

TO BRIDGE AN OCEAN

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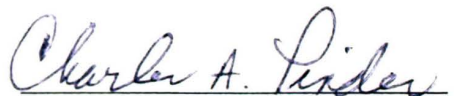


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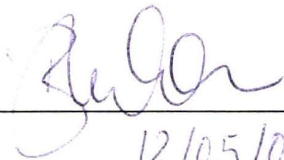
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To Bridge an Ocean

**A Thesis
Presented for the
Master of Arts
Degree
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**Beatrix M. Brockman
2005**

Dedicated to my sister

Barbara Rogge

8 December 1953 – 27 April 2005

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Abstract

*The memoirist need not necessarily know
what she thinks about her subject
but she must be trying to find out;
she may never arrive at a definitive verdict,
but she must be willing to share her intellectual
and emotional quest for answers.*
--Judith Barrington

Primarily, these essays cover the growth of the author from girl to woman to wife. They are stories of growing up in a conservative Catholic family in Germany, stories of love and loss. Writing these texts helped me to uncover and acknowledge the deep connection to loved ones and the underlying pain. They helped me deal with the illness and loss of my sister Barbara and express my love for her in manners I had never thought I was capable of.

It is my hope that these texts will touch the readers and their hearts through the human condition we all share regarding relationships and love. I hope that my soul-searching has shed some light into shadowy areas of inner life, family and love. And let's not forget about food – "*Essen hält Leib und Seele zusammen*" (eating is the glue of body and soul), we say in Germany. So for obvious reasons, my mother's sumptuous meals are the red string of these memoirs.

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A Table for Seven

*If more of us valued food
and cheer and song above
hoarded gold, it would
be a merrier world.*
J. R. R. Tolkien

When our parents returned from their trip to the Bahamas, my twenty-four year old sister Angie and her husband Martin picked them up from the airport. As we welcomed them back home, the entire family was in the living room, listening to first descriptions of balmy turquoise water, white sand and clean air and accounts of our oldest sister's life in her Caribbean paradise with her husband and the new baby. Angie, petite, always fashion-conscious and well-groomed, sat on the arm of Martin's chair, a sturdy piece of oak that our father had sanded, stained and shellacked himself, as he had built the entire furniture set in this room. As usual, there were no clouds on my horizon, and I could hardly wait for them to open their suitcases to see what they had brought back for me.

Only one week later, almost everybody was back in the living room. Angie sat on the same arm of the same chair, but the sophisticated man in the chair

was not her Martin. He had brown, curly hair, sculpted features, manicured nails. Quite the opposite of Martin with the shaggy hair, walrus mustache and beer-induced pot-belly. Yet they were holding hands. This was more than my fifteen-year old brain could process. What I did comprehend, however, was the look of doom on Papa's face and the apprehension in Mama's eyes as they darted back and forth between her husband, the crucifix on the wall and her own hands, folded in her lap, as if she were praying for redemption from this nightmare.



I

Five centuries ago, Albrecht Dürer immortalized the Praying Hands as timeless archetypes of faith. I had always thought that these were the hands of his mother, but as I researched the image once again, I found out that they are his own. His left hand modeled for him through a mirror, while he painted with his right. A copper relief of the Dürer-hands, mounted on wood, hangs in my mother's kitchen, where she prepares all her food

To make the perfect Sunday meal, my mother likes to mix her meats. She carefully selects a large piece of sirloin and a pork shoulder with rind at the local butcher shop. The shop assistant has to hold the meat up and turn it so my mother can look at it from all sides, before she nods. At home, she begins to heat the oil in the Dutch oven as she meticulously removes excess fat from the beef. An onion, cut in half, is almost blackened in the hot oil and then removed. She

adds her personal selection of spices, some mustard and a broth cube and slowly mixes everything with her trusty wooden spoon that must be as old as I.



"Over my dead body." Even at eighteen, about to go off to college, I felt intimidated by my father's steel-blue eyes.

"That guy is crazy about you." Mama looked at me accusingly.

"You are not going to Mainz," Papa said.

We were in the upstairs living room, which at one point had been the room I shared with two of my sisters. Funny, how different it looked now, with the bunk beds gone and new cabinets along one wall and bookshelves on the other. My mother loves books, and in her lifetime she will not be able to read all those paperbacks and hardcovers she keeps buying or receives as gifts. A sleeper couch, on which Papa snored away his evenings, graced one wall, while next to it sat Mama's wing chair with the carefully cushioned ottoman that supported her legs without hurting her varicose veins.

"I really don't think you should go." Mama's knitting needles clicked away like rosary beads.

"I don't understand," I said. "We're just friends. And I am going to visit my friend, no matter what you are imagining here."

"He is much too old for you, anyway." Dad was quite upset by then. "As long as you put your feet under my table, I forbid you to go visit him. Besides, what are you going to do when he goes back to America, this GI of yours?"

Obviously, I knew that David wanted more from me than to show me his stamp collection. We had already kissed the first time we met. And when he had visited me in my hometown, it had not stopped there. However, who was I to admit that to my conservative, Catholic parents?

"We are just friends," I repeated.



Of course, there is always a picture of the current pope hanging in my parents' bedroom. A Madonna hangs on his right, a crucifix on his left.

Of course, they go to church on Sunday, and if we didn't go, there were no privileges.

Of course, we were five children, because if "the Lord giveth a sheep, He giveth grass for feed."

Of course it did not matter that my mother's health and body were ruined in the process of bringing up these children on the food she could grow in her garden.

Of course, the Christian Democratic party was the only party to vote for.

Of course, my brother never had to do menial housework, because my father's "son didn't have to put a foot into the kitchen, with five women in this house."

Of course, my brother picked a wife, who avenged his four sisters and his mother.



Sundays were always the best day of the week. We couldn't sleep in, needless to say, because of church. But right after breakfast, lunch (the main meal in Germany) was started and when we returned from mass, the fragrance of roasts wafted through the house. With parents and children, we were at least seven at the table. Sometimes there were more, seldom were there less. To this day, the number around my parents' dinner table gravitates toward seven, which delights my father, and he never fails to point it out. Sundays were the only days of the week when our large family could afford meat. During the week, my mother cooked small portions of meat for my father who was working physically for ten or more hours a day. As a toddler, I would often stand right next to him when he ate his supper, following the path of his fork with my eyes, opening my mouth every time he did. "Has Mama not fed you yet?" he asked, and I would vehemently deny it every time until he took pity on me and gave me a forkful of his meat. Thus, for someone like me, whose first word she ever spoke was "Fleisch" (meat), Sundays were like heaven.

The most coveted pieces of the roasts were and still are the end pieces because of their delicious crust. When Mama finally grew tired of the fights over the end pieces, she started cutting the meat chunks in half before putting them into the oven, so there would be more end pieces. Regardless, there was only one piece of meat per person at the table. Seconds were highly unlikely.

It has taken me thirty years to understand how hard it must have been for my mother to pinch every penny and curtail the amount of meat everybody could

have. Today, she still overcompensates by cooking such large quantities that there are always left-overs. But still, no matter which day of the week she now prepares such a dinner, we all call it a Sunday-feast.

The roast experience was typically crowned by dumplings made from home-grown potatoes covered in a dark, aromatic gravy whose recipe must have come directly from heaven. Even today, I am not able to coax a gravy out of my roasts that tastes anything like my mother's, despite following her recipes to a T. As carefully as she, I brown the meat on all sides, so the juices are sealed. Then I add the vegetables and other ingredients and let them brown, too, before I fill the Dutch oven with broth and cover it. In Germany, it was much easier to convince my own children to eat what I had cooked when they thought that *Oma* had made it.

As I think about those family lunches, I don't remember the scarcity of meat. My mouth waters. Before my inner eye, a universe of perfectly round, ecru-colored orbs swims in an ocean of brown delight, spices tickle my nose and the satin-sheen on the surface, only disturbed by a fork-pierced dumpling, promises to satisfy yearning taste-buds with an explosion of love, warmth, childhood memories, home.



II

It is time to put the roasts, which she has cut in half, into the mixture and brown them on all sides. The perfect browning process after the pores have closed involves pouring some broth into the pot and letting it boil away several times. Next, the vegetables go in. The onion joins the roasts together with some carrots and celery root. Now my mother lets the meat simmer for two to three hours. This gives her at least an hour to take care of other household chores that need her attention. When she returns to the kitchen, she peels the potatoes for the dumplings. She cuts them into quarters, washes them and boils them in saltwater for twenty minutes. As a multitasker, Mama has many pots and pans going simultaneously and still finds the time in between to clean up spaces and dishes that she doesn't need any more for the meal-in-progress.



While I was still in elementary school, I loved it when my mother sent me to the bakery to get a fresh loaf of bread. I was very proud that she trusted me with an errand of my own. When the little cowbell that was attached to the doorframe of the bakery store jingled its welcome, I would be enveloped in a cloud of fragrances from freshly baked bread, rolls and ground coffee. The shop assistants wore crisp white smocks that rustled in unison with the thin paper bags they counted the Brötchen (rolls) into. The store was tiny, and if more than three persons wanted to buy something, it could get crowded very quickly in there. On

Saturday mornings, everybody wanted fresh Brötchen for breakfast; then, the line would run out onto the sidewalk.

"One loaf of rye bread, please." I arched my neck to look at the sales lady.

"That will be one Mark and forty nine Pfennigs."

I had to stand on my tiptoes to put the money on the counter and had to make sure my change was correct, because every Pfennig had to be accounted for. The shop assistant would then wrap the loaf into a piece of parchment paper and hand it to me, stretching across the counter. Sometimes when she was in a really good mood, she would hand me a small roll or cookie or one of my favorite rum-flavored chocolate truffles with the change. On some days, I would savor every bite of the delicacy as I dawdled home; on other days, I would carefully put the object of desire into my pocket to give it to my mother as a token of my love.

As I strolled up the sidewalk, the paper would crackle the aromatic bread fragrance into my nose, and I was very tempted to tear off a piece; but I was on Scout's honor and would have never dared to act on that urge. Nevertheless, I could already see pats of virginal butter marching out of the fridge, and I knew Mama would cut me a thick slice of bread, slather the butter on it and shake chocolate crumbs on top. Sometimes, in summer when we had fresh strawberries in the garden, she put some slices with sugar on the bread and rarely, if we had enough money, bananas.

Whenever my mother cut the bread, before we could afford our first hand-operated bread slicer, she would use a long serrated knife. I can picture her tired, five-foot frame, tightly permed, maroon-colored hair, seldom coiffed, and her

calloused hands embracing the loaf. First, she turned the bread on its side and then made the sign of the cross on the bottom of the loaf with the knife, so it became blessed nourishment. Then, she tilted it on her hip, started sawing thick slices off its body and put them into a bread basket. In the meantime, one of us children had to set the supper table for seven, while another made some tea, and put home-made jellies, honey, cheap bologna, and butter on the table. After Mama said grace, we all made our own sandwiches while we chitchatted across the table.

When my father wasn't working at his job as a foreman in a prefab cement factory, which was eighty percent of his time plus overtime, he was working in the garden, in his woodshop, with honeybees or preparing fruit to be fermented into wine. During honey season, he would spend most Saturdays driving his apiaries to prime locations, checking them for disease or preparing feeding solution. At our Saturday lunches, usually some stew of sorts with homegrown vegetables and tiny pieces of cheap smoked pork belly in it, very often some bees circled above the dining table or crawled over his shiny, bald head, after scuttling out of his collar or cuffs. He wouldn't even become slightly excited, if Mama pointed out that one of them was about to become entangled in the white corona of what was left of his curly hair. Getting stung on a regular basis was his first choice medication against the rheumatism that had plagued him ever since WWII.

