

The Children's War

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CHAPTER ONE

Marseilles, March 1939

Ilse held her suitcase safe between her knees. There was a continuous loud crackle of announcements, which she could not understand. After an hour she moved to the corner seat beside the frosted glass window, for this gave an angled view of the Gare St Charles. There she watched the constant flickering of single and multiple blurs against the yellow advertisement for Amer Picon. Any one of those blurs might open the door from the huge vault of the station and solidify into the person collecting her. This was distracting. Each time the door opened and it was not for her, she could not settle. In the guidebook, the tour of Marseilles occupied twelve pages, whereas Paris took up thirty-three. Marseilles was a mighty port, the oldest of the cities of France. Ilse shut her eyes and conjured up the map of the harbour which, facing west, was defended by its two great forts, Saint-Jean to the north and Saint-Nicolas to the south. How happy her mother had been to find a guidebook in French in the tiny foreign language section of the Wuppertal public library.

Greeks from Asia Minor had landed here twenty-six centuries ago, dark men in galleys with long oars. Centuries passed. Another hour went by. The city of enthusiasms welcomed the revolution, sent five hundred volunteers to Paris. The soldiers from Marseilles

electrified the crowd with their rendition of a new marching song. It became the hymn of the revolution and was renamed in their honour. The guidebook had printed all the verses. She sang them in her head: the day of glory has arrived. People came and were collected and were replaced. Yawning, she feared to sleep. Marseilles, she recited to herself, is the great western emporium for trade with the Levant, importer of grains, sugar, peanuts, copra and Indian corn. How hungry she was. The big boy with the scuffed shoes unwrapped and ate his picnic, shovelling bread into his mouth. The woman with two small children went away to the café and then returned with chocolate bars. But Ilse did not move. What if the Red Cross woman came and did not find her there? Her legs felt funny, tingling with pins and needles but also very soft. Anxiety blurred the din, sharpened the ceaseless turning and returning of the same thoughts. Her head jerked up as once more the door opened abruptly, letting in a swell of noise.

It was a short woman with dark hair dyed blonde. 'Du bist Ilse,'¹ she said. She was not German. Ilse stood, a little wobbly. Certainty, which should have brought relief, was worrying. How had she recognised her? The Red Cross woman beckoned to Ilse to come nearer. She smelt of sweat, her pink face thickly powdered. With a pencil, she trailed down her typed list and crossed off Ilse's name, scoring it deeply. 'Come! Hurry you along!' she said in an odd mixture of German and French.

They hurried through to daylight and dust and wind. A huge flight of steps led past massive statues down to a boulevard. There was a hotel opposite and the sprawling city below, a patch of green to one side. Ilse noticed some young children playing and paused just for an instant but the woman (red woman, cross woman) hurried her on. They were to take a taxi. As she opened the door, the woman told the driver to go straight to the ship's offices and to take the most direct way. She was disinclined to talk, which seemed to Ilse a great pity and an opportunity missed. Wriggling forward in the seat, the woman took off her jacket and eased her

¹ 'You are Ilse'

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

feet out of her shoes, as though she was on her own. How busy she must be, to need this moment so badly. Her feet were swollen with angry-looking bunions, the blouse ringed with sweat stains under the arms. She studied the list, which was typed on both sides of the piece of paper, biting at ragged cuticles. Her hands looked raw and used. Perhaps she went back and forth all day, shuttling unknown children on and off boats, to and from stations. Ilse hoped so. She badly wanted a companion.

Jolted against the acrid odour of sweat and perfume on the turns, Ilse looked in vain for traces of the great trading city. There was no sight of the world-famous Canebière ('broad boulevard at the heart of Marseilles where those touring Provence must choose to stay; site, in more turbulent times, to a permanent guillotine'). She saw unremarkable streets full of people and trolley cars and trees whipped by the wind. She tried to see the street names, for the French loved liberty, equality and fraternity. Every town in France boasted a street named after deputy Mirabeau, a Jean Jaurès or a Garibaldi. Her mother had explained that France honoured great men who fought for freedom, even the foreign ones. There could never be a Hitlerplatz here. This was why everyone loved France. Hard as she tried, squinting against the light, the streets reeled by much too fast for her to read the names. But for the dirt and the names of the shops, it might have been Düsseldorf. They turned into smaller and darker streets. There was still no sign of the sea but she had smelt it in the sharpness of the wind; she felt its nearness in the way the streets all hurried down towards the water.

She cleared her throat and spoke in her careful French. 'Can we go to Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde? From the peak, one can admire the view of the town and the Mediterranean.'

'What?'

'A church. It is called Notre-Dame-de-la-Garde.'

'You want a church?' said the woman, giving her a curious, sidelong look.

'There is a lovely panorama over the sea,' persisted Ilse. The steeple, with its gilded ten-metre-high Virgin, rose fifty metres

above the hill. The guidebook said that it was the Virgin who kept the city safe.

‘Ah no, there is no time. It’s the opposite way,’ she said.

Ilse had the timetable of her long journey firmly fixed in her head. She knew that she had hours to spare. She looked at the woman and the way her fingers ripped at each other, and her turned-away face.

They turned into a square and then the taxi drew up at a big cream building. The woman told the driver to wait. A queue spilled onto the street. The woman forced her way inside in the face of protests, tugging Ilse behind her. She cast one look at the room, which was packed with people, and pushed Ilse on, one hand in the small of her back, not unkindly but firmly.

‘These people are waiting for the boat to Oran. You’ll go from La Joliette. That’s the new port. You can walk to the dock from here. Go with the others. You understand?’

