

When Mourning Becomes Family Story

I was close to fourteen when a letter arrived addressed to Mother—Mutti to my siblings and me—announcing the visit of her half-sister Lilo and Lilo’s beau. My brothers and I were ecstatic, for our family rarely enjoyed company. The exception was the woman who helped serve in our store on Saturdays, when customer demand was heavy. (German law decreed that businesses close on Saturdays by five PM 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 for her two older children, the two little ones “merely” suffering neglect. For Karl, two years younger than I, Mutti got hold of whatever came to hand—an electrical cord, a piece of firewood, a frying pan—whereas my punishment was to be grabbed by my braids, hurled around, and sent crashing into sink or stove or cupboard. “You are the nail in my coffin,” she’d yell. What headaches beset me when she yanked me about, what fury! To top it off, since Mutti reasoned it was the children who had caused her to fly off the handle, Karl and I were made to apologize after the storm. Nothing would do but we beg her forgiveness. Aunt Lilo’s impending

visit brought secret glee: There would be no beatings that day, no debasing apologies.

Our family had been awarded a duplex in a settlement of Eastern refugees called *Waldsiedlung*, Settlement by the Woods, outside the town of Bruchsal, although we did not qualify as war refugees like the many families who petitioned for housing—we'd fled Communist East Germany only after our dad's return from prison camp. Hence, we obtained the housing on a loan that had to be vouched by our dad's sister's husband, a master baker like the man we called Vati. Not only that, but the government forced us to sublet our upstairs—even in 1955, the housing crunch was acute. A couple with their baby baby lived upstairs for eighteen months; after that, the house was our own. We owned neither icebox nor telephone, and the kitchen sink was concrete. A toilet and tiny sink were wedged in an alcove by the stairwell; baths happened in the kitchen by filling a tub with water heated on the coal stove. Laundry day meant dragging a washtub and wringer next to the clothesline. Still, we were happy to have escaped homelessness.

When our dad obtained a permit to build a bakehouse next to the duplex, my parents converted a bedroom into a store where we sold baked goods, groceries, beer and wine. It proved a way to stay current on the housing loan, since Vati suffered from a war injury that made state employment unlikely. Karl and I were recruited to pitch in.

From overhearing my parents' talk of Aunt Lilo, I passed sketchy details to Karl. "She is the kept woman of that man," I said, not knowing what it meant. "She lives in a cheap hotel."

Lilo arrived to request joining our family. "I don't want charity. I'll work for my keep," she said. The beau, much older than she, had brought her in his automobile. He sat by her side, nodding, as the adults sipped their Sunday coffee and nibbled the bread-like concoction we

called *Kuchen* that has little in common with American cake. “Lilo,” we learned, was short for “Lieselotte.”

We children ate our cakelets on the stairwell, four-year-old Helmut skipping his nap to join his brother and sister. As usual, our baby brother was in his carriage behind the bakehouse. Unlike Helmut at his age, Reiner had given up early in his babyhood and did not howl his rage at being ignored. “He is such a good baby,” we heard Mutti tell her sister. “Reiner never cries.”

“I hope they let her stay,” I whispered to Karl, “so I can keep going to school.” Just one more year, I’d pleaded with my parents the previous week, “let me stay in *Gymnasium* one more year! I love the English and French I’m learning.”

“You’re doing poorly in math,” Vati pointed out.

I hung my head. Why point out that I often showed up in class distraught and unable to concentrate, that I rarely had time for homework? Surely he knew this?

What with Mutti's scorn at her sister's loose morals, denying Lilo's request must have been a foregone conclusion. Vati had no say in the matter, having long ago shrugged off any notion of influencing his wife. When she snapped into one of her fits he took to his bakehouse, where he read *The Horse Racing News* over a smoke and a bottle of beer. That his offspring had no such option seems never to have occurred to him, nor that his presence might have mitigated the abuses rained down on our heads. He sometimes stepped away from his baking to rock Reiner's carriage, but that was it.

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. Turns out, Lilo had fled Communist East Germany on promises of a man who had no intention of leaving his wife. Why

did she submit to a man who lied to her? She'd arrived in West Germany without her birth certificate with her. Was she afraid to secure the document lest she raise the suspicions of East German officials of her plan to abscond, but why not go to the mayor's office in the West, to plead for asylum? Had she turned as unimaginative—as dysfunctional—as Mutti?

