

“Kühn!”

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Our Lady of the Elms

Word Count: 1000

Emil awoke in darkness. The room was freezing; the ranks in his dorm were wearing extra thick socks and two undershirts.

He had thought about requesting leave to visit Anna, but Emil was expecting a promotion, and didn't want to risk earning more money, especially after Anna had just given birth. A baby girl: “Minna Kühn.” Emil had always been proud of his surname. Frau Ida told him that Kühn meant bravery. He was a bright boy, selected to attend a Political Institute. He was told that he could be an elite of the Third Reich. Emil graduated in 1935 and became a Soldat at eighteen.

It wasn't in training camp that he met Anna. He had walked into a shop to purchase gloves and talked his way into dinner with a beautiful auburn-haired clerk. One year later, the two married, and as of Emil's deployment in 1943, they had two children.

Anna was an excellent mother. She always made sure their apartment was clean, and the children fed. Anna had a sister, Elena. Elena was older and had children of her own. She and Anna occasionally shared morning coffee.

“You should bring the children with you,” Elena voiced one morning. Anna shifted her glance to her mug. She never let her children come to Elena's. It'd be risky enough if *she* were seen in Elena's home; she wouldn't put her children at stake.

Elena’s in-laws were Jewish. For all intents and purposes, he, Elena, and their children had assimilated into society. But there was uncertainty clouding Berlin. Walter’s cousin lost his notary position, a job he held for decades. Walter was the only man in his family with a mind to forge papers. He worked hard to drape the veil that separated himself from those he saw rounded in trucks. But this veil was thin. And a ghost made of secrets stood opposite it, pressed against Walter. Elena disliked secrets, disliked living a life created by them, raising her children upon them.

Anna looked up from her mug. “I know I’ve no right to speak, but—” she started. “Correct. You’ve no right,” Elena responded curtly. “My only concern is safety. Does Walter know?” Elena looked away. “He doesn’t. But the children should *see*. I don’t want them thinking it’s acceptable for powerful people to stomp on everyone else. The demonstration will be peaceful; I wouldn’t bring them otherwise.

Rather than staying longer, Anna returned home. She washed silverware in such a daze that she cut her palm. Anna stared at the blood. *Elena says the demonstration will be peaceful.* She got ready to pick up the children. *I’ll take them for ice-cream after dinner,* she thought. Anna told Emil this on their daily call.

Emil had been in Germany for about a year. Tonight he would be sent to Berlin because of protests that were becoming increasingly pestilent. By 6:00, he was stationed beside his commanding officer.

Anna and her children never got ice-cream. By 5:30, the shops had closed. Anna was headed home, children in tow, when she heard her name.

“Anna! Anna, you came!” exclaimed Elena. Anna's steps faltered. She began to withdraw before being shoved. *When did the square get so crowded?* Anna pulled Paul closer, clutching Minna.

Emil knew that hair. He knew the boy pinned to his mother's side, he knew the baby in said mother's arms. *Anna? What are you doing here?* Then, they were out of sight, so fast he questioned if he had hallucinated. But no, that was Anna.

Elena was right. This demonstration was non-violent. It appeared more effective than any violent protests. It made sense; some of the toughest battles Anna faced were when her opponent refused cooperation. Picking up a child who refuses to move, feeding one who isn't hungry. Anna worried for those upfront, pressing themselves closer to the soldier.

Anna was right to worry for those people upfront. The square had become so crowded that she and the others were shifting forward. After the strongest surge of the night, she heard a shout that sounded like “fire!”

Emil couldn't hear.

“Are you listening? I said fire!” Emil registered his commander's shout, yet remained still.

“Kühn, for the last time, fire!” Emil knew what he was asked to do. He knew it'd come to this.

What he hadn't expected was being told to fire at his family.

Emil's rifle rested on his shoulder, it felt heavy. He could vaguely interpret the sound of shouts, but he only listened for one. *AnnaAnnaAnnaAnnaAnnaA-*

Emil returned to reality. He was holding a gun and pointing it into a crowd. He was told to fire. *There are so many people in this crowd.* He counted all heads within 100 feet. Thirteen were red-headed. How many did he miss? *If I release one round into the front, what are the odds*

that I hit Anna? Paul? Minna? How many bullets are in the chamber? Emil was trapped inside a chamber.

At that moment, Emil understood who he was aiming at. Not an angry mob, but hundreds of Annas, Pauls, and Minnas. Not people destroying, or damaging, but fighting for culture, the erasure of culture. If they win, they receive a humble prize: language, tradition, life. If they lose: death.

They will lose. They've become resistant because of their foolish hope. Emil remembered his commander's words. But now, he understood the opposite. *The hope is born of resistance. Its through resistance that they carry on. They aren't afraid of dying, but dying without purpose. Hope is their purpose.*

At that moment Emil decided. He wouldn't turn from his wife and children. They were in that crowd. He was a soldat, but his first duty was to protect his family, and his hope.

Emil would lose his rank. He might be killed. *Don't think Emil stop thinking just stop-*

Emil abandoned his position when he saw red hair. Within that chamber of reflection, where he spent at most sixty seconds, Emil felt like a Kühn. Emil felt brave.

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