

CLOUDS ACROSS THE SUN

A Novel

Ellen Brazer



Clouds Across the Sun

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*For my husband and best friend, Mel;
For my mother, Esther Glicken, who is watching from above; and
for my father, Irving Glicken, who brings sunshine into my life*

Some people like the Jews, and some do not. But no thoughtful man can deny the fact that they are, beyond any question, the most formidable and most remarkable race which has appeared in the world.

—Winston Churchill

**CLOUDS
ACROSS
THE SUN**



1951

Naples, Florida

Jotto folded back the bedspread and slipped beneath the covers. She closed her eyes and waited, alert to every sound in the house. There would be no bedtime kisses on the forehead, no endearing words wishing her pleasant dreams, and no prayers said on bended knees—not on this night nor on any other night. Jotto heard footsteps coming down the hallway. The door handle turned and the light switched on. Her eyes flew open. She did not need to see a clock to know it was precisely nine-fifteen, and that her father, Hans Wells, had entered the room.

“Good evening, Father,” Jotto said, her tone measured, her demeanor disciplined.

“I hope your eleventh birthday was pleasant,” Hans said as he pulled the over-stuffed chintz chair beside her bed.

“Yes, Father.” Jotto hid her disappointment in a smile. “Thank you for the encyclopedia.” She could not tell him her real wishes, that she had wanted a Monopoly game and a record player. Her father did not believe in self-indulgent activities.

Hans shifted in the chair and frowned. He did not like the way his daughter had been acting lately: unpredictable moods, picking at her food, sulking. “Have you completed your day’s assignments?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. Then, we shall begin.” Hans opened the German version of *Mein Kampf*. He reached into his suit pocket, removed a

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silver music box, and flipped it open. The haunting refrain from Beethoven's *Fur Elise* drifted out.

Jotto blocked out the music, determined to say what she had been contemplating for weeks. "Father, I don't..." She swallowed hard, the demons of doubt screaming at her to remain silent. "I don't like that book." She sucked in her breath. "And, I don't want you to read to me anymore." The fury in her father's eyes told her she had gone too far. Jotto's hand flew to her mouth and her heart plummeted.

Her father slammed the music box closed and rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand. The silence was pervasive.

"I will not tolerate your insolence."

The tone of his voice dripped ice, and Jotto cringed. "I'm sorry, Father," Jotto said, hoping he would not hear the insincerity in her voice.

Hans drilled his eyes at her. "We will begin now." He opened the music box again. "You will close your eyes and take deep breaths." The timbre of his voice was gentle and mesmerizing. "You will listen. Feel yourself growing sleepy. Feel yourself relaxing. You are a feather drifting to the ground. Floating, falling, floating, falling." He repeated the words over and over and over again.

Jotto slowed her breathing, fluttered her eyes open and closed a few times, pretending to settle into a trance-like sleep.

Hans began to read the book. *In mingling of Aryan blood with that of lower peoples, the result was the end of the cultured people.*

Hans took his time, lovingly translating every word. *North America, whose population consists by far with the largest part of Germanic elements, who mixed but little with the lower colored peoples, shows a different humanity and culture from Central and South America, where the predominantly Latin immigrants often mixed with the Aborigines on a large scale.*

By this one example, we can clearly and distinctly recognize the effect of racial mixture. He will remain the master as long as he does not fall a victim to defilement of the blood.

Jotto was disappointed and exasperated at the words her father read. It felt wrong to her—all the poison.

She took refuge by reciting the multiplication tables, as she always did when trying to block out his words. Only then could she drift out of harm's way.

* * *

The morning sun reflected off the windowpane, bathing the room in white and gold. A cardinal perched on the windowsill, pecking on the glass. Jotto awakened with a start.

The door opened without warning. Her father stood on the threshold, dressed in a navy blue pinstriped suit, his tie securely in place. His squinted eyes shot a look of disapproval her way. "Do you know what time it is?"

Jotto glanced at the clock on her night table. "I'm sorry, Father," she stammered. "I didn't realize it was so late."

"Get dressed. The newspapers have arrived, and we have many issues to discuss before you go to school."

Every day it's the same dumb things—up at dawn, read the papers, have my schoolwork checked, and be able to discuss the stupid books he makes me read. Who cares about German history anyway?

