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THE BOY WHO DARED

A NOVEL BASED ON THE TRUE STORY OF A HITLER YOUTH



Werner grows white around his mouth as he reads over the pamphlet. "No way," he says, shoving the pamphlet back at Helmuth. "I'm too busy for this."

Helmuth eyes Werner closely. Werner looks angry. Has Helmuth made a terrible mistake? His hands shake as he folds the leaflet, slips it into his pocket. At that moment, their boss, Heinrich Mohns, passes the doorway, pokes his head in. "What's going on here?"

Düwer elbows Werner, a warning to keep quiet.

Helmuth pretends to be unruffled. "I hoped Werner could help me with a little homework, with something I didn't understand," he tells his boss.

Herr Mohns stares at Helmuth and then Werner. "Get to work," he says at last. "We don't pay you for socializing."

Helmuth and Düwer return to their desks. Helmuth feels Mohns's eyes on him, wishes he would stop staring. Helmuth buries himself in his work but he can't concentrate, not with Herr Mohns's eyes boring into his back.

February 5. Two-thirty. The office grows suddenly quiet as two Gestapo agents stride purposefully through the office door.

"Helmuth Hübener?" says the taller agent to Helmuth.

Helmuth's mouth turns dry. He licks his lips, nods, and says, "Yes."

"You know why we are here," says the agent.

It isn't a question. It's a statement.

Helmuth glances at Werner, who doesn't look up, only stares at a green file folder on his desk. Herr Mohns stands in the doorway, looking gleeful. Helmuth understands the look. Herr Mohns is a man who has done his duty.

"Come with us," says the agent. He nods to Düwer. "You, too."

Helmuth goes for his coat, but the agents yank him back, push him toward the door. He falters, recovers his step. Outside, the boys slide into the backseat of a black Mercedes, are swallowed up inside, flanked by the two Gestapo officers.

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With each tick of the pocket watch, Helmuth's heart pounds harder. Herr Ranke glances down at an official-looking paper. He begins to read slowly and clearly, enunciating each word importantly:

"On the eleventh of August 1942 the court found Helmuth Hübener guilty of listening to a foreign radio station and distributing the news heard in connection with conspiracy to commit high treason and treasonable support of the enemy."

Must not breathe, must keep hope swallowed inside, must not let hope fly out of throat.

"He is sentenced to death and the loss of civil rights during his lifetime."

The words begin to shoot around the cell, exploding off the walls, striking Helmuth like bullets.

Bang. *The National Minister of Justice has decreed that there will be no clemency.*

Bang. *Justice will run its course.*

Bang. *The execution of the judgment will take place on 27 October 1942 after eight P.M.*

Tonight.

The floor buckles beneath Helmuth and the walls waver. The single lightbulb overhead throbs, hurts his eyes, burns into his skull. He closes his eyes, squeezes them shut, won't let the tears escape, wills them away.

Helmuth opens his eyes. The men are still there. The prison guards grip their truncheons, pulsing pulsing pulsing.

"Have you any final requests?" asks Herr Ranke.

Helmuth licks his dry lips. "Yes," he whispers hoarsely. "I would like to write letters to my family."

"So be it," says Herr Ranke.

Their job done, the men turn on their heels and, one by one, leave the cell. Single file. Slam. Click. The cell door bolts shut.

Helmuth reaches for the wall behind him, sinks to the floor, clutches his belly, lets out a deep wail. Hope flies from his chest, flutters around the room, beats against the window.

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Four-thirty P.M. Helmuth stands in the police interrogation room, waiting. He takes in the padded black leather door. Gleaming wooden desk. Green blotter. File folders. Straight-backed wooden chairs. The slightly burned smell of real coffee. Two white china cups. Two saucers. Two silver teaspoons. It all looks so normal. Civilized. Like a banker's office.

He wonders if they will beat him, wonders if he can hold up. Remembers his promise to Karl and Rudi. *No names.* Remembers Brother Worbs. *You'll admit to anything to stop the pain.* Shakes the thought from his head. He will take one step at a time. He will find out what they know. Admit nothing.

Helmuth hears the stamp of feet in the hall, two crisp "*Heil Hitler*"s. The door swings open. The same two agents enter — Wangemann and Müssner, Helmuth has learned — and barely acknowledge him.

The taller man, Müssner, sets his briefcase on the table with a thump. Unbuckles it. Shuffles several papers into a neat pile on the desk.

Helmuth's stomach tightens. Fliers. His fliers.

"Sit," says Wangemann. He's shorter, more squarely built.

Helmuth sits. Wangemann stands next to Helmuth, arms folded.

