

NICOLA THOMPSON

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## *A Time to Forget*

### ***July 13, 1994: Eulogy***

**J**Annette Müller runs her eyes over the seating crowd. Helga graciously greets the incoming mourners despite her partner's shift in focus. Annette had no idea that he knew so many people or that people thought enough of him to come to say their farewells.

They fill the crematorium and the vicar begins his solemn verses, though Annette can't concentrate. All she can think about is the eulogy she's prepared. Her ears fill with her heart drumming as she struggles to keep her breathing even and calm. She is no stranger to speaking in front of people, she has led several rallies. But hyping a crowd toward human rights is not the same as addressing mourners at her father's funeral.

The vicar stands aside, holding his arm out to her as she rises. It is her turn to speak. She stands at the podium, looking out over the dark clothes and sad faces, and wonders if she can do this.

"We are here today to remember the life of Edmund Müller, a cornerstone of our community," Annette begins. "I don't think there is a business in this village that doesn't have at least one piece of furniture he crafted. Most of us know him as the man who would do anything for anyone and perhaps more than he should in some cases. But he was an endless well of love and charity, and that's how I think everyone in this room remembers him.

"I can think of no better way of honoring him than to discuss his greatest philosophy, one he might well have bestowed on a few of you.

“For those of you who don’t know me, I would like to share a little about myself, first. I’m his first daughter and his only child. While he only came into my life when I was seven, after meine Mutter died, he has never been anything but a kind and supportive parent to me, despite my sometimes stressful political activism. To be honest, I’m surprised I hadn’t given him a heart attack years ago.” She pauses and a few smile sympathetically at her attempt at humour. As the words left her mouth, she realised it was inappropriate. Her face flushes in slight embarrassment as she pushes herself to continue.

“Mein Vater accepted me when I told him that I, too, was to become a single parent, during the early stages of my pregnancy. The day my son was born, he held him in his arms and wept pure joy.

“While he took a little longer to come around, he eventually accepted me when I told him of my love for my partner, Helga, and soon came to accept her as his second daughter when we declared our lifelong dedication to one another. He told her that he had always wanted more children, and that she was a blessing to him.

“When I was a little girl, he said that the most important thing we can do for one another is to forgive. This was his philosophy, his rule of thumb. He believed that no matter what, no matter how much you disagree with another person, you must forgive so that you can find peace within yourself. He said it was the only way to come to terms with this world, and to uphold and keep together family and community, and this is what we should remember him for.”

She takes in a deep breath. This is where it gets harder.

### ***June 23, 1994: Memories***

The room is stale as are the rest of the rooms in the facility. The home itself is small, allowing for each of the residents to have their needs handled. Helga had done well, found the perfect place, just as Annette asked.

Annette adapted to the emptiness of the house after her father left for the facility better than she thought she would. Bastian though, handled it differently. He went quiet, only speaking when necessary. Annette knows he blames her for his grandfather’s passing, just as she knows that it is the grief that fuels him, not logic. Somehow, he doesn’t remember his grandfather’s failing memories, his lashing

out at his family. Bastian forgets that his grandfather had struck him, and that was when Annette agreed with Helga that Edmund needed a home more equipped to handle his mental decline.

Annette finishes folding and stowing into a suitcase all of Edmund's clothing, touching each button of each shirt she put away, when Helga arrives. When Annette says nothing at her presence, Helga's face arranges in one of apology. She should have been there sooner.

"What else is there to do?" Helga asks, her hand warm against Annette's shoulder, who is sitting on the floor next to the single bed. Her thumb runs along the silver edge of a framed photograph. Annette's eyes absorb the sun-bleached image of Edmund's round belly and arm supporting the two-year-old version of Bastian while wearing a colourful birthday party hat.

"I think that's everything," Annette says. She puts the photo in the small case on the bed. Two other, larger suitcases next to it are filled with things to be donated upon Bastian's approval. But this small case is just for her and her memories.

"What about this?" Helga is on the other side of the bed, bent over. She stands and passes along a small shoebox with worn corners. She opens it and her brow furrows before she passes it to Annette.