As soon as the busy bees had filled all the honeycombs, he brought them home for us to help him spin the combs in the centrifuge. The 'honey machine' – as I called it – was a copper cylinder, three feet in diameter and five feet high, that

stood on spindly black metal legs. The honey combs had to be decapped and then were put, three at a time, into the centrifuge. When it was my turn to help him, I was allowed to operate the crank, which was at my eye level. After cranking it twenty times as hard as I could, the honey would start dripping like thick amber through a sieve into a big bucket. Sometimes, I was allowed to stick my finger into the stream. I would lick the sweet gold from my fingertip and love the lingering aftertaste in my throat. Papa kept the honey in these big buckets for weeks, whipping it every other evening with a huge whisk attached to a power drill. This ensured that the sugar in the honey would not crystallize once it was filled into jars, and it would stay creamy and smooth like butter for years.

Some of the honey, he would turn into wine, just as he did the cherries, currants, gooseberries or apples from the gardens. Weekend after weekend in fall, he washed and cut the fruit and juiced the berries by pressing them through linen cloth. Then he filled the juice into big glass balloons with some sugar, yeast and whatever other secrets it took to turn the fruit into wine. The balloons were topped with little glass snails, so the gas from the fermenting process could escape. Whenever I went to the basement to get something for my mother, I could hear the balloons gently burping, and I could smell the beginnings of Papa's wine. There are still gallons and gallons of fruit wine in my father's basement, today, some of them labeled with the year of my birth, thick and sweet like liqueur (especially over vanilla ice-cream) and revered by everybody who has the honor of getting their hands on them.

Today, I can appreciate these times of companionship with my father and look back at them with some sentimental pleasure. Back then, I was much too busy to be obedient and try to impress my father so he would take notice of me. I now know that he never was a man of many words and that involving me in his projects was his way of acknowledging me.



III

While the potatoes boil, Mama dices some bacon and browns them in a cast-iron pan. She adds diced onions to the bacon and browns them, too. Then the mixture is split and each half is put into a different pot. She puts a bay leaf into one pot, a jar of sauerkraut and fills it up with broth. She throws a diced apple into the other, followed by a jar of red cabbage and broth. Once, she has finished these preparations, the potatoes are ready for the next step in the dumpling process. By now, the fragrances of roast and vegetables are permeating the house as the kitchen is filled with steam. My mother nimbly commutes between table, stove and sink, occasionally washing her hands or wiping them on her apron. Her tight perm curls even tighter from the steam, but she doesn't care. Once the windows fog up from the steam, they must be tilted and allow some fresh air to stream into the kitchen.



My father is the quintessential patriarch. What he says shall be done – even though he is eighty-five, today, and his children are all grown. On Sundays, we would always go to church; no church – no cake; no church – no TV. As I grew up, I heard that some people called him the Pope of our hometown. Actually, that fits quite well. He is the same age as Karel Woytila, just as Catholic and even looks a lot like him. Papa doesn't have the same shock of white hair; only a curly wreath remains around his head; however, the shape of the face and the Slavic features are very similar. If he knew that somebody compared him to John Paul II, he would probably consider it a compliment. My father is so conservative that even today, he and my mother adhere to the long-abolished seating order in St. Mary's Church, where the women sat in the pews on the left side of the center aisle and the men on the right. Because of her varicose veins, Mama can't kneel any longer. Therefore, she chooses a side bench without kneeling bar, allowing her to stand and bow her head instead of hurting her legs. Even though I hated being forced to go to church as long as I lived in their house, I have benefited from this upbringing by having a deep faith in God. I just do not buy into the doctrines of the Catholic Church any longer, and I eat cake and watch TV even if I do not go to mass.

As Catholics, contraception was no option for my parents. So, I was the youngest of five children, four daughters, one prince. He was number four – I was an accident, a five-year delayed reminder that things never go as planned. I saw my sisters getting married, one after the other, and never realized the dramas that went on before my own eyes. The emotional turmoil and feeling of

failure must have been overwhelming for my pious mother, as must have been my father's rage. Out of five children from this ultraconservative Catholic family, only the second daughter, Barbara, married a man who had not been married before.

The oldest, Rose, was the first to come home with a divorced man. My parents were quite shell-shocked when their daughter insisted on marrying him and moving to the Bahamas. When Angie, their third daughter, broke her Catholic marriage vows, divorced Martin and married Klaus, the father of her coming child, after he got a divorce himself, another house of cards collapsed for my parents. Then came their youngest – me – who simply eloped with that GI (previously divorced, too) and came home married from a vacation to the United States. And to top it all off, the prince had to marry a divorced woman and now, fifteen years later, is in the process of divorcing her himself.

Such conservatism could tear any family apart and create non-existent relationships. Not so with my parents. Despite their strong Catholic faith and principles, their love for us overrules everything. They quite naturally welcome all spouses of their children into the family. Family life is written with a capital F and everybody loves to gather around them, grandparents now, on many occasions, and not just the special ones. Mama and Papa practice what they call the *long-leash*. "Let them go and they will love to return to you."



IV

She pours the water from the potatoes and lets them sit a couple of minutes, while she takes the ricer from the bottom drawer next to the fridge. She deftly presses two or three potatoes at a time through the contraption, and they drop as golden, steaming worms into a stainless steel bowl. Then she adds a little water to the mass and a packet of potato starch, before she kneads it with her hands to form a fluffy, not-too-firm dough. Customarily, potato dumplings are round like tennis balls, but after sixty years of cooking, my mother has no patience for such frills. She rolls the dough into two long strips as thick as her lower arm and cuts it into two-inch slanted slices. They taste just like round dumplings, but this saves her half an hour.

Marrying a foreigner in Germany is no easy feat. I could not believe the amount of paperwork involved. Marrying a German in Germany is quite complicated enough for that matter. Welcome to the world's capital of bureaucracy.

Getting married or thinking about it was never a big deal for me, especially – I was only seventeen – after my first boyfriend, Armin, had planned our wedding and the entire rest of my life without consulting me. But David and I were in love, we lived together. I did not want the big ceremony, the white dress or being the center of attention during a long wedding day. Not to mention all the money that a big wedding would cost. So, I was doing it because ... Hm, why? Maybe

because I wanted to tie him down, I would say in hindsight. But there also was another more petty reason, that seemed pretty important to me when I was twenty-one. As an American, he had access to all the shopping facilities on the military base. I had to sit in the car and wait for him when he shopped because we were not related. While I hated to be left out, I didn't have the stamina to work it out within the German bureaucracy, nor with my Catholic parents or the Church.

When David and I went to Spokane, Washington, to visit his parents in 1983, I asked him to find out what the wedding formalities would be there. I was quite surprised at how simple things could be. He only needed to apply for a marriage license; his father had to vouch for him, certify that he was who he claimed to be, and nobody cared about me, or about me being German. I could have been Gina Lollobrigida with five kids stashed away somewhere – it wouldn't have mattered. I didn't even have to show my passport.

Naturally, I pounced on the opportunity, and being the pushover that he is when it comes to me, he agreed. After the application for the license had been turned in, I had to endure an hour-long talk with his dad about *the facts of married life*, interrupted by his frequent expectoration of phlegm from his emphysemic lungs (a result of decades of inhaling pesticides on a tractor, while 'working in fresh air'). *And did I know what I was getting into with a man who was twenty-three years older, yada yada yada*. I didn't care. Besides, my English wasn't good enough at the time, and I understood only half of what he was saying.

Our wedding ceremony is a blur to me now. I remember that it was performed by a county justice, and David's father and stepsister were our

witnesses. And I had to point out *after the fact*, that I *wanted* a wedding band. After the ceremony, we had dinner at a small restaurant with our witnesses and then just the two of us went to a romantic movie: *Charles Bronson in Death Wish II*.

I loved being married. I felt all grown-up at age twenty-one talking about my husband rather than boyfriend, but I didn't think it was a big deal that we had eloped. This is how I conveyed it to my mother when I called from Frankfurt airport upon our return to Germany. I did not anticipate her reaction. She was speechless, angry, sad, bewildered and could not understand how I could have taken such an important step so spontaneously. Barbara later passed on to me that I had better not show my face at my parents' house for a while. To this day, I can sense the spur in Mama's side about me taking such a giant step without talking to her about it and without the blessing of the Church.



V

Now she fills the biggest of the pots with water. While she waits for the water to boil, the meat has been cooked to perfection; time to think about chocolate brown gravy. She takes the meat from the Dutch oven and transfers it into the preheated oven, covered with tinfoil, to keep it warm. Then she waits until all the liquids have evaporated from the pot again and browns the vegetables some more. She adds water to the pan this time and stirs everything around for a

moment to loosen the crust that clings to the bottom. Afterward she strains the liquid through a sieve to take out the vegetables, and the pure jus remains.

In 2001, after eighteen years of marriage I was of age – almost forty – time to get my midlife crisis. I felt incapable of bridging the gap between my emotional needs and what I perceived as David's detachment. To compensate the increasing emptiness I felt, I treated myself to my first vacation alone, a two-week trip to the Bahamas. I also refused to move to America yet again, a topic that had come up repeatedly during our marriage. Then I bought myself a brand-spanking-new silver sports car, and finally I took my whole family on another two-week trip to the Bahamas. It was there, I started to think and talk about divorcing my husband.

Yet, we made it through this tumultuous year, we recouped, and I agreed to move to Tennessee. In the summer of 2002, I stopped climbing the corporate ladder in the pharmaceutical industry, packed up and sold a house, made a loss on my sports car, grabbed my two teenage children and followed my husband onto a plane to America.

Everybody had been so jealous.

"You are moving to America. Wow," my friends said, expressing the general fascination Germans have for the United States.

"You are so lucky. I wish I were in your shoes."

I kept wondering what they were talking about. They acted as if America was Eden where milk and honey flow, and all I had to do was open my mouth so a free burger would flutter onto my palate. I saw a country like my own, with people who have to make a living just like everybody else; and I saw the distance I was putting between myself and my family. I left behind aging parents, three sisters, one of them with cancer and a handicapped daughter, and a brother going through a painful separation. I left behind a small circle of wonderful friends, and I lost a successful translation business, a career in the pharmaceutical industry, good money.



I was eighteen years old, when I had met this GI, in a discothèque of all places where neither I nor he was comfortable. But then, disco was popular in the seventies and eighties. He had been on maneuvers with the US Army in Germany and had the privilege as an NCO to go to the local swimming pool for a hot shower. He did his guys a favor by following them to the disco afterwards. I had just wanted to escape the silence in my parents' house, since they were visiting my sister in the Bahamas. Therefore, I had joined some girlfriends for an evening out.

I loved dancing, but there were just no good dancers at the disco that evening. That changed quickly when a horde of uniformed GIs (oh how I loved men in uniform – my first boyfriend had been with the German border police) more or less took possession of the disco.

