

Clung Together

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The rags Rebekkah wore barely covered her modesty. It was impossible for them to cover both breasts. As she struggled along the muddy track, the rotting shoes on her feet let in the moisture from the earth while each step exposed her bare crotch to the chill of the late March wind. But Rebekkah had long ago lost all sense of propriety or dignity. And if her mind ever rose above consideration of her current misery would anyone see her as the pretty teenage girl she knew herself to be? So bruised and battered was her skin, so filthy her bare legs and, with her stomach caved in from malnutrition, she was no better than the brute animal her captors treated her.

She was surrounded by other women in as much misery as she, all of them condemned to march across the German countryside while the Soviet forces chased from behind, but not rapidly enough to bring the deliverance that was all the hope Rebekkah allowed herself. Despite the futility of these last few days of Jewish persecution by the murderous Nazi regime, the Police Battalion was determined to keep order of their charges, systematically denying them food and lashing out beatings on the slightest pretence.

A plane roared overhead and all heads raised to the sky: a column of the ill-fed and ill-treated, female flesh bared and exposed, hair still soaked from an earlier downpour when the Jewish women prisoners were denied any shelter whilst their guards moaned about their fear of Soviet retribution. The plane was almost certainly a Soviet one, but the likelihood was that rather than effect their escape, it would just add to their misery. Fortunately, the plane roared away, no doubt taking its payload to the cowering Germans in the towns.

But there was no pause in the march, despite the fears shared with the police guards. A few women who had halted in their steps were brutally beaten to force them back on their weary way. Rebekkah nodded sympathetically at the middle-aged woman clutching the hand of her nearly naked daughter who huddled beside her, but the woman's blank eyes registered no acknowledgment.

The column marched on in a landscape that seemed almost peaceful under the clouded sky, but offered Rebekkah no comfort at all. The only thing she wanted was rest, blessed respite from the kilometres of aimless procession past deserted untilled fields and abandoned livestock. If she had the opportunity, she doubted she had the strength or energy to run away. And if she should, the likelihood was that she too would be shot by pursuing guards and her corpse left unburied by the roadside.

And then, as she knew it would eventually, the weariness and misery overwhelmed her. She stumbled and fell onto the ground. Her knee caught on a loose stone and added another spasm of agony to the constant pain that wracked her battered body. She fell onto her palms, her arms unable to bear her weight. And this despite having very little weight to support after all these months of starvation.

“Bitch Jew!” were the words that greeted her from Ilse, the police guard who came to her attention. “Get on your shitty feet, you cunt!”

“Sorry! Sorry! I’m so tired!” Rebekkah wailed, gazing up at the young woman towering above her.

Ilse was a slender woman who clearly wasn’t as comfortable adorned in her police uniform as she would have been in the clothes of the school student she would still wear if the war hadn’t worsened so dramatically. Her blonde hair was stuffed

under her hat and although by no means starving, like the other police she no longer looked nearly as well nourished as she might normally. A streak of dirt smudged her face and a lock of hair fell over her high cheek.

“Don’t fucking talk back, bitch!” Ilse ordered. “On your fucking feet!”

Although Rebekkah was complying as best she could, she was sufficiently slow for Ilse to strike her again and again with her police baton, adding more bruises to the many scars, scratches and swelling red and blue marks on Rebekkah’s mottled skin, each unnecessary blow felt that more acutely on a frame ill-equipped to withstand them and not at all inured by familiarity to the ringing pain that shuddered through her body.

In another time and from another perspective, Rebekkah would know that Ilse’s cruelty did not come from the pleasure of meting out punishment. Like all the German guards, whether Nazi or simply functionaries in the Nazi cause, Ilse had come to see this as normal and natural behaviour. She would never have inflicted such treatment on Rebekkah in the days when she relied on her deceptively non-Semitic looks to pretend she was of Aryan birth. That was before an anonymous informer had betrayed her.

But the benefit of sympathetic hindsight at the last relics of the Nazi regime trembling before the unstoppable onslaught of the Slavic foe was not accessible to her at this time.

Rebekkah hated Ilse, as she hated all Germans. And if she had the opportunity to return to Ilse the punishment that was mercilessly met on her battered head and shoulders, she would have gladly done so. And not only in reparation for her own

wretchedness, but for that of all Jews. And most especially for her parents and family whom she was more and more certain she would never see again.

