

When Dying Becomes Family Story

I was close to fourteen when a letter addressed to Mother—"Mutti" to my siblings and me—announced the visit of her half-sister and the sister's beau. My brothers and I were ecstatic over the upcoming change for we rarely enjoyed the company of family members or strangers. The hired help who served in our store on Saturdays, when customer demand was heavy, was the exception. (German law decreed that businesses close by 5 PM on Saturday and remain closed until Monday morning.) When an outsider did venture into the family circle, it reined in Mutti's outbursts, which typically ended in beatings meted out to her two older children; the two little ones "merely" suffered neglect. For Karl, two years younger than I, she used whatever came to hand—an electrical cord, a piece of firewood, a frying pan—whereas my punishment was getting grabbed by the braids and flung against sink or stove or cupboard. "You are the nail in my coffin," she'd yell. What headaches I suffered when she yanked me about, what seething fury! As if that weren't enough, invariably Karl or I were made to apologize afterwards. Mutti reasoned that one or the other had caused her to fly out of control and so, nothing would do but we beg her forgiveness. Aunt Lilo's impending visit from Frankfurt brought secret glee: There would be no beatings that day.

Our family had been awarded a duplex in a settlement of Eastern refugees called *Waldsiedlung*, Settlement by the Woods, outside the town of Bruchsal. We did not qualify as war refugees like the many families who petitioned for housing. We'd fled the East only after our dad's release from Soviet prison camp in 1949; hence, we got housing on condition of a loan vouched for by my dad's sister's husband, a master baker like the man we called Vati. This home was cramped and primitive and offered no hot water and no bathroom. Baths took place in the kitchen by filling a tub with water heated on the coal stove. The kitchen sink was of concrete,

while a toilet and tiny sink for hand-washing wedged in an alcove by the stairwell. Laundry day meant dragging a wringer and washtub to the outdoors, then hanging the clothes on a line. When our dad obtained a permit to build a bakehouse in back and my parents added a store to sell baked goods, groceries, beer and wine, it proved a way to stay current on the government loan, since Vati suffered from a war injury that made employment unlikely. Karl and I were recruited to pitch in, the two little ones being too young to help.

From overhearing my parents' talk about Aunt Lilo I passed sketchy details to my brother. "She is the kept woman of that man," I whispered to Karl, not understanding of what it might mean. "She lives in a cheap hotel." "Lilo," we learned, was short for her baptized name of Lieselotte.

Lilo's visit served to request joining our family. She assured our parents that she would work for her keep. The beau, who had brought her in an automobile he drove, sat by her side as the adults sipped their Sunday-afternoon coffee and nibbled slices of Kuchen, that doughy concoction that has little in common with American cake. Of his appearance only his atrophied hand stands out today, and the fact that he was much older than she. We children ate our cakelets on the stairwell, four-year-old Helmut skipping his nap to join his brother and sister. As usual Baby Reiner was in his carriage in the garden behind the bakehouse. Unlike Helmut at his age, Reiner must have concluded early on that it was useless to howl his outrage at being ignored; no one would come to his aid. Vati occasionally stepped from his bakehouse to rock Reiner's carriage but that was it.

"He is such a good baby," We heard Mother tell her sister. "Reiner never cries."

As our family did five years earlier, our aunt had fled Communist East Germany under cover of night. The difference was, Lilo had done so on promises of a man who had no intention

of leaving his wife.

“I hope they let her stay,” I whispered to Karl, “so I can keep going to school.”

What with Mother's self-righteous indignation over her sister's loose morals, denying her must have been a foregone conclusion. Since Lilo was her relations, our dad had no say in the matter; besides, he had long shrugged off any effort at influencing his wife. When she snapped into one of her fits he took to his bakehouse, where he read "The Horse Racing News" over cigarettes and a beer. It seems it never occurred to him that his offspring had no such option or that his presence might have mitigated the abuses rained down on their heads.

A week after their visit Lilo's beau wrote that my aunt had killed herself. He was heartbroken, said the letter; he'd found her hanging in her hotel room. My parents never inquired into any funeral arrangements nor did they attend any memorial service if there was one, which I doubt. Lilo, anonymous victim of familial intolerance, was mourned by no one except perhaps her one-armed brother back East, if and when he learned of it.