Ilse nodded.

She watched the short figure stumping out to disappear into the haze, the last link in the human chain that had moved her to this place. She knew that the woman was supposed to see her onto the boat. Sitting on the suitcase, Ilse was level with the legs shuffling towards the ticket office. She had been wrong to mind the smell of sweat. The Red Cross woman was the sort of person whose kindness was all used up in her work, leaving nothing over for conversation, no space into which other people might intrude. She would probably never talk to the children she took from place to place. Ilse thought with regret that she had had her opportunity to see Marseilles and she had sat in the station and not taken it. From Strasbourg to here, she had crossed the whole of France without even drinking a cup of the prized French coffee: for this she had nobody but her stupid self to blame. It was nearly three o’clock. French people took two or three hours for lunch. The tables at the charming seafront restaurants would still be full. Her mother had told her how to order food in a proper restaurant and had recommended the bouillabaisse. She would have undertaken any of the excursions her mother and she had planned, had they

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

been offered. But Ilse was incapable of leaving this room, where she had been told to remain, to go to an unknown café, however near.

Weeks ago, her mother had bought a berth in a four-person cabin in a cruiser, a white ship which would set sail from the harbour built by the Romans as the sun set. Big though the ship would be, it hardly seemed possible that all these people could get cabins. They looked hard-pressed and too poor for a luxury cruise. The woman at the guichet was bad-tempered and snapped at anyone who showed the slightest impatience with her. Every berth was taken. There was space on deck. She shrugged her shoulders. If they didn't want this boat, then they could take the next. For you to choose, she said. But it would be just as crowded if not more so. One or two went away. Most just bought tickets.

Her stomach rumbled. There would be dinner on the boat, perhaps at the Captain's table. Because it was such an expensive journey all the meals were included. Conversation would be animated and pleasant, and the Captain would salute his guests in champagne, making toasts to every one of them. 'A votre santé, Monsieur le Capitaine.' 'Et à la vôtre!'

The people waiting did not look as if they were the kind who dressed for dinner and she felt embarrassed in advance for them, for the awkwardness when they found out. In her case, she had a dress, which she hoped was not too crushed.

At six o'clock a man in a blue official-looking jacket opened the double doors at the back of the room. The crowd pushed forward. A short walk from the back of the building lay the sea, which was not blue at all but nearly black. The wind blew hard and she held her coat together to keep warm. From the quay she saw that despite the pretty name, the *Belle de France* was not a cruise ship, but a ferryboat. Streaks of rust lay down the funnels. There could be no sun loungers on this deck, no pursers in white uniforms. There was no first class. She had been told to find a steward who would have a passenger list and tell her where to go, but no such person seemed to exist.

The decks were already full of people who had no berths, who lay or squatted on the floor and should have been unhappy, but had a kind of ease. Men in long gowns with dark faces and sandals were smoking strong-smelling cigarettes. These were probably Berbers, natives of Morocco. One man gave her a welcoming smile. Coffee-coloured, he was beautiful with eyes of a miraculous, deep blue. She was not to smile back. Her mother had been very clear about whom to talk to (almost nobody) and when (only when essential).

It was stuffy down below, where a long snail of passengers trailed down corridors all carrying luggage and looking for their cabins. Ilse held her suitcase in her arms as a buffer before her and followed the others. People argued. Nobody knew where to go. The names of the passengers were handwritten on slips of paper pasted outside the cabin doors, so each door created another obstacle in this already crowded place. Ilse reminded herself that those like her, shuffling from corridor to corridor, sidestepping and stumbling with their luggage and fighting to see the scraps of paper, were the lucky ones. They would have a bed to sleep on. Mademoiselle Blumenthal's berth was at the very end of the corridor a further floor down; there seemed no way that fresh air could penetrate these depths. She read a French name and two more German-sounding ones, a Madame Ginsberg and a Mademoiselle Tischler. The door was open: a nun sat on a bunk reading. A fat middle-aged lady wearing a lace blouse sat on the other side with suitcases piled beside her, with eyes closed. When Ilse knocked, she gave a start.

'Bonjour, Mesdames,' she said quietly. A lucky chance had allocated her the top bunk. She lifted up her suitcase and heaved it up, then scrambled up after it. She had not had a space of her own for days. There was a little net on the side, which would be a good place to put her book, her own light switch and a hook for her coat. The blanket was folded in a neat way and perhaps the sheet was clean. She hung up her coat and lay down, and through her trembling legs and the heaviness of her head, which was now aching quite hard, she felt deep relief at being in the

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

precise place which her mother had selected for her. With her eyes closed, she could almost see her mother's face.

'Are you Mademoiselle Blumenthal?' The fat German lady stood in the middle of the cabin, beaming and looking at her.

Ilse said that she was.

'Miriam Ginsberg, very pleased to meet you.'

She stared too hard. Ilse wondered if she had a smut on her nose. She rubbed it, unobtrusively, checked that her hands were clean.

'My dear. You won't fall down, will you?'

Ilse said that she was fine. She opened the case, took out *Winnetou* and hid behind it.

'What are you reading?'

She held up the book politely.

'Isn't that a book for boys?'

She shook her head, concentrated and read on. A tall, thin woman came in and the fat lady whispered something and then introduced her as her sister, Fräulein Tischler. The sister, who had a sweet smile, held out her hand. Ilse climbed down, did her curtsy, offered her hand and climbed back up again. The thin one whispered through one cupped hand to the fat one, something that Ilse had been taught was extremely rude and quite unnecessary when a person was not even looking in their direction. She turned on one side and read on, facing the wall. If she remained that way round and kept her head down, she could avoid seeing them.

