

Billy



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About the Authors

Joan is a native of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She has raised six children, three of them adopted. With four children already in her family she continued her love of learning with an Associate Degree in Social Science, then a B.A. in Elementary Education, an M.S. in Conflict Management, and finally, (her husband hopes) an M.Div. from the University of Notre Dame.

During these years she welcomed two more children into her family, and after completing her M.Div. Degree she was given the position of Pastoral Director for first one, and then a second Catholic parish where there was no resident priest.

Joan is now a full-time advocate for the full inclusion of women in ministry including the priestly ordination of women in the Roman Catholic Church. In 2006, intentionally breaking Church law to change it, she was ordained a priest through the Roman Catholic Womenpriest initiative (RCWP), and in 2009 was elected and ordained bishop for the Great Waters Region of RCWP. In 2019 she retired as bishop, but continues in active participation in RCWP.

Joan remains committed to the Roman Catholic Church, and works continually to convince her Church to ordain women for the good of the Church and for the women who are called to priestly ministry.

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John is a native of Dayton, Ohio, with a B.S. in Civil Engineering from the University of Dayton. His engineering career took the family to numerous places as he worked on a multitude of projects. John loved the challenge of building things; especially things that had never been built before and sometimes in new and unusual places while helping Joan raise their family.

John is now retired and is a full-time supporting partner in Joan's ministry. He shares her fire and enthusiasm for the inclusion of women at all levels of ministry and the professions. He is pleased that in his engineering field the participation of women has gone from essentially zero to approximately 30%.

After years of being "on call" John enjoys the freedom of not carrying a mobile phone or maintaining an e-mail address. He enjoys the company of his two Tomcats and writing as a creative outlet, including letters "to the editor" and to their children and grandchildren.



Welcome to the continuing story of the Allen and Sue family. Billy, you may remember, was Allen and Sue's second child. It was a difficult pregnancy for Sue, and we almost lost them both. In the Megan and Nick story we find Billy growing into a normal teenager. By normal we mean not exceptionally gifted nor too difficult to live with.

Billy's family did make a lasting impression on him in important ways. He was blessed by being loved and nurtured in a stable multigenerational family, and second, that family included men who loved and respected women. So now Billy finds himself a young man in the Army with normal attractions to women while carrying on the male family tradition of loving respect for the women he meets. This surprised himself, and the women he comes to know, in unexpected ways. Enjoy. Oh, and we will meet Billy again in future stories.

The story about Billy is about ordinary people. These are the kind of people we know, and the kind of lives they live. All the characters are creations of our imaginations. If you find in this story someone who seems familiar, it is because they are ordinary people. It is your imagination that has rendered them even more familiar. Actually, we hope that happens.

This story is intentionally not, repeat not, a "published" document with "rights reserved." This story is an extension of our Catholic ministry, and as the Gospel advises, we "take no money in our purse." So we will take nothing for this creative journey. If you choose to copy the story, we ask that you always include this Introduction Page, and honor the missionary spirit of the authors. We do hope you share it in any way you choose. *Billy* and all of our other stories are available to be read, downloaded and shared from Joan's web site: <http://joanclarkhouk.com>

Joan and John Houk
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Other stories in this series by the authors:

Allen and Sue -- a story of new beginnings and the power of community even in McDonalds.

Megan and Nick -- a story about surprise and being open to new possibilities, including bringing thoughtful young people into your lives.

BILLY

“Billy, is that you?”

Billy’s mother, Sue had chosen a calming chime sound for her ring tone because she never knew what she would hear when she answered the phone. With her husband Allen a firefighter, and with a child in college and another one in the Army, not to mention her own middle management job, she wanted to be able to answer her phone in a calm mood and with a calm voice. Her phone chimed nicely and she looked at the number. It was not in her contact list so she may not have answered it, but something said “answer it” so she swiped the phone and in her best calm voice said, “This is Sue Baxter.”

At first there was no response, then she heard, or thought she heard, Mom, I’m OK. Billy, is that you? Mom, I’m OK. What are you saying, Billy? Speak up; I can’t understand what you are saying. Mom, I’m OK.

Sue looked at Allen across the table and said, I think it’s Billy and I think he keeps saying, Mom, I’m OK, and she handed Allen the phone.

Billy, is that you? Speak up; we can’t understand what you are saying. No answer. Billy, is there someone there with you? Give them the phone. No answer. Now using his *firefighter* voice, BILLY, GIVE SOMEONE ELSE THE PHONE.

A long moment went by, then a strong, hello, who is this? came over the phone. This is Allen Baxter, Billy’s father. Whom am I speaking to? My name is McCarthy. I’m a nurse. McCarthy, what’s going on?

Sue had gotten up and walked around to Allen’s side of the table and was reaching for the phone. Allen moved her hand away.

Mr. Baxter, Billy is in the hospital. He asked to call his mother so I let him use my phone. This is an expensive call so please don’t stay on too long. Now using his *calming injured person firefighter’s* voice Allen repeated, McCarthy, what is going on?

Billy OD’d but they got to him in time and gave him Naloxone. We think he will be OK. Sue, Billy OD’d but they think he will be OK. Give me the phone, Allen.

This is Billy’s mother. I want to talk to him. There were some muffled sounds, and Sue took a chance that by now Billy had the phone.

Billy, what are you doing scaring me to death? I’m sorry Mom, but I’m OK -- and the phone went dead. He hung up, Allen. I have to call him back, and she was about to touch “return call” when Allen stopped her.

Sue, we know all we need to know right now. They used Naloxone. We use it; it works like magic. He will be OK. I need to see him, Allen. I need to know he's OK. I need to touch him. I'm going to call the airlines. I've got to do this, Allen.

Sue, we need to find out what the Army is going to do with him. They may send him stateside. They may even send him home. You could be on a plane to Germany when he is on his way home. They will call us. I know how the Army works; they will call us to let us know where he will be.

Allen, I can't sit here and wait for a phone call. I just can't. What if he does it again? It happens, Allen. I have to go see him.

There is no way he can OD again in the hospital, or wherever they put him. Yes, some people do it again, but he can't; not now.

Why would he do such a thing, Allen? Could have been accidental. There is a lot we don't know. Call your mother, Sue. Why should I call my mother? Because you can't just sit here and wait for a call; I understand that.

OK, Allen, but if the Army doesn't call us in an hour, you call them. It's the middle of the night in Germany, Sue. Then call the President. OK, Sue, call your mother.

~ ~

Sue had spent an hour on the phone with her mother. Her mother had calmed her enough that she could go to bed but not enough for her to be able to sleep. It was 2:00 a.m. when her phone chimed. She knocked it to the floor trying to reach for it on the night stand. Allen kept quiet.

Without looking at the number on the phone, Sue answered it. This is Sue Baxter. Mrs. Baxter, my name is Major Wilson and I need to inform you of the status of your son, William. Yes.

We think William overdosed on illegal drugs last night. He was treated and brought to our hospital by the MPs, and he will stay there for at least 24 hours.

Is he OK? I mean is he in any danger? Physically he is likely to completely recover, I am told, but the Army has strict rules about illegal drug use and there will likely be serious consequences.

How serious?

There are several possibilities, which it would not be right for me to speculate on. Will you keep him there? For now, yes, but I can't speculate beyond that. Will I be able to talk to him? Yes, when he is released from the hospital he will be confined, but he will be able to call you.

Confined? You mean like in a cell?

He will be confined to his quarters, and that's all I can say at the present moment. I am sorry you had to receive this call in the middle of the night. Thank you, Major Wilson. And the phone went silent.

Allen, they will keep him in the hospital all day and then he will be confined to quarters. I don't think they know he called us.

Just as well; it probably would not go well with the nurse who let him use her phone. Allen, this major said there could be serious consequences; what did he mean? Could be demotion, loss of pay, even dishonorable discharge. The Army is serious about drugs. They will look into what happened, and I don't think there is much we can do about it.

I hate feeling useless. I know, Sue. Tomorrow I'll call the lawyer who works with City firefighters to see if he has any ideas, or better if he knows someone who does.

I won't be able to sleep; I'm going to get up. Put some coffee on and I'll join you. We didn't need this, Allen. Billy will be OK. Let's hope this is just a bump in the road.

It could be a really big bump. We will do what we can. Right now, that doesn't sound encouraging. I'll put the coffee on.

~ ~

Allen and Sue look for ways to calm each other after two jarring late-night phone calls. Allen, you need a new bathrobe; it's too small. I think you have bulked up a little. Is that a nice way of saying I should lose some weight? Maybe, but it's old and too small. Sit down; I'll bring your coffee.

Sue was thinking out loud. There must be something we didn't do right. Why would Billy take drugs?

I'll leave that question until we get to really talk to him. I don't like it any more than you do. What did your mother say? You were on the phone a long time.

She knew how to calm me down. She has had to do it often enough starting when I was a crying infant, I suppose. Your mother always seems to have it all together. Interesting you should say that because on the phone she really didn't have it all together.

Well, it had to be a shock that her grandson OD'd and could have died. A person couldn't be expected to be their best self under the circumstances.

It was the little things, Allen, that I have seen before but not really noticed. There are times when she seems to be searching for a word and I must fill in the blank for her. Aren't those just senior moments? She's in her 70's, isn't she?

Pushing 80, Allen, and I didn't think anything of it really until now. You think this is something to be worried about? she seems fine to me.

I'll be more aware and if she... but Allen, the last time I was at her house things were a mess. There were dishes in the sink and old newspapers scattered about. I even told her I would help her clean up and she was glad for the help. That's never been like her. She always kept a super clean house.

Can you reach the coffee? So maybe her house was a little messy and she stumbles on some words, so what's the big deal? I think you are just looking for something more to worry about. You've got your worry volume turned way up.

You think I don't have good reason? It's like every day we sit with coffee in the wee hours wondering what's next – like maybe Jenn calls from grad school and says she's pregnant!

Let's worry about your car breaking down on the Dan Ryan, or even better, the dishwasher floods the house while we are sleeping. You got any ideas on what more we should be worried about?

OK, OK, Allen, but you need to find out how we can help Billy, and I need to observe my mother more closely; she may need some help and I didn't realize it.

It's turning grey outside. You want to take a shower first. This is a work day, Sue.

I'll shower. Get a new robe.

~ ~

Sue couldn't just sit in her office waiting for another call so she went to see her old friend, Nick. Sue knocked on the door of the big old house. She had always wondered why it was so much bigger than all the other houses on the street, then the door opened.

Sue, what a nice surprise. Come on in. I was just about to have some lunch; would you like to join me? I'll sit at the table with you, Nick. I need to talk.

I'm going to have a bowl of chicken soup and half a sandwich. You sure you don't want something? Here sit at the end. What's going on?

Remember when we first met? How could I forget? You were a bright spot in a dull room. Maybe I was, but I had PTSD and a very contagious STD – you saved my life, Nick.

And you changed mine because I began to see beautiful women as valuable friends instead of dangerous distractions. But I don't think you came to talk about old times. How about a glass of Coke and a cookie?

OK on the Coke and cookie, Nick. I think I need a vacation from life. Nick agreed, vacations are always a good idea. Tell me what's going on.

I can't sleep and I can't stay at work. This morning after Allen left, I sat on the edge of the bed and cried. Then at work I sat at my desk and just looked at my stack of work.

Chocolate chip? Is that OK? Yes, whatever – Nick, are you listening? Nick looked directly at Sue and said, I know you will tell me whatever you want to tell me so I am in no hurry about it.

I'm a bad mother. Apparently really bad, Nick. And I may also be a very bad daughter.

How about wife? How is that going? Damn it, Nick, don't make fun of me. Allen and I are just fine, but I'm not.

I can see that you are not fine, but I also know that you are a very good mother and a loving daughter. That's my reality check. Have another cookie.

Billy OD'd and they brought him back with Naloxone. Oh, that's not good. He's in the Army, right? Thank God he survived, but he could be in big trouble. Sue, you did not fail him as his mother. I have counseled many drug users and in no case was their mother the problem.

Then what is the problem, Nick? Sometimes people self-medicate. Sometimes they get hooked on prescribed pain relief. Sometimes there doesn't seem to be any reason a person does foolish things. Drugs are dangerously addictive and there is stuff out there that can kill even a first-time user. Does Billy have a history with drugs?

No. I mean, I didn't think so. I'm not sure I know anything today. The Army has him confined to quarters until they decide what to do with him. I want to go see him, but I may not be able to see him, and Allen says he could be on a plane here while I am on my way there. I don't know what to do, Nick, and I can't stand doing nothing.

OK, this is important. Billy almost died. That's enough to make any good mother sit on the edge of the bed and cry. You are having a very normal reaction to a bad experience.

It's not my PTSD coming back? You are as normal as I am, Sue. Well, maybe that's not the best example. Doing nothing is the hardest thing. I suggest you study the problem of drug use. It will help you, and it could help Billy. It would get you out of that terrible doing nothing feeling.

Where do I start? Go on my sun porch and check my library. Take a couple of books that jump out at you. I know you will bring them back. OK, I'll do that. Allen is checking to see what we can do legally for Billy. So, you both have something you can do right now that could really make a difference.

You've been a big help, Nick. How are Megan and Sam? They are both fine. How is Dorothy? My mother may be OK, but I have not been as attentive to her getting old as I should have been.

Dorothy's getting older is hardly your fault. I know, but I worry. I know you worry. In fact, you are really good at it. At least I am good at something, Nick.

Sue couldn't go back to work. There was no point in looking at her stack of papers and doing nothing so she went to the empty, dark and quiet church across the street from her office. I didn't ask for this she thought, and she began to cry. Then her thoughts turned to her other child, Jennifer, away at school and doing very well, or was she imagining that too. She thought Billy was doing well. What didn't she see? She took out her phone and sent a text to Jenn's number, two words, "call me". She got up and left the church having found no answer to her question, "what didn't I see?"

Sue knew Jenn could be in class and may not call back for some time, so she was at home with Nick's books when the phone chimed with Jenn's number on the screen. Hi Jenn. I needed to hear your voice and know that you were OK. I'm fine, Mom. What's going on?

We got a call that Billy had OD'd. They brought him back; he almost died, Jenn, and now the Army has to figure what to do with him. Mom, that's terrible. You say he will be all right? We think so. Your firefighter dad sees this happen often enough, and he thinks they did the right thing for Billy.

Mom, I'm going to come home. You don't need to do that. Yes, I do. I'll be there tonight, but it may be late. OK, Jenn. Be careful driving. Sue put down the phone knowing that, at least, she had done one thing right. It would be good having Jenn with her tomorrow.

~ ~

Sue was now alone in the house and went to the kitchen. She wasn't hungry; she saw that there was nothing in the slow cooker, but Allen would be home soon, and she knew he would want something. Allen was never "not hungry". Then Sue heard a light knock at the door. It was way too soon for Jenn to get home. When Sue got to the door and opened it, her mother stepped in and gave her a big hug.

Mom, you shouldn't be out by yourself! Why not? I have been by myself ever since your father died? I get along fine, but you look terrible. Missing a night's sleep will do that to you, Mom. What time does Allen get home? In about an hour unless he is out on a call. I don't see anything happening in the kitchen. No, Mom, I can't think about food.

OK if I fix a quick dinner? How about a breakfast dinner? Would Allen like that? That would be wonderful, Mom. Thanks for coming over.

Do you know anything more about Billy? Dorothy asked, as she got eggs and bacon out of the refrigerator. No, Allen was going to talk to a lawyer but he hasn't called me. Nick gave me books to read. What kind of books? The smell of bacon frying helped Sue to feel less out of control. She might eat a little something, she thought.

Books about drug addiction, Mom. Do we know if Billy is addicted to drugs? that doesn't seem like Billy, Sue. I guess we don't know that; I don't really know anything. What you need is some food and some sleep. There must be a bottle of wine here. In the pantry, Mom. Find whatever you like.

Dorothy took out a bottle of Rosé, opened it and handed a glass to Sue. I don't think I want this, Mom. A little sip may help. OK, Mom. Whatever you say. Sue's empty stomach absorbed the sip of wine immediately, and she felt a touch of vertigo and sat down. The door bumped open and Allen came in, smelled the bacon, and went to Dorothy and gave her a big hug. Sue wanted to know what Allen had found out, now – she had no time for pleasant greetings. What did you find out, Allen?

I called our City lawyer and he gave me a name, someone who knows military law. Well, what did he say, Allen? What could he say? We don't know any of the circumstances. We don't know if there are German law issues. He may need to bring someone in who knows German law. We don't know anything, but he said he would look into Billy's situation for us. He needs a retainer, Sue.

How much are we talking about? \$10,000. Do it, Allen. Just do it. OK, Sue. I'll have a glass of that wine. Thanks for helping, Dorothy. We are going to give Sue some breakfast food and put her to bed. No arguments.

By the time Jennifer got to the house Allen had put Sue to bed and brought her phone out into the living room, hoping that there would be no calls to disturb her. Dorothy was about to leave when Jennifer walked in, tossing her backpack in the corner.

Hi, Grandma. I didn't expect to see you tonight, but I should have known you would be here with Mom. Hi, Jenn, your Mom is asleep, and I'm about to go home. I am glad you will be here, Jenn. How long can you stay? The weekend is coming, Gram, so I can stay as long as I need to. What do we know about Billy?

As Jennifer asked the question Sue's phone chimed, and Allen thought, "I should have turned it off." Too late – as he picked it up, he saw Sue standing in the bedroom door. Is it Billy? I'll answer it, and Allen swiped the phone. Hello, this is Allen Baxter. Hi, Dad, it's good to hear your voice. Can we talk?

I'm going to put the phone on speaker. Your Mom, Jenn and Grandma Dot are all here.

Hi, Grandma and Sis. I'm sorry if I scared you, Mom. I'm really OK. Billy, where are you? I'm in the company office. They gave me a phone to call you, but I don't have a lot of time, Mom, and they haven't said what comes next so I don't have much to tell.

Billy, you have a lot to tell. Are you taking drugs? No, Mom. It was a one-time thing. Where did you get the stuff that almost killed you? That's one thing I can never tell. Got to go, Mom. I'm OK. The phone died.

