"How do you know everything is being closed?" Pia said. "Who told you?" They didn't own a radio and hadn't gotten the newspaper since Vater left because Mutti couldn't read.

"Frau Metzger heard it at the butcher shop," Mutti said. "And Mrs. Schmidt heard it on the radio." She stopped and pointed toward the front door, her face a curious mixture of anger and fear. "Those mothers still letting their children outside? They are *Verruckt!*" She spun her finger near her temple. "You must stay inside until this is over, you understand?"

Pia nodded and put a finger to her lips.

"What?" Mutti said. "Why are you shushing me?"

"You were speaking German," Pia whispered.

Mutti gasped and put a hand over her mouth. Then she glanced at Pia's neck and her eyes went wide. "Where is your garlic?"

Pia felt for the rank necklace, only then remembering she had taken it off and laid it on the grass during recess, like she'd done the day before when Mary Helen came over to pick a fight. "I must have lost it," she said.

"You must be more careful, Pia," Mutti said. "Mrs. Schmidt was very kind to give us the garlic and I have no more."

"I'm sorry. It was an accident."

Mutti threw her hands up in exasperation, then started down the hall toward the back of the building. "Come help with the water, *bitte*," she said, too upset to realize she was speaking German again. "The twins will wake up again soon."

Pia followed her mother down the hall, squinting as her eyes adjusted to the deepening gloom. Except for the front apartments on each floor, which had the only windows in the building, the hallways and the rest of the rooms were shrouded in darkness, even in the middle of the day. She tried not to think about their little shack back in Hazleton, with windows on three walls to let in the sunshine and mountain breezes. Thankfully, though, her family lived in one of the front apartments, with a window in the main room to let in natural light. She couldn't imagine what it was like living in the back and middle of the row house, where the only light came from candles or lanterns. Not to mention no fresh air to ward off the flu. With that thought, frightening images formed in her mind

of the people in the back apartments, sick and dying in the dark, where no one would find them for days.

Clenching her jaw, she pushed the gruesome thoughts away and followed Mutti through the back door and outside, into the fenced backyard that housed the water pump and outhouse. Mutti picked up one of two buckets and put it beneath the cast-iron spout. Pia set her books on the back step and pumped the handle, grateful to be getting water now instead of being sent to fetch it after supper. She hated coming down to the backyard alone, especially to use the outhouse. Sharing outhouses and water pumps with other families was nothing new—they had done it in the mining village—but the fences and closeness of the surrounding buildings made her feel like a pig in a pen, vulnerable to whomever else was in there at the same time. Like Mrs. Nagy, who kept asking questions in Hungarian, then stared at her waiting for an answer, as if Pia could speak the language. And especially old Mr. Hill, who rattled the outhouse handle when it was occupied and started pulling down his pants before shutting the door when it was his turn. Sometimes he talked to her until she came out of the outhouse, then grinned like they were best friends. He always shook his head and chuckled, making excuses about being old and senile, but she could see the cunning in his eyes. He knew exactly what he was doing.

When they finished filling the two buckets, Pia picked up her books and helped Mutti carry the water inside, down the shadowy hallway and up the narrow stairs, their hard-soled shoes crunching on dirt and plaster. What seemed like a hundred thick odors layered the floors of the row house—boiled cabbage, fried potatoes, warm curry, simmered tomatoes, sautéed sausage, roasted garlic, baked bread—each one more fragrant than the one before. Despite her fear and unease, Pia's stomach growled with hunger. It had been over six hours since her breakfast of rye bread and hot tea, and there hadn't been enough food to pack a lunch.

On the third floor, Mrs. Ferrelli was outside her door, tying a piece of black crepe to the handle, her face red, her cheeks wet with tears. Dark streaks and maroon blotches stained the front of her yellow dress, striping the swell of her pregnant belly.

No, Pia thought. *Not Mr. Ferrelli.* He was too young and too

strong, a broad-shouldered brick mason who filled the halls with laughter and had been hoping to see the birth of his first child before reporting for the draft. Not to mention he and his wife were one of their few English-speaking neighbors who weren't afraid to be friends with Germans. How could the flu kill someone like him?

Mutti came to a halt and Pia stopped beside her, not knowing what to do or say. The bucket handle dug into her fingers. She felt awful for Mrs. Ferrelli and her baby, but more than anything, she wanted to keep going, to get to the safety of their rooms.

"I'm very sorry for you," Mutti said.

"I'm sorry too," Pia said.

Mrs. Ferrelli murmured a quiet thank you.

"Was it flu?" Mutti said.

Mrs. Ferrelli nodded, her face contorting with grief, then hurried back inside.

Mutti glanced at Pia with tears in her eyes.

"Did you know he was sick?" Pia said.

