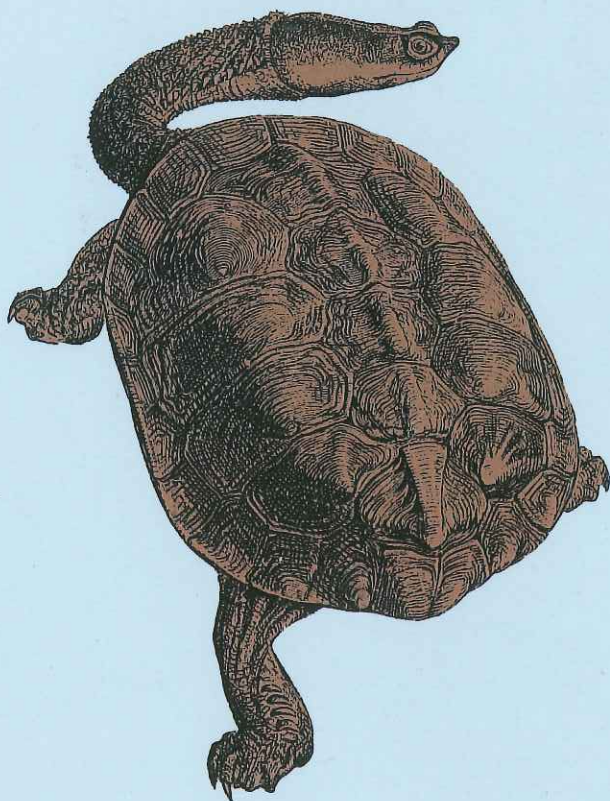


IT WAS RAINING & VAMPIRES



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TANTE FRIEDA

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It was not unusual for it to be foggy in San Francisco and today was like the others—the city mired in thick, choking fog. I sit in the family room, my hard-buckle shoes forgotten on the floor and my skirt rumpled. I tap a pen against my lips waiting for something to distract me from homework and provide much-needed entertainment.

“Guten Tag *liebling*,” My uncle Rudolph says coming into the room.

“*Guten Tag* Uncle Rudolph,” I reply standing up to give him a hug. He smiles at me and sits on a comfortable chair across from me.

“What is wrong?” he asks in German.

“Just tired. All this fog, *schrecklich*,” I say in English. He speaks to me in German and I talk to him in English; it helps us both learn better.

“Ask Tante for a sweet. She is making schnitzel; she will give you some,” he says, patting my shoulder. Rudolph was always my favorite uncle, he was nice and gave my siblings presents, although he had an

extra one for me, because I was the oldest and had to take care of the younger children. The presents were interesting, little trinkets or novelty candies sold from German novelty stores around the city. The best ones were in Noe Valley, where many Germans lived. They would be wrapped in plastic with the faint aroma of cigar smoke coating them from being in his pocket. We would unwrap them greedily and thank him in a mixture of English and German.

I enter the kitchen and the smells of tomato goulash soup peppered with paprika and moist chicken dumplings cover me. Tante Frieda bustles around the kitchen, stirring pots and opening the oven. Her brown hair is coming undone and her cheeks are pink. Frieda is plain and blends into the background sometimes, but I've always thought she was pretty and an amazing cook.

"Hello, Walpurga," Most people call me Val, but the uncles call me by my full Austrian name. She smiles at me and like my uncle she immediately senses my restlessness, and hands me a piece of strudel.

"The fog depresses me too. Austria was hot and sunny in the summers," Frieda reminisces.

"What was Austria like?" I ask curiously sitting down at the small wooden table smushed into the wall of the kitchen. Frieda places a hot piece of strudel at the table and I gobble it up, burning my tongue in the process. My uncles and Frieda rarely talk about Austria or the homeland as they call it when they do mention it. I know only a little about my heritage and I gobble up information the way my

brothers gobble up Frieda's delicious rich, chocolate Sacher torte.

"Austria was a beautiful place," Frieda says stirring the pot of Tafelspitz, a spicy beef soup. "I had a beau, in Austria." She smiles sadly out the window.

The girl looks down at her tiny house, smoke unfurling from the chimney. She clutches her shawl tightly around her and shivers in the night air. Her breath puffs, making designs in the cold. She waits, wishing he would hurry.

"Frieda." Her name is no more than a whisper but she whirls around at the voice and runs into his arms. Her blue eyes sparkle, as she looks at him and she smooths her silky hair. She is young and vivacious.

I am intrigued. Frieda never talks this much and I wanted to know everything about her. Obviously nothing had become of her relationship, but I'm curious about how it ended. Frieda could have had a more fulfilling life if she had married. She is head of the family now, guiding everyone with what she cooks in the kitchen and her fragmented English. We speak only in German—Frieda does not get out enough to master the language.

"I loved Reizlern, it was a beautiful town. The mountains were breathtaking, literally the altitude was awful." Frieda says, suddenly. I glance over at her and she is looking at me with her brow furrowed.

"We left because it became too expensive to live there. Your father was here, he has a job, and we would all live together," she continues. "My beau

would come as well and we would start a family.” Her face becomes pinched and sad and I feel bad for her.

“I don’t want to leave! I want to stay with you, to have a family with you!” Frieda cries, beating at his chest. “Austria is my homeland, I don’t want to leave. America is big and scary. I hate it already.”

“Don’t cry darling,” He says, wiping tears off her cheeks. “Go to America, I will join you when I can support you. We will have a family where our children will have endless opportunities!” He rubs her back, hugging her tightly.

