

The Moon in a Paper Bag

A Novel By Lila Kalick

For my family, biological and logical

And for my Uncle Bill specifically, You always wanted to write a book about our family, so I wrote one about yours.

I.

Chapter 1: “Lauf!”

Northern Germany, fall, 1936: The soles of a pair of boots trample lattices of beige and ochre leaves covering the ground. The fallen leaves crunch and fracture as a yellow-haired, 15-year-old boy tears through an orchard toward a grove of taller trees ahead. His pack beats against him and he grips the top of its straps: the skin on his hands, usually pearl white, flushes with blood; his knuckles darken. He glances back over his shoulder and hears the distant but deep barks of Shepherds ringing out. His knees pull up closer and closer to his chest. He sprints.

In the oak grove, the earth is damp and slippery. The boy inhales and crisp air stings his lungs. He feels an unhealed wound on his left ribs reopen. It swells and begins to bleed. He arrives at the piled tree trunks.

Heaving layers of brush to the side, he reveals the two bicycles hidden beneath, but as he positions himself to pull one out, he trips over an exposed root.

Trapped, the boy expects to be caught at any moment. He panics and thrashes around, then relaxes his ankle, finally freeing himself.

In a matter of seconds, he dislodges the bike, mounts, and cuts through the wood to ride forcefully alongside a rotting fence. His pack’s tangled leather straps dig sharply into his shoulders. He shoves a hand into his pocket and pushes a lock of hair hidden there deeper into his trousers.

Zutritt Verboten!

At the property sign, he slams on the brakes and stops short.

The boy looks over to his right where there is open road. He returns to look at the field in front of him. The wheat crops are high, preventing visibility. A brick farmhouse in the distance has a coil of smoke coming up from its black chimney, a red flag hanging from its side. The boy swallows. He dismounts and shoves the frame to the edge of the low fence, hops it, then lifts the bike over. The path he takes goes behind the field and the house; hugging the perimeter of the forest is the only way to avoid the roadway. But not far along his route, just as the property curves, he spots an old farmer previously hidden from view.

“Halt! Dies ist privatbesitz!” The graying man hollers.

But the boy does not stop. Instead, he fakes a smile, swerves around the man, and directs his course to a driveway that leads sharply onto the road he hoped to avoid. He waves and blasts past, his heart slapping against his sternum. “Entschuldigung, danke!”

The farmer shakes and hangs his head, as the boy shoots by a large hay bale into the road. There is an open field in front of him, more woods in the distance. He pushes onward, trying as best he can to ride behind the crops along the road and remain hidden.

Meanwhile, he can't shake his breathing into a normal pattern. Instead, inhales catch in his chest and ricochet off ribs like air trapped in an accordion bellows. His wheels cut through low grasses with a whistle as he crouches down to his handlebars and shoots across the flaxen landscape. The phantom sound of marching echoes in his ears, though at this point he is far from where soldiers might be stationed. Manic thoughts drench his mind, as he surges on, the gears squealing between his legs, a memory of a military demonstration weeks before swirling around in his head.

In his memory, his class stands at attention while a captain walks by and admires the students. They salute. “Sieg Heil! The boy sees the eagle pin on the army man’s jacket, glinting silver in the sun. He bows his blonde head, wondering if the captain can tell he is Jewish by the figure 6 shape of his nose.

In the present, cold sweat soaks the boy’s undershirt clinging to his back as he peddles. He wishes to peel it from his skin. He cannot stop though, not yet. He must ride to Emden; find his uncle; figure out what’s happened. Cold wind whips at him and his worst fears for his family play out in his mind: The dogs released. His mother beaten and shoved to the ground by Gestapo. His grandmother dragged from her bed. The boy streaks along the road, ducking across farms for what feels like hours until the autumn fields shine orange with the promise of an approaching dusk. He picks up his pace, whipping through them. Tears roil his vision, making the evergreens up ahead bleed outward like inkblots in a Rorschach test.

Chapter 2: Blood and Soil

The day the Nazis came in search of Friedrich Eltzer's older brother Ephraim was the first time he had been allowed to cut hair. Their mother let him trim Ephraim's first, but seeing how much joy it brought him, she soon let him at her own spiraled locks. These days the widow Adele Eltzer could not bear to let her boys out of her sight; she needed to keep them close. This was a great struggle with her eldest Ephraim, who had just turned 19. Friedrich was 15. He still listened to her.