Rebekkah staggered on, the pain from the nascent swelling on her cheek a fresh distraction from the sick emptiness of her stomach and the bleeding scratch on her knee. And behind her, Ilse tucked away the baton, ready to be used on one or other of the many Jewish prisoners should the excuse arise.

It was in very different circumstances that Rebekkah next met Ilse, by which stage her stomach had recovered somewhat thanks to the beneficence of the Americans whose food aid the Soviet troops distributed. She was still sporting a prominent discolouration on her cheek as a result of Ilse's brutality. But on this occasion, two weeks later, it was Ilse, not Rebekkah, who was most in need of attention.

Like everyone else in the chaotic days as the war remained unresolved, Rebekkah was scavenging for food and shelter in the bombed and desolate towns, no longer troubled by any mould on abandoned bread and already insensitive to any sympathy for the domestic fowl she killed to sate her appetite. She had slept on the straw of a deserted barn along with other refugees, only a few of them Jewish and most being Germans that the Red Army tanks had overtaken on their rush to Berlin.

She heard Ilse's sobs from the hallway of the ruined house she had wandered into long before she knew who they belonged to. Curious, she cautiously mounted the stairs on the ragged carpet past the detritus that was almost certainly the result of the vandalism of Soviet or even German soldiers. The house was no longer a welcome place, but one of shadows and redolent of despair.

The door was open to the bedroom where Ilse lay naked on the bare stained mattress on the metal bed frame. The morning sun shone through the grimy lace curtains onto her pale shoulder. At first Rebekkah had no idea who it was collapsed in this state of piteous despair. Although she had seen the desperation of so many people in the last few months, as her health improved she had gradually regained her sense of compassion. And even though this naked figure was so obviously a German, her accent apparent in every bitter curse, Rebekkah had rediscovered pity from having seen the fear and desolation of the German refugees, now almost pathetic in their chorus that it wasn't them but others who had supported the Nazi regime and its persecution of the Jews.

Ilse lay huddled in a foetal crouch on the mattress, her hands squeezed between her thighs and protecting her crotch. Her face was pushing against the ragged fabric of the mattress, her hair partly obscuring her eyes. Rebekkah placed a hand on the girl's shoulder, and shivered slightly from the first glimmer of recognition, but not yet sure exactly where and when they might have met before.

“Are you alright?”

Ilse looked up at Rebekkah, clearly startled, but with a blank emptiness behind her stare. Her pale blue eyes were red and raw and the streaks on her cheeks bore the memory of the salt she'd squeezed out of them with her tears. She nodded.

“What happened to you?” Rebekkah asked.

Ilse was still unable to speak. She nodded her head towards her crotch and grimaced. Then she dropped her head down again. “Fucking! Fuck! Shit!” she moaned.

It was then that Rebekkah at last remembered who this girl was. The voice, slightly husky, with a distinct Berlin accent was exactly the same one who called her a bitch and a cunt less than a fortnight before. At this moment, Rebekkah made a decision that was to haunt her for the rest of her life, the consequences of which she had no inkling at this stage. Although she could so easily abandon Ilse, perhaps satisfied that the vengeful retribution she had harboured had indeed come to be, she chose instead to stay by Ilse's side.

It was a long time until Ilse recovered her composure sufficiently for Rebekkah to learn just what had happened to her. And her account came out falteringly and in disconnected sentences. Even at the end of the day when the two of them nestled together under the thin tablecloth that Rebekkah made into makeshift bedclothes, it wasn't clear whether Ilse had yet managed to recognise just who her saviour and new companion was. But there were glances and long puzzled stares that told Rebekkah that Ilse had at least identified that there was some link that bound the two together.

Ilse had scattered like the other police guards when the Russian tanks stormed towards the wretched column of prisoners, knowing that in her uniform she was the obvious target for Soviet bullets. And while Rebekkah and the others greeted their saviours with as much of their weakened energy remaining to them, Ilse ran off, losing all sight of her companions.

Eventually, after days of wandering and scavenging, having exchanged her uniform for a stolen dress, she was staggering down the street of this small town, so weak from hunger and depressed from the total destruction of the German motherland that she didn't notice the approach of a group of Soviet soldiers, exactly how many

she was never able to establish.