Mutti shook her head, her free hand scrubbing her apron, then rushed up the last flight of stairs. Pia followed her up the steps, across the hall, and inside their apartment, closing the door behind them. At last, she was home. The dark-walled space consisted of two rooms—a combination kitchen/living room, and a windowless bedroom no bigger than the chicken coop they'd had back in the mining village. An oil lantern cast a dim light over the necessities of life that filled every square inch of space. Rough-hewn shelves lined with graying eyelet doilies held a crock of silverware, a stack of white plates, baking tins, a mismatched assortment of cups and glasses, baby bottles, a clay pitcher, and a mantel clock. Frying pans hung from hooks above a narrow wooden table with three mismatched chairs that had been repaired and strengthened with twine and pieces of wood. Baskets, a metal tub, and empty pails sat stacked beneath the table, along with a bucket of cleaning rags and a short broom. Across from the table, a chipped enamel teakettle and matching pot sat simmering on a coal stove with a crooked pipe that leaked smoke at every joint. A cloth calendar hung on the wall above a metal washbasin sitting on wooden crates, and clean diapers hung from clotheslines strung across the ceiling. The only

decorations were a blue bud vase and a faded embroidered tablecloth that had belonged to Pia's late *oma*. To the left of the stove, Pia's narrow bed sat beneath the only window, lengthwise along a wall covered with newspapers to keep out the cold. Drapes made out of flour sacks fluttered above the peeling sill.

Remembering how crowded it had been when they'd shared the rooms with her paternal aunt and uncle for ten months after they arrived in Philadelphia—Mutti and Vater on the narrow kitchen bed, Pia sleeping on the floor—she knew how lucky she was to have an entire bed to herself. Eventually her luck would change, either when the landlord found out her aunt and uncle had moved to New York and he needed room for more tenants, or when the twins got too big to sleep with Mutti. But for now, she relished being able to stretch out and turn over on the horsehair mattress.

Thinking about it now, she couldn't wait to go to bed later. Exhaustion weighed her down, making her lungs and limbs feel heavy and slow, every thought and movement an effort. She couldn't wait to eat, then escape into sleep, so she could stop thinking about the little girl who grabbed her hand during the parade, and Mary Helen and Tommy Costa, Mr. Ferrelli, and the man in the trolley. She wanted to stop thinking about the trolley man's bloody face, and the flu, and the horrible things happening in the city, and in this very building. It was too much. Then she remembered Finn's brother and prayed he wasn't sick too, even though in her heart of hearts she knew the truth. Hopefully Finn would send her a note saying she was wrong, if she heard from him at all.

After setting her water bucket next to Mutti's near the washbasin, Pia put her books on her bed, the familiar aroma of vinegar, boiled potatoes, and the sharp tang of lye soap wrapping her in an invisible cocoon of home and safety. She wanted to close the window to keep the comforting smells in and whatever was happening in the city out. It made no sense, of course—fresh air was supposed to ward off influenza—but the urge to shut out the disease and fear-filled air everyone else was breathing outweighed any common sense. She knelt on the bed and put her hands on the sash, ready to pull it down.

"What are you doing?" Mutti said.

"It's chilly in here," Pia said. "May I close the window?"

"We will shut it when the boys wake up," Mutti said. "The fresh air is good. We need to keep it open when they are sleeping." She went over to the table, picked up a spoon, and held it out to Pia. "Mrs. Schmidt brought this over. To keep away the flu."

Before getting off the bed, Pia glanced over at Finn's window. It was open, but no one looked out. She got down and went over to her mother. "What is it?"

"A sugar cube soaking in . . ." Mutti furrowed her brow. "I cannot think of the word. Kar . . . karo . . ."

"Kerosene?"

Mutti nodded. "*Ja*. I took one and gave one to the boys too, with a little water. This is for you."

Pia made a face. Back in Hazleton, they ate violets and drank sassafras tea to keep sickness away, not kerosene. But no violets or sassafras trees grew in the Fifth Ward, or anywhere in the city as far as she knew. Knowing she had no choice, she took the spoon and put the sugar cube in her mouth. It tasted sweet and oily at the same time, as if she were eating a piece of candy rolled in tar. Trying not to gag, she chewed and swallowed as fast as she could. Mutti gave her a ladle of water from the bucket, but it didn't help. The inside of her mouth tasted like mud and lantern oil. She grimaced and wiped her lips with the back of her hand.

"That was awful," she cried.

Mutti put a finger to her lips. "Shh, don't wake your brothers. They have not been happy all day." She took the spoon and put it in the washbasin, then sat down at the table and picked up a darning egg from her mending basket.

"They probably didn't like the medicine," Pia said.

"Medicine is not meant to taste good," Mutti said.

Hoping supper would get rid of the horrible taste in her mouth, Pia went over to the coal stove and lifted the lid on the simmering pot. Potato soup. Again. Due to the war, they were supposed to sacrifice by having wheatless Wednesdays and meatless Mondays, but she couldn't remember the last time they'd had meat at all. Maybe

it was Easter, or Christmas. Vater had tacked the newspaper articles on the wall before he left, to remind them to keep sacrificing while he was gone. As if they had a choice.

If you eat—THESE—you eat no wheat/CONTAINS NO WHEAT:
Oatmeal, potatoes, rice, hominy, barley, and 100 percent substitute bread.

100 percent breads:
Corn pone, muffins, and biscuits, all kinds of bread made only from corn, oats, barley, and all other wheat substitutes.

Don't waste ice. Don't waste ammonia.
A ton of ice waived may mean one pound of ammonia saved. One pound of ammonia saved may mean twenty hand grenades. Twenty hand grenades may win a battle.