Adele savored the softness of Friedrich's hands as they tousled her curls. As the young man worked, she found grace in his clunky, unpolished movements. She suppressed a giggle when his eyes widened with the anticipation of the scissors' metallic sound – snip, snip, snip. While she admired his good work in their last remaining mirror, Friedrich swept up, pocketing a few of the fallen tresses. She and her sons were passing time in the kitchen at the back of the house, while the boys' grandmother slept in the next room. Their uncle, aunt, and baby cousin, with whom they also lived, were visiting more family in Emden, a nearby town.

While his brother tidied up the fallen hair, Adele's elder son Ephraim alternated between anxiously reading his newspaper and looking out the back window onto the orchard behind their house. The morning fog fell heavy on the deciduous trees, making them hard to see past, but further in the distance the oak and pine trees rose, black against a leaden sky. She watched Ephraim as he peered nervously out over the scenery and unconsciously swiped at his new haircut with his right hand.

Friedrich had come home from school a few days before badly bruised from some sort of fight and it wasn't the first time something like that had happened. Ephraim wanted to do something about it. Adele said no. The older boy sulked. "Let me handle it," he said. "No." she repeated. "It won't be long now before you leave," she explained to her sons. "In America things will be different."

But Ephraim was headstrong and arrogant. He didn't just let things go. The last few years, he spent the majority of his time in the company of rougher local boys, gentiles with shifty eyes and stiffened smiles, and had gotten a reputation for shooting off at the mouth and ending arguments with his fists.

A ribbon of blood poured from Friedrich's nose while another snaked downward toward his brow.

Adele worried he would be too proud and brash for the patient work of survival in a new place. How could he be, she thought. He hasn't known war. To him it was just a game in a far off being's mind and a chance to prove himself. Sensitive and insecure, he felt the need to constantly prove his strength by over-exerting himself. These efforts were continuously thwarted by his constitution, thin and somewhat spindly. His broad face had at its center a pin straight nose and gathered mouth that came together like an exclamation point. Above them, his head barely held his pair of sharp, bulging eyes. They were eyes that cackled back at you even when his mouth remained motionless.

In the last year, Friedrich had started to grow taller than his brother had been at his age. When he eventually eclipsed him, she knew Ephraim would take his little brother's stature as a personal affront.

She turned her gaze back to Friedrich. He was lithe too, but more naturally muscular than his brother, fairer skinned too. “Hashem, you have blessed me with my sons,” she said. A smile curled over her lips as she looked at her little one. She was only mildly surprised by the good job he had done with her hair.

As a baby at her breast, he always pulled at her ringlets, delighted by the way they straightened and bounced at his touch. These touches turned to the baby’s waves at each passerby, then eventually to sweeping, arcing handwriting on his schoolwork and undulating expressions in drawings.

Pain radiated from his left side. There was soil on his shins, smeared across his face, and on the tip of his nose from where he had been thrust to the ground.

In his sketches he never drew straight lines, as if all he knew were curves and curls. The pictures he painted were of pigeons and robins, following them as they glided and dove. He had talent. She knew this. Maybe that was why the town painter had taken him under his wing – that strange man. She only hoped The Painter wouldn’t encourage any of the oddities she had begun to perceive in her younger son.

The new boy’s eyes in math class. They were kind eyes. They were curious.

The Painter, a Catholic, had unorthodoxly decided to send his only child, Ilse, to the Jewish elementary school Friedrich and Ephraim attended before it was closed. The Painter had gone from school to school in town, speaking with them about his daughter, and liked the Jewish teachers most. Ilse was a gifted singer, and at the time, the best

music teacher in the town taught at the Jewish school. Friedrich and Ilse became good friends and he often spent time at their house.

The Painter's wife, Adele gathered, passed away in childbirth, but The Painter hadn't remained alone for long. When the children were small, The Painter's friend, another artist around his age, mysteriously came from far away to live with them. Once Adele swore she saw the two men strolling the street holding hands. It had been nearly 10 years, and neither The Painter nor his friend had taken a new wife. The townspeople whispered about the pair of them. They called them "the lust boys."

Friedrich's cheeks flushed, and he pulled his thighs closer together under his desk. His tongue had involuntarily left his mouth, so he pulled it back in and sucked at his teeth.

Adele's forehead wrinkled with worry thinking of this. Often she would find Friedrich alone in the backyard, below the window of the boys' room, or outside by the old outhouse, searching for birds' nests or simply watching the sky, and she would wonder if her younger, gentler son was searching for things that could know a freedom he never would.

