

Cathie Fidler

In Hazy Zones



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*Translated from the French
by Katy Scrogin*

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Author's Note

These stories, although inspired by actual events, are fictional.

All characters are the imaginative products of the author, and the geographical reference points have been blurred.

Hence, the reader should be able to recognize the essential truths of these stories, without searching for factual accuracy within them.

The only matters of importance are the questions these tales bring forth.

Translator's Note

The translator has included a few glossary items at the end of the book, in order to clarify some historical or geographical references with which American readers may be unfamiliar. Glossary items are listed according to the order in which they appear in the text.

*The parents have eaten sour grapes, and
the children's teeth are set on edge.*

Ezekiel 18, NRSV



From A Dead End

I

Deep furrows creased the man's pale face; the woman pressing herself against him was transparent with fear. Stooped and huddled together, they looked desperate to melt into the shadow of the shelter where, fists clenched, barely breathing, they submitted to their instruction in the ways of terror. Even before they had endured the worst, they had already tasted its bitterness, felt its cruelty, been submerged in its sorrow. They knew what to expect; they had already seen too much, suffered too much, to dream of survival. How long would this respite last? They were infected with the paralysis of despair. But then they would pull themselves together, trusting in their hideaway. Such a destructive back-and-forth even caused them, in their desperate attempt to protect their daughter, to deny her actual existence.

The little girl clasped her bear against her belly, like a hot water bottle that would warm her heart. His fur was plush, a light brown mohair. The fine wood shavings of his insides tickled his soft tummy, and his black eyes sparkled, well-polished buttons torn from a pair of ankle boots. She knew he was watching her, and that the little piece of metal fastened to his left

ear let him hear her secrets, and keep them. She knew, too, that the woolen claws crocheted onto his fat paws would protect her from the mean men who followed and terrorized not only her, but the grown-ups in her family as well. What could make such intimidating adults tremble, almost as badly as she did, when faced with the men in black coats?

“Look, Fritz, I’ll keep you here in the closet. Don’t be afraid; I won’t leave you.”

“Be quiet, Elsie, I already told you not to talk in the closet; you have to get used to it, you never know... The littlest bit of noise could cost us our lives.”

“But *Mutti*, you’re talking, aren’t you?”

“Don’t argue, just do it, that’s all there is to it.”

No, she really didn’t understand adults and their rules.

The closet was a clever hiding place. Its double door, painted the same color as the wall, concealed a space big enough to hold three or four people, sitting or standing. When she stepped inside, Elsie dreamed of passing from the other side of a secret mirror that granted her access to a magical place, just like in the story her papa used to read to her, before, when he still had the patience and the composure to do it.

“Before:” that was a whole other life, already growing blurry. Even the memory of her pretty room, done up in its wallpaper of finely embossed flowers; the little rattan armchair where she gave Fritz his meals; even the doll she had named Marlene, whose porcelain complexion and polished nails she loved so much – such heartache when she had to choose which of the two friends to take with her! She had left

Marlene on her bed, made up so carefully with the eiderdown blanket tucked into a pink percale slipcover – as if she would come back after a brief trip abroad.

“Goodbye, Marlene, be good! I’ll be back soon, don’t cry; you’re a big girl like me, and look, *I’m* not crying,” Elsie sobbed, while her father begged her to come downstairs; the train wouldn’t wait for them.

Her room was on the second floor of an imposing townhouse. When she broke the rules and leaned out the window, she could make out the statue of Bismarck on his bronze horse, casting his protective air over the square around him. Every evening before going to bed, Elsie waved over to him, asking him to keep the monsters out of her room. Some monsters, though, weren’t his responsibility.

Her parents’ room, in which she never set foot, was on the other side of the hall. Her older brother, Hans, had his room right next to hers, but it had stayed locked ever since the young man had fled the house, his only luggage the little silver dishes and ashtrays that had held pride of place in the dining room cabinet. Apart from the few words that he’d left for his mother, informing her of his flight to Holland, they had heard nothing more from him, and no one knew where he could be.

Next came the simply decorated little bedroom for the nanny – or “governess,” as they all said – the ever-vigilant guardian and watch dog over her every move. Fräulein Anna, the last to hold the post, was Prussian, her manner so military that her gray uniform lacked only the pointed helmet – Bismarck’s bona fide domestic counterpart.

“Stand up straight, keep your head up, put your hands on the table, take that sweater off, it’s not that cold...” The orders were hammered into her on a daily basis. But more than all of Fräulein Anna’s icy reprimands, Elsie dreaded her obsessive punctuality, and even worse, the meals that she supervised without even a hint of sympathy for the little girl’s disgust for this or that type of food. Every morsel dished onto a plate was to have disappeared by the end of the meal, under threat of being served again at dinner, or even the next morning at breakfast.

Needless to say, Elsie took her meals in the kitchen, under the watchful eye not only of Fräulein Anna, but of the maids and the cook as well, only to creep back to her room on the second floor, to take the nap that she abhorred.

In the closet, at least, she was free from that strict young lady, who hadn’t had to flee. Her image was slowly disappearing, too, her features growing smudged, her silhouette ever more vague; even her colorless old lady’s clothing had started to melt away like a sodden watercolor, warping the pages of the photo album in her mind.

Oddly enough, the only impressions that remained were olfactory: only the odors of the great house that had been hers had survived. The scents of tar soap and resinous pine, of the laundry room; the persistent, sweet-and-sour smell of red cabbage; the hints of polish and cologne; the pungency of geranium leaves crushed between her tiny fingers: they all lingered in her nostrils, even though the sweet perfumes of lavender and rosemary had replaced them now.

“Alright, we can go out now. But that doesn’t mean you can make any noise. You mustn’t attract attention, or disturb Monsieur and Madame Basino.”

It was a recurring test of the closet. For her parents, it was a question, in some ways, of getting the trio used to the challenge of smallness, of discomfort, of overcrowding, of heat... maybe it was also a means of conquering fear, of transforming this cage into a real refuge, and not an early grave.

The house that surrounded the closet was spacious, smaller than hers back home, but large enough so that the three of them could live in two rooms, on the floor above the Basinos, who owned the home. They had agreed, for a substantial compensation – such was the risk – to take in this family on the run, to feed them – to hide them.

And yet the layout wasn’t at all satisfying: the house itself sat squarely in the middle of a cul-de-sac. After the rarely used road split off, it twisted up towards the summit of one of the many hills overlooking Nice. Evenings brought with them the clip-clop of tired horses, the drivers leading them back to the stables after a hard day spent carting wealthy, carefree visitors along the Promenade des Anglais. There hadn’t been much traffic today, save the deaf and mute, even blind, pensioners strolling out from the nearby institute run by the Sisters. Not much to fear from them – but a cul-de-sac...

The family never went outside. In front of the larger of the two rooms, their view of the outdoors consisted of the geraniums hung on the balcony. The nights were so stuffy with anguish for the parents that

they had no patience left to deal with their daughter during the day.

She wasn't worried, though; with Fritz at her side, nothing could happen to her.