

LEARNING A LANGUAGE

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The front door burst open and a small woman staggered in out of the rain with one large dripping suitcase. She wore a shiny red slicker and matching hat. Her face shone, as if there could be no people more exciting than the residents of this flat in the Kaiserstrasse.

We had been expecting her. Inge Hochstim was an actress who needed cheap lodging for the repertory season. Her first role at the Karlsruhe Municipal Theatre would be Anne Frank in the play by that name. I had been eager to meet her and see the play.

My roommates and I lounged around the kitchen, all more or less under Inge's spell, aside from Ulrike, who was concentrating instead on a complicated plum cake. She took the *Kuchen* out of the oven and cut it into slices, humming to herself as she worked.

My boyfriend, Manfred, leaned over the table, his forehead gleaming, fine blond hair tufting over his ears. He sat next to me and across from Inge, watching her closely. She was telling a story, gesturing with both hands. Everyone burst out laughing, and I had no idea why.

Dietmar and Walter slouched on the banquette, playing a half-hearted game of pinochle and stealing sidelong glances at the actress. I called them the Katzenjammer Kids because they both had cowlicks and freckles, and at first I had difficulty remembering who was who.

Now and then, familiar words bobbed up out of a sea of German like brittle little life preservers. Although Manfred and one of the Katzenjammers were fluent in English, I'd insisted on speaking only German with them.

I heard Manfred mention California and his American friend, Nora. Inge reached across the table, offering a well-manicured hand. She spoke slowly, for my benefit.

“So you are Californian, like your new president! Are you from Hollywood, too?”

“*Nein*. San Francisco.”

“Ah, Frisco.” Inge regarded me with curiosity. “What are you doing here? The only Americans here are tourists or soldiers.”

“I teach English in a private school.” I hesitated. Why was I here? I told her, “I want to learn the language of Goethe.”

Inge beamed. “*Natürlich*,” she said.

“Also I have friends in K-town.”

“As do I,” she smiled at all of us. “I already love K-town.”

She told us she’d been hired to play Anne Frank because she was short and youthful-looking.

How will she pass, I wondered, with that flaxen hair and snub nose.

“I will dye my hair and eyebrows for the role,” she said, as if reading my mind

“I go to look at the play,” I said. “I must read Anne Frank’s *Tagesbuch* again.”

“You can read *auf Deutsch*?”

“I read better than speak.”

“I packed my copy, the one I read when I was twelve. You can borrow it.”

She favored me with her sunniest smile.

“You don’t need it?”

“There are many copies at the theater. You take mine.”

I was pleased. I hoped Inge and I would become friends. She was about my age, early thirties. Perhaps we could talk about books, theater and matters of the heart—once I got beyond the rudiments of the language. Her English, it turned out, was more primitive than my German, so even as a last resort, communication *auf Englisch* wouldn't be an option.

§

The text of Anne Frank's diary was more challenging than the fairy tales Manfred had suggested I read, but I could figure out unfamiliar words in context and didn't have to use a dictionary. It was exhilarating, though difficult, to read an entire book in another language. It was also somewhat unsettling to re-enter Anne's world *auf Deutsch*. The sound and shape of German intensified the experience.

Or perhaps it was the recurring dreams that cast a sinister spell. For several nights, I woke in a panic. I was running away from storm troopers, the agents of an evil, implacable authority. I ran to strangers for help, but I was dreaming in German and could not express myself clearly. No one would listen to me. It was a relief to wake up and curl against Manfred's warm back.

I really wasn't worried about being murdered by storm troopers. I worried that people would think I was stupid because every time I opened my mouth, something stupid or nonsensical came out.

I told Manfred about the dream. "Fantastic, you're dreaming in German," he said. "But you should be reading something more cheerful."

§

Twice a week I attended a German for Foreigners evening class at the *Volkshochschule*. My classmates came from everywhere in the world. I heard the same accents in German as in English—Spanish, Russian, Italian, French, Chinese. They knew I was an American as soon as I began to speak.