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. Such, anyway, read the implied family story. In actual fact, our aunt's death weighed on us more than we knew. Her suicide was to have far-reaching effects on the lives of a niece and three nephews.

Many times have I thought how differently our lives might have turned out, had our mother acted with the least charity toward her sister. As it was, I became an apprentice to Vati, which meant working full-time at home. I had a household to look after and the store. *Gymnasium*, the school I'd entered at ten, was irretrievably lost. Four years earlier, my dad had pedaled me on his bike to the exams—why? Only to have my days subsumed in shrieking bedlam? Not until well into adulthood did I consider that Mother's illness had forced his 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.

Soiled diapers piled in the kitchen corner for me to wash in a bucket and hang on the line. When not resting on her couch, Mutti gossiped with women customers while I scurried around, retrieving the goods they demanded. Early morning, before the store opened, I delivered fresh rolls to the families who provided cloth sacks to be filled and hung on their doorknobs.

Afternoons, as twelve-year-old Karl was deemed old enough to join in, we took loaves of bread to the families. Since he was done baking for the day, Vati helped, carrying the bread in a covered trailer coupled to his *Moped*, a bicycle powered by a small motor. All the bakers in Bruchsal delivered to their customers as we did. All of them began their workday at four AM like our dad.

Once a week I joined a classroom of boys apprenticed to their master bakers as I was. Classroom learning was imposed by a teacher who boxed the ears of students failing to follow what he said about keeping the temperature constant in a coal-fired bake oven, or what kinds of flours derived from rye, barley, oat, or wheat. None of it applied to the tasks laid out for me.

“What shall we make for our midday dinner?” Mutti would ask just before the store’s daily closing, noon to one-thirty. She’d send me to the butcher for a piece of sowbelly. After that I’d peel potatoes while she added a can of carrots and peas. Most days the hodgepodge was our noontime meal, the main repast of the day. By the time it was ready, the store had to be reopened. Between customers I slipped into the kitchen to eat and wash dishes.

Before long my bedtime ritual revolved around debating how to do away with myself. Could I, pockets weighted with rocks, wade into the gravel-pit-turned-lake, where Karl and his boy-scout friends splashed on summer Sundays? 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 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 ran away? One evening after bedtime I stole what money was

in the till and left a note on my bed. With a few clothes in a rucksack, I took Vati's *Moped* to the town's train station.

A few months prior to my parentally-enforced exit, my *Gymnasium* class had undertaken a daylong excursion that involved a train ride to the mountains where we would hike. As the train passed through the outskirts of Mainz our teacher called us to the window. "There," he said. "That's a base of the American army. I know someone who works there."

Someone who works there. What sort of work did one do on an American base? Sell bread and rolls? Wash diapers? Would four years of schoolbook English gain entry into that world? At four in the morning I arrived in the Mainz station's waiting room cum coffeeshop. It would be hours before the *Bahnhofsfriseur*, the station's beauty parlor, opened for business. The pilfered money had covered the train ticket, but there was enough left to get rid of my braids. Not knowing what else to do I plunked into a chair. Presently a man sat down next to me and bought me a cup of coffee. He was of indeterminable age and small of stature, with thinning, light-brown hair. At times I had trouble hearing what he said, he was that soft-spoken. Later I noticed 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.

"Look for a job as domestic."

"I know a bus line that goes there," he said. "But there's a gate at the entrance. You'll have to get past the sentry." Seeing my expression he added, "I'll go with you. I can explain to

him what you want. Perhaps he'll direct you." Evaluating my undersized frame he added, "You'll need to tell them you are seventeen."

His desire to escort me made me uneasy. He seemed harmless enough, but I would depend on him as 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.

I did have my braids cut off at the *Bahnhofsfriseur*—and got a stylish hairdo to boot. I did take the bus with the man, who stuck to me like a burr. He did talk with the sentry, who happened to know several families looking for help. My escort, however, was not allowed to accompany me; he would wait at the gate until I finished my errand.

As luck would have it, one family was ready to take me in the very day. 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 in an apartment building that looked like all the others in rows and rows of buildings. I had carefully memorized the address.

