one was Miescha. Miescha! Small Miescha, who only yelped once and then vanished, the water closing over her much too soon.

Klaus did not stay long at this foster home. He moved to a new one with the same promises of eggs and children to play with. But this home was bombed. To the ground, it was bombed, and Klaus, once again, was a wandering boy in the streets of Gelsenkirchen.

Klaus didn't have time to feel lonely, or so it was he later told the story. He had two missions: one, to find his mother, and the other, to stay alive. As he stumbled over piles of rubble and pieces of furniture one afternoon, he suddenly felt something cold and

wet bump up against his hand that had only just held the piece of cake a woman had offered him. Startled, he spun around to find a German shepherd—a beautiful dog, even in this dreadful time of war—with eyes looking intently into Klaus’s. There was no question he wanted to be friends, and Klaus welcomed the company, although he decided not to name the dog. He could not lose another Miescha.

Klaus and the German shepherd wandered together then, the German shepherd pawing through piles of fallen bricks and random household items, looking for food, while Klaus approached adults to do the same. Always, when he was given something to eat, he shared it with the dog, and always, the dog sat patiently and politely waited for his share.

Another onslaught of bombers arrived one day. This time Klaus and his new friend were in the streets, not hidden in a cellar, sitting alongside others. This time it was just the two of them, running helplessly, hoping to find shelter, not knowing which way to go.

The roar of the bombers grew louder. The planes came so close he even saw the eyes of a pilot looking right at him, and he felt frightened like he’d never experienced fright before. He screamed, but he knew no one would hear in the din of the sky machines, and he knew, too, no one would care, because whoever was left in the street was afraid for the same thing—his own life.

Klaus ran to a doorway, the only place he could find to hide. His four-year-old legs trembled with fear as he buried his face into the corner of the door. The prayers he had learned from the Sisters would not come to him. He wet himself. Then he sobbed, and he squeezed his eyes shut so hard he thought he might never open them again.

But he did. He wanted to know where the German shepherd was, and for one brief moment, he did see the dog standing in the middle of the street, looking disoriented, looking left, then right, then left, then right again, and it happened. A bomb exploded just behind him. The building on the other side of the street began to spew flames through the openings where windows once were, and when Klaus looked again, the German shepherd was gone. For days afterward, Klaus looked for him, but he knew instinctively that they would never be reunited.

How this came to be, Klaus could not tell you, because he could not remember, but not long after that day of bombing, the day he lost his German shepherd friend forever, Klaus was taken in by a new foster family. In a city where hundreds of children suddenly became orphaned, foster families could earn decent money caring for these homeless and parentless children. More than twenty such orphans lived in this new home and, it, like the first, was also a farm with chickens that laid eggs.

Klaus inherited new sisters and brothers, his favorite being Trudi, the girl who stood in the doorway, with ruffled brown hair and mismatched shoes, to welcome him the day he arrived. His other friend and brother was Wolfgang who bit his nails when he was nervous, or, maybe even when he wasn't nervous at all, because Klaus noticed they were chewed to the very last sliver and usually bled. The farm, though, was a pleasant farm, surrounded by a forest, and, although the children were required to help on the farm, Klaus and Trudi and Wolfgang always found time to play.

A trough, once used to feed pigs, now rusted and useless, became their airplane. Klaus would crawl inside and place the torn half of an old ball on his head and tie it with twine so it fit like a helmet, and he would point a shovel toward his friends, saying he

was about to shoot. At other times, though, they played family, each taking turns to be a foster mother or father, each taking turns to be a child. Even the little one, Dieter, the brother who still preferred to crawl, was allowed to play in this game.

The war soon was done. During the evening of May 1, 1945, Adolf Hitler and his new wife, Eva Braun, took their lives; Joseph and Magda Goebbels fed their six children poison and then took their lives as well, and within a week, Germany signed an unconditional surrender with the Allies.

For the German people, those who remained and those who were now in French, American or Russian prison camps, this marked the beginning of a time of new famine. During the first years just after the war, the German people were allowed four potatoes per day, which gave them enough calories to stay alive, but not enough to stay healthy. More than two million people died of starvation or disease due to poor nutrition during this time. One can imagine what may have occurred, how an adult, a stronger, bigger person, may, perhaps, have stolen from a child, or received food for a child he was entrusted with, but rather ate it himself.

Klaus's mother was dead. He would learn many years later, when he was old enough to understand what abortion meant, that she died when her brother, his uncle, a doctor, tried to help rid her of an undesired pregnancy. She bled to death.