Old Shatterhand, feigning timidity, said he could not swim and asked how deep the water was. The Indians despised this. When kicked into it by Intshu-tshuna, he threw up his hands and dropped into the water with a show of terror. Once in the element he knew so well, everything changed. Like an otter he swam under the cold water, holding his breath, surfacing at the overhang on the opposite bank where there was just room for a man to lift up his face and breathe, and the chance that he would not be seen. It was a daring and a courageous plan.

'Would you like to come and sit with us? It's much more comfortable down here.'

‘No, thank you.’

The Indians had believed his show of fear, despising him, and now they stood, amazed, scanning the waters and wondering where he had gone. With lungs full, Old Shatterhand slid down into the water again and swam with powerful strokes on to the distant bank. The water eddied and flowed, and the Indians stared. By now, surely, he was dead.

‘Are you hungry?’

Ilse turned round. Miriam Ginsberg’s eyes were big and brown, her hair done in plaits coiled round her head, lipstick disappearing into the furrows around her mouth.

‘I’m going to eat in the restaurant later, Frau Ginsberg,’ she said.

‘The restaurant! I don’t think you’ll find one on this old tub.’ The face withdrew.

Ilse forced herself to read every word of passages she knew by heart. Anticipation, especially this kind, was so much more interesting than surprise. Most surprises, at any rate those she had experienced, had nothing pleasant in them at all. The scraping sound was the suitcase being pushed from side to side, the clicking was the sisters opening it. A rich smell arose. Ilse cast a sideways look. There was a Camembert and a packet of butter wrapped in several layers of newspaper and greaseproof paper, which rustled. Her mouth was watering. There was a good slab of Pumpernickel and a knife and napkins. The dragging sound was Frau Ginsberg pulling a big leather bag out into the centre of the cabin to use as a table. She inserted a knife, prised apart slices of the dark bread and buttered them. The rich smell of cheese filled the cabin.

The thin sister caught her looking and fluttered her hands in an anxious way. ‘Please, sit with us. We’d so like the company,’ said Fräulein Tischler. ‘We really would.’

Ilse put the book into the net and scrambled down. The sisters offered food to the nun, who gravely shook her head. Ilse tried not to eat too fast. The cheese was wonderful. Frau Ginsberg levered open a jar of gherkins, saying she had preserved them herself.

The suitcase was full of food: tins of meat and anchovies, two

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

bags of coffee beans, a thick packet of cakes and preserves. Perched on top was a box of sticky delicacies, which Frau Ginsberg appraised and then closed again.

'These pastries and tarts are from the best pâtissier in Marseilles. On the Canebière. He'll miss us, even if nobody else does. Look, my child,' and she held up a flask of coffee in one hand and a tin of condensed milk in the other.

Ilse savoured France. When the cheese was gone, she lingered over the crumbling pastry, licking the apricot jam from her fingers.

'Have another one?'

'Yes please.'

The more Ilse ate, the more Frau Ginsberg beamed. She herself nibbled daintily but continually at the sweet things, while her sister hardly ate at all.

'So, my child, you are going to meet somebody?'

Ilse smiled and nodded.

'What's a little girl like you doing all on your own?'

Good as the pastries were, she did not have to swallow the questions too. There was a time to speak and a time to be silent. Old Shatterhand, who had the strength of a bear and the cunning of a fox, understood this well. Not everyone could fathom his wisdom. He had made his plan, looking at the river, had thought through his dilemma and predicted the outcome. 'Didn't I tell you that when I drown, then we are safe?'

'Won't you at least tell me your first name?'

'Ilse,' said Ilse severely. 'I think you must think I am younger than I am. You know, Frau Ginsberg, I am quite old already. Nearly fourteen.' She was used to being taken for a ten-year-old.

'Ilse. What a pretty name.' She was not offended, not at all. 'It's good to be with somebody who speaks our language. And a young lady, too. We are lucky. We're two old women sick of each other's company, aren't we? We've been in France for six months. Before that Holland. And now we are going to South America. Who would have thought that I would travel so at my age? When I was a girl I wanted to. But now, I just think of Dahlem and the lovely house – all gone now.'

She ignored the way her sister frowned and plucked at her sleeve. Ilse was tired suddenly and her head kept dropping forward, though she knew that it was rude. The fat lady talked on, while Ilse tried to keep awake. Snatches of her words reached her. '... the most beautiful coats,' she heard. 'What stitching, mink, beaver, anything. Such workmanship,' and later she burst out indignantly, 'He was a hero – in the Great War!' Ilse's head drooped. Frau Ginsberg should not talk so much. Telling people things did nobody any good. If you spoke, people pushed things out of you, but if you were quiet they would give up eventually.

'Ilse? Where are you headed for? Because you may be going the same way as us.'

'Look how tired she is, poor darling,' said the thin sister in a whisper. 'Let her be,' and she was the one who helped her to her feet and then up into the bunk.

The boat, which was supposed to sail at six, left much later. In the night, the weather became stormy. Ilse woke to see Fräulein Tischler kneeling between the bunks on the little strip of floor and supporting the big head with its coiled plaits while Frau Ginsberg was sick again and again until all the pastries had returned to the surface and there was nothing left to come up. Fräulein Tischler stroked her sister's head in the kindest way. She draped a small towel over the nasty basin. Then she sat on the edge of the bottom bunk and held it for a long time, not so much from solicitude as from the impossibility of putting it anywhere. No stewards would come, of course, even though there was a button to press to call for them. There was no help to be had from anyone.