Müssner picks up the first leaflet, waves it carelessly as if it were a simple grocery list. "This was found in a telephone booth in the Luisenweg-Süderstrasse at nine o'clock in the morning." He fans out the others. "The rest were found in stairwells and mailboxes at Süderstrasse 205. All brought in by good citizens."

Wangemann leans in. His breath smells of onions. "Do you know why you've been arrested?"

Helmuth looks at him blankly. Hopes.

"You're accused of distributing enemy propaganda. Do you have any idea what this means for you, distributing enemy propaganda?"

Helmuth corrects him. "Allegedly —"

Wangemann's fist smashes into Helmuth's face. Knocks him to the floor. A black boot kicks him in the stomach, twice. Helmuth curls, knees to his chest, arms shielding his head, gasping for air.

"You want the government to fall, but who's fallen now?" shrieks Wangemann. He kicks Helmuth in the ribs. Again. And again. "Get up," he says. "Now let's see how you stand."

Helmuth wobbles. He reaches for the chair. It hurts to stand straight. He tries to take a deep breath. His ribs burn.

"You might as well confess," says Müssner. "Things will go better for you, the way they're going better for your friend Gerhard Düwer. He's told us everything."

That shocks Helmuth. Not Düwer. It can't be. It's a trap, he tells himself.

"You don't believe us?" says Müssner. "You think it's a trap?"

Müssner flips open a file, selects a typed sheet, reads from it: "'One day, it could have been the middle of January, Hübener handed me a typewritten paper and asked me to read it. I read the paper and without saying anything, I hid it and took it home. I could tell at once it was inflammatory writing against Germany.'"

Helmuth's ears fill up, as though he's underwater.

Müssner looks at Helmuth, and when he speaks, his words sound underwater, too. "Your friend is a good German who only wants to do his duty." He continues to read from Düwer's statement. "'At home, I locked the paper in a box because I wanted to gather evidence, so that at the right time, I could denounce Hübener.'"

The word rings in Helmuth's ears. *Denounce denounce denounce.*

Müssner continues reading. "'I realize that I was wrong, and I now fall under suspicion for having cooperated with Hübener. This is not the case, however, and I want to clarify that I merely wanted to collect evidence against Hübener.'"

Müssner stops, clasps his hands together, rests them on the desk. "Have you anything to say?"

Helmuth's heart sinks as he realizes that Düwer denounced him in order to save himself. *You'll admit to anything to stop the pain.* That's what Brother Worbs had said. What did the Gestapo do to Düwer?

Helmuth sees Karl's grinning face, Rudi's worried face. He feels their hands, three hands, one atop the other, shaking on their promise. *Agreed. No names.*

"I'm ready to confess," says Helmuth. "I take full responsibility."

Later, the black Mercedes carrying Helmuth threads through the Hammerbrook streets. Helmuth prays Oma isn't home, so that she won't see his bruised face, but she is home, and she cries out and rushes to him, reaching for him. "Helmuth, what have you done?"

Wangemann thrusts out his hand, stops her, says, "Official Gestapo business. We're looking for enemy propaganda."

"Enemy propaganda!" says Oma. "We don't have any —"

Opa guides Oma to the sofa, saying, "Quiet, dear, let them look. They'll see that they're mistaken, that all this is a terrible mistake."

Oma clutches her apron. Wrings it. Weeps loudly. Opa draws her to him, a stricken look on his face, and Helmuth can't watch anymore. He points to the closet, his bedroom, says everything can be found there.

But the two agents ransack the apartment anyway. Oma whimpers as they empty drawers, lift mattresses, peeling wallpaper for secret hideaways. In the end, they find all the incriminating evidence just where Helmuth said — the Rola radio, a pile of assorted leaflets, notebooks, manuscripts of handbills, shorthand notes, and the Remington typewriter with seven carbon sheets of paper stuck between the carriage rollers.

"Such interesting reading," says Müssner sarcastically, leaning over the typewriter. "It says, 'Who is inciting whom?'" He reads a section out loud. "'All accusations against the American government . . . lack any truthful basis. They are fabricated, malicious, and remain symptoms of the deepest hatred —'"

Wangemann glares, apeline, at Helmuth. "So you think the Führer is a liar."

Helmuth wants to shout out, "Yes! He is a liar!" But instead he clamps his mouth shut, steels himself, prays Wangemann won't hit him, not here, not in front of his grandmother.

"You disgusting piece of trash," says Wangemann. He pushes Helmuth out the door, out to the street. Oma wails behind him, and as he ducks into the car he looks up, sees her glistening face at the window.

Eight P.M. A green prisoner van transports Helmuth to Concentration Camp Fuhlsbüttel to the north of Hamburg. A guard takes his trousers, his shirt, his shoelaces, and hands him a pair of blue prison pants and shirt. Leads him to a holding cell.