Later I was to wonder if, by the time she showed up in the West, Lilo had become as dysfunctional as her sister. She had fled to West Germany without taking her birth certificate and, instead of contacting the authorities with a plea for asylum, submitted to a man who lied to her. Still, I have often thought how differently our lives would have played out, had Mutti acted with charity toward her deceased mother's child. Perhaps she imagined her sister would alienate the affections of spouse and children; her fears were practically palpable. They seeped into my siblings and me as if by some poisonous osmosis.

At Lilo's arrival I attended an academic school called *Gymnasium*, an escape I treasured. Sadly I often showed up in class distraught and unable to concentrate; besides, I rarely had time for homework. Less-than-stellar grades proved justification for my parents to remove me from school and

make work full-time at home. “Just one more year! Let me stay in school one more year,” I pleaded, to no avail. Not until well into adulthood did I consider that Mother’s illness had forced their hand.

“I won’t get old,” Mother used to tell us even before she fell ill. “I’ll die of cancer like my mother did.” Without will or choice her four children adopted the mantra as their own.

Once, I lost my classroom refuge life subsumed in the shrieking bedlam of a woman increasingly unfit for life. One morning a week I joined the trade-school classroom of boys apprenticed to be bakers, where learning was imposed by a choleric teacher. Herr Ficht never hesitated to box the ears of students who failed to follow what he said about keeping the temperature even in a coal-fired bake oven. To distinguish what flours derived from rye, barley, oat, wheat, and what they required in the rising of their dough, seemed beyond most of these youngsters. None of it applied to the tasks laid out for me, heaps of soiled diapers waiting in a corner of the kitchen to wash in buckets of water and hang on the clothesline to dry.

I had a household and two baby brothers to look after, plus an “apprenticeship” of helping Mother in the store. Before the store even opened I delivered the customary fresh rolls to families who provided cloth sacks for the purpose, to be filled and hung on their door knobs. Afternoons, with Karl deemed old enough to help, we carried loaves of bread to the families. Our dad helped in the deliveries. He brought the loaves in a covered trailer pulled by his *Moped*, a bicycle with a small motor. All the bakers in Bruchsal delivered to their customers as we did.

When I was home Mutti gossiped with patrons or else retired to the couch to rest. “What shall we make for dinner?” she’d ask as the store’s daily closing approached, noon to 1 PM. She’d send me to the butcher for a piece of sow belly. I peeled potatoes and she added a can of carrots and peas; most days, the hodgepodge was our noontime meal. By the time the repast was

ready, the store had to be reopened. Eating and washing the dishes I managed between serving our customers.

As Mother's physical and verbal abuses turned from hateful to intolerable I spent nighttime hours debating how to do away with myself. If I weighted down my pockets with rocks, might I wade into the gravel-pit-turned lake where Karl and his Boy Scout buddies splashed in the summer heat of a Sunday? Swallow a handful of Mutti's pills? My terror of water made the former unworkable while the latter seemed uncertain of outcome. No, my best bet was to turn to the woods on a cold winter's night with a thermos of wine to ensure falling asleep in the snow. Trouble was, winter was a long way off. What if I managed to pass the intervening months someplace else? What if I escaped by running away from home?

A few months prior to my parentally-enforced exit my *Gymnasium* class had undertaken a day-long excursion that involved a train ride to the mountains where we would hike. As the train passed the city of Mainz our teacher called us to the window. "Look here," he said. "That's an American army base. I know people who work there."

People who work there. What sort of work did one do at an American base? Sell baked goods? Wash diapers? Would four years of school-book English gain an entry into that world? One evening after bedtime I stole what money there was in the till, packed a few things into a rucksack, left a note on my bed and took Vati's *Moped* to the train station in town. The money would cover the train ticket and the cost of getting rid of my braids.

At four in the morning I arrived at the Mainz train station. It would be hours before the *Bahnhofsfriseur*, the station's beauty parlor, opened for business. Not knowing what else to do I plunked down in the station's café cum waiting room.

Before long a man sat down next to me and bought me a cup of coffee. He was of indeterminable age and small stature, with thinning, light-brown hair. At times I had trouble hearing what he said, he was that soft-spoken. Presently I discovered he walked with a limp.

“I must get to the American base,” I told him. “First, however, I need to have my braids cut off.”

“What do you want on the base?” he asked.

“Find a job as a domestic.”

“I know a bus that goes there,” he said. “But there’s a gate at the entrance to the base. You’ll have to get past the sentry.” Seeing my expression he added, “I can explain to the American soldier what you want. He may be able to direct you to a family.”

