

SINGING IN HARMONY, STITCHING IN TIME¹

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Spring 1911. Seated in her parlor on the farm they lease, Bertha Hansen shivers as she slips her needle through beige linen. Heinrich has booked a trip to Germany, a visit home, but as departure draws near, uneasiness envelops her like the white mist of their native marsh. Does danger await them, a great storm perhaps, and is the chill she feels a premonition? Or is it simple bad humor, a wife's irritation with a husband who squanders money on steamship tickets when they're saving to buy a farm?

Bertha stops mid-stitch, looks up from the letters she's embroidering on the new throw pillow. Might Heinrich be lying? Gripped by resolve even greater than when she chose orange wool for thread, she pilots the needle with renewed fervor. Her message to her sister Volina, *Forget Me Not*, must blaze among the blue forget-me-nots. Suddenly, as nimble stitches close the loop on the second *o*, they catch the sun. The *o* takes on the appearance of a small jewel, an amber nugget.

It may as well be crystal. Across a century Bertha sees me, Volina's granddaughter, miles from the prairie in my high desert home, lettering in tandem, interlocking our lives.



1. Second place winner in the 2019 Eugene England Essay Contest.

Schobuell, North Friesland

Summer 1972. With a distinct thud, I deposit the brown canvas suitcase I had to have, better-suited to a safari than a European tour, on the unpaved drive of the first farm north of Husum, a cozy-seeming harbor town. Like the novice traveler I am, I stuffed the bag so full it's painfully heavy.

The farm is a cluster of farmhouse, outbuildings, and gardens. A thick windbreak—birch and aspen, apple and plum—encircles it before giving way to pastureland in which placid cows loll or help themselves to abundant summer grass. Behind the fields, the farm is protected from the North Sea by something I've never seen before—the massive rampart of a steep-sloped dike, a band of worn green velvet.

Before I can make my way to a set of elaborately carved doors, one opens. Out onto the drive emerge a handsome, blue-eyed couple in their late twenties and two blond, wide-eyed boys. We exchange greetings as two women approach from a side entrance, the taller one reaching us with the no-nonsense stride of a Viking. A slower-moving woman arrives behind her, leaning on a cane. Her black, ankle-length skirt is matched to a long-sleeved blouse, black flecked with white flowers. Her hair, brushed upward and pinned at the crown, is the muted silver of my grandmother's. Wearing light mourning sixteen years after her husband's death, she's the portrait of an elderly German widow. I know in an instant this is the grand-aunt I've come to meet.

I'm a budding genealogist searching for my German roots, and Bertha is the only sibling of my grandmother's to return from America to live in Germany. Her face, lined and crinkled like fallen leaves, has even features. She greets me in English, and I'm relieved to see the gray-blue eyes, like a child's let out of school for summer, are lit with glee. Why, if you wave away the gray, the wrinkles, and the widow's weeds, she might be holding her big sister Volina's hand as they splash together in the North Sea.

"Can I stay about a week?" I ask, hoping not to seem presumptuous.

“*Du kannst en Jahr blieven!* You can stay a year!” replies the tall woman—she’s Grete, Bertha’s daughter-in-law—commandeering my bag like a Grand Tour porter as she whisks me inside. Her German sounds curiously closer to English than any I’ve heard before; it must be the Low German my mother told me to expect. We climb the stairs to Grete’s flat, where I’ll share her sunny bedroom with a view to Husum and the dike; Tante will join us from her downstairs flat for noon-day meals.

The parched landscape of Utah, where I’m a college student, is already fading from my mind, its midsummer browns and grays exchanged for a vibrant kaleidoscope: houses with steep roofs flank narrow streets while window boxes overflow with geraniums and petunias, lavender and lobelia. The windmill I saw as my train neared Husum appears again to offer its storybook thrill. Next, I picture six Nordic faces converging outside the gabled frontispiece of an eighteenth-century farmhouse. Last up, the image of that enormous dike amazes me as it foreshortens the horizon. “Climb to my ridge,” it seems to beckon, “and look west to the sea.”

Bertha and her family have transported me across their threshold into an older—and for me, mesmerizing—European world. If ancestral voices still echo in the shadow of the dike, I trust I can coax them into song.