Ever since I had broken up with my policeman and had been invited by my sister to visit her in the Bahamas for some consolation, I was also totally fascinated by everything English. And now... English in combination with a uniform. Who could ask for more? ... seventh heaven ... Living in the British sector of Germany, it was a treat for me to see some Americans. Spell-bound I watched the lively group and then took a deep breath before I asked one of them to dance. I had my eye on him from the very beginning. He had a huge black mustache and seemed to be the leader of the group. Even though he was no hulk of man, I felt attracted to him right away. At first, though, I had to silently giggle because the way he was jerkily twisting and dancing was everything but elegant or "cool." The convulsions he performed did not match the music at all, and the funny faces that accompanied them made clear that he knew but didn't care. As we yelled to drown out the loud music, I found out that country-western was more his style.

When we said goodbye a little while later and exchanged our addresses, neither of us would have thought that twenty-five years and two daughters later, he would still lovingly tell anybody who asked him about how we met the story of the US-Army Reforger Maneuvers in Germany in 1980 and the ensuing maneuver damage - me.



VI

The jus is returned to the pan and thickened with a little cream and cornstarch. When the water for the dumpling boils, Mama will shout through the house, and we have to predict how many dumplings we will eat. Of course, she will add at least ten to the final number, because everybody wants to eat sensible amounts, and nobody can refrain from taking seconds. The dumplings are added to the boiling water, which is turned down to simmer. First, the golden potato globes sink to the bottom, but when they float to the surface, they are ready to eat. While they simmer, my mother cuts the meat into hefty slices and arranges it onto a platter. She puts sauerkraut and red cabbage into serving bowls and readies two more bowls for the arrival of the dumplings. Meanwhile, one of her daughters will have set the table, most likely for seven, and trailing the fragrances emanating from the kitchen, everybody will have congregated in the dining room.

After one of the children or grandchildren has said grace, it is time to dig in, while my mother, who doesn't like dumplings herself, enjoys everybody's appetites more than she does her own meal, of which she only eats the tiniest of portions.



The first time I was fully aware that there were different levels of education was in fifth grade when, thanks to the persuasive abilities of my sister Barbara, Papa allowed me to be the first in my family to attend a school of higher education (called Gymnasium in Germany) as opposed to the typical German

middle and basic schools my siblings had gone to. He did not think that a girl was in need of too much higher education; the basics were enough before she had to find herself a husband and job.

One day during an incident over lunch, I realized that going to the Gymnasium was separating me from my family, though. I must have been eleven years old, and my mother was chiding me for not washing and putting away my dishes after breakfast. She must have been exhausted from all the work she continually did and frustrated with the laziness of her youngest. But all I could concentrate on was that she used general terms and spoke in the plural, as if all children at the table were concerned. Self-serving as children are, I asked her in my newly appropriated grammar terminology why she was addressing me in the plural. That's when I almost got a beating from my brother for being so stuck up. The last thing he wanted for himself or our mother was to be in awe of his little sister. It had never occurred to me that neither she nor the rest of my family would be able to understand my new jargon.

My parents belong to the German WWII generation. Neither of them had a chance to go to college. Mama even had to leave school after the seventh grade because of the war, and when it was over, survival was more important than education. Because of her magnificent soprano voice, for instance, she had been offered free training by an opera singer, which would have been wonderful for her, but my grandfather decided that he needed her to work – so he wouldn't have to – in order to earn money for the family. It was not lack of intelligence but lack of schooling that put my mother in awe of educated people and instilled in

her a fear of writing anything down because she might not know how to spell it properly. Today, I regret the many times I pointed out mistakes on her shopping lists. I wish I had been more diplomatic and less occupied with myself.

I am sure that this is why in three years in Tennessee, I have not had a single letter from my parents. Yes, we telephone every Sunday and exchange news this way, but sometimes, just sometimes, I would love to run to the mailbox in hope of getting some personal mail and not just account statements and bills. I would love to have something of permanence in my hand that I can read and read again.

I also stay in touch with my family through the internet. Every Sunday, I write the Tennessee-News, keeping my loved ones abreast of the boring life we lead, what mischief my daughters have been into and how my life at school is going. One of my sisters will print the email out and take it to my parents. They keep all of them in a big binder that is pretty full by now. My sisters and I also communicate via an internet messenger. This has brought us closer together than we have ever been. As products of an emotionally autistic family, we find it much easier to say some things when we don't have to look each other in the eye.

Initially, after I moved to the States, I was mostly chatting with Barbara. Every Saturday, we'd have a lot to say to each other. A year later, Rose became computer-literate and joined us. So we started to do online conferences then. In 2004, when Barbara's cancer had gotten the better of her, she could no longer sit at a computer. We communicated by phone again. Just out of habit, though, I

often opened a messenger window to begin chatting with her when online. Then I realized that the cursor would only be blinking.

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## The Road Not Taken

*I shall be telling this with a sigh  
Somewhere ages and ages hence:  
Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—  
I took the one less traveled by,  
And that has made all the difference.*

**Robert Frost**

CLARKSVILLE, TN, MARCH 2005

*We sit in the basement office of our split-level house which I derisively call a cracker box, because I miss the solid, sandstone brick house we owned in Germany. Our backs are at a ninety degree angle to each other, as each of us faces a flat computer screen. My husband David plays Euchre online; an important tournament, as usual, so he can't be bothered with anything because he might lose his ranking and the virtual bucks he can win. Only when his bladder is full – and this happens rather frequently because he drinks lots of water to keep his blood pressure in check – does he break eye contact with the puke-green Yahoo display and stampede up the rickety plywood stairs covered with stained pseudo-Berber. I feel sorry for our daughters because they have a knack of getting in his way when he is in such a rush that his eyes water. But*

*right now, he sits behind me, muttering at invisible players, whooping when he gets a trick, cursing when his virtual partner screws up, and laughing at jokes that someone must have typed in the chat section of the game. And I – I wonder what I am doing here. In this land that is not my own, where I have no family or friends.*

*I miss my spontaneous nights out with the girls from work. I miss work, for that matter. I miss the calls from my mother, saying "I made a roast, dumplings, gravy and red cabbage. There is enough for you guys, too. Why don't you bring everybody over after work?" I miss my Saturday morning walks across the farmers market with my wicker basket, going from stall to stall, selecting the best organic carrots, the freshest white asparagus, and potatoes and apples from local farms. Saturday mornings often ended outside the Ratskeller-Café, on a shaky chair at a table wobbly on cobblestone, sipping strong coffee and nibbling on a breakfast roll, while taking in the hustle and bustle of shoppers and vendors on a sunny weekend day.*

*"What am I doing here anyway?" I ask him, turning towards him on my swivel chair.*

*"Homework, I suppose," he says, eyes glued to the seventeen-inch screen.*

*"No, I mean, here, in America, with you," I say.*

*"How am I supposed to know?" he mutters, annoyed about being bothered.*

*I get annoyed myself and try to remember whatever possessed me to do this.*

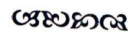
After we were married in 1983, it was clear that I would go to America with him as soon as I received my degree as a translator. But when I graduated, I pulled back. I was afraid of the unknown, and I didn't want to leave my family. David agreed to hang on a little longer, since he had a good job. In no time, however, a couple of years turned into twenty.

After all these years on my turf in Germany, my husband never mastered the basics, let alone the beauty, of the German language. His great sense of humor was lost on my friends and family, and he missed out on a lot of interaction himself. Nevertheless, he developed a warm relationship with my parents. Neither spoke much of the language of the other and still they got along wonderfully, especially when it came to cooking and baking. "David, you come kitchen," my mother would say and he would answer, "Ya ish kommt gleich!" (be right there). Almost perfect. She loves his mean turkey, and he adores her wonderful cream cheese and berry cakes. And "hmmmmm" is universal when it comes to showing that you like the taste of something!

In twenty years, he also did not manage to learn the intricate difference between the formal and informal use of the two German words for "You". He quite frequently embarrassed me by addressing my various bosses informally while being very formal with my parents. It was, of course, never his intention. He just didn't get the hang of it. This was especially unfortunate when dealing with typically stuffy, bank clerks or sales people in Germany, who did not appreciate being addressed in this manner. To add insult to injury, his relatively dark complexion and heavy moustache or beard at times prompted them to think



he was Turkish, an immigrant minority in Germany which is met with considerable prejudice and contempt. Once, early in our marriage, we were at a Bavarian fest. I was wearing a traditional Dirndl dress, and he was just his usual self when I overheard people behind us commenting on how this "clean German girl" could hold hands with this "dirty Turk." We chose to ignore it and took it with humor; "Kemal" and I still had a lot of fun that night....



*David's online tournament is finally over, and I ask him if he remembers when he first came to Germany.*

*As I hack into my own computer, he turns around on his swivel chair to face my back, scratches his head, takes another sip of water. His eyes sneak back to his own computer screen, and I have to clear my throat so he knows I am still waiting for an answer.*

*"Well, when I returned from Korea and was stationed in Huntsville," he says and wrinkles his forehead in utter concentration, "the army retrained me from air traffic controlling to communications. Then I got orders for Germany and my ex-wife, Pat, decided that the kids were old enough, and we should separate. So she stayed in Huntsville and filed for divorce, and I went to Mainz, Germany."*

*"That's where you met the love of your life, right?" I prompt him, but my hint goes unnoticed. Sometimes, I feel like a dry sponge, sucking up every droplet of emotion or love that this contained man might accidentally leak.*

*"What the heck was I doing, messing around with you, anyway?" he asks*

*"You tell me!" I say.*

*"You were young; you were female; my dick was hard," he says, adding insult to injury.*

*"How romantic," I say.*

*"Oh, well," he says, hastily. "You know, things just happened and it simply felt right."*



ERLANGEN, GERMANY, 1981

"You are kidding right?" I said.

"No," he said. "I'm afraid my ex-wife is serious. As a matter of fact, here are the flight data. We'll pick my daughter up on Thursday."

"Ok, then, I said. "Schöne Scheiße. Das kann ja heiter werden" (shit, that sounds like fun).

When Kathleen arrived, there wasn't much love lost between David's seventeen year-old daughter, whom he hadn't seen in a year, and his nineteen year-old girlfriend, especially since he worked in Mannheim and was home on the weekends. During the week, he left us two girls to deal with each other. As the months passed, I was less and less capable of dealing with this wild American girl who did as she pleased. Her manners were diametrically opposed to what I was used to and expected after my strict German upbringing. After all, I considered her a guest in my house. She, however, thought she was out of her parents' reach and had no one to answer to. Of course, I wasn't mature enough to deal

with her properly. Not only was I jealous of the attention she was getting from him, I was so stupid that I locked away food and towels from her, not willing to share anything with her, especially since I had no say in the sharing of her father. Four husbands later, she still makes me uncomfortable, so we keep the contact to a minimum.

David wasn't very happy when she announced that she was engaged to a young GI, not much older than herself, and that they had decided to have a baby. He was even less happy when at four months pregnant she decided to dump the young man for telling a white lie. That's when David resolved he couldn't handle his daughter any longer and thought it was time to send her back to her mother. Who was I to argue?

Instead of going back to America, however, Kathleen moved in with another soldier, a Vietnam vet who was happy to have an attractive young girl in the house, he most certainly would not be able to knock up. At night, she was working as a waitress in the officer's club on base; during the day, she managed his household. So he took advantage of her until it was time to send her home to Alabama to have the baby before the airlines wouldn't let her fly anymore.