Peeling potatoes, scrubbing floors, washing clothes: those things I knew how to do. But the foreign smells, the bleaches, the disinfectants that offended my nose! And the stuff these people ate! To this day I won't go near cornflakes, they revolted me so with their odor of corn. In Germany, corn was pig feed.

The lady of the house instructed their fourteen-year-old daughter to take me to the basement and explain the washer and dryer. How marvelous, to do the wash 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 a girl of my age and her three-year-old sister. "Wish us luck," their 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 had gone shopping with her small daughter, I was taking a break from ironing to step out on the balcony. Whom should I spot but my erstwhile escort, limping along, checking house numbers. I ducked back inside before he caught sight of me and went back to my ironing, thankful for a woman's small warning in a train-station waiting room.

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

When I did write home, my mother responded by return mail. "Your poor father broke down when he read your note," it said. I could not imagine what a broken-down dad looked like. 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 even at Helmut's birth. Now I wondered, did Vati recover his *Moped* when I left it at the train station? The deliveries would be a problem without it.

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

I was astonished to discover, returning minus the hated braids changed the power differential at home. Nor only that, my escapade had earned Mutti's grudging respect. Her

daughter Edith, hobnobbing with *die Amis* at a foreign base—no settlement woman had anything comparable to say of her offspring. I couldn't believe my luck.

As to the desire to immigrate born on that American base, it sunk into temporary 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, the boy would take over the business someday. Karl, however, could not abide our dad. Two years after our mother's death he left for America, though at great cost. "*Ich komme mir hier ganz einsam vor,*" he was to write from the Big Apple a couple of years later, "I feel utterly lonely here." His card reached me in Paris, where I was equally lonely.

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At one time Mutti possessed a lovely voice; indeed, my parents had met at a prewar 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.

Shortly after my stint with the Americans, as Karl and 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 elated over my weekly thirty minutes. At seventeen I joined a group of guitarists and mandolinists who called themselves *Naturfreunde*, Friends of Nature. Harald, its youthful leader, played weekends in a dance band and worked a menial job the rest of the time. Recently he'd decided to change the music group's all-male enclave. I was one of two young women who passed muster. By then our family had upgraded from the motorized bicycle to a tiny Fiat station wagon for our daily deliveries. I had learned to drive and owned a license, but Mutti was wasting away. Later I thought the cancer must have been present before Reiner was born, and the pregnancy exacerbated their growth. At any rate, within eleven months of his birth she was in the hospital for a double mastectomy. Eighteen months later a lump appeared on her temple, which sent her to Heidelberg for what seemed many weeks of treatment. She wrote us saying 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 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. There they were targets of older kids' cruelties, as Helmut was to relate many years later. Karl and I learned how guilty Helmut felt for failing to stand up for his small brother, hiding instead to escape the bullies.

Mutti returned with her forehead back to normal and so, our house doctor claimed she was free of cancer. She knew better. Over the next few months, death notices would arrive from families of one or the other of the women who had undergone treatment alongside our mother. Each time one of those black-rimmed envelopes showed up, she'd say "I'll be next." We paid no heed; we believed the doctor's assurances. 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 the *Naturfreunde* decided to perform for Hungarian refugees who subsisted in German army barracks. The exiles had fled their homeland after an uprising against their Soviet overlords. Newspaper photos showed military tanks advancing on stone-throwing civilians. Those who managed to escape found themselves a long way from home and utterly bereft. The year was 1959.

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 Advent 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, I asked my musician 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 a bottle of beer for each of us?” said Harald. Age restrictions on alcohol consumption being nonexistent, I agreed. The boys who’d bicycled to the barracks bowed out but three of the guys who lived near Harold’s piled into his VW. I led the way in my dad’s Fiat. Once there, the guys stationed themselves in the stairwell and tuned up while I stepped into the room, no larger than a storage closet, 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* are here. We’re going to sing and play a few Advent songs.” I left the door open as I joined the guys.

We repeated our earlier performance. To our 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 fellows 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, 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 nine, Reiner four.

Whatever wrongs we endured during her lifetime, Mutti’s death hit us hard. For decades we mourned her, or should I say we mourned our motherless state. Each of us hoarded the secret of our guilt, with no way of knowing that our siblings felt equally abandoned, equally bereft. Wrapped in my own sorrow, for years I remained oblivious to my brothers’ suffering.