

In the dark squared-off pews of the German Mennonite church sanctuary sat my accusers, stern and silent, all eyes converging on me. I dropped my head and concentrated on the rectangular pattern of the tile floor. The closed church shutters kept out the fiery late afternoon Paraguay sun. The weight of the musty, trapped air was suffocating.

Pastor Arnold Entz, a short, balding man with stooped shoulders and a large belly stretching the seams of a black jacket a few sizes too small for him, had ushered me in through a small door at the front of the church next to the choir platform where I stood to sing each Sunday and behind the organ that I had played for seven years, since I was eleven. A single, straight-backed, wooden chair had been placed next to the pulpit.

The pastor signaled for me to sit. I made my way to the chair without looking up. I had dressed judiciously for this meeting. My dark gray skirt hung well below my knees. My arms itched against the starched, long sleeves of my white shirt, buttoned neck-high. I had pulled my reddish-brown hair into a tight bun at the nape of my neck. I wore no makeup.

Pastor Entz addressed the rows and rows of pews in High German. Although Mennonites in Paraguay all spoke the guttural, mostly unwritten *Plautdietsch* (Low German) to one another, in church we spoke only the more dignified High German, which was a distinctly different language. For example, “church excommunication” in *Plautdietsch* is “*Tjoatjebaun*” while in High German it is “*Kirchenverbot*.”

“We have called this special church meeting to discuss your sins and to determine the consequences,” Pastor Entz said. The silence throbbed in my ears. I swallowed hard to keep bile from rising in my throat.