Dorothy decided she didn't need to spend the night, and called her favorite Uber driver who took her home. That left Sue and Allen facing a tough weekend without more news from Billy.

Sue had good qualities, but she was terrible at waiting. The weekend seemed to last forever even with Jennifer in the house to keep her company, and Allen finding little jobs to do to keep himself busy and not thinking too much. Finally, Jenn went back to school promising to stay

connected. So it was a relief when the phone chimed and it was the attorney, whom Allen had hired.

An associate of ours in Germany has had a chance to talk with your son. He was forthcoming only after he accepted that we would represent him and that what he told us would be covered by attorney-client privilege. The same conditions hold for our conversation if we are to represent the family, that is the parents, and not just the father.

We want you to represent both of us. You are on the speaker phone and there are only the two of us here. What can you tell us?

This is the story your son told us. He was on a training exercise and badly sprained his back. He was given routine treatment, but his back pain persisted. He was out with his girlfriend for an evening and complained about his back. The girlfriend's brother, he was actually at the girlfriend's family home, said he thought he could secure some pain medicine that would help. The girl, her brother, and your son went out and met someone on the street who gave the brother a pill that he then gave to your son. After taking the pill, your son collapsed on the street, and that's all he remembers until the MPs brought him to the hospital. It's a believable story. Apparently, he is lucky to be alive.

Allen responded, this is really good news. We knew Billy was not a drug user, and the girlfriend and her brother can corroborate his story. To the Army this should be no more than a hand slap, and not dishonorable discharge.

We think you are right, Mr. Baxter. The problem is that your son refuses to tell, even us, who the girlfriend or her brother is. He thinks they could be in real trouble for giving him drugs, and he could be right.

What's next then, Allen asks? We don't know anything about a girlfriend, Sue added.

We can approach the Army with this story and gauge their response, but without those names it may not be enough.

Can we call Billy? Should we go see him? I have had enough of not being able to do anything.

I think you would want Billy to talk to you through us. That goes for the Army also. We will look into your questions about communicating and visiting. We will get back to you as soon as we have talked to the Army. I'm sorry that this is such a worry for you both. We will do the best we can for Billy.

Thank you. We will wait for your call. And the phone call ended.

I hate waiting, Allen, and Billy never mentioned a girlfriend. He's in big trouble. Why wouldn't he tell the whole story? What was he thinking? Sue, I'm guessing that this girl is more than a casual friend. He was at her home. He knows her family. This wasn't just a date, Sue.

God help us if Billy is in love with this girl, Allen, because he may never give the Army her name. I agree that we need all the help we can get.

Sue had gone into work the next day, but her concentration kept drifting. Finally, she gave up and left early. At home she found some quiet time with the books Nick had given her. The psychology of addiction was interesting enough to keep her reading. She was surprised to read that one could become addicted to one's own adrenaline and become a thrill junky. When Allen got home he looked at the bare kitchen and called out for pizza.

Knowing that Sue was going to ask, Allen said, I got a call from Billy's attorney about an hour ago; he had some good news. I would have called you, but there is something we need to agree on. Billy's girlfriend's name is Liesl Forster.

How did they find out when Billy wouldn't tell anyone? The story is complicated; that's why I waited to talk to you. Out with it, Allen.

It seems this Liesl saw that Billy recovered from the overdose but she couldn't follow him to the base hospital. Later Billy called her using the nurse's phone; remember the nurse's phone? Yes, Allen, so what happened? He told her he was OK but in real trouble with the Army, and she shouldn't say anything to anybody. Well, she must have said something to someone.

I'll get there, Sue. Billy lost his phone on the street; we think when he OD'd. I don't care about Billy's phone. It may be important, Sue. So, this Liesl couldn't call him on his phone, but the next day she hit return call on the nurse's number and told her story to the nurse. The nurse then gave her Billy's unit number and she called them. They sent someone to her house and got a written statement which confirms Billy's story. Allen, this is wonderful!

The attorney thinks so too. He thinks Billy's problem went from criminal to stupid; that's how he put it. Allen, Billy may have done a dumb thing but he isn't stupid. Whatever, he may lose pay, may even be kicked back from specialist to private first class, but that won't really hurt him in the long run. He's going to be OK, Sue, but maybe Liesl isn't, and that's what we need to talk about. Go on, Allen.

We gave the lawyers a large retainer and there is now no need for an investigation or lots of interviews, etc. They are not going to spend all that money. We could tell them to do what they can for Liesl. She may have given Billy a new chance.

Of course, we should try to help her, Allen, that's an easy decision. I knew you would say that, but I had to be sure. Just do it, Allen. OK, I'll call the lawyer. Pizza's at the door.

I was overreacting, wasn't I? Get a couple of cold beers and I'll put the pizza on the table, and no, I don't think you were overreacting. Things could have gone really bad for Billy, but they didn't. Pepperoni and sausage? It's what I like; next time we can get veggie.

You didn't get all disconnected like I did. You went to work; ate like a horse. It bothered me that you didn't seem to care so much.

I care, but I have a job to do. I didn't like the Army. Getting almost blown up and getting PTSD didn't help, but the Army taught me to stay focused on my job or someone could get killed. So I had to learn to stay focused. It makes me a better firefighter.

I wish I knew more about this Liesl person.

What do you want to know, Sue? We know about everything there is to know except her dress size. We know she really cares for Billy. We know she is honest. We know she is resourceful. She found a way to connect when Billy lost his phone. What else do we need to know?

You're right, Allen. Billy seems to have picked a winner. What's this about his phone being important?

Billy's attorney in Germany thinks the German police will be very interested in who has his phone. Someone who pushes bad stuff would also be the kind of person who would pick-pocket a phone off of a person OD'd on the street. He thinks they will be very interested in Liesl's and her brother's cooperation plus the lost phone. People are dying from bad drugs on the street, probably Fentanyl, and the Germans want to find out who is dealing them. Billy's phone has a GPS and it could really help them.

I've had all the pizza I want so the rest is yours. Thanks, I was hoping you would say that. I think we need a trip to Germany to see Billy and his girlfriend but not until the dust settles, maybe in about a month. Can you schedule a week off? I'll just do it. Can you? I think so. When we finally get to talk to Billy, we can do some planning. I really like you, Allen. I count on it, Sue.

I'll call Jenn and my mother. They will want to know the whole story, and I'll invite Nick and Megan over for dinner.

How's their little boy, Sam, doing? I didn't see him when I visited Nick about Billy. I'm sure they will bring him along. It would be fun having a little boy in the house for an evening. Do we still have some toys? I have a box put away for grandchildren. We don't have any grandchildren, Sue. Not yet. Want another beer?

I'm going to go sit in the living room. Bring that beer and sit in my lap.

Really? OK, like old times. What will we do with grandchildren, Sue? God only knows, Allen.

~ ~

LIESL AND SALLY



Every young man's dream? Or maybe not.

This story really began in early December when the big Wiesbaden Christmas Mart was open for business. Night time was the best with all the decorations lit up. There was even a life-size Nativity down at the end of the market, but there was more interest in the Merry-Go-'Round, which was very busy. Large crowds of dark brown coated people filled all the open spaces. This is what Billy Baxter saw when he hitched a ride from the Army Post with a sergeant friend. He was in civilian clothes, but with his haircut, shoes and open expression there was no hiding that he was an American. His brown jacket blended in, but he still stood out. Maybe I need a dog on a leash, he thought, to blend in because there were several in the crowd.

As Billy was enjoying his sausage on a bun and thinking about Christmas gifts to send home, he couldn't help but notice a young woman walking in his direction. At his age he noticed all young women, but this particular one could not be missed. She was tall, maybe 5'7" with a long blond ponytail, but what was really different was that she was wearing a puffy bright yellow jacket and white knit hat. She was a canary among a flock of sparrows. It was impossible for Billy not to notice her.

Billy was fixed in place by this apparition when the sergeant that drove them over tugged at his sleeve and said, I want you to meet a friend of mine. Billy, this is George. We sometimes party together.

As Billy was trying to refocus on being introduced, the young woman in yellow walked up and stood next to the man to whom he had just been introduced. George noticed the young woman and said, Guys, this is my sister, Liesl. We were just going to get something to eat. Want to come along?

Billy had just had a big sausage and bun so he said, I'd like one of those big sandwiches. I'm really hungry. My name's Bill but people I know call me Billy. I'm learning a little German. Is your name spelled "Liezl"? No, it's a German "s" that sounds like a "z" to you Americans. Come with us to get some food.

As the four of them moved off through the brown crowd Billy was desperate to think of a way to continue their conversation. He couldn't stand the thought that this Liesl person would get a sandwich then drift away from him. So he said, I need to buy Christmas presents for my mother and sister. Do you think you could help me pick out some nice things? I don't know fair prices or good quality, and I don't have a lot of money and ...

He stopped short because he realized that he was rambling, and maybe making himself look both dumb and poor. But Liesl flashed a smile that he hoped said "I'll help". Then she really said it. I would like to help. You need to tell me about your mother and sister so we can choose good presents. Billy realized that describing the most important women in his life could take a long time, and it was such a wonderful thought that he almost forgot that he was supposed to be hungry.

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In the days leading up to Christmas, Billy was pleased with himself because he had beat the mailing deadline for packages to "Be Delivered by Christmas". The little bear with a German flag vest for Jenn, a carved red cardinal tree ornament for Mom, not the delicate glass one that Liesl talked him out of because it may get broken in the mail. What about your father, she had asked? And Billy answered, well he likes to eat. So, a carefully boxed selection of chocolate candies would work.

The down side of his run up to Christmas was that he had no way of knowing when he would see Liesl again, and she was always on his mind until he discovered the petite pfc. The up side, he knew he would get a "care package" from home and it arrived in time for him to enjoy his grandmother's homemade cookies for Christmas.

The only really interesting thing happening in Billy's life was a conversation he was not aware of. This conversation was taking place in a quiet room miles away.

We have a request for a security clearance for Specialist William Baxter. They want him to be able to work in a secure area at Division Headquarters. What kind of work is he going to be doing? He's an electrician and he will be part of a remodeling crew. What does his file look like? Nothing to raise any questions. No unusual travel or relationships. I say give him a temporary clearance so he can work, and we can do the background work on a routine schedule.

So when Billy was called in to see his company master sergeant, he was surprised that he was being sent to Division Headquarters, and he had been given a low-level security clearance. You

start tomorrow. See Sergeant Brown. He will be your crew chief. You will be working in a secure area. Do not remove any material from that area. Not even trash. Do a good job and we will all look good. Thanks, Sergeant Major, I'll go see Sergeant Brown to see what tools I'll need.

You can expect people back home will be interviewed so don't be surprised. Your clearance is only temporary, but they want to make it formal, which means interviews. I don't have any hidden problems. It won't be a problem, Sergeant Major. OK, Baxter. Let me know how long this work is going to take when you've had a look at it.

When he arrived at Division Headquarters with the work crew the first thing he noticed was that the space was watched over by a petite private first class, who kept track of names and people coming and going. Can't take anything, Sergeant Major had said, but he didn't say anything about getting to know people.

Name's Baxter. I see the name on your shirt, Specialist. I think your sergeant is calling you. Do you always work here? I have work to do, Baxter. Billy stood a little straighter than usual as he walked away.

On the last day of Billy's detail to Division Headquarters he noticed that the petite pfc was now wearing spec. 4 patches so he commented. Congratulations on your promotion, and for the first time she actually spoke to him. I've had my time in grade and was waiting, but nothing was happening. This grade means a lot to me so I was being a very professional administrative specialist. I can be a little more relaxed now. What's your first name? Billy, and you really do look good with the new patches on your sleeves. What's your name?

Thanks, Billy. My name is Sally. You better get to work.

This is my last day here; we are cleaning up. Oh, well, I could stay after work if you have time for a beer at the club.

Thanks, Billy, but I don't want to go down that path. My luck with men hasn't been good. I'll put my pay raise in the bank and hope they give me a better job. I'd like to work in finance.

I hope you get your better job, Sally. Friends? And he held out his hand. OK, friends, and she smiled and shook his hand. Billy walked on to his work site thinking whatever men she had bad luck with were stupid men.

Winter moved toward spring. Billy's low-level security clearance came through, which made his sergeant major happy because now he could send Billy on any detail that may come up.

Time passed with no petite specialist 4 and no Liesl. They both began to fade from memory like other girls he had met. By the time Fasching season party time arrived his mind was on other things like rumors of deployment. Then one Friday his sergeant buddy asked him if he would like to go to a party. Silly question, Billy thought as he cleaned up and put on his civvies.

When they arrived, the party was well under way. The band was loud and the long tables full of people, with bar maids shuttling big mugs of beer. They looked for an empty spot when Billy

saw a blond woman standing with her back to him. Her hair was loose and long and he moved in that direction. Why not move that way, he thought? She was the most interesting person in the room. Why would he move in any other direction? Then she turned toward him with a smile that froze him to the spot. It was Liesl.

Billy, I didn't know you would be here. I didn't know I would be here either, he answered, knowing it sounded stupid as he said it. Liesl asked, are you sitting someplace? If not come with me. My brother is over there. Billy thought that if he had reserved seating, he would still go with her even if she asked him to sit on the floor.

As he followed her, he saw his sergeant shaking hands with Liesl's brother so this was not a completely accidental meeting. Well, what if Sarge knew his friend would be here, and what if that was why he invited him to come along? So, he was getting a little help from his friend, and not the divine intervention that he had suspected. Then Liesl said, sit here with me, and she waved her hand to get a couple of steins of beer.

Did you family like their Christmas presents? Yes, very much. Everything got there without breaking or melting. You were a big help. The beer came and she paid.

Billy could see the door from where he sat, and he saw two young women come in, take off their coats, and they were wearing bikinis, little bikinis. Wow, he thought, this party could get interesting! Liesl followed his stare and said, we like to have a good time at our Fasching parties, but don't expect me to take off any of my clothes.

Billy hadn't really thought that until she said it. Now he was having trouble getting that thought out of his mind. Liesl would look great in one of those little two-piece things. Then she brought him back to "don't expect me to do that" reality.

What do your parents do? Are they still married? Do they come to visit you? Billy looked at Liesl and realized that she was actually interested in him, in who he was and what he was. This was new territory from any of his other girlfriend experience, and he lifted his beer, ready to tell his own story. Life was good.

As Billy told Liesl about his family he needed another beer, which he paid for. It's a man thing, he told her, as he paid. As they continued to talk and drink beer, Billy began to notice more closely how Liesl was dressed. Her sitting directly across the table gave him a full view of her light gray turtleneck with long sleeves. Nothing was showing yet Billy could see a great deal. He saw no bra lines under the not tight, but not loose, sweater. No strap lines either. There was nothing under that sweater but Liesl, and his now somewhat fuzzy focus shifted from family on the South Side of Chicago to the sweater that showed nothing, yet revealed everything.

Do you think we could find a quieter place? I'd like that Billy, but not tonight; I have to go soon. Come to my home next Friday at about 7 and we will go out and have a quiet dinner. Then she took a card out of her purse and wrote an address on the back and handed it to Billy as she got up to leave.

Billy wondered if he had said something wrong, but couldn't come up with anything. He stuck the card into his shirt pocket without looking at it and asked for another beer. Billy hadn't finished the new beer when his sergeant friend put his hand on his shoulder and said, it's time to get back to the post. When Billy stood up, he realized that he probably had one too many, or maybe two too many. He didn't need help walking but it was a close call.

In the car Billy's head cleared a little. I think I had one too many. You think? Liesl gave me a card, and he took it out of his pocket. The front said Liesl Forster. That was all, just her name, and as he felt it he realized it was embossed, not printed. On the back was a street address, then Königstein. Fancy card. She wrote her address on the back, Königstein. That's an upscale village, Billy. Frankfurt bankers' money.

What's her house like? Never been there. But you know her brother. Yeh, but he has an apartment in Wiesbaden. I've never been to a house in Königstein. She wants me to pick her up next Friday at 7. Can I borrow your car?

Lucky guy. Sure, I'll go to a movie on Post. What's her brother do? Some kind of sales he says. He sold me this car so I think he sort of free lances. He never flashes a lot of money, but he always seems to have enough. You need any cash for this hot date?

No, I'm OK, but I don't know how hot it's going to be. Stop staring at her sweater and you'll be OK. That obvious? At least you kept your hands under control. It wasn't easy, Sarge.

Friday came and Billy borrowed Sarge's car to spend the evening with Liesl. He eventually found the address she had written on her card, and parked on the street, walked up a long flight of stairs and knocked. A middle-aged man looking very fit and comfortable opened the door. You must be the young man Liesl is expecting. Please come in.

Billy had never been in a house where everything looked very expensive, but at the same time, very comfortable and welcoming. The house fit the man, or was it the other way around? Yes, I'm Billy Baxter. You have a very nice house, Mr. Forster. Please sit. I'll call Liesl. His calling wasn't necessary. Hi, Billy. I'll get my coat.

Keep your mouth shut Billy, he said to himself. Liesl had on another sweater, but this one went all the way to her knees. It fit so perfectly that it might have been made just for her. Her hair was tied up in a formal bun and her shoes were formal looking but made for walking. Billy had on his best civvies but he suddenly felt frumpy and out of place. Liesl took charge.

I hope you don't mind walking. There are nice places where we can have dinner. Good-bye, Father. I won't be late.

Billy ran every morning and didn't mind walking. In fact, he was relieved that he didn't need to ask Liesl to ride in Sarge's rather dirty 12-year old Honda. As they started down the hill he recovered enough to say, you look really nice, Liesl.

Thank you, Billy. I wanted to feel comfortable tonight. I didn't know if you would wear a uniform. I have never been on a date with an American. You look very neat and comfortable in

those clothes. It helped to hear Liesl say he looked nice, but he still felt frumpy and out of place.

The small restaurant she took him to was not very far from Liesl's house, as she had promised. As soon as they were seated, she ordered two glasses of white wine. The table and chairs were from some ancient time. The walls were decorated with old weapons and animal trophies. The old lamps had been converted to electric. This was her home turf. No, more than that, this was who she was. The house, the clothes, the walk, the restaurant, the white wine. This was Liesl. She had invited Billy into her world. He had tried to tell her about his, and now she was showing him hers. He mentally tried to search for common ground and felt lost. It was as if she had taken him by the hand and led him into a German reality that he never imagined existed, and he was truly lost.

