

WOLFENBÜTTEL

Megan Weiler

I held a borrowed umbrella in one hand and a piece of paper with directions on it in the other. The rain was only a soft drizzle. I had come a long way by train to a remote town in northern Germany to visit my former nanny, who was ninety years old. The place felt like the end of the world. Its medieval center was picturesque, full of freshly painted half-timber houses. The town castle was strawberry-colored. Bakery windows were crammed with pastries and pretzels, and over the market in the square hung a scent of frying sausages.

Elfriede Blume had already been old when my brother and I were small, living in southern Germany. She was like a grandmother to us, yet we always called her Frau Blume, addressing her in the polite form. She had recently moved up here to live with her Polish nephew Jurek. Frau Blume had no children of her own, but we knew that this Jurek, whom we had never met, was as close to her as a son.

“There is a problem,” Jurek had said the day before when I called to ask what time I should come. “My aunt is very ill.”

But he couldn’t tell me what was wrong. Until that moment there had been no mention at all of illness. Frau Blume’s voice, when she came to the phone, sounded unnatural, swimming and distant, like someone coming out of anesthesia. She used the word *fate* repeatedly. “Fate holds all the cards,” she told me sadly.

And she said she wanted to give me a doll that played *die Schicksalsmelodie*—“Fate’s Melody”—to remember her by.

I was shocked to hear her speaking like this. Frau Blume had always been a cheerful person who had lifted our spirits or at least made us laugh with her homespun sayings and adages. Even as children, my brother and I knew that she had a simple mentality. It seemed as if the only thing that could make her sad was if we didn’t praise and finish to the last bite the food that she prepared for us.

I had left Germany to study in America and had settled there. I would go back every summer to visit friends and relatives, including aunts and uncles who lived in distant towns. In the beginning I went from affection and loyalty, relishing the role of the adventurer who returns. As time went on and the number of friends and relatives dwindled, a strange compulsion drove me to continue making what increasingly seemed like dutiful pilgrimages. Perhaps I didn’t want to be forgotten. Or perhaps I wanted to show that I was the most loyal person in the world.

Frau Blume, when I visited her, would always dredge up the same two or three old memories, and would annoy me by reminding me how, whenever she had baked a crumb cake, “I’d turn my back for five minutes, and when I looked again, half of it was gone!” She herself had hardly changed over the years. She was small in stature, with a friendly round face, big cheeks, little round brown eyes, and a broad, upturned nose. When I was a child she was always telling me to stop reading and go play outside. “The sun is shining! You’re so pale!” She taught us how to play canasta and rummy. She cooked delicious, heavy meals for us at lunchtime, beef roulades or chicken with homemade French fries. Ravenous after school, I couldn’t hold myself back from taking seconds, and I was getting to be plump. Her notion of reassuring me was to say that my plumpness was just *Backfischspeck*—“baked fish fat.” I didn’t know why a young girl should be called a baked fish, or how this was supposed to make me feel any better.

When I tried to diet, she’d proclaim: “To be beautiful one must suffer!” And when I took too much food on my plate: “The eyes are bigger than the stomach!” Her favorite adage was a rhyme:

We grow wise for the day that’s past
When it’s time to go to bed,
But never wise enough
For the day that lies ahead.

Frau Blume had often talked about her Polish nephew Jurek. He was a scholar: he had written several books about Copernicus. Yet as far as I knew he had never been employed. He owned a house in the countryside near Warsaw, of which Frau Blume used to say, “If only he could sell it, it would make him a millionaire!” But since he couldn’t sell it, she used to send him money from her own

meager salary. She was always shipping off care packages to her Polish relations, who were greedy for the luxuries that we in the West took for granted. It seemed they were never satisfied no matter how much she sent.

A note of impatience crept into Frau Blume's voice whenever she spoke of Jurek. He was still a bachelor, still unemployed! Why couldn't he get married and find a job? Even working as a taxi driver would be something! But no, he was above that. All he cared about was his books and articles, which did no one any good.

"He has his head in the clouds!"