I remember going to their house for Thanksgiving dinner that year. Because they didn't have much money, David had bought the turkey, and they prepared it there. By the time my college classes were over and we had arrived at – let's call him George – George's house, I was in for a big disappointment. As we walked in at five in the afternoon, starving and ready for a good meal, we only got to look at a turkey skeleton in the kitchen. Kathleen and George had invited



friends for dinner and hadn't wasted any thought on saving some food for David and me. There was a little bite of pumpkin pie left, which I despised. So I ended up having a bag of potato chips for dinner. It didn't matter that much to me that this was the Thanksgiving dinner I missed out on – because this holiday does not exist as such in Germany – but I was mad about how inconsiderate Kathleen had been.

First, I settled in an old stained chaise in the living room with my bag of chips; then I realized that the guys in the room were watching a porn flick. It took a while for that to sink in, because I could not believe – Catholic and inhibited that I am – that anybody would watch this kind of stuff with a group of others and without any shame whatsoever. Apart from never having watched a porno movie myself, I knew quite certainly that, if I ever did, I would be alone in a locked room where nobody could witness me doing this. I got up and went to look for David who must have gotten lost somewhere between the kitchen and the living room.

When I found him, he sat at a table in the den, deeply engrossed in a game of poker. He had completely forgotten that I was anywhere around. When he plays cards, he stops thinking about anything around him – the only thing that matters to him then is engaging the brain in logical battle with Lady Luck. Put this man in a room with likeminded people and a deck of cards, and he will deny knowing his own mother. Not even a rooster crowing three times could rouse him from this card-induced trance.

I sat down on a chair nearby, patiently waiting for him to finish so we could leave and go home. But they shuffled and dealt the cards again and again, while

I ran out of hangnails to bite or flowers to count on the dated wallpaper. I was surprised by how many different geometric patterns I could find in the yellowed, random arrangement of blooms on the wall. Finally, I needed to use the bathroom, to find out that it had no door. It took another five minutes for me to overcome my embarrassment and get up the courage to pry David loose from the poker table. He had to guard the entry to the bathroom, while I tried to pee as discreetly as I could, dismally failing to be soundless. As I still washed my hands and patted cold water on my cheeks to make the blush go away, he couldn't wait and went straight back to the poker game and lost track of me so completely that he had no clue that I was ready to claw his eyes out.



To him it had been just a harmless game of poker.

"I came and stood in the door when you had to go the bathroom. Besides, how can this be important twenty-three years after the fact?" He shrugged his shoulders when we were talking about it recently. "Women," he muttered under his breath. "There is nothing wrong with you and me. You know I don't get emotional."

'I know,' I thought to myself and remembered when I was pregnant with our first child. I loved being pregnant. It made me feel so special. Everybody loved and took care of pregnant women, didn't they? Husbands and future fathers were supposed to baby their pregnant wife and spoil them rotten. Or so I thought. When I mentioned my disappointment about his casual attitude to him, he had

only said, "Well, in Korea the pregnant women go to work in the field, squat down, give birth, and continue working. They don't get any special treatment."

But we weren't in Korea, and I felt kind of lost and wanted to be babied. And he never realized that I envied those pregnant women whose husbands would talk to the tummy, admire it in awe or whatever. Even though his callous behavior hurt me, I knew that he didn't mean to upset me and that deep down inside he loved me very much. But I still feel hurt when I think about the lost moments that I had so much wanted to add to my emotional treasure chest. Then I feel silly that twenty years later, I am not over it, yet.

Personally, I believe his detachment has to do with the fact that he was adopted when he was two years old. The reasons could be in his early childhood. He had not been an orphan when he was adopted, but he was simply taken away from his mother. His maternal grandmother had considered her daughter unfit to raise children, after she had an illegitimate son while her husband was stationed in Hawaii during World War II. David has no memory of his biological mother from that time, but there must have been some emotional trauma from having been torn from his home and placed into the hands of strangers, no matter how loving they were. Maybe this made him afraid of becoming emotionally attached to anybody. This was probably compounded by his first wife, who cheated on him several times and filed for a divorce twice. He once told me that he never left a woman, they always left him.





WÜRZBURG, GERMANY, 1986

*Dallas* was on when the first pain hit. I was stretched out on the cognac-colored rattan leather couch my brother had given me after he bought new living room furniture. I wasn't sure if it was the real thing, so I waited, until I knew who shot JR. At eleven o'clock, David, whose reproductive expertise stems from having grown up on a dairy farm, decided it was time to leave for the hospital.

The midwife checked my cervix and prepared me for giving birth: a little shaving, a lovely enema, a relaxing bath. Unfortunately, the baby decided she was not going to move out yet, and by three in the morning labor had all but ceased. Because they didn't know when the contractions would begin again, the doctors decided that I couldn't eat. So I lay in this drab room, on scratchy, starched linen, starving for another sixteen hours, while I watched my husband gobble up my hospital meals, before I went into labor for real.

The delivery room was an ugly sterile space with dark turquoise tiles, an olive green naugahyde table with menacing stainless steel stirrups and lots of blinking and beeping machines. During delivery, I had to interpret between David and the staff, since his German – shall we say – lacked a certain sophistication. This was especially arduous when I had to push. He was supporting my back, shoving me forward during each contraction. Between catching my breath, panting, and the obstetrician throwing himself onto my abdomen to drive out the



baby, I had to interpret and tell my faithful husband to stop pushing against my back.

Every once in a while during the delivery, I noticed that the staff kept glancing at something behind me and then again at David. I just figured it was because he was American and they were not used to Americans bringing their wives to civilian hospitals. Or maybe they were irritated by the enormous zoom lens of the camera that lay on the window sill.

After Rebecca was finally born, cleaned, weighed, measured, and put into my arms in a blanket, David laid a small gift-wrapped parcel on my stomach, together with a carrot. I noticed the curious looks of the nurses, but I was just as clueless.

"Do you remember the dream you told me about when you were six months pregnant?" he said.

I shook my head.

"About the one carat diamond earrings that I would give you after our baby was born?" he said.

"Oh, yes! Now, I remember," I said.

"Well, I couldn't afford one carat." He grabbed the carrot. "I only had enough money for one carrot. So here you are. One carrot diamond earrings."



CLARKSVILLE, TN, MARCH 2005

*"What did I give you when Dominique was born?" he asks as we continue our conversation.*

*"Don't you remember anything, you knucklehead?" I say. We both chuckle.*

*"You gave me opal earrings with a matching chain and pendant," I add.*

*"Really?" he says.*

*"Really!" I say.*

*"Are you going to give them to Dominique for her eighteenth birthday, like you gave Rebecca the diamond studs?" he wants to know, the twinkle in his eyes mocking me lovingly.*

*"That's the plan," I say, seriously.*

*"You and your rituals," he says and shrugs his shoulders.*

*"Yes, me and my rituals," I say, trying to give him a consternated look. I fail and hug him instead.*

*"I may not get all of this," he mumbles with his head buried in my bra. "But I do love you, you know?"*

*"I know," I say, running my hand over the stubble and the bald patches on top of his head. "Even though sometimes you have some weird ways of showing it," I sigh.*

*As I stand there, with my arms around him, I realize that I had almost given*

*all of this up. These little moments when I can truly feel the connection between the two of us and I am at peace.*



SALZGITTER, GERMANY, 2001

We had our ups and downs in eighteen years of marriage. Who wouldn't have? As a child of an ultraconservative, Catholic family, where no one speaks of their own emotions, I have always kept feelings buried away, and the mere thought of true intimacy is as threatening to me as standing buck-naked on Times Square. Perhaps, this is why I subconsciously picked this stoic man. Perhaps, I knew that there would be no threat from him demanding the expression of emotions beyond what I was capable of giving.

Imaginarily overweight in adolescence (if I had known then that I was just fine) I had yoyo-dieted myself to unbearable figures both in dress sizes and on the scales by the time I was twenty-six and twenty-nine and thirty-three and thirty-nine. I was medicating myself with food and was truly morbidly overweight for most of my adult life with a few slim bright spots. This became a big issue for David and me. The issue was not my weight as such, though, as one might think. The issue was sex. The bigger I got, the less attractive I felt, the less I felt inclined to be intimate. I felt embarrassed about my ever growing bulges, and if I conceded at all to let him get near me, the room had to be pitch black or else there was no chance I could relax.

The more I hated myself, the more grateful I should have been that this man stuck by this waddling pile of fat and even desired me. He still saw the beautiful person he had married and knew to look beyond the pain. Yet there were quite a few years of many frustrating months for him, and he still stuck around, sometimes raving mad and demanding, but never threatening to leave me. Neither of us realized that I was using food to numb my need for his expression of emotion, that I could not feel sexually attractive because I did not love myself and could not believe that he did. How could this unlovable person be desirable enough to go to bed with? I had no idea how much I was hurting him. He had no idea how much I was hurting.

In 2001, we got a flat rate for the internet, and I started hanging around in chat rooms. Anonymous and disembodied, hidden behind a computer screen, I could be myself. Just the inner beautiful person I had always been. I did not find another love, but I made many friends, male and female, who liked and loved me and gave me back some of my confidence, but no more wisdom. I spent a half a year in limbo, not knowing what I wanted. I sold the family car and bought a six-speed silver Toyota Celica with 145 HP. I took a two-week vacation in the Bahamas, all by myself, and had a ball. I decided that I wanted out of this relationship, that I needed more than a guy who could not express his emotions, other than demanding sex from me, which I was not ready to give any more.



## OREGON

EUGENE, OREGON, 12 SEPTEMBER 2001

On 9/11 David, on a tour through the States, was in Oregon visiting his half-brother Jes and family, whom he had never met,. The next day, he was about to fly from Oregon to California to see his father. His nephew Joe had researched the genealogy of the family and found Van, the biological father of David and his brother Richard.

Since all flights had been grounded until further notice, however, David said his goodbyes, rented a car and drove to Sacramento, where he would be introduced to his eighty-one year-old father for the first time.

When I wanted to know more about the emotional side of meeting his real father for the first time at age sixty-two, he didn't know where I was going with my questions.

"What do you mean? Just another stop on my trip. Another person to meet, I had never met before." He looked baffled.

"Weren't you excited, anxious, happy?" I asked

"You know, I don't get emotional," he said.

"So what did you talk about?" I wanted to know.

"Well, he was still very resentful about his mother-in-law grandma giving away his children without any chance for him to keep them," he said. I could not detect any emotional reaction to that statement either.

After David left his father in Sacramento, he traversed the States by car and visited his brother Richard in Florida, before flying to the Bahamas to meet up with me and our daughters for a vacation nobody would forget so soon, since this is where I got up the nerve to talk about separating.

"So you want a divorce?" he asked as we lolled on the king-size bed in our vacation cottage. I nodded and watched him carefully. His face did not twitch, and I saw no emotion.

"Ok then," he said. "If that's what you want." I don't know what kind of a reaction I expected, but this wasn't it.

When we returned to Germany, David decided that he was going to move to the States, so he packed some bags again and a month later left in order to go house-hunting for himself and the girls. I was going to stay behind and enjoy being a single woman. Maybe hunt for a guy who would be a little more emotional.

While he traveled, he would call me from the States every once in a while to see how we were doing. Once, he asked me if we were still on track with the separation, and I told him that nothing had changed.

"OK then," he said and hung up.



SALZGITTER, GERMANY, DECEMBER 2001

"Hey, I am in London, my flight to Hanover has been delayed. Are you still planning on picking me up?" I sat at the desk in my office when he called, my

trainee across from me, trying to figure out how to fill out a form for the production department. I waved at her and pointed at a stack of papers that needed to be copied, so I would be alone in the room while having a private telephone conversation.