Our village, even the house we live in, and this restaurant too, are centuries old. We love our traditions. After we have had dinner, I would like to show you our castle. It's a clear night. We should be able to see the tall buildings in Frankfurt.

She suggested the wienerschnitzel, and it was as good as she said it would be. The food and the wine had their calming effect, and Billy slowly began recovering his mental footing. You must love this place. Yes, we do. There are some new people. More expats living here than there used to be, but they respect our village by not trying to change it. Billy wondered if he could be like that, and he started looking forward to their walk to the castle.

By now it was after 9 o'clock and there was a chill in the night air, but the castle grounds were lit up as if the castle was expecting company. Looking up at the stone tower Billy could imagine a king sitting by a roaring fire safe in his walls. The King picked this spot for his castle and the village grew around it, Liesl offered.

Billy wasn't interested in history. He stepped in front of Liesl and put his hands inside her coat and around to her back. Then he hesitated. She kissed him on the lips and said, there's no zipper, Billy. It all comes off in one piece. Her kiss was wonderfully soft-firm, but not the "don't stop now" kiss he had imagined. You aren't going to take it all off here in the castle yard, are you? No, but there may be other times and places, she teased. Let's walk back; I'm starting to feel cold. I really like you, Billy, and she took his hand and began to walk back into the village.

You have lived here all your life? Yes. And you know everyone and they know you? Almost everyone. I've never been in a house that nice. My great-grandfather built it, and my father takes good care of it. Someday it will be my house. Not your brother's? No. My father knows that he would sell it, so the house will come to me.

Liesl, you have everything. Almost. Billy let the "almost" settle in his still badly distracted mind. When he couldn't connect the dots he said, why me? You mean, why do I like you? I'm not trying to talk you out of liking me. Maybe I'm a likeable guy, but still, why me, Liesl?

You asked my help selecting gifts for your family. No man has ever asked my help for anything, especially nothing personal like choosing family gifts. I really liked being asked, Billy. Wow, and I thought it was a natural thing to do. Exactly. You weren't putting on a show for me.

Well, sort of. I really wanted to know that beautiful woman in the yellow jacket. Did you know I would be at the Fasching party last week? I wasn't sure, but I did drop a hint to my brother that it would be nice if you were there. Obviously, he told your sergeant. When I bought the first beers and you didn't complain about a woman buying your beer, I knew you even better.

That was a test? Not a test, Billy. It was my way to get to know you better, and I liked what I saw. You treat me like I have always wanted to be treated. Billy was quiet as they approached Liesl's house and he saw it in a new way. This house is like your castle, isn't it? In a way, yes, it is. We don't build castles anymore, Liesl.

On Monday morning the sergeant major called Billy into his office. Baxter, you have a call. She said she is from Division Headquarters and needed to talk with you. This better not be a personal call on my phone.

I'm sorry, Sergeant Major. I guess I must have left something when I was on detail. Don't bullshit me, Baxter. Tell this person not to use my phone.

Hello, this is William Baxter. Billy, this is Sally. I wanted to share my good news. They are moving me to finance. It's what I wanted, Billy. Can you come help me celebrate?

It's late; can I pick it up tomorrow? What are you talking about, Billy? It can't wait? OK, I'll come over now. Thanks for calling. Are you coming or not, Billy? Yes. I'll be right over.

Billy didn't think the sergeant major was fooled. He didn't get those stripes for being dumb, but Billy didn't know what to do except stick with his "left something" story. Thanks, Sergeant Major. I'm going to take the bus over to Division Headquarters. The sergeant major just looked at him and shook his head. He knew he could count on Billy to do good work, but he was pushing his luck with the fake phone call.

Billy kept his word and got to Sally's desk at just about quitting time. Hi, Billy. I'm so glad you could come. This has been a really good day for me and I wanted to celebrate it with you. What was that silly talk on the phone?

The sergeant major doesn't like people using his phone for personal calls. Don't use that number to call me. I have my own phone. Here's the number, and he wrote it down for her. Let's go have a beer, Billy. Sally got up and started for the door.

This was the first time Billy had actually walked behind her or even with her. She had always been sitting at her desk when he had talked to her. He realized right away that this new view was really quite nice; really nice. She was maybe 5'2", blouse tucked into a straight skirt, small waist and nicely rounded hips. Sally had his full attention.

When they got to the club, he ordered a couple of beers and paid for them. Then he noticed the new hairdo and a little makeup. She had fixed herself up special – for a promotion? She sipped her beer and said, where have you been working? It was nice having you around even though I think you were fixing things around my desk that didn't really need fixing.

Billy felt slow-witted. This wasn't about being promoted to finance. It was about him. They move me around. You really look nice, Sally. Thanks, Billy. I was hoping you would think so.

I could use something to eat. I don't usually eat at this club.

I'd like supper. They have good schnitzel. Really? They have a German cook and the prices are good too. So they ordered two.

I'm glad you called me. But what happened to your "I don't like men" attitude? I didn't say I don't like men. I said I had some bad luck with men and that goes way back. Billy was thinking "why me?" and realizing that he had just said that to Liesl. So he took a different approach.

You have an accent, but I can't place it. I'm from Eastern Kentucky. We talk funny. At least that's what other people say. Isn't there a city near where you come from? Hazard is the nearest town, but I wouldn't call it a city. There really is a Hazard, Kentucky? Yes, but my family lives way away from town. I told you that I was going to put my promotion money in the bank. Well, I have changed my mind. I'm going to send that \$200 a month to my mother. Not your father? Lordy, no Billy. I'm gonna tell my mother to open a bank account in only her name so she can put that money there and build up some savings. They don't have anything, Billy, and they never will. My father is on disability and my mother works a \$7 an hour job at the drugstore. They're dirt poor, Billy. So what's the problem with your father and money?

Just then their dinners showed up and it looked as good as Sally said it would. My father has problems but the worst problem is his buddies. They know when he gets his SSI check, and they are like bees to honey. I was going to say flies to something else, but I'm trying to clean up my talk. Anyway, they all come over and the money goes for whiskey. That's what would happen to any money I sent him.

How did you end up in the Army? This is good. I should eat here more often.

It was my aunt. That's my mother's sister. She married an Army man years ago, but when he was killed, she came home. She would tell me about all the places she had been. When I told her about how all the boys were interested in only one thing, she told me "don't give in to them". She said I would get pregnant and live with a bunch of kids in a holler the rest of my life. That's not me, Billy. I had to get out. The Army gave me a way out, like my aunt said it would, and they have been very good to me.

You talk like a lifer. Why not? The Army likes me. It's the best job I can imagine, Billy. What about you? Are you going to stay in? I don't need to think about that yet. Want another beer? I'm buying. Dinner too. Thanks, Billy. You're a real gentleman.

Billy wasn't thinking very gentlemen thoughts, but he said, a pretty girl like you must have a boyfriend? You haven't been listening good, Billy. The guys here treat me like a hic from the back woods, and maybe I am, but I don't like to be treated that way. And thanks for the compliment. Do you really think I'm pretty, because I know I look different?

Billy realized that too much praise could put him on a slippery slope, but he wanted to tell the truth. He was also feeling a surge of confidence. Why not be confident, he thought? Sally likes me. Liesl likes me. I'm on a roll. So he told the truth as he saw it.

You are a different looking pretty girl. You could be a beautiful woman. The only thing that's missing is confidence. Wow, Billy, I could listen to that talk every day. Finally, Billy had to say it, why me, Sally? You remember when you asked me to go with you to celebrate and I said no because I've had bad luck with men? Sure, I remember. That's when you put your hand out and offered to be my friend. I remember. You are the first man that ever said that to me. You were thinking of me first. That's powerful stuff, Billy. Billy remembered that being friends was just the natural thing but it wasn't all he was thinking about, and it wasn't all he was thinking about at that moment either.

The next day he got a call from Liesl, and she asked him to come to dinner at her house. You mean with your family? Yes. I'll feel out of place, Liesl. My parents are ordinary people, Billy. I think you will like them. I know they will like you. Come have dinner with us.

My back hurts so I may not be very good company; I strained it doing bridge training. It will be a quiet evening. There will be nothing to bother your back. You are not using your back as an excuse not to come, are you? No, I'll come. At 7 tomorrow? That's perfect, Billy. I'll wear comfortable clothes and you can wear whatever you want. Thanks, Liesl. I'm not very good at meeting parents. See you tomorrow. Of course, he didn't know the near tragedy that his tomorrow would bring.

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DECISIONS

“It’s complicated, Mom.”



We pick up the story again after Billy’s big mistake with street drugs. The Company office was quiet and the sergeant major was checking his lists to make sure he wasn’t forgetting anything when his phone rang. He didn’t recognize the number as he answered. This is A Company. This is Specialist Sally Tate. I would like to speak to William Baxter, please. You can’t talk to him. Sally asked, is there something wrong with him? I called his phone and a German-speaking person answered it. I want to know if he’s OK. Tate, Baxter is confined to quarters, that’s all I can tell you. Sally persisted, but is he OK? Yes, but don’t push me.

You say you called his phone and someone answered? Yes, a German-speaking person, and I know I had the number right. When did this take place? I think the MPs would be interested. I’m going to send them over to talk with you. Where are you?

The MPs? Am I in some kind of trouble? Where are you, Tate? Division Headquarters, Finance Office. Can they call you on this number that’s on my phone? Yes, if Billy is in some kind of trouble, why can’t I talk to him? Are you the woman who called about him yesterday? No, I’m not.

I’ll give him your name and number like I did hers and I will tell him to call you when he is free to call just like I did for the other woman. Please tell him. I will, and you will hear from the MPs. Soon I would guess. And he put the phone down, wrote Spec. Sally Tate and phone number on a piece of paper, and said to his clerk, go get Baxter and bring him here. In a few minutes the clerk came back bringing Billy.

You got another call from another woman wanting to know if you were OK. This is her name and number. You seem to be in trouble and popular at the same time. How did you manage that? I don’t know Sergeant Major. I asked this Tate person if she was the same woman who called yesterday because I had already given you that number.

Billy took the piece of paper and saw Sally’s name and number. Tell your women friends not to use this number, Baxter. Someone stole my phone; you know about that, but I’ll keep telling

people not to call your phone. When will I be able to buy another phone? I know it's not going to be today. Go on back to your quarters. You told her another woman had called? Yes, and I'm going to send the MPs over to talk to this Tate. She didn't do anything, Sergeant Major. I know that but she used your number and got a German speaker. Now get out of my office.

The German police had questioned Liesl and her brother. Their cooperation was appreciated, but not very helpful. They knew the person who gave Billy the pill only by his first name and where they had seen him. This only confirmed that the Village of Königstein was not immune to the drug problem.

Sally was disturbed by the MPs at her desk because she didn't want any problems in her file, even though they were not interested in her, but only Billy's phone.

When all the information was given to the Army's board of officers that would determine Billy's status, the decision was to fine him a month's pay and remove his security clearance, which they wrote could be reviewed in six months and be reinstated if there were no further problems.



Billy was released from his quarters and came to talk with his sergeant major. You got off easy, Baxter. Stay away from bad company. I'm sending you to C Company for training. Report there tomorrow morning and get their training schedule. What kind of training? Booby traps. There are no booby traps in Wiesbaden, Sergeant Major. No, but there may be where you are going.

Wait, do I have deployment orders? Not yet, but I have a request for a good electrician, and you are my best, but you need special training. Sergeant Major, are you sending me away because of the trouble I caused? No. You are a good electrician and that's what they are asking for, but it won't hurt for you to have a change of scenery.

I don't want to get blown up, Sergeant Major. That's why you are going to training. Go to C Company first thing in the morning and get their schedule. And, if you have the money, buy yourself a phone. I have the money. Good, now get out of my office.

It took most of the day for Billy to buy a phone and the first person he called was Sally. Billy, are you locked up? What did you do? I was never locked up, Sally, just confined to quarters. I got a pain pill on the street and OD-ed. That was stupid, Billy. You could have died. The MPs wanted to know about a call I tried to make to your phone. It didn't look good having MPs standing around my desk, Billy.

I'm sorry that happened. All that's over now, Sally. It better be. You could be the death of me, Billy. I hope that's just a way of speaking. It is. When can I see you? I'm going for training and

I don't have the schedule yet. Use this number if you want to call me. It's my new phone. OK, Billy. I want to see you. I'll call you when I have my schedule.

Liesl, this is Billy. I have a new phone so use this number from now on. Billy, I was worried. Two attorneys came to our house and asked a bunch of questions. Your parents hired attorneys to help me if I was in trouble with the law.

Really! I didn't know anything about it. They, the attorneys, seemed to think that I don't have a big problem, but said if anyone asks me any more questions about you or the pill you took that I should call them. Liesl, I'm sorry this happened. My parents hired a lawyer for you? That's awesome, Liesl. I thought so too. Your parents must be very nice people.

I would like you to meet them some day. That would be nice, Billy. When can you come over? I don't know. I'm not confined to quarters anymore, but they are sending me for training and I don't have the schedule yet. What kind of training, Billy? I probably shouldn't say. OK, I understand. Have you talked to your parents? No, that's the next thing I need to do. Billy, that should have been the first thing you did. It's the middle of the night in Chicago, Liesl. You don't know much about your parents, Billy. I guess not. I'll call you soon. Use this new number. My sergeant major is tired of seeing me in his office.

Hi, Mom, it's Billy. Billy, shouldn't we be talking to you through the lawyers? That's over, Mom. The lawyers were helpful, I guess, but the Army was easy on me. Loss of some pay and at least temporary loss of my security clearance. Why did you need a security clearance? I was detailed to work in a secure area. I met a neat girl there. Her name is Sally.

Oh, that was super nice to have the lawyers offer to help Liesl. It turns out she probably won't need any legal help, Billy. If she hadn't come forward to confirm your story you would be in a lot bigger trouble. I know that, Mom. Liesl is special. I would like you to meet her someday.

Dad and I want to come and see you, Billy. That would be great, Mom, but you had better make it soon because I might not be here much longer. How much longer are you talking about? I'm not exactly sure. I have training that starts next week and lasts for two weeks. After that I don't know how long I will still be here. We were going to come in about a month. We'll move it up. It will be great to see you. I'll be busy, but evenings should be free. Plan for us to meet Liesl, and who is this Sally person? It's complicated, Mom. Sounds like you'd better un-complicate it, Billy, and that you should do it soon. OK, Mom, bye – oh, and this is my new number.

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When the Baxters get off the plane in Frankfurt they begin to notice the differences. There isn't much room in the back seat of these German cars. It's because the price of gas is so high, so they make small cars. We passed a gas station and the prices on the sign didn't look that high. That's per liter. Oh, that's high.

Will you two be quiet? I'm trying to get a nap before we get to the hotel. The seats on the plane were awful. Should we upgrade on our way home? What do you think, Dorothy? Allen, I

can be miserable for nine hours, but it sounds like Sue has had about enough. On the drive from the Frankfurt Airport to Wiesbaden, Billy's family had time to air their complaints about their trip over. They would keep all that to themselves when they met with Billy and his friends.

There was time for a nap at the hotel before going to see Billy, and the beds were comfortable. Still, the overnight flight had pushed their thoughts toward home and their own comfortable beds. When they told Dorothy about the trip, she wanted to go along, and Allen and Sue agreed. It would be good for Dorothy, and Billy always liked his grandma. So, as evening approached, local time, not their body time, they all got back into the small rental car and went to meet Billy.

Grandma, I didn't know you were coming, and he gave Dorothy a big hug. You feel kind of thin, Billy. Are they feeding you enough? The food's good, but I run every day. Billy got in the back with Dorothy and directed them to a restaurant that he thought had a good mix of American and German food. They all ordered off the German menu.

Army vet, Allen, wanted to know what his son was doing. You like being an electrician? Mostly, it's clean inside work. They like my work so I get sent on interesting details. What's this training you mentioned on the phone? Billy had started his training and had learned the language. Learning how to spot a problem so the crew can get in and do repair work. Are they going to send you to Iraq? They haven't said, but that's where a lot of rebuilding is going on.

Allen knew exactly what Billy was talking about, but Sue didn't. What do you mean, spot a problem? Billy hesitated so Allen responded. He means spotting booby traps, Sue. I don't want him spotting booby traps, Allen. I don't think they are asking our permission. Dorothy had known Sue all her life, and she saw a fight coming. How is your meal? Mine is excellent. Dorothy's effort to change the subject worked, at least for this evening, and the good food and German beer smoothed out the conversation.

So, this OD business is all over? Yes, Mom. It was a dumb thing and I won't do it again. And your back pain is gone? It keeps getting better. I'm surprised that you came to visit me. I know how much money it cost. The lawyers couldn't be cheap either. I'm really sorry I caused all this trouble.

Dorothy added, we're family, Billy. Finally Dorothy liked the direction of the conversation. I know, Grandma. Well, I guess I didn't really know until now how much being family means. Sue too was more relaxed now that they were on one of her favorite subjects. What can you tell us about Liesl? Is she German?

Very German, Mom. She lives in a village where she knows everyone and her family lives in the house that her great-grandfather built. She sounds very settled in her ways, yet she must see something she likes in you, an American. I guess she does, Mom, and I really like her. She's really pretty, Mom, just like you. Thanks, Billy, but you don't have to tell your mother she is pretty. Yes, I do. Well, then maybe that's why Liesl likes you. You give women compliments they don't ask for. Could be, Mom.

They were all tired and looking forward to a real night's sleep. Billy told them they were invited to Liesl's home for dinner tomorrow. That pleased everyone, especially Sue, so she asked what

she thought was the question that needed to be asked. Who is this Sally person, Billy? A quiet settled around the table and Billy felt like he had been caught in the head lights. Finally, he thought, I'll just tell it like it is. I don't know, Mom. That's the problem; I just don't know. If it wasn't for Liesl. OK, Billy, but tell me a little bit about her. Talking it out can help.

