

The Reformation of Wolfshausen A Mighty Fortress, 1527

“This unbridled preaching of pardons makes it no easy matter, even for learned men, to rescue the reverence due to the pope from slander, or even from the shrewd questionings of the laity”-81st Thesis

Trudi was back at work, standing by the tree in the park, when Vater Karl and Gretchen walked by, the priest holding the baby.

Gretchen was speaking, “Maybe if you hold her by her feet, she’ll just naturally point toward Jeremiah like a dowsing rod.”

Trudi interrupted, “Did you say Jeremiah? Do you know a boy named Jeremiah with a big boar?”

The trio turned and looked at the prostitute as the baby started to squall.

“I knew it!” insisted Gretchen.

“Karllein?” asked Trudi. “Is that you?” Then, putting her hand out towards the infant added, “I’m not surprised. I figured you had it in you somewhere under all your priestly rectitude. And who is this lucky acolyte?”

“Ah, Trudi. It has been a while,” the priest answered. Gretchen’s face flipped between the two like a leaf in a crosswind with too short a stem. “You’ve been well, it seems.”

“I’m Gretchen,” explained the Mistress of swine.

“I bet you are,” answered Trudi before continuing, “What brings the three of you to this park? No room at the Inn? You look like the holy family for the fallen. Bless you all. What is the baby’s name?”

“Well,” answered Karl, before Gretchen interrupted,

“Frau Braun!” Karl pulled his eyes away from Trudi to offer Gretchen a small scolding stare.

“Excuse my manners,” Karl continued, “Gretchen, this is Gerthrud. She and I were in the same business, I suppose, here in Marburg before you were born.”

“Ach!” Gretchen’s smile grew wide as she replied, “Another priest! In these days of reform, will nobody wear the collar? I’m glad to meet you, Vater Trudi.” And she curtsied.

Trudi laughed, “I think he means we both minister to the poor sinner. He on Sunday and I on payday.”

Karl blushed. Gretchen answered, “I am looking for my son, the Jeremiah of whom we were speaking and whom you seem to know. I am very worried and very much in a hurry to find him. If you have seen him, he would have been with a handsome boar, and I am desperate to hear all that you know of his doings. But first, I would like to hear how you and Vater Karl came to be such close colleagues that you recognize each other after the span of my years.”

“We should be more focused, I think, Gretchen. And the baby would perhaps like her whey.”

“We all need our milk,” came Trudi’s riposte. “Strangely, I’m also looking for this woman’s son.”

“Herr Vater Karllein,” Gretchen explained, “My son is first in my thoughts, but after Jeremiah I have my whole town to consider. I would like to have this story.”

Karl bent at his creaky knees and lay his bundle in the grass. He took some of the soft cheese from its wrapping and busily got about squeezing the liquid so that it dripped down his extended index finger into the suckling mouth of the infant.

“You have reason,” Trudi complied, “Lot’s wife could not forsake Sodom and you should remember your neighbors as well as I remember my own and a sweet, old, sober Karl. You see, before he was this baby’s father,” Karl looked up and opened his mouth, but a wink from Trudi shut it again as she continued, “before he knelt

on the park grass in his splendor, more than thirty years ago, he was a much younger old priest.

“And I was a much younger Jungfrau than the innocent you meet under this tree. Like so many, I was born in the hospital but I did not have the great good fortune of many others born under St. Elizabeth’s auspices, my mother survived.

“She couldn’t take me back to Nieder-Weimar, the town where I was conceived so she stayed in Marburg. At first, she swept and cleaned for the sisters of St. Elizabeth. But she disappointed the nuns, I believe with a seminarian and so she left the hospital and took up residence in the alley behind the cathedral, bringing me along. We lived in a small barn where the altar boys kept hay for the horses and two secrets, one growing.

“As a girl, I was wild as a cat and leapt into windows when it rained but my mother was a lady. My grandfather, I am told, was a gentleman and a merchant who raised Mütti with estates in mind, rather than barns. Despite her fall, her gentility remained and so she died of pneumonia in the hospital on the first day my womanhood arrived.

“Those were the days when Jakob Fugger’s agents were everywhere our language is spoken, hawking forgivenesses for the sins of the people. Landgraff Philip was still a little boy and his mother was serving as regent. Bureaucrats and police captains spilled out across this city looking for sins of their own to prosecute and profit from.

“I tell you, Gretchen, those were hard times for anyone with bad intentions and good money. The competition for their absolution was intense and Marburg became a pious city.

“Our own great cathedral quickly became a target for the Archbishop in Mainz. He thought our people should repent more. The high priest had not reached his authority to live under pressure and he called his most trusted ecclesiastical advisors into council. Vater Karl, of course, was not invited.”

“Thank you for remembering that detail,” Karl rasped from his place on the ground.

“Of course, Karllein. You were born too old and have remained too sober ever since. I only hope your mother tasted beer at some point after your weaning and pleasure after you left home.

“I was, of course, not invited either. I was a secret only the youngest priests and students shared. But I had been hiding in a window when the council was gathering and listening at the door when it began. A young and ambitious priest, who had been enjoying a run of luck playing cards in the alley arrived late and caught me. He took me by the elbow and pulled me inside the council chamber.

“Vater Johann knew me well already, but he introduced me to the hierarchy as though he had found me in a wolf trap.

“‘It seems,’ he announced to the small synod in that deep voice of his, ‘that our rich are not sinful enough and our sinners are too poor. Perhaps this daughter of a fallen woman can help restore the balance.’

“And so, whenever, a wealthy merchant or magistrate came through town, he would be introduced to me at night and to the agents of the Archbishop in the morning.

“One day, a year or two later, when I was fifteen, this old priest,” she blew a kiss thirty years old to the man now feeding curds to a day-old infant while Gretchen’s smile shone on him like a halo, “found me sobbing outside the richest inn in the city. He asked me what would make such a young girl cry so close to prosperity. I told him, ‘my life has only just begun and already I have fallen.’ You see, nobody thought to offer me forgiveness for I had no money.

“I told him my story and, bless him, he tried so hard not to frown the entire time I was speaking but I never saw him smile until he saw the solution. I remember him finally speaking, ‘Jesus wept for us all and paid the price for all of our sins. Today, the poor weep for their own sins while the rich pay the price for theirs. Perhaps you will be happier among those who will weep for you than those who will pay for you.

“And so I ran away to a brothel and have been the most blessed of sinners ever since. And, I think, maybe, the most forgiven. Ach, Karl, I have missed your smile, though.”

Gretchen spoke after a moment. “Well, I can’t tell that story in Wolfshausen. Now, woman, why are you looking for my son here? Boys and pigs don’t fall out of trees.”