Potatoes are a splendid food. Excellent for your body. Delicious when well cooked.
What they do for your body: They are good fuel. They furnish starch, which burns in your muscles to let you work, much as the gasoline burns in an automobile engine to make it go. One medium-size potato gives you as much starch as two slices of bread. When you have potatoes for a meal, you need less bread. Potatoes can save wheat. They give you salts like other vegetables. You need the salts to build and renew all the parts of your body and keep it in order. You can even use potatoes in cake!

If only we could get muffins and biscuits and meat, Pia thought. She glanced at her mother, who was picking up a tattered sock and scrubbing one hand on her apron. Her flour-sack blouse hung loose on her shoulders, exposing her thin neck and jutting collarbones, and her brown skirt hung like a faded tent over her legs. Her jawline and cheekbones stood out in sharp angles in her pale face, and her waist-length blond hair, which Pia used to love to brush and Mutti now wore in a loose braid, looked limp and dull. Pia wasn't sure how much longer her mother could keep nursing the twins

without eating more, but Mutti refused to spend what little money they had on formula when she could feed her babies for free, and she didn't want to use the jars of Mellin's Infant Food on the shelf until absolutely necessary, even though doctors said Mellin's mixed with cow's milk was superior to mother's milk. But they only had water to mix it with, anyway.

Pia wanted to look for a job to bring in more money, but Mutti hoped the war would be over soon, Vater would return, and things would go back to normal. In the meantime, Pia was only thirteen and needed to stay in school as long as possible, especially because the laws for Germans seemed to change every day, and there was no way of knowing how much longer she'd be allowed to attend. Finn had offered to teach her how to steal food at the open-air market, but she refused. Mutti would never eat stolen food, not to mention the trouble she'd be in if she got caught. The first time she saw Finn stuff a brisket under his jacket, she'd been shocked—and asked him afterward how taking meat was any different from robbing bottles and rags from the old colored woman. He said the boys who did that were trying to cause trouble by stealing from someone who already had nothing, but he was trying to help his family survive. Like him and everyone else unlucky enough to live in the Fifth Ward, she'd been dealt an unpredictable lot in life, he said, and someday she might need to slip a loaf of bread beneath her shirt to stay alive. Having been taught that taking something that didn't belong to her was wrong, no matter what, she hadn't been convinced. But she had to admit she was beginning to understand. Desperation was a powerful thing. Now she wished she'd listened to him. She supposed she could still try stealing if things got any worse; then she remembered she was too scared to leave the house.

"Did you go to the market this morning?" she asked her mother.

Mutti shook her head. "I was waiting for you to stay with the boys. Then Mrs. Schmidt told me everything was closing and I should stay home."

Just then, one of the twins started crying in the other room. Mutti sighed and pushed herself up from her chair, her hands on her knees, her face contorting in pain.

"What's wrong?" Pia said. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Mutti shook her head. "*Nein*, I am only getting old."

Pia frowned. At thirty-two, Mutti wasn't *that* old. "Stay there," she said. "I'll get the boys."

Her mother sat back down and sighed. *"Danke."*

Opening the door a crack, Pia peeked inside the bedroom. Maybe whoever was crying would fall back asleep. The lantern light from the kitchen fell over a wooden washstand, a dresser with mismatched handles and crooked drawers, and her parents' rusty iron bed filling half the room. Near the head of the bed, a floor-level cubby and open closet took up one wall. The twins lay on the bedcovers in cotton gowns and day caps, their rattles and swaddling blankets on the floor. One was on his back with the toes of his foot in his mouth, the other on his stomach, red-faced and howling. Their names were Oliver and Maxwell, Ollie and Max for short—good American names, according to Mutti, who wanted Pia to change her name to Polly or Peg after the war started. But Pia liked being named after her great-grandmother, even though some of her schoolmates used it as another reason to pick on her, and in the end, Vater said she could keep it. Max was the one howling.

She entered the bedroom, lit the lantern on the dresser, picked up the rattles and blankets, and stood by the bed, waiting to see what the twins would do when they saw her. Max noticed her first. He stopped crying and gave her a teary-eyed grin, his drool-covered lips still quivering. She wrapped one of the blankets around him, scooped him up, and sat on the edge of the bed, cradling him in one arm. He grabbed a handful of her hair, and Ollie cooed up at her from the bed, then stuck his toes back in his mouth. Then she remembered something and stiffened. What if she felt something strange when she held her brothers? What if her chest hurt or her lungs burned? Touching family had never troubled her before, but that was before the parade and the flu, before Mary Helen and Tommy Costa. She took Max's tiny hand in hers, held her breath, and waited. To her relief, she felt nothing but his warm body against hers, and the silky soft skin of his little fingers and palm. She exhaled, her breath shuddering in her chest, and wiped the tears from his face.

"What's the matter, little one?" she said in a soft, singsong voice.

"Did you think we left you home all alone? Don't you know we'd never do that?" She kissed his forehead. "Never, ever, ever."

Max grinned up at her again, bubbles of spit forming between his lips.