And he kept working on his house, his dacha. With the help of the caretaker he was fixing it up to be "an international meeting place for historians and philosophers." Frau Blume's voice, in quoting him, dripped with sarcasm. She scoffed, yet would describe with a certain admiration her nephew's latest contrivance for the conference room that he dreamed would one day be filled with scholars from all over the world. Although she never said so, we eventually understood that the man she referred to dismissively as "the caretaker," a retired army major named Staszek, was Jurek's life companion.

Once, while visiting Frau Blume, I saw a letter of Jurek's, which began, *Herzallerliebste Tante*—"Heart's dearest Aunt." This unctuous phrase, doubtless the prelude to a request for money, gave me a bad feeling. I began to think of Jurek in a sinister light, and my interest in him increased.

Another time, I had just missed him: he had left the day before my arrival. Frau Blume had had a kidney operation, and before going into the hospital she had summoned her nephew all the way from Warsaw, because he was her heir and she might die.

But the operation had gone well.

"And now," she told me, "I had to let him stay with me for a whole week, and give him my own bedroom to use, because, you know, he needs space and privacy to do his writing."

Frau Blume and her friend Marga, who had come to look after her, slept together on the sofa bed in the living room.

One evening, Frau Blume recounted, she had procured a dinner invitation for Jurek from some friends, so that he would not become bored in the company of two old women. He returned late at night, long after she and Marga had gone to sleep.

"You should have seen him," she told me. "You would have laughed yourself sick!"

Jurek was drunk. Frau Blume's friends had plied him with glass after glass of wine, all the while asking him questions about the books he was writing and pretending to be fascinated, even though they had no idea what he was talking about.

It was nearly one o'clock in the morning. Jurek was drunk and elated. He threw himself on his aunt, hugging and kissing her.

“Help! Stop!” she cried out, struggling to free herself from his embrace. “Go and kiss Marga!”

“No, no!” shrieked Marga, hiding her head under the covers.

He began to waltz round and round Frau Blume’s little living room. “Everybody loves me,” he sang, “everybody loves me.”

After the fall of the Soviet Union, Jurek, now well over fifty, managed to get a sinecure at a scholarly institute in Germany. Frau Blume bought an apartment in the same town for both of them. It was supposed to be a mutually useful arrangement, since she would need someone to take care of her in her old age. But she was beside herself when she discovered, after moving in, that Jurek had emptied their entire housekeeping account to buy himself nice furnishings. I had written her a letter strongly suggesting that it was not too late to reconsider living with him.

A bizarre thought had popped into my mind after our telephone conversation the day before. I wondered if Jurek might have begun poisoning his aunt, so as to get at his inheritance more quickly.

My directions led me to an address outside the town center, in a neighborhood of modern apartment blocks, all alike, as clean and ugly as could be. I was studying the numbers on a complex of buildings when I saw a man in a beige raincoat and fedora standing in front of one of the doors. We glanced uncertainly at each other; then, as I came closer, we both began to smile and stare at the same time.

For some reason I had always imagined Jurek as blond and sallow. Instead, the man before me had grey hair, pink skin, and pale blue eyes. His fleshy lips, smiling, revealed uneven yellow teeth. Rather than shaking my proffered hand, he kissed it, bowing elaborately, then gestured for me to go ahead of him into the building. As he followed me up the stairs, it occurred to me that he had probably seen my letter.

Frau Blume was sitting on a chair just inside the apartment door, waiting for me. She used a cane to get up out of the chair.

“Oh, my dear, how nice to see you!” she exclaimed, adding suspiciously: “But why did you come?” She was unable to believe that I had traveled all this way just to visit her.

She had lost her former comfortable rotundity and seemed shrunken to almost nothing. Her hair had grown out; it was combed away from her face and held in back with a clip, which oddly gave the effect of a young girl. She was dressed in zebra-striped stretch pants and an embroidered vest.

She really did look unwell, although she said that today she was feeling better. “At least I was able to get out of bed for your visit.” She wavered unsteadily on her feet; when I took her arm, she leaned on me heavily.