I waken under a feather-filled comforter in a bed painted antique-white to find seven-year-old Holger waiting in his short summer pants. “One, two, three, four, six, seven, nine, ten,” he counts, then looks to me for approval. I clap readily. Grete comes from her kitchen to join us, two neat braids already wound around her head, and shoos Holger out so I can dress. I breakfast downstairs with Tante Bertha on brown bread spread with fresh tomato slices before she sends me off with Grete to the Lutheran parish offices.

The pastor, I learn, is on vacation for the next two weeks; no one else can unlock the safe. I make quick calculations. Staying here longer would give me time to climb the dike, walk the shore of the North Sea, and explore Husum—and get to know Tante Bertha and my cousins. I loved my mother’s stories about life on a farm—here’s my chance to live on one.

Grete’s way ahead of me. She tells me to join her.

Across from the offices, the church is surrounded by graves outlined in low hedges. I follow Grete as she crosses the road and navigates narrow pathways, stopping finally in front of a grave plot with three monuments. The most imposing—a black granite tombstone with gold engraving—tells me the plot belongs to “*der Familie Thomsen*” of Sterdebuell. Sterdebuell—my grandmother’s birthplace!

The black tombstone commemorates my great-grandparents; a smaller stone of gray granite is inscribed with the names of Grandma’s youngest brother and his wife; and Grete lets me know the third memorial, an iron cross without names, rests atop the grave of my great-great grandparents—all people I would have loved had I known them.



I came to Germany hoping to see the North Sea Grandma played in as a child, but I never expected anything like this.

Behind the *Schwein Stall* stretch some of the farm’s wide fields, grazed in by Grete’s cows. To cross them, follow Ingo, my five-year-old guide, and together we side-step cow pies, hop across drainage ditches and over fences, then scatter several sheep grazing on the steep landside of the dike. We climb to the top, where the horizon suddenly expands.

The dike’s seaward side slopes slowly into mudflats and shallow water—the coast-hugging North Sea, here called *das Wattenmeer*, the Wadden Sea. Across from me, reached by a causeway south of Schobuell, lies the large island of Nordstrand, home base for the trucking outfit that

employs Paul-Heinrich, Bertha's grandson and the boys' father. On the island's long east coast I can see a tall white silo as well as its reflection in the sea, and nearby, a windmill.

The intertidal clearing seems teeming with life. The seabed closest to me is hard-packed and sandy but shifts inevitably into vast, spongy stretches of brown-gray mud, black and gummy beneath—rich with silt, humus, and the tiny creatures, like sand-hoppers, that thrive in it.

The tide is swirling swiftly in with a sound new to me, between a sizzle and a low crackle; the air has a tang I've never smelled before. With Ingo, I descend the dike and enter the world of the Wadden Sea on *Lahnungen*, branches bound into bundles and lashed together to form low breakwaters. They're designed to catch sediment when the tides race in. Like the Dutch they imported to teach them, the people living on this low-lying coast are experts at land reclamation.

Perhaps as children my grandmother and Tante Bertha were fearless as Ingo on this coast, but I'm careful about my balance. The sea may be shallow here even at high tide, but I walk only a short way out over the water before I head back in.



From the Hansens' farm, I reach Husum by bike in twenty minutes. The town is small, the perfect size for someone who doesn't speak the language, and I never get lost. As a child at Disneyland, I loved pretending I was really sailing by windmills and thatched cottages on my Storyland Canal Boat, but make-believe isn't needed here. Boxes of colorful summer plantings highlight white, multi-paned windows on gray buildings as I walk the town's real cobblestone streets, ducking into and out of real shops.

In the museum I learn that, centuries ago, colossal floods swamped the land in front of Husum, and a quiet inland village evolved into a bustling harbor town. Today it's a draw for the German tourists with

whom I enjoy strolling beside the inner harbor—both when the colorful boats are floating at high tide and when the receding sea strands them on the mud floor. The outer harbor is equipped with locks, and when I walk out to see them, I ponder the immense fury of the storm that would lead to their closing.

I landed in Paris and will visit Copenhagen, Dublin, and London before I leave Europe, but I won't feel any more at home than I do in Husum. Wartime bombs missed the town's historic center, still lined with gabled houses and shops in the Dutch style. Some date from the early 1600s, and I picture Bertha and Volina entering the same shops as young women to finger bolts of cloth and purchase marzipan.