There had been one other *Amerikaner* in the class for a few sessions. The first night, when students introduced themselves, Brooklyn-born Josef Kornblum announced he was the son of German Jews who, having survived Auschwitz, immigrated to the States.

"I am entitled to reparation," he said. "I want to live in Germany for the rest of my life. I need a German visa."

Josef was tall and broad shouldered with a full beard, dark curly hair, and a hawk nose. He looked like an Israeli lumberjack. I could see my own astonishment mirrored in the teacher's face.

I introduced myself as Nora Baum from San Francisco, teaching English at Eloquia Privatsprachschule.

Josef followed me out of the classroom.

“Fraülein Baum,” he spoke to me in awkward German. “Join me for a coffee, *bitte*.”

We walked out of the building together and along the brightly lit Kaiserstrasse to a nearby café.

He too wanted to know why I’d come to Germany. He suspected from my last name I was Jewish. No one else I’d met in Karlsruhe had picked up on that. Only Manfred knew because I’d told him. “*Mir egal*,” he’d said. It was all the same to him.

“Like a moth to the flame, perhaps,” I said in English, not knowing how to translate this.

He nodded and we continued speaking in German, until finally I suggested we speak English. But his English, after only a few months abroad, sounded as awkward as his German.

“Why hide what you are?” he demanded.

“If anyone asks me, I’ll tell. Otherwise, why make a fuss?” I said. “I don’t want to be a trophy friend.”

He stiffened.

“What do your parents think about this reparation business?” I asked.

“They think I’m *meshuggah*.”

Maybe you are, I thought.

He complained that the *Volkshochschule* class was too structured.

“Too German?” I suggested, and he shook his head, clearly annoyed.

“I will learn better myself on the street,” he said.

I was relieved when he stopped coming to class. After that, I’d see him around town—hurrying down the Kaiserstrasse or haggling at the twice-weekly farmer’s market—and I’d go out of my way to avoid him.

§

I came home late from the café. The flat was dark and Manfred was not in his room nor mine. I got into bed and stared glumly out the window at ragged clouds, a chipped moon. Later Manfred tumbled in beside me and planted a beery kiss.

“*Beliebte Schmoozinger*,” he murmured, then rolled over and fell asleep.

Schmooze meant something altogether different in his dialect than an American might guess, closer to cuddling with than chatting up a friend, especially a beloved one. Manfred was teaching me Schwäbisch.

“I am a Schwaben,” he’d insisted. “I’m not a German.”

“Aren’t you both?” I’d asked, puzzled. “Like I’m a Lithuanian Jew and also an American.”

“In historical terms, Germany is a recent political contrivance.”

“So is the USA,” I countered. “And almost any country you can name on any continent.”

“Nevertheless, I am proud to be a Schwaben.”

That gets you off the hook, I thought. I’d probably feel the same way had I been born in Germany after the Third Reich, especially if my *Beliebte* happened to be a Jewish *Maedle*.

§

The Sunday after Inge moved in, the entire *Wohngemeinschaft* plus several friends went for a walk in the Schlosspark, a huge swath of forest and parkland stretching north from the castle to the Rhine. *Wohngemeinschaft* could be translated as commune, but in this event, it was a bunch of people renting rooms together. With the exception of myself and Inge, they were still in school or had recently graduated. Even Manfred, who was a few years older than the others, talked too fast and in dialect about *numerus clausus*, courses they were not eligible to study because of quotas, and summer vacations in

Africa, Thailand, and Australia. I listened and waited for some of it to make sense, but it was an almost impenetrable wall of sound.

I had my camera in hand, a manually operated 35mm with a separate light meter. Fiddling with the settings kept me busy. I dropped back a little and snapped some candid shots of the group. Only Inge saw what I was up to and mugged for the camera. She and Manfred were at the front of the gang chatting like life-long friends.

I slowed my pace, dropped back even farther. No one noticed.