As we walked toward her room, where the coffee table had been set, I

peered into the other two rooms in the apartment, Jurek's study and bedroom. They were furnished with beautiful antiques that made one forget one was in a modern building.

Frau Blume was saying: "Isn't she a pretty girl, Jurek? You still look like twenty-five! So—how do you like each other? You'd make such a nice couple!"

Years ago, she had expressed her disappointment in the husband I'd found by saying, "I always imagined someone tall and blond for you, a Nordic type!"

She said it again now.

Frau Blume's room couldn't have been more different from Jurek's. The largest of the three, it was carpeted in cherry red, with glossy white furniture. The shelves were crowded with mementos from the many trips she had taken. Frau Blume was a brave soul who used to take the cheapest bus tours to exotic places. She would spend two weeks viewing the sights through dirty windows, eating from tins and sleeping in cubicles smaller than coffins, and return happy because she had seen another part of the world. She could spend her vacation on a beach in Mallorca jam-packed with German tourists and come back convinced that she had been in paradise. And from each of her trips she had brought back some trinket, such as a plastic doll in folklore dress, that she found charming.

The table was set with the familiar china with the brown and orange stripe. There was half of a store-bought marble cake and a pot of hot water with a jar of instant coffee beside it. I sat in the middle between Frau Blume and Jurek. It turned out none of us wanted coffee. It didn't agree with Frau Blume's medicine; I was afraid of not sleeping at night; and Jurek said that the last time he'd drunk coffee it had given him amnesia for two days.

I said I couldn't believe this.

"Yes, it's true! I had files in my computer that I didn't recognize."

"He stole my sleep last night," Frau Blume said. "I didn't sleep all night because of him. I'll tell you how it happened."

She had asked Jurek to turn off the heat when he came to say good night, and instead, in the dark, he made a mistake and turned it "all the way up to seven." She'd lain there sweating, her legs on top of the covers. "I thought my fever was rising, now for sure I was getting seriously ill, and just when you were coming to visit me! I took a sleeping pill at ten, and then I took another one at two, all for nothing."

More than once she said, "He robbed me of my sleep all last night."

In fact she was treating Jurek quite badly, ordering him about and barely looking at him. While he was in the kitchen fetching herbal tea bags, she suddenly snatched up the box of chocolates I had brought and placed them by the foot of her chair, as if to prevent her nephew from getting at them.

Then, with an air of getting down to business, she showed me the figurine

that she wanted to give me. It was a porcelain lady in a blue dress attached to a music box.

“I want you to have this. It plays the song from that sad movie, I don’t remember what it was called but I’m sure you know it. It was so sad, when she dies at the end you have to cry. I think the tune is called ‘Fate’s Melody.’”

She wound the doll up and took my hand and looked at me with a sorrowful expression as we listened, her head cocked to one side. It was the theme song from the old American movie *Love Story*. I realized that Frau Blume wanted to be wept over, and felt myself involuntarily hardening a bit.

Jurek stayed tactfully in the kitchen until it was over. When he came back to the table I asked him about his work. He said he was writing his “third and last” book, a history of humanistic enlightenment, which would show “the universality of the humanist ethic.”

Frau Blume interrupted him: “It’s too bad. It really is too bad.”

“What’s too bad?” I asked, touching her arm.

“That my sense of humor is gone today.”

This was very unlike the Frau Blume I knew and loved. I had never seen her so low. To try to cheer her up, I began to question her about the past, when she had been a nursemaid in Poland. She had worked for a Jewish family, and she said she remembered clearly the day, September 1, 1939, when Warsaw was attacked. They were all sitting on the terrace and they thought the big booms in the distance were just some sort of test. When it turned out they were real bombardments, Frau Blume’s employers decided to flee toward the East. They offered to take “Elfi” with them. But she said no, thanks; she’d wait until the Germans arrived and return to Germany with their help.

