

Translated excerpt

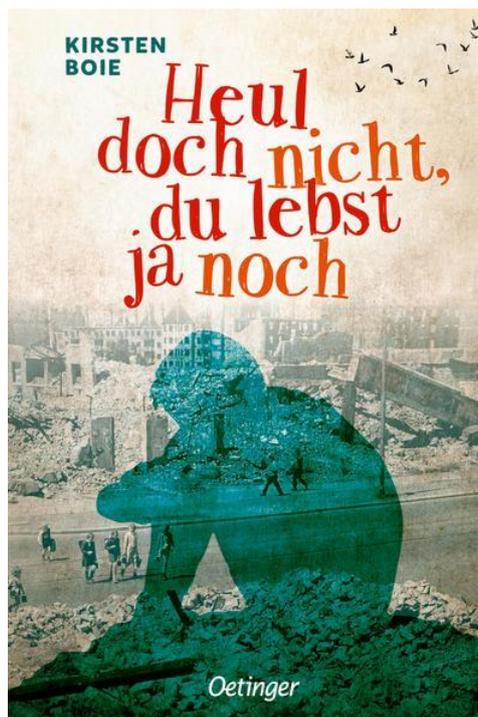
**Kirsten Boie**  
***Heul doch nicht, du lebst ja noch***

Oetinger Verlag, Hamburg 2022  
ISBN 978-3-7512-0163-6

pp. 112-125

**Kirsten Boie**  
***Don't Cry, You're Still Alive***

Translated by Helena Kirkby



Tuesday 26.6.1945

JAKOB

Thank goodness it was light so early in summer. It meant that the night was over, even though there weren't any birds singing in the new day above the ruins. But the sun was slowly creeping over the horizon, and Jakob could finally try to get a bit of sleep at last. He knew, though, that his stomach wouldn't allow him to sleep until he'd managed to find something to eat.

And now that was light, his thoughts were also clearer. He drank a cup of water; water made you feel fuller, too.

They didn't recognise him. The children yesterday, that is. They laid into him because he was trying to ambush that woman, and maybe because they'd already seen the brooch. But they hadn't realised who he was.

A German boy.

Nobody would be able to tell, Jakob mused. The crazy thing is that I got my blond hair from my mother. Her blond hair and her blue eyes. No Jewish boy looks like that. At home, they laughed about it at first; they sometimes laughed - earlier, this

was, much earlier - at the pictures in *Stürmer*: the pictures of Jews with disgusting big noses and sly expressions.

“Bloody ridiculous!” my father had said, pulling my mother into his arms. “If someone were to try to guess which one of us was Jewish, who do you reckon they’d go for?”

Then they had stopped laughing. There wasn’t any reason to laugh; persecution isn’t something to laugh about. And although in the early years my mother could get away with doing pretty much everything that was forbidden to Jews, there was no getting away with it by the time she had a great big J stamped on her identity card. Her second name, Sara, was a giveaway too. That put paid to any idea of travelling by tram or going to the park, or to the theatre, or to the cinema, or to a concert. Her blonde hair couldn’t help her now.

But it might help him. That night, it became clear to Jakob that he was lost. Help wasn’t coming. So long as Herr Hofmann had kept coming, everything was okay. But nobody could survive completely on their own. Ambushing someone wasn’t as easy as he’d imagined it to be.

He needed to find the kids from yesterday. He’d tell them the story about Friedrich Hofmann whose house was bombed out, whose mother was killed in the bombing, and whose father died at Stalingrad. And he’d take the chain with him, the one that went with the powder blue dress. He might be able to

swap the chain for something to eat. “You might well need it,” Herr Hofmann had said.

And the big boy, the one wearing the Hitler Youth shirt, had taken the brooch off him. Maybe he wanted to give it to his mother. Or maybe he had something better in mind for it. Maybe he could help Jakob with his chain.

Jakob drank another cup of water. That would have to do, until he could find something to eat.

HERMANN

Hermann couldn't bear it any longer. His mother set off early for Holstenhofweg wearing his father's work suit, his papers in his battered briefcase, a bit nervous but full of confidence. “Fiete, Hermann - wish me luck!” she had said. “Keep your fingers crossed for me!”

The look his father had given her was full of hatred. But he hadn't said a word. You can only forbid things that you can actually prevent.

Then his father had rolled one cigarette after another, and Hermann had wrenched open the kitchen door. Nothing but ruins outside, and not a single other kid to be seen on the pavement.

Tobacco couldn't be that bad for you, if his father used the end of one cigarette to light the next one. Hermann was almost

happy about the smoke. It masked the other smell, the one he'd never get used to.