She slipped into a khaki skirt and a white blouse. *I shouldn't have to take etiquette lessons from what's-that-stuck-up-your-nose Miss Cheavers, and I shouldn't have to wear dumb dresses to dinner.*

Using her fingers as a comb, Jotto pulled at the tangles in her hair as she stared at herself in the mirror. Her hair was the color of freshly harvested wheat, blond and curly. She had almond-shaped sapphire eyes, magnolia-white skin, high cheekbones and a heart-shaped mouth, all suggestions of the great beauty she would become. That is not what Jotto saw as she stuck out her tongue at her reflection. *My legs look like beanpoles and my feet are huge. No wonder my mother disapproves of me. Who could blame her? It's not because she's sick, it's because I look just like Olive Oyl.*

She sneered at herself one last time, slipped into sandals, and took off down the circular staircase.

Jotto slid across the marble floor and jumped over the Persian rug in the hallway. Her breath came in short gasps as she tucked in her blouse and squared her shoulders, before tiptoeing onto the porch.

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His mustache seeded with toast crumbs, Hans slowly wiped his face with the linen napkin and rang the bell beside him on the table.

Jenny, their cook, walked out, clicking her tongue. “I ain’t no cow need calling,” she said, under her breath.

“Miss Wells is ready for her breakfast,” Hans said, ignoring Jenny’s remarks.

Jotto stifled a giggle. “Good morning, Jenny.”

“Good morning, Sunshine.”

The affection hung between them, a transparent web strong and viable as a spider’s lair, despite Hans’s directive that there was to be no emotional relationships between Jotto and any of the staff.

“No dilly-dawdling, Missy.” Jenny put the plate of eggs and bacon on the table. “You eat up before it gets cold.”

“That will be all,” Hans said, his scowl dismissive.

Jenny puffed out her chest, made a face, and walked into the house, slamming the door.

She is incorrigible,” Hans hissed. “Good help is impossible to find.” He spread the newspapers out so the front page of the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* were clearly legible. “Look at this,” Hans said, pointing to the headline. Hans shoved the paper across the table. “Read.”

Jotto nodded. *It’s going to be a bad morning.*

* * *

After dropping Jotto off at school, Hans climbed the stairs to his wife Ilya’s bedroom and pushed open the door. It was dark and smelled of stale cigarettes and strong perfume. He pulled open the heavy brocade drapes, immersing the room in sunlight. He glanced around and for the hundredth time he berated himself for spending such a fortune on furnishings: Italian Venetian Murano etched glass wall mirrors, a five-piece salon set of French Art Nouveau furniture, carpets imported from Turkey, a nineteenth century Austrian Biedermier desk. Ilya groaned from under the covers.

Otto placed the newspapers on the bed beside her. “Are you planning on sleeping all day?” His voice dripped disgust.

“What else is there for me to do in this God forsaken shit hole?”

Ilya hissed in German. She propped another pillow under her head and stared at Hans. Looking much older than her forty-two years, the once beautiful Ilya was like a dehydrated persimmon. Her huge green eyes were lackluster, the blond curls dulled by strands of gray, and her skin was blotched a sickly, sallow shade of ash. She scratched at the festering mosquito bites dotting her bruised arms.

“Why should I get up? You’re never here.” Ilya poked her finger at his face. “You’re too busy with your dinner parties, fancy luncheons, and golf.”

Hans watched her with cold, uncaring eyes, infuriated by her whining, his face a dangerous shade of red. “You could make a life for yourself if you wanted.”

Ilya spat out a laugh and gave him a half-grin, half-grimace. She raised both eyebrows. “I find it so interesting that you always find the time for that spoiled little brat.”

“That’s enough!” Hans smashed his fist on the night table. “You will not speak that way about our daughter!”

“Think about it, Hans. If you let me go to Bolivia to be with my brother, you and your precious little daughter could be together with no interruptions.” She held her breath, waiting for his reaction.

He pulled at his mustache and stared off into the distance—remembering the war and why his brother-in-law was in Bolivia.

Hans and his family were hiding in a bombed-out house in Paris trying to decide what their next move would be, when the political situation took an unforeseen shift. America had identified a new and dangerous enemy—Russia.

Hans and his comrades recognized an unequalled opportunity, and wasted no time establishing a clandestine Nazi network throughout Europe. Soon, they were passing top-secret information to the CIA and the Army Counterintelligence Corps about Russia’s plans to expand communism into all of Eastern Europe. As a reward for their loyalty, and despite laws passed by the United States Congress, selected Nazi scientists were allowed entrance into the United States. Unfortunately, his wife’s twin, Otto, had interrogated thousands of prisoners during the war, and because of Otto’s high profile, the Americans had refused him entrance into the country.