And now she really did seem more cheerful, telling how, rather than stand at the back of the long line of Germans waiting to be repatriated, she had run straight to the front, ignoring the outraged cries of the people in line. “I was always the cheekiest of them all.” By pleading with an officer, she managed to secure places for herself and her two girlfriends on a freight train leaving the very next morning.

“What a jolly mood there was on that train! We traveled for several days, the floor was covered with straw, and we all slept side by side—men, women, children, soldiers, all mixed up. No one bothered the others, whether they snored or not.”

This last remark was directed sidewise at Jurek. I remembered how, years ago, when our parents traveled and Frau Blume slept at our house, she had snored so loudly that the furniture vibrated. My brother and I would get up and stare at her, giggling, astonished that so much noise could come out of such a small person.

Then Frau Blume told me how, some years later, she had helped her sister and her sister's Polish husband and their child, Jurek.

"I can still see him standing there, in his little white fur coat. When I asked him what his name was, he said 'Mishka.' That means 'little mouse' in Polish."

I had to smile at this, but refrained from looking in Jurek's direction.

It was 1944, and Jurek's father was trying to escape recruitment for the Polish uprising in Warsaw. Frau Blume had set the family up to stay with her relatives in Silesia. As she recounted these long-gone events, Frau Blume kept mistaking her nephew for his father and he had to correct her again and again. "That wasn't I, that was my father."

I knew nothing about the Polish uprising in Warsaw, although I had probably learned about it in school. I knew little about Poland in general. My impression was that it was a wretched country, the perennial victim of history. And, of course, like everyone else, I knew that in this chapter of history, one of the darkest of all, it had played a role in which trains figured prominently.

Jurek turned to me: "We were in Silesia when the war ended. The thing I don't understand is why my parents moved back to Warsaw then, when they would have had the opportunity to go west."

"Why don't you ask your father?" Frau Blume said with a resentful emphasis. "He's still alive, isn't he?"

Jurek looked at me as he answered the question. "I don't think I'd get an honest answer. When the Nazis came my father wore an SA uniform, under Stalin he was a Stalinist. He doesn't know what truth means. For him everything is strategy."

He added that his father had nearly completed his training as a lawyer when the war broke out.

"Perhaps," I suggested politely, "he wanted to return to Warsaw so that he could finish his studies and practice his profession."

"Oh, no. My father was too great a *lover* ever to do anything professionally. He had no time for that. Every two or three months he fell in love with another woman. The habit caused him to fall into considerable debt, which, as you can imagine, isn't easy to do under socialism. This went on," Jurek concluded matter-of-factly, "until he lost his eyesight."

Frau Blume cried out with force: "His mother gave him everything! She sold all her land only so that he could continue his whoring!"

Jurek had chilled champagne in my honor, but none of us really wanted that either. It didn't agree with Frau Blume's medicine; it was too early in the afternoon for me; and Jurek said that he'd had too much prosecco at a luncheon. He opened the bottle nonetheless and poured it. I noticed his hands, which were small and soft and rather pudgy.

I was beginning to have some sympathy for him, though. He just wanted to live his life as a scholar. So what if he was a bit of a freeloader? His aunt had probably trained him to be dependent on her from a young age. She had needed and used him as well. And it occurred to me that she herself had implanted my prejudices against Jurek, by the way she had ridiculed him and made him look bad, although he was closer to her than anyone else in the world.

Frau Blume did not approve of the courses in life that my brother and I had chosen, either. She despised any pursuit, like writing or painting, that did not make money. In order to express her disdain for my brother's decision to become an artist, she used to say that if someone were to give her a painting by Picasso, she would throw it right in the garbage.

This was the first time I had ever heard her talk about her own life. Like most Germans of her generation, she did not like to discuss the past. I knew that she had been married very briefly, perhaps only a few months, before her husband went off to war and died.

"Your memories are so interesting," I said to her now. "You should write a book so that other people can read all about what you have experienced. Perhaps Jurek could help you."

Jurek said that he'd had the same idea, and had offered to type what his aunt dictated. We both looked at her encouragingly, but she pretended not to hear our suggestion.