"Yes, of course, I promised, didn't I?" I doodled a heart on my notepad and started filling out the contours with my ball-point. "Just let me know when you have the exact time, and I will be there, ok?"

"Ok," he said.

I heard a click and listened to the busy signal for a moment while I stared at the doodled heart. Then my eyes wandered to the window-sized print of van Gogh's *Café de Nuit* hanging above my computer. The voice... His voice kept ringing in my ears. I started to ask myself, 'What are you doing? Why are you doing this? Why are you giving this up and for what?'

I continued to stare at the dark cobblestone street and the stars on the painting and the more I thought about the situation, the more I missed David and us. And I knew, that I didn't want to live without him. It was a split-second realization.

My heart jumped as I watched him through the glass divider coming down the granite stairs to the baggage claims. After he had walked through Hanover customs, who always just wave people through, I hugged him very tightly, and we kissed. But I didn't say anything other than "Welcome home." On the one-hour drive from the airport I kept touching his leg and his hand. He would look at me questioningly, but didn't say anything. I felt too shy and stupid. But I had the

proverbial butterflies in my stomach. When we got home, I cried and told him that I wanted him back, if he would have me. There was no question for him. He just took me in his arms and kissed me very tenderly. Then we made love and decided to stick it out together.

Of course, the house in Clarksville had been bought by then, and we had to make some decisions.

"I spent twenty years in school, twenty years in the Marine Corps and Army and twenty years in Germany, just for you," he said a couple of days later, as we were discussing our future together. "I think, the next twenty years belong to me, and I want to spend them in my home country."

"Do you know what you are asking me to give up?" I asked, despite the new-found warmth in our relationship.



CLARKSVILLE, TN, MARCH 2005

"I know what you gave up," he says. "And I'm sure glad that you are here with me. And that emotional stuff – you know, I've been working on it, right?"

He dances around me, singing:

"I love you, I love you, I love you." He hugs me from behind and asks impishly if I am cold. It is a family joke that will crack me up every time. It relates to an episode in my parents' house. We were newly-wed, and as usual seven of us sat at my parents' dinner table. My dad was next to my Mom on the corner bench, below yet another picture of the Madonna. When he got that smirk in his



eyes, we knew he was up to something. He sidled behind Mom, put his arms around her and cupped her breasts, saying 'Are you cold?' Everybody was laughing so hard their sides were hurting, even Mom, once she got over her embarrassment.



## Roses and Chrysanthemums

*Since grief only aggravates your loss,  
grieve not for what is past.*

**Walker Percy**

My husband David has taken me to the Nashville airport to fly to my family in Germany. It is Saturday morning, the last day of April 2005, Barbara and Holger's twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. I had decided to go on this trip only two days before and therefore had not developed my usual travel anxiety. But in our customary fear of being late, we have arrived at the airport much too early again. Nonetheless, I don't want him to wait around until it is time for check-in. I can see that he is at a loss for words as he looks around the hustle and bustle of the airport. He has even brought a book along because he knows I am too restless for a decent conversation. I tell him to go back home to our girls. We hug and say goodbye at the end of the security check line, and he rushes off without turning around or waving. It is better this way.



At first, I had no intention of traveling to Germany this year. I had my hands full in America, a family to take care of, my work, my studies. But Amelie did not understand. How could I not plan to come to her mother's funeral? My goddaughter was devastated. And I was scared, too scared to face the grief – my own or that of my family. Besides, I had not been there for my sister when she was dying; certainly in death, I couldn't do anything for her either. Living on another continent had made it impossible for me to be part of the experience. While I was fulfilling my dream of graduate education, my parents had been helplessly watching one of their daughters slowly deteriorate and die. Like me, my brother and sisters had lost a sibling, but they also had seen more of her suffering. Barbara's children had endured the shadow of cancer's sword above their heads for six years before losing their mother. I had escaped most of this, had not heard the bitterness creeping into her voice or taking over her face. I was spared watching the emaciation. And now, I was too much of a coward to go to my sister's funeral because in my forty-three years I had never been to one.

My sister Rose and Holger, Amelie's father, called me several times and finally persuaded me to come to Germany after all because it was so important to Amelie. Within three days, I was on my way, but not before very professionally finishing up my duties as graduate assistant and taking the comprehensive exam I had prepared for since January. The exam had been scheduled for the Saturday of my flight, so I arranged with the chair of the department to take it a day early. Rose had suggested to me on the phone to keep telling myself that I was doing this for Barbara, to make her proud. So stuffed away in a cupboard of

a room, I spent four hours trying to focus amongst others on the importance of courtly love in medieval drama. There was no way I would cop out of my duties, riding on the wave of sympathy that was pouring out from friends and professors. I just could not allow myself to let my emotions interfere with the business at hand. This is not how I had been brought up.



For some reason, I function well under extreme stress. I can bundle my energy and focus on the task at hand. This came in very handy when Barbara's daughter was born during my sister's summer vacation in 1989. The circumstances of Amelie's birth will always be a miracle to us:

Imagine a very hot day.

Imagine you're stuck in traffic.

Imagine your seven-month pregnant sister is in the passenger seat – in labor – and you have to get to the hospital ASAP.

In 1989, I lived with my husband and two daughters in a tiny village – approximately three-hundred people – near Würzburg, Germany. Our home was in the upstairs of a brand-new split-level house that a farmer had built for his retirement. He was renting it until his son would come of age to take over the farm. It was a cozy and beautiful three-bedroom apartment overlooking a large yard with apple trees; a wooden balcony, bursting with red geraniums in summer, ran along the entire length of the house. The floors were covered with warm



honey-colored tiles and the ceilings were paneled with blond pine. Living downstairs from us were a music professor from the Würzburg conservatory and his wife, a violin instructor. Thus we never lacked musical entertainment - whether we wanted it or not. Of all instruments, he had to play the trombone, and his studio was right below our bedroom.

That summer, Barbara was on the way to vacation in southern Bavaria with her husband Holger and their adopted son Timmy. Halfway on the eight-hour trip from their hometown, they stopped at my house for a visit and to spend the night so Barbara could rest, since she was seven months pregnant. We had not seen each other in almost a year. Hence, the welcome was especially joyous when their blue station wagon pulled into our driveway with their two-year old son in the backseat. Barbara looked simply radiant with her swollen belly and the big grin on her face. She wore her blond hair in a pony tail and obviously loved the way her overalls stretched over her navel as she lovingly cupped the bottom of her belly, the way pregnant women often do instinctively. She was triumphant considering that medical rumor had posited that she and Holger would never conceive.

David and I had everything ready for a barbeque, and after our guests were settled in, we started our little party on the balcony. When Barbara got up the following morning, she told me that something seemed to be off concerning the pregnancy, and she wanted to be safe and see a doctor before traveling on. I took her to the office of my gynecologist in Würzburg. Unfortunately, he was on vacation, and a rude substitute examined her. He told her calmly, off-handedly

that she was in premature labor and needed to go to a hospital. While he also told me after the examination that I had to take her to the University Clinic, he neglected to tell me how urgent it was. My sister was too shocked to utter anything coherent at all, and I, in my obliviousness, simply took the scenic route through town, pointing out the castle and river-building where my husband worked. Truth be told, I believe the doctor simply should have ordered an ambulance instead of letting a seven-month pregnant woman in premature labor walk back to a car. But in hindsight we are always smarter.

This is how we ended up in the traffic jam – with a preemie on the way. When Barbara started to moan, I knew we were in trouble. Our two lanes were jammed going in the direction of the hospital. Since this all happened well before it was fashionable and even affordable for everybody to carry a cell phone, there was no way I could get an ambulance. The only other option were the two lanes going in the other direction. And I did what I had to do: I pulled into the sparse oncoming traffic, praying that the lane would stay clear. I kept flashing my high beams, had my hazard lights going, rolled down the window, stuck out my head and shouted "*Krankenhaus, Krankenhaus.*" It took another thirty excruciating minutes, but we finally made it to the Würzburg University Clinic.

When we arrived at the huge white brick building with the blue-roofed cupola and gothic windows located on the southern hillside of the city, I was shocked to see that the hospital staff already had a stretcher waiting. The gynecologist who had seemed so dismissive and without concerns had called ahead and advised the seriousness of Barbara's condition before our arrival.

After I delivered her to the hospital, I headed back out into traffic to inform Holger, who was still at our house, and take him back to the clinic. Amelie was born on 24 July 1989, even though the doctors were able to stop labor for a couple of days. She weighed in at less than three pounds.

The fact that Barbara went into premature labor in Würzburg was a blessing in disguise. Later she would often say that God was at work here, thus giving the word godchild another meaning: had my sister given birth to a preemie in our hometown, the outcome might have been quite different since the hospital in Salzgitter has no special neonatal care facility. If Amelie had been born there, she would have been transported by ambulance to the nearest children's hospital, twenty miles away. Not only would mother and child have been separated at birth until Barbara's release from the hospital a week later, but the neonatal care would not have been even half as good as the one in the university clinic. This way, Amelie received first-rate medical attention.

So it happened that instead of staying one night, my sister ended up spending six weeks with us until Amelie was ready to go home. I hardly ever saw Barbara, though, because she spent all of her waking hours in the neonatal care unit. In the meantime, Holger had already gone back home because he had to work, and he had taken Timmy with him.



Now, sixteen years later, I was on my way to bury my sister. As usual, the trip to Germany took almost 24 hours. Traveling alone left me with plenty of time



to let my mind wander. Very infrequently were my reveries interrupted by the flight personnel during the catering periods, but I could not have cared less what I was eating or drinking. My sister was dead. What did pasta or chicken matter? During the transatlantic flight, the crew showed the movie *Finding Neverland*, the life story of James Barrie, author of *Peter Pan*. As I had been trying to imagine all kinds of scenarios involving the encounters with my grieving family, I plugged in the earphones hoping to relax with a nice movie. How was I supposed to know that in the film the mother of five young boys dies in the end, leaving them orphaned? I was glad the lights on the plane had been turned down, so nobody noticed my sobbing.

Ever since I was a child and well into adulthood, I had felt that our ultra Catholic family was untouchable. We seemed to live in God's protective palm, while people around us were getting divorced, becoming sick, having disabled children or dying. This happened to others, not to us. It was hard to face the truth, when my godchild Amelie was diagnosed with tetraspastic syndrome at age three in 1992. It was even harder when the realization sank in that she would be physically handicapped for the rest of her life, unable to have full control of her four limbs. No amount of praying ever changed that, so after many years, I finally gave up asking God for Amelie's healing. The cruelest truth to accept, however, was that our perfect little world was not safe from cancer either.

As I sat in my window seat on the plane, my thoughts returned to the days when I still believed that everybody in our family would live happily ever after. I remembered the sunny afternoon Barbara and I spent in the garden of the old



house she and her husband had bought on my parents' street. They had lovingly renovated the inside to make it a cozy home with Nordic wood paneling, a cast-iron wood stove and lots of other natural building materials. Rather than green, however, the garden had been their sore thumb. It was screaming neglect at everybody who entered. They had no time to invest into gardening other than the bare minimum such as raking leaves, cutting the grass and growing some organic vegetables.

Later when the cancer had not only robbed her of her health, but also had forced her to give up the teaching position she so loved, Barbara turned to nature. She transformed the unwelcoming, neglected garden into a little paradise, with a splashing fountain, a typical German *Strandkorb* (a canopied wicker seat for two, that we sisters and our brother had bought for her after she was first diagnosed with cancer), which she lovingly called her North Sea, a wooden gazebo, a plethora of flowers blooming in almost all seasons and in all colors of the rainbow; in short, a place that magically drew in family and friends wanting to spend time with her.