The definitive fact that Klaus had no mother was something he heard one day from a woman who came to the farm, wanting to take him away. She was an older woman. Her gray hair was pulled back into a severe bun and her thin dress hung loose around her bony ankles.

He was now seven and adult enough to know that just about anywhere else would be better than this farm where there rarely was more than a potato or two to eat, rarely a glass of milk, never an egg, and so he looked to this woman with hope. His eyes were bright and full of desire to impress her. From the exchanges between the two adults, the gray-haired woman and the farmer's wife, Klaus understood this was his *Oma*, his grandmother.

"Oma, look! Look, watch me! I can ride a bicycle!" And, although he had never learned the art of riding a bicycle, he jumped on the one with the torn leather seat that was leaning there against the garden wall, a bicycle much too large for him, and ran with it, hoping he would figure it out just by trying. The boy crashed, of course, the bicycle landing on top of him, and, with a bloodied nose, he sheepishly returned to the two women, who stood aghast.

"Klaus! That's no way to behave in front of company. Go clean yourself. And put Papa's bicycle right back where you found it. Shame on you!" It was the farmer's wife who spoke, and it was clear she was not about to let Klaus go. One less foster child: less potatoes; less income.

Klaus was to go to a court one day to talk to a judge, who was to determine who would keep the boy. The farmer's wife sat with Klaus's hand folded tightly in her lap. In a woolen dress and a hat, she kept patting his hand, saying, "Things will be all right. Things will be all right...this won't take long."

Across from them, on a bench, sat the woman who had said she was his *Oma*. Klaus looked at her face with her hair pulled back and wondered what was to come.

“All rise,” Klaus heard and stood for how long he could not remember. But he remembered the women named Oma and he remembered the farmer’s wife, each walking separately to the front of the court to speak with the judge. And when they were done, the judge called for Klaus to step forward.

The judge, in his black robe with its velvet hem, holding his gavel in one pale long-fingered hand, did not look stern like Klaus would have expected. He looked kindly at Klaus and thought of him as a waif, a gangly, under-fed orphan who desperately needed a family of his own. Here was a woman who claimed him as her kin and another woman who claimed she had raised him as her own son, and that, with her, he would have a home and a family and sisters and brothers to grow up with.

The first woman had nothing. Nothing but one thing: a slice of brown bread—and she had cut it thickly, knowing exactly what she was up to—covered with a thick layer of gooseberry jam. This, she had wrapped in waxed paper and kept hidden in the pocket of her dress. It was a brown dress, certainly not new or even “a good dress,” but she did stand in the kitchen that morning ironing it well, because she knew she had a mission, and it was one of the greatest missions of her life. She was on her way to the court to bring her grandson home. He was a boy she barely knew, the son of her youngest child, a girl named Luzie, who was now dead. He was a child, too, whose life had been taken by the war. The gruesome and uncaring war—the arm of fate that had destroyed her city, killed her neighbors, and tore her children away from her. This boy, Klaus, was all that was left of what she held dear to her. Family. And so she pressed her brown dress with the two front pockets, and she wrapped a shawl around her shoulders and boarded the train that would drop her off at the courthouse steps.

Klaus stood when asked to stand, and he walked to face the judge, as he had learned so well: when an adult asks, you obey. He walked forward and his blue eyes looked to those of the judge and waited in eager anticipation. For once, all eyes were on him. For once, they wanted to hear from him. It would be his voice that would determine an outcome and, it seemed, this one would be an important outcome.

“Klaus. You have been asked to leave your home and your friends, your sisters and brothers and your parents, to go with this woman, Frau Dölle, who claims to be your grandmother. The court now asks, what do you make of this? And whom would you choose to be your lawful guardian?”

Klaus, surprised at how simple the question was, felt in his pocket for the bread with the gooseberry jam, covered in waxed paper, that this woman, who called herself Oma, had slipped into his hand as they passed in the hallway just before entering the court. And he thought of his friends at home, the friends he would never see again if he said yes to her. The dog, the boy named Wolfgang, the girl named Trudi, and baby Dieter. His parents. And Klaus knew, without a doubt, the answer to the judge’s question. For one silent moment, one magnificent moment, Klaus understood that the answer to the questions of his life that even the Sisters could never give him, was about to come to him as easily as the mystery bread with the gooseberry jam had slipped out of his Oma’s pocket. He would choose to say, “I am a man,” and he would never, ever doubt his decision.