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## **The Equestrian Banquet**

By the time Andrea decided to leap from the window of her childhood home and marry her sweetheart in the winter of 1945, her family was already nearing the brink of starvation.

“Are we poor?” seven-year-old Mila Wolff asked one winter evening while her family played cards on the living room floor. Her father, Walter, spent forty-three minutes on his back under the chimney, plastering a brick that had collected dust on the ground ever since his eldest daughter chose her baby-faced mailman over her own family. He occasionally poked his soot-stained face into the living area to offer his insight on the conversation. When his daughter asked this question, however, he allowed the brick wall to conceal his expression, and merely scratched at his bushy eyebrows with the handle of his plastering tool.

“What?” her mother responded from the kitchen. Alma stirred a pot of clear soup with one hand and wiped the sweat from her forehead with the other. “Who told you that?”

“So we *are* poor then?” Mila persisted, tracing an imaginary line around the perimeter of the house with her pinkie toe. Her older brother Karl peeled a Queen of Hearts from the deck and slapped it on the wooden floor.

He sighed and mumbled, “Everyone’s poor right now, Mila. It’s not just us.” Simon, the youngest brother, cradled a three-legged Tabby cat in the cage of his arms and struggled to spread his cards in a fan formation with his tiny hands. He stuck his tongue out in concentration as the Tabby cat craned its neck and tickled Simon’s chin with his whiskers.

“Well Liza Sauer said her family isn’t poor,” began Mila. She tip-toed around the dining room table and tapped each chair as if her finger was a magic wand that would transform everything into gold. “She said she has a whole *closet* full of candies and that she even has her own shelf—her *own* shelf—for all her books and that she goes to a fair every weekend and wears nice clothes on Sunday for mass and buys lots and lots of dolls and that—.” At this, she stopped to catch her breath as her father lowered his muscular frame out from under the chimney.

He waved his plastering tool in the air and boomed, “The Sauer’s are liars, pumpkin. That family never goes to church, I can tell ya that right now.”

“Your father’s right, Mila,” her mother added from the kitchen, drying her hands with a dirty towel before placing it over the handle of the stove. “And Liza probably stole those books from the store below their house, hun.

Remember we told you to stay away from her?” She leaned away from the cloud of steam issuing from the pot and peered into the living room, “Did you hear me, Mila? Remember why we said that?” Her daughter simply clicked her tongue and skipped around the room, her blonde curls bouncing with each step. She hummed a tune, plopped down on the floor beside Simon and Karl, and balanced her chin in her hands. When she tilted her head in the direction of Karl’s cards, he yanked them away from her and exclaimed, “You little cheat! Get away!” These words did not feign her, and still humming, she shifted her weight to the other side and glanced at Simon, who was too preoccupied with trying to *hold* all the cards like his brother to risk shielding them from Mila and losing his grip. Unamused by her brother’s collection, Mila edged her nose right up against the Tabby’s and stared into its giant eyes. *You’re the only fun one here*, she thought. The Tabby meowed and reached an inquisitive paw at a stray piece of Mila’s tangled hair. Mila giggled and lost her balance, tumbling backward onto her father’s ankle, which protruded out of the chimney like a freshly fallen piece of timber. Walter let out a groan and dropped his plastering tool, sighing, “Mila, honey, stop that now. Go sit down or draw something, alright? Let your daddy finish this.”

Mila straightened her dress and walked stiffly to an armchair situated by the window. She kept her legs and arms rigid like a Nutcracker soldier and banged her heels into the floor with each step, and the wood creaked and moaned as if to say *C’mon now, Mila. Listen to your father and go sit down.*

Now would be an appropriate time to mention that, not unlike most German families, the Wolff family lived on the second floor of a blue apartment building, situated just above a taxidermy shop. Otto Fischer, a widely-revered huntsman and strudel connoisseur, inherited the business from his father and maintained the rooms upstairs. Many of

the building's inhabitants believed that Herr Fischer took a particular liking to Andrea Wolff and that her departure affected him so deeply that, to contend with his anger, he traveled to a sunflower field every morning before dawn and shot at each goose that floated along the horizon until he fired his entire pack of bullets. It is most likely that the Vogel's—a newly-wed team of giggling fools who occupied the room above the Wolff's—fabricated this story after they witnessed Herr Fischer enter the building with a cigarette perched between his lips, a rifle slung over his shoulder, and two handfuls of geese hanging limply at his sides.