Unlike everyone else, she could always tell her brothers apart. Even Vater joked about hanging numbers around their necks so he would know who was who. Looking at their white-blond hair and cobalt blue eyes—traits inherited from Mutti—it would be easy to get them confused. But Pia knew Max's face was the slightest bit thinner than Ollie's, his button nose a tad flatter on the end. His dimples were deeper too.

She'd never forget the day four months ago when the twins were born, the tense minutes after Ollie's appearance when Mutti continued to groan and hold her still-bulging stomach. Vater sent Pia to get Mrs. Schmidt, but by the time she returned, a second baby had arrived, much to everyone's surprise. Mrs. Schmidt, holding a jar of lard to "lubricate the parts of passage," seemed unfazed.

"I knew you were having more than one when you said the kicking felt like the baby was wearing hobnailed boots," she said proudly.

While Mrs. Schmidt helped Mutti remove her soiled skirt and get cleaned up, Pia swaddled the newborn twins and studied their tiny faces, grateful and amazed to finally have two brand-new brothers. From that day on, telling them apart had been easy.

"I know who you are," Pia said to Max now, as she cradled him on the edge of her parents' bed. "Yes, I do." She bent down and kissed Ollie's forehead. "You too, Ollie boy."

Ollie smiled, chuckling around the toes in his mouth.

Pia picked up one of their rattles and held it out for him, trying to get him to let go of his foot. Vater had carved the rattles out of wood before he left for the war, sanding them over and over until every spot was smooth and soft. He used twine threaded through holes to hold four brass bells on each side, and carved each boy's initials on the handles. The sound they made when shook reminded Pia of sleigh bells at Christmas.

Ollie was more interested in playing with his feet. She put the rattle down and noticed Max was falling back asleep, his long dark

lashes like feathers against his pale cheeks. She rocked him in her arms and sang a lullaby in a soft voice. Ollie lay still and listened, then let go of his toes, put his thumb in his mouth, and gazed up at her with sleepy eyes. Within minutes they were both napping again. She covered Ollie with the other blanket, then stood and carefully laid Max next to him. After waiting a few seconds to make sure they'd stay asleep, she turned the knob on the oil lantern and the thick wick receded, reducing the flame. Then she tiptoed out of the room, giving them one last look before letting the door latch slip quietly back into place.

When she turned around, her mother was still at the table, her head in her hands, her mending forgotten in her lap. A knot of fear twisted in Pia's stomach.

"What is it, Mutti?" Pia said. "What's wrong?"

Mutti looked up. "Oh, *liebchen*," she said. "Nothing. I'm only tired."

Her words did little to lessen Pia's alarm. She studied her mother's face, worried she wasn't telling the truth. It wasn't like her to complain about being tired. Or anything else, for that matter. "Did you eat today?"

Mutti nodded. "*Kartoffelpfannkuchen*, a potato pancake, and applesauce."

"That's not enough," Pia said. "Why don't you have something to eat and take a nap while the twins are sleeping? I can work on the mending."

To Pia's surprise, Mutti nodded, put the mending on the table, and stood. "*Ja*, I think I will lie down for a little bit." She went over to Pia's bed, moved her schoolbooks to the floor, and got under the blanket. "The soup is almost finished," she said. "Be careful not to let it burn." She took a deep breath, then exhaled with a shuddering sigh.

Pia dug her nails into her palms. Mutti never lay down in the afternoon. She went over to the bed and knelt beside her. "Are you sure you're feeling all right? Maybe I should get Mrs. Schmidt."

Mutti gave her a weak smile. "Do not worry, *liebchen*, I'm fine," she said. "Remember I said the twins were fussing today. They were

awake all night too. I'm only tired from that." She closed her eyes. "And Mrs. Schmidt is not here."

"What do you mean? Where is she?"

"On the train to her mother's house. In Pittsburgh."

"Maybe I should go look for a doctor, then," Pia said. The thought of leaving and going into the city again terrified her, but she'd do it for Mutti. Then she remembered what her teachers said about the shortage of doctors and nurses because of the war—that those left behind were overwhelmed and the hospitals were full—and a cold block of fear settled in her chest.

Mutti opened her eyes and looked at her, her face serious. "I am not sick, Pia. I only need to rest, just for a few minutes. Then I will feel better."

Pia sighed. She prayed Mutti was right, but she hated feeling so helpless. "Then let me close the window so you don't get chilled."

Mutti turned on her side and pulled the blanket up to her chin. "*Nein*, fresh air is good to keep away the flu."

Pia lifted her hand to check her mother's forehead for fever, then froze. What if she felt pain in her chest or became short of breath when she touched her? What would she do then? Mrs. Schmidt was gone and the hospitals were full. Chewing her lip, she went over to the table, picked up the darning egg with trembling fingers, and dropped it into a sock. Maybe she *should* feel her mother's forehead. The sooner she knew if she was getting sick, the sooner she could try to find some kind of help. Maybe someone else in the building would know what to do. Maybe they'd have whiskey or some other kind of medicine. If only Mrs. Schmidt were still there.