She was easy prey to them. She was forcibly dragged up the stairs of the nearest house, her dress torn from her before they had even kicked open the front door. And here on the mattress, the bedsprings resonating still in her memory as one after the other, or maybe more than one at the same time, the soldiers raped her. And she a girl who was betrothed and had held fast to her virginity even in these despairing last days of the Reich that lasted only twelve of its promised thousand years.

And it didn't stop at just the one violation. It continued for what seemed like, and very probably was, hours of penetration and the accompanying slaps to subdue her struggles. Taking her virginity not only from the front, the blood of her virtue coated on her inner thighs, but forcing her to undergo indignities she had never imagined were possible. Her anus was sore and bleeding. Her mouth had been as roughly violated as her crotch. And it went on, another soldier ready to replace one when the other had finished.

There had been a pause in the ordeal. In fact, there had been more than one, but these occasions were mere respites in which Ilse wept and swore unable to understand a single word her captors said either to her or to each other. But then, from a signal that Ilse was unable to recognise, the brutal assault would resume. And continue with, if anything, less respect than before as one by one the Russians lost what few inhibitions had restrained them in their previous violations.

Rebekkah comforted Ilse as best she could. She found clothes to cover her and after a day or so Ilse had recovered sufficiently to accompany Rebekkah on her foraging. But her recovery was slow and halting. She would burst into tears at the

smallest excuse and she carried about her a look of someone so traumatised that even death would be a kind of welcome relief. Her eyes reflected a darkness and vacuity that her high cheekbones merely accentuated.

In retrospect it seemed obvious that the two girls should become lovers. They nestled close each night, clung together in their shared misery, enjoying the comfort and warmth from the other's body. Rebekkah was certain that Ilse now recognised her as the Jewish prisoner she had once beaten so cruelly. It was evident from Ilse's guilty apologies for her crimes during the Nazi regime and her evasiveness regarding her activities prior to her abandonment of her position in the police battalion. But the truth of their earlier ties was not discussed at all. It was just something that both girls knew full well, but was not to be mentioned.

Rebekkah wasn't sure, as Ilse was also later unable to specify, exactly when the cuddles and consoling hugs became the first kiss or the first truly passionate embrace. But both recalled with a clarity that remained with them forever as the only memory of those dreadful days that they would choose to cherish that moment when the kisses and embraces became something much more passionate, wholly abandoned and altogether unambiguously the act of physical love.

The memory that remained distinct was not just their mutual application of tongues and fingers to those parts never willingly surrendered before, Rebekkah having retained her virginity more from the Germans' racist disgust than from any act of kindness, but those moments of tenderness when their perspiration-soaked bodies separated and the two naked girls could reflect on just what it was that they had just enjoyed. And also discovered not the feeling of disgust and shame that Rebekkah

might have imagined before that time, but an appetite for yet more that had a greater urgency than any she had ever felt before.

The delight and joy that her appetite was reciprocated made Rebekkah smile. This was the first smile on her face for over a year and one that became a fixture for all the night and for most of the following days.

Ilse's vagina, the surrounding pubic hairs, so soft and silky, the smell of her juices strengthening and later souring, the perfect folds of her labia were not as pristine now, Rebekkah reflected, so many years later, as her tongue and fingers probed, her mousey brown hair now much shorter and no longer able to brush on Ilse's thighs. But the coarser bush of hair, the sourer smell of Ilse's stimulated vagina, the ragged edges to her vulva, might now belong to a woman as menopausal as she, but it was the same Ilse.

And a woman who, despite the many intervening years, was still very much the love of her life.

Ilse gasped as Rebekkah pushed three bunched fingers into the open hole, less elastic but more loose. Her head pushed back and her greying hair, kept long and now untied, fell onto the pillow as she gave vent to the guttural cries of passion that Rebekkah knew so well. Her voice huskier than it was possible to imagine it could become was deepened and coarsened by a cigarette and whiskey habit that had only slightly lessened over the years.

And then Rebekkah pulled herself forward, over the rising hump of Ilse's stomach, no longer taut and flat, and let her tongue encircle the nipples on a bosom that had never been especially large, but was now spared the sagging from which

Rebekkah's slightly larger breasts suffered. The nipples were long and hard, and Ilse gasped in short urgent intervals as Rebekkah gently nibbled at the areola.