As Annette reaches for it, the box shifts, sounding heavy metals rubbing together. With weak hands, she steadies the teetering contents as she stands to examine them, moving toward the window for daylight.

She gasps. Annette's cold hands cover her mouth, dropping the box. Her eyes follow the splaying medals and aged letters as the box topples. As the mess splays across the carpeted floor, so do Helga and Annette's eyes on the SS pin catching the summer light.

### ***March 19, 1959: Beginnings***

Annette runs her fingers over the doll's head. It isn't a pretty doll, but her mother gave it to her on her last birthday. Around its neck is a tiny bracelet, one that her mother bought her as a baby. Annette doesn't remember getting this gift, and only knows that her wrists are now just too big for it, but this doll's neck is the perfect size.

She sits in the backseat of the car while two men talk outside.

One of the men rode in the car with her to this spot on the street. He has been with her since Mama died though she had never met him before. He told her he was her temporary guardian, Herr Weber. She doesn't know the man he is talking to, the one with the shabby suit jacket and stocky build.

The car door opens. Annette looks up from her doll to see the two men focusing their attention on her.

"Annette," Herr Weber addresses, putting out his hand for her. Reluctantly, she tucks the doll under her arm and takes ahold of the offer, scooting out of the car. Her shiny, black shoes meet the cobbled stone with a satisfying clap. "Annette, this is Herr Edmund Müller."

*Müller*, Annette thinks. *My name is Müller.*

"This is dein Vater," Herr Weber continues. "He will look after you from now on." He puts a hand on the centre of her back, urging her gently toward the new man.

Vater. *Father*. Annette knows other children have fathers, though she never supposed she might. She looks at the man, who kneels on one knee on the wet pavement before her, smiling. She wonders if he is her father. She doesn't feel anything toward him and surely, she would if they were related. He puts his arms out and pulls her in, embracing her. He smells of sweet tobacco and wood.

"I'm so happy to meet you, Annette," he says, pulling away from her. She sees his eyes watering through his smile. She didn't know someone could be sad and happy at the same time. She doesn't feel anything toward him, except that she likes the way he smiles, even if he does cry while doing it, and likes his smell.

"You'll have to excuse her," Herr Weber tells Herr Müller. "She hasn't spoken since her mother passed. With routine and time, she should right herself."

The man claiming to be her father nods, still watching Annette. "Don't worry, Maus," he says. "We have all the time in the world."

### ***October 2, 1961: Forgiveness***

Annette is too mad to stop crying though she knows she should. Her school uniform is now muddied, and her tights have a rub down them. None of that matters. None of that is the worst of it. She storms into the house, through the kitchen, to her room. Papa turns

as she passes him in the kitchen standing at the stove.

“Maus?” he says as she storms past, glancing over his shoulder from the cooking pot on the stove. “Mäuschen?”

Annette ignores her father, flinging her book bag onto her bed in her room. She flings herself alongside it and buries her face in her pillow, uncaring of the mud on her shoes dirtying the quilt.

“Maus,” Papa repeats as he stands in her doorway. “What’s the matter?”

Annette doesn’t budge, and squeezes her eyes shut against her father’s presence. She wants to stop crying but is just too angry. She allows herself to face him when she feels the bed sink under his weight as he sits next to her, his hand on her back. She sits up, wiping her eyes with her sleeve, and lets him put his arm around her shoulders.

“Karin says I won’t know how to be a woman because I don’t have eine Mutter,” she confesses. “She says no one will ever want me because I will only know how to be a man.”

“I thought Karin was your friend?”

Annette allows herself two more sobs before sucking in her hurt. “She’s not any more. I hit her in the face.”

“Annette!”

“Then Monika and Renate pushed me down and pulled my hair. I hate them, too.”

Papa moves from her side and crouches in front of her. “What brought this on? Why did Karin say that?”

“Because she’s mean and horrible,” Annette sulked.

“It wasn’t a very nice thing to say, that’s true. But you shouldn’t have hit her.”

“What else was I supposed to do?” She is at a loss. Papa always tells her to stand up for herself, and so she did. “I did like you said.”

“Oh, Mäuschen,” he says, trying to suppress a smile, fuelling her frustration. “Only hit when you’ve been hit, when it’s self-defence. Did you stand up for yourself to those other girls?”