Ilse lay very still and held herself in readiness, and thought through the many different things that might happen, until her imagination was tired from the effort and gave up. Each time the ship rolled one way the widow moaned, then gave a horrible groan as the vessel sank upon itself. Eventually she fell quiet. Ilse peeped down. Perhaps it was the dim bulb over the door, which could not be turned off, that had turned her puffy face such a peculiar sallow colour. Dark circles lay under her eyes.

Abandoning the basin, Fräulein Tischler climbed carefully up

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

into her berth and looked across at Ilse, who pretended she was asleep. Ilse would have liked to read her book, sleep being out of the question with all the noise and motion, not to mention the smell, but she dared not put her reading light on. On the bunk opposite, the thin sister cried continuously and, it seemed, inconsolably. She did it silently, as though by practising the art she had grown expert. The little French nun, who had not spoken to any of them, was silent. Perhaps she slept, though it hardly seemed possible with so much suffering just a metre away.

Waking to the sound of the trolley bus creaking up the Wuppertal hill, to the faint singing of Tante Röschen in the bathroom and the drumming feet of cousins Max and David fighting on the stairs, Ilse lay with her eyes closed, exulting at her success. It was her most cherished ambition to stay overnight with her big cousins, no longer to be that baby who never could be left. Her mother put her to bed at her aunt's house, just the way she did at home in the Landsweg. The breakfast table had been set with an extra place, between the boys. A tiny spoon carved of horn lay ready for her speckled morning egg. Ilse would lie upstairs, listening to the soft farewell on the doorstep, the assurances that Tante Röschen would telephone at once if anything were amiss. Always before, the sounds of her mother leaving had made her lose her nerve and run down in her nightgown, desperate for the familiar, clamouring unreasonably to go home. Why then, as the noises of the house increased around her, was her anxiety growing? Abruptly opening her eyes to wake for the second time, the deception was revealed. The world was a blur of unhappiness. Ilse scrubbed hard at her face with a grubby handkerchief. She scolded herself for her stupidity, with the feet all going on deck and everybody packing up and the boys long gone. Max and David must be young men by now. They had said goodbye in 1934, sold up and left for Palestine. The English let people in if they had enough money. Even then, it had cost 15,000 marks, the price of a house. After that there was no family left in Germany, since Grandfather Salomon did not count. Nor did her mother's only relative, Tante

Käthe in Krefeld, so old that she had always to be reminded who Ilse was. She was the one who said that 'that child is not one of us'. In spite of this they visited her twice yearly, taking flowers and sugared almonds. Though she was the only relative they ever saw and Ilse wanted to love her, she was not able to bear the way the old lady ate the nuts, crunching them all up greedily and then picking little pieces out of her teeth with a sweeping and poking finger.

Ilse scrambled down and tried to spruce herself up. Frau Ginsberg lay with her eyes closed, seemingly asleep. Her sister was nowhere to be seen. The boat was no longer rocking. The nun, who had apparently not taken off her clothes at all and did not seem to have any luggage, folded up her bunk and clipped it to the wall. She went away. Ilse hurried up on deck. The sea was perfectly flat. The day grew hot and clear as she watched the glitter on the waves. It was March 26th, Ilse's thirteenth birthday. She thought of the present in the case, which her mother had packed in a brown box right at the bottom, so no temptation would come her way. She would open it in Meknès. Fräulein Tischler came wandering along the deck looking for her, offering something to eat. Ilse shook her head. She felt a constriction in her chest, a tightness which prevented even the thought of food.

By the afternoon, a dark smudged line could be seen, the North African coast. The guidebook had insisted that the first glimpse of the coastline was something no traveller to the Dark Continent should miss. Now that she had seen it, Ilse went down to fetch her case. She should be ready. Her uncle might be in a hurry to get away. Frau Ginsberg, restored and with her hair once more tightly braided, took a lace blouse out of the suitcase, one with a lilac trim, and put it on. She rummaged, found matching lilac leather gloves. She was smartly turned out in a suit of navy blue with silk stockings. Savagely, her sister brushed her jacket with a brush that removed lint. Back on deck, Ilse braced her suitcase between her legs for safety. The port of Oran was called Mers el-Kébir and for centuries had been a den of

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

pirates. She looked for black sails but saw only a tugboat ahead and two small fishing boats.

Passengers were jammed up against the railings long before they steamed slowly into the quay past a long row of rusty boats, unloading not people, but huge crates. Ilse leant against the saloon walls and waited. When people got off she would have a better view. She wore the winter coat, which would not fit in the case, fearing that if she were to try and carry that too she would lose it. It was very hot inside the coat. Those at the railings were pointing and laughing, chattering loudly to each other.

People were starting to disembark. Spotting a gap a few metres away, she wriggled as near as she could to the railing and peered down, shading her eyes. Hundreds of people were standing below, some holding signs on pieces of paper or card. The writing was too small to read, too far away and the light too bright. She looked at men in headdresses and long robes, women in light clothes and high heels. Baggage was being unloaded in a hubbub of people shouting and pushing. Two women fell with screams into each other's arms. A customs officer with a blue uniform leant against the whitewashed building of the Douane and puffed a cheroot. Somebody pushed their way up against the flow and shouted up, 'Hast Du meine Blutwurst?'²

A hand touched her sleeve. Frau Ginsberg, reaching past a big bearded man, said that she should go with them. The sun showed up funny indentations in her thickly powdered face and released a wave of eau de Cologne. Her sister looked apologetic. 'Here is the plan, my child. We will all wait a little while until things ease and keep an eye on the luggage. I need a porter and what about you – what if you got lost in the crowd?'