"Fate holds all the cards," she said again, ignoring her little Mishka, who must have turned out to look just like his father. "The good ones and the bad ones. And if it has ordained that I should be ill just when you have come all this way to visit me . . ."

"Oh, that doesn't matter," I said. "We can still enjoy each other's company." Soon after this Frau Blume said she wanted to go back to bed.

"But Jurek will accompany you and show you the town. Won't you, Jurek?"

It was almost evening and the sky had cleared. I carried the umbrella folded in my hand. Jurek had put on a large soft black cap, different from the hat he had worn when he waited for me in front of the door. It felt a little awkward and at the same time oddly natural to be walking together like this. Frau Blume's remark about our being "a nice couple" linked us, through its absurdity, in a silent understanding.

I was upset over the way Frau Blume and I had parted. She had remained sitting in her chair while I hugged her. In the past, she would have given me a tight hug in return; but instead she just sat there passively, with a distant, preoccupied expression on her face. I'd said: "Take care of yourself and get better! I'll see you again soon!"

And I had waved at her with a bright smile as I went out the door.

To put this lie out of my mind, I followed it up with another, remarking to Jurek how mentally acute his aunt still was, for her age.

But Jurek said: "Didn't you notice how she kept mistaking me for my father? And recently, she picked a fight with Staszek for no reason at all, completely out of the blue."

"She picked a fight?"

"Yes—she said to him: 'I don't want you ever to help me again! I haven't yet sunk so low that I have to let myself be helped by a Pole!'

"Of course," he added, "she hates what I do, just as she hates what you and your brother do." Then, as if impatiently brushing all falsehoods aside, he said he wasn't at all sure his aunt would recover from this illness. "The doctor hinted at the possibility of a tumor, and he said that her heart isn't very strong."

I was silent, confused. I recalled my previous suspicion about Jurek. Then I remembered how Frau Blume had treated him, and I thought that the hunger for affection could make people cruel. She hated Staszek, I thought, out of jealousy. She would have liked me and Jurek to be a couple so that she could govern her nephew from the inside, possessing him completely.

Where was Staszek, anyway? His name hadn't come up in the apartment, and now Jurek was talking as if I should know him. Was he living nearby? It was all so strange that I didn't know how to ask.

We walked on in silence. The air was mild and beautiful between the old houses. Despite everything, this very fact that we were able to walk side by side, in silence, created an odd companionability. In the gathering dusk I felt buoyant, floating, pleasantly loosed from my moorings. I felt as if we were in Poland now—a dark, mysterious place. A desire to laugh came over me out of nowhere.

We were in the oldest part of town. Jurek told me that the name of the street was *Krumme Straße*, Crooked Street. Not only was the street crooked, he explained, but all the houses in it were warped because for centuries they had been sinking unevenly into the ground.

As we came to the end of the street where it opened into a square, suddenly Jurek was greeting a young, dark-skinned man who carried a little girl in his arms.

"Hallo!"

"Do you remember me?"

"Of course!"

I felt like laughing again, as if I were being tickled. They both spoke German with heavy accents, and their exchange of greetings was like a comedy skit.

The man's name was Salvatore. Jurek introduced him to me, saying: "He was a friend of my boss at the Institute, who hanged himself last year."

They clasped each other's hands.

"It was so terrible."

“I felt I should have known. I should have been able to do something.”

Turning again to me, Jurek explained in a neutral tone that his boss had killed himself because the funds for his Institute were drying up.

This seemed scarcely believable, but I didn’t say anything.

“I am so happy to have met you,” Salvatore said. “Come to my house to have coffee. Come now. Please.” His breath smelled strongly of wine. He gazed entreatingly at us. “*Please.*”

Jurek looked at me and said: “I am accompanying this young lady home and am at her disposal. So it depends on her.”

“Yes, please, come,” Salvatore said, looking at me.

“All right,” I said, “but only for a little while, because the friends with whom I’m staying are expecting me for dinner.”

That wasn’t true, but it somehow reassured me to say it.