A flash of color in the underbrush caught my eye. It was a cluster of red and yellow toadstools with fat stems and speckled, bulbous heads. I dropped to my knees for a closer look. I don't know how long I was there, angling for one good shot, before footsteps broke my reverie. I looked up to see Ulrike, shaking her head, as if at a mischievous child.

"Everyone went on ahead," she said. "We'll meet them at the Waldestueble."

Off we went at a brisk pace to the tavern in the forest. En route, she told me it was dangerous to walk alone in the forest. "A woman was raped in the Tiergarten in Berlin," she said. "*Verstehst Du, Vergewaltigen?* And the Schlosspark is twenty times larger than the Tiergarten."

“Is there much crime in Karlsruhe?” I asked.

“Just last year a federal prosecutor was murdered in front of the castle.”

I’d heard about that already. It was the Baader-Meinhof gang that assassinated him.

“Terrorists aren’t going to hurt a woman taking a walk.”

“You can’t be too careful,” she said.

§

My favorite part of the day was mid-morning when almost everyone left the flat for classes or part-time jobs. I didn’t have to be at the school where I taught until after lunch.

Inge and I were often in the kitchen together preparing our separate breakfasts. She bustled in with a hearty “*guten Morgen*.” Then she served herself a soft boiled egg, hunks of pumpernickel with butter and several slices of cheese and fatty wurst. I was partial to smoked fish for breakfast. The wurst looked horrible to me and Inge clearly felt likewise about my fish, though we refrained from saying so. We sat down at the table together several times and managed to piece conversations together, until one day, she lost patience.

Something must have happened at the previous night’s rehearsal to upset her. Or it might have been the phone call around midnight to her boyfriend,

who lived in Bremerhaven. She had sounded a little drunk and angry, and she finally slammed down the receiver.

Over breakfast, she unleashed a torrent of words.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized. “I didn’t understand.”

“Must I repeat every little thing?” she asked, teeth clenched. “Your fish stinks.”

That was only the beginning. Everything I did or didn’t do annoyed her. That I routinely left a small block of wrapped cheese out on the kitchen counter infuriated her. She kept putting it in the fridge.

“I like cheese at room temperature,” I explained, taking it out again.

“Disgusting. It will go bad.”

“I eat it before it goes bad. That’s how it’s done in France, only fifty kilometers away.”

“This is not France,” she huffed.

§

Ulrike told me Inge said I was a “dirty California hippie.” Ulrike had been the only one in the flat impervious to Inge’s charms from the start.

She was kneading dough on the counter and punched it down for emphasis. “So I told her, ‘Nora may be a California hippie, but she isn’t dirty.’ And

then she said, 'What do you know about such things? You're still a baby.' Well, she may have those three boys under her thumb, but not me or you."

§

I told Manfred, and he laughed and said it was a hen fight.

"Inge is an artist. She's temperamental."

"I'm an artist, too," I said. "It's no excuse."

"The difference is she's professional."

"What is that supposed to mean?" I turned away from him and went over to the window to look out at the little park across the street. I'd taken a series of photos in that park, of the old men on the benches, the equestrian statue of Duke Karl, the pigeons, and of Manfred on his balcony gazing out at the park.

He didn't look at me. He said, "Your photographs are good, but you don't pursue it seriously. You don't have the same ambition. You're an amateur."

"Thank you for the vote of confidence."

I left him without saying goodnight and went back to my room to sleep.

I had the crappiest room in the flat, right next to the kitchen, which made it difficult to read or prepare lessons at night when a noisy group gathered around the big table. Even worse, some nights only Manfred and Inge were hanging out there entertaining one another. And some nights they went out

drinking together. I was always invited, but after the first uncomfortable evening out with them, declined. “The smoke makes my head ache,” I’d tell them. So then I’d stay home and fume. I wanted Manfred to stay with me, of his own volition. I would never beg him to stay home. Apparently Inge was a more interesting companion.