“I'm going out,” Hermann said. “You're smoking like a chimney. Do you want me to get you some more?”

His father inhaled deeply. He looked as if he were about to shout at Hermann. But then his shoulders dropped and he nodded.

Hermann loitered around in the street, waiting. The others would be along soon; at least it was dry today. He'd never have imagined that he'd long for school. For school but, more importantly, for other young people. For the evenings spent singing songs, making camp fires, doing exercises. For the work harvesting potatoes with his mates. There had always been something to do. Now the days were empty.

Then he saw it. The end of the road. He screwed up his eyes. Yes - there was Ludwig, the American. Wasn't he back in his American zone yet? What was he doing here?

He might have some more cigarettes, Hermann thought. His father would be angry if the American showed up - even more angry than he normally was - but he'd be more than happy to have the American's cigarettes. They'd probably be better than the Rübenkamp stuff.

Ludwig had meanwhile spotted him too. He waved. “Hi, Hermann!” he said.

Hi. That's American. Typical of the Amis - everything was so laid-back, as if nothing mattered, neither politeness nor discipline. They weren't civilised people - they were all cowboys. Their soldiers hung out in their jeeps as if they were going on a weekend jolly. Not a scrap of honour about them. That was at least one thing the Tommies had going for them. They did at least know how to behave properly.

“Hi, Hermann!” Ludwig said again, as if he thought Hermann hadn't heard him. “I wanted to have a word with your parents before I go back!” And he carried on, heading towards the front door.

“My mother isn't there,” Hermann said curtly.

The American stopped abruptly and looked at him. “Gone to shovel rubble?” he asked. “Where will I find her?”

Hermann shrugged. He wasn't telling the American anything. Who knew whether he might not snitch on his mother to the Tommies. After all, they were allies, the Amis and the Tommies.

“I don't know where she's gone,” he said. “She never tells me.”

Ludwig pulled a face as if he believed Hermann. “Just your father up there?” he asked. Hermann nodded.

Ludwig sighed. “That’s tricky,” he said. “ I had something important to discuss with her.”

He had already worked out that Hermann’s father played no role now, Hermann thought. He was surprised to find that this made him angry. But not angry enough to suggest that Ludwig talk to his father.

“I had a suggestion for you all,” Ludwig said. “I’ve been talking to my Major.” He looked Hermann up and down, as if he was seeing him for the first time. “Come on, let’s sit down.”

He settled himself on what was left of a wall and lit a cigarette. “Do you want one?”

Hermann nodded, but when the American made to light it for him, he shook his head. The cigarette was for his father. He’d never smoked; there was no point to it, and what would he do if he tried one and actually liked it? Then he might end up with an insatiable craving for cigarettes like his father and so many other men. Being constantly hungry was bad enough.

“Listen, Hermann!” the American said. “I saw how things are for you, the day before yesterday. I can’t say how sorry I am. But there’s nothing I can do. This is the British zone. If it were ours ...” He shrugged helplessly.

Ours? Hermann thought. Ours? It isn’t yours! You’re already talking about the American zone as if it were yours - but it’s still in Germany!

“I can’t help your father,” the American continued. “Though believe me, I’d love to. It’s all terrible for him, but I can’t do anything about it. But you - ” he gave Hermann a penetrating look - “you’re still so young! You’ve got your whole life ahead of you. So I spoke with my Major. It should be possible for you to come back to the States with us when I go back home. There are ways to do this, I’ll vouch for you, we’re related. Obviously your parents would have to agree. You could go to school, train for a useful career. What kind of future do you have here? How long will it be before ...” Ludwig looked around “I can’t help your father, Hermann. But I might be able to help you.”

Hermann stared at him. His head felt as if someone had swept up its entire contents.

“I was going to discuss it with your mom,” Ludwig said. “But at least I’ve told you now. Have a think. Have a chat with them about it. I need to go now. But we’ll be back in Hamburg in a couple of weeks. Then we’ll have plenty of time to talk it through. For now, just mull it over.”

Hermann remained silent. But Ludwig didn’t seem to be expecting an answer. He put his hand on Hermann’s shoulder. “You’re a brave lad!” he said, and Hermann realised that this kind of “brave” was different from the one they talked about in the Hitler Youth. “Give these cigarettes to Fiete. Give him my regards.”

Then he winced. “Or should I ...?” he asked.

Hermann shook his head vigorously. “It’s fine. I’ll do it.”

As Ludwig made his way down the road, he waved back at Hermann. The Amis were the enemy. But there was always enough to eat in America.