He imagined a North Sea breeze catching in the boy's wavy hair.

Then again, she reasoned, maybe he was fantasizing about his Catholic girlfriend, The Painter's daughter. She stood and grabbed Friedrich from his sweeping, embracing and kissing him on the forehead. Even as he tried to pull away, she held on tightly. These last few weeks, she attempted affection with her boys often, never knowing which hug

would be their last. Friedrich's angular body knocked awkwardly between the weights of her breasts and she felt the scratch of presumptive facial hair travel across her collarbone.

"Mutti, let go! I need to finish."

But they weren't alone, Friedrich and the boy. Someone else watched them.

In the mid-1930s the tree-lined streets of the Eltzers' town, Aurich, were unchanged except for a new crop of red flags, their black symbol like two sets of mangled handlebars fused together. That year, 1936, the flags began blooming with the same cadence as the crimson hued tulips in the town square, until the entire place became a menacing shade of red.

Life the past few years in Aurich had gone on much the same as always. Adele's children grew, the seasons turned; nothing *too* different came to pass. If she heard this or that about politics she listened, but not too closely.

Maybe because of this, it took her a while to really notice the differences in the townspeople that Aurich's other Jews talked about. Perhaps she chose to ignore if her non-Jewish neighbors were less generous with their greetings than they had been before. There must be trouble for them at home, she reasoned.

If her boys or their Uncle Leo complained, she told them they were paranoid. "So there are new laws," she said. "So what!" This was the way things had always been. People weren't actually more circumspect with their chit chat at their family clothing

store where she worked as a seamstress. And their neighbors still waved when she passed by their red brick homes.

But when they saw her stopping to admire their neatly trimmed gardens filled with gooseberries, they no longer always came out, making this excuse or that.

Once, she overheard a father describe a Jewish man across the town square to his son. The man described was a shop owner, Herr Dachsguber, whom Adele knew from the synagogue:

“Look at this criminal!” The young boy’s father said sharply, motioning dramatically to the front of the shop where Dachsguber stood. “Look at that dirty beard, those bent legs! Watch how he haggles with these nice people in the street as they try to avoid him? Good riddance. Don’t ever speak to people like this, my boy. They’re despicable!”

How terrible! Adele thought. This man has done nothing wrong. Why would someone say such things? But she couldn’t focus on it for long and forgot about it quickly. There was too much to do; too much to worry about with these sons she was raising.

The bully touched the pin on his Hitler Youth uniform.

There were small things that stayed with and bothered Adele, of course, like the drawings. The cartoons of her people in *Der Stürmer* went from impish to evil. One in particular haunted her. She’d seen it only briefly when a man and his wife were pointing at their newspaper and laughing together on a bench outside a cafe in town. She peered

with casual curiosity over their shoulders, trying to see what the paper contained. It revealed an exaggerated caricature of a Jewish man's face, a Star of David painted across his forehead. The man-monster stared unwittingly out from the page. In his agape, drooling mouth, the artist had rendered fangs closing in on a shrieking German damsel.

This seemed a bit extreme. But that was satire, *wasn't it?* One person's impression. It's probably nothing to concern yourself with, she told herself.

Then came the school closings, then the book burnings and boycotts, and the slow shuttering of some of the Jewish shops and meeting places in town. The Gestapo strolled by with their guard dogs, a troop of the town's obliging thugs, and signs that demanded that people not shop at these businesses. Thankfully, Adele had been able to enroll Friedrich at the town's private boys school, though Friedrich was also the only Jew left there, a fact that had remained concealed until a schoolmate passed their family on their way to the synagogue.

Her deceased husband's family store also remained open despite the boycotts. But even though she continued to work there as a seamstress and tailor, she began to worry how much longer they would have there before they were forced out of business. Many of her best customers, women from the town for whom she'd made all manner of dresses for christenings and weddings, called on her less and less for her services. When she saw them from time to time, walking near the square, wearing new-looking designs with unevenly sewn hems, she smiled graciously at them and accepted their excuses.

"Oh Adele, yes, money is tight right now," they said.

“My husband doesn’t want me spending on such things, you know how men can be.”

But she didn’t know though, not really, not anymore.

Adele was used to feeling isolated in this way. The women unintentionally reminding her of being single was nothing new. She was widowed young, a few years after the Great War, after her husband Karl Eltzer, whose proud mother would brag to anyone who would listen about the Iron Cross her son won for his service to the Kaiser, suddenly succumbed to a mysterious illness. She was left behind to contend with her in-laws and two young children.