Inge had the best room, facing the street, plus a balcony, even though she moved in after I did, and now she was flirting with my man. I didn’t need a manipulative bitch for a friend.

§

All six of us roommates were at the table, along with a few guests, for a dinner of home-made spaetzle and sauerbraten, to celebrate *die Elfter im Elften*, the eleventh of November, a kick-off to the holiday season. Inge eyed my fresh applesauce suspiciously, as I’d not peeled the apples.

“Most of the nutrition is concentrated just under the skin,” I explained. I was pleased with myself for putting that sentence together *auf Deutsch*.

“*Dass ist absolut bloede*,” she snapped.

“What does bloh-de mean?” I asked.

Manfred stared at his plate. Walter and Dietmar seemed embarrassed; our guests, puzzled.

Finally Ulrike said in dialect, “It’s *blay-de*. It means stupid.”

There it was. My worst angst had materialized, like really bad-smelling fish on the table. I was mortified. Everyone was talking about something else now, as if nothing had happened, except Ulrike, who glared at Inge and whispered something to her.

Inge looked at me, as if dismayed. “I was only joking,” she said.

§

Everyone in our flat had free tickets to “Anne Frank.” We put on our best clothes and sat in a block near the front. I looked around. All seats were taken. On the other side of the auditorium, in the first row, I saw Josef Kornblum leaning intently forward. I shrank in my seat.

Then, swept off into the world of the play, I forgot about Josef. Inge *was* Anne, a dark, slender adolescent brimming with curiosity and wonder. It broke my heart, not only because of the bitter ending, which had always made me weep, but also because it was more poignant than ever in a theater packed with Germans atoning for their collective guilt. I wanted Inge to stay in the part, to be that lovely child-woman, always.

After the play we all went out to our local pub, die Pinte. Ulrike was unusually quiet. Inge didn’t notice. Basking in the afterglow of her performance,

she was still a little like Anne, winsome and girlish, though shedding that persona with every drink.

“Another round for everyone,” she cried. “My treat.”

Ulrike pushed back her half-finished Pilsner. “I’m too tired,” she said. “I’m going home.”

Everyone turned to look at her.

“Are you all right?” I asked.

“I’m fine.”

“I’ll walk with you.”

Inge frowned, and hastily Ulrike and I gathered our sweaters and purses and decamped.

It was a perfect autumn night, the air clear enough to see stars for a change, and I walked with my head tilted back, looking for familiar constellations. The same stars had shone on Grand Duke Karl 200 years ago, perhaps inspiring him to build his castle here. They shone on the Eagle’s Nest in Berchtesgaden and on the secret annex in Amsterdam.

“It was so depressing,” Ulrike said. “I saw no reason to celebrate.”

“But it was an excellent play and very well done. Inge has reason to be proud.”

“It was based on reality. I can’t be frivolous after seeing that.”

“Yes, it is horrible,” I agreed. “You can talk to me about it, though.”

But she fell into silence until we were almost home.

“I guess you don’t know that I’m Jewish?” I said.

“What?” She peered at me, as if I might have two heads. Or a wig. “You are joking.”

“No, I’m not.”

“But you aren’t like, like,” she stuttered. “Not at all like the other ones.”

“What other ones?”

“In Munich, in my school.” She hesitated. “Those Jewish girls were unfriendly, even rude. They would only associate with each other.”

“I can imagine, if my parents were German Jews who somehow survived the Third Reich, I might be like that, too.”

“American Jews are different?”

“Everyone is different. That’s the point.” I struggled to find the right words, but I couldn’t translate stereotype or prejudice, not to mention justifiable paranoia.

“Imagine,” I said instead. “The only German girl in my American school is Inge. Should I think all Germans are like that?”

Ulrike laughed loud and hard. I could see she was relieved.

§

I liked the play so much that I went again and invited two classmates from the *Volkshochschule*. Other theater goers glanced at us as we came in, and then looked again. Jennie was Chinese-Malaysian, and there weren't too many Asians in Baden-Wurtemberg. Fazil was from Turkey. I could pass for Italian or Spanish.

