

Thirty-Seven

I choose to believe there was one moment when our eyes met, a passing moment, the few seconds it takes for someone to walk through one door and out another. The date is certain, and the memory refuses to fade. Even though I was at a young age, I clearly remember the smallest details of all else that occurred on that day.

What remains uncertain is that one single moment. Still blurred, so brief and so sudden, even now I am unconvinced whether it was imagined or actually did occur. Once, when I asked Josef if he recalled the afternoon or could confirm or deny the instance, he gave me no answer. He seemed terribly anguished and was unable to respond. On most matters, Josef would willingly offer opinions. On matters involving Hilda, he remained silent and reflective. I've always thought he preferred to forget.

That moment took place in Berlin. It was in late winter of 1915, a little more than six months after the war began. The snow and ice were beginning to thaw, and I

was not much more than five years old the morning I accompanied Mutti and my fifteen-year-old-brother, Fritz, to Am Urban, the old Kreuzberg municipal hospital that sat at the end of the street near where the two roads crossed. It was a short distance, only a few paces from our house on Dieffenbachstraße, not far from the Landwehr Canal and close enough for Fritz to walk, even as fatigued and weak as he was.

Fritz had been ill for several days, unable to sleep and suffering from unrelenting coughs and terrible night sweats. We were taking him to meet with the doctor. As we were leaving the house, my other brother, Karl, gently pulled me aside and whispered the frightening words Mutti had told him that morning. Mutti feared that Fritz might have *schwindsucht*, a word I only knew because it sounded so harsh and was repeated so often. That day, as we walked through the slushy ice and snow, I was much too young. I had only a vague notion of what this word really meant.

War was extracting its toll on Berlin, sapping our energy and already lasting far longer than anyone had expected, certainly much longer than the kaiser had promised. Throughout the city, food was in short supply. There were many days when, after I stood with Mutti, waiting our turn at the markets, there would not be enough to fill our shopping basket. We would return home with less than half of what the stamps on the ration card entitled our family to receive. Soup and potatoes were quickly becoming our everyday meal.

Nearly every family on Dieffenbachstraße was suffering from the terrible misery that accompanies hunger and the worry that illness would not be far behind. There had been reports of more and more cases of tuberculosis, the dreaded disease the doctors were unable to cure, the sickness that resigned those afflicted to spending their lives as outcasts. Even at my young age, I was beginning to understand. I had seen the large warning notices posted on the front doors of the houses. Others in our neighborhood were already victims.

That day when we walked with Fritz to the hospital, I did not meet the doctor. There was little time and no need for introductions. Our visit was not a social call, and the room was crowded with patients, all waiting their turn to see him. I was told to sit quietly outside the office door and mind my manners while Mutti and Fritz conferred with the doctor.

As we waited for the nurse to call Fritz for his examination, the doctor's office door opened, and a well-dressed woman close in age to Mutti stepped out. I watched her walk quickly across the small room to the door that led to the hospital corridor. As she passed, she turned her head toward me, and it seemed our eyes met for that one brief instant. Then, as she opened the exit door and disappeared into the hallway, I am almost certain I heard the nurse say, "*Auf wiedersehen, Frau Samson.*"

A short while later, as Mutti and I retraced our steps back up Dieffenbachstraße, she explained that Fritz needed to stay behind so he could be seen by other

doctors. I remember the dark circles under Mutti's eyes and the worried look on her face as she pulled me close and said these words. When I woke the next morning, Mutti told me that Fritz had been sent north of Berlin to the Hohenlychen Sanatorium, where he could be away from the city and get fresh air and recover. Beelitz-Heilstätten, the sixty-building park-like complex to the south of the city, was no longer available for tuberculosis patients. It had been converted into a hospital for the growing number of war casualties sent home from the front.

After we left him, I never saw my brother again. Fritz never recovered from his illness. All I would be left with is this memory, one that I can never forget.

Thirty-Eight

There are few pleasant memories from my childhood. I would rather not share them. Why should anyone know of these things or hear these stories? What good would that do? I was the product of a distressful and dark time in the world and have since attempted to put what I do remember in a little box hidden in a secret place that has long been forgotten. Those years are so difficult and painful to recall that even when Josef asked, I told him I would much rather leave them that way. He asked often. He was like that, always digging and pushing, unrelenting, always wanting more from me. Of course, I know he meant well. But these memories? No. These memories should be forgotten. They are too private and sad. They are better left behind.



After Fritz was sent away to the sanatorium, our home became empty and neglected. Laughter and caring were

replaced with the cruel loneliness that so often accompanies disappearance and then silence. That late winter day when we left the hospital and retraced our steps, Mutti must have already been convinced that we would never see Fritz again.

I don't believe she ever recovered from the loss of her eldest. She was never the same. I remember waiting and waiting for Fritz to come home. I wanted him to reappear as if he had never left. Every night I would pray for him to return. He was always so kind to me, always laughing, always patient and considerate, always looking out for me. At five years of age, I was old enough to be told what had happened but much too young to understand what it really meant.

Losing Fritz weighed heavily on Papa. He struggled to fight his depression. When he returned from the war, dear Papa tried and tried until he became too tired. Mutti had already given up trying, and if she did try, it was rarely with me.

Somehow she and I were unable to find our balance. I have always believed that I loved her more than she could love me, that I was a weight she had no choice but to carry. I think that she was resigned to her fate, that her losses destroyed any reason to continue, that they were more than she could handle. And then one day, Papa, Karl, and I stood together and watched helplessly as Mutti slowly withered away.

When Fritz suddenly vanished from our lives, I was too young to have known that there had been another story, that it had taken place years earlier, that Fritz was

not the first child my parents had lost. I did not understand that before I was born, the portrait of the Kasmund family had been complete, with Mutti, Papa, and their three children. First Fritz, then Liesbeth, then Karl, one for each year, beginning with the turn of the century. My arrival would not take place until 1910, a decade later, after they had become accustomed to their lives with one another and all the seats at the family table had been taken.

I have often wondered whether, in Mutti's eyes, I may have been more of a trespasser than an accepted substitute for the daughter she had lost. By the time I was born, my six-year-old sister, Liesbeth, was already a memory, one that was spoken of but could no longer be touched. I could never be her replacement. I tried to be strong like Papa. I tried and tried, but Mutti was rarely satisfied. It seemed that for Mutti, no matter how high I jumped, I could never jump high enough.



As for my brother Karl, together we survived our childhood and the war's difficult times, but we were left with lingering scars, ones that would never heal. Our parting would come years later, after he moved to Munich. Then it became clear that our differences could not be reconciled, that neither of us approved of or even accepted the other.

Karl was a year too young to join the army and go to war. After the war, when he left home and began

searching for work, the armies were returning, and the jobs were all taken. Karl joined with those who were angry and bitter and took to the streets, shouting. He needed someone to blame.

He was drawn to the voices of the German Workers' Party when it was in its earliest days, when they met in Munich at the Bürgerbräukeller. This small group of twenty-five raging and dissatisfied men blamed the Jews for profiting from the war and taking the jobs that should have been filled by those they considered true Germans, the Aryans.

That's when it was apparent that we would follow opposite paths. The reasons Karl vanished from my life might have been different from either Mutti or Fritz, but the result was the same. Then I was left with more memories to be hidden, too painful and private. Why should I remember? What good would that do?