



T R O P H Y   N E W B E R Y

# The Upstairs Room

JOHANNA REISS

Prequel to THE JOURNEY BACK

It was the only safe  
place they knew.





# 1

I was not very old in 1938, just six, and a little thing. Little enough to fit between the wall and Father's chair, which in those days was always pulled up in front of the radio. He sat with his face close to the radio, bent forward, with his legs spread apart, his arms resting on his knees. And he listened.

"Father, look at this." I held out a drawing I had made.

"Ssht."

"Father, I asked you to. . . ."

He listened, but not to me.

Where was Austria, which Hitler had attached to Germany in the spring? It was not a nice thing to have done, I guessed. Father had looked angry.

Hitler. All the man on the radio ever talked about was Hitler. He must be an important man in Germany. Why didn't he like German Jews? Because he didn't. Why else would he be bothering them. The radio said he did.

"Father . . ."

"Sshh."

Or why would he let Jews buy food only at certain hours? Or arrest them and put them in jail? Only the jail was called a camp. But Germany wasn't Holland. I smiled. A good thing! If we lived in Germany, Hitler might do the same thing to us. He must have been the man who had just told the German people they could steal things from Jews. Anything they liked they could take. Or burn. The German people could even arrest Jews, just like that.

The radio said something had happened. A Jewish boy had killed a German man. That wasn't nice. But allowing people to run through the streets in Germany one night and do all those things to the Jews was not nice either. It had a special name that night: *Kristallnacht*.

"Father, what does *Kristallnacht* mean?"

"Sshh, Annie. I'm listening."

That was all Father said to me these days. And I didn't like it. He used to say much more to me, nice things. Even play with me. How could I ever find out anything if he never answered questions? I got to my feet. Mother would tell me. I walked into her bedroom to ask her what the word *Kristallnacht* meant, but she had a headache again. How come bad kidneys give you headaches?

Well anyway, Germany wasn't Holland. I frowned. Winterswijk was near the German border though, less than twenty minutes away. That's how close it was.



Some farmers lived so close to the border that their cows grazed in Germany, only across the road from their houses. I knew because Father was a cattle dealer, and he often took me with him when he went to buy cows.

I was glad we lived right in Winterswijk, not so close to Germany that you could see it from your room. I saw something much nicer when I looked out of my window: the house of the Gans family, which was right across the street. The Ganses often waved to me at night when I leaned out the window—the old man and woman and their big son. “Get back in bed,” they’d call, “or we’ll tell your mother.”

That wouldn’t be bad. As long as they didn’t tell my sisters. I had two of them, Sini and Rachel. Big sisters, sixteen and twenty-one. And then there was Marie, our sleep-in maid, who was almost like a sister. We all lived in our house in the center of town, away from that border.

After the bad night in Germany, a meeting was held at our house. The Gans family came, all three of them, and Uncle Bram, who was in the cattle business with Father, and his wife. Uncle Phil was there without his wife because Aunt Billa and Mother didn’t speak to each other. It had to do with my grandmother, who lived with Aunt Billa and Uncle Phil but who came to our house every day to complain about them. I knew. I had heard her. When I sat at the top of the stairs, I could hear a great deal, whether the voices came from





# A Life in Hiding

When the German army occupied Holland, Annie de Leeuw was eight years old. Because she was Jewish, the occupation put her in grave danger—she knew that to stay alive she would have to hide. Fortunately, a Gentile family, the Oostervelds, offered to help. For two years they hid Annie and her sister, Sini, in the cramped upstairs room of their farmhouse.

Most people thought the war wouldn't last long. But for Annie and Sini—separated from their family and confined to one tiny room—the war seemed to go on forever.

"This admirable account is important in every aspect as the one bequeathed to us by Anne Frank."

—Elie Wiesel, *The New York Times Book Review*

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