She's Army, same grade as me. She's from a very poor family. The Army was her way out, she says. I think not only out of poverty, but out of a bad family situation. She is going to be career Army, and I know she will do well. She has the drive, and she likes what she does.

All that's nice, Billy, but you're not telling me why you like her. She's right on the edge of being drop dead beautiful, Mom. She told me she is tri-racial, and I told her that all she needed to be beautiful was confidence in her appearance. Tri-racial? Scots-Irish, African and Cherokee. That sounds almost exotic, Billy. And she has a great shape to go with it. You can admire a beautiful woman and then walk away, Billy; I still haven't gotten the picture.

She has had, several I guess, bad experiences with men, and she didn't want me around either. But when she got promoted it was me she wanted to celebrate with. I think she sees me as different, not like all the others. If I just walk away, I may be just like all the others, and I can't stand doing that to her. It could just blow away her confidence, Mom. I know she really likes me, and that I really have helped her confidence.

How far has this relationship gone? Just dinner together and a good night kiss. Dorothy finally had to say something. She may not be as fragile as you think, Billy. Someone who has found a way out of a bad situation and has a career plan is not a fragile person. Thanks, Grandma. You may be right.

Allen had finished his beer and was ready for bed, and as always, the practical person. Maybe your being deployed will help. My sergeant major said I could use a change of scenery. Do you think he wanted to get rid of you? No, Dad. He's tough, but not mean. You have a lot to think about, and I need a night's sleep. OK, Dad. Let's go. Thanks for listening. We're family, Billy. That's what we do.

~ ~

The Baxters experience even bigger differences. Every family wants to look their best when new people are visiting. This is especially true when the visitors are the family of someone your daughter is interested in. Even so, the formality was striking to Billy's family. Liesl's family home looked staged to Dorothy, and beyond necessary for Allen and Sue.

Billy had been in Liesl's home for short visits. The home had looked upscale to him, but he was so focused on Liesl that he had paid little attention to details. Dorothy wondered if anyone actually lived there everything was so perfect, but she said nothing. They were warmly greeted, and everyone began to feel more comfortable.

Allen noticed that Liesl's parents were obviously physically fit and carefully groomed. He chalked it up to the German way that he admittedly had no experience with. He knew his clothes, that had spent a day in a suitcase, would not measure up to what he was seeing. He

was determined to be comfortable with these different people, and he pushed aside any negative feelings.

Sue wanted to see this house she had been invited to, and asked if that would be possible, not knowing what was acceptable. But Liesl's mother responded with a smile, and led Sue into a room with large furniture and a well laid fire in a large fireplace, then into a dining room with a table all set with beautiful china and silver. Sue asked about the kitchen, and was shown into a large kitchen with two women busy obviously preparing their dinner. Sue thanked the women and apologized for her interruption.

When Sue came back to the group, she gave Allen her "this is different" look. But she was really interested in Liesl. Sue noticed that Liesl was more casually dressed than her parents. She also noticed why Billy was so interested. Liesl was a strikingly beautiful woman. Could a woman like this be interested in her Billy? Apparently so, she thought. Perhaps she had underestimated her own son. So Sue became determined not to prejudge anyone and would watch how this all played out.

The catered meal was excellent. It was explained that they had no domestic help, but liked to have meals catered for company so they didn't need to spend time away from company in the kitchen. Dorothy thought, OK, but I always took my company into the kitchen with me. The differences were starting to accumulate in Dorothy's mind. Finally she had to say it.

You are being very gracious to us in your beautiful home and wonderful dinner. You should know, however, that we are not use to this. We live much simpler lives. As nice and welcoming as you have been, it is difficult for me to be at ease. Everything is so different than what we have in our own homes.

Liesl heard Dorothy's discomfort and knew that some open and honest exchanges were necessary. She has spent enough time around Americans, including Billy, to know that was what was needed. So she said, Dorothy, I really like your grandson, Billy. We may have a future together. What can you tell me about him?

Liesl got up and motioned Dorothy toward the big chairs by the fire. As they were leaving Allen asked Liesl's father if he was aware that Billy had OD-ed right here in their village. He thought this question needed to be asked. Yes, it was a very bad experience for him and all of us. Our fire brigade was the first to respond and gave him Narcan. Liesl may have told you that I am a firefighter, station captain. We use Narcan and find it very effective. I am an amateur photographer, by amateur I mean there is no money in it for me. When our fire brigade gets called out, I go with them and take photos which they keep as a record.

Did you take photos the night Billy OD-ed? Yes, and I sent them to the fire brigade for their record. Do you still have copies? And could we see them? Yes, come with me please. Allen started to go and Billy, having heard the conversation about himself said, I want to see too. And the three left the room together.

Sue was now alone with Liesl's mother and said, my mother is Irish and she says whatever is on her mind. I know you want to be very welcoming to us, and I hope my mother's boldness hasn't offended you. She does speak her mind, doesn't she. Now that we have a quiet moment,

would you tell me a little about yourself. Liesl has told me that you work for an insurance company.

Without intending to, Dorothy has succeeded in creating a new openness and everyone was taking advantage of the opportunity to look for common ground.

Dorothy had followed Liesl to the best chairs and immediately noticed a beautiful doll dressed in fine clothes and sitting in a little chair. She went to it and picked it up. Liesl noticed and said, it was my grandmother's doll; it will be mine someday. My mother keeps it in beautiful clothes. Is your grandmother still alive? No, I have no grandmothers, but I think of her whenever I see the doll. You asked me about Billy; he is very much like his father. He can do anything he wants to do. Billy treats me like an equal person. He wants to know what I think and how I feel.

That's the kind of family he grew up in. Allen has always asked Sue about anything important, and he has always encouraged her. She works as a manager and may have a bigger salary than he does, although I am not sure of that. But there is no sense of competition. They celebrate each other's achievements. Allen likes to say that he likes to be married to a successful woman because Sue makes him look good. That's the kind of home Billy grew up in.

I think you know then why I really like him. Do you plan to have a career? Yes, my father works in a bank and my mother is very active in our village community, but I want to work in finance like my father. And you think Billy could fit in here? That's what I hope for. And I would like to have a grandmother.

As the evening drew to a close everyone thought it had been a success, except for Billy. Allen would go home with new ideas about recording emergency calls. No obvious useful drug dealer information was noticed on the photos, but it was agreed that the German police and the MPs should be aware of their existence if they were not already.

Sue had a new appreciation of village life and Dorothy had decided that Liesl was a keeper. But Billy did not have even a minute with Liesl. It was as if she read his mind when she said, I'd like to show you where I live, and she took Billy to a downstairs apartment complete with a bathroom and kitchen. I really like your grandmother. Liesl, we all love her. She is always open and honest about how she feels.

It was then that Billy noticed that the shower walls were clear glass and he took his cue from Grandmother Dorothy and said what he was thinking. I would love to watch you take a shower. That can be arranged, but not tonight. Liesl, they are going to want to leave soon, and I need to get back to the post. Could you stay a little longer if I drove you back? Checking the time he said, maybe another hour would be OK, while thinking he would have said that another hour would be OK no matter what time it was.

I'll tell them I am going to drive you back. See if there is something in the refrigerator that you like, and she went up the stairs with Billy watching the way she moved. It seemed like she was gone a long time, but it was probably only a few minutes. I had to say good-bye to everyone, she explained when she came back down the stairs. You didn't find anything you wanted?

Yes, I did, and he took her hand and led her over to the big couch. You are what I want. I've been waiting to hear you say that, and this time her kiss was exactly what Billy had been hoping for. They both knew that an hour was not going to be long enough. A life time may not be long enough. It was Liesl who finally said, I think we need to go. Liesl, will you marry me? Yes, but not tonight. We should go.

The house was quiet when they went upstairs to leave. Liesl picked up her purse. At the curb the interior lights came on in a big black Mercedes sedan. This is your car? How did it know it was you? It's the family car, and the key fob is in my purse. I have never been in a car like this. Do you think you could get used to it? Yes, yes, I really do.

~ ~

Billy was up early the next morning and went to the company office. Sergeant Major, I want to get married. That's poor planning, Baxter; I just got your deployment orders and you leave in ten days. There's no way I can get married in ten days? Not in this Army. Who are you going to marry? The German girl. The one who saved your butt? Yes. Aren't you supposed to be in training? I'll be there on time. Isn't there anyone I can talk to about getting married? I'm no marriage counselor, Baxter, but I know how long the paperwork takes. Talk to the chaplain.

How about leave? Can I have a couple of days? Training is over the end of the week and that gives me six free days. OK, put in for some leave. How many in your class? There's ten of us. You are all going to Iraq. You filled out the ten they asked for. Thanks, Sergeant Major. I'll get to class. Is your family still here? Yes, they met Liesl's family last night. So that's her name. Don't forget your family in your rush with wedding planning.

Billy left to catch his bus. He was remembering, "it's never two people" but how could he not be in a hurry? Liesl said "yes". Concentration in today's hands-on class was going to be difficult. Good thing it wasn't live explosives that they were training with.

Billy had time to shower and put on his civvies before Allen picked him up. The family was leaving in the morning and they wanted to have their meal together this evening. There would be no time for good-byes at the airport in the morning. What did you think of Liesl's family, Dad? They wanted to make us comfortable; that was enough for me. Her father is an interesting man. We're going to get married, Dad. Wow, wait until your mother hears that. I go on deployment in ten days. Don't see how you can do both. That's what my sergeant major said. Then Allen said, I wanted to talk about this deployment when it was just you and me. OK. Don't be a hero, and don't team with guys who want to be smart ass heroes. There are ten of us going and I think I already know who the heroes are. OK, and if you're looking at something you have never seen before back away; let the demo guys take care of it. OK, Dad. I'll come back in one piece, and Liesl will have nine months to plan a wedding. It was impossible for Billy not to notice the big difference between his Dad's small rental car and the car he was in with Liesl last night.

After they stopped at the motel to pick up Sue and Dorothy they went to the restaurant they had become familiar with. They knew, after being in Germany a few days, that this place catered to mostly Americans. It was an American restaurant in Germany the way their favorite

Italian restaurant was Italian on the South Side. They were greeted with a smile by a woman in Bavarian dress, and Allen asked, can you place us in a quiet corner? We want to use a phone and not disturb anyone else.

Sue gave him a questioning look as they were led to a round table in the corner. By now they knew that Germans don't sit at round tables. Allen asked Billy if he would call Liesl and put it on speaker. Sue thought, how nice, our last night here and we will be polite. Allen continued, Billy has something I think he wants to tell you. Dad means that I have asked Liesl to marry me, and she said yes.

It took a minute for Sue to get her footing. Isn't this kind of sudden? I can see problems. I'm going on deployment in ten days, and there was no reason for me to wait to ask her. What kind of problems, Mom? You can't plan a wedding in ten days, and how will she adjust to living in Chicago? She won't move to Chicago, Mom, and we will get married when I get back. Then what will you do? I'll live here with her. You will become German! Oh, I don't like that Billy. I'll be an American living in Germany, Mom. Can you do that? Yes, I can, and I want to.

Is it because she is rich? Mom, that's not fair. Why would I walk away from someone I really like because she has money? You're right, Billy. I shouldn't think like that, but I worry. Once again Irish Dorothy thought it was time to speak up. I like her. I think she will be good for Billy. Call her, Billy. Let's welcome her into the family. Billy tapped in Liesl's number.

Hi, this is Billy. I'm sitting at a table with my family and this is their last night here. I told them I asked you to marry me and that you said yes. Dorothy leaned toward the phone. We want to welcome you into our family, Liesl. We think you will be very good for Billy. Allen added, please tell your father that I am looking forward to sharing firefighting experiences with him.

There was a quiet moment as they waited for Sue to say something. Finally she said, we would like you to come and visit us. We have plenty of room. You could meet Billy's sister, his other grandparents, and all of our family.

I would like to come and visit. Dorothy, could I stay at your house? I think we have a lot to talk about including your cooking which Billy says he loves. Certainly you can stay at my home. Good, I would like that. Billy, you told me you have deployment orders, when do you have to go to Iraq? In ten days, Liesl, and I'm asking for some leave. I want to spend that time with you. I was hoping you would say that. Thank you all for welcoming me.

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Billy's family left the next morning, and then Saturday morning finally came and Billy's request for four days leave had been approved. He had agreed to have Liesl pick him up at 10 o'clock and he was a few minutes early talking to the guard when she pulled up. The guard was so startled by the big Mercedes that he almost saluted. Instead he watched Billy get into the car with a woman with a long blond ponytail. Billy looked back at the startled guard and knew that there would be stories floating around when he got back. "Maybe Baxter is CIA and we didn't know it."

Where are we going? To take long walks and that's why I suggested you bring your boots. His boots were tied together by their laces and draped over his small duffel. He hadn't questioned why she asked him to bring them along. OK, but where are we going? Berchtesgaden. First, I think, we will stop in Munich for the night then in the morning to the park.

By now they were on the Autobahn headed south and Billy glanced at the speedometer – 160 kph, and there was hardly any wind noise or engine noise. This car was amazing so he said so. My father buys a new one every few years. When he buys his next car I'll ask him for this one since you like it; they last forever. Billy had never gone this fast in a car before, and he began to think it may be better to not distract the driver with small talk so he settled back and tried to relax.

A few minutes later he had to say what was on his mind. I would like to buy you an engagement ring but I only have a few hundred euros. I would like a ring, Billy. We can stop at a jeweler's when we get to Munich. A ring will not be expensive. German women don't want expensive diamond rings. We will pick one out together, and I didn't expect you to have a lot of money with you so don't worry about money. That was easy, Billy thought. Maybe I'm on a roll, so he asked another question. Would you tell me how old you are? I don't think you ever told me. I'm 25, and I think you are not so old as I. I'm 23, almost 24, and I like older women. So, I am the older woman now. Yes, and I like it.

Much sooner than he expected, they were coming to the big city. Liesl asked the car for the location of the nearest jewelry store and within a few minutes they had found their way to it. Liesl picked out a plain gold band rather wider than Billy had seen on women in his family as wedding rings. Are you sure this is what you like? Yes, it's perfect for me, Billy. The price was within the money he had with him so he said, I would like to pay for it. Yes, that would be nice, and she slipped the ring on her finger.

The car directed them to a hotel, "mid-price hotel near places to eat". The desk clerk was friendly and gave them two key cards to "a room with a view of the city" and some suggestions for places to eat "within walking distance". Billy wanted their first night together to go well. He knew his face gave away how he was feeling so he said it. I really want this night to go well for us. Liesl told him to sit down and relax, and she went into the bathroom. In a few minutes she came back into the room wearing only a black strapless bra, lacey black panties and heels.

Billy knew that Liesl's stride was long and graceful. Several times he had to pick up his own pace to keep up. Now she moved across the room with long strides and made a graceful turn and faced him. Close your mouth, Billy. What do you think? I think you are awesome. You could be a model for women's underwear. But I was. Really? Why would you do that? certainly not for the money. I have a friend in the lingerie business and she asked me to model for her so I did, for the fun of it, Billy, for the fun of it. Billy stood up and walked to her and she began to take off his shirt. So it's fun you want, is it? It is, and I want it to always be fun for us.

They were in no hurry to leave the hotel the next morning so it was late morning before they got to Berchtesgaden and Lake Königssee. I didn't know there was such a large lake, Liesl. I thought it was only mountains. I have come here with friends and I think you will like it. Lunch would be good; I'm hungry. Yes, I think we should eat and then go to a hiking trail for the afternoon.

Isn't this where Hitler had a kind of hideout? I think you would call it a vacation place. Can we go there? I would like to see it.

This is a good place to eat, she said, and Liesl stopped the car and got out. Billy followed her into the restaurant and they sat quietly at their table waiting for their lunch. You didn't answer my question. It's called "Eagles Nest" and, yes, you can go there, but I do not like to go there. There are other places I don't go also – so, we can eat quietly. I didn't mean to bring bad memories, Liesl. We must remember the bad, Billy, so that it never happens again, but I don't like to see it. It's for American tourists to see, not Germans. So I am acting like an American tourist? I think so, and I don't want to talk about it.

Billy pushed his plate away, got up and walked outside. The mountains and lake were beautiful and the sun was warm on his face. It was a cool sunny day, perfect for being outside and taking a long hike. He was like an American tourist she had said, and it had stung like a bee. He turned and walked back in. Liesl was still sitting alone at their table. He went back to the table and sat down and said, I want to understand, but you must help me. It is not possible for you to be German. Liesl, I am in love with you; I want to spend my life with you. Then you must let me be who I am. I don't want to change anything about you. Good, I do not go to the Eagles Nest.

Do you have a favorite hiking trail? you said there are many. How good are you at hiking, Billy? Better than you, I think. I don't think so. We will go to a difficult trail and we will see who is the better at hiking. Billy finished his lunch. He felt like they had moved to a better place, and he had been challenged. Are you ready to go? I must stop in the women's room, then we can go. Billy thought that would be a good idea for himself. There may not be a tree to step behind. I like walking behind you. The view is better than the mountains. The truth got the smile Billy was looking for. Life was good.

The travel guide said 14 km, moderate, 2 hr. 30 min. I have been on this trail. It is very nice. I think you will like it. We were going to a difficult trail; this sounds too easy. It is right for us today. Billy had mentally prepared himself for a challenge and "moderate" was not what he expected, however, he said "OK".

The first part of the trail was steeply up hill and after an hour they stopped for a few minutes to enjoy the view of the lake and mountains. In the cool breeze they could feel the sweaty dampness in their clothes. Often the trail was single file and Liesl would push Billy ahead telling him to set the pace. Nearing the end Billy could see what looked like the last part of the trail and it was steeply downhill. This was a beautiful trail but too easy he thought, so he said, I'll race you to the bottom. No, we do not run down. It is too steep. You don't want to lose. Billy challenged, come on I'll race you to the bottom. No, it is too steep to run.