The proposal made me uneasy. The man seemed harmless enough, but I’d depend on him as my guide. I looked about me. A well-dressed woman at a table not far from mine caught my eye. Slowly she moved her head from side to side. Without conscious effort I took her warning to heart.

I did have my braids cut off—and got a stylish hairdo to boot. I did take the bus with the man as my escort, who stuck to me like a burr. “Tell them you are seventeen,” he said. He did talk with the sentry who happened to know several families looking for help. The man could not accompany me but said he would wait until I finished my errand.

As luck would have it, one family was ready to take me right away. I returned to the gate and gave my escort an address the next street over. Then I hurried back to “my” family, who lived on the second floor of an apartment building that looked like all the others. I had carefully memorized the address.

Peeling potatoes, scrubbing floors, doing laundry: these things I knew to do even as the foreign smells offended my nose. The bleaches! The disinfectants! The stuff these people ate! To this day I won’t go near corn flakes, they revolted me so with their odor of corn. Meanwhile the lady of the house instructed her fourteen-year-old daughter to take me to the basement and

explain the washer and dryer. How marvelous to wash the laundry without having to hang it on a line! Juanita Brooks lit a cigarette down there, making me promise not to tell. Evenings I functioned as the sitter for the girl, who was my age, and her three-year-old sister. "Wish us luck," the parents said as they left to play bingo.

One day when Juanita Brooks was at school, her dad at work, and the lady of the house shopped with her small daughter, I was left by myself to do the ironing. As I took a break and stepped on the balcony, whom would I spot but my erstwhile escort, limping along, looking at house numbers. I ducked inside before he caught sight of me, thankful for a woman's small warning in a train-station waiting room and went back to my ironing pondering fate.

When you move from one German town to another, you register at your new domicile's *Bürgermeisteramt*, the major's office, and you document your identity with a birth certificate. I hoped the Americans wouldn't know of the requirement, but no such luck. "We must register you," they kept telling me. I said I had to write to my parents for my birth certificate but took my time with the letter.

Mother responded by return mail when I did write home. "Your poor father broke down when he read your note," it said. What did a broken-down dad looked like, I wondered. Did he recover his Moped from where I left it at the Bruchsal train station? Without it the delivers would be a problem. What of Helmut and little Reiner? The day Mutti gave birth to Reiner under the care of a midwife, she directed me to wash the cloth sanitary napkins that collected in a bucket "so your dad won't have to do it." Bright red blood mingled with the bucket's water. I could not imagine a man involving himself with the task, though Vati may have done so at Helmut's birth.

"My father has fallen ill," I said to my American family. "I need to go home." They were so sympathetic, they took me to the train station. I had been with them for ten days. Ten glorious

days! Returning minus the hated braids, however, changed the power differential once and for all. Even more astounding, my escapade had earned Mutti's grudging respect. Her daughter hobnobbing with *die Amis* at a foreign base—no settlement mother had anything comparable to say of her offspring. I couldn't believe my good luck.

As to the desire to immigrate born on that American base, it sunk into oblivion. My brother, on the other hand, lost no time appropriating it for himself. As Karl turned fourteen Vati apprenticed him in the bakehouse. It was a given that the boy would take over the business someday. Karl defied the edict, though at great cost. "*Ich komme mir hier ganz einsam vor,*" he was to write from the Big Apple in a couple of years, "I feel utterly lonely here." It may have been this postcard that reawakened the desire to immigrate. Obviously Karl needed my help; besides, I was corresponding with an American I'd met on a riverboat excursion down the Rhine who lived in California.

* * * *

At one time Mutti possessed a lovely voice; indeed, my parents had met at a pre-war gathering of singers in the Leipzig symphony hall, the *Gewandhaus*, she with the female and he with the male chorale, all coming together in one impressive performance. Later, when I was six and the days crawled on in near-starvation and hope-against-hope for our dad's return from prison camp—he was not allowed to write home in those years; we did not know if he was still alive—Mutti taught me to sing and play the mandolin. She had sacrificed her treasured possession, her lute, which her one-armed half-brother traded for bread on the Leipzig black market. The fat-bellied mandolin, however, stayed with us.

As I remained indentured in our mom-and-pop business, I gained a lucky break when a guitar came to me from a bitterly poor family. They begged my dad to allow their elderly

grandfather to teach me to play the instrument in exchange for two loaves of bread twice a week. The man was frail and hardly spoke any German but I was ecstatic over my weekly thirty minutes. So it was that, at seventeen I joined a group of guitarists and mandolinists in a civic organization called *Naturfreunde*, Friends of Nature. Harald, its youthful leader, played weekends in a dance band and worked an everyday job during the week. That year he decided to change the music group's all-male enclave, and I was one of two young women who passed muster.