After a little while, she put down the mending, went over to the foot of the bed, and gazed down at Mutti. She was sound asleep, her mouth hanging open, thin strands of hair stuck to her cheeks and lips. Exhaustion clung to her features, aging her beyond her years. Pia took a deep breath and let it out slowly. What should she do? She looked out the window toward Finn's apartment. If only she could send him a note to ask for help. But undershirts and baby-wear filled the clothesline. She couldn't take them off without waking Mutti. Who knew if he'd answer in time, anyway? She thought

about hurrying across the alley and knocking on his door, but what if the twins woke up and Mutti didn't hear them? Not to mention she didn't want to go out in the hall, let alone outside.

As if roused by her thoughts, the twins started crying. Mutti opened her eyes and started to sit up.

"Stay there," Pia said. "I'll get them."

"*Nein*," Mutti said. "They are hungry and I have too much to do." She moved to the edge of the bed and stood, her hands on the small of her back as she straightened, and started toward the bedroom. "Please take some soft potatoes from the soup for their supper."

"Yes, Mutti," Pia said.

"And close the window. It may be too cold for them."

Pia pulled the window sash all the way down, then went over to the stove. She took a slotted spoon from the kitchen shelf, fished several floury potatoes out of the soup, and put them in a bowl. Mutti came out of the bedroom with Ollie and Max, laid them on the bed, unpinned two clean diapers from the ceiling clothesline, and started to change them. She smiled and kissed the boys' faces, laughing when they babbled and cooed.

"You are the best little boys in the world," she said, cooing back at them. "And the most handsome too. Are you hungry? *Ja?* Your sister is getting your dinner ready for you."

Pia mashed the potatoes in the bowl and softened them with a little broth, one eye on her mother. Maybe she'd been wrong to worry. Maybe Mutti really was just tired and the short nap had helped. In any case, she was acting normal now. Fear seeped out of Pia's chest and relief loosened her shoulders.

Mutti picked Ollie up and kissed him on the cheek, then put him back down on the mattress. She made a move to pick Max up, then hesitated, put a hand to her head, and sat down hard on the edge of the bed. Red blotches bloomed on her pale face.

Pia put down the soup bowl and rushed to her side. "What is it, Mutti?" she said.

Mutti closed her eyes and moaned. "I'm not sure," she said. "I . . . I'm feeling a little dizzy."

Panic flared in Pia's chest again, beating against her rib cage like stone wings. "I'll go try to find a doctor."

"*Nein*," Mutti said. "You are not leaving. It's not safe."

"But what if . . ." Pia hesitated, trying to keep her voice from trembling. "What if you're getting sick?"

"I'm all right. I am not coughing or too hot, only tired. Besides, there is no money for a doctor. And they don't want to help a German, anyway."

"Is there anyone else in the building like Mrs. Schmidt? Someone who might know what to do?"

Mutti shook her head. "Our neighbors have their own troubles right now. I only need to sleep. It is the best medicine." She pushed herself off the bed and stood. "Will you take care of the boys for a few hours while I lie down in the bedroom?"

"Yes, of course. And I'll bring you some soup."

Mutti nodded and started toward the bedroom, walking slowly. Pia followed, struggling to stay calm. For as long as she could remember, her mother had never complained about not feeling well, not even after having the twins, when Mrs. Schmidt instructed her to spend two weeks in bed. Not even when she had a horrible headache that seemed to last for weeks, or when she broke her big toe. Mutti always kept quiet and kept going as best she could. She never gave up or gave in. To hear her say she didn't feel well sent a flood of terror through Pia's bones. Mutti sat on the edge of the bed and Pia knelt down, unbuttoned her boots, and pulled them off.

"*Danke*," Mutti said, lying back on the pillow. Pia covered her with a blanket, wondering what else she should do.

Out in the other room, Ollie and Max started crying.

"*Bitte*, feed the boys and let me rest," Mutti said, shooing her away with one hand. "I will be much better when I wake up."

"Will you promise to call me if you need anything?"

"*Ja*, now go."

Pia started out of the room, then stopped at the door and turned. "And tell me if you start feeling worse?"

"Ja, ja," Mutti said. She laid her forearm across her forehead, her pale wrist turned up, and closed her eyes.

"Promise?" Pia said.

"*Ja*, Pia."

With growing dread, Pia left the room and closed the door. Hopefully Mutti was right; she was only overworked and exhausted. It made sense, with the twins waking up several times a night to nurse, then barely sleeping during the day. Still, Pia couldn't help fearing the worst. She prayed she was wrong.

After feeding Max and Ollie mashed potatoes softened with broth, she put them on a blanket in the middle of the floor with their rattles, then filled a bowl with soup and slowly opened the bedroom door, trying not to make any noise. A slice of weak light fell across Mutti's pale face. She was sound asleep again, her mouth agape.

"Mutti?" Pia said in a quiet voice. "I brought you some soup." She went over to the bed and looked down at her. "Mutti?"

Mutti didn't blink or move. Pia thought about waking her, but decided to let her rest. The few minutes she'd gotten earlier probably weren't enough. She needed an entire night of uninterrupted sleep, then maybe she'd be back to her old self by morning. Pia left the bedroom, quietly closed the door, took the soup over to the table, and sat down. From the blanket on the floor, the boys watched her eat, grinning and gurgling, and reaching for each other's hands and faces. She would take care of them tonight. She would mix a jar of Mellin's Infant Food with water and feed them that so Mutti wouldn't have to wake up and nurse. They weren't used to drinking from bottles, but if they were hungry enough, they'd figure it out.