In the market square is a large fountain. Above it stands the bronze statue of Tine, a young woman in blouse and vest, long skirt, apron, and wooden clogs. Her hair is tucked inside a scarf against the wind; she's looking out to sea, holding an oar. Perhaps she's even standing on a dike. Holger and Ingo have come to town with me today, and though I snap a photo of them standing at the fountain rim, it's the image of Tine that I take away with me when we leave Husum.



Grete and I flip our kick-stands outside the parish offices. The pastor, a man of medium height and miss-nothing eyes, has finally returned, and he invites us into his office. He knows what I'm here for and agreeably lugs to the desk several of the parish's old registers—cool, brittle leaves bound in pigskin the color of raw amber.

I ask to see the death records for the early 1800s. After he opens to the entries and shows me how the list is arranged, our eyes move down the pages, pausing finally at a line of thin brown script. Vollig Volquardsen, mother of the great-great-grandmother buried beneath the iron cross, died on July 26, 1806, age thirty-four. Below Vollig's entry is one for her youngest child, a year-old daughter, who follows her three months later.

The thrill of pushing back our family tree another generation is tempered as I imagine my way into Vollig's too-short, hard-working life—the record reveals she bore five children before her early death. I want to see what her baptismal record can tell me. The pastor locates the list of babies christened over the stone font in July 1772—two hundred years ago. He explains that the larger, underlined name is the child's; the smaller names that follow are the parents'. Again our eyes move down the list of entries, until there it is.

“Vollig,” the pastor reads. “Daughter of Harre Volquardsen and Christina, daughter of Albert Hansen and Catharina.” I'm back two more generations, and, even knowing Vollig will grow up to leave five children motherless, the feeling is heady. Grete is smiling, too, but I know it won't do to keep her waiting while I page through old books looking for ancestors. I promise the pastor I'll be back.

At sacrament meeting, two rail stops away from Husum, I meet the friendly, English-speaking Sister Benn, a genealogist. She picks me up on Monday, and we drive to Hattstedt. Digging in, we locate many names, but like a gold prospector titillated by her first nuggets, I want more.

Three days later we're back again—more names, more gold, more gold fever. I vow to return to North Friesland to do more panning. I picture my future children climbing over the dike with me to wade into the Wadden Sea.

That evening, when I tell Tante I'll be leaving at the end of the week, she's visibly shaken. She thought we had more time.



The morning's shopping secure in my bike's basket, I set out for Schobuell. I'm sailing along the coast road, waiting to overtake the hedges of wild roses near the farm, when I puncture a tire. I walk the bike the remaining distance and arrive late for our mid-day meal. Tante is waiting in the drive, leaning on her cane with worry in her eyes—and a little ire. “Where

have you been?” she demands. “Why are you late? Grete prepared *Eis* for you, and it melted!” Neither Grete nor Bertha has a refrigerator yet.

Germans like their windows without screens, so later, with the enthusiasm of a big-game hunter, I track and swat flies in Tante’s flat. Whack! “Dead fly!” I exclaim in German. Whack! “*Tot Fliege.*” Whack! “*Tot Fliege.*” It’s the small entertainment I offer a very dear woman.

She tells me a linguistic researcher taped her years ago speaking Frisian, one of the last speakers of my family’s dialect. I want to hear the tape, but it’s somewhere in Kiel. I settle for listening to her sweet-talk Hansi, her pet parakeet.



One last time, as Tante and I sit together at the parlor table, she shares old family photos. I ask if I could perhaps take them to Husum to see about copies. I promise to be careful.

She pushes the photos toward me. “They’re for you.” She looks away.

“But we can make copies!”

“They’re yours.” She says it almost dismissively.

“Your family,” I protest. “Paul-Heinrich. The *kinder!* Surely they’d like to have these someday.”

She shrugs. She turns to look at me. Though her gray-blue eyes are moist, her gaze is steady.

Except for a soft, ever-present buzzing, the room falls silent. One large fly lands suddenly among the photos. I brush it away and take my grand-aunt’s hand. I say, “Grete thinks when I’m a *Grossmutter*, the young will ask me about our family. If they do, I’ll tell them about my summer on the Hansen farm. I’ll tell them about you.”



The car is here to drive me to the city of Flensburg on the Danish border, where trains depart for Copenhagen. Ingo has gotten up early so he can say good-bye. Grete carries out my bag, a little lighter since I winnowed its contents and mailed home a package. The bag also carries something new. Tante Bertha's photos travel now in my safari suitcase.