Billy would not be discouraged from what he thought was a great idea and he took off running, yelling at Liesl to race him to the bottom. Within about 50 yds. Billy began thinking that Liesl was right. After about 100 yds. he could feel the leg burn and he was going faster and faster even though he was trying to slow himself. He rounded a corner and saw a large rock sticking out at the side of the trail. He fell backwards and slid feet first into the stone outcrop. He stood up and waited for something to start hurting, but everything was OK except some stone

pricks on his hands, so he dusted himself off feeling good that he had found a way to stop. Then he heard Liesl calling his name, again a second time, and then a third time and getting closer fast. She came around the corner at a full run and he tackled her. They rolled over twice and stopped with Liesl on the bottom.

Get off of me. What did you do to me you foolish man! I tackled you. It's an American game. Are you all right? Foolish American games. Get off of me. Billy stood up and helped her up. Oh, you have a busted lip. It's going to puff up and you will look like you were in a fight. Turn around and I'll brush off the dirt. I don't think you are brushing any dirt, Billy. Why did you run after me? You could have been hurt. I was afraid for you; you were doing a very foolish thing. So you decided to be a fool like me. I was OK until you almost killed me. I thought you could have been hurt badly and I couldn't let that happen. I love you, Billy, but you are a foolish man. You look funny with a fat lip. Liesl insisted, let me walk in front. I don't trust you. You may start running again. Billy thought that was a great idea.

Back in their room. I got strange looks from people in the restaurant. I think they were looking at your fat lip and thinking I did it. Well you did. OK, but not the way they were thinking. You will never hit me. I know that. We can't help what other people may think. Tomorrow we will see castles. No more hiking in the mountains. I can feel painful places. Billy knew about painful places and said, it can take a few hours before it starts to hurt. It's early, but I think I will feel better in bed. It helps to kiss where it hurts. Not my lips, but here, and here. As Liesl pointed to her painful bruised places Billy lightly kissed them. And here, and maybe here. I think you mean everywhere. Yes, I have pains everywhere. I have some pains. Then I must make them better. Saying "I have a pain here", and pointing to an elbow or a knee or hip became their new personal code for love-making. They would say it even in public places and laugh remembering the first time.

Billy was not impressed with the ornate excesses of Bavarian castles. He wondered what they were thinking. Way too much gold and glitz, but the food was wonderful. He made a mental note to come back for the mountains and the food.

Tomorrow we need to go back. I need to have time to get ready, and my leave will be up. Can we talk about important things? What do you think we need to talk about? I know for sure that we must teach our children not to run down steep trails. So, you want children, Billy? Yes, two would be nice; more would be OK. I think two would be enough. OK, two. That was easy. What's next? I would like to be married when you come back, and I would like your family to come. They will come. Are we thinking a big wedding? No, small, but family and a party after. You plan it any way you want and I'll be there. Liesl, my family wants you to come and visit. Liesl reflected a moment and then, In the summer, I think – would that be good for them? They would be happy to have you come anytime. Billy, will I be able to see you after we get back to Wiesbaden? I don't know, but for sure we will talk on the phone. Liesl asked, do you know Skype? Yes, and there are newer ways we may be able to talk when I am on deployment. Good. Enough talk, make love to me, Billy. On one condition. So, now there are conditions? Yes, you must let me drive tomorrow. OK, the key fob is in my purse.

Billy loved the feel of the powerful car. He saw all the buttons and had to ask. Liesl answered, there is one for speed, one for telephone, but if you want to talk to the car, like asking directions, you must speak German. I knew that was coming. I will have time on deployment to

learn. Good, and you will need French, Italian, some Czech, I think. If you will live here you must speak languages. You speak very good English. We learn English in school, and I need English to work at my job at the bank, but I know my accent is very German. I love your accent. I want to come back to Bavaria again. I like the mountains and the food. There are many things here that you may like; it is easy to go to Austria or Switzerland. You can learn to ski so we will come in the winter. There is also the Passion Play at Oberammergau; it is only once each ten years and people come from all over the world to see it. Are we talking about the story of Jesus' crucifixion? Yes, outside and very big. The Play lasts all day. You have seen it? Nine years ago with my family. Next year it will happen again. The village has been doing this play every ten years for 400 years. There must be a story; why would they do this? It was the plague. Everyone was dying but the village was spared. So the play was a thanks to God that they did not all die from the plague.

We haven't talked about Church. My family is Lutheran; they go to Church on special days like Christmas and Easter; I always went with them, but not so often today. My family is Catholic. They go to Church every Sunday, but like you I go "not so often". I would like to go to this Passion Play with you next year. Yes, we will do that; I would like it also.

Billy thought of Sally. There is something that I must tell you about another girl, a woman, really. You don't need to tell me anything, Billy. Yes, I do, because I really like this person and I feel bad that I haven't talked to her about us, or I don't think, even about my deployment. Then you must talk to her; if you don't, she will think badly of you, or even about herself. Is she German? No, American and Army like me. Talk to her, Billy. I will, and I hope she understands.

I think we shouldn't talk so much while you are driving at 200 kmh. Oh, I didn't know I was going so fast. You must learn to talk to the car, Billy. I will, and some French. They say the French are good lovers. Watch your driving, Billy.

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Billy sat in his room thinking about Sally and remembering what his grandmother said about her not being so fragile, then he picked up the phone. Hi Sally.

Billy, is that you? I thought I would never hear from you again. Why are you calling me now after all these days? I'm sorry I haven't called. I wanted to say good-bye, but I didn't know how. It's only two words, Billy. Why are we still talking? I knew there was someone else when I heard it from your sergeant major. Was there someone else when you were telling me how pretty I was? That wasn't very nice, Billy.

I knew her then, but it hadn't gotten serious yet. I feel bad about how it all happened, and I was a coward not to call you right away. Anyway, I'm going on deployment. When? Tonight. Things sure happen quick in your life, Billy; I'm a more-steady-as-you-go person. Maybe it wouldn't have worked out for us anyway.

Is that drug business all over? Yes, and Liesl, that's her name, really saved me by telling the Army how it happened. She could have gotten in big trouble herself. Her telling her part of the story made all the difference. I could have had a dishonorable instead of losing a month's pay.

She must really like you, Billy. It goes both ways, Sally. Do you want to keep in touch? I'm not going to fool around, Sally, so it seems unfair to string it out. You may be a coward, but I like you. If you want to talk Army and career, call me, and I won't make the mistake of thinking you are stringing it out or worse. Sally, I'm sorry I was so slow to call. You told me all I needed was confidence; that was great advice, Billy, and I think about it every day. Thanks, Sally. I really meant it. Got to go. Billy, stay safe wherever they are sending you. Bye.

Billy called Liesl. Hi. Thanks for the push to call my friend, Sally. I should have called her days ago. How did it go? How do you say good-bye to someone you really like? but it turned out about as well as it could have, I guess. Can you come over? No, I am on a night flight so I'll need to call you when I get there; if I can. Don't worry about me; it could be several days before I can get set up to call you. Stay safe, Billy. I love you. Love you too, bye.

~ ~

Billy sat on his bunk. He was all packed. The bus would pick him up in a couple of hours to take him to the airport. Time to think. There hadn't been much of that lately so he lay back and closed his eyes. Maybe Sally was right, too much too fast. Got to let go of that. Whatever I get into in Iraq, I will need to be slow and steady. No hero stuff. Need to say good-bye to the sergeant major, and he got up and walked down the hall to the company office. Baxter, don't you leave tonight? Yes, Sergeant Major. The bus picks me up on about two hours. Have you been in Iraq?

Yes, and Afghanistan. My dad says don't be a hero. Good advice, Baxter, but sometimes you have to do what needs to be done. These wars, if you can call them that, seem to go on forever. I don't do politics, Baxter. Were you married when you were on deployment? Oh, yes, and I am still married to the same woman. How did she manage by herself? She was sort of house mother to some of the younger women. She knew how to manage finances and often the younger ones didn't. How many years do you have left? I have my 20, but I'm in no hurry to get out. Billy responded, when I finish my enlistment I am going to get out. A Black man in Baltimore, that's where I'm from, doesn't get the respect these stripes give me, and that's where I will go when I leave the Army, Baxter. There are jobs in the DC metro area, but it won't be the same. That's why I'm in no hurry to get out.

I'm going to stay in Germany. That's different, Baxter. You sure about that? I'm going to marry a German girl and I don't think she would move to America. Have you talked with the chaplain about getting married here? No, but I'll do that as soon as I get back. Better do it sooner. Call him. There may be paperwork that will take some time. OK, you have always been a big help. And you have always taken up too much of my time. Don't miss the bus; I may not be here when you get back; listen to your father.

Billy went back to his room with mixed feelings about the Army. The Army was Sally's way out and Sergeant Major's ticket to respect. Why was he, Billy, in the Army? He didn't need a way out and he wasn't a Black man looking for respect. His grandpa was Army and so was his dad. It just seemed like the thing to do. College had been out of the question. He hated to sit in class. Well here he was going someplace where he would need to watch his step, and he better

be good at it. He picked up his duffel and went outside to wait for the bus wondering what the weather was like in Baghdad.

~ ~



FAMILY

"It's never just two people"

Sue looked up as Allen came in from work. Liesl called me at work today. She is coming to visit. We expected that didn't we? When is she coming? Tomorrow. Really? Then you won't have time to have the carpets cleaned and replace the old couch. Don't tease me, Allen. I'll take tomorrow off and clean up around here in the morning. Her plane gets in about 1:30 and I'll pick her up. What airline is she using? Don't be dumb, Allen, Lufthansa. OK, is there anything you need me to do? What would you like to have for dinner tomorrow? How about chicken in the slow cooker? It makes the house smell great. I'll get what we need this evening.

Did she say why she was in such a hurry – call one day and coming the next? No, she didn't say. I hope it's not something about Billy. She had asked about staying at your mother's house. Do you think that is a good idea? I forgot about that. We can't take her over to Mom's if the place is a mess, and it might be. I'll go over this evening while you go to the store for chicken, but I think she should stay here for at least a night or two unless she insists on going to Mom's. Tomorrow is Friday. What if we suggest she stay here Friday and we have family here on Saturday for her to meet? Then if she wants to go home with Dorothy, she can do that.

I like that. I'll still go over to Mom's this evening and tell her about Liesl coming, and make sure that her place is not a disaster like it has been lately. Call your parents and invite them over on Saturday. Do you think Pop can make it? He does OK with his walker, but if he needs help, I'll go get him. What about Jenn? I'll call her tonight and see if she can come. Anybody else? What about Megan and Nick? They always liven things up. That would make it more like a party instead of a family inspection. OK, you call them. It took Allen and Sue only a few minutes over dinner to organize for Liesl's visit. This was practiced teamwork they had developed over many years. Why the sudden visit was a question they could live with. Life had always been full of unanswered questions.

Sue had become increasingly worried about her mother's mental state. Maybe, she thought, her Mom having company for a few days would be good for her. How long was Liesl going to stay? The way this girl seems to rush around, it could be two days or two months. Allen had his marching orders, go to the store and call his parents. He thought he got off easy and Sue didn't have time to replace the favorite couch, which she had been threatening to do. Life was good.

~ ~

Sue met Liesl coming through the crowd and asked, how was your flight? I am very tired. Is this all your luggage? Yes. My, you travel light. Thank you for coming to the airport. Is there

someplace we could stop and talk, maybe get some coffee and a bun? Yes, of course. Sue got off of I-294 at the next exit and spotted a little diner. Sue ordered coffee and donuts. Is it OK if I call you Sue? Yes, we are very informal in our family, and I love your name Liesl, but I suppose I don't pronounce it correctly. I needed to talk with you quietly.



Is there a problem with Billy? No, it is me. I am pregnant, and I must know how you and Billy's family thinks about it. I suspected, but yesterday I was tested to confirm it and that is why I called you and came to see you. Does Billy know you are pregnant? No, I wasn't cautious about getting pregnant and Billy didn't question me about it. He is a fool for me, Sue. We would have a dozen children if I was not cautious about it. You think Billy will be happy that you are pregnant? Yes, I am sure he will be happy, but I don't know you well. I know how important family is to Billy and if you thought my becoming pregnant was careless or even very bad, it would be very bad for Billy, and for the two of us. Sue, I had to know how you feel about this and I had to know right away because if I must terminate this pregnancy, I must do it very quickly. There is no question about your marrying Billy is there? No. I wear his ring. We will be married when he returns from Iraq.

I had to ask that question, but even if you were not getting married, I myself, and all his family would want you to have this baby. There is no need for you to ever think about terminating your pregnancy. Sue reached across the little table and put her hand on top of Liesl's, and Liesl began to cry. I had to know. Well, now you know. This child will be loved by all of Billy's family. I think our coffee has gotten cold, and she waived the one waitress to please bring them fresh coffee.

I think I must tell Billy. I have an idea. Perhaps you would like to rest tomorrow, and then on Saturday we will have a party with family and a few good friends. We will get Billy on Skype and you can tell him. I think this would be best for me to tell him myself; I will try to call him; then

we can have the party. OK, do you like our donuts? Not so much, but I like your coffee. I am very tired. Let's go home, Liesl.

~ ~

Sue greeted Liesl as she came down the stairs on Friday morning. Good morning, Liesl. I hope you slept well. I'm worried because I have not been able to talk with Billy. I have not been able to connect with his phone. Then we must go with our party plan. Allen has set up a Skype call for Saturday when family and friends can all be here, so you can tell Billy about the baby then. I like the way you talk about the baby; it's like he or she is already a person. That's the way we think. It's natural to us. Liesl, someday I would like to tell you about my first pregnancy; it did not go well. I would like to hear your story.

Now I need to go to my work. Allen has already gone. You will have the house to yourself, and I hope you will rest. There is food in the refrigerator if you get hungry, and this is my phone number. Call me if you need anything. I will be home about six, and Sue left Liesl in a quiet house. Liesl went to the kitchen and saw a coffee machine that looked familiar, and began to make herself a cup of coffee. Then she felt something on her leg and looked down to see a small grey cat looking up at her. So, I am not alone, she said to the cat, who knew it was now the subject of Liesl's attention and responded with a rumbling purr.

Liesl got her coffee and sat down, and the cat saw her lap as an invitation. Just as Liesl and the cat were getting comfortable with each other she heard an unfamiliar sound. It came from the front of the house and the cat jumped down to go investigate. Liesl followed it to the front door, and saw a figure standing on the other side of the glass door so she opened it. It was Billy's grandmother, Dorothy. Dorothy stepped in and pulled Liesl to her with a long hug.

Sue told me you were here, and she told me the good news that you are going to have a baby. I couldn't wait until tomorrow; I had to come see you; I hope I didn't disturb your sleep. When we flew back, I was wiped out for two days; you look wonderful. I am so glad you came to be with us. How long can you stay? When is this baby due? Have you had any breakfast? Let me fix you something. Have you told Billy? Oh, I need to stop talking. How are you feeling? I had terrible morning sickness when I was pregnant with Sue.

Liesl started laughing. It is wonderful to see you, Dorothy. Please come in and don't step on the cat. I never had a cat in the house. Liesl, this cat knows me; she will stay out of my way. Then come sit with me and I will answer all of your questions. Dorothy wasn't satisfied with just sitting. She went to the kitchen to see what she could find for breakfast. I haven't had any breakfast myself. Do you like eggs? And some toast? How about some orange juice? All of those things sound wonderful, Dorothy. May I help? You sit right down there and tell me all about it. I'll do the cooking. Liesl was home, and for the first time she felt it.

~ ~

Saturday finally came and everyone was full of questions. Sue became the protector. She made sure that Liesl did not feel like she was being interviewed, or worse, inspected. But Liesl's life was different, and everyone was interested, so Liesl told everyone a much-abbreviated story of how she met Billy at the Christmas market, and how they became engaged and planned to be married when he returned. Suddenly in telling their story she realized that their baby was due to be born the same time Billy would be coming back from Iraq, and that their wedding would be at the same time so she just blurted it out. It's all going to happen at the same time! Always practical Allen had to ask everyone's question. Do you want all this to happen here or in Germany? I think in Germany. Billy and I will be living there.

The room became quiet. They would not be part of this wonderful alignment of events, or would they? Could they? Liesl sensed their quiet question. I would want all of you to be there, and I know Billy would want that too. This made people feel a little less left out, but only a little because it was not only the wedding and baby, it was their lives, their whole lives. They would not be an everyday part of their whole lives. It was always in their minds that Jenn was going to finish school and then come back home. Billy was going to finish his tour in the Army and then come home. The possibility that these things were not going to happen was a bitter reality check. Dorothy could see that a shadow had crept into the room.

I will be at this wedding, and I know Liesl and Billy will visit often. We will celebrate that they have found each other. Allen added, we will be there; and then Jenn, of course, I will be there. Then Allen, it's time for our Skype call. Who should go first? Liesl should go first, everyone agreed. Billy's image came on the screen. Hi, Billy. Liesl, is that you? Yes, it's me, and I have some news for us. How did you get to Chicago? Don't be dumb, Billy, on Lufthansa. Your family has been wonderful for me. I am pregnant. We are going to have a baby. Really? That's great! Does my family know?

That was the signal Sue was waiting for, and she moved close to Liesl. Yes, we all know, Billy, and we are all here to celebrate. You can say hello to each of us; here is your Dad. The family shifted into the picture one at a time, and then there was Pop. Jesus Christ, Billy, you found a real looker. Yes, Pop, she's a keeper.

~ ~

When the Skype call ended Liesl was pleased when some of the focus shifted to Megan and Nick's little boy, Sam. Sam loved being the only child at the party. Megan enjoyed some freedom from watching Sam, and came and sat next to Liesl. You have brought a lot of happiness to this house. How are your parents, and how do they feel about your being pregnant? My Dad is quiet and my mother hovers a little, but they are both fine. They like Billy, and they like his family even though they only met them once. My mom will help me any way she can. I heard about the family trip; they were very worried about Billy. They said that you helped Billy out of a big problem. I guess, but there was no question in my mind that it was the right thing to do. Your little boy is so cute. Do you have other children? No, Sam is our first and probably our last. We were older when we married. Maybe you would like to hear our story sometime. I would.

