
these
BLUE
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For the Dr. Rices in my life,
Paul and Nelljean

One gone too soon,
and the other still cheering me on.

Art is a province in which one finds all the problems of life reflected.

—Josef Albers, *Black Mountain Bulletin*

1

Berlin, Germany
November 24, 1932

Hedda slipped from the frigid air into the warmth of the kitchen and snugged the door shut behind her. She closed the dead bolt. Opened it. And closed it again, nearly dropping the newspaper beneath her arm. She reached for the lock a third time but then lowered her hand.

No. It wasn't necessary.

Turning, Hedda took a few steps into the kitchen, placing the newspaper on the table. Quietly, she began to heat water for a *Köppke Tee*, savoring each step in her routine. She took down her favorite cup and saucer—the one with violets—and scooped tea leaves into an infuser. She added an extravagant lump of rock sugar to her cup, followed by the little silver basket. She poured steaming water over it, watching the dried leaves unfurl. She'd once read this was called "the agony of the leaf." She chuckled softly. Agony indeed to get a decent cup of tea with a little sugar in these lean days.

When the tea was a deep amber, she removed the infuser and added a splash of milk, watching it billow through the dark liquid. Sighing deeply, she lifted the cup and took a careful sip.

Sweetness, warmth, and dare she say peace seeped into her spirit. She exhaled slowly and settled the cup in its saucer with a click. It was always like this when she ventured out. Such relief to be safe in the shell of Lotte's house once again. Like a turtle, she thought as she dropped into a chair at the table and drew the newspaper toward her.

She'd read the front page on the train home to this comfortable house that she still struggled to think of as *home*, even though it had been familiar to her before she came to stay. The woman she'd once expected to become her mother-in-law was not well. When Lotte's sister asked Hedda if she would consider moving in, she hadn't known how to say no. And why would she? She loved Lotte, and it was certainly more economical to live here. Hedda still wasn't clear on what ailed her—perhaps because Lotte wasn't clear herself. But each week she could see the burden of her sixty-two years pressing down harder. It was a shame to be so old while still relatively young.

She knew she should check on Lotte even now, but the peace of the kitchen after the bracing air and the bustle of the train was too enticing. Glancing at the clock, she felt certain Lotte would still be napping. Exhaling the tension of the outside world, she folded the front page of the newspaper back, meaning to read page two—she always started on page one and read through to the end—but a photograph on page three caught her eye. A dignified man with a hat in his hand was placing a wreath on a large monument. But that wasn't what made her gasp and slosh tea into the saucer.

The name. Right there in the foreground. There was a small white cross with a name she knew like the beat of her own heart: *Fritz Meyer*. But no. Surely it wasn't her Fritz. It was a common enough name, she told herself even as her breath came short and tight.

She pushed the tea away and drew the paper closer, getting smudges of ink on her fingers. She read greedily, eyes tumbling over the words. The man in the picture was the German ambassador to the United States, Friederich von Prittwitz, and he was placing a wreath on a memorial to eighteen German seamen who had died in a typhoid outbreak at a camp in Hot Springs, North Carolina, in 1918. The names of the soldiers were listed, and there it was, the name she'd been mourning for more than fourteen years. Fritz Meyer, her fiancé. Lotte's missing son.

"Hedda, you are as unsettled as a hen that has lost her chicks." Lotte shuffled into the *Wintergarten* and sank into a chair with a soft moan. She lifted her legs, one at a time, onto a footstool. Hedda could see how swollen her ankles were.

"Do you think so? I suppose the waiting is making me anxious."

"Waiting. It seems that is what life is about in the end. If there's an answer to your letter, it will likely be to tell us this is some other Fritz Meyer. Don't be anxious, *Liebling*."

Hedda knew Lotte was right. But it had been two weeks since she sent the letter to *The American Legion, Asheville, North America*. Since then, she'd felt as though her life were a simple melody being played on a badly out-of-tune instrument. Her previously ordered life now revolved around checking the post each day in hopes of receiving a response.

Had her letter even arrived? It seemed as if a lifetime had passed since she had seen the newspaper photo that she'd clipped and tucked into a corner of her vanity mirror. It was now December—surely this was long enough for an answer.

She glanced at the clock. The post almost always arrived by two in the afternoon. But she would be giving young Liesl from down the street a piano lesson at two. She was one of six students whose fees made it possible for Hedda to live comfortably without having to depend on Lotte for every little thing.