The Wolff's, being rational and unfeigned people, paid no attention to this rumor and expressed their gratitude to Herr Fischer for his unyielding kindness in their time of desperation, and this only heightened the Vogel's suspicion. One evening, when the Vogel's were laughing and stomping exceptionally loud at a godforsaken hour, Walter Wolff trudged upstairs and knocked on their door with bags under his eyes as purple as a cabbage.

"Herr Vogel, might you keep it down?" Walter implored. "I have young children and a very tired wife. It's far too late and tomorrow—."

"Why don't you bring it up with Otto, ah?" Frau Vogel yelled from inside the apartment. Past Herr Vogel's downcast smirk, Walter could see the woman shuffling across the floor, with a bottle of beer raised above her head and a vinyl at her side. She kept her eyes on the record and leaned against the doorway. "He does your family *so* many favors already, Herr Wolff," the woman pouted, peering under her eyelashes. With a wet hiccup, she added, "What's one more?"

Mila plopped down into the chair and hugged her legs close to her chest. She wondered if Liza Sauer really *was* a liar and a thief like her family said. Mila thought to herself that she wouldn't mind being a liar and a thief if it meant she could have her own shelf full of her own books and wear nice clothes on Sunday for mass and—.

"Dinner!" heaved Alma. The mother hobbled out of the kitchen and carried a massive pot into the dining room. She hoisted it onto the table and removed her oven mitts like a weary surgeon.

"Thank God," exclaimed Karl, "I could eat a horse." The boys raised themselves off the ground and flipped their cards face-down; "To-be-continued" they reasoned. But when they saw the rusted pot on the table, both of their frames weakened a little. A man can only eat so much soup before he goes mad. Or runs out of soup.

Walter slid out of the chimney and used his forearm to wipe the sweat from his brow. He sat down at the table and said, "Ah, Chef's Choice I see?" He ruffled his sons' hair and proceeded to ladle soup into a chipped bowl. "This is Dinner of champions, boys," he beamed, and the pillars of his teeth glistened against the dirt on his face.

Alma rolled her eyes and ladled soup into her sons' bowls, then her own. "Mila!" she called, "it's dinner time. Get over here." Mila buried her face into the back of the armchair.

"I'm not hungry," she lied. These days, hunger gnawed at the empty tomb of her little stomach regularly, and she told herself she wasn't hungry just like Liza Sauer told herself she wasn't poor.

"Well Herr Fischer isn't going to bring you chocolate anymore, Mila," warned Alma. Her sons lifted their heads instantly and searched their mother's eyes for falsehood. She winked and pressed a finger to her lips and their breathing steadied. She swallowed her soup fast, so as not to have an opportunity to think about the taste. "So this is all you get for the rest of the night."

"There's a horse-y in the street," Mila mumbled into the palm of her hand, gazing out the window into the city below.

"Daddy, why is there a horse-y in the street?"

"I don't know, pumpkin. Maybe for the fair this weekend," he gulped and added, "the one Lisa Sauer always goes to." Simon snickered and shielded his bowl away from the curious whiskers of the Tabby on his lap.

Shouting and heavy footsteps echoed from upstairs like someone collided into a league of bowling pins and sent them spiraling about the apartment. The Wolffs paid no attention.

Karl eyed his soup and twisted a tassel on the tablecloth. He leaned back in his chair and ran his hands down his face. Alma pointed at him with her spoon and commanded: *Eat*. He heaved through his nostrils and scraped the bowl towards his chest, creating a miniature tsunami of murky cabbage and potato that collided against the side of the bowl. He picked up his spoon and shoveled the scorching liquid into his mouth, pressed his lips into a firm line, transferred the soup to the reservoirs of his cheeks, and gulped with his eyes closed.

Walter was about to raise his spoon when the thudding noise upstairs grew so loud, a thick cloud of white dust billowed from the ceiling and caused little specks of cement to settle into the Wolffs' soup with a heavy *thump*. The beads on the light fixture trembled like jelly and tugged at the surrounding plaster.

Except for Alma, each person frowned at the little particles of ceiling that floated along the surface of his soup. They kept their heads down in silence until they heard the clatter of Alma's spoon as she dropped it into her bowl, the scrape of her chair as she left the table, and the quiet patter of her sobs as she turned away from them and cowered in a corner.

Walter rose from the table and appeared at her side just as Mila released a blood-curdling scream from the armchair. Simon and Karl turned to face her when she cried,

"The horse-y! What are they *doing* to her? Someone make them stop!" She jerked her tear-sodden face away from

the window just as Simon and Karl approached. “Look!” she begged, “They’re *hurting* her! Stop it!” Karl stared agape and tugged at Simon’s shirt to ask, but the older brother stood as still as a statue and couldn’t speak. The footsteps thundered above and made the ceiling cough more plaster particles.