That afternoon, however, we took our coffee to the yet dilapidated gazebo with yellowed corrugated plastic walls. The grass was sparse on the brown earth, and there were no flowers. Still, we enjoyed the sun as we talked about kids, life, and family. When the topic shifted to our health, she pointed to her abdomen and said that she had been having stomach aches for a while now, and that her belly felt weird and very hard. She was considering going to the doctor.

It took her another two weeks before she made it to our family practitioner

who took an ultrasound and sent her on to her gynecologist without telling Barbara what she had seen or what she suspected. The gynecologist also took an ultrasound and sent her to the nearest clinic in the city of Seesen without giving her any clues. At the clinic, finally, they did more than that. After many more diagnostic measures, the doctors removed a mass the size of a football from her abdomen. On May 3, 1999, my sister Barbara was diagnosed with ovarian cancer.

### OMENS

During my annual visit to Germany in 2004, I had spent a lot of time with Barbara. Our oldest sister Rose from Hamburg often said, "Look, how Barbara is seeking your company, as if she has a premonition and wants to enjoy as much time with you as she can." I shrugged that off. I did not want to hear.

The year 2005 started with nothing but bad omens. The ceramic dove I had once made for my sister lost its head. Then, the terracotta hedgehogs she kept in the garden burst from the frost. In January, Barbara developed water retention in her lungs, which had to be drained several times so she could breathe. She felt like an old woman, she said on the phone, couldn't even walk one flight of stairs in her house without pausing every other step. Late in March, her Polish shepherd Jeannie, came down with kennel cough and also had water in its lungs. "Look," my sister had said to our mother as the dog lay at her feet, "she is as sick as her owner." Jeannie had to be put down on my birthday. Barbara withdrew from the family for a while, mourning her dog and probably

herself. Then, the Pope died in April, and as I was watching the news coverage, especially of the funeral, I couldn't help but wonder about another funeral, that I knew was coming soon, knowing that my sister's body was slowly shutting down, even if her spirit refused to acknowledge it. Barbara had never fully recuperated after the last surgery in the fall after my last visit. While I never witnessed any of this, I know from conversations with my family that there were no more painless days. She could not sit upright comfortably anymore; she had to bring her knees up to her chest to take the pressure off her stomach and the thrice-opened scar that furrowed down from the solar plexus, curved around her navel and ended at the pubic bone. Her mood swings attained seismic proportions as she grew bitter, and laughter became a rarity in her house. Yet, she never talked about dying. That was taboo. The rest of the family also did not say it out loud; pronouncing it was out of the question.

Ten days before she died, I had called Barbara not knowing that this was the last time I would ever hear her voice. She was sitting on a deck chair in her garden. I heard birds in the background and the murmur of a conversation between Holger and his sister who had taken the cordless out to Barbara. I can still recall our chat vividly. Her voice sounded very tired and almost resigned. So we tried to keep it light. She did not want to talk about her illness, although she did tell me that she felt very weak and just did not seem to be able to get back on her feet after that last surgery. I made an effort to sound confident that better times would come, before she switched the topic to our children. Nonetheless, I could hear in her voice that even this conversation was too much for her. Like a



wounded animal, she wanted to be left alone and after only eight minutes I said what would be my last "Mach's gut" (take care) and "Tschüss" (bye).

In the days to come, the cancer slowly took away her ability to eat, and she began to fade while excruciating pain began clouding her judgment. In the evening of April 25, 2005, Holger had called her doctor, because she could not even keep down a glass of water any more. The physician rushed to the house and gave her an IV with glucose solution, so she would not dehydrate, and recommended admittance to a hospital. But she was adamant that she would not go back to a hospital. The next night must have been horrific. Apparently, the tumor absorbed all of the glucose and grew with explosive speed. Her pain was so excruciating that her husband gave Barbara a quadruple dose of pain patches, which did not work. When my mother came to look after her in the morning, Barbara was very weak and in horrible agony.

"I can't go on any more, Mama," she whispered, convulsed in pain.

Cradling Barbara's head in her lap, my mother drew a cross on her sweat-beaded forehead. She blessed her and said, "If you can't go on any more, child, then you don't have to. It is ok to let go."

Meanwhile, Holger had called the doctor again who urgently recommended hospitalization and ordered an ambulance.

As they were waiting for the emergency team, Barbara gestured to her husband that she wanted to get up. Thinking that she wanted to use the bathroom, he helped her up, but instead of going straight ahead, she turned left. She pushed hard against him, which did not amount to much because she was



completely emaciated and had no strength left, looked at him with her eyes that had grown huge in her now tiny face and she said: "Bitte! Bitte!" (Please). Her gestures made clear that she did not want to go to the hospital, she was trying to get away into her beloved garden. But it was raining very hard, and it was impossible for Holger to take her outside.

"I should have carried her into the garden, rain or no rain," he later said.

"Bitte!" had been the last words she ever uttered. Supported by the medics, she still had enough strength to walk to the stair lift. But downstairs when the male nurses put her on the stretcher, she closed her eyes under the bitter weight of defeat. Barbara lived for less than twenty-four hours after this. While the doctors were able to make her comfortable with the morphine drip, they also took her last chances of consciousness. Eighteen-year old Tim stayed until after midnight. "Sleep well, I love you, Mom," he kissed her before he left the hospital room. Amelie never got to say goodbye to her Mom. She was in school when the ambulance came, and later she refused to go the hospital, saying that "Mom will not be able to let go, if I am there." But Holger, our brother Michael, Rose and her husband Siegfried stayed with Barbara until she breathed her last.



I arrived in Munich at eight on Sunday morning and had a three-hour layover. Even though I was exhausted, I was too restless to sit down and wait until I could continue on the last leg of the trip to Hanover. I just kept pacing up and down in front of the check-in counter. When the commuter plane finally

touched down at noon, I expected my oldest sister Rose to pick me up. Anxiously, I was peering through the glass wall dividing the waiting area from the baggage claim area as I walked down the stairs. When I detected Rose, we waved and then put our hands against each other's, separated by the thick security glass. I was happy to have arrived but apprehensive. Just how do you behave in a family that doesn't show emotions when you are bereft with grief? But then, Rose wasn't alone at the airport. There also were Amelie, blond and sunk down in her electric wheelchair, Timmy gangly and lanky, and Holger with cropped gray hair and a drawn face. Amelie was wearing a black hat and sunglasses. They had come with two cars to pick me up. Rose had also brought her husband and her own daughter, Maja, who at age 28 and in training as a special education teacher, took wonderful care of Amelie and Tim. As I embraced one after the other, I was biting back the tears, trying to make as light as one can of such a situation, commenting on Amelie's cool outfit, but I ended up burying my nose in Rose's shoulder. I am a good trooper, and in true family fashion I was able to keep my composure.

As usual when I arrived at my parent's house, my mother's love awaited me in the form of a sumptuous meal. Once again, the scent of golden potato dumplings bathed in chocolate brown gravy, red cabbage and a variety of roasts greeted my nostrils long before I ever laid eyes on Mama. For the first time, she looked her seventy-four years of age. The preceding months and the loss of a daughter had taken a toll on her. Still, I could feel the love and relief of having me safely in her arms as we quietly hugged. The sun was shining brightly on this first

of May, and it was very hot, as if the weather wanted to defy the solemn reason for our gathering. The family spent the rest of the day together, sometimes softly talking, sometimes silently lost in thought. Once my parents retired, Rose told me about the last hours she spent with Barbara and how touching it had been to see Holger and our brother Michael cry and embrace at her deathbed.

The funeral was to take place at two p.m. the next day. All morning, I was very apprehensive as everybody was quietly getting ready. But then something amusing happened that lightened the mood for a short while. My mother's cousin had come to express his condolences. He was a burly man in his seventies, wearing a typical Loden suit and a matching green hat with a *Gamsbart*. In the course of their conversation, he proceeded to ask my dad, pointing at me sitting in the garden and thinking that I could not hear them, if I had learned enough English yet in my three years in America to find my way around. Papa was filled with indignation and leapt into a description of my accomplishments as a pharmaceutical translator and now graduate student at an American university. I was chuckling but also very touched when I heard the pride in his voice.

As we later sat in my parents' living room, the afternoon of the funeral, with my sisters Rose and Angie, and my aunt Christa and uncle Karl-Hans, the older folks began reminiscing about their youth during and after World War II, to distract themselves. My mother told us how her sister – now sitting in the room with us – had been five years old when she automatically responded to the air raid sirens in the middle of the night. She barely woke up, grabbed her Teddy bear, threw on



her coat and ran down the street to the bunker. The bunker guards already knew that little Christa would arrive long before the rest of the family.

"I remember when I was seven," Christa said, putting down her coffee cup. She is a petite, high-strung blonde, slim, well coiffed and dressed very elegantly – quite the opposite of my mom, who is an earth mother, plump, with her wiry hair in an old-fashioned perm and wearing sensible clothes. "We were scavenging for potatoes on a freshly harvested field. A British bomber was flying low above and the gunner was shooting at us. I mean, we were only children. There was no cover in sight. Maybe we were just lucky that he did not aim that well – or maybe he was trying to scare us."

"Yes, it was hard to find food then," my father added. "After the wheat was harvested, we would hunt for anything edible on the fields, too, but we would also take nail clippers with us and hide on the inside of grain sheaves and clip off the wheat berries. We would steal whatever vegetables and grains we could from the farmers, knowing that they were only scraping by themselves. But hunger makes for bad manners and little compassion." He rubbed his hand over his bald head and reached for another piece of cheese despite his diabetes.

Then it was time to go to the cemetery. I felt lost and unprepared. My mind kept replaying variations of how I anticipated the memorial service to be. I tried to imagine what Barbara looked like. Dead. But I never could conjure up her face. I had refused to look at a picture taken at the visitation. When we entered the chapel and I saw the coffin, I was Vardamin thinking that she certainly wouldn't be able to breathe in there! Were they sure that she was dead? Was



my sister really dead? I was not able think of Barbara with the peaceful, sleeping face logic dictates; instead, I could only imagine her naked feet pointing upwards, the second toe longer than the first, just like my own. Even now, although I know that Holger had her dressed in an orange outfit and white sneakers, I still see her bare feet, pointing towards the wooden lid. I think of her under the earth. Unable to breathe.



The homily was held by Father Hübner, an old family friend, who had married Barbara and Holger in 1980. Parts of his sermon had originally been intended for the mass on their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. My brother Michael had told Rose in early April that it seemed to him, as if our sister was hanging on by her bare teeth to make it to the anniversary. She almost did. The church service for the silver anniversary had long been scheduled for April 30, only three days after she died.

The flower-covered coffin was made from the light ash wood Barbara so loved. Amelie, screaming and howling, was once again hiding behind sunglasses and the hat. My mother, whom I had never seen crying, was convulsed with grief. She kept repeating that she could not fathom that her child was supposed to be in that wooden box as we were walking behind the hearse in slow procession from the chapel to the cemetery. My father, outwardly composed, but his face very drawn, was grieving just as much. When Holger had brought them the news

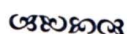
immediately after Barbara's passing, our father had told him: "You and I have lost someone very precious!"