She twisted a bit of hair at the nape of her neck around and around her finger until it tangled. She tugged her hand free, stifling a yelp. It was a terrible habit, one she thought she'd finally conquered.

The doorbell sounded, and she hurried down the hall to open the door. Liesl stood there, music book under one arm and crutch under the other. Hedda peered down the street, hoping the mail might arrive early for once, but alas, no sign of the postman.

She motioned for Liesl to come in and settle beside her on the piano bench. The child leaned her crutch against the sofa and hopped onto the bench. Liesl, having been born missing a foot, had started learning to play the piano early in life, this at the insistence of her mother. Now, at ten years old, the girl was clearly demonstrating her remarkable gift.

Hedda opened the book to the music she'd assigned the previous week and folded her hands in her lap, Liesl's signal to begin playing. They hardly needed to speak anymore, which seemed to suit them both. Hedda settled in to listen and critique.

As Liesl played, Hedda tapped her finger to the correct tempo. Her student was lagging. She unfolded her hands and

tapped the same finger on the case, where Liesl could see it. She grimaced and played a bit more quickly.

"Allegro," Hedda murmured.

Then she heard the clink of the mail slot. Her finger stuttered, losing the rhythm. Liesl frowned and glanced toward her.

Hedda took a deep breath and smiled at her student. "Forgive me. Let's begin again, shall we?" Liesl nodded and started the piece over. Hedda gritted her teeth, deciding this would be an excellent exercise in delayed gratification. Lotte was surely sleeping now and wouldn't stir to collect the mail. Most likely there was nothing of importance in the post anyway.

The next thirty minutes passed with grinding slowness. Liesl seemed unusually clumsy. Or perhaps Hedda's nerves were catching. Either way, they were both relieved when the lesson came to an end. Hedda closed the book, and Liesl scooped up her crutch with surprising agility, scampering for the door. She grabbed the two envelopes lying there and spun to hand them to Hedda.

"Your mail, *Fräulein*," she said with a cheeky grin.

Hedda traded the book of music for the post and closed the door behind Liesl. She leaned against it, suddenly afraid to examine the envelope in her hand that she thought bore the word *Flugpost*. Airmail. From America.

She dared to look, her hands shaking. And there it was, a letter from North Carolina. She tore it open, immediately regretting the ragged edge. She always slit her envelopes neatly. But never mind. Inside was a single sheet of paper. She glanced at the signature. It was from Thomas B. Black, former commander of the Kiffin Rockwell Legion Post in Asheville, North Carolina.

Hedda slid to the floor, drawing her knees up and bracing

her hands against them so she could steady the page. There were a few preliminaries, and then this:

> *Your letter of November 25 to the American Legion has been referred to me. I can confirm to you that Fritz Meyer died of typhoid, August 17, 1918, age 25, at an internment camp in Hot Springs, North Carolina. He had been in service as a seaman on the ocean liner* Vaterland *and was buried in Riverside Cemetery, plot 76, grave 4.*

There was more about the dedication of the monument and how more than four thousand people had come for the ceremony, but Hedda could barely absorb the information. She was too much occupied tallying the facts that pointed to this man being her fiancé.

Fritz had indeed signed on as a seaman for the *Vaterland*, the world's largest ship, in 1914, soon after asking her to be his wife. He was nineteen to her sixteen, and his plan was to earn as much as he could until her parents would allow her to marry at eighteen. Then they would wed and live in his grandparents' home near Potsdam just outside of Berlin. She'd received several letters from him extolling the wonders of the immense vessel he helped sail. Hedda smiled, remembering his description of the flocked carpet and tufted velvet chairs in the lounge. She'd dared to dream that she might one day sail on such a fine ship.

But their plans came to a crashing halt when Great Britain declared war on Germany in August 1914. Fritz and everyone else on board the *Vaterland* were ordered to remain in New York Harbor. Eventually, the ship was commandeered by the

United States Navy and renamed *Leviathan*, while the men were scattered to internment facilities. This much she knew.

She and Lotte had a smattering of letters from Fritz over the next three years. They were always cheerful and full of the wonders he was seeing in America. The last letter mentioned the possibility of being sent to an American state called North Carolina. And then . . . nothing. She'd heard other seamen were allowed to come home, yet there was no word from Fritz. Not to her. Not to his mother. She'd feared the worst, and now this letter seemed to confirm it.