When she was done with her soup, she got up, knelt on her bed, opened the window, and, working fast, pulled the clothes off the line and piled them beside her. The undershirts and nightdresses were still damp from the fall air, but she'd hang them up again inside, when she had time. When everything was off the line, she closed the window and stacked the laundry on the kitchen chairs, then took her math book out from beneath her bed and tore out the first page, which was blank, except for the title and copyright. Damaging a schoolbook would likely get her in trouble, but there was no other paper in the house, and this was an emergency. She found a pencil, sat down at the table again, and wrote to Finn.

Are you all right? What's wrong with your brother? Mutti might be getting sick and I don't know what to do. I have no medicine or whiskey. She says I shouldn't leave the house to find a doctor, and I don't really want to, anyway. Please help. I'm scared.

She folded the paper, crawled up on her bed again, opened the window partway, fastened the note to the line with a clothespin, and sent it across the alley. The pulley squeaked while the clothesline lurched and paused, lurched and paused, until finally the note reached the ledge outside Finn's window. Afraid to blink, she watched to see if he would reach out and take it, but no one came to the open window, or looked out. She glanced over her shoulder at her brothers, content and playing on the blanket, then pushed the window open all the way and leaned out as far as she dared. Praying Mutti wouldn't hear, she called out, "Finn!"

No answer.

"Hey, Finn! Are you over there? It's me, Pia!"

Still no answer.

She pulled the sash down and watched for a few more minutes, but no one came to the window. Looking out over the eerily silent Fifth Ward, a cold eddy of loneliness began to swirl inside her chest. The sun blazed on the distant horizon, casting a yellow glow over the cool fall evening, the perfect weather for a brisk walk or a rousing game of stickball. But no children played in the alley below. No delivery wagons rattled along the cobblestones. No women gossiped on the front stoops or called their children in from open windows. A hollow draft of fear swept through her. It felt like the end of the world.

While Mutti slept and Pia took care of her brothers, panic gripped the city. The director of the Philadelphia General Hospital pleaded for volunteers to relieve nurses who had collapsed from overwork. Doctors and nurses started dying, three one day, two another, four the next. Undertakers ran out of embalming fluid and coffins, and masked policemen guarded what coffins were left. Gravediggers were either ill, overcharging people, or refusing to

bury influenza victims. The director of the city jail offered prisoners to help dig graves, but withdrew the offer when he realized there were no healthy guards to watch them. Thirty-three policemen had already died. The citizens of Philadelphia began whispering the word *plague.*

Meanwhile, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* scorned the closing of public places:

What are the authorities trying to do? Scare everyone to death? What is to be gained by shutting up well-ventilated churches and theaters and letting people press into trolley cars? What then should a man do to prevent panic and fear? Live a calm life. Do not discuss influenza. Worry is useless. Talk of cheerful things instead of disease.

For Pia, getting the twins to drink formula out of bottles proved to be more difficult than she thought. By the time the first feeding was over, all three of them were exhausted. When her brothers finally collapsed into a restless sleep on her bed, it was after midnight. She edged off the mattress, moving slowly and quietly, and peeked into the dark bedroom, surprised her mother hadn't heard the boys' frustrated cries. Mutti was still sound asleep, her breath like sandpaper against wood. Pia tiptoed into the room, stood by the bed, and, with trembling fingers, reached out to feel her mother's forehead. As soon as her hand touched Mutti's clammy skin, heat lit up her face and neck, and an invisible weight pressed against her chest. She yanked her hand away and the frightening sensations disappeared. Tears filled Pia's eyes. *No. Mutti can't be sick. She just can't be.*

Turning toward the dresser, she quietly opened the bottom drawer, took out a sweater, and laid it over her mother's chest and shoulders, pulling it and the blanket up beneath her chin. She didn't know what else to do.

Queasy with fear, she crept out of the room and closed the door. The thought of leaving the safety of their apartment, going out into the city in the middle of the night to search for a doctor, not knowing if anyone would even help, terrified her. And who would take care of the babies while she was gone? Mutti might be

too sick to watch them. And the boys probably shouldn't be near her, anyway.

Paralyzed by indecision, she turned down the lantern and lay in her bed, the boys' small bodies snuggled between her and the wall. She needed to organize her thoughts and gather her courage. The sun would be up in a few hours. Then she could ask a neighbor to watch the twins. Mutti always said everything looked less frightening in the light. She hoped so, because right now she was scared to death. Knowing she couldn't sleep, she tried to come up with a plan.

When her frantic dreams ended, she opened her eyes, confused and trying to remember what day it was. An eerie, grayish glow filtered in under the flour-sack drapes. She turned her head and looked up. A jagged water stain colored the gray ceiling paper like a small yellow lake, making her think of the spring runoff near the culm banks in Hazleton. Then she remembered—the schools and churches and all public meeting places had been closed. And Mutti might be sick with the flu. The twins still lay between her and the wall. She sat up with a start and nearly fell off the edge of the bed, then blinked and looked around, trying to figure out how long she'd slept. She got up on her knees and pulled aside the drapes.

