I carefully shook her awake.

“Come, Ilse, it’s time to leave. Shh, be very quiet, now.”

My daughter sat up slowly in bed, rubbing her eyes and frowning.

“But Mutter, where are we going?”

I folded up our passports and papers, hastily buttoning my coat and speaking softly in the apartment’s dimness.

“Do you remember what I told you, liebe? About visiting Aunt Elisabeth for a while in the country?”

She nodded, hopping lightly out of bed and obediently putting on her shawl.

“Good girl, now,” I gave her a quick kiss. “We have to hurry. We need to meet Vater with the car. And we must be very fast, and very, very quiet.”

Ilse brightened. “Like the kitty from the book you read me yesterday?”

“Yes, darling, just like the kitty. Now, hold your bag, that’s a good girl.”

I shut the door softly behind us. I was trying so hard to swallow the lump of fear in my throat. I made my eyes scan both sides of the narrow, city road for any sudden movements or strange shadows. No lamps or lit windows, thank God; all were asleep in Braunschweig tonight.

I took Ilse’s hand and we began creeping through the maze of alleys towards the city’s edge. I prayed that Kramer was there, prayed that he hadn’t been caught while “leaving” on business the week before. For several months we had been planning this flight to Switzerland in
an effort to dodge the war, the air raids, and the violence. The Nazis were growing more and more suspicious of our sympathies due to my husband’s mixed feelings about slave labor at his company; any day now we could be taken away. For the sake of our little girl, we had to leave Germany and wait out the destruction.

The clicking of our shoes was muffled by the burlap I had tied underneath them. Ilse gripped my hand tightly. At every corner we stopped, checked if we were being followed, and moved on. We couldn’t afford a run-in with the Gestapo for we would surely be taken as traitors.

A light September wind blew through the city and carried smells of the coming autumn. Ilse’s small, innocent hand continued to clutch mine as she quietly and quickly followed my lead among the stoic, watchful buildings. Sheer determination propelled me in this race against the clock. The more we lingered in Braunschweig, the higher the risk of running into soldiers or the Gestapo on night patrol.

We kept on. My packs were heavy, Ilse’s hand damp. There was nothing, not a sound, save our labored breathing. And then, suddenly, a loud crash just meters behind us. In terror I clamped my hand over Ilse’s mouth and yanked her to my side, pressing our bodies into the stone doorway of a watch shop. I felt her rapid, skittering heartbeat, felt the panic rolling off like waves from a churning sea.

No flashlights, no angered yelling, no cold rifles cocked into position. I dared to crane my neck to glimpse the source of the unsettling noise.

A mother and two children. Ilse’s age. They, too, were loaded with bags and sacks, one of which had spilled onto the ground. They, too, were panicking, trying their best to hurry and pick up the pieces. But there was something different about them. As my ears strained to hear their whispers, it became painfully apparent that they were not speaking German, but Yiddish.
An icy chill sprinted through me. They would be a magnet for the Gestapo, I thought. We had to get out of here. What if they got caught and ruined our escape plan as well as theirs? We couldn’t have been the only ones to have heard their clumsiness. I looked down at Ilse, who had noticed the family too. I removed my hand from her mouth and urged her to move. I tugged at her coat. She was frozen.

“Mutter,” She whispered. I crouched low.

“Liebe, we don’t have time. We need to leave.”

“Mutter, we can’t. We have to help them.”

I blinked rapidly.

“Ilse, we must go! We can’t risk helping them! Think of Vater, of Aunt Elisabeth waiting for us!”

“But Mutter—”

I pulled her hand and dragged her away from the Jewish family, still trying to tie their bags back together, partially hidden in the shadows. We rounded several more corners before we stopped to catch our breath. I held my daughter against the wall and tried to summon in my head the map of Braunschweig I had meticulously studied for the past three weeks. Only a few more blocks, I calculated, and we would be at the city’s edge where transportation awaited us. I breathed the good news to Ilse, but it didn’t seem to register. She pulled my hand.

“Mutter, what about the little children we left behind? What about them?”

I spat out impatiently, “Darling, they don’t…”

I caught myself.

Ilse’s blue eyes widened in a questioning look.
Oh, dear Lord, forgive me. "They don’t matter..." My thoughts screamed, but my heart cried. I knew what was expected, I knew what I had been told to think of such people, but on the inside I knew better. And I was so close to feeding my daughter the same trash I myself had refused to eat.

I was obligated, by God, by my daughter’s innocence, by my duty as a fellow human. How could I tell my sweet liebe to walk away from someone in need?

Ilse reached out and took my hand. She was so blameless, so young to understand society’s talk. I resolved there, in the dangerous silence of Braunschweig, to protect her unmarred heart. I would demonstrate to her, even now, how to truly “love thy neighbor.”

I prayed for God’s mercy and stood. I shifted the bags on my back, looked at my precious Ilse, and squeezed her hand in the darkness. We turned around.