But still she doubted. The Fritz Meyer buried in the United States was twenty-five—two years older than her Fritz would have been in 1918. Could that be a mistake? Also, there had been a letter from Fritz, joking about how many of the seamen had the same names. Johann or Hans or Fritz. *"There are five of us Fritzes,"* he'd written. *"I am Fritz-zwei, which I think has a certain ring to it."* At the time she'd thought that perhaps when they were married, she would adopt this as her pet name for him.

Hedda looked up as though awakening from sleep. Why was she sitting on the floor like this? She climbed to her feet and carried the letter with her to Lotte's favorite chair. She needed to think. If this was her Fritz—Lotte's Fritz—what did that mean? She'd long assumed he was dead but now recognized that she'd also been holding on to the thinnest sliver of hope.

She snorted. Hope of what? That he was alive and well and carrying on without her? That he had been horribly injured and was too ashamed to return home? That he had been hit on the head and had forgotten his family and his homeland?

Lotte needed to know. Perhaps there was a detail here she was missing that would confirm the truth once and for all.

And if so, they could mourn Fritz together. After that . . . well, perhaps she would move on with her life.

Hedda let the page drop to her lap and gazed out a window at the gray houses and grayer street of this part of Berlin. She rarely ventured more than a few blocks away. To the market, to the church or to the library. Sometimes, when she wanted to feel the energy of the city around her, to a nearby coffee shop where they knew her order before she placed it. Perhaps, if she could put this sorrow she'd been carrying for so long behind her, she might finally consider what lay before her.

2

Hedda peered into the *Wintergarten*, letter in hand. She was trying to decide how best to frame this news for Lotte. It seemed their Fritz might be buried in a cemetery in Asheville, North Carolina. But then again, perhaps not.

She was still dithering when Lotte opened her eyes and blinked at her sleepily. "Hedda? Is that you? Is your lesson over so soon?"

Hedda clasped and unclasped her hands. "I have a letter. From America."

"Oh . . ." Lotte tried to compose herself, clearly muddled from her nap. "Well then. Come and sit so you can tell me this news."

Lotte finger-combed her short hair and rearranged the throw Hedda had placed over her legs, exposing her swollen ankles.

"Have you been putting your feet up?" Hedda asked.

"Of course, can you not see?" she huffed, then immediately softened. "Ach, *Liebling*. I'm sorry. It's only my breath

comes hard, and as you have noticed . . .” She waved in the general direction of her feet.

Hedda tutted and grabbed a thick pillow. She lifted Lotte’s feet one by one, raising them a bit higher. Lotte sighed deeply and let her head fall back. “It’s good to have someone to look out for me. You are as dear as any daughter ever could have been.”

Hedda sat beside Lotte and took her hand. “And you are as dear to me as my own mother was, God rest her soul.”

Lotte squeezed her fingers. “We have both lost so much. Thank God, we have each other, yes?”

Hedda returned the squeeze. “Yes.” She took a deep breath. “Now, let me tell you what this letter has to say.”

Lotte closed her eyes. “Is it possible that we are to know what happened to my son? After all this time?”

“Perhaps,” Hedda hedged. She read the letter, translating the English to German for her friend.

When Hedda finished, Lotte looked at her closely. “I see this leaves you with doubts. You’re not certain it is our Fritz?”

Hedda realized she was twisting her hair with her free hand. She stopped. “There’s much to suggest it is, but then again, there were several Fritzes on the ship, and who knows if there might not have been more in the camp? It’s such a very common name. And the age—it’s wrong.”

Lotte nodded slowly. Hedda could hear a soft wheeze when the older woman inhaled. Lotte said it was her heart that caused her troubles—the swelling in her legs, the shortness of breath. Hedda feared her friend’s heart might not have many more years in it, and the stress of this letter surely wasn’t helping.

“You’re right, I think, to be less than certain.” She placed a hand over her chest. “My mother’s heart isn’t certain, ei-

ther. I have always thought that I would know when my only child left this earth." She shrugged. "But then my heart isn't strong, so perhaps I shouldn't depend on it so much."

They sat in silence. Abruptly, Lotte lowered her feet to the floor and stood. She shuffled across the room to a small wooden chest tucked away on a bookshelf. Hedda knew Fritz had made it, shaping the wood and carefully fitting the pieces together before he painted it with incredibly detailed peonies, his mother's favorite flower. It was beautiful and demonstrated superior craftsmanship. Fritz had often joked that if he could have his way, he'd be an artist—a sculptor or a painter. But no, he always said, art doesn't bring in the Reichsmarks. Still, he sketched or painted whenever he had a free moment and a few coins for supplies.

