

A vignette that didn't make it into the novel:



January 20, 1945

Freezing temperatures have turned our apartment into an icebox. White puffs rise as I watch Mother sort through the ration cards. We received coupons for coal, but none is available. Neither are briquettes.

I chew my lower lip, the skin on my face achy with dryness. "I'm going tonight—Helmut too." I want to add that the light from a half moon is perfect in the blacked out city—just enough to see, but not too obvious to others peeking through a window. My mouth remains stubbornly closed and the kitchen lapses into silence. I know Mother has long given up arguing. Or maybe she's plain too tired.

Our steps echo on the hardened snow. Freezing air bites my cheeks, and the insides of my nose. Neither of us speak as we hike uphill. The streets are inky and silent. Not much farther. Every so often I stop to yank free the sled I'm pulling. These days the road resembles a rough field. Rubble mixes with garbage, bits of crumbled bricks and splintered roof tiles. The layer of snow isn't thick enough to hide it all—the ugliness, the desperation are right there, palatable as salt on my tongue.

I know the place we're going. The long driveway is deserted, but I imagine eyes watching from beyond the wall. Chances are we're not alone. What was I thinking? Doubt creeps up my spine, making me tremble. I glance at Helmut, but it's too dark to see his expression—and too late to talk it over.

We take a few tentative steps as the driveway stretches endlessly. At the end of it a metal gate with vertical struts blocks access. Beyond lies what we came for: coal.

Last September when I was here with Mother, the entire yard was filled with coal—black miniature mountains. Rich from the earth to warm our homes. What I see today is something else: a single mound, no higher than ten feet, the coal's shadow deeper than its surrounding area, a black hole snuffing out all light.

Nothing moves, the quiet amplifying the steps we take, each breath a roar in my ears.

We reach the gate, the metal bars cutting my skin like ice.

"What now?" Helmut whispers.

I want to turn back, yet the thought of another freezing night in my home, my little brother pumping his arms as he tries to warm himself, is too much.

"Climb over." I point to the side, where a half-wall holds the gate in place. That's when I realize we'll have to leave the sled behind.

We'll have to fill the burlap sacks we brought and carry them on our backs, haul them across the gate somehow. It's clumsy and slow and not at all what I envisioned. The last couple of years have taught me that if you want to steal, you've got to be fast. Nothing gets you into more trouble than acting slowly.

Helmut is already on top of the wall and slides down the other side. I follow suit. The air is so cold, my nostrils feel like they're gluing themselves together. It hurts to breathe.

The coal glints in the bluish moonlight as we shove chunks into our sacks. All the while my ears are on high alert.

The office next to the coal yard is dark, but that doesn't mean anything. In the back, a two-story house rises against the sky. Its windows are dark, too.

I urge my hands and arms to move faster as the creepy feeling in my neck continues. Helmut hurries too. I think these days we communicate by osmosis.

The burlap sacks used to hold potatoes and are pretty large. I crouch low, my eyes on the blackness, using my palms to shove, when I feel something behind my back. It's less than a sound, a vibration of something or someone.

All I get out is "Helmut" before I feel something poke between my shoulder blades.

"So you thought you could steal from me," a voice says. I instantly recognize the coal trader, Mother argued with last fall. At the time we'd taken a wheelbarrow to get some briquettes and the man had refused. I knew he wanted extra payment, some sort of bribe, to let go of his precious briquettes, but we had nothing to give.

I slowly rise and lift my arms. Helmut does the same and I nod at him.

As I turn to face the coal trader, the ground shifts under Helmut's weight. Next thing I know, he's racing to the gate. Well, racing is an overstatement. The sack is so full, he's dragging it across the ground. It's only about fifteen yards, but his speed is that of a snail on a Sunday stroll.

"Hey you, stop right there," the coal trader shouts after Helmut. He keeps trimming his rifle on me, so I silently urge Helmut on. The man may sound mean, but I doubt he's going to shoot us.

From the corner of my eye I inspect my own sack. It's hard to tell the weight, but judging by Helmut's trouble, it weighs at least seventy-five pounds. Maybe more than a hundred. I can tell the man is torn between running after Helmut and letting me go. *Come on, lower the stupid gun.* Helmut has reached the gate and shoves his bag up the half wall.

I've found that fear gives you superhuman strength. Under normal circumstances Helmut would never make it. Add a gun and nighttime to the equation and voila, you've got serious adrenalin to help you out.

"Don't move," the man says to me just as Helmut squeezes himself along the half wall, dragging the bag with him. He pulls hard, some of the coal falling out of the sack on the other side.

The man leaves me standing and hurries to the gate. As soon as he turns his back, I'm following him with my own sack. Question is, can I fling the bag across? I empty half the contents and twirl the bag a few times to close it. As the man fingers a key from his pocket to unlock the gate, I swing my bag with all I've got. It goes air born...and for a moment lands on top of the gate before sliding off on the other side. Coal sprinkles through the air and through the dust I see Helmut heaving his sack on top of the sled, ready to go.

The man swears something fierce, "Damn boys, thieves, good-for-nothing ruffians." He opens the gate just far enough to get through.

“Run,” I yell coming up from behind. Helmut begins to drag the sled, but it’s slow going with the unwieldy load. The man has crossed through the opening and I follow him. It’s clear he’s going to catch up with Helmut. In a desperate move I shove the man over, not a big push, just enough to make him lose his balance. He sags into the snow and loses his rifle as I rush past. Taking hold of the coal sack on top of the sled, we run down the driveway around the corner and out of sight.

The coal trader’s swearing fades. He’s probably picking up the second bag, I left behind.

I’m relieved about getting away, but why is it that we don’t even have access to heating materials? Or food? Why is it that two sixteen-year old boys have got to steal to keep their families warm? Fresh anger pulses through me as we divide the coal. After I drop off Helmut—none of us are in the mood to talk—I open the outside flap to our coal cellar and let the coal rumble down. It may last a week, or two if we stretch it. Maybe by then the weather will warm enough to be tolerable.

As I tiptoe into our apartment, hunger edges through my veins, a slow ache that makes my legs weak and my mind soft. Later today, I’ve got to think about a way to find extra food. Candle in hand, I pass by the mirror in the hallway. A stranger stares at me, a coal miner with a blackened face. I don’t want to wash, but mother will be livid if I climb into bed like this.

With a sigh I sneak into the bathroom for the wash bucket.

PS 1: True story: the next day, a neighbor stopped Günter’s mother in the hallway and said, “I know what’s going on, but tell your boy not to make so much noise when he delivers coal into the cellar at four in the morning.”



PS 2: As of December 1942, the German government urged people to “save” coal and use less. It was a huge propaganda campaign because Hitler needed every bit of it for his war machinery. So the civilian population froze. Things got worse after the war ended and people stole whatever they could from trucks and trains.

*Hermann Claasen, Koblenklau ('Fringsen') 1946, © LVR-LandesMuseum Bonn*