

# The Reformation of Wolfshausen

## The Temptation of Vater Karl, 1524

*“Because love grows by works of love, and man becomes better; but by pardons man does not grow better, only more free from penalty.”- 44th Thesis*

Frau Braun fairly trotted to Witwe Greulich’s home the following Week, a basket full of bread and cheese on her arm. The thick pillar of smoke from the Greulich home might have come from the hulls of Lorelei’s victims.

As she neared the house, she was surprised to see Julia Ausländer stepping out through the widow’s door. “Well, good day, Jullein!” she offered with a drawn smile a stranger would take for cheerful and a neighbor would recognize as a marker of mischief.

“Good day, Frau Braun. I see you’re bringing Hilda a basket. Stones from your husband’s field?”

“Of course not, Julia! We throw those stones over the fence.”

The two stared at one another for a silent moment, then another surprised at the first.

It was Frau Braun who broke the interruption. “Did you enjoy the tart?”

“Yes, of course. Thank you. I hope you found your pan where I left it.”

“On top of the cows’ stanchion? Yes. Heinrich brought it in after milking.”

“Listen,” offered Julia, along with a tone of intimacy. “Of us all, you were always the most dedicated to the church. Does the Czech evangelist not bother you? He really is very big and terribly wild.”

“No, neighbor, he doesn’t bother me. I know where my loyalties belong and Vater Johann, the high priest in Marburg, knows it too. Herr Braun gives him free cheese and I don’t say a word about it.”

“Was Joshua in battle ever as devout as a silent Frau Braun? But the carpenter, Dietrich, he belongs to the church in Marburg, does he not?”

“He certainly does, although you’d have left him to a sinful fate. Seeing him in his novice’s robe, mending the altar was the proudest moment of my life.”

“Then, don’t you worry about his future there? He is very young and not very worldly.”

“Not worldly in the slightest.”

“And yet, even now, in the castle above him, Philip, our magnanimous and rightful Prince, considers renouncing the church on behalf of us all. And here in little Wolfshausen, a burly separation of the faith walks tall and proud and sleeps with our priest.”

Frau Braun stood rigidly beneath a shaking head, which jutted forward and tucked back into her neck and cocked to one side. From a crisp frozen haystack out of earshot, a voyeur would have pitied Frau Ausländer’s abuse by Frau Braun. But a blind observer standing between the two would have known Julia’s victory, hearing only the wrinkling of the older woman’s collar, the erratic expulsion of churned droplets of her saliva and the steady rhythm of the younger woman’s elated, aggressive heartbeat.

Julia continued, “What is the likely fate of an innocent lamb during an era of liberation? Listen, sister. We have been neighbors but not very much friends. I worry for my children, your carpenter and Hilda’s outbound soul. What two have common cause more than two neighbors appalled at the state of the neighborhood and the riffraff next door?”

A small black dot rose from behind the forested ridge that pressed Wolfshausen against the river below. Frau Braun watched it rise and darken and swell in the clear, blue, frozen sky as it approached the pair and became a pigeon. Frau Braun took a step back, leaving the controversy with the bird to her neighbor. Julia Ausländer stepped forward into the gap as the bird caught a breeze and followed a n invisible corkscrew upward toward heaven’s gate.

“Frau Braun, I just asked Hilda for permission to address the group you started. As its founder, I ask your permission as well. I don’t know what can be done to preserve the church in our town but whatever is to be done, we should do together. If a new blanket for Vater Johann’s comfort is all we can offer, so be it. But if we can knit a blanket to smother dissent in our community, it will be my honor to knit it with you.”

“Heinrich likes heresy,” Frau Braun lamented.

“And my husband is as simple as his most submissive sheep. Unanimity is women’s work. Controversy is too complex for our poor men.”

“What can we poor women do? Most of us command nothing but our husbands.”

“You were certain of collective action by farmwives when Gretchen had Dietrich’s eye.”

“She never! She’s a piggy witch!”

Julia laughed. “OK, but the point is this: Are we not women? Do we not know how to separate two people who are growing too close? The secret is written on our feminine hearts.”

Frau Braun looked at her neighbor, scanning her from chin to waist and back up. Julia continued. “Who is the giant’s comfort? Who holds the giant’s attention? For everyone in town, the evangelist sleeps through our entrances, ignores our impositions and daydreams past all our daily activities. But Vater Karl, that small, old and unsanctioned priest, the giant looks at like the prophet Isaiah hoping for help from the hills above. And Vater Karl, although educated, moral and unmarried reveals himself to be as oblivious as a suitor. The titan’s admiration and affection he turns to comfort, confidence and consideration.

“Separate one from the other and the evangelist’s long journey will be in vain. He’ll return to his homeland, the fire of reformation a cold coal in his heart. Perhaps the company of other blasphemers will kindle it again. But if so, he will not come back here to Hessen. Think of all the tales of romance you have ever heard. Does the broken-hearted swain ever return to the site of the fatal tryst? Of course not! The unfortunate lovers always meet again in Venice. Or else, they’re eaten, embracing, by lions.

“Frau Braun, whatever Philip decides in his castle we will have to live with. We are his subjects, by the rights passed down from Saint Elizabeth. But our little town by this hillside in Hessen we can spare for your Church. Let our land fall from the castle heights, if it must, but let us take care that it doesn’t rise up beginning down here in Wolfshausen.”

Frau Braun by now was frowning down at the basket of gifts. Her heart burned with resentment at this young woman, so contrary and venal, who had schemed what the older woman should have thought through first. Frau Braun thought for a moment that Dietrich’s ascent had made her complacent. And then she thought how passive and careless her husband had been since they’d married.

“Julia?” Frau Braun addressed her neighbor at last.

“Yes?”

“I am bringing bread and cheese to the Witwe Greulich. Would you like some before I carry the rest inside?”

“Please,” answered Julia. “I’ll take one. I’m afraid otherwise you’ll throw leftover rolls into my husband’s field.”