First Sue, and now Megan were offering to tell her their personal stories. This was a new experience for Liesl. Personal stories were closely held in her family. Megan went to the kitchen to help and Liesl saw Pop sitting in a big chair with his walker off to the side. She went over and sat on a stool in front of him. So, you are Allen's father. Sure am. He does some of the craziest things, but comes out in one piece. So Billy picked you out at a Christmas Market. I can see how that could happen. Are all German girls as pretty as you? German girls like to look nice. Did you hurt your leg? You mean the walker. It's my knees. They don't do what I want them to do. Billy is a super kid. He's my only grandson. I didn't like it when he went in the Army, but I did it and so did Allen, so what could we say – don't be like us? But I miss him. I don't think I can make a wedding in Germany.

I will encourage Billy to come home for a visit as soon as he gets back from Iraq. I would really like that, Liesl. How do you say your name? With a "z" Pop. I'll make sure that Billy gets home to visit you. If I counted on my fingers right, this baby will be born in December. That's right, Pop. Can I get you anything? See if there is a cold beer in the fridge. I'll bring you one. You're going to be good for Billy. I hope so, she said while wondering if all the men in Billy's family were so open about their feelings?

By the end of the day Liesl had spent at least a little one-on-one time with everyone, even building a block tower with Sam. As people were beginning to leave, she asked if she could go home with Dorothy. They had talked about that before and she hope it would be OK. Dorothy spoke up, I would like for her to come home with me. My extra bedroom is all cleaned up for Liesl to use. So it was agreed, but Sue insisted she go with them. Allen gave Sue a questioning look. Sue responded, go watch some basketball, Allen. I won't be long.

~ ~

Dorothy had anticipated Liesl's visit, but not so soon. Even so, the house was orderly and her extra bedroom comfortable. On Sunday morning Liesl slept late. I hope you were comfortable last night. You have all been very nice to me. Yes, I had a very good sleep. I hope I am adjusting to the time change. Sit with me – but first, do you need any clothes washed? Tomorrow, I think. I have been surprised by how your family talks so openly about themselves. Even Billy's grandfather told me how much he missed Billy, and I told him that Billy would want to come and see him. That seemed very important to Pop.

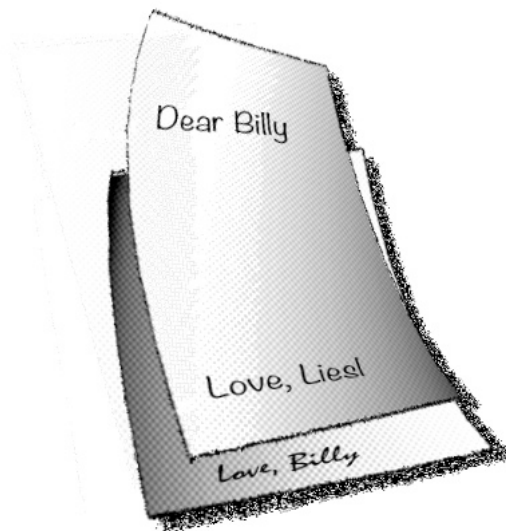
Sue thinks my mind is failing, but that's not true. Some days I miss Bill so much I can't do anything but sit. You met Nick yesterday. He has been a big help. He counsels people you know. No, I didn't know he did that, but it is good that he is helping you. I am a widow, and I know what it's like to miss someone. You know Billy was named after my husband. That was Sue's idea. This is my husband Bill's picture. Liesl took the frame and studied the photo. I see similar features. What was Bill like? He was a quiet man, not up for adventures. He loved Sue. Her bad first marriage was very hard on him. I didn't know Sue had been married to someone else. Is Billy's older sister from that first marriage? No. There were no children, but the whole idea of divorce was new to Bill and he had a hard time dealing with it.

After a moment Liesl commented, Sue and Allen seem to be a happy couple. Yes, things have worked out very well for them. He almost died you know. There was an accident and people

were killed, and I think it changed his life. Firefighters have dangerous jobs. They do, however, this happened when Allen was in the Army. Oh, I worry about Billy. I think things are safer now, Liesl. I hope so. He is like his family. He has been open with me about his personal life. He even talked about another woman in his life and I think he liked her very much. That surprises me a little. Why? We may talk about personal things, but not so much about experiences we had with other people before we were married. So Billy wouldn't expect me to tell him about my private life before we met? Oh, I don't think so, Liesl.

I live in a small village and everyone knows me. Billy and I will live there together so I think there is something I must tell him. You mean because he may find this out from someone else and think you were hiding it from him? Yes, I think so. I had a relationship with someone in the village that was very passionate. They were very sad, I think, when I became engaged to Billy. Then I think you should tell Billy about this man and assure Billy that this relationship is over. It wasn't a man, Dorothy, and I think I will always be friends with this person. Liesl, I don't know anything about that kind of relationship, but I agree with you that you should tell Billy. Can you just be friends with this person? I think we must always be just friends, Dorothy. Then you must tell him.

~ ~



*Dear Billy,
I am sitting at Grandmother Dorothy's kitchen table. We have talked all day. She is such a wonderful person, and we have agreed that I must tell you that I am bisexual*

and that I had a passionate relationship with a woman friend before we were engaged. I didn't know how to tell you so I must write it plainly.

When I told Dorothy about it, she said I must tell you. She said she had been writing letters to you while you were in the Army. She even showed me some letters you wrote to her. They are beautiful letters but you must work on your writing, but Dorothy said, oh, I can read it. I told her that I didn't have your postal address and she gave it to me.

I should have told you about Gretchen when we were together, but I was afraid. I didn't want anything to spoil our time. Now I know that was a mistake. Your family is so open about their personal lives. That has given me more courage to tell you mine.

So I think it will always be true that I will have romantic feelings toward both men and women. I will not spend nights with Gretchen while you are away, and I will no longer model for her. But because she lives in our village, I cannot avoid seeing her, and I think we must always be friends.

I love you and I will be a good wife for you. I know you love me like I am. I love your family. I will be back in our village soon and my phone will work better. Stay safe, and come home to me.

Love,

Liesl

Also, Pop misses you. You must visit him as soon as you get back from Iraq.

Liesl mailed her letter to Billy then spent two more days at Dorothy's house talking about family and food. She copied a few recipes wondering if she would ever get to use them. There was a final dinner with Allen and Sue then she boarded a plane for home, still not knowing how Billy would react to her letter.

At home she finally made a phone connection with Billy, and they talked about their baby and the weather. He didn't mention the letter and this only increased her concern. A week went by, then another week with two more phone calls, and still he said nothing. She made the decision that on their next call she would bring up her letter. She had to know.

Liesl's mother always brought in the mail and placed it on a little table. Liesl seldom looked at all the junk and requests for money. But today her mother said, there is something for you in the mail. It looks like a personal letter.

She went to the table and saw an envelope with her address. It was written in Billy's scrawling handwriting. She took it and sat down. Her mother noticed Liesl's worried face and sat down next to her. Her own experience said that personal letters seldom brought good news. Liesl opened the envelope, which contained a single sheet of paper. *Dear Liesl*, it began.

I will copy your letter writing style and use plain language to say important things. Nothing in your letter changes anything for me. We will be married, have children, and live in Königstein just as we have planned.

Liesl stopped reading and her hands dropped to her lap and she began to cry. Her mother picked up the letter and read the first lines and gave Liesl a questioning look. You wrote him a letter? Yes, and I told him about Gretchen. Perhaps that wasn't the best thing to do, Liesl. But it was, mother. I had to be open with him. Even his grandmother thought so, and now, well you read it, we are going to be OK. It's wonderful mother; it really is. She took her letter back and continued reading.

I am writing this letter the same day I received yours. There was no questioning my love for you and no need to wait, or think about, how I would respond. But I know how slow the mail is from writing to Grandma Dorothy. I am sorry if the snail-mail caused you worry.

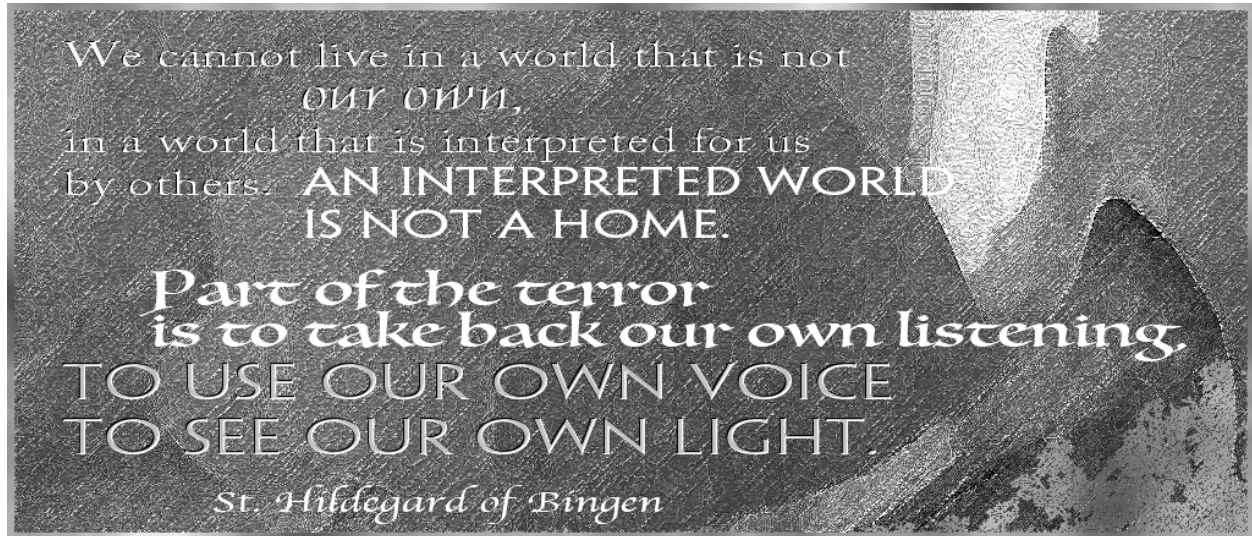
I wanted to say something on our phone calls, but thought a letter should be answered with a letter. I hope you are OK with that.

About my handwriting. I am not a perfect man. It is best that you know that now in case you want to change your mind about us.

*I can't wait to see you again.
Love,
Billy*

~ ~

LIFE



Summers in Iraq are brutal. Billy and Liesl had settled for a weekly Skype schedule. It was as important to see one another as it was to share weather stories. Liesl would say, the weather here is 75° and misty rain, and Billy would wish he were there.

Allen and Sue had also created a new routine of having Dorothy, Pop and Ruth over for Sunday dinners each week. Sue could hardly believe that her mother was getting weekly letters from Billy. They were single page notes really, but it miffed Sue that Dorothy knew more about what Billy was doing than she did even if Dorothy's news was a little stale.

Everyone could see that Pop was fading. Taking care of Pop and the house took all of Ruth's energy. Allen was over to their house often to fix the toilet, change light bulbs or whatever Ruth needed help with.

Sue had taken the initiative to stay connected with Liesl, and their e-mail connection was working well. So it was normal for Sue to see an e-mail from Liesl pop up. Liesl was in her sixth month and an attached picture showed a very pregnant Liesl. The e-mail read, **had my six-month checkup and the doctor says we are going to have twins.** That was the complete message and Sue couldn't believe it. She wanted more information, a lot more. So she replied, **is the doctor sure? Did she say they would be boys or girls? Do you need any special medical care? What does Billy think? Are twins common in your family? Liesl, talk to me.** Click.

Liesl must have been sitting at her computer. **Yes, the doctor is sure there are two, and there have been other twins in my family. The doctor thinks they are girls but is not completely sure, and I am healthy – see my very big picture. Billy doesn't know, but we will talk on Saturday. Please tell your family, especially Dorothy, that I am well and so are the babies.** Click.

Sue thought, this girl and I must talk. Her brief plain language approach to communication needs to be adjusted, but she didn't say that. Instead she replied, **how wonderful. I bet Billy will be delighted. I will tell everyone. Please keep in touch and take good care of yourself.** Click.

Sue called her mother. Mom, Liesl is going to have twin girls. You're kidding! Isn't that wonderful! Does Billy know? He won't know until Saturday, Mom. That's all she told me, Mom. We need to get Liesl to talk to us more. She talked to me when she was here. Maybe she's a little blunt, but that's just her way. It doesn't help for you to be fussed up about it. OK, Mom. I'm going to call Allen. Well, we will have great news to talk about over Sunday dinner. It is great news. See you Sunday.

Why are you calling me at the station; is the house on fire? Don't be silly, Allen. We are going to have twin girls. Sue, have you been drinking in the middle of the day? We can't have children. Not me, Allen, Liesl! You had me worried, Sue. I thought you had lost it, but that's great news. Wait till Billy finds out. His life will never be the same.

On their Saturday Skype call Liesl stepped back from the screen and turned in profile and said, Billy, look, twins and probably girls. Twins! Stand right like that, and he vanished from Liesl's screen. Then he reappeared with a crowd of other faces. These are my buddies waiting for their turn on Skype. I wanted them to see you with twins. What do you think guys? And there was a round of clapping and only Billy's face again. Did you really need to do that, Billy? I think you look great and I had to share that with my friends. You really do look great, Liesl.

Yes, great big. I hope you get back before they are born. I don't want to have twins all by myself. I'll tell you as soon as I have travel orders. Did your doctor say you would come early or that there would be any problems? She doesn't expect any problems. All three of us are healthy, and my due date hasn't changed; it's still December 21st. Does my family know? I told your mother and she would tell the others. She wanted to know all the details. That's my Mom.

Their time was soon up and the last thing Billy said was, you look beautiful, Liesl. She needed to hear that because she didn't think she looked beautiful. She thought she looked big and fat. Her mother came into the room. How was Billy with your news? He had to show me off to his friends. He thinks I look beautiful, Mom. He will be a good husband for you, but I think you should be careful not to eat too much. It took months for me to get my shape back after you were born. You don't want to get too big. I am a healthy weight, Mom, and I will follow my doctor's instructions. You have always looked beautiful, Mom. I enjoy my exercise so it is easy for me; now you must not get too fat. OK, Mom.

Liesl calculated in her head. If Billy's deployment was exactly nine months then he would not be back before the twins were born. Her mother would be there, but that would not be the same. The wedding date? That was easier. Billy's family would want to see the new babies and they would also want to be at the wedding. They could make one trip for both. Liesl liked that

thought. There would be forms to fill out, so she realized that she needed to begin the paperwork for the wedding.

Where to have the wedding? Where they had their first dinner together! She would arrange that today. It was time to pick the date and venue, and let everyone know, especially Billy's family. She knew what needed to be done, and she started for the front door. Her mother asked, where are you going? To plan our wedding.

~ ~

The person she talked to at Billy's old Army unit, the only phone number she had, suggested she talk to the chaplain and she had made an appointment. When she was shown into his office, he came around his desk to greet her and hesitated. I didn't know you were about to deliver. Please sit down. Thank you, but my due date is still some weeks away. The twins make me look very large. Twins, I see. So, is there a problem with one of our enlisted men? No, we will be married when he returns from deployment in Iraq. There is no problem except we must do the necessary forms. Will you want to use the Army Chapel, and do you want me to officiate at your wedding? No, we will have our wedding in my village. That has already been arranged. I think I will need a letter from the Army saying that Billy is an American soldier. I have asked his family to send me a copy of his birth certificate as proof that he is an American citizen. The chaplain asked, I need his full name and unit so that I can confirm his status, and then I will be able to write the letter you are requesting. Is he fully aware of your wedding plans? We talk each week, and he likes the plans we have made. His family from Chicago will come to the wedding. You have been a very efficient wedding planner; I wish more young women in your situation were as organized. More often, people come to me with serious problems; it is a pleasure to meet such an organized person. When will you be moving to the states? You must know that the children would be U.S. citizens if they were born there. We do know that, but we will be living here, and they will be German citizens.

If you have not talked to the American Embassy, I suggest it because there may be ways of doing things that would be helpful to you both. Thank you. I will do that. This is Billy's name and unit, as she handed him a clearly written piece of paper, and that is my name and phone number. If you would please call me when you have the letter, I will come pick it up. Looking at her name, Ms. Forster, it has been a pleasure to meet you. I will pray that your wedding to Specialist Baxter all goes as planned. Do you know if he is a religious person? If so, it would be good for me to talk with him about the responsibilities of a husband and father. I will ask him if he would like that. Thank you for your help. As she got up to leave, the chaplain made sure she was safely out his office door. Several days later she was on the screen with Billy.

Liesl, you must have made quite an impression on the chaplain. He has requested that my date to rotate back be moved up so that I can be back for Christmas. That's what his request said, "Be back for Christmas." He is a nice man, Billy, and that's good news. I think he was afraid I would go into labor in his office. He would also like to talk with you. OK, but tell our babies to "Wait until I get home." Babies have their own schedule, Billy.

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After the chaplain's request, the Army took the easy way and calculated Billy's deployment in months instead of days. So when Billy got off of the plane in Germany, it was December 14 instead of January 14, his original date. His leave request was approved and the next day he was on a flight to O'Hare with Liesl's encouragement. I am healthy and our babies are healthy. Go visit your family, especially your grandfather. He isn't doing well, Liesl; I need to see him. I'll be back in four days. Billy arrived at O'Hare at 1:35 p.m. and Sue met him with a big hug. Billy, you look all skin and bones. We will stop for a sandwich and then we will have pot roast for dinner. That would be great, Mom. How is Pop? Not good, Billy, but he hangs on. He is really looking forward to seeing you. I want to spend all day with him tomorrow. Good, he would really like that. When they got to the same house Billy grew up in, he took a shower and a nap, but he was up and, in the kitchen, when Allen got home. They would enjoy dinner together for the first time since before his deployment to Iraq, and Allen had a lot of questions.

There was only one time, Dad, when I found a booby trap. There was a suitcase sitting where you would not expect it to be. They blew it up, and after that I had no more complaints about time wasted waiting for the demo crew to come. What they had me doing most of the time was watching over Iraqi contractors. The more I watched, the more I said to myself, I can do that. That's what I am going to do, Dad. After I am discharged I am going to start a business. I'll contract work with the military and maybe find a German partner to do civilian work. That sounds like a good plan, Billy. We are looking forward to seeing those twins and celebrating the wedding.