“Will you write me?” Frieda asks all of her uncertainties and fears were contained in that one simple question.

“Of course I’ll write you, I love you.” He leans down to kiss her.

“What happened?” I ask quietly.

“He never came, he never wrote me, I thought it was my fault or that I would not be a good wife to him, that I was not Austrian enough, but it was not me!” she ends angrily, her spoon striking the bowl she’s stirring nearly knocking it over.

“Do I have any mail?” Frieda asks excitedly, when she sees Joseph reading his letters.

“Not today, sister, perhaps tomorrow.” He smiles and pats her head but pays no more attention to her than that. No one sees Frieda’s shoulders slump, or can feel her

sadness permeating the walls. They only notice when it seeps into the soup and makes it salty. They only notice when it matters to them.

“They hid his letters, they let me believe he did not want me, that I wasn’t good enough, but it is them who are not good enough!” Her voice holds a note of finality and I know I won’t be getting any more information. I leave the kitchen quietly. I feel bad for Frieda and I am furious at my uncles. How could they have done that to her? I’m not paying attention, too lost in my thoughts and I walk into my Uncle David.

“Be careful there!” he says smiling at me.

I stare up at him, angry and confused. I don’t mean for anything to come out, but I start yelling at him, German and English mixing together in a slur of words. “How could you? How could you do that to Tante! *Ich hasse dich!* You are all horrible! None of you are my uncles anymore. *Auf Wiedersehen!*” I’m crying by the end of my rant and he stares down at me in shock.

“What is going on *Honig?*” he asks, setting me in a chair.

“Frieda told me what you did to her,” I say, wiping at the tears dripping onto the carpet.

“What did we do?” he asks, pulling out a handkerchief. All my uncles smell like cigars, like old wood furniture and I bury my face in the comforting scent.

“She told me you hid the letters from her beau,

she found them when it was too late and wouldn't read them. Doesn't Tante deserve happiness? Doesn't she deserve to be married have a family?" I ask.

"It's not that simple," he sighs. I am embarrassed by my earlier rant. I should feel lucky that I have a huge family; some of my friends' parents are divorced!

"Frieda deserves happiness and we wanted to give it to her. We wanted to protect her."

"David, will you take a look at this." Joseph calls down the wide hall to his brother.

"Of course." David replies entering the study.

"I have a letter for Frieda."

"Just give it to her, she's been moping around for weeks and I'm tired of salty schnitzel." David turns to leave but Joseph speaks.

"I'm worried this will make her sadder." Joseph hands David the letter

Dear Frieda,

I'm not coming to America; I have found many possibilities in Austria and do not want to leave for a new country. I have my whole life here and I have a family now. I release you from whatever engagement you thought we had. I hope you will be as happy as my family is.

"Hide the letter," David says, walking out of the room. He's angry, and sad for Frieda, but perhaps it was for the best. After all, she made the best schnitzel in San Francisco and he did not want to lose that, which he would if she left. But she also deserved happiness. He knew it was a

risk not to tell her, but it was easy to hate her family, she would eventually learn to forget and to love them again.

“He led Frieda on—she thought they were going to be married, but he decided he did not want a family with her, especially in America,” he tells me, his face shows pain and some guilt. I try to ignore his good deeds, rather blaming him than some unknown Austrian man who had jilted my aunt, and who was probably dead.

“Why didn’t you just tell her? Doesn’t she deserve to know?” I ask, my anger flaring up again.

“I thought I was protecting her.” He says calmly, which only makes me angrier. “Besides, Frieda got her revenge.”

“I asked her!” Joseph says, bounding into the room like a carefree boy.

“Asked who?” David asked, concerned for his brother.

“The woman from church—she’s coming over tomorrow, after mass, to celebrate the feast with us,” he says giddily.

“Frieda! Will you make an extra serving for our guest?” he says, smiling.

Frieda glares back at him and continues to stir the soup. They had betrayed her, why should she help them?

“Rebecca, this is my family, family, this is Rebecca,” Joseph says, introducing his friend to the family. He could hardly contain his smile.

“Come on, I’ll introduce you to Frieda.” He leads the young pretty girl with dark hair and gold eye makeup into the kitchen.

Frieda runs up to her, a heavy ornate cross in her hand, she snarls at the woman while sprinkling holy water on her.

The woman's eyes grow large and her red mouth opens up in a scream of horror. She runs out of the house leaving a dumbstruck Joseph standing next to Frieda.

"I don't care if she got revenge. Tell her! Tell Frieda what you did! She deserves to know, now at least," I tell him.

He shakes his head, sadly. "It will only open old wounds."

"Fine! I'll tell her!" I march back into the kitchen.

Frieda is stirring the pot of soup, humming a lullaby from long ago, one that makes me want to cry. Her graying hair is coming undone from a bun, and her shoulders are hunched and stiff. Her sadness bent her joints and twisted her fingers into gnarled claws. It has sucked the beauty from her face and the happiness from her eyes. But she was beginning to forget her long ago hurt, her shoulders had become less hunched, a small glimmer of light crawled back into her face. She was moving on. She was becoming a person again. It was *my* curiosity that hurt her. Now I knew why they rarely talked about Austria. It was just too painful for all of them. I stand in the doorway until Frieda notices me. She smiles and beckons.

"Come try the soup and tell me if it's too salty."

With her words we fall back into a familiar

pattern—her in the kitchen, me in the dining room, tasting soup while slowly doing my homework, and her only angry at the people she will always love.