Twelve years had passed since her husband’s death. Now these children were young men, which brought their own considerations. Ephraim had already been apprenticing for two years with her and Leo at the store, where he struggled to prove himself. And then there was Friedrich’s education to worry about. He kept getting into trouble at school.

When Friedrich finally spoke to him, the new boy’s voice was ethereal. He recognized in it something similar to his own voice. A hidden thing, rooted, but packed down with too much earth to see the sun.

But the boys, their grandmother, their Uncle Leo, his wife Frieda, and their baby daughter Margaret, they had all gotten along fine despite things so far. Though the thriving Jewish community in Aurich had dwindled and many in their extended family had moved to America, Adele was confident they would remain. She thought everything

happening with these Nazis, with the Gestapo, must be a phase. Much like her little Friedrich's eccentricities, she assumed it would pass.

Then one day, Adele overheard the news that changed everything. The Painter and his friend had been arrested on charges of homosexuality. They were taken from their home and sentenced to prison time, the girl Ilse sent to live with relatives in Hamburg.

But how quickly a sound can change. How quickly a note can go from sweet to shrill, from promising to ominous.

"How disgusting!" She overheard two townspeople discussing what happened at the shop. "He had a child."

"There's no room for such scum in Germany."

"Don't worry. They'll show them in prison."

Adele turned away, finishing a package for one of the customers, while her ears rang with their words. The air had left the room and pain radiated from the back of her neck's knotted flesh. Soon her Friedrich would be a man, and the townspeople would start to talk. Perhaps they already had.

She cursed herself for letting Ilse and Friedrich's friendship continue as long as it had; for thinking somehow the sight of them together might protect him. Now she saw how all of it could backfire. Only a slightly more observant townspeople would have noticed the neutrality of the charge between the two children. And now Friedrich was

linked to the sinful bunch of them! It was finally clear to her that something real and sinister had touched the town, something that could come for her family, for her baby.

So she called upon the strength she'd used before, before when she lost her husband, before when she moved away from her family, and she made a plan: Erase Friedrich's existence, send him to Holland where her husband's family had business contacts then on to America to be with her brother.

Ephraim would go with him. They would meet people in Philadelphia, perhaps a wealthy sponsor who, along with her brother that lived there, could help the rest of them over. She set out to convince Leo of the idea, sending the boys on an invented errand so she could speak openly with him, and her sister- and mother-in-law.

"What does that have to do with Friedrich?" her brother-in-law growled after she explained about The Painter. "That boy is just sensitive is all. He just needs to toughen up!"

Adele watched Leo run his fingers impatiently through his auburn hair. The flecks of gold in it had just started to dull with age. Her sister-in-law Frieda sat beside him at the kitchen table nursing their baby. She said nothing. She rarely did. The boys' grandmother lifted her head slightly from the corner at the sound of her son's raised voice, but then returned to staring out the window.

Adele went quiet. How could they all remain so passive and avoid the truth of their situation? She continued to stare at Leo's hair, and watched as his shoulders curled forward. There was so little of her Karl in his brother that looking at him only reminded

her of how she could no longer conjure up her deceased husband's face without consulting photographs. She looked up and over to her mother-in-law, hoping for some support, but the old woman was still turned away, gazing at the sun setting in the distance.

These were the people Adele had lived with all her adult life. Certainly, she thought, if she could speak honestly, she must be able to do it here, among family. She needed to say it aloud; to say what she knew. If men like The Painter and his friend were being arrested, her son didn't stand a chance.

But when Leo met her eyes again, she felt her throat brim with salt.

How could she face him staring at her so? Daring her to say out loud what everyone must know, what they *must* see about Friedrich, even at dusk, when the murky light obscured it. She took a shallow breath, paused, and then began again.

"You agree that the boys must carry on our family name," she said, projecting the power of her voice toward where the older woman stood. It turned out to be a good tactic. Her mother-in-law finally extricated herself from whatever she fixated on at the window and turned to nod at her. Adele waited and watched as the others nodded slowly in agreement. Frieda cradled the baby who whined softly.

"Well then," Adele stood from the table to walk across the kitchen and collect herself. She was relieved when she felt the strength in her voice return and her throat relax. "If the Nazis are taking away their own, you might venture a guess into who will go next?"