Liesl is great. She has it all together. I only hope those babies wait until I get back. Sue told Billy who all was coming to the wedding, and kept filling his plate. Can you take me over to see Pop in the morning? Allen answered, I'll drop you off. Look around for things that need to be done. Your grandmother has all she can handle. She would be happy to have an extra pair of hands.

In the morning Allen dropped Billy off, and he went up on the porch and knocked on the door. He waited, then he knocked again. Finally, the door opened and Pop was standing there with his walker. I told Ruth I would get the door. I knew it was you. Come on in. Don't they feed you in the Army? Ruth came in and took Billy by the hand, and they all sat down together in the best chairs. Dad told me to ask if there is anything that needed to be fixed, Grandma. Well, there is. The downspout came off of the house in the back. I'll fix that, Grandma. Then Pop said, I have been thinking about you and there are some things I want you to help me with. OK, Pop. Whatever it is we will do it together.

As Billy looked at his grandfather, he realized how fast Pop had aged. Pop looked over at Ruth. Would you get us some coffee? this may take a while. Billy, I have trouble with stairs so I would like for you to bring my TV up from the basement and hook it up here in the living room, and the fridge too. I can do that Pop, but do you really want your big beer fridge here in the living room? Damn, Billy, the old fridge quit, so I got one of those dorm room jobs. It can sit right by my chair. I'll do that today, Pop.

Billy, you don't remember your backyard baptism because you were little, do you? Of course, I don't, but Mom has pictures and it must have been quite a party. It was. It set me to thinking,

and I never did much of that. After that, Father Mike and I became friends. We have been having lunch together about once a month for years. That's nice, Pop. I heard Father Mike was retired. Yes, we are a couple of old geezers that enjoy each other's company. The last time we had lunch I asked him if I could be baptized, and he said any time I like. I'm going to be baptized tomorrow and I want you to be my god-father. Billy thought he heard right, but it didn't make any sense. Maybe Pop was getting soft in the head so he said, Pop, I think it's wonderful that you want to do that, but I don't understand my part in it. It really doesn't make a lot of sense, Pop.

You know, Billy, Father Mike never pushes; he just walks with someone. That's the way he talks, Billy. So, when I brought the subject of baptism up some time ago, he asked me if I remembered yours. I said, yes, and that was when I realized I wanted to do it. Then he said, you remember there were people who were Billy's god-parents, and who would you like to be yours? I know how it works, Pop, but how does an 84 years-old man have god-parents? You see the problem, Billy, but Father Mike said you need someone to walk with you, to be your spiritual friend, and that's when I thought of you. Maybe you didn't know it, but you have been a joy to me your whole life, and I want you to walk with me for whatever time I have left.

Billy sat quietly as Ruth handed them both a fresh cup of coffee. Do Mom and Dad know about this? They do, but I asked them not to say anything until I talked with you and knew it would be OK. Grandma, is this OK with you? It's what Pop wants, and that makes it OK. Well, it sounds crazy and wonderful at the same time – yes, of course, I will do it. Tell me where you want your TV, Pop, and I will even set it up so you can see my wedding on your TV. That's great, Billy. Ruth, you tell him how you want the room arranged.

That evening back at Allen and Sue's house Billy said, Pop wants me to be his god-father. You mean his sponsor for his baptism. If that's what it's called, OK, but Pop likes god-father so that's what I'm going to be. I also told him that I would link his TV so he could watch the wedding. Isn't that going to be expensive? It will cost some money, Mom, but what else can I do for him? Write him letters like you do for your grandmother. That would be nice. I know he likes to get mail. I can do that. Who all is coming tomorrow for Pop's baptism? Only your Dad and myself unless Pop has invited others. Billy sent a short e-mail to Liesl. **Don't have those babies until I get back. I'll have a great story to tell. Love, Billy.** The answer came back. **We are all very good. Send pictures.**



Even the small gathering seemed to fill Pop and Ruth's cozy living room. Then Megan and Nick came in bringing Dorothy and little Sam. Father Mike asked Pop, is this everyone, Pop? I had to invite Megan and Nick, but that's everyone. Good, then we will begin. Pop, it's OK for you to sit. Everyone, gather around. I want to stand. Good. Father Mike had baptized hundreds of people so he didn't need a book. Ruth held her favorite fruit bowl with the water, and gave her favorite cup to Father Mike for him to use, and he recited the prayers and asked the group to recite the creed together. Then, *I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.* The water didn't stay on Pop's bald head. It ran over his shoulders and down his back. Ruth reached for a towel, but it was too late. Pop was wet. He stood through the final blessing and lighting of the candle.

I'm a Christian, Ruth. Can you believe it! Pop, we also need to give you the Sacrament of Confirmation. Can you stand a little longer? You're going to give me the whole shebang, aren't you? We are. Then you will be a confirmed Catholic and can receive communion at Mass on Sunday. I guess I have to start going to Church, Ruth. I guess you will, Pop. You will go with me, won't you? Ruth had set down the bowl and cup, and now she sat down herself. She wasn't answering Pop's question. Ruth, if you don't go to Church with me, it won't seem right. No one said anything. They knew this was between Pop and Ruth. It seemed like a long time, but it was probably only a minute or two. Then Ruth said, could I be baptized someday, Father Mike? What about today? Today? You mean now? Yes, now. Then Sue spoke up. I'll be your sponsor, Ruth. I have known you for a long time, and you would be more than welcome in our parish Church.

Then Pop added, come on in, Ruth, the water's fine. We can do this together. Ruth was baptized and confirmed with Pop, with Sue holding her hand. Father Mike was more careful with the water, but some still went down her face. It looked like she was crying, and maybe she was a little.

Sue motioned to Megan, and they went to the kitchen. That was really special, Sue. You knew just what needed to be said. Megan, will you help me with a reception after Mass on Sunday? The parish will want to celebrate. You thinking coffee and cake? And punch. Sure, I'll help. OK, let's feed this crowd and take some pictures. Perhaps for the first time in his life, Pop couldn't think of anything to say. He asked Ruth to sit with him on their old couch. Finally he said, we did it, Ruth. We sure did, Pop. Now you will have to watch your language. Damn, I didn't think of that.

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The overnight flight was almost full. Billy enjoyed his airline dinner, which was better than he expected. He had to remind himself that he was going 600 mph while eating his pasta. The crew was helpful. He had asked for some paper and a pen and those things were brought to him by a blond German woman with a smile. He was on his way home, but his mind was still on Pop. He took his Dad's suggestion and began to write Pop a letter.



Dear Pop,

I'm on my way home and thinking about today with you. The plane is full and the food is good and the cabin crew is nice, but the seat is terrible. I am sure you would have something to say about it, like, what idiot made this seat! I have been thinking about what you said, that I have been a joy to you. And you were right, I didn't know it.

I was never an exceptional kid. A benchwarmer and a C+ student. There was never much to celebrate except birthdays. So I am guessing that it was the times we spent together doing little things that were important. The weekends that I would sleep over and you would make us a "Pop's special" breakfast. Watching the Bears on TV and making popcorn. It was those times, wasn't it?

I will always remember that with my own children. It is the time spent together that brings joy to a family. No one needs to be super special. Thanks, Pop. I needed to learn that from you.

I hope you like your TV where I put it. I'll write again.

Love,

Billy

Billy folded the letter and put it in his shirt pocket, then took another piece of paper and began to write. He felt like he was on a roll and he had better make the most of it.

Dear Grandma Dorothy,

I am on the plane on my way home. The food on the plane is good, but the seat is terrible. You should consider an upgrade when you come for the wedding.

The day with Pop and Grandma Ruth was special, wasn't it? I'm sorry they can't come to the wedding. I know Pop can't travel, and Grandma Ruth won't come and leave Pop behind.

I wish we had more time together this week, but I needed to get home. There, I said it again. Home is where Liesl is. You had a good marriage so I think you must know how I feel about going home.

We will send pictures as soon as our girls are born. We have started to think about names. It's all happening kind of fast, Grandma.

Dad says that all of you will be coming a couple of days early for the wedding. We will find some time together to talk. Maybe lunch away from the crowd.

Again, I'm sorry we didn't have time together this week. Liesl says our babies will be born on their own schedule, and I want to be there.

*Love,
Billy*

Billy folded his letter to Dorothy and put it in his pocket next to Pop's. Life was good, but he was in a hurry to get home.

At 3:00 a.m. Liesl woke up. Was that a contraction? Maybe it was that peach she shouldn't have eaten last night. She lay quietly and the sensation went away. She was almost back to sleep when it came again. Now she knew what it was. She got up, dressed, and went upstairs and woke her mother. I'm having contractions. How far apart? I'm not sure. I didn't look at the clock. Start timing them while I get dressed. We will call the doctor's answering system and they will want to know the timing. Liesl went and sat where she could see the clock. Four minutes, Mom.

We are going to the hospital. I will drive; your father is awake now and he will come later. We must go now. You must call the doctor's number from the car. Mom, Billy's plane gets in at 7:00. Oh, then your father will go to the airport and meet him. At the hospital the admitting nurse took one look at Liesl and put her in a wheelchair and headed quickly down the hallway with Liesl's mother trying to keep up.

As Liesl was being prepped for delivery she was told that the doctor was on her way to the hospital. Mom, did you deliver me in the middle of the night? Yes, you were a 2:00 a.m. baby. I have called your father and he will meet Billy at the airport. Time seemed to slow for Liesl. All the lights, the people with masks, a strange humming sound, what was that? Then she heard the doctor's calm voice saying, it is time to push now.

As the sun came up two healthy twin girls were born. Their first cries were greeted with pleased smiles and a rush of laughter and movement from people in the room. Mom, are they...? They are beautiful, Liesl. The doctor says they are identical twins. We must dress them differently to tell them apart. Billy is with your father. When he gets here you must choose names. I am so tired, Mom. You can rest in your room. I will go to meet Billy and your father.

Liesl's mind drifted, and then Billy was at her bedside. They look so much like you and they look exactly the same. How do you feel? and he took her hand. I am so happy you are here, but I am so tired. Then I will sit with you while you rest. Later we will choose names. No, we must do that now, Billy. I would like to name them after our grandmothers. And so, two twin girls that look just like their mother became Dorothea and Bertha. Their birthdays would be celebrated each year five days before Christmas.

The proud father still belonged to the Army. He would report in. His leave was up. He had already asked for leave for the wedding, and he could count on that. And after he was married, he would request to live off post, but for now he would see his new family as a visitor some evenings and weekends. With several months left on his enlistment that was the best he could expect. The early parenting would fall to Liesl.

Liesl would be granted the mandated time off for new German mothers, and her downstairs apartment would be the nursery. When she needed to go back to working at the bank, her mother had agreed to care for the babies during the day. Liesl was organized.

The wedding plans firmed up, including a company that would provide an uplink so Pop and his friends could watch the wedding in real time. Pop calculated the time difference and realized that a 6:00 p.m. wedding would be about 11:00 a.m. in Chicago, a great time. The friends he invited could stay for lunch. The next day at the hospital, Liesl had a chance to go over the wedding plans with Billy. That all sounds great, Liesl. I like the idea of taxis for everyone. Who wants to be a designated driver at a wedding party? There is only one problem I see. What's that Billy?

My mom, grandmother and sister don't have anything to do. My dad will just fit in, but I know the women in my family. They will not be happy unless they have a part to play. There isn't anything left to do, and we can't make things up just to make them feel needed. They would suspect that right away and that could make it worse. It's your family, Billy. You come up with something for them to do.

What about the twins? Someone needs to look after them. Of course, their grandmothers, Billy. Our mothers can each take charge of one of the twins. That will keep them busy. Good thinking, Billy. How could my sister, Jenn, be of help to you? She can be *my* sister for the day, making sure I look my best, and that I don't forget all the little things. OK, I'll loan you my sister for the day. That will also be a good chance for you two to get to know each other better. This is all sounding good. What about my grandmother, Dorothy?

She has become my special friend, Billy. I don't want to give her tasks to do as that would seem like giving her a job. Will there be flowers? A few, and all the arrangements have been made for them. And the food is the same, all settled, including a cake like the Americans'. What about a toast, asked Billy? At American weddings there is a *best man*, usually the groom's best friend, who offers a toast to the new couple. Do you mean like a blessing or praying over us? A little speech asking for health and happiness, and so on. Sometimes it doesn't go too well. Why is that? Too much to drink, I think. Your grandmother wouldn't have that problem. Then let's ask her to bless us, and trust her to say nice things about us. I like it,

Billy. We work well together. I think we will need to remember that often. They didn't know it would be tested the next day.

The following day Billy was surprised that Liesl and the twins had been released from the hospital and were now at home. In the evening as he was driving into the village in a borrowed car, he saw all the booths and traffic of the village Christmas Market. The fact that it was only two days until Christmas rushed into his mind. At the house Liesl's mother met him at the door and said that Liesl and the twins were downstairs. As he came into the apartment, he could see a clutter of baby beds and other baby furniture he didn't recognize. Another thought rushed in, they would need a house. Liesl came into the room.

Billy, I am glad you could get away; give me a hug. We are going to need a house, and, it's only two days until Christmas. Where has your mind been? Of course, we will need a house, but having the twins here for now will make it easier for my mother to care for them when I need to go back to work. It has been a whole year since we met, hasn't it? With everything else going on I lost track of the season until I came into the village and saw the Christmas Market. You and your yellow jacket at the Christmas Market; I love that memory. Why were you in Wiesbaden when there was a Christmas Market right here in the village? Well, Wiesbaden has a much bigger market and it lasts longer, but I was also looking for something special. And what was that? You, of course, and I knew I wouldn't find you in our little village.

Billy was feeling dim-witted, but he knew what he wanted when he saw it. That thought made him feel a little more confident so his mind came back to today and Christmas. Can we go to the Christmas Market tomorrow? Can you walk that far? What about the twins? Could they go with us? I can walk and the fresh air is good for all three of us, but we Germans don't take infants to the markets. Our girls are half American so they could act American and go with us. Also, I would like it if you wore your yellow jacket. Even better if you have yellow blankets for the girls to wear. The three of you would look wonderful together, and I could buy each of you a Christmas present.

Would it be OK with you that we looked so very different from everyone else? More than that, Liesl. I would love it. Next question. Can we go to Church together on Christmas Day? My mother and father will go, and I guess we could find a person to watch over the girls so we could go too. Why can't we take them with us to Church? It's not done, Billy. Babies cry and fuss and Germans don't take babies to Church. Oh, I know what you are going to say. Billy continued, yes, you do, they are half American and I want to make it a tradition for us. We take our girls to the Christmas Market every year and they wear yellow. Then we all go to Church together. When they get old enough, we will tell them the story of how we met. I want them to always remember that they are half American.

Liesl responded, we will go to the market together, and we will buy your family their Christmas presents each year, and there will come a time when they will be able to help us choose what to buy. I like that, Liesl. It will help them connect with my family. I also want them to go to Church with us on Christmas. Christmas is a birthday celebration, and they will understand that. Let's not get too far ahead, Billy. We will work out what to teach our girls about Christmas, but taking them to Church now is a problem to me.

Could we buy a nativity set at the Christmas Market, and agree to have it in our home each year at Christmas? Billy was trying to close a gap that he didn't want to grow. Liesl responded, we can do that, and maybe next Christmas we will take our girls to Church with us. It's too late to buy gifts for my family for Christmas this year, but they also celebrate Epiphany. We could buy gifts for them to enjoy then. We also celebrate Epiphany, so I think that is a good idea. I also want to buy you a present. So you know about the three Wise Men from the East? Of course, but it is too soon to take our babies to Church. OK. Will you help me buy gifts for my parents and also for your parents? I trust your gift choices. The gift list keeps getting longer, doesn't it? Yes, it does, and it makes Christmas even more special. Tomorrow we will go together to the Christmas Market and buy presents. It will be our new tradition.

It was Christmas Eve and Billy saw one of the strange pieces of baby furniture morph into a stroller for twins. Liesl put the girls in the stroller and they headed down the hill toward the Christmas Market. Billy put a steadying hand on the stroller. He imagined it getting free and careening down the steep hill. At the market Liesl bought him, what he decided, was the biggest and best sausage sandwich he had ever eaten. They were making good progress on buying gifts and looking for a nativity set when Billy sensed Liesl stiffen. Already they had begun to read each other's body language, and months in Iraq had heightened Billy's senses for anything threatening. Then he saw what had caused the tension in Liesl.

The woman coming directly toward them was, to be nice, petite curvy. She had a Middle Eastern complexion and face that could be part Turkish. She did not look threatening to Billy. In fact she had a wide and engaging smile that put him at ease, but he moved his hand slightly so that it touched Liesl's wrist. The woman spoke in German. Good day, Liesl, and she extended her hand, and this is William? What beautiful children you make. Liesl responded in German and even though Billy's German was getting better, he soon lost the thread of the women's conversation. He did catch that Liesl had said, *nein*, twice. Then the woman moved on with what Billy judged was a neutral expression. Billy could feel Liesl relaxing. He waited for Liesl to say something.

That was Gretchen. You were all tensed up. I didn't know what she would do or say. Are you all right? Do we need to go back to the house? I am feeling good and we can shop; the girls are sleeping. Is there anything I need to know? I didn't understand much of what you said. She asked if I would have lunch with her and I told her, no, and that we were very busy with wedding plans. Then she asked if she would be invited, and again I told her, no. I said I thought it would be confusing and distracting for her to be there. She was not happy, but she will not cause a problem for us. Whom to invite is your decision, Liesl; I am not a jealous man. I know, but I needed to set boundaries. Let's complete our shopping before the girls get hungry and start fussing. Then we will go home and have a nice meal with my parents.

Billy loved having his confidence in Liesl confirmed, and agreed with her completely. They found a nativity set with figures that included the Three Kings. It was beautifully hand carved. Billy was surprised at the high price, but Liesl said, we will have it forever. So it was purchased to be carried home and set up in a special place. When they got back to the house it was beginning to get dark and they could see their parents' Christmas tree lights through the front window. Billy remembered how he had told his family that he was sorry that he had to leave so soon, but that he "had to go home". Again, he knew he was right.