Helmuth looks around the putrid cell. An overflowing slop bucket in the corner. A cot with no mattress, just boards. A single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling. Somewhere he hears a scream, sobs.

He sits on the bed, swings his legs over the edge of the cot, lies down. He folds his arms across his chest for warmth. Closes his eyes. Tells himself the worst is over. He's confessed. He kept his promise to Rudi and Karl.

Tears swell and then come in great heaves of relief.

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Helmuth sits on the floor beneath the window in a square of sunlight. He can barely breathe when he thinks what lies

ahead. He focuses his mind, doesn't want to be numb. Wants to think, to feel. He listens to the sounds of prison. From the hall, a metallic clattering sound, doors opening, doors closing. From another cell, sobs. From a passing guard, foot-falls. From the prison yard, the tramp of feet. From the city, sirens.

The square of sunshine moves, diffuses, grows faint yellow. Helmuth feels lost in a dream. Karl and Rudi enter the dream. Their faces float in front of him, then fade out, and enter again, first one, then the other, and then the three of them together.

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Morning. The slot opens. A cup of brown liquid and a hunk of dry bread. Helmuth gulps the liquid, gobbles the bread. He can no longer avoid the overflowing slop bucket.

Later. Footsteps. Outside the cell door. Helmuth stands in anticipation. The slot slides open. Eyes meet his. The slot slams shut. A key turns in the lock, a rasping, grating sound, metal against metal. The door swings open.

A guard looms in the open door. "Out," he says, motioning with the rubber truncheon. "Back to police headquarters with you."

Helmuth falters. "But I've already confessed."

The guard's mouth tightens. *Wham.* His truncheon strikes Helmuth in the stomach, so fast he doesn't see it coming. It doubles him over. Knocks the wind out of him. Helmuth groans, clutches his belly. The sour taste of vomit. He swallows it down.

"Guess you didn't tell them enough," says the guard. "Hands on head!"

It stabs to stand up straight. Helmuth clasps his hands on top of his head, walks, elbows sticking out like wings. He plods down the corridor, outside to the transport van.

Gestapo headquarters. Helmuth awaits his turn for interrogation in a room painted a brilliant, dazzling white and brightly lit with large lights. It's called the "Hall of Mirrors," a Nazi joke, Helmuth supposes, because there are no mirrors. All around, blue-clad prisoners stand at attention, noses one inch from the white wall, never moving, never flinching.

One hour. Two. More. Helmuth's legs ache. His stomach burns. He feels faint. His mouth is dry. Needs the toilet, worries he cannot hold it, doesn't want to think about the trouble that will cause.

His name is called. The Gestapo interrogation room has a concrete floor. Round metal drains. A hose looped

in the corner. Dark splatters — dried blood? — across whitewashed walls. A lingering scent of disinfectant. In the center, a wooden table. Two wooden chairs.

"We know you didn't work alone," says Wangemann, tapping his truncheon against his palm.

"But I did," says Helmuth.

This time Helmuth expects the blows, the kicks, the grind of boots.

The transport van carries him back to Fuhlsbüttel, where the guard clamps his hands and feet in metal bands, cuffs the bands to the bed. "For stubborn ones," says the guard. "You're a tough one. Most crack within twenty-four hours. Maybe you'll give a better answer tomorrow."

Helmuth lies spread-eagled on the boards. His face back shoulders buttocks legs they burn burn burn. He prays, not for deliverance, but for strength. He will not crack. Must. Hold. Out. No. Names.

Another interrogation. Helmuth gasps for breath. Each breath burns. His whole body feels on fire, and he cannot hold out any longer, cannot stop himself as he croaks, "Karl-Heinz Schnibbe. Rudi Wobbe."

Helmuth sits on the edge of the cot, head in hands, and sobs. Huge, wracking sobs. He hates himself, hates what he has done.

If only he held out.

If only they had killed him.

Helmuth wishes he could kill himself. But how! He has no shoelaces. No sheet. He lies on the cot, stares at the ceiling. Holds his breath, gasps, and gives up. Clutches his throat. Squeezes. Hard. Gasps again. Tries again. Harder. No use.

And then he realizes: He can't die, he mustn't die, he must live.

Live, to take the blame.

Live, to save Karl and Rudi.

The SS sit at a large table in the middle of the room. Talking, laughing, shuffling papers. Helmuth tunes out the guards, narrows his eyes to slits, blocks out the dazzling wall, stands, nose one inch from the wall. Nothing fazes him. Nothing detracts him. He knows what he must do.

The Gestapo are precise. Methodical.

The Gestapo don't make mistakes.