'I won't get lost,' said Ilse.

'You're small, stand next to me. Who is coming for you?'

She was a kind woman, she meant it well.

'Is somebody coming?'

Ilse did not speak. The two women gave each other meaningful

² 'Have you got my black pudding?'

glances. Ilse was not a baby but thirteen and capable of travelling on her own, and she wanted them to go. Her money was in a purse in the deepest pocket of the coat. She kept her hand round it. She had been very careful and it would be enough. It would get her to her uncle's house if necessary.

'Surely you're going to be collected, my dear?'

'Don't worry.' Fräulein Tischler was hovering. 'People never know what time these boats are arriving.'

She thought that she was being helpful. Ilse did not look at them. She stared down at the quay.

Willy was awfully handsome, her mother had said. He would be easy to recognise, for he had hair her mother said was 'just like yours'. On the piano in their old home, their proper house, among the silver frames stood a photograph of a very tall young man, with his arm round a pretty girl. This doomed, romantic couple had only had a few years together. Her mother, generally so precise, would not say what had happened to the wife, though she evidently had had something to do with her only brother leaving Germany for ever. Willy and his broken heart were part of general conversation. But her parents had said other things too, lowering their voices so she had to strain to hear. Willy, her mother had said once, could never say no. 'Good thing he wasn't a girl.'

She scanned from right to left and back again. In the crowd below she could not see a single red-headed person. Ilse touched each button on her coat from bottom to top and then each of the mother-of-pearl buttons on her cardigan, from top to bottom and never the other way round. Mother-of-pearl was precious and special. They were all there, as was the button on the back of the waistband of her skirt. Finally, bending quickly, she touched the laces on her shoes. They were done up tight in double bows. The arrangements for the long and difficult journey had actually been perfect. It was very natural that things could not be as she and her mother had imagined in the long evenings spent sitting together, sewing and practising French. She realised that they had been wonderful evenings. They had found plenty of things to laugh about in the guide. Lore had been so amused by the idea that the

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

people of Marseilles, with the whole sea at their disposal, chose to eat bouillabaisse, a soup concocted out of odd bits of fish. Her mother had knitted the cardigan and had sewed each tiny button on with a double thread, stitching the ends in neatly to the back of the ribbon binding, making each safe. There was something about the tightness of the stitching and the care of it, which was unbearable.

Ilse gulped, but the air did not go where it should. Her head ached. She was dissolving. Fräulein Tischler kept trying to give her a piece of paper, an address in Casablanca, the hotel where Ilse could stay with them. She whispered that Ilse was not to mind, her sister's interference was well meant. She was sad because of her little girl, who had died years ago. Ilse put the paper in the pocket of the coat that she hated, that was much too hot. There was no reason for her to care about a little girl she did not know, who had happened to have a look of her. If only she had not mentioned it. Why was it, then, that it was Fräulein Tischler, not her sister, who seemed the sad one? Ilse might have said this, had she been able to speak. There was sadness everywhere. It rose from the sea, a mist that slipped through the small gap between the ship and the land where all the strangers stood. Ilse was drowning, with no hope of ever coming up.

Something very big, something white was weaving through the crowd, catching the light as it edged to the very front. The letters shone and danced. They re-formed as she blinked, then blurred again unstoppably. The European in a cream suit and hat was taller than anyone else and the sign itself was simply enormous. He took off the hat and waved it in huge sweeps, from side to side. The brilliance was the sun irradiating thick reddish blond hair. The scarlet letters, professionally executed, were huge: Willkommen in Oran, liebe Ilse!³

'You see,' Ilse said. 'You see!'

She waved with all her strength. He waved back. She explained to Fräulein Tischler that the sun here was very strong and it affected

³ Welcome to Oran, dear Ilse!

a person's eyes. Then everything speeded up and she was hurrying down to the docks, she was on the land, spirited through the crowd and he took hold of her and swung her up and round. He was laughing. He did look like Lore. She stared at his skin, which was tanned dark, his dazzling, very pale blue eyes. His laughter at her looking at him was delightful. His hair, thick and glossy, grew back in a wave just like a film star's, just the way her mother had always wanted hers to.

'Your friends want to say goodbye.'

The sisters looking incongruous, one tall and one fat, stood a little way off like an island lapped by a sea of cases and bags. Willy gave them his card, thanked them for keeping an eye on his niece. Ilse, who was not in the habit of embracing people she hardly knew, found herself giving Frau Ginsberg a kiss at which the big face crumpled alarmingly. At that moment a porter picked up their leather bag, which was much too heavy for one man to lift, and its handle came off. Frau Ginsberg's lilac gloves twisted in lamentation and then Ilse saw no more, for Willy was off, swinging her case and she was running to keep up with his long legs. They dashed through customs – nobody stopped Willy Lindemann. People knew him. They greeted him and smiled.