Before he left on his first sea voyage, he'd presented Hedda with a portrait he'd done of her in charcoal. In 1913 they'd gone together to the new Galerie Der Sturm's *First German Salon d'Automne Exhibition* to see hundreds of works. Hedda remembered how taken Fritz had been with paintings by artists called Wassily Kandinsky, Marc Chagall, and Paul Klee. The portrait he'd done of her was in something called Cubism. At the time, she'd thought she would have preferred a painting of flowers but had treasured it simply because he'd made it. She wondered now where it had gotten to.

Lotte opened the box and drew something out. She returned to Hedda and dropped back down, her breathing heavy and face flushed. She took Hedda's hand and pressed some paper into it. Hedda frowned—what was this?

"You must go and see," Lotte said.

Hedda stared at the money in her hand. "Go and see?" she repeated faintly.

"Yes. I know someone. He can help get the papers you

need to travel to America. You'll go and see for yourself. If it is our Fritz, perhaps you can bring him home." She nodded to herself. "And if it isn't, then perhaps someone will know what became of him."

"But I can't." Hedda pushed the wad of bills back.

"No." Lotte shook her head slowly. "It is I who cannot." The words floated in the air between them like dandelion seeds—soft, ephemeral, not certain of where to land.

Finally, Hedda spoke. "It's true that I have a passport, but the newspapers say that with the current state of Germany, not to mention the world . . ." She let her words trail away. She knew Germany was in turmoil with more elections happening soon, but she generally skimmed over the more upsetting news in the papers.

"I have a cousin who can help. He's high up in the National Socialist German Workers' Party. They did very well in the July elections."

Hedda began to twist a strand of flaxen hair around and around her finger. She had never traveled farther than Austria, and that had been many years ago. Plus she didn't like getting involved in politics. Everyone seemed so angry since the end of the Great War and the hardships brought on by the Treaty of Versailles. Life was difficult enough without opening herself to the vagaries of politics and politicians.

"I don't know," she said at last. "What if it isn't our Fritz and I go to all this trouble for nothing? And even if it is him, I may not be able to bring . . . his remains home." She laughed—a nervous tittering that embarrassed her. "And then there are my students, my life here. I can't just step away without preparing."

But even as she spoke the words, she knew it wouldn't be difficult at all. Her few students would likely relish a break,

and her friend Gretel—also a pianist—had been asking if Hedda might refer some students to her. She could easily send Liesl and the others to Gretel until she returned.

Lotte coughed, a dry hacking sound as though something deep inside her couldn't find its way out. She finally stopped, her breath coming in small gasps. She pressed a handkerchief to her mouth and closed her eyes. "I must know. I thought I had given up hope of ever knowing the truth." She opened her eyes, which were a faded blue just like Fritz's. "You have brought me hope. Don't take it away again."

Hedda stopped spinning her hair and pulled her hand free. She nodded once. "Very well. Tell me what to do to arrange the travel papers. I'll leave before Christmas if I can." If she delayed, she would lose her nerve.

The wide smile on Lotte's face did something to soothe the turmoil in Hedda's belly and the uncertainty in her heart. She returned the smile and was surprised to discover that she felt something else as well.

Excitement.

She'd been stuck, suspended in time since she'd lost Fritz. Finding him again, in whatever way, made her feel that she might, at long last, be more than the girl whose fiancé never came home.

Getting her nonimmigrant travel papers together hadn't been as simple as Lotte suggested. But it had been accomplished—perhaps at a cost Hedda dared not think about. It seemed some favors had been used, especially regarding her "legitimate" reason for traveling to America. And if she were to need future assistance, it most likely would not be forthcoming.

Nevertheless, she now stood at the rail of a ship on a frigid December day, watching her homeland recede and wondering what it would be like to spend Christmas at sea. She managed a wry smile. Surely no worse than the Christmases she'd spent alone with a book and a plate of *Pfeffernüsse*, making her miss her parents with an intensity she could barely endure.

Her mother had been a painter and her father an architect, who found places at the Bauhaus when it opened in Weimar, Germany, in 1919. Their home had been filled with color, laughter, and music. There had been guests from around the world on holidays and sometimes on regular days, too. Hedda had begun playing the piano when she was four and could manage pieces with some complexity by six. Her father loved to trot her out to play music that should have been beyond her years and her small hands. Hedda had loved every moment, including the inevitable point at which her mother would swoop in, scoop her up, and carry her to bed, singing as she went.

No, nothing could be worse than the misery of missing them.