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Ilya dug her nails into Hans's arm, bringing his attention back to the present. "Why keep me here, when we both know you hate me?"

Hans snapped his head toward her. "I don't hate you. I feel sorry for you."

"I want my brother." Tears streamed down Ilya's face. "Please. Don't do this to me. Let me go."

Hans took her hand. His eyes and face softened. "I know what you need," he said gently. "I'll give you something to make you feel better."

He moved into the bathroom, took a key from his pocket, and opened the locked cabinet. He inserted the syringe into the vial of morphine and pulled back the plunger. He smiled as he replaced the vial.

South River, New Jersey

A month later Hans Wells pulled into the parking lot of the Diakos Greek diner to meet with two of his German comrades. He stepped out of the rental car, straightened his tie, took a deep breath, and pulled back his shoulders as he pushed open the finger-smudged glass door. The midday crowd was animated with businessmen in suits smoking cigars and talking loudly, and students wearing Rutgers University sweatshirts drinking Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and scoffing down lamb gyros. Hans weaved between the tables.

"We were beginning to worry," said Alexander Lippisch, the renowned German aerodynamicist and full professor at Rutgers. He glanced at his watch and readjusted the gold cigarette holder clenched between his teeth.

"Sorry. My plane landed on time but I got caught in traffic." Wells slid into the booth. He was always uncomfortable around Lippisch. He was uncomfortable around all the elitists with their greater-than-thou attitudes.

Their other comrade, Kurt Blome, a research scientist with a background in biological warfare, smiled, showing crooked, cigarette-stained teeth. He pulled at the sleeve of his wrinkled, plaid corduroy shirt. "It's good to see you again."

"You too," Hans said, meaning it. "How have you been?"

“Ach!” Bloom said. “There are not enough hours in the day.” Deep creases crinkled between his eyebrows, as if he was in perpetual contemplation. He scratched the two-day growth of stubble on his face. “How’s Florida?”

“Naples is paradise,” Hans said, unbuttoning the jacket of his hand-tailored suit.

“Yah, but it’s in the middle of the Everglades.” Blome’s eyes twinkled.

Hans thought about the boulevards lined with swaying coconut palms, the sweet-smelling warm salt air, expensive stores, and charming restaurants. Aloud he said, “the city is small, but it’s populated by the giants of American industry, people like the Smuckers and the Evinrudes, who come in the winter to play golf and languish in the pools of their sprawling mansions.” He smiled. “And best of all, the appointment book of my psychiatry practice is filled with the wives of these men—women who accept infidelity, drug abuse, alcoholism, and physical abuse as a way of life. If the city of Naples is a reflection of America...”

“Not a bad life, living in a mansion on the ocean.” Anger and jealousy poured from Lippisch’s piercing blue eyes.

“It’s not the ocean. It’s on the Gulf of Mexico and the expense was necessary.” Hans kept his tone neutral to hide his displeasure at the unspoken accusation. He had chosen Naples because it was only ninety miles from Miami and had no psychiatry practice. More important than that, no Jews lived there. Its isolated location gave him a safe place where he could indoctrinate his daughter without the distractions living in a big city would bring.

“Are you gentlemen ready?” The waitress asked. She wrote down their orders and poured coffee.

Lippisch grunted, his lips pinched in a scowl. “Let’s get down to business.”

“Always in such a hurry. You should learn to relax.” Blome took a sip of coffee.

Hans turned his eyes toward Blome. “How are things going here?”

“Couldn’t be better. My wife is content, and my three-year-old son speaks perfect English. As for me, I have started to talk just like

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an American—telling people my son will grow up to be president, and who knows,” he winked, “maybe he will.” Blome laughed. “Alex, tell him about your new girlfriend.”

Lippisch lifted one eyebrow. “She’s an adjunct professor of physics at the university, who just happens to be the very ugly daughter of New York Senator Albert Willick.” He stared at Hans. “I’m doing my part for the Reich,” he whispered. “Now, tell us what’s going on with our other comrades?”

Hans leaned on his elbows. “The papers were signed last week. We are now officially capitalists—owners of an oil company in Longview, Texas.”

Blome smiled. “Interesting and brilliant decision. Oil dependency is growing exponentially.”

“This is only the beginning,” Lippisch said, a sinister scowl coloring his face. “To accomplish our mission we will need to build a network of people who share our ideology.”

Hans smiled. “Take my word. That is going to be easier than we ever imagined.”