Sad to say, despite music's life-giving pull I felt dead inside as I soldiered on. Although each one in our family existed under the pall of death I only understood myself as cast down. Oblivious to my brothers' doldrums I also harbored no inkling of our dad's state of mind. By then Vati had upgraded to a tiny Fiat stationwagon for our daily deliveries. I had learned to drive and owned a license even as Mutti was wasting away. Later I thought the cancer cells may have been present before Reiner was conceived and the pregnancy accelerated their growth. At any rate, within eleven months of his birth Mutti was away from home to undergo a double mastectomy. A year later a lump developed on her temple, which sent her to Heidelberg Clinic for what seemed many weeks of treatment. She wrote that she was housed in a large dorm-like room together with other women suffering the radiation. They supported one another through the sickness, her letter said, and they pledged to stay in touch after returning home. For the duration of the Heidelberg time, for reasons that escape me, our parents put the two little ones in an orphanage. The experience that stunted and maimed them, as Helmut was to mention to Karl after joining us in California.

When Mother returned with her forehead back to normal, our house doctor said she was free of cancer. It plunged the family in denial but she knew better. Now and then the mail

brought the death announcement from the family of one of the women who had undergone treatment alongside her. Each time one of these black-rimmed envelopes arrived, she'd say, "I'll be next." We paid no heed. What must she have thought, knowing what was to come yet unable to get through to the people closest to her, a latter-day Cassandra?

One Advent Sunday in 1959 the *Naturfreunde* leader suggested we perform a small concert for the Hungarian refugees who subsisted in German army barracks. The exiles had fled their homeland after the uprising against their Soviet overlords. Newspaper photos showed military tanks advancing on stone-throwing civilians. Those who had managed to escape found themselves a long way from home, bereft of everything they cherished.

We arrived at the barracks in a November drizzle and assembled in the courtyard. Since the damp would ruin our sheet music we sang and played from memory, confining ourselves to well-known songs of the season. The Hungarian language has nothing in common with Germanic or Romance dialects, and our listeners would have had only the vaguest understanding of our songs. They seemed to appreciate the gesture nonetheless. Hunching beneath shawls and babushkas and felt hats, they sometimes nodded their heads, sometimes clapped to our beat, sometimes tried to hum along. Only when we packed up did they shuffle back to their dank quarters.

At this point I asked my friends if some of them would come to my house to play a few tunes. "My mother is ill," I said. "She loves Advent songs."

"Will you get us each a bottle of beer?" said Harald. Age restrictions on alcohol consumption being nonexistent, of course I agreed. The youngsters who had bicycled to the barracks bowed out, but three or four who lived nearby piled into Harald's VW with their instruments. I led the way in my dad's Fiat. Once there, the guys stationed themselves in the

stairs and tuned up while I stepped into the room where my mother lay on her couch.

She'll hate me for waking her, I thought. "Sorry to disturb you," I mumbled, touching her hand.

Mutti opened her eyes. "I was only resting," she said.

"The *Naturfreunde* boys are here. We're going to sing and play a few songs." I left the door open as I rejoined the small group on the stairwell.

We repeated our earlier performance. To a repertoire of pre-Christmas songs we added a hymn Mutti cherished about the power of love manifest in Jesus. Then I distributed bottles of beer and the boys went home.

In the few weeks that remained, Mutti and I left off quarreling. "Now I can die in peace," she said. "I know you will make it." I wanted to protest like we always did when she began her talk of dying—our house doctor said she suffered from a persistent flu—but for once I did not. Ten days later a stroke waylaid her. In the early morning hours of Christmas Day she breathed her last. I was eighteen years old, Karl sixteen, Helmut eight, and Reiner four.

Whatever wrongs we suffered during her lifetime, Mutti's death hit us hard. Silently we mourned her loss, or should I say we mourned our motherless state. We hoarded the secret of our guilt with no way of knowing that each of our siblings felt equally as abandoned, equally as bereft of life. I, for one, felt altogether unforgiven. Years would slip by, decades, before I freed myself of self-absorption and grieving. My unfortunate brothers fared worse. Each died long before his prime. An aunt's suicide and a mother's self-fulfilling prophecy had turned unalterable future.