“No,” she says quietly.

“You instead hit the one girl who only used her words?”

“Yes. But I’ll get them back tomorrow,” she asserts.

“No, you won’t. If you saw someone hit your friend, wouldn’t you do something, too?”

Annette thinks about this and can't find any reason against it. She nods in defeat.

"You need to forgive and forget this, Annette."

"But Papa—" How can she forget such horrible things that were said to her? How can she forget the embarrassment of being thrown on the ground or her school clothes ruined because of them? Her scalp still feels the resonance of her yanked hair, her neck aching from resisting. Yet her father's face is serious, his stern look stopping her protests.

"This is the most important thing I can ever teach you, Liebling," he says. "Forgiveness is the greatest strength anyone can have. It's the only power we can ever possess."

"But they were—"

"Annette, I am not finished."

The little girl quiets herself, biting her bottom lip and scowling at her father.

"Anger only breeds evil things. It becomes hate and that is the worst monster there is in this world. We can only find peace between each other and within ourselves if we can learn to forgive."

Sulking, Annette nods her head.

"Do you hear me?" he asks, his tone soft like a blanket despite his firm words.

"Yes, Papa."

"You will apologise to Kiren tomorrow?"

"Yes, Papa."

He smiles, breaking the tension as he pulls her forward into his arms. She takes in his smell of tobacco, wood and fried onions. She gives in and wraps her arms around his neck, feeling the stubble of his chin against her cheek.

"Now, go wash up for supper."

***November 24, 1987: Different***

"His name is Bastian," Annette tells her father as he is led by nurses into her room. She does her best to sit up, to pass the tiny bundle of her, the being her body worked to create, her son, to her father. "Bastian Edmund Müller."

As exhaustion sweeps over her, emotion accompanies it. She

knows he wasn't present at her own birth and remembers the time that she met him seven years later. So many times, he had expressed his regret for his long absence in her life. "I was away," he would say, never elaborating the definition of 'away'. Annette never asked. It didn't matter. She's held on to the mystery as a means of leverage, as a means to fire back at him when her temper burned.

Despite this, he has always been there when she needs him. And now he is here for Bastian. Her early years without a father have no weight any more. She knows that his presence for the birth of his grandchild is everything to him. She watches as his eyes mist, his lips pulled back into a smile: the same look he gave her when he met her.

"Bastian Edmund Müller," he says quietly to the baby. "Mein Enkel, mein Enkel." *My grandson*. A tear openly rolls down the aged face, clean shaven to the silver hair left shaggy on top of his head.

Annette wafts in and out of consciousness at the movement of nurses, lulled by the soft humming from her father to the newborn. She wakes long enough to hear him whisper to Bastian, "I promise life will be different for you. Everything in my power to make your life different from mine..." before slipping back asleep.

***February 3, 1994: Betrayal***

"I don't think he'll ever forgive me," Annette says, pouring the Chablis into Helga's glass.

"Who? Bastian or Edmund?" Helga leans back in her chair at the table, taking the glass with her and resting it against her chest.

"Bastian. I don't think Papa will forgive himself." Annette swirls the cold, white wine over her tongue, letting her heat warm it before swallowing. "He was lucid. I think that's the worst of it. He was lucid when I left."

"That's a blessing."

"Is it? I had to turn my back on mein Vater after telling him he needed full-time care after he struck his grandson during one of his... episodes. I don't know. I think the blessing would be for him never to be lucid again."

"Bitte, you're not that cruel." Helga waves her glass, dismissing her partner's comment.

“It’s not cruel. He now knows his mental state. He knows he’s hurt his family. What’s cruel is leaving him in a strange place, taking away his independence and letting him focus on that.”

“Liebling,” Helga reaches over and puts her hand on Annette’s. “You can only do what you can do. He won’t hold that against you, you know that.”

“I know. It’s Bastian I need to worry about now.” Annette’s eyes roll to the ceiling above them, where her son sleeps.

“He’ll come around. He’ll understand when he’s older. He’s only six.”

“Nearly seven,” Annette reminds her. “His grandfather leaves his life at the same point that he came into mine. I just pushed him out the door.”