They drove all the way to Meknès in his big American car. It was a long way but Willy said he loved to drive, said he loved his car, which was so big that a person could comfortably lie full length in the back seat. When her uncle smiled, his mouth curled up and pleasure crinkled his face. He had long elegant hands, which smoked and gesticulated and loosely held the wheel. The car purred on. The day was bright and the sun laid down a blanket of comfort. Meknès was a royal city, a beautiful city. She would speak French. He and his wife Toni had a simple place but she would like it. The pleasures came in snatches as the nodding of her head woke her up. They would go to the cinema. Swimming. On picnics. He presented these marvels to her as though she was a normal child with the right to such things. Weariness and relief overwhelmed her. He stopped the car, insisted that she stretch herself out on the back seat and put her coat over her; he gave

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

her his jacket as a pillow. He did not care if it creased, what did that matter? They could stay the night somewhere if he felt tired or perhaps not. They would see. It would be good to get back to Toni. The motor hummed and the road curved in her head, and Toni was like Tante Röschen only younger, with a kind face and soft, warm body.

Willy was whistling. It took a moment for her to realise where she was and that this noise was intended to wake her, this gentle touch his hand on her shoulder.

‘Wake, little one. You must see this.’

Yawning, Ilse tried to get up. It was cold. Her legs were stiff. She rose from the darkness behind to the rim of light coming over the world. Meknès climbed out of the plain, minarets sharp-cut like a child's picture book of the *Arabian Nights*, ochre walls flushed pink by the dawn sky. They leant on the hot bonnet and marvelled. He had driven all night and he wasn't tired; he put his arm round her and Ilse laid her head upon his shoulder, and they sat quietly until the sun edged up above the towers.

They drove through the medina, which Willy explained was the name given to the old part around the great mosque, and skirted the hammam. Everything started early, stopped, went on until late. Some of the passers-by waved and saluted them. Ilse, sitting proudly beside him, saw how the cafés were already busy with groups of men drinking glasses of tea. Others wearing long dresses, which Willy said were called djellabas, led little donkeys to the souk, their panniers charged with merchandise. Young men in western clothes wove in and out of the narrow streets on bicycles; one woman was modern in short skirts and heels and stockings, though others wore long robes in bright colours. The big car nosed its way along the Rue de la Route, stopped beside an old stone wall with a tiny opening protected by an ancient metal grille. Below was a sign etched in brass: M. & Mme Lindemann.

Willy opened a wooden door, which led into a long shady corridor and from there through to a big room. Beyond this was a courtyard lined with colonnades in dusty pink and a garden of an astonishing green. All the houses were like this, he said: plain

outside, their treasures hidden away. The courtyard was flanked by two buildings: one had a kitchen and dining and living room, the other bedrooms and bathrooms. The third side was a big shed with ladders and painting gear and room enough to nose the car inside, to keep it cool.

‘Quietly, now,’ he said. ‘We don’t want to disturb Toni.’

They crept in.

He balanced the case on his head, carried it Moroccan style into a room with a little white bed, a wardrobe and a chest of drawers on which stood a cut-glass vase full of white flowers. She washed in the beautiful white-tiled bathroom, took out a clean dress and put it on. Outside, the grass was dew-dropped, iridescent. The sun streamed through the window and slanted across the floor, warming her feet and bare legs.

In the kitchen Marie, a smiling woman with a sing-song voice, introduced herself and, clucking that the little one was too thin, made her scrambled eggs with herbs. Famished, Ilse ate the whole panful with piece after piece of bread. At home they had white rolls in the morning and at night Vollkornbrot or dark rye. This bread was flat and you pulled it apart with your fingers. When Willy came in, Marie made more eggs. She came every day, Willy said, for Toni did not care to have a woman living in. At her name, Marie smiled and nodded, though she did not understand any German. There was real coffee and fresh milk, and a big basket of croissants. Like a Frenchman, Willy dipped his in a big bowl of coffee and ate the soft, crumbling mass with a good appetite.

She was not to be any trouble; her mother had impressed this upon her. Ilse unpacked her case, laying all the things carefully in the chest of drawers, hanging up both dresses and arranging her slippers. There was her present at the bottom. She took out the shoebox, carefully wrapped with brown paper and string, and put it on the chest of drawers. She sat on the bed, thinking that she would open it – but she would just put her head on the pillow for a moment. But when the gentle beat of her heart turned into the sound of somebody knocking on the door, the room was the colour of amber in the setting sun. Though it scarcely seemed

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

possible, she had slept the whole day away. 'Come in!' called Ilse.

A head appeared: a child with blonde hair hanging down to her shoulders. It wasn't a child, but a doll. Toni wore a dressing gown, a filmy pretty one in pale blue with a pattern of roses on it that, falling open, revealed golden-coloured legs and throat.

'How are you feeling?' She had a strong foreign accent.

'Fine.'

'Come on, then. We need to talk.'

Ilse rose and followed. Willy had gone to work and come back again, and now he sat on a big wicker chair facing out onto the garden, which was slanted grey and gold, winking at her.

'Can I come?'

'No.'

'If you need me, little mouse, scream. I'll come and save you,' he said, lighting a cigarette, inhaling deep and smiling through the smoke rings.

The bedroom was Toni's domain. Her dressing table, a beautiful gold-coloured sleek thing with a mirror on top, held a dozen elegant cut-glass bottles of scent. It was somehow just like Toni herself. A wall of cupboards filled one side of the long room and everything was very modern. In one corner stood a little trolley with glasses on it and ice. Toni picked up a cocktail shaker, shook it vigorously and poured the contents over ice.

'Want one?'

'No thank you.'

Nobody had ever offered her a drink before.

Sipping at hers, Toni looked at Ilse very carefully. 'You're small for thirteen,' she said. 'Like me.'

Ilse smiled. 'Thank you for the flowers. You're very kind.'