Tante is crying. As the car rolls down the long drive to the road, I watch Tante, Grete, and Ingo through the rear window.



Schleswig-Holstein and Salt Lake City

2010–2013. I'm sitting at a computer in the Department of Frisian Studies, headphones covering my ears. As I listen, rain clouds putty the sky and lilacs purple the city's streets in copious bloom. After thirty-eight years, a voice I love is speaking again, words in my lost ancestral dialect fill the computer screen, and I want this moment I've waited for so long to last. The office is bathed in the timid sunshine of a Baltic spring. It is May along the fjord, and the city of Kiel has ushered in another day of gentle breezes and sudden showers.

Though I took my mother to meet Bertha five years after my first visit, she died a month before we could arrive. Today her voice is music to me, its cadences clear and strong, even confident. The department chair says he couldn't have prepared this surprise for me if, like the others in the project, Bertha had spoken off-the-cuff. The tape would have taken longer to transcribe, and the professors have few minutes to spare with research funds dwindling. Your grand-aunt, he tells me, must have written out her remarks before the chair's retired colleague, a Swedish linguist, showed up packing a reel-to-reel tape recorder.

I laugh as I recall the message on a pillow that found its way to me. I tell him Bertha Hansen, *née* Thomsen, *wanted* to be remembered.

No time remains today to translate Bertha's Frisian, but the professor believes I've made a friend of the retired linguist? Perhaps he can help me out? And so I leave by bus for the railway station, carrying my find, a Frisian printout, and I wipe away tears on the train back to Husum. So what if the transcript is code to me? What matters is the voice, louder than the ancestral echoes I once hoped for in the shadow of the dike, more enduring, ultimately, than the dike itself.

I'm delighted later when the Swedish linguist promises to translate the pages for me, but even a professor emeritus has many projects, and mine falls to one side.

Two years go by, and I move to North Friesland to write chapters of a memoir during my sabbatical. Suddenly, half-way through my leave, I fall dangerously ill with a rare diagnosis. Ambulances carry me from one hospital to the next, from Husum on the North Sea to Flensburg on the Baltic. A dedicated neurosurgeon operates. I come back from the brink. I will walk again; I will write.

A get-well card arrives at the hospital from the Swedish linguist and his Finnish wife. I missed a lunch with them when I became ill, and I take advantage of my situation now to ask a favor. Soon an attachment arrives in formal High German. After I return to North Friesland, a friend turns the German into English and I read Bertha's memoir in my own language.

In the spring a Danish journalist interviews me for his paper, and when the story is picked up, interest grows in my upcoming presentation. On a summer evening four decades after my first encounter with the North Frisian dikes, a crowd listens to me present an excerpt in English before Frisian actors read the German version of "Watermarked."

My sabbatical is ending now, and I visit the Hansen plot in the Schobuell churchyard to bid farewell to Tante Bertha—and to her grandson Paul-Heinrich, who died too young, and to willing-hearted Grete. The next day I travel home.

When I arrive, wilting in Utah's heat, I walk past the antique album my mother gave me, the one I filled with photos of the eleven Thomsen children and display on the tea cart my father loved. I climb the stairs. I pass the enlarged photo of the old Thomsen farmhouse in its dark carved frame, enter my bedroom, and, kneeling by the bed, pull out from under it two long cardboard boxes. I shake the dust from their lids, take the photos out, and make piles of them on the rug beside me.

I haven't unpacked yet, neither my suitcases nor the items I stored before I left for Europe. Inside its storage bag, Tante's beige pillow remains safe, still as it came to me with "Forg . . . Me Not" in threadbare orange, the missing letters torn away with a thin triangle of cloth.

I spread out the photos on the rug. Lifting my head a moment, I look across the room to the portrait I painted after my first visit to North Friesland. In it, an elderly woman stands at a table in her kitchen, now the spare room where last week I stored some boxes. Wearing a long black house dress, the woman extends her right arm over the table; her hair, swept up and pinned at the crown, resembles tarnished silver. Curtains of white gauze filter sunlight at the window; in the garden beyond, wind blows a black dress hanging on the line. It is morning on the Hansen farm, and while I sort the photos she entrusted to me, Tante Bertha waters her geraniums.

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