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To understand the story that follows, you have to remember a few things. Actually, you have to *forget* a few things. You have to forget everything that you know about World War II, about Nazi Germany, and about the Holocaust. This tale begins in the summer of 1939, and the characters in it—many of whom were real people—did not know that World War II was about to begin. And they certainly didn't expect the Holocaust to occur, with its death camps and gas chambers. It's hard to believe it now, but to average people in England and Germany in 1939, the mass murder of six million Jews, and millions of others, was quite literally unimaginable.

Even so, in 1939, life for Jews in Germany was brutal and frightening. Which is why many left, and why some of those who couldn't leave resorted to sending their children far away from home . . .

CHAPTER

One

Once there was a boy who had two immortal creatures living on his shoulders.

This was the fourth most interesting thing about him.

The first most interesting thing about Max—that was his name—was that he was a genius. He could make a working radio from the junk at the bottom of a trash can, and he could usually predict what someone was going to say ten minutes before they said it.

The second most interesting thing about Max was that, when he was eleven years old, his parents sent him away from Germany, where he was born and grew up, to England. All by himself. Even though he'd never been there, didn't know anyone there, and barely spoke any English.

The third most interesting thing about Max was that, when he got to England, he fell in with spies. Real, honest-to-goodness spies. A lot of them.

And the fourth most interesting thing about him was that he had two immortal creatures living on his shoulders.

But that's probably what you have the most questions about, so let's start there.

The two immortal creatures appeared the day his parents sent him to England.

His family had been arguing about it for weeks. Their small Berlin apartment shook as Max had stomped from the living room to his bedroom to the kitchen and back again, shouting things like:

"You *can't* make me go!"

"Everything is *fine*! Who cares about the stupid Nazis?! They don't matter!"

"What if you *need* me?!"

And, more quietly, alone in his room, "*What if I need you?*"

But no matter what Max said, his parents had refused to change their minds. His mother had held him at the train station against her soft stomach, while his small, thin father had stroked Max's hair. They'd waved as the train pulled out, taking Max and the 198 other Jewish children to Holland and the ferry. Max hadn't waved back. He'd just stared at them and thought, *How could you do this?*

The 198 children had left the train station in Holland and boarded a steam-powered ferry. With a blast of its foghorn, the ship had pushed out into the North Sea, bound for England.

Thirty-one minutes later, Max had fallen asleep.

This might be a little surprising. But after a trauma—something really awful that happens to you—your brain often

makes you fall asleep right away. Maybe to help you process the trauma. Or maybe because your brain is scared of more traumas, and figures you won't have to experience them if you're asleep. Whatever the reason, it happens a lot. And it happened to Max.

So he fell asleep thirty-one minutes into the ferry ride.

Thirty-two minutes into the ferry ride, he heard a voice in his ear.

"Max. *Max!*"

Max jerked awake and looked around.

"Max, you are drooling."

Max quickly wiped his mouth.

Wait. Who said that?

He looked to either side of him. He was sitting on a bench in the belly of the steamship. There were other kids on other benches. Some boys were sleeping, leaning against each other, not too far away. A girl had her face buried in a handkerchief, sitting across from Max. But the voice had been right next to his ear. And it had *not* sounded like a kid's voice.

"What'd you wake him up for?" said another voice, very near his other ear.

"He was drooling. It was disgusting! I thought he would want to know!"

Max spun from side to side. *Where were these voices coming from?*

"You think he doesn't have bigger problems than drooling

in his sleep? The poor kid just lost his country, his home, his parents. You can't let him drool a little?"

Now Max was staring at his left shoulder. His eyes came into focus.

Crouching there was a tiny man with a bulbous nose, thinning hair, twinkling eyes, and a sour smile.

"Hiya," he said.

Max screamed and fell off the bench.

The sleeping boys woke up with a start and looked around to see what the commotion was. The girl across the way lowered her handkerchief and glared through wet eyelashes at Max.

"No need to scream." This was coming from Max's right shoulder. He turned . . . and saw *another* tiny man, who looked exactly like the first. This tiny man said, "We are not going to hurt you."

"He's not worried we're going to *hurt* him," said the little creature on Max's left shoulder, who Max would later learn was called Stein. "He's worried he's going insane."

"You are not going insane," said the creature on Max's right shoulder, who Max would later learn was called Berg. "We are really here! Sitting on your shoulders!"

Berg spoke with an antique German accent, like something out of a storybook.

Stein sounded more like a vaudeville comedian.

Max looked desperately to the children on the other benches. They were staring at him.

“Don’t worry,” said Berg. “They cannot see us. Or hear us.”
“Just like we can’t hear you! Say something!” Stein demanded.

Max said, “I’m dreaming.”

“Nope!” Stein said. “Not a dream!”

Max put his butt on his bench. He eyed both of these tiny men warily, his gaze flitting between them. Then he said, “I’m gonna go back to sleep. Since this is a dream, when I wake up for real, you’re going to be gone.”

“I wouldn’t count on it,” said Berg.

“Yeah, not gonna happen,” added Stein. “Sorry, kid.”

Max did not believe them. His eyelids were so heavy they closed themselves.

Max slept the remaining seven hours and fourteen minutes of the journey to England.

He dreamed of his parents sitting on the threadbare sofa in their living room, listening to the radio Max had built for them, the way they always did after Max’s father got home from work: Papa’s eyes closed behind his wire-rimmed spectacles, his head resting against the cushions; Mama twisting her long hazelnut hair up away from her neck and smiling proudly at Max, who was on the rug leaning against their knees. But in the dream, instead of the symphonic music the radio station usually played, the wireless set was illogically making announcements about the ferry ride. Still, the dream should have made Max happy. But instead it filled him with an emotion

he did not have a word for. Maybe the word was *longing*. Or maybe it was *guilt*?

But why should Max feel guilty? He hadn't *chosen* to leave.

Then the ferry's foghorn blew three blasts to the boats in Harwich Port, and Max woke with a start.

He rubbed his eyes. The children around Max were peering out of portholes, gazing at the industrial coastline of shipyards and cargo docks. Wondering what the next days, weeks, and months would hold for them. Wondering how they would like their new foster families. And wondering when their parents would be joining them in England.

Not knowing that very few of their parents would be joining them in England.

At least, Max thought, that weird dream about the creatures on my shoulders is over—

"*There's our sleeping beauty!*" shouted Stein, grinning at Max.

"You drooled again! It was gross!" added Berg.

Never mind.