HERMANN

Hermann watched the American go. He was clutching a packet of Lucky Strikes, but he couldn’t take them up now.

America! He could go to America!

His heart was pounding, and he had to sit down. The Amis - they were the enemy. They *are* the enemy! They hadn’t a clue about anything. Not a scrap of honour between them. They were just a bunch of cowboys. But there was always something to eat in America.

His stomach contracted painfully. And maybe he could get his mother to join him later. He could learn a trade, find work, earn money. They’re all rich in America! She could come out and join him.

He suddenly felt frightened. His father. What on Earth would his father do in America? And would they even allow him in - a cripple with no legs?

His mother wouldn't go without his father.

But I can! Hermann suddenly thought. I can!

He conjured up a picture in his mind of skyscrapers, fast cars, prairies, Indians. He imagined a vast country full of possibilities, a life packed with adventure, full of dishes piled high with roast meat.

And if his parents couldn't follow on, he could always send them parcels. Tins of meat, dried fruit, proper coffee beans, chocolate, cigarettes, soap. Warm winter clothes! It would be better for all of them - him with the Amis and his parents in Hamburg. No, he had to go. He wanted to go! He wasn't afraid. Hermann had never been fazed by anything.

His heart was racing now. It would be a couple of weeks before the American returned to discuss it all. If only his mother had been there! And what if Ludwig didn't return? What if it was all just talk? What if he changed his mind once he was back in the American zone? What if he forgot about Hermann? They wouldn't even know how to write to him. "Dear Ludwig, we agree with your suggestion. Please let us know what we need to do in order for Hermann to return to the USA with you, and what he needs. With German greetings" - no!: "with best wishes, Ursel and Fiete." But they didn't have his address.

He then suddenly came to his senses, and he felt the anger rising - anger mixed with despair. It was crazy even to imagine this. His father was sitting on the sofa in the kitchen upstairs, and needed to be carried to the mezzanine floor. What was he supposed to do if Hermann went off with the Amis? He should never even have considered it. He was going to have to stay here forever. Forever, forever, forever. For Hermann, there would be no America; his father has lost his legs, and he had lost his future.

He banged his fist on the remnant of a wall and cried out with pain.

Don't be a whingebag, be as tough as leather, as hard as Krupps steel. German boys don't cry. German boys don't whinge. And the Amis are in any case the enemy.

Then he saw the boy from yesterday.

**JAKOB**

Jakob immediately spotted the big boy; he didn't even have to start searching among the ruins for the kids. The boy was leaning against the wall of one of the few houses that were still standing, turning a box of cigarettes over in his fingers. Were they allowed to smoke in the Hitler Youth? German girls didn't drink or smoke or wear make-up. German boys didn't want to wear make-up anyway. But smoking? The boy was now putting the box into the breast pocket of his uniform shirt.

He was the very one who'd taken the brooch off him yesterday. The one who'd thrown him to the ground. Jakob had run away from him. Never mind. Nobody can survive on their own; he'd come to realise that.

“Heil Hitler!” Jakob said, raising his right arm. He was surprised by how easy he found it, and how firm his voice sounded. He'd never said “Heil Hitler!” before - or “Sieg Heil!” He wouldn't have been allowed to. The German greeting was only for Germans. Jews were forbidden to use it.

The boy stared at him and screwed up his eyes. “What?” he said belligerently, taking a step towards Jakob. “Idiot!”

He wasn't returning the salutation. A member of the Hitler Youth who wasn't responding to the German greeting! Had he realised after all that Jakob wasn't someone who wasn't allowed to raise his arm? Or was it a sign of something? Anyone who refused to say “Heil Hitler” was also refusing to swear allegiance to the Führer. Anyone who refused to say “Heil Hitler” was punished.

“What?” the boy repeated.

Jakob took a deep breath. “It's about yesterday!” he said. “I just wanted ...”

“I know exactly what you wanted!” the boy retorted, and Jakob's heart contracted for a moment. “Have you forgotten? I saw you! You wanted to rob that woman! You've got a nerve

coming here!” He took a further step towards Jakob and clenched his fists.

“Please!” Jakob said. “No, honestly, please listen! I was starving - that’s why I did it. Please!” The boy stopped. “I told you we’d been bombed out! Not in Eilbek - in town!” He pointed back over his shoulder to the centre of the town. Anything to stop the boy asking him why he’d never seen him around before. And nobody would in any case believe that he’d spent the past two years since the bombing living on his own among the ruins in this part of town. But the last raid on the town centre, the day raid following which Herr Hofmann had brought him here: that would do. “And I’ve got no money. I ...”

