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A Miraculous Escape

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"Adi, Emmy, darlings, would you mind popping to Herr Hoffman's grocery to buy a pound of sugar? I haven't enough for the apple cake," Adi's mother called from the kitchen.

"Ok. Right - a pound of sugar. Come on, Adi," responded Emmy.

Their mother handed them the money and the twins put on their coats and walked the short distance to the grocer.

"A pound of sugar, please," Adi politely asked Herr Hoffman.

She handed him the money and put the sugar under her arm. Just as Adi and Emmy were about to leave, they were shunted out of the way by a pair of bustling, middle-aged women. Emmy had seen them before as they lived a few roads down and knew they had a reputation for gossiping, but she didn't know their names. The women were talking at the tops of their voices - about Adolf Hitler.

Their parents usually avoided talking about this particular topic in front of their nine-year-old daughters, but Adi still heard them sometimes.

"If he becomes Chancellor, I don't know what will happen. Germany will fall to pieces! Did you know he hates the Jews? Well, as you know, I'm a Jew and he should know that I'm not afraid of him," the larger woman said.

"Yes, Martha, I agree. All the same, the children must be safe. I'd never forgive myself if anything happened to them. I have a bad feeling about Hitler. Ominous - like something I dread to think of might happen," the other one replied, exchanging a meaningful look with Martha.

Adi and Emmy looked at each other. Both had shock in their eyes - they didn't know that Adolf Hitler hated the Jews. What if something happened to them? Emmy bit her lip. She suddenly felt incapable of moving.

"Let's go," Adi urged, taking her twin's hand and leading her out of the shop.

They ran all the way home.

“Nothing will ever happen to you two. I promise. Martha and Judith are full of gossip - it’s probably just a silly rumour,” their father had reassured them when they had told him of their worries late that night. “Nothing will ever happen to you.”

November 1938

Adi shot up in bed. Drenched in sweat, she pulled her blanket closer around herself. Ever since the chancellorship of Adolf Hitler began, things had been going downhill rapidly. Every day, she had been terrified. The Nazis marched through the streets night after night, making sure not a single Jew was out of their house after 7pm. A rough banging echoed through the night. Again. Someone was pounding on a door somewhere in the neighbourhood. Adi crawled into Emmy’s bed and they huddled together under her blanket - even though they were now 14, they were still each other’s best friend and having each other helped them to get through the dreadful nights that awaited them at the end of every day. Raised voices reverberated around the otherwise quiet streets and then a fearful scream rang out. Adi squeezed her eyes shut and tried to pretend that she couldn’t hear the menacing stamps of the Nazis’ boots coming closer and closer. They held each other even tighter, shivering despite the woollen blankets. The Nazis were coming nearer. More screams. A gunshot sounded so loud it was as if the gun was being fired at their very door.

The next day, straight after school, their father came into their bedroom, where Adi and Emmy were beginning their tedious maths homework.

“Girls, bring some clothes into your mother and I’s room. She’s packing. Quickly now, we don’t want to be late,” his voice was steady, but Adi could see he wasn’t all that calm - she could see his eyes were anxious.

“Why? Are we going on holiday?” Adi asked, even though she knew it was a silly suggestion; no one went on holiday anymore - not with the Nazis taking over.

“Don’t ask questions. I’ll tell you when we are on our way. Hurry!” He replied, leaving Adi wondering.

In twenty minutes, they were ready to go. With a small suitcase of a few of their things, they hurriedly put on their coats and their mother filled a small bag with enough food to last the journey. Adi had to leave a lot of her things behind as they couldn’t take much - only one bag between the four of them. Eventually, Adi and Emmy were told that they were going somewhere with their cousins Leah and Benjamin and their mother and father. So as not to draw too much attention to themselves, the two families would travel to the train station separately, planning to meet each other on the train.

Adi never forgot the day that they fled their home and everything she ever knew to escape to Paris. The enormity of the undertaking only hit her when she was no longer in the safety of her house and climbing into a taxi.

“Good afternoon. Where to?” The driver asked.

“The train station, please,” Adi’s father answered, then when the driver looked suspiciously at them (“I bet he’s a Nazi!” Adi asserted later), “We are going to visit an ill family member. My mother is very old now and has taken a fall. She’s very frail and weak. Without us, she has no one to look after her.”

This was their cover story. If anyone asked, their grandmother was on death’s door.

“Oh, dear me. We must get there as soon as possible, then. I hope your mother recovers,” the driver replied, turning on the engine and pulling away from the kerb.

Only half-conscious because of her fear of being caught and punished, Adi hardly knew how they managed to survive the drive to the train station. The driver, Heinrich, he informed them chattily, noticed her pale face and wide eyes and comforted her.

“I’m sure your grandmother will recover. She has things worth living for: a lovely family who are on their way right this very second to see her.” This only made Adi feel worse as they were lying to him when he was only trying to be kind.

Their father bought tickets at the ticket office and then they hurried to get seats on the train.

Leah, Benjamin and their parents were already there and Adi collapsed, exhausted, into the seat by Leah. From then on, the journey was slow and watching the city merge into fields soon became boring.

It was late, but Adi couldn’t sleep. She couldn’t stop thinking about the menacing face of the Nazi officer who had stepped into the road intimidatingly, a single hand up, halting their progress when they were only a hundred yards from the station. Adi’s mind had become a whirlwind of dread. It was all over, and they hadn’t even made it to the ticket office. The officer’s blood red armband had stood out painfully clear in the steadily fading light – a glaring symbol of his hatred for people of her kind. He had demanded to see their papers; his harsh, authoritative voice as sinister as his imposing uniform. Their father had been about to hand them over. Horrified, Adi had clutched Emmy’s clammy hand. If anyone - especially the Nazi police - found out they were Jewish, then it could be their last hour of freedom.

But then a miracle happened.

Another officer stepped forward and said firmly, “I can handle this.”

The first officer muttered something, then strode off.

“Peter!” Adi and Emmy exclaimed, exactly at the same time as the officer's face appeared at the taxi window. Peter was their father’s best friend and had been since they were kids.

“Keep your voices down or they'll find out I’m helping you!”

“You are?” Adi asked, surprised.

“Hand me your papers, so I can pretend to look at them,” Peter said as their mother handed him the documents.

He looked around sharply and then handed them back.

“Go, quickly! Get out of here. As fast as you can. No, don’t thank me. What Hitler is doing is wrong, I know. I’m trying to get as many Jews out of Hitler’s reach before it’s too late - it’s all I can do to help. Move, quickly, before anyone sees. Good luck.”

“Thank you, Peter. Thank you,” and then he was gone.

Adi was so relieved and exhausted she couldn’t speak. If Peter hadn’t come to their rescue, they might have never made it to the train station. As the train drove steadily onwards, Adi thanked the Lord for their lucky escape. Now they just had to reach France. Soon, she was fast asleep and slept through another anxious document check at the border. Hours later, Adi was awoken by the sound of her father's voice.

“This is it. We’ve arrived. We’re in France.”