“Chiara’s mother will be happy to see you,” Salvatore said, bouncing his baby as we turned and began walking back through *Krumme Straße*. His feet wove a little as he walked. Jurek said, “Why don’t we take the lady in the middle.”

I told Salvatore that I had come to visit Jurek’s aunt, who had been my nanny.

“Isn’t it wonderful!” Jurek said. “To think that such romantic people still exist! Let us say, a woman with a heart.” And he put his arm around me.

I was startled. I felt that Jurek had seen through me. I admitted to myself on the spot that it was from curiosity, more than from affection, that I had traveled so far. I had wanted to meet this man who was like a part of Frau Blume we had never seen—her shadow side.

Jurek told me that Salvatore owned an Italian restaurant in town. “His wife is from Poland, and she is a philologist, like myself.”

It was dark by now and the streetlights had come on. We entered one of the old warped houses and went up the stairs. I thought that our host in his inebriated enthusiasm was making a terrible mistake, and his wife would be dismayed to have unannounced visitors. But the apartment was as spotlessly clean and Salvatore’s wife as elegantly dressed and made up as if she had in fact been expecting us.

While Jurek and Salvatore sat on the couch discussing their dead friend, I chatted with Beata. She was blond and broadly built and the white skin on her face glistened with moisturizing cream. She looked very different from Salvatore, with his fine Mediterranean features. “Ever since I had the baby,” she said, “I have not been able to work on my doctoral thesis. Especially with Salvatore spending so much time at the restaurant. I have to watch her every minute of the day.” And she smiled, watching Chiara totter about the room.

She said she had come to Germany to study, but then she had met Salvatore. It hadn’t been difficult for her to learn Italian and German, since she had learned

five languages at her school in Poland. In the same day, she'd have classes in Latin, Greek, Russian, English, and French. "It wasn't a problem." Her sister lived in Paris and was married to a Frenchman.

Beata's manner of talking about herself was pleasant enough, but the discreet highlighting of her accomplishments was reminiscent of a marriage advertisement, as if she had learned to sell herself in a certain way. It probably had something to do with Poland's history, I thought. I remembered Frau Blume. Her image was already small and distant, as if I had left her behind a long time ago. Frau Blume, who was gripping on to her life so fiercely that she'd had no strength left to hug me. Or perhaps she was angry at me. For the whole past hour I had forgotten her.

Now and then, Beata and Jurek would speak briefly to each other in Polish. I had the disturbing feeling that everything that was being said in German was just play or fluff, but in Polish they were saying their real thoughts, which were serious and adult, hard, with no illusions or pretenses. If only I could understand Polish, many things would become clear.

After an appropriate amount of time, Jurek met my eye. Like a well-rehearsed old couple, we rose to our feet at the same moment.

Jurek said: "I'll just quickly show you the Institute on our way."

It was getting chilly, and as we turned corner after corner, I felt lost.

He stopped and we stood looking through a black wrought-iron gate at a low, ancient building.

"Many of the older scholars who were my mentors when I first arrived here have since died," he said. "I have few friends left."

After a silence he went on. "Once, a very famous Polish philosopher, who is now teaching at Oxford, came to visit the Institute. This man is trying to save socialism within the confines of philosophy, after its failure in the real world. He is such an eminent thinker, such a great mind, that no one else dared to speak to him after his lecture. Only I felt myself so insignificant that I had no compunctions. We ended up talking for several hours. It was one of the most wonderful moments of my life."

As he told me this story, I found myself liking Jurek.

"I have to confess something to you," he said as we walked on through the dark streets toward the house where I was staying. He paused and then said: "I have joined the Freemasons society here."

Another wave of laughter washed over me soundlessly, as if from behind. It was as though he had pulled out, with pomp and circumstance, a meaningless antiquarian relic. I asked him what the Freemasons meant, these days.

While he spoke I glanced up into the sky between the houses. It was a cold, blue, empty night. We shook hands goodbye. I looked after his diminishing form and felt rising up in me something like a ravenous hunger to live.