Afterward, we lingered outside the theater, eager to talk about the play.

"Come to my flat," I offered. "It's not far from here."

Off we trooped down the Kaiserstrasse. As we crossed the street, Josef Kornblum caught up with us. The others were pleased to see him again, but I was uneasy.

"How many times have you seen the play?" I asked.

"Six," he said. "I have a friend doing costumes."

Only Ulrike was home. She had just taken yet another pastry out of the oven and seemed pleased to see us come in. I introduced her to my friends. Then I put a kettle of water on for tea.

Ulrike busied herself serving Linzertorte. Her pale blonde hair was braided in a crown atop her head and she wore a hand-embroidered apron over jeans and a t-shirt.

“This is heavenly, *Fräulein*,” Josef rumbled, mouth full. Ulrike watched him, fascinated.

“One can believe in *das Gute*, now.” he declared. “This is the new Germany.”

“No, we must always be on guard against intolerance,” Fazil cautioned. “*Das Gute* is too easily crushed.”

“Oh no,” Ulrike and Jennie and I cried in unison.

Fazil went on, his forehead creased. “In Turkey, Muslims are hated by the secularists, and vice-versa, and all of them hate the Kurds. It’s no different in Malaysia or America, *nicht wahr?*”

“*Brüder*, you speak truth,” Josef put out a hand, and Fazil shook it vigorously.

Jennie cleared her throat. “Your actress friend must be a good woman, *nicht wahr?*” she asked me.

“She’s a good actress.”

“Oh?” Josef seemed amused. “What does that mean?”

“It means she’s never the same person two days in a row,” Ulrike said.

“Maybe she can’t stop acting,” he laughed.§

Fazil was mimicking the customs official who’d interrogated him in Frankfurt when the door to the flat clicked open suddenly and slammed shut. Everyone jumped.

It was Inge. She swept into the kitchen smiling expectantly, but the smile faded when she saw who was at the table.

“Where is everyone?” she demanded.

“Drinking at Die Pinte as usual,” I said. “Inge, these are my friends from school. We were at the theater tonight.” Again, I introduced them one by one.

“I am pleased to meet you. You are a very excellent actress,” Josef said loudly, and he jumped up to shake her hand. But Inge stood motionless, and he sat down abruptly.

“Won’t you join us for tea and *Kuchen*?” Fazil pointed to an empty chair.

“No thanks. I’m exhausted. *Gute Nacht Alle*,” she said and hurried off, not to her room down the hall, but out the front door, which clicked shut behind her.

I didn't know what to say. The real Anne Frank would have sat down with us. Apparently the actress wanted nothing to do with a clutch of foreigners. Before long, my classmates made their excuses and left too.

Ulrike helped me clean the kitchen. Her forehead was damp, and two hectic patches burned on her cheeks.

"I like your friends, Nora. That American guy is so interesting."

§

When I told him what had happened, Manfred said, "You're overreacting."

"She was rude to my friends."

"Maybe she was too tired to talk to Muftis and other *Ausländer*."

"What is a Mufti?"

"A Turk, an Arab."

"That sounds racist, Manni."

"It's a common expression, slang-wise."

"Really? And what would I be called, slang-wise?"

"You?" He laughed, uneasily. "*Eine Tiere*."

"An animal?"

“All women are animals, according to some less than enlightened men.”

He was teasing, but I would not be placated.

“I’m Jewish, remember? What would that be, slang-wise?”

He hesitated. “A Herschel. But you’re not a Herschel.”

What exactly is a Herschel? No surprise. That’s the old guy with sidelocks you meet everywhere, in the Outback or in Waziristan, who tries to “jew” the poor German tourists down.

“What am I if not a Herschel?” I demanded. My voice trembled a little.

Looking alarmed, Manfred hugged me. “You’re Norale,” he said.