Helga leaves her chair for the fireplace in the next room, stoking it and adding two logs. She rubs her hands together and blows on them as she returns to the table in the kitchen. “You can’t do this to yourself. You did everything you could for him but knowing your limits is the best thing you can do for Edmund, for Bastian, and for yourself. You’re the head of this family, you’re who keeps us all together. No one is going to begrudge you this decision.”

“Bastian will.” Annette thinks about the welt on her son’s cheek, how today it was a deep purple that would soon melt to an acrid yellow as it heals. When it happened, she pressed the crying child to her, looking on at her father, who had already turned to run a hand over the furniture, sanding with invisible paper, an invisible project. And yet, that afternoon when she had taken Edmund to the home, Bastian had wailed and pleaded for her not to take him, begged to not have to say goodbye. He’s too old for six, she often thinks.

### ***June 24, 1994: Decision***

Hot tears blur Annette’s vision, her eyelashes flapping rapidly to blink them away in frustration. “All those years away. All those years and he was in hiding. That’s what he was doing,” she says, her face buried in Helga’s arms. Her face is warm against the thickness of her partner’s arms, and though she struggles to breathe through her upset, the smell of her, the tightness of her embrace, stops the world around her.

“Was my mother a sympathiser too? Was she in hiding? Was that why she was there?” Annette sobs. “She must have been, how could she not know? She must have been just as vile as him.”

“You don’t know that,” Helga tells her. “There is so much we don’t know. And it doesn’t matter. None of that matters.”

“How can you say that?” Annette pulls away from Helga, her tear-swollen face surveying her partner’s round face, framed by greying, chin-length hair and straight-chopped fringe. “There is blood on his hands—”

“We don’t know the whole story, Liebling. Those things could be taken from someone, or someone asked him to keep it...”

“Don’t be so foolish, Helga.” Annette pulls away from her altogether. “There are three medals, there are inscriptions—”

“To a name that is not Edmund Müller. The name is Hermann Fischer. Das ist nicht dein Vater.”

“I read the letters to my mother that he never sent. I read letters he received from my mother with *my name* in them. I read all of them. Hermann Fischer is Edmund Müller. It’s him. It’s all him.”

Annette paces, a silhouette against the ground floor windows overlooking the street, casting a marching shadow on the wooden floorboards. The heat from the summer sun through the glass on her is too much, adding to her boiling upset. Her hands rest at the top of her head, her fingers rub through her hair.

“There was a photo in that box, and it was him,” Annette expels. “In uniform. He was one of them. How can you not be angry?”

“I am angry,” Helga says, slowly. “I am angry, but what is the point of being angry at a dead man?”

“He called you his daughter. He accepted you as his daughter, and yet the blood of how many men and women? Of children? The blood of how many people are on his hands?”

“We never knew,” Helga says quietly. “When you and I met, you told me your father was the most important person in your life next to Bastian. You told me there was no man on earth with as much love as Edmund.”

“I was wrong. He was hateful.”

“How could he be when he gave you, Bastian, and now me, so much of himself? He had love for all of us.” Helga steps toward

Annette, who leans away, closing her eyes against her. Helga sighs, putting her fists on her hips. "Don't you think his love for this family is enough?"

Annette rubs her palms over her wet face, stretching her skin. "I want it to be... But it isn't. That's not how it works. He was a coward. He couldn't admit what he'd done or even ask for forgiveness. He hid under our noses. Our time with him was nothing more than a disguise for him."

Annette shakes her head, new sobs bubbling up. She crumples to the ground as her knees fold under her, tears making slippery the flooring beneath her face. "How can I invite people who knew him and respected him to his funeral? How can we even host a funeral to celebrate that life? He was a fraud. The last thirty-five years he's been back in Germany have been a sham."

***July 13, 1994: Eulogy Complete***

Annette holds up her hand to the crowd, signalling the moment she needs to gather herself. She's held herself together this long, she can keep going.

"Edmund Müller's greatest gift to his community was to teach forgiveness. He said that the evils of the world resided in hatred, within the pride that harboured that anger. And forgiveness is the hardest lesson of all to learn. It is a rule that we all should follow and a discipline which must be practised regularly.