It was dawn.

And her note to Finn still dangled on the clothesline.

Ollie turned toward her, kicking his legs and starting to fuss. Max was starting to wake up too. She picked Ollie up and bounced him on her hip, her eyes fixed on Finn's window.

"Shh, Ollie boy," she said, patting his back. "Everything's going to be all right."

She watched Finn's window for another few seconds. No one moved behind the glass. Had they taken his brother to the hospital? Or were they all sick? Ollie started to wail, his face turning red, his small hands in fists.

"I know," she said to him. "You want your mommy. Have you had enough of me?" She got down from the bed, snuggled his cheek against hers, and moved toward the bedroom. "All right, all right. I'll take you to your *mutti*." Then she stopped and glanced over her shoulder at Max. "Stay right there, good boy. I'll be right back."

Max blinked and grinned at her, still half asleep, while Ollie howled in her ear, loud enough to wake the people next door. She started toward the bedroom again, a growing surge of fear coursing through her, making her chest hurt. Surely Mutti could hear Ollie crying. Why hadn't she come out to see what was wrong?

Pia knocked lightly on the door. "Mutti? Are you up?"

No answer.

"Mutti?"

Pia opened the door and entered slowly, keeping her eyes down in case her mother was dressing. "I'm sorry to wake you, but Ollie's hungry. I fed him some Mellin's a while ago, but—" Then she looked up and went rigid.

Mutti lay on her side in the bed, her clawed hands frozen at her throat, her mouth agape as if stuck mid-scream. A dark fluid ran from her nose and mouth and eyes, red and crusty and black, and her skin was the color of a bruise. The coppery smell of warm blood filled the thick air.

"Mutti?" Pia managed.

No response.

"Mutti?"

Realization, sudden and horrible, struck Pia. Her legs turned to water and she bent over, gagging and almost dropping Ollie. She grabbed the iron footboard to stay upright. The floor seemed to tilt beneath her feet.

Ollie wailed louder, filling the room.

Pia fell to her knees, her heartbeat thrashing in her ears. *No. This can't be happening. It can't be.* Dizzy and hyperventilating, she edged around to the side of the bed, the wood floor like a rasp on her bare knees, her shaking arms struggling to hold on to her baby brother.

"Mutti," she cried. "Get up! You can't leave us! You can't!" She held her breath and reached out with trembling fingers, as if one touch would shatter her mother like glass. "Please, Mutti. Wake up!" Her fingertips grazed the sleeve of Mutti's sweater, and she drew back, her stomach turning over. She didn't need to touch her mother's skin to know something was horribly wrong. She didn't

want to touch her and feel *death.* Grabbing the side of the damp mattress, she pulled herself to her feet, put a hand on Mutti's shoulder, and shook her. Mutti's body wobbled back and forth, like a life-size doll lying on a shelf.

A scream built up in Pia's throat, but she clamped her teeth against it. She fell to her knees again and let Ollie slide to the floor, her arms too weak to hold him. He lay on his back, his face red, and cried harder. In the other room, Max started wailing too. Pia buried her face in her hands and squeezed her eyes shut, hoping the image of her dead mother would be gone when she opened them. *This can't be true! It can't be! Mutti is not dead. She's not!*

She dropped her hands to the floor to keep from collapsing and opened her eyes. Her mother was still there, on the bed, covered in blood. Pia moaned and slumped to the floor, her legs and arms vibrating out of control, her breath coming in short, shallow gasps. Violent sobs burst from her throat one after the other, before she could catch her next mouthful of air. Each wail wrenched the strength from her body. Ollie howled beside her, oblivious to the fact that his mother was dead and his life had been changed forever. He reached for Pia's arm, clutching her sleeve in his small fist. She picked him up and hugged him to her chest, her shoulders convulsing, her mind screaming in terror and grief.

More than anything, she wanted to lose consciousness, to faint and escape into nothingness, where pain and fear couldn't reach her. But she had to take care of the boys. She had to go out to the other room and get Max, who was crying even harder now. When she trusted herself to stand, she staggered to her feet, still hugging Ollie, and stumbled out to the kitchen. She hefted Max onto her other hip and carried her brothers back into the bedroom on quivering legs, then slid down the wall opposite the bed, dizzy and out of breath. Her body felt like kindling, her nerves stripped and sparking, ready to burst into flames at any second. Her mind raced and her stomach churned, overwhelmed with grief and horror and disbelief. How could Mutti be dead? Dead? She rarely caught cold. How could she catch the flu? She kept her feet dry. She stayed warm. She even ate sugar cubes soaked in kerosene.

Pia stared at her mother, bile rising in the back of her throat, the babies howling in her arms. What were she and the twins going to do without her? Who was going to take care of them now? Pia wailed with her brothers, fighting the urge to scream and vomit, the black manacle of grief closing around her shattered heart and locking into place with a horrible, sickening thud.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

These suggested questions are included to enhance your reading of *The Orphan Collector* by Ellen Marie Wiseman.