'Flowers? Oh, Willy must have bought them.' Toni slipped off the dressing gown and looked at herself in the long mirrors. Ilse admired her wonderful figure. Tiny as she was, her bosoms and hips were womanly, her waist small. Her girdle and brassiere were very modern. 'From America,' she said, noticing the look. Her large eyes were a curious hazel colour with golden flecks, like those of a cat.

‘So, what’s going on in Germany?’

Ilse shrugged.

‘How’s your father’s business doing now?’

Ilse hesitated.

‘The import company. The new shop in Krefeld.’

‘It’s not his any more. You know. “Wer vom Juden kauft ist ein Verräter.”’⁴

‘Who says that?’

‘The signs. In the street.’

‘They took it over?’

Ilse nodded and looked away. A distant memory surfaced, one she did not care to share with Toni, of her mother bent over papers, cross, her father’s upraised voice: ‘Do you expect Otto Blumenthal to buy and sell dishes while the world starves?’

‘My father’s not a capitalist,’ she said.

Toni burst out laughing. ‘He spent enough time on the shop design. And money. All that glass and concrete. The very latest merchandise, Swedish glass. Italian ceramics. That expensive silverware. I suppose he got bored when it was finished.’

With practised movements, her fingertips finding the hairpins without looking, Toni did up her bright hair in a sleek roll. ‘I saw the pictures. There was an article, in the Düsseldorf paper. Your mother sent it to Willy. The grand opening party?’ She glanced over at Ilse. ‘I expect you were too young to go.’

Ilse nodded.

‘It was a very handsome shop. He should have put the business in your mother’s name.’

‘It was grandfather’s business.’

‘So? Your mother isn’t Jewish. She could have run it.’

Ilse hung her head.

‘Why not, then?’

‘He’s not like that. My grandfather.’

‘What is he like?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Ilse, shrugging helplessly.

⁴ ‘Whoever buys from a Jew is a traitor’

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

'Don't you know him?'

Another truth to be kept from Toni was that Lore had never met Grandfather Salomon. He had refused to meet the divorced woman his son was marrying, a woman not of the Jewish faith.

'He had to retire,' she said evasively. 'He was too old.'

Ilse watched as Toni wiggled herself into a tight dress, which clung alluringly across her hips and thighs. She had seen her grandfather twice. She had a clear memory of a vigorous man in his sixties who was small and stout where her father was skinny. He smoked a big cigar and he smelt very nice, of the smoke and perfume. She had liked him for his clever eyes, eyes that smiled even though the mouth seldom did. She could see that he liked her. He would have liked her mother too, had he not been so stubborn.

'Your parents were coming here,' said Toni. 'Willy fixed it. Anyone with any sense got out when the Nuremberg laws came in. They should have sold the business right away.'

'My father fought in the war. He has a medal,' she said.

Toni raised a quizzical eyebrow. 'So?'

'Besides, people can't all run away, can they?'

But they could. Ilse saw it. They could all have been here in clean white beds, going to the cinema, speaking French, eating ice cream. She thought again. 'Germany needs people to stay and fight against the fascists,' she said.

Both Toni's eyebrows shot up. 'The fascists? I see. So your father's still involved in politics.'

'No!' She shook her head violently, her face burning. 'Of course he isn't!'

Toni studied her. 'A stateless bankrupt Jew, who could have got out. Still running around making crazy speeches?'

Ilse smiled a smile of sheer embarrassment.

'Well,' said Toni, stubbing out her cigarette, 'it's all too late now. Is your mother as pretty as Willy says she is?' She smoked cigarettes with long filters and every gesture was deliberate.

'Very pretty.' Ilse thought of her mother's kind face and smile.

'To think, she married him for the money and then this happened. What bad luck.'

‘She didn’t,’ said Ilse faintly.

‘My dear, it certainly wasn’t for his looks.’

‘How do you know? You haven’t met them.’

‘Don’t get on your high horse.’

Carefully, she put bright red lipstick on her half-open mouth.

Though she might entertain dark thoughts about her father, Ilse could not bear for Toni to voice them. The truth was something even worse. Her father had been in and out of prison for years. He was what he called a ‘submarine’, living underground and holding secret political meetings, always travelling from place to place. If the police picked him up, they would send him to prison or worse. Communists were banned. He was a Bolshevik and a Jew, doubly an enemy of the Reich. Everything he had was confiscated.

When the Gestapo took their house, Ilse and her mother had moved to a room in the Jews’ House. They were lucky to get even that: they did not fit in anywhere. Not being Jewish, her mother still had her German nationality and because of this, Ilse was still permitted to go to school when Jewish children were not. A slate hung beside her classroom door. It read: boys 19, girls 18, Jews 1. She was (yet was not) that Jew. In the Jews’ House she trod softly, fearing to offend these people of whose customs she knew nothing. Trailing home with her satchel one day, she had heard her father’s voice inside. ‘Lore, please, don’t leave me.’

She had frozen, her hand still on the doorknob.

‘That’s rich, coming from you,’ said her mother. ‘Keep your voice down, Otto. The child will be back any moment.’

She had counted to ten. Shyly, then, she had opened the door, clearing her throat and making as much noise as she could. Her father was standing in the corner, smoking, still wearing his dark coat and hat. She reached up to kiss his stubbly cheek. She had not seen him for nearly a year and hardly knew what to say. His nose and chin were sharper, even his eyes more defined, as though he was turning into a cartoon version of himself. Before he even spoke, her mother asked her to fetch cake. Ilse had run all the way up the hill to the shops and breathlessly back,

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

worrying that he would be gone before she returned. She shot up the two flights of stairs, the slice of cake sliding on its cardboard tray, the double fold of wrapping paper starting to gape. Then, more slowly, up the third flight, because she could hear them arguing still. The room was tiny, the house crammed; everyone heard everything.

