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Through Heavy Water

By Linda Frazee Baker ©

Not quite three weeks after they arrived in Germany, Matt Coleman came home one evening to find his wife Mara hurling books and clothes into the same boxes from which she had so recently removed them.

They had come from Bloomington Indiana, where he had been a graduate student in physics and Mara had practiced real estate law. It was 1974, inflation and unemployment were in double digits, and Nixon's budget cuts meant there were no jobs for Matt at home. With his adviser's encouragement, he reluctantly applied for a junior scientist position at the *Institut*. But after less than a month, Mara had decided to depart. She could not make an independent life for herself here, she said. She was going back, at least for a while.

After the initial shock, it was some comfort if a surprise that Matt rather liked Germany--or, as his family had called it, "the other side." He came from a long line of Indiana farmers who had fled little Bavarian towns, and when he strolled along the Rhine at night, the lights on a ship moving slowly over the water gave him a strange feeling of having finally come home. Tiny fragments of his childhood surged into his mind. What he had once thought of as family eccentricities he saw now as typical German attitudes--like the way his mother

always kept the thermostat at 63 degrees all winter long, using the savings to buy a Sunday rib roast from the best butcher in town. He remembered too--oh indelible childhood memory!--the velvet dresses she had kept in her back closet "for good," all smelling of flower-scented perfumes and other smells less easy to define. He understood now that German culture was a culture of extremes.

Without Mara, of course, Matt felt very much at loose ends. He bought a used Peugeot sports convertible with chipped yellow paint and drove to rock concerts in the Eifel at speeds he would once have thought reckless. Jostled by leather-jacketed youths hurling beer bottles down onto the stage, he was torn between horror and a secret envy of the spontaneity of people with so little to lose. Sunday afternoons he walked through the ancient forest side-by side with the pensioners, feathered Bavarian hats atop their heads and gnarled walking sticks in one hand. On the way home he would stop off at the grand cafe on the Marktplatz, all blazing lights and chrome surfaces. With a kind of loneliness he had never known before he would pour a bit of evaporated milk into his coffee and stare at its exotic inhabitants with their aquiline European features and their elegant, expensive clothes. He saw himself now as a heavy-set man who faced the world in a pair of hopelessly unfashionable maroon trousers, chequered shirt, and scuffed

shoes. Afterwards he would stop in the nearby movie house and buy an ice cream from the little old ladies in black aprons who hawked sweets during the commercials that preceded the film. He understood so little German it was like watching a silent film, but it was something to do.

When the divorce papers arrived by registered mail, Matt was distressed but not surprised. At first he and Mara had written every day, passionate and tearful letters, but as time passed they had less and less to say. After reading the papers through, Matt scrawled his name in a script as unintelligible as the old *Fraktur* and mailed them back. His first article had just been accepted at *Phys Rev Letters*, and he was quite excited about his next cyclotron experiment.

Winter came, and the rock concerts ended. Matt found he missed driving 175 kilometers an hour on the autobahn, so Sundays he would go down to Frankfurt. At first he frequented museums and restaurants, but then, finding these boring, he allowed himself to spend the afternoons in one or another of the bars along the river. To show he wasn't just another tourist, he would ask the waiter for a *lokales Bier*, then strike up a conversation with one of the women, all listless in their gestures and shod in tinselly high heels.

He would buy her an Export beer, and she would lean over slowly to let him

light the filtered Ritter drooping from her hand. As she would chat about the weather (dreadful), German politics (the latest *Skandal*) -- *he* would stare at the thin black charcoal lines around her eyes and feel absurdly grateful. Just then her attention would drift to some businessman in the back--some fellow in a dark wool suit with full, lascivious lips and a bank account beyond anything at the Institut. As she swung her legs lazily off the stool, muttering some excuse, he would watch with anger and relief.

He felt awkward about it, but what else was there to do? Spend the day with Shelby Moore, the only other American at the institute, like some poor relation, shoveling down the roast pork and fried bananas that his wife Gloria in her real but cloying solicitude would force on him? Sit back on their couch while Shelby once more showed photographs from their last trip back to St. Kitts or whatever Caribbean island it was Gloria came from?

All humiliation aside, he found it hard to talk to them. All their sentences started with *we*. *We* made his voice crack or go embarrassingly soprano. He could say *I*, but *I* hurt him. *I* was an admission that he was alone, had been alone, and perhaps even liked being alone.

In January, he went to look at a refurbished fiat on the Poppelsdorfer

Allee--a classic nineteenth century townhouse with a bay window that looked out directly over the park. As he walked through the high-ceilinged rooms, he felt he had wandered into the city house of his youthful Indiana dreams. At the burnished mahogany dining room table by the light of an electric candelabra, he sat down and made out the Eurocheck with a rush of unfamiliar joy.

But the moment passed. In the rooms of the Poppelsdorfer flat, when he lay down to sleep, his eyes would stare out into the blackness until it filled and overflowed with little gold dots until it seemed to him a sky with small, judgmental stars.

At the end of March, he went to give a talk about his work at some university in Texas. As he stood behind the podium, the palms of his hands began to sweat. His gray wool German suit, so entirely *correct* in the shop on the Marktplatz, felt awkward and decidedly foreign-looking-and much too warm for the American South. Everyone in the room looked odd and ugly, as if their bones had been broken and then incorrectly re-set.

But it must have been all right, for a wave of what sounded like genuine applause rose up from the audience. After a few questions he luckily could answer, they took him out to Captain John's Fish Fry in the strip mall just outside

of town.

Captain John's was very crowded, with fat, pasty-faced children underfoot, and the air was bad. He chafed at his collar as they waited for the brusque, cheerful waitress to bring the food. Jokes were made about people he knew; gossip that no longer interested him flew back and forth. Nonserious bets were made on which new subatomic particle would be discovered next, and by whom.

When the conversation faltered, he somehow managed to get up the courage to ask how the department's funding had fared in the latest round of budget cuts. A silence fell. All the senior scientists stared at their beers as if they were looking at a particularly complex data run.

Construction of the new cyclotron had been put on hold. One, perhaps two, of the younger scientists would not be renewed at the end of the year. As soon as the recession was over, though--surely by fall at the very latest--things would turn around.

Someone put a plate of fried catfish and paper-cupped slaw before him without saying "Please." As he reached for his fork, Matt caught a sidewise glimpse of a pale blue dress--some soft, shimmering fabric and, above it, a cluster of sleek black hair. A whiff of perfume assaulted his nose familiarly. Tea Rose?

Shalimar? He had never been good at those names.

She had sat down now at the end of the room and was turned toward him. A woman with fine features and light brown almond eyes. No resemblance at all to Mara's Slavic cheekbones and deep black irises flecked with green. Nonetheless Matt trembled with excitement as if his wife was really somewhere near.

Mumbling something about a cigarette, Matt pushed back his chair and walked blindly toward the *Exit* sign. Outside, a soft misty twilight smelled of spring. In front of the rest rooms he paced back and forth as if waiting for a friend. He breathed slowly to relieve the pressure in the back of his throat, but this merely converted the pressure to a desire to scream.

"Shit," cried Matt Coleman.

And kicked the wall with his foot.

By the time he returned to Germany