In our mourning, the family became more close-knit than ever: uncles and brothers-in-law protectively hugged crying women. I had been pushed away from my parents by the crowd when we were leaving the chapel, so I had to elbow my way back to the front where I belonged. I still see us walking behind the coffin, the white rope running through white-gloved hands lowering Barbara into the ground. I see sunflowers, yellow roses, white chrysanthemums, a heart woven of red roses; the hand of Martin, Michael's son, on grandma's shoulder at the grave. Rose coaxes me to throw the ribbon-tied, furled poem I had written for Barbara onto the coffin. A large crowd of fellow-teachers, friends and family, pays their respects.

A young Turkish man in his twenties, dark haired with olive skin, an earring glinting in the scorching sun, had done everything he could to find out the time and place of the funeral. When it was his turn to approach the open grave, he slowly spread his arms, turned his hands palms facing upward, and declaimed an Islamic prayer for her. Later, he told Holger that Barbara had been his elementary school teacher and that there was so much he had Barbara to thank for. She had never given up on him when he had had difficulties learning German and therefore to read and write in elementary school.

Barbara had also never given up on me. I have a lot to thank her for, too. Had it not been for her, my father would never have considered sending me to a better school as had been recommended in my elementary school. She pointed

out to him that he should not make the same mistake with me that he had made with her, forcing her to make up for lost education later so she could go to college and become a teacher. Frequently, she also came to my rescue when I did not feel well. I began suffering from migraines in my late twenties, and she often held my head between her cool hands until the pains subsided.



After the funeral, I stayed in Germany for another three weeks with my family. I visited a few friends, but mostly spent time with my parents reminiscing and speaking about their youth, my youth, things we had forgotten, things I never knew. Death makes us want to celebrate life, one another, and the experiences of our parents. I needed to connect some dots and ask some questions while we were still all here and together. For instance, I knew that my father had been a prisoner of war in Russia in 1945 and that he had escaped. But I never knew how. I had always had the impression that the topic was taboo in our house. When I said that to Rose, she smiled and told me that I was mistaken.

"You were the youngest." She took a sip of her red wine spritzer as we sat in my parents' living room together. "When you were old enough to understand these things, the stories had been conveyed so often that they were just not told any more."

You might say I was surprised at that. But then, it liberated me to ask my father about all the things I wanted to know. Thus, he told me the entire story of escaping from Riga where he had been a Russian POW in 1945. This is also



how I found out that he, too, had not only had lost a sister, but also a brother: In 1944, my uncle had been injured in the war and was on hospital leave in Silesia. While recuperating, he was allowed to go out on the town occasionally. On one of those nights, Russian soldiers invaded the small city. While the women scrambled to hide wherever they could, the Russians shot every man who was old enough to be a soldier. Amongst the ones they shot that night was my uncle on crutches. Two years later, just as everybody was trying to forget the horrors of the war, my father's sister had died in an accident, a few weeks after he had been reunited with his family in West Germany. His adult sisters Hildegard and Erika were trying to have a little fun and rode a crude wooden wagon down a steep road. Suddenly, the wagon veered to one side, and they ran it into the curb of the sidewalk. Hildegard was catapulted out and hit her head on the street. She was dead instantly. It was one of my father's first duties as head of the household to write to his brother-in-law at a Russian POW camp to inform him of the death of his wife.

Thinking about all of this, I realize how sheltered I had grown up in a very loving home. There was never much money for a family of seven, despite the fact that I grew up during the *Wirtschaftswunder* (economic wonder), but there was an abundance of love that protected me from the harsh realities that my parents must have faced during and after the war. I had little understanding of what it must have been like for them, just like it was hard to understand what Barbara must have been going through in her struggle with cancer. In one sense,



she was at war, too, just like my father had been. But she had to battle her own body, which had turned on her.



For six years, I had known deep down inside that the call would come one day. I thought I was prepared for it. I didn't expect it to sucker-punch me in the gut. Of course, I didn't want to face the truth that my sister would die, either. I never allowed myself to acknowledge the fleeting moments of truth when the research I did in the internet or the medical doctors I worked with told me that the chances of my sister's full recovery were zero. I felt like a traitor when the scenario of a funeral zipped through my head, as if I was disallowing my sister hope. I permitted myself to be lulled into false relief when the chemo kicked in for a while and her voice on the phone sounded so full of life. I knew it couldn't be. I knew I couldn't allow it to be. I knew that I mustn't ever say it out loud.

When the call finally did come, I was not prepared. I had known for a least two weeks that only a miracle would do anymore. I had hoped for one for six years, not daring to admit that I didn't believe it would happen. Not because I don't believe in God's power or in miracles, but because I just didn't believe we would be the chosen ones. Then, of course, I would feel guilty for not having enough faith; in my darkest hours I believed that my lack of faith was the reason why God did not make that miracle happen to my sister. Still, as I sit here, writing this, I cannot believe that she is dead. It has been six months now and every time I see her picture, I feel a pang deep down inside. Living in America, it is

easy for me to pretend that she is still puttering around in her garden.

During my weeks in Germany, I took many long walks, not only because I needed the exercise, which was an absolute must considering my mother's delightful cooking, but also because I had to clear my head and have time by myself. In the Roman empire, they say, all paths lead to Rome; in my small hometown, I had to face the reality that all paths lead past the cemetery. There were hardly any days when my feet did not take me by our church's graveyard. While it was the most beautiful route to town, down a shaded avenue lined with ancient oak trees, I found myself plotting ways in my head that would allow me to get to my destination without having to walk the narrow path that directly leads past my sister's grave. Even when I was driving my father's car, there was no escape. The main road downtown goes past the cemetery, and the hedge around the new addition where Barbara lies is not high or dense enough yet, so one can see her grave from the street. For days I was also haggling with myself. I desperately wanted to take some photos of the flowers on the grave. For some reason it felt wrong and disrespectful, but in the end I did and now I am glad.

It is amazing how my sense of a place changed once I was personally affected. This place had been a graveyard all my life. My paternal grandmother had been buried there and my uncles; my parents are talking of being buried there one day. But only when somebody close actually rests there does the abstraction of the word cemetery fill with grave meaning.

My brother had volunteered to take me to the airport for my return trip. I hate goodbyes. I hate them so much that I had been fretting about this moment for days already as I last hugged my parents. But how they surprised me and added to my emotional turmoil. Both of them did something they had never done before. They drew a cross on my forehead, blessed me, and asked God to protect me during my journey and in my future. I still have to swallow hard every time I think about it, and back then, it took all my strength to stay composed. My answer to them was anything but graceful. I just mumbled a thank-you into their shoulders as I held on to them tightly. It was an awkward moment for me, not only because this blessing was so unexpected, but also because I know that with my parents' advanced age there is always that chance that there will be no next time.

Their blessing, their prayers, and Barbara's intervention as I like to believe did make my trip home quite memorable, though. Upon arriving at Munich airport for my transatlantic flight to Chicago, I was frenzied, because the airline had not been able to confirm my seating in Hanover. But God and Lufthansa's blue crane were gracious. I was upgraded to business class. This was the most comfortable flight I have ever been on. Nine hours of bliss, fully stretched out in a reclining seat with a Shiatsu massage program. I bet I ran the motors hot during that flight. The meals were served on real china, placed on tiny table cloths. The menu selection was divine. Prepared by a German gourmet restaurant, there were two choices of hors d'oeuvre (crayfish or veal), a salad, and three choices of Entrees. How about Guinea Hen with Olive Gnocchi and Morel Mushrooms on Leek



Ragoût? Or rather Poached Fillet of River Trout on Vegetable Stew and Seminola Diamonds in Apple Horseradish Sauce? Perhaps Celery Ravioli on Basil Cream with sun-dried Tomatoes, Kohlrabi, Zucchini and Carrots? There was also a selection of cheeses available to "close the stomach" and for dessert, a choice between peppered chocolate mousse enhanced by Strawberry Rhubarb Compote or a Fresh Fruit Salad. Quite a difference from the overcooked aluminum tray grub they serve in economy class. Pictures of slaves rowing a Viking ship came to my mind as I was thinking of the poor blokes in the rear of the plane. And while I was still numb with grief and pain from saying goodbye to a sister forever and to my parents for at least another year, I was able to smile and enjoy my blessings on this flight, watching the clouds outside the plane like plumes of wings.





## One-Way Ticket

From Latvia to West-Germany via Silesia

*"Courage is the first of human qualities  
because it is the quality which guarantees the others."*

**Winston Churchill**

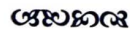
Papa was twenty-five years old and approximately one thousand kilometers away from home when World War II ended. Navigating by the stars, it took him seven weeks to walk home.



When he enters a room, he possesses it. He wears his eighty-five years well, these days, with his laurel wreath of white curls, proud that he is as slim and straight as a birch tree, maybe not quite as flexible, but still strong enough to putter around his garden for six or more hours every day. He is the patriarch of our family. His own father died when Papa was only fifteen. From then on, he stood by his mother's side, ensuring her survival and that of his seven siblings,

later that of his own five children. He only knows how to be in charge, how to tell people what to do the only way he understands – his way. His mind is still sharp as ever but certainly less agile than his body. As one can expect from an arch-Catholic, he is as opinionated as he is grumpy. He is my father, my Über-Vater, whom I respect so much that I am almost afraid of him.

It is one of the few qualities of death that it brings people closer together. After Barbara was put to rest in April of 2005, I spent many evenings with my parents. Talking to them, especially with my father has strengthened my bond with them, and they helped me to tear down the invisible wall between knowing and showing love for each other. I was mesmerized and proud when he finally told the stories of his life to me, his audience of one.



On May 8, 1945 my father's battalion heard on the radio broadcast that Germany had capitulated, and the war was over. The Soviet army had them surrounded near Riga, Latvia, and to make matters worse, he was expecting to be court-martialed any day because he had dared to voice his opinion that the war was a lost cause and that it was time they surrendered. The Russians took all German soldiers prisoner and, except for the car mechanics and drivers, sent them to POW camps. Since he had been the chauffeur of the commander, my father was one of the lucky ones who remained behind. The victors had captured a large number of German vehicles, and now they needed to keep both drivers and mechanics with the spoils to maintain and drive them to Leningrad. Dad had

been on one of those trips when he abandoned the vehicle and decided to try to make it back home to Silesia.

He knew he had to head to the southwest, and he knew the approximate distance. It must have been overwhelming, but he planned to walk forty kilometers every night, grateful that it was still summer time. During the day, he hid in forests and copses and slept. When dusk approached, he would look for a dwelling and observe the people living there for a while. If he felt it was safe to approach, he would go to their door and beg for some food.

Once, my father had been invited to share supper with a farmer and his family. While the cabbage soup was thin with tiny specks of bacon from a hog slaughtered months ago, the air was filled with the aroma of freshly baked bread. The loaf was a big round wheel; the farmer's wife cut it into thick slices and slathered it with homemade butter from their only cow. When she saw how fast their guest had wolfed down the first piece, she handed him another and ended up giving him two thirds of the loaf, after she realized that he put the second piece into his pocket as provision for the next day. He was so ravenous that he immediately ate half of what she had given him before he started on that night's march. But his body could not deal with the vast amount of food it was supposed to process after the involuntary fast. Hovering on the edge of starvation, Papa's stomach was only used to small quantities. He suffered from cramps all night long.