Just then, a man banged on the front door and roared, “Walter! Open up! *Now!*” Walter turned away from his wife and opened the door to reveal a panting Otto Fischer. The man rested his hands on his knees and gasped, “Get your family out of here, Walter.”

“What’s going on?” Simon called from the window. Otto stared at the children and shook his head.

“The people are going crazy in the streets. You have to leave.” Alma appeared from the kitchen and wiped at her face.

“What’s wrong?” she asked, first to her husband. “Walter, what’s happening?” Mila let out a deep wail from across the room,

“They’re *killing* her, daddy! Make it stop! They’re chopping her to bits!” she sobbed. Hearing this, Walter searched Otto’s eyes, and a cryptic message passed between them. Alma ran to the window and raised a hand over her trembling lips.

In the center of the street below, a dead horse lay sprawled on the pavement encircled by a pool of blood. People poured out of the surrounding houses and storefronts and sprinted into the road, brandishing axes, knives, hammers, and rifles. They dug their weapons into the flesh of the muscular stallion and tore bits of it away, elbowing and shoving at the others.

“I have a family to feed,” one roared over the screams, jabbing the butt of his ax into the side of another man.

“You think you’re the only one?” the man retorted, stumbling to the ground. Like vultures, the people scrambled to the center and wallowed in the animal’s blood, sawing at its limbs and pulling strands of its meat. One woman reared up the front of her blood-stained dress, formed a pouch, and piled up the dripping muscles inside before dashing out of the angry mob. Some crawled and wept just to touch the mane of the animal before getting kicked and pushed into the outskirts of the crowd, their hands and elbows covered in blood.

“What are we supposed to do, Otto?” The husband spoke quietly, “We have nowhere else to go.” Behind Otto, families darted down the stairs carrying suitcases. Small children shrieked and their cries reverberated down the stairwell.

“Run as far away as you can. You’ll get trampled if you stay here,” Otto exhaled, his eyes imploring.

Alma scooped her daughter out of the armchair and grabbed her son’s free hand as he cradled the Tabby. Walter ducked under the chimney and removed the remains of a small wad of money hidden in the groove of the fallen brick. He shoved it into his pocket and guided his children out of the house. Trailing a little farther behind, out of his family’s sight, Karl slipped a knife from the kitchen blade-down into his leather boot and covered the handle with his trousers.

Following Otto’s lead, the Wolff’s descended the stairwell and exited the building using a back entrance of the taxidermy shop. Mila rested her head on her mother’s shoulder and gawked at the stuffed animals protruding from the walls. The child wondered why the strong creatures didn’t just climb out of the walls and run away before the people started chopping them up too. All of them frozen in time—eyes wide, mouth ajar, paw lifted, wings spread, fangs bared. The family exited the room of wild animals only to find themselves in a street filled with them.

Over the screaming and hysteria which saturated the air like a poisonous gas, the Wolff’s did not hear Mila’s cries for her oldest brother as he slithered into the turbulent crowd and disappeared from sight. Like a delicate string, the family threaded through dirty elbows and shouting and shoving until they reached the outskirts of the city and settled at a train station. Having just witnessed the rabid mob in the streets, Walter reasoned that the crowd at the station more strongly resembled a patient group of children waiting in line at a candy store.

Yet it was not until they arrived at the train station and caught their breath that Alma whipped around and inquired about Karl. She spun in a circle and scanned the platform—over the benches, behind the poles, past the ticket booths, into the street,—but he was nowhere to be found. She yelled his name into the hollow station as if she were trapped in the ribcage of a giant whale and her son sat just beside the blowhole, checking his watch. Walter searched his sides and stared in disbelief. Then all at once, like a tsunami, a bleak reality collided against the thumping metronome of his heart: he would never see his son again.

Meanwhile, in the city of animals, the sun began to drip between the giant fingers of the skyline and illuminate the clouds into a hazy fusion of deep reds, oranges, blues, and purples. Slowly, the mob dissipated and abandoned the giant carcass, and thick swarms of flies weaved through the city to ravage the remains of the equestrian banquet vacated in the road.

Slouched in a damp alleyway, Karl Wolff leaned against a wall and licked the remains of his meal from each of his fingertips. He used the back of his sleeve to wipe the blood off his lips and chin and smeared the blood from the knife onto his trousers. He started at his distorted reflection in the tiny blade and smiled, bits of his supper still peeking between the pillars of his teeth.