1. The 1918 Spanish Flu pandemic killed more people than any other illness in recorded history, including the 14th century's Black Death and AIDS in the 20th century. Taking an estimated 100 million lives, it was a horror that turned victims bluish-black then drowned them with their own body fluids. A person would be fine one minute, then incapacitated and delirious the next, with fevers rising to 104-106 degrees. Death was quick, savage, and terrifying.

   Yet 1918 is called the "Year of Forgotten Death" because the Spanish Flu was so rarely discussed or even remembered in the 100 years after. Why do you think that is? When did you first learn about the 1918 pandemic?

2. During the time of the Spanish flu, people used all kinds of folk remedies to protect themselves from illness and help cure disease, many of which we now consider useless and even dangerous. Along with tying garlic around their necks, eating extra onions, and sucking on sugar cubes soaked in kerosene, they took formaldehyde tablets, morphine, laudanum, chloride of lime, and gave whiskey and Mrs. Windsor's Soothing Syrup to babies and children, despite the fact that it contained morphine, alcohol, and ammonia. The American Medical Association called the syrup a "baby killer" in 1911, but it wasn't removed from the market until 1930.

Can you think of any other strange things people did in the past to cure or protect themselves from illness? Are there any folk or natural remedies that you think work?

3. During WWI, President Wilson's Committee on Public Information and the Sedition Act passed by Congress both limited writing or publishing anything negative about the country. Posters asked the public to "report the man who spreads pessimistic stories." To maintain morale and hide additional loss of life from their enemies, wartime censors in 1918 curtailed reports of influenza and mortality in Germany, Britain, France, and the United States. But the newspapers were free to report the epidemic's effects in Spain, creating the false impression that Spain was especially hard hit, and leading to the nickname Spanish flu.

   In 2020, as the world became aware of the COVID-19 pandemic, did you notice any similar patterns in communication? How were things different from the way they were in 1918?

4. In Philadelphia, doctors pushed for the Liberty Loan parade on September 28, 1918 to be canceled because they were concerned that the crowds of people would spread the flu. They convinced reporters to write stories about the danger, but editors refused to run them, or to print any letters from the doctors. Consequently, despite their earlier warning to avoid crowds, the city's public health officials allowed the largest parade in Philadelphia's history to proceed. Two days later, the epidemic had spread, and over the following six weeks, more than 12,000 citizens of Philadelphia died. How much of a difference do you think it would have made if

those stories had been printed in the newspaper? Do you think people would have stayed home or gone to the parade anyway?

5. Have you ever heard of or met anyone with Pia's ability to sense illness in others? Would you want to be able to tell when other people are sick before they know it themselves? Why or why not?

6. Though the disease knew no gender, racial, or ethnic boundaries, Philadelphia's immigrant poor suffered the worst, with the largest loss of life happening in the slums and tenement districts. Why do you think that was? What issues do you think contributed to it? Do you think any of those issues continue to impact people living today?

7. Do you think Pia should feel so guilty about losing her brothers? Do you think it would have been helpful if she had told the nuns at St. Vincent's what happened? Should she have told Dr. and Mrs. Hudson sooner?

8. Disguised as a nurse, Bernice does a lot of horrible things to the immigrants in Philadelphia. What do you think is her worst crime? Do you think she paid for what she did?

9. How did you feel about Bernice when you first met her? When did your perception of her change? How and why did it change?

10. Comparing what happened in 1918 to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, it's important to remember some facts:
    - In 1918, St. Louis, Missouri immediately closed schools, movie theaters, and banned public

gatherings. Their death toll ended up being one-eighth of the losses in Philadelphia due to the Spanish flu.

- Many people blamed the 1918 pandemic on Germans, claiming they were spreading poison clouds, or that Bayer, a German owned company, had infected their aspirin.
- To fight the Spanish flu, medical professionals advised patients to take up to 30 grams of aspirin per day, a dose now known to be toxic. It's now believed that many of the October deaths were actually caused or hastened by aspirin poisoning.
- In San Francisco, people without masks were fined $5.00 and were called "mask slackers."
- The New York City health commissioner in 1918 tried to slow the transmission of the flu by ordering businesses to open and close on staggered shifts to avoid overcrowding on the subways.

How do you compare each of these facts with what you've heard, observed, and/or experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic? What lessons, if any, do you think we've learned?

11. When the highly contagious second wave of Spanish flu hit some cities, the medical communities were not prepared. Hospitals quickly became overcrowded and were forced to turn thousands of sick and dying patients away. However – as during the COVID-19 pandemic – countless nurses and medical students stepped up to help. Parish houses and armories were turned into makeshift infirmaries, and with the shortage of medical staff due to the war, volunteers were called from medical and nursing schools. The brave nurses of the Visiting Nurse Society of Philadelphia went into homes to reach those who couldn't make it to hospitals. And again, like

today, a number of medical professionals gave with their lives.

What stories have you read or heard about the selflessness and heroism of today's healthcare workers? What differences do you see between the healthcare workers in 1918 and those taking care of COVID-19 patients, especially concerning the proper medical equipment and protective gear? Do you think you would be brave enough to help take care of someone with the virus? Why or why not?