Even though he was not always as lucky in obtaining food from well-meaning farmers, nature also frequently provided. After one night's march, he



was rubbing his tired feet as the sun just began illuminating the cathedral of trees and revealed a carpet of chanterelles at its feet. It looked like Cockaigne to him. He fried the mushrooms in a tin can over an open fire that morning and then slept soundly after this feast. What a pity that they were not suitable to take along for the next day. Another time, my father made soup from flour and margarine some well-meaning soul had given him. It was a hungry man's minestrone to him, after he added some herbs he had picked in the woods. His worst experience was when he was so desperate and hungry that he ate unripe rye berries from a field. He ended up vomiting all night and could not meet his forty-kilometer goal. That was the hardest lesson on the trip.

When Papa reached East Prussia, he came to a city hall that had been completely vandalized. All records had been strewn around and destroyed. There, however, he found a map of the area and of Silesia, giving him a better idea of which roads to follow and where the best places would be to cross the rivers. If he had a river on the route, he looked for the shallowest place to cross it. Sometimes, it was enough to roll up his trousers and wade across; sometimes, he had to strip, put the clothes on top of his head and swim. Always at night, of course. The water of one of the rivers was so savage that swimming was out of the question. There was no bridge nearby and no ferry. But then, Fortuna smiled on him: as he sat behind a tree, watching the river and brooding over his options, a Russian patrol boat came down-river and pulled ashore not far from him. He didn't know and didn't care why they landed there and disappeared into the forest. My father waited until he could not hear them anymore and was certain that they



were nowhere near. He made the sign of the cross, said a quick prayer of thanks, and just took their boat. After he rowed to the other side, he pushed it into the stream.

After Papa had reached Poland, he rode as a stowaway on a train to Warsaw, where he arrived on 1 September 1945, just as the trees were putting on their patchwork cloaks. At that time, he also found out that his home, Silesia, no longer belonged to Germany, but was Polish now. It must have been devastating. To avoid standing out, he had traded the jacket of his German uniform with some Pole. Many Polish men wore scavenged German uniform parts just to have some clothing, so he blended in nicely. And since he spoke Polish, nobody noticed anything unusual about the German soldier. From Warsaw, Dad continued by train to Kreutzburg, Silesia, and walked the last thirty miles to his home village of Grasenau.



It was dark by the time he arrived. Since he did not know if his family was still there, he casually walked by his home, a small, red brick house, surrounded by a garden with lush apple and cherry trees, and he observed what was going on. I imagine his heart plummeted when he had to realize that a Polish family was living in his mother's house now. When they saw him staring, they were afraid and chased him away. He ran off, circled around and approached the property again from another direction. In the end, though, his curiosity still unsatisfied, he went to the neighboring village to check on an aunt who had not

left for Germany. She told him that his mother had fled from the Russian invaders with his siblings to Salzgitter, West-Germany.

Papa contacted his family by letter, but stayed in a spare room with Aunt Emmie for almost a year, until July of 1946. Since he was a carpenter, there was a lot of work for him. Many households needed repairs that just had not been a priority during the war. Stolen furniture had to be replaced, farm equipment needed new handles. But people also had to grow their own food, and when he was not in the woodshop, Papa's help was always welcome on the fields.

After he had settled in with Aunt Emmie, he returned to Grasenau one more time during the day to look at his family's home, and he spoke to the Polish family living there. They had been assigned to the house by the new local administration. Very graciously, they allowed the son of the former owners to look around in the house and on the grounds surrounding it. At the far corner of the property, my father found a big heap of garbage and papers, which he sifted through. It contained everything that his family had had to leave behind of their personal belongings. He fished out a number of family photographs and important documents.

Surprisingly enough, he also discovered that the new house-owners kept their livestock in one of the bedrooms and not in the stables. When asked, they told him that very often hordes of marauding Poles came by at night trying to steal anything edible or salable. These marauders also were the reason why my father had to leave my aunt's home less than a year later.

Of course, Aunt Emmie's little farm and village, where mostly German

Silesians lived who had decided to stay in their homes under the Polish government also were not spared from these onslaughts. But fortunately, the villagers had discovered stashes of rifles in the forest that the Russian troops had left behind. So during the assaults, they shot into the air to scare the robbers off. Since my father was the youngest of the village men and a former German soldier, he led the village defense. This is why the local police kept an eye on him, however, even though he was only protecting himself and the other villagers. When a friend told his aunt that they were only waiting for Papa to give them a good reason for an arrest, he decided it was time to join his mother in West Germany.

He needed to go by train, but had no travel permit or money for a ticket. Luckily, his uncle had worked for the train company, and Aunt Emmie still kept an old uniform around. As she was digging through the bedroom wardrobe looking for the uniform, she told him about the east-bound concentration camp trains that had pulled through their station during the war. The prisoners, stuffed tightly into cattle wagons, moaned or screamed for water and threw cards and letters out of the train begging for them to be mailed. Since she could not officially give them water to drink without getting into trouble, she said, she would spray the wagons with the hose, and she mailed as many of those letters as she could. She must have been very brave, circumventing that iron fist of the Nazi machinery, when she did what little she could to help the Jews on their way to an unknown destiny, but there was no pride in her voice, as she told the story to my father.



Once the uniform had been found, Dad packed his stuff and caught the next train to the West. After carefully observing the traffic for a couple of weeks, he had figured out that a train crew consisted of eight persons who did not know each other well. So he pretended that he belonged to the previous crew and was catching a ride back to the origination. His story was easily accepted, even though his Polish was not perfect.

When the locomotive stopped at the border to Germany, everybody's papers and tickets were checked. Dad had to think quickly to avoid being caught. So he got off the train and looked for a way to blend in inconspicuously. As he walked around desperately trying to figure something out, he stumbled over the toolbox of a station hand. Then it hit him: he grabbed a hammer out of the box and, while the train was standing, went from wagon to wagon, banging on wheels and joints, pretending to check their tightness. As soon as the train started moving out of the station again, he swiftly hopped back on and thus made his way to Berlin.

Once in Berlin, he was devastated by the destruction he saw. The streets had been cleaned up as far as was possible in order to allow what little traffic there was. The mortar had been pounded off the intact bricks lying around, and they had been stacked up in front of ruins. Stretches of streets were carpeted with a thick layer of dust. Russian and German tank wrecks rusted on many street corners. The city was a bleak heap of rubble, as if smashed by the hand of a giant. Only the shadows of houses remained. Dad could not believe what he saw, but he asked around until he found his way to the Berlin-Spandau refugee

camp where he registered with the Red Cross. There, he was supplied with a train ticket to Braunschweig and Salzgitter, where he joined my grandmother, aunts and uncles.



After my father arrived in Salzgitter, a small industrial town at the edge of the Harz mountains, he once again became the head of grandmother's household. He knew that he had to take care of her and his sisters whose husbands were still gone. The family lived in shabby wooden refugee barracks on a corner lot. A supermarket stands in their place today, and when I shopped there as a child, I had no inkling of the history of the location.

Rations were scarce and the locals must not have been too fond of the refugees taking their jobs, stealing from their gardens, doing whatever they considered necessary to survive. My father and uncles would go to the surrounding fields at night and scavenge any edible items they could find. Since the family needed furniture, my dad could also put his carpentry skills to work again. The only problem was the building material. But necessity is the mother of invention, and thus *the boys* boldly went into the local forest and illegally cut down trees. More than once did they escape the forest ranger, until one day, one of the neighbors snitched on them. Luckily, my fathers and uncles could buy off the ranger with their cigarette rations, since cigarettes were the ultimate black-market currency before 1948. Some boards made from the wood he cut down

almost sixty years ago are still stored in the attic of my parents' house, just as some of the furniture he built back then still graces their basement.



My parents had not known each other yet in 1947, but they shared a common experience of life in postwar Salzgitter. Mom's family also came from Silesia originally. However, they had already moved to a tiny house in Salzgitter in the 1930s because my grandfather had found a job there. Her mother was earning money by washing clothes for the guards of the Polish prisoner camp. When she collected and delivered the laundry, she would often stick some food she could spare through the fence to the prisoners. After the war, this paid off since some of them who stayed behind in Salzgitter returned the favor and vouched for her before the denazification committee. To supplement the food rations, both families regularly sent their children into the forest to collect beech-nuts, which would be run through an oil mill later, since butter or margarine were scarce. They also had to hunt for fir cones as burning material. Of course, others had the same idea, so the children had to search long and hard, wading and sifting through cold and wet leaves in any weather in any season.

Grandma kept a pig in the garden that she fed with potato skins and whatever other scraps she could put aside. When the time came for it to be slaughtered, however, this had to be done in complete secrecy since food was rationed between 1945 and 1948. The family's food rations would have been



shortened accordingly, if my grandmother had officially slaughtered that pig. Grandpa had to bribe the butcher, who gladly took some meat. All windows, doors and gaps of the washhouse had to be covered and stuffed tightly with some cloth, so no neighbor could look in or smell the fragrance of meat being cooked and canned as sausage.

Around the same time, my father and his brothers collected sugar beets that had been left on the harvested fields to sell them at the sugar refinery. Sometimes, they were lucky and made a penny or two. Sometimes, they could not sell their goods. Then they would cut them up and cook them in a laundry tub for days. They would turn the juice first into syrup and then distill it. This operation also required stuffing all gaps and key holes with cloth, because their suspicious neighbor was not beyond sniffing at their door. But it was well worth it. The schnapps came in handy more than once when my father had to barter for food or other things the family desperately needed.



Things began to look up in West-Germany soon after the implementation of the Marshall Plan and the Currency Reform of 1948. In 1949, my father found a job in the Faka factory in Salzgitter-Bad where the Walba scooter was built. My maternal grandfather also worked there, and Papa saw my mother for the first time when she brought grandpa his thermos with soup and his paper-wrapped sandwiches for lunch. She was eighteen years old and a stunning beauty. Her thick brown hair flowed almost to her slender waist, and she had twisted the front

into a prominent forelock over two impish eyes and a small pointed nose. Today, they often joke that my grandfather pawned her off to my father to marry off another daughter. But Papa loved everything about her. The way she walked, the way she talked and especially her inspired soprano voice when she sang in church. Papa and Maria began dating soon after my grandfather introduced the two to each other, and they were married in 1950.

When my father told me his stories after the death of my sister in May of 2005, I was able to look beyond the Über-Vater he has always been to me. I could feel him reaching out to me for a closer bond between us, even though I wasn't quite comfortable with that yet. I still hear the pride in his voice about outfoxing the Russians and making it home on foot. I see him – a content storyteller – his ever-freezing feet in fluffy down shoes, lying on his side on the couch, his legs stuffed into a sleeping bag, shaking his left hand, which apparently had gone to sleep under the weight of his head.

Looking back at the hard times that my parents went through both during the war and the years after, trying to raise a family of five children on a single salary, I can realize the hardship they took upon themselves to give us a memorable and loving childhood. It feels good to appreciate both the accomplishments of my father who tirelessly worked to make ends meet and the sacrifices of my mother who is the epitome of the virtuous woman described in Proverbs. My mother's candle also never went out by night, as for many hours in the evenings, she sewed or mended clothes for five children. I remember hating my hand-me-downs and the disappointment after having finally outgrown one

sister's dress only to be big enough for an identical one that once belonged to the next older sister. Mama spent decades getting up after only four or five hours of sleep, stocking the woodstove so her family would wake to a warm house. My mother definitely is that proverbial *virtuous woman* but it is both of my parents whose *price is far above rubies*.

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## Vita

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