Their special place for the nativity was a low table that could be pushed against a wall. Billy said, that's the perfect height for children, which made him think of Megan and Nick's nativity village. Megan and Nick have a whole room as a nativity village. I loved going to their house at Christmas time. A whole room of their house? It is Nick's counseling room the rest of the year, and it's a whole nativity village at Christmas time. I wouldn't want that in our house; it would be too much. I like what we have purchased, and I would like us to display it every year.

Billy was never going to insist on a nativity village, yet he was curious about Liesl's resistance. I would like to take our girls to spend Christmas with my family when they are older, and they could see the nativity village. Little Sam is not so much older than the girls. They could be friends. Billy, we have a real village here with real people. A trip to your family would be good, but not a trip to see a whole room full of nativity figures. Christmas is a great story, Liesl.

I agree, it is a great story. A child born in poverty, who becomes a great moral teacher. Perhaps that would not have happened if he hadn't experienced poverty as a child. But what, Liesl? I don't want an argument, but I would like to know how you think. We have a long road together. Liesl looked directly at Billy when she asked, do you think Mary was a virgin? A virgin mother is an impossible model for all other women, Billy. We have two girls to raise. We need to be honest with what we teach them. Liesl, the virgin mother part of the story has never been that important to me. Billy, you don't get pregnant and have children. Well, I can't do anything about that. Do we need a grand plan for what we will teach our girls?

No. It wasn't even on my mind to talk about now. Perhaps the best we can do is answer their questions honestly when the time comes. I would like to talk about your chaplain, how he is a nice man. If he had not requested your early return, you would not be here. You should at least visit him and thank him. I will do that. What if we invite him to the wedding? Liesl asked, you mean as a guest only? Allen responded, yes, he has helped us, and he may enjoy a wedding with no responsibilities. So, is it OK if I invite him? We can't let the guest list grow too big; it is a small restaurant, but yes, invite him. I'll see him next week. We have a Skype call scheduled tomorrow for Christmas. We can hold up the girls for my family to see.

On Christmas the call went well. Even the great-grandparents had their turn. Liesl had taken charge of the Christmas goose in the oven while her parents went to Church, and Billy took charge of the twins. Next year he hoped they would all go to Church together. Their first Christmas together! They were together and everything else seemed unimportant, even the wedding. The wedding was three weeks away with all the planning completed. Billy had Army responsibilities, and he needed to buy a car. Small problem, he thought, in a big picture. What could go wrong? They were together.

It only took two days for Billy to get an answer to his thought, *what could go wrong?* He was working in a secure area that did not allow cell phones so when he got back to his Company there was a message that he should call his parents. He tapped in his mother's number, but his father answered. I'm glad you called, Billy. Pop has died. It was sudden. They tried to bring him back on the way to the hospital, but it was too late. Billy was quiet for a moment, then, I need to come home. Can you buy me a ticket? I'm a little short on money. Billy, you have a wedding in a few days, and the Army won't let you fly off whenever you want. You had the best visit when you were here. There is nothing you need to do.

He was my best friend, Dad. I know, and he wouldn't want you to go AWOL and create a problem for yourself. You're right, Dad, it would cause a problem right now. I have been running Ethernet cable in a secure area with a deadline. There would be unhappy people if I didn't get it finished on time. You need to finish this job, Billy. Also, I will not be coming to the wedding. Someone needs to be here with your Grandmother Ruth, and I'm going to stay with her. Dad, I had it set up so Pop could watch the wedding in real time. We can still do that. I think your grandmother would really like that, and Pop had invited some friends over and we will make it a party. That will be good for everyone. Thanks for calling, Dad. Tell Mom she gets to hold one of the girls at the wedding. Oh, she will like that, Billy. I'll tell her. Don't do anything foolish. I won't, Dad. Bye.

Billy went to the Company office. The sergeant major was about to leave for the day, but he saw Billy coming down the hall. Bad news? Yes, my grandpa died. I'm sorry, Baxter. Do you have the chaplain's number? He may already be gone for the day, but I'll call him. Would you like to see him now? Billy nodded. The call was made. Go on over to his office. He will wait for you. When Billy got there, there was no clerk but the inner office door was open so he knocked. Baxter, is that you? Come on in. I was wondering if I would get to meet you. Your sergeant major said you needed to talk to me today. What's up?

My grandpa has died, and I needed to talk. I'm sorry about that, Baxter, and aren't you getting married soon? Yes, less than three weeks. He was my best friend. Had he been ill? I saw him after I came back from Iraq, and he did not look good, but he was glad to see me. We had a great two days together. He was even baptized, and he called me his god-father. We were close, Chaplain, and thanks for putting in a good word for me. It made it possible for me to get back in time to be with Liesl and to go see Pop.

I'm always amazed, Baxter, at how things happen like that. You say he was baptized while you were there? He had a priest friend, Father Mike, who had been inviting him to come into the Church for years. Pop finally said he wanted to do it. Do you think that maybe he knew how sick he was? That's possible, but he was a good man. I don't think he had anything to worry

about. I mean he didn't need to be baptized. I understand perfectly, Baxter. Do you think there was anything left unsaid between the two of you? No, Chaplain, we were on the best terms. Except...

Go on. I wrote him a letter after we were together, and I just remembered that I forgot to mail it. Was Pop your dad's father or your mother's? My dad's. What if you were to mail that letter to your dad? I think he would like that. Thanks for the suggestion, and there is one more thing. Liesl and I would like you to come to our wedding, just as a guest, to celebrate with us. I would like that. Let me know where and when. Your fiancée is special, isn't she? I'm a lucky man, Chaplain. And now we have twin girls. So, you are a man with a family of your own now. That was quick. People have told me that things seem to happen quickly for me. I guess they do.

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The days before the wedding slipped by until Billy's family arrived on an overnight flight, and ready for a day of rest. That evening Billy stopped to check on them and found his grandmother, Dorothy, sitting in the hotel coffee shop. I thought you would still be sleeping. I had a nice nap. Sit down; the coffee's good. Are you ready to be a married man? I've been ready, Grandma. Wait until you see our girls. It will be love at first sight. Do you ever mix them up? They look so much alike in their pictures. They seem to be developing some differences already, but Bertha has a round birth mark on her left foot. She is also the first one to complain about being hungry.

It is sad that Pop won't see this wedding or watch the twins grow, but at 84 he had a good life. Everyone liked Pop, Grandma. What you saw was what you got. I will miss him. You know the wedding will be up linked. This new stuff is like a wonder to me. I can't imagine how it is done, and thank you for inviting me to give the *best man* toast. Liesl really likes you, and we want your blessing. We had a good time together when she visited. She was a little surprised that our family was so open with our thoughts and feelings.

She learns fast, Grandma. We had a personal talk about how to celebrate Christmas. She doesn't like the virgin mother part of the story. I told her that it wasn't a big deal to me. We agreed to teach our girls about Christmas by answering their questions honestly, but we bought a nice nativity set and agreed to put it up each Christmas season. Billy, the Virgin Mary has always been an important part of my life; therefore, it's interesting that Liesl has a problem with that part of our Christmas story. It hasn't caused a problem for us, Grandma, but Liesl is sensitive about the role of women. Oh, I know. We talked about that. I have a toast all written, but now I think I was addressing the wrong people. I need to rethink it. These two girls of yours are going to be a challenge for you both. I can see it coming, Grandma. It will help a great deal if you and Liesl can come to agreements on how to raise them because they will test you.

I have a wedding present that seemed like a good idea, and now I think it was a very good choice. I have admired Megan and Nick's statue of Mary and wanted one like it for myself, but I never saw one to buy. Then I went looking for one for your wedding present and I found it. I guess I never noticed a special statue of Mary at their house. I hope Liesl will like it. What makes it special? It is a very pregnant Mary. Oh, that is different. I hope you will put it in a

place that your girls will see it often. And I hope Liesl likes this statue as much as you do, Grandma. I'll make sure she knows how I feel about it. I need to check in with Liesl. Tell the rest of the family that I stopped to check on them.

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Finally the day of the wedding arrived. Liesl was showing Jennifer how to fix her hair in a formal circle at the back of her head which was held by one pin. See, if I pull out the pin, the hair falls naturally. I will remember how to do that. I love your dress with its long sleeves, but I am surprised that you would choose a tightly fitted dress. It has only been a month. I will get back my flat stomach with good exercise, but today I have a little help from the top of my stockings. Liesl's one concession to tradition was a circle of flowers she would wear on her head. Taking her charge to watch out for the little things, Jennifer asked, who has the rings? Liesl showed her the engagement ring Billy had bought for her ten months ago and the matching ring she had purchased. Billy will put the engagement ring now on my right hand, and he will wear this matching ring. We do not wear diamonds.

What will you need for the twins? Jennifer was still trying to be helpful. The ceremony will take less than 30 minutes. Then we will have a nice dinner. Our mothers have agreed to care for them and it is only a short walk to the house when they need to sleep. There is breast milk for them. They will be good, I think. Do you think you will have a Church wedding someday? Billy and I have not talked about that, but I know my mother would like a Church wedding. You could have a Church wedding in Chicago. We would fill a Church with family and friends. If that is something that Billy wanted. We will see. We must go now. Help me with the twins.

Billy looked good in a dark suit. When Liesl saw what he was going to wear she liked it, but she sent him back to the store for new shoes. As the guests gathered at the restaurant, the thing that raised questions was the van out front with the antenna on the roof. The van helped set the tone that this was to be a very modern event. Two children and a satellite van were not tradition, but the formal dinner and party after made the event seem more like a real German wedding celebration. Even Liesl's father was comfortable with what he was mostly paying for.

Sue had struggled with what to wear and how to pack. She wanted to look good, but not upstage the mother-of-the-bride, or especially not the very modern bride. She settled on a nicely fitted two-piece, jacket and skirt, feeling sure that she would not look like she was trying to be the best dressed. She knew that she looked very good for her age, but she couldn't do anything about that except enjoy the admiring looks.

Dorothy did not want to look like a frumpy great-grandmother. She chose a dress in her favorite blue, no prints or pearls, and white medium heels. No one would suspect that she was a *great*. She was comfortably mixing when she saw a tallish man in a Roman collar come in. Who is this she wondered and went to find out? Hello, I am the groom's grandmother, and she held out her hand. Nice to meet you. I am William's chaplain. I am here as a guest. I have no official function. O'Malley is my name. Well, Father O'Malley, where are you from? Chicago. North Side. Dorothy nodded knowingly, if we were back in Chicago we would have never met. We are South Side people. Surely, Father, you will give the new couple a blessing. I will if I am asked.

I am asking you, but you must keep it short. Did you see the van out front? They have only a one-hour contract, I was told. German efficiency, Father, and I will be giving the toast. It wouldn't be nice for you to cut into my time in front of the camera. I have always admired South Side straight talk – I will keep it short. You must be very pleased to be a great-grandmother and yet look so young. I see you haven't lost your Irish blarney, Father. I see people waving at us to assemble. It was lovely meeting you, and your name is? Dorothy, and one of the twins is named after me. They are calling her Dorothea, but I suspect she will be called, Thea. Ah, that's a name I am familiar with. We must join the group. I will listen carefully to your toast. I may want to use it in a homily. And they moved to the front of the room.

Liesl and Billy faced the Registrar. He was an ancient man who looked like this may be his one-thousandth wedding, but he assembled people with a smile. He had made a special concession to the family to come to the restaurant instead of using his office for the wedding. Liesl with her headband of flowers captured everyone's imagination, thinking this is what every bride should be – radiantly beautiful. The twins were quiet through the official pronouncements until the rings were exchanged. Then Bertha began to fuss. It was like a cue to everyone to relax and celebrate because new life was making itself heard.

Dorothy waited until everyone was seated at the table, then she nodded to Father O'Malley. He stood on cue. I want everyone to know how impressed I am with Liesl and William. Seldom to I see such a strong beginning in a young couple, and I ask God's blessing on these wonderful young people and their beautiful twin girls, and he sat back down.

Dorothy smiled and stood up holding her glass. Then she began to speak. I have known Billy all his life. Liesl has asked me to be a grandmother to her, and I have agreed. I have great confidence in their future, but they will need the help of two families to raise these two beautiful girls. I know from my own experience that this will be their big challenge. This calls for us to raise our glasses.

During my whole life I have depended upon Mary, the Mother of Jesus, to comfort me and be my guide. It is my fondest wish that Dorothea and Bertha experience Mary's love in their lives. Many times in my life I found myself at the end of my rope, and there was Mary waiting to catch me.

Mary knew what it was like to be pregnant without a husband. She knew what it was like to be vulnerable, having no control over her life, even to the point of being displaced from her home.

She knew the grief of seeing one of her children tortured to death for daring to challenge authoritarian leaders and oppressive foreign occupation of her country. She stood at her child's feet as he died. There was nothing I could experience that Mary would not understand.

I want these twin girls to grow with a strong mother and father to guide them. I also want them to know that Mary, the Mother of Jesus, is always there for them.

So, raise your glasses with me for a toast to strong women and to the men who love them. God's blessings on them all.

A very mixed group of people sipped their glasses. Then Father O'Malley began to clap and soon everyone joined in. Billy beamed at his grandmother, and Liesl moved across the room and gave Dorothy a big hug.

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In two weeks, I will have my six-week checkup at my doctor's office. Billy had come out of the shower trying to clear his head of too much beer, and Liesl was sitting on the couch nursing the twins. His fuzzy head was trying to decide if this doctor visit, he had now heard Liesl tell him about, was just information or was there more he needed to know. The wedding was fantastic, but the wedding night was not developing as he had imagined it, and he had imagined it many times over the last months. He decided to explore for more information.

How long does it take to nurse the twins? She sensed that Billy's question may not be his real question, but chose to answer just his question without elaboration. They decide, Billy. There are times when they seem to enjoy eating and they are in no hurry to stop. They may even nap a little. Billy was trying to get his head around the fact that his life, their lives, were now on someone else's schedule. Perhaps he knew that in some small way, but now, for the first time, it had become perfectly clear. These two little girls were going to dominate his life. This was not easily digested news. So he said, again avoiding his real question, will you be taking a shower? Liesl had enough of Billy's dancing around his real question. Yes, I will take a shower, but we will not have sex tonight.

He walked back into the bathroom, put his towel on the rack then went into the bedroom and found his robe. Finally, he ran out of distracting things to do and had to deal with this new information. This is not what I was hoping for, Liesl. This is not what I wanted for us tonight. You can't turn me away like this.

It's not about you, Billy. I imagined it too, but I didn't know how I would feel. Now, it's about me, and it's about us. I am so tired I almost fell asleep nursing the twins while you were in the shower. And my doctor said it would be best for me if we waited until after my six-week checkup. She didn't so, no, but she did say it would be better to wait. She also told me that I could get pregnant right away. It doesn't happen often, but it does happen. Nine months from now we could have four children instead of two.

This is not what I expected, Liesl. Unwilling to give up his disappointment, he sat down next to her. Bertha was finished nursing, and Liesl handed her to Billy. It was so wonderful for us in Bavaria. That's what I dreamed of when I thought of our wedding night. It's hard for me to let go of that dream. Bertha moved a little making herself comfortable. I promise a thousand nights like Bavaria, Billy, but not tonight.

He remembered his Grandmother Dorothy's question, are you ready to be a married man? And he realized that he wasn't really ready. Not tonight, she said, a thousand nights she promised, and he had a baby in his lap that smelled of milk, and something else he would become familiar with – where are the diapers? Under the changing table. I can do this he thought. He took Bertha to the changing table, and became a married man. Life was good. Grandma Dorothy would be pleased.

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The e-mail from Allen said that **the picture and sound were perfect, and it was especially good for Grandma Ruth to see everyone having a good time. Mom looks forward to the day when the twins will come for a visit.**

In the airport lounge Billy was enjoying the last few minutes with the three women from home. Sue was worried. How are you going to manage in that little basement apartment? This works for now, Mom, but we are going to start looking for a house. I can start living off post with Liesl, and my enlistment is over this summer. The house is our next big thing.

Do you think you will be able to visit us? We will come this year, Jenn, but I don't know when. We agreed last year that we would go to the big Passion Play this summer. It only happens every ten years, and this is the year for it.

I would like to see that. Do you know when you are going? Do you think I could go along? We don't have a date, but probably in June. It would be great if you went with us, Grandma. I'll tell Liesl we need to pick a date so you can plan a trip.

I had some good time with Liesl and learned a little about living here in Germany. I am going to have a big student loan, and she says university is free here. That was a shock. I know, Jenn, and daycare is free for the twins when they get a little bit older. They do things differently here.

Grandma, I learned to change a diaper last night. Billy thought he was just making conversation. He was surprised by the immediate positive responses. I hope I marry a man who will change diapers, his sister said. Sue laughed. Congratulations, Billy. That's a big step, and his Grandma gave him a hug. I didn't think it was a big deal. Grandma Dorothy added, you are going to be a good husband, Billy.

Even though there was no long line at security Sue said, I think we should be going to the gate. We don't want to be late for our flight. Give Liesl and the twins our love, and she got up to go. For Sue, saying Good-bye, even for a little while, was hard. We will get a house with space for company, so there will be plenty of room whenever you want to visit. That made everyone feel a little better, but only a little.

As the three women in his family walked away, Billy remembered his response to his father when he was told that Pop had died. He remembered saying, I need to come home. So, what was home? Here with his wife and children was home, but so was, what, the South Side of Chicago? Really it was his mom and dad and sister and grandmother. They were his home and he was watching them leave.

As he turned and walked out of the airport, he felt an unexpected loss. He knew he would visit. They would visit, but the everyday connections, the everyday experiencing how much they cared, the knowing that someone always had your back, that was not going to be there. And he felt it.

On the drive back to the village that would be his future home, he noticed that all the road signs were in German. Of course, they were, he thought, what else would they be? Yet today the road signs seemed to be talking to him. Liesl had told him that he needed to learn French too. I can do that, he realized, and some Italian. He knew that he would be good at speaking German and whatever other language he needed, but that he would always have a South Side accent.



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Authors' Note: You will meet Bertha and Dorothea again. They will grow to look exactly the same but be very different people. We hope you will follow their lives with us into our next story. Stay tuned.