§

I went for a long walk in the Schlosspark to clear my head. It was possible to walk for hours on less frequented paths undisturbed, which I preferred to Sunday outings with the *Wohngemeinschaft*. I couldn’t understand why Germans had to hike in herds.

It was hushed and damp, as peaceful as a cathedral.

I’d brought my camera with me and was adjusting the settings when I heard twigs crunching. Someone was coming up the path. I cleared my throat loudly and prepared to smile and say “*Grüss Gott*,” which translates literally as

greet God, but means hello, how are you. Behind me the crunching grew louder, someone was huffing, running, coming quickly closer. I spun around.

So close I could have reached out and touched him stood a tall freckled man, a redhead, entirely naked except for sneakers and socks. He had large feet, I noticed, and a small limp cock, which he was vigorously rubbing, to no avail. His eyes seemed to reflect my own fear.

Instinctively, I raised the camera. "I'll take your picture!" I blurted in English. The man turned and fled. I ran after him.

"Stop!" I hollered. I couldn't focus and run at the same time. I snapped the shutter anyway. He ran into the woods, leaning over to pick something up, probably his clothes. Then he vanished.

§

At dinner that night I recited my adventure in flawless German, which I had rehearsed all the way home. My roommates gasped, then laughed, then chastised. "I warned you not to walk by yourself," Ulrike said.

But Manfred beamed. "That's what American women do," he insisted. "Nora is like a cowboy."

When I described the *Exi's* butt disappearing into the bushes, Inge laughed until she choked.

“Who would do such a thing?” Ulrike wondered.

“Maybe an American soldier,” I said. “Lonely and alienated. I feel sorry for him now.”

“Some really fucked up guy,” Dietmar said. And Ulrike clicked her tongue.

“A creepy pervert,” she said.

“You should take the photos to the police,” Walter advised. “Or the newspaper. Does anyone recognize this ass?”

“That’s not necessary,” Inge spluttered. “This *Exi* is *kaputt*. Nora finished him totally.”

§

After the *Exi* incident, Inge greeted me every morning like an old friend. Instead of picking on me, she unloaded her wrath on the three men in the flat, one by one.

Walter was easiest. He was gentle and soft spoken, and he listened carefully to everyone. He was studying psychology at the Uni. But he was a little slack with dishwashing and communal clean-up details. Inge blew up when he missed his turn at the sink one time too many.

“She picked on you first,” Walter theorized, “because she perceived you as weakest, therefore easiest to take down. She’s like an angry little girl throwing tantrums. She’s an only child, you know.”

Dietmar, a meticulous clean freak, could do no wrong in Inge’s estimation until the night he locked himself in the bathroom with his girlfriend Sybelle and wouldn’t come out for an entire hour. Even Ulrike got annoyed with him. She rapped on the door and said, “Inge has worked all day and night and she needs to relax in the tub. Dietmar, don’t be so selfish.”

“She already bathed this morning,” was Dietmar’s retort. “It’s my turn.”

Manfred thought this was hilarious, which may have signaled the beginning of the end of his friendship with Inge, who was not at all amused.

I can think of no single incident in Manfred’s case. They had been really tight chums. Probably he fell from grace because he could never be serious about anything for long, and Inge, at bottom, needed to be taken seriously. One night she yelled at him over some minor disagreement, and he walked out of the kitchen without a word and down the hall to my room.

“She’s crazy,” he said. “I feel sorry for her boyfriend.”

Oh yes, the boyfriend. Axel drove down from Bremerhaven over the Christmas holidays. He was a bear-like man, large and hairy, funny and smart.

She picked a fight with him, too, and after only one day, he went back to Bremerhaven.

§

In February, Manfred, Walter, and Dietrich drove with several friends to the Austrian Alps for a skiing vacation. Ulrike had gone to Munich for the school holiday, or so she told us. Though I don't ski, I could have come along for the holiday, as Manfred urged. Rather than endure a dozen noisy chain smokers, I elected to stay in the flat. I wished Inge would go, too, but she had not been invited. By then she had alienated everyone, not only at home but at the theater, and apparently considered me her only friend.