Ilse had retreated down to the very bottom and waited, sitting on the last step balancing the little parcel on her knees, all the time smelling the rich dark poppy seeds, the black eye of the cake looking at her. She jumped up when anybody entered, stood aside politely to let each tenant pass. It was the usual quarrel. Her mother wanted the three of them to leave Germany and her father would not go. He had no money. Jews' bank accounts had been frozen long ago and he could neither work nor borrow anything. Her mother had a job as a waitress, enough to feed them and a little surplus. She saved every pfennig. Ilse remained on her stair. When she judged enough time had passed, she went up, pretending she only had just got back. Her father said that she had grown, though she had not. She looked at their faces, marked with all the feelings they tried to conceal in her presence, the way they avoided looking at each other. They drank the coffee, which was cold, and he crumbled the cake but ate none, though it was his favourite. Later it occurred to her that perhaps this was because his throat hurt, as hers did when she was upset. He had left almost immediately.

After this visit, her mother said that they would wait no longer. Ilse had to be sent out of Germany as soon as possible. That was why she went alone: because they could only afford one ticket to Oran. They had agonised over this decision. For the same money they could buy two tickets to France. In France, they would be together but penniless and her mother did not know how she could earn money. Willy had connections. He had achieved the near impossible, a visa for her to enter Morocco and stay six months. Once she was there, her mother had said, it could be extended indefinitely. With Willy, Ilse would be safe.

Toni slipped into black high-heeled shoes, paraded before the

mirror, then kicked them off. From the cupboard she got out different shoes, tried them on. Finally she settled on a pair just as high but the red of her lipstick and made of the softest calf. With those shoes on, she was perfect. Ilse stared at her fine features, her skin which was a golden olive colour, her tiny feet and hands. She was the sort of person you could not ignore. You could not stop looking at her, once you had started.

‘Why didn’t she divorce him?’

It was the first time Ilse had heard a grown-up express this idea out loud, though it had crept into her own mind on numerous occasions. ‘I don’t know,’ she said.

‘Be honest. Weren’t they as good as divorced?’

When they narrowed, Toni’s eyes were just like a cat’s. Ilse studied the carpet. The Gestapo had told her Lutheran Protestant mother to divorce the Jew. Her mother had refused. They had never discussed why. Soon, when she was back in her room, all the things that her mother must have said about her father would come back to her, remarks about his looks and his talents.

‘My mother loves my father. She would never leave him.’

Perhaps this was the truth. Behind her back, Ilse crossed all her fingers into four crosses. That undid the fib and also meant that no bad thing could happen.

‘Then Lore is even more of a fool than I thought. We thought you were all coming years ago. Willy sent the money, after all. It was bad luck that it was confiscated. Fancy choosing to stay in Germany instead of getting out while she still could.’

Toni picked up her bag, admired her rear view, twirled back round. ‘Ready?’

Ilse stood up. ‘She wants to come, she’s working as hard as she can waitressing,’ she said. She rushed on, wanting Toni to stop doing that thing she did with her eyebrows. ‘Once Mutti’s saved up enough for her ticket, she can apply for the exit visa. You have to have the ticket first, that’s what takes so long.’

Toni opened the bag, checked the contents and then snapped it shut.

‘Look, when we’re out, don’t talk about these things. You don’t

THE CHILDREN'S WAR

look Jewish. It won't help with her visa, either, if people sniff it. And don't look so worried.'

They walked to a nearby café, its elegant chrome tables full of men and women, all French-speaking and laughing and drinking. More than half of them were Europeans and she noticed quite a few Germans. They seemed to know everybody there and she strained to remember the names as she was introduced to this one and that. A very broad man with a kind, clever face took pity on her, told Willy in German to sit the poor girl down and let her absorb it slowly. This man was called Heinz Steinberg and reminded her of Grandfather Salomon. Ilse was grateful. He smelt of a lemony cologne, what she thought was a good, German sort of a smell. He spent a long time filling a pipe, first teasing out the tobacco then tamping it down while telling a joke about Hitler going fishing with Mussolini and Chamberlain.

'The British premier lights a pipe and waits and waits. After two hours he lands a big trout. Furious, il Duce throws himself into the water, catches a monster fish with his bare hands.' Somebody called to Heinz. He laid his pipe carefully in an ashtray, got up and went to another table, looked at a chessboard and moved a piece, then moved to yet another table. He was playing three games of chess simultaneously. In a moment, he returned, recovering the pipe. 'Now it's Hitler's turn. He orders the pond to be drained. The fish are all thrashing about. Chamberlain says, "Why don't you scoop them up?" "No," says Hitler. "They have to beg me first."'

The grown-ups around all laughed. Ilse did too, not because it was funny exactly but because it was wonderful that here Hitler was just a joke. She had a citron pressé with spoon after spoon of sugar. She was hungry, but did not want to ask for something, when they were going to a special restaurant for dinner, later, in the old town. Willy bought her an ice cream with whipped cream and a cherry. In the end there was no dinner, for the cream – much too rich and gobbled up too fast – made her sick. They took her back to the house in a taxi.

'Poor little mouse, you'll be better tomorrow,' said Willy. It was

MONIQUE CHARLESWORTH

he who stroked her hair, who put her to bed. He tucked her in and pulled up the blanket so nicely. As sleep overtook her, she felt her very bones relaxing from the intense relief of being a child again.