It was indeed a miracle that the two lovers remained together. It had been a love tested so many times. By Ilse's many infidelities. By Rebekkah's several guilty indiscretions. And most of all, by Rebekkah's doomed and wholly unsuccessful marriage to the Communist Party officer at the state bank where she had worked at the time. It was a marriage to a man many years older than Rebekkah was then, but many years younger than Rebekkah was now. Her marriage had not wholly failed, as it had resulted in Katrina, her daughter.

If Rebekkah turned her head, she might even be able to see Katrina on the television screen. She knew that her daughter was somewhere amidst the jubilant crowd in Berlin celebrating the destruction of the Wall that had so long divided the East from the rest of Germany.

But the excitement of this day, so long hoped for but almost too soon when it arrived, had become an excitement that engulfed Rebekkah and Ilse in passion, soon taking their gaze from the screen where East and West were joining hands over the rubble of this visible evidence of Communist paranoia, and focused their exhilaration on each other.

Rebekkah hoped that she could catch a glimpse of Katrina, as did Ilse who had become strangely much more a father than a second mother to her daughter. Perhaps it was the shared love for the growing girl that had brought Ilse back from the arms of her many lovers. All of whom had been women, and often ones she'd picked up in the Berlin bars when they lived in the capital city. Although Rebekkah's indiscretions,

and of course her marriage itself, betrayed a lack of total commitment to her sex, Ilse was so traumatised by her experiences at the hand of the Soviet soldiers that the mere thought of a man touching her body repulsed her in a strangely frightening way. Even an innocent hand on her shoulder or a peck on the cheek would cause Ilse to shudder and her body to become rigid. Real hostility flashed from her pale blue eyes that only the most insensitive man could fail to notice.

Rebekkah pulled her body further up Ilse's so that their stomachs pressed against each other and their crotches ground together. She ran a finger tenderly over Ilse's red lipsticked lips and studied her lover's face. She loved every one of the lines that coarsened her face, the slight sag of jowl over her mouth, the furrows on her brow, and the sags under her eyes that contrasted with her high cheekbones. She kissed Ilse tenderly on the lips and then responding from the bright flash of desire in Ilse's eyes her mouth locked itself in place, tongue doing battle with tongue, imagining she could taste the gold of Ilse's upper incisor.

It was impossible to say whether Ilse would always have preferred women so exclusively over men. In a country that sometimes treated the love they felt so strongly towards each other as a medical condition, there was no shortage of unsympathetic explanations, but Ilse was sure that their love was one they felt more for each other as lovers than for each other's sex.

But now the passion was rising and the two of them responded to the grunts and sighs of the other to bring each other upwards and forever toward the climax that came less readily now, but was accompanied with a sparser expression of vaginal release and that they expressed towards each other with rather less frequency than in

those early days of Soviet occupation when there was no excuse too slight for the two of them to abandon discretion and clothing for their conjoined lust.

And then, later, the sweat damp on their skin, Ilse's hair plastered to her cheek and long ragged neck, the two of them collapsed, their bodies still entwined, and returned their gaze to the destruction of the wall on their sputtering East German manufactured television.

The drama of the event they watched from the West German channel was interspersed by frequent interviews with dignitaries, politicians and celebrities from both sides of the forty-five year old divide. So accustomed had Rebekkah become to watching West German television that it was actually those people from the East with whom she was least familiar.

“So, it's happened! At last! One Germany. One fatherland. United!” exclaimed Ilse with genuine passion and emotion, a huge grin on her face.

Rebekkah nodded, hoping to catch a glimpse of Katrina, perhaps amongst those bashing down the wall or amongst those gathered in the evening shadows. She knew Katrina was there. Her excited phone call from the capital where she worked had left her mother in no doubt as to her intent.

“At long last, after all these years of Honeker and the DDR, the business is finished!” Ilse exclaimed.

Not quite all, reflected Rebekkah. Despite the closeness of their love and their many nights of passion. Despite the long pillow chats and the tearful confessions of guilt about the women she had seduced or let herself be seduced by. Despite a love the two had tried to rescue from Ilse's infidelity by a failed night of making love together

with a third woman, a lover from whom Ilse was reluctant to be parted. Despite all their many ups and downs, trials and tribulations, and their shared parenthood. Despite all this there was still one issue wholly unresolved.