"For every difficult situation I encounter, I thank him for this lesson.

"However, in his death, he continues to teach me..." Her voice catches in her throat as she sees Bastian tuck his face under Helga's arm, who pats him sympathetically. She doesn't agree with Annette's decision and through the nod of encouragement from her partner, Annette can still see past to the disapproval.

"I'm sorry, I just..." Her hand tucks into a ball, covering her mouth with it. With the motion comes the urging of tears. She can't let them. She won't allow it.

She clears her throat and nods to the crowd, opening her hand in apology.

"Thank you for your patience. However, in his death, he continues

to teach me.” Annette allows herself another moment to push back the tears, to swallow the emotion bubbling within her throat.

“I don’t announce this lightly and I didn’t know whether to announce it at all. Even as I speak, I don’t know what the right action is to do. However, I do know that it’s changed what I believed and what I thought I knew.

“While sorting through his things, collecting memories of him, I learned where he had been for the first seven years of my life. Until meine Mutter died, forcing him to be my sole guardian, he was in hiding, like so many after the war. I learned he was hiding because he had been an SS officer under the name of Hermann Fischer. There is enough evidence to enforce that this was the true identity of mein Vater.”

Murmurs ripple through the audience, some shifting uncomfortably. Annette wonders if some would leave, wonders what she would do in their position. She doesn’t wait to see if anyone leaves as she forces the rest of her words from the sheet of paper on the podium to sound.

“I spent my life believing there was no greater man than mein Vater. I was so grateful to have him as a role model in my son’s life. In their short time together, he taught my son honour and integrity. He instilled the steadfast rule of forgiveness in both me and my son, that forgiveness is the only power we have in this world.

“It’s true. Through forgiveness we can condone and set forth codes of conduct, we can understand what is permissible and what is not. It is through forgiveness that we create the pathway to peace. This truth of mein Vater’s past gave way to a realisation about rules, the realisation that with every rule set out, there are appropriate and essential times to break them.

“Today, I break the rule of forgiveness. I love the man who raised me, though that is not the whole man. He is, sadly, half a man, half of a story. The man I knew had a past that was mysterious to me and, as it turns out, completely evil. How do I trust a man who I believed to be made up of nothing but love yet whose hands are stained with the deaths of thousands?

“Perhaps I am an imperfect person because I do not know when good deeds erase evil. And so, I do not forgive Hermann Fischer for

the war crimes he committed, for the deaths he is responsible for. He played a part in the war that devastated the world, no matter how little or few his actions might have been.

“If we forgive these past vile deeds and those like them to come, then we are sending the message that the actions are, on some level, permissible and I refuse to let that be the case. We cannot continue down the path of ‘act now, ask for forgiveness later.’ We must set forth a standard of what it is to live in this world with each other. Neither bigotry, xenophobia, nor racism will be tolerated if we are to create a peaceful world.

“Mein Vater always said that peace is in forgiveness. This is true. There is peace in forgiveness. But I believe his hope in teaching me this was that I might forgive him if ever I found out his past. There is peace in forgiveness, but peace is also in preventing hate-driven attitudes and actions. And I will not give peace to hate. I cannot give peace to mein Vater. We must live with the consequences of our actions and this is the consequence of his.

There it is. The tear that escapes and rolls down her face. She will allow the one. Just the one. Annette folds her speech and puts it in the pocket of her black pea coat.

“I will continue to honour the man that was mein Vater and try to forgive the biggest lie he ever told me. I love mein Vater who, I think, is the same man you all knew, and for whom you all came to pay your respects. I don’t forgive Herr Fischer, and right now, I cannot forgive mein Vater. But I do hope to find forgiveness for Edmund Müller and will continue to remember him as the man who taught me that hatred is the greatest monster there is, and that he worked to quell the monster that was Hermann Fischer.

“I will give no more words to him on this podium though I welcome anyone else to the stand. Let us give life one last time to this man.”

She doesn’t see if anyone rises to take her place as she steps down from the podium and walks to the back of the crematorium. She pushes open the doors, and doubles over in the summer sunshine, gasping for breath before crumpling into the grass.