One night she came home early from rehearsing a new play and knocked on my door. She had a bottle of single malt Scotch and two glasses in hand.

"Come on, join me."

I put down my book and followed her to the kitchen, wary but curious.

"Only a little," I pleaded. "Whiskey's not my drink."

She ignored that and filled my glass.

"*Prosit!* Isn't this lovely, Nora? It's so peaceful here without all the children."

"Just the old folks at home."

“Ach,” she groaned and crinkled her face up like an ancient crone’s. Then in a blink her skin smoothed out and she tossed her hair, which was the color of gold again. “Forget that old folk *Scheisse*. I’m a *Maedchen*, pure as snow.”

“Wake up, Inge, you’re dreaming again.”

“Your German is much improved,” she observed.

“I’ve been working on it.”

She nodded. “So once you learn German, you’re not going to stay in this shit hole, are you?”

“It’s not so bad,” I said.

“I don’t understand why anyone would choose to live here. I’m leaving as soon as I can.”

“I like it better now than I did,” I confessed.

She poured herself another drink. I was sipping mine, but it wouldn’t take much more before the room began to wobble. We talked for a while about beautiful cities she or I had visited—Venice, San Francisco, Barcelona—the walled medieval towns like Rothenberg, the difficulty of learning a language, and Shakespeare. She’d read all of Shakespeare’s plays in translation.

“What book are you reading now?” she asked.

“*Der Zug Kommt Punktlich An* by Heinrich Böll.”

“So the train was on time?” She yawned.

“It’s about a German soldier traumatized by the war. I’ve never read anything like it.”

“I’m not familiar with it,” she said.

“You can borrow it when I’m done. It’s totally absorbing and, finally, heartbreaking. I’ve already read the ending.”

“Why would you do that?”

“I hate suspense.”

“Me too. I like to know what’s happening from the start.” She thumped the glass for emphasis.

“I wouldn’t want to know the endings in my life before they happen,” I said.

“You can’t anyway. You plot and plan and life sneaks up and surprises you.”

“But that’s good, *nicht wahr?*”

“Not when it stabs you in the back.” She stared into her glass, pouting a little.

“Just as often, surprises are pleasant,” I persisted. “For example, it’s a surprise that we became friends.”

“How so?” she replied, a little too sharply.

“We’re so different in our habits and backgrounds,” I said, backtracking. Could she have forgotten she’d despised me for months?

“We’re intelligent women,” she countered. “We read.”

“Did you keep a diary, too, when you were a girl?”

“Oh yes, I did. It’s not unusual for young girls, of course. That’s how I got into Anne Frank’s head.”

“But her *Tagesbuch* is entirely different from yours or mine. We were never in those circumstances.”

She shrugged. “I mean she was, at bottom, just a girl, like you and me.”

“She was a Jewish girl. How did you get into that?”

“I’m an actress. I can become anyone I please. Besides, it’s all in the journal. It’s just like while reading that book you can believe you’re a German soldier.”

“You had me convinced,” I said, then paused a beat. “And I’m Jewish.”

Inge seemed unperturbed.

“Really? How interesting. Well, it doesn’t matter to me what you are. Here, we can’t let this bottle stay so full.”

“*L’chaim*,” I said and clinked her glass. “To life!”

“Life is shit,” she said.

“What about *das Gute*? What about Anne Frank?”

Tears sprang up in both our eyes. Oh, Anne!

“I believed it once,” Inge said wearily. “But I’m not an adolescent anymore.”

§

I saw little of Inge for two days. She had a terrible hangover. A postcard arrived from Austria. Manfred had a hangover, too. It was beautiful in the mountains, and he missed me. Did I believe that? Maybe. Did I miss him? Only in the middle of the night.

Late Tuesday afternoon, Inge charged into the flat hollering my name. “Nora, come out of your cave, Norale. A *Strassenfest* has popped up out of nowhere. Let’s go!”