“You know, Ilse, there is a matter we haven’t discussed.”

“There is?”

“Yes.”

“And what’s that, Becky?” asked Ilse, perhaps quietly aware what Rebekkah was alluding to.

“The time we first met.”

“In that house? After I’d been... after that awful... when...”

“No. Not that. The first time.”

“What time? What do you mean?”

There was real fear in Ilse’s eyes. She looked towards Rebekkah, not really at her, perhaps even through her. Colour appeared to be draining from her already pale face.

“You know exactly what I mean. It wasn’t there we first met. It was earlier.”

“I don’t understand. What are you saying?” asked Ilse, with a distinct tremble in her voice.

“On the forced march. The death march. You know what I’m talking about. You and your baton. I know it was you who beat me then. And I know that you know it was me you beat.”

“You can’t! You mustn’t! It’s not true!” said Ilse, with genuine panic.

“It *is* true. It is the most true thing there is.”

There was a silence between them, but not a silence in the room, as the cheers and cries of excitement continued to stream from the television set and the commentators described the exultation around them, unable to disguise the very real one they also felt.

“Yes. I know. It is true,” said Ilse at last, in a soft and tremulous voice.

And then, like a dam that had suddenly been broken, her eyes flooded with tears, her face cracked into fragments of misery, and her mouth contorted into ugly rubbery trembling. And from deep inside her came huge sobs, welling up and exploding, her chest and her bare breasts shaking with convulsions with each guttural explosion of misery.

“It was me! I know it was! I did it! How can you *ever* forgive me?”

Then, desperately, she clung to Rebekkah’s waist, arms clasped about her hips and her face, damp now from the unstoppable torrent of tears, on Rebekkah’s sagging bosom, her body shuddering with each sob.

“Please forgive me. Please. *Please!* Please say you forgive me! Please!”

Rebekkah was silent. She placed a hand steadily on Ilse’s head, not stroking her hair but just keeping it in place. Could she forgive Ilse?

The memories of those months of humiliation flooded back. The times she was forced to strip naked. The times she had been spat on and beaten. The times she had witnessed the most appalling brutalities. The woman beaten to death, although she was so weak from hunger she would have soon died anyway. The woman shot in the back as she ran desperately across the fields, followed by a bullet shot to the skull. The bloody mess that was where her face had once been. The constant cruel taunts.

The systematic denial of food that was permitted for the Slavs and Poles in the same company.

But somehow, although not especially the worst in kind, there being many beatings and many humiliations worse than that, the worst memory that haunted Rebekkah after all these decades was the beating she'd received from Ilse.

Rebekkah looked down at her trembling lover.

What was Ilse saying?

"I know I did wrong. I know what I did was wrong. So very wrong! It was then. We were taught that the Jews... that people like you... that you were less than human... that you deserved to die... I was so very very wrong!"

"That's an excuse, Ilse," Rebekkah said firmly. "No one forced you to beat me that day. And I'm sure, in fact I know because I saw, that I wasn't the only one you beat and tormented. I wasn't the only one you called a bitch or a cunt."

"*Cunt?* I called you that? *Bitch?*"

"You did!"

"Oh, Becky! I'm so sorry!"

For a moment, Rebekkah viewed this as her time of triumph. She could now abandon Ilse as she could so easily have done so many years before. Leave her Teutonic lover to rue her viciousness. But Rebekkah knew that the reason she remembered that moment so very vividly, and why, of all the torments she'd suffered, the one she received from Ilse was the one that hurt the most intensely, was precisely because of the intensity of the love she felt for Ilse and the passion they had shared so often and so equally intensely over the many years. Perhaps they had clung together so

tightly because of the strength of this unspoken guilt that Ilse had carried with her, but there was also the true love Rebekkah knew Ilse felt for her. A love that had always had her returning to her first love whatever the desire and lust she expressed towards and experienced from other women.

She stroked Ilse's hair, slowly but firmly. Ilse was quiet now, her sobs fewer, but fresh tears were still seeping free and leaving a trail on Rebekkah's bare breasts.

"Do you forgive me?" asked Ilse again, looking up, her face as miserable as that day they met in the abandoned house when the object of her misery had been violent and prolonged.

Could Rebekkah ever say anything else?

"Yes, Ilse. I forgive you."