“So?” the boy said. His hackles were still up. “You’re not the only one who’s been bombed out, are you? Just look around. Didn’t you tell the Tommies you were here?”

This was a danger point.

Jakob shook his head. “I didn’t know what was going on,” he whispered. Just don’t say the wrong thing. “I couldn’t think straight. It wasn’t here, it was only a couple of weeks ago, and when I saw my mother ...” He didn’t have to try. His sobs came from deep inside him. True: he hadn’t seen her lying under the rubble. But it was bad enough to think of her holding her suitcase.

The boy unclenched his fists. “Shit!” he said. He was clearly imagining something different. Was there a note of pity in his voice? “So you ran away and decided to stay here? So that you didn’t have to see it any more?”

Jakob nodded. He couldn’t speak.

Then he took a deep breath. He reached into his trousers pocket and took out the chain. “I thought I might be able to ...” he whispered. “Somewhere? When I’ve got no money?”

The other boy stretched out his hand greedily. “No problem in the countryside,” he said. “Everyone does it. But you’ve got to get there first.” He took the chain, looked at it, and gave it back to Jakob. “Your best bet is to get rid of it on the black market,” he said. “But I don’t know how much you’ll get for it.” He shrugged. “Quince jelly!” he then said, and Jakob wondered why he suddenly started laughing. “Yes - you go there.”

“To the black market?” Jakob asked.

“Hansaplatz!” the boy said. “Haven’t you heard of it? They’ll exchange anything there.”

Jakob stared at him. “And it’s allowed?” he asked.

The boy was now looking at him as if he had dropped down from another planet. “Of course not!” he said. “You’ll need to take care that nobody catches you.”

Nothing new there, then, Jakob thought. I'm used to that.

But he was surprised that a boy in a Hitler Youth uniform was suggesting something so forbidden. Perhaps Jakob didn't need to be scared of him after all. First no German greeting, and now this.

The boy looked upwards at the façades of the houses, as if he were wondering whether he ought to go upstairs. Then he turned back to Jakob.

“If you'll give me a share, I'll come with you,” he said. He held out his hand to Jakob. “Hermann!”

Jakob took his hand and shook it. “Friedrich!” he said. He had almost dropped himself in it. He would be even safer with someone in uniform. Then he wouldn't just be relying on his blond hair.

## JAKOB

They walked along without speaking. Jakob hardly dared to look around. When had he last walked through the streets? It was the night that he'd been out with Herr Hofmann. It had been only two days after the last bombing raid when the old man had smuggled Jakob away because the old witch next door had started to become suspicious. But when had he last been out in daylight? It had been a rainy day in February. The day when his mother had set off for the lodge.

Don't think about it. It was summer now.

“Impossible to remember what all this looked like, isn't it?” Hermann said as they reached the Alster. Jakob wondered what he meant. “The dummy houses and stuff!” Hermann said. “I've completely forgotten how it looked before, when you could still see all the water. Fucking Tommies.”

Jakob wasn't sure how to respond. “Yes. Fucking Tommies,” he said, remembering the night he had spent by the window watching the town burn. That was the English at work. Fucking Tommies.

There weren't many people around. Jakob felt safer with every step.

“And now they think they can tell us what to do!” Hermann said. “First they come and bomb everything to bits, then they start acting like Lord Muck.”<sup>[L T L]</sup><sub>[SEP SEP]</sub> “Eh?” Jakob said. He didn't understand what Hermann meant.

“Helping themselves to our girls!” Hermann continued, as if Jakob hadn't spoken. He kicked a stone ahead of him as he carried on walking. “And those stupid uniforms! And of course they've always got enough to eat, and cigarettes ...”

“Eh?” Jakob said again. What was this Hermann boy talking about?

At that moment a vehicle came towards them, and Jakob jumped aside. Soldiers! His heart skipped a beat. But the vehicle passed them by without any further ado. One of its occupants flicked an unfinished cigarette onto the ground in passing, and Hermann ran to pick it up.

Jakob froze. That wasn't a German jeep, and the soldiers weren't wearing Wehrmacht uniforms.

“Fucking Tommies,” Hermann repeated, and spat on the ground. But only once the soldiers couldn't see him.

Jakob froze. He felt sick. Everything was swirling around him; he didn't want to faint. He sat on the ground. Fucking Tommies.

“Friedrich?” Hermann said, startled.

“They were English!” Jakob whispers. “Why ...” Everything started to swirl around him again. He tried to take some deep breaths.

“Of course they were English,” said Hermann. “I told you so! Acting like Lord Muck! Constantly feeling the need to show us who won!”

Then everything went black.