Except there was something worse. On the second day at sea, they encountered rough waters, and Hedda soon joined the ranks of the seasick. Christmas Day was spent lying in her bunk, eyes tightly closed, willing her stomach to stop its roiling. Even when the seas finally calmed, allowing her to creep out onto deck to collapse onto a chair in the thin sunshine, she still felt even the slightest roll of the enormous vessel beneath her feet.

She squinted into the sun, praying that this horrible journey would soon be behind her. Someone took the chair beside her. Hedda ignored the woman, every fiber of her being

focused on weathering the next wave passing beneath the ocean liner.

"It's a misery, isn't it?" The cheerful voice belied the comment.

Hedda nodded and risked a glance at her neighbor. "Are you ill, too?"

"No, it would seem I have a stomach of iron. But my husband . . ." She shook her head. "You would think he is the first man in all of history to lose his dinner over the side of a ship." She chuckled. "He's finally sleeping now that the seas are calmer."

Hedda sucked in her lower lip and groaned as a swell made the deck tilt and sway. "I keep telling myself the worst is past, but my stomach isn't inclined to agree."

"Poor chick." The simple words made tears sting Hedda's eyelids. She realized how desperately alone she'd been feeling in her illness.

The woman reached into a shapeless bag at her feet, withdrawing something wrapped in a square of linen. "Try this."

Hedda balked at the sight of a piece of bread—or perhaps some sort of cracker—in the woman's hand. "I can't possibly eat anything. I've barely been able to keep water down."

"Nibble it. It will help to settle your stomach. Eating a little something is what finally allowed my Amos to rest."

Hedda took the large square cracker, browned in spots, and placed a corner between her lips. It was plain and very bland. She was surprised to find her stomach didn't rebel. She took another small bite.

"Yes, good, good. You must eat to regain your strength." The woman seemed inordinately pleased with Hedda's pitiful appetite. "We'll be in America soon, and perhaps you are going there to find your future as we are."

"I'm going to try to find my past." Hedda spoke the words without thinking, but as soon as she said them, she realized how true they were. She needed to put her past to rest if she were ever going to have a future at all.

The woman nodded as though this made perfect sense. "The past can be a cruel taskmaster. Too many of us are slaves to our past." She smiled widely. "Which is why we're going to America. Germany is not a good place for people like us." Her smile dimmed. "And my Amos fears it will be much worse before it gets better. We were lucky to get visas." The smile brightened again. "And now we are going to a land of milk and honey, where Amos can teach in a university and I will continue my studies in botany. I understand the state of New Jersey has a wonderful diversity of flora."

Hedda was surprised to find she'd finished the cracker and felt almost as well as she had when she'd first boarded the ship. She was also surprised to learn that this woman was, what, a scientist? "So you are a student?"

"Not formally, but I enjoy dabbling. When Amos isn't retching on ships, he's actually a terribly clever physicist. We thought he would have a wonderful future in Berlin, but the government these days . . ." She trailed off. "No, let us not speak of hard things. Germany is changing, but perhaps it's only temporary and we will return home sooner than we think. Now, where are you going in America?"

Hedda drew in a deep draft of the invigorating sea air and felt, for the first time in days, that she might actually live to see a foreign shore. "North Carolina. I believe they call the area I'm traveling to the Blue Ridge Mountains."

"Oh, that sounds lovely. Perhaps Amos and I will find our way there one day. What is your purpose in going to these blue mountains?"

Hedda hadn't meant to, but she'd soon told her new friend her story of loss and the hope she had of learning what had happened to her fiancé. As she spoke, she found herself more and more resolved to unravel the mystery of what had happened to Fritz. And more and more confident that she could do so.

Her friend nodded. "We will say a prayer for your success and for you to find peace." She reached out and took Hedda's hand. "Wherever you go, know that Frieda and Amos wish you well." She stood. "Now, I must go and see if my husband is strong enough to dress himself and sit at the table for our evening meal." She chuckled. "He has been saying he was growing too stout. This trip has been a help for that!"

Hedda watched Frieda leave, half wishing she could go with her. Not just to the supper table but to New Jersey and a life of studying botany. To have such a meaningful purpose, wouldn't that be wonderful?

She realized she hadn't noticed the movement of the ship for some time now. She stood and gave her attention to the gentle swell and sway beneath her feet. It no longer felt foreign. Planting her feet wide, she took the motion into her body and felt the strength of the sea fill her with confidence and determination. She'd been living by rote long enough. The time had come to discover a new tune.