A street fair in winter? I pulled on another sweater and my navy pea coat, and set off with Inge down the Kaiserstrasse to where the road was closed to traffic. Beyond the barricade were rows of canopied stalls and a larger semi-enclosed and gaily colored tent, from which oompah music reverberated.

The sun was setting over the *Strassenfest* beer hall. The clouds looked like cotton candy.

We fortified ourselves at a long trestle table in the tent. I spotted the ubiquitous Josef Kornblum over by the band talking with both hands to a woman with thick, blond braids, her back to us. I squinted. That looked like Ulrike's back, but it wasn't possible. She was in Munich. He looked over our way and I waved, but he either ignored me or didn't recognize me in my winter garb.

We moved on to the *Frickadellen* and *pomme frites* stand and discovered we both loved those spicy meat patties served on thick slabs of buttered bread. Then we strolled down the rows, inspecting the contents of stalls. Teens and young couples played carnival games, shooting or throwing for prizes. Women handled laces and jewelry, children lingered over toys and dolls. I could discern no unifying theme or purpose in the fest until we came upon several stalls displaying religious artifacts.

"It's Fat Tuesday," I exclaimed. "What do you call Mardi Gras?"

"*Fastnacht*, of course. I forgot too." Inge frowned. "The farther south you go, the more Catholic."

"Look, Inge." I pointed at a merry-go-round.

Her face lit up and we hurried toward the back end of the fest where the carnie rides were stationed. For a while we watched the painted and gilded animals go up and down and around while the calliope played a Strauss waltz.

Then I saw Josef again, seated in one of the stationary open booths holding hands with the blonde, and, yes, she was our Ulrike. Her cheeks were flushed and she was gazing into his eyes. In the seat opposite theirs lolled an oversized stuffed panda.

“Look, there’s Josef,” I said to Inge.

“Who’s Josef?”

He would be the Herschel, I thought and felt my face flush.

“That big bearded guy over there with Ulrike.”

“What’s she doing here? Who’s the guy?”

“I know him from the *Volkshochschule*. You met him, remember?”

She shrugged. “Oh those guys, they all looked alike.”

“He’s your biggest fan. He saw *Anne Frank* six times.”

She rolled her eyes in disbelief. “That’s weird. Is he stalking me?”

Something else caught her attention. She grabbed my hand and pulled me to a ticket booth. “Let’s ride the bumper cars,” she urged.

We climbed into our little white cars, each with thick dented bumpers all around.

Inge went up to top velocity in seconds and shot across the circular track.

I proceeded at a more gingerly pace around the perimeter. There were a half

dozen or so other bumper cars skittering around with parents and children and teens in them.

Abruptly, Inge changed course and veered toward me head on. I accelerated and she hit me broadside, with a tremendous thump, then backed up and nudged me again.

“Fight back,” she shouted and let out a guttural roar like the battle cry of the Valkyries.

I took off across the track, weaving around the drivers so they were between us. That didn’t faze Inge. She bumped them, too. Everyone was laughing, what fun to knock the stuffing out of total strangers.

I swiveled the car around and waited for an opening, then pressed the pedal to the floor. “I’ll get you now,” I yelled.

Inge was boxed in and couldn’t move out of my way, on her face a concentration of fierce joy she couldn’t possibly be faking. She was waiting for the collision.

Jo-Anne Rosen's fiction has appeared in *Other Voices*, *The Florida Review*, *The Summer* *Review*, *Pithead Chapel*, *Lime Hawk*, and several other journals. She is a book and website designer, living in Petaluma, California. She also publishes *Wordrunner eChapbooks*, an online literary journal at www.echapbook.com, and is co-editor of the *Sonoma County Literary Update* (www.socolitupdate.com). Some of her stories have been performed in local readers theaters and at the New Short Fiction Series in Hollywood, California. *What They Don't Know* is her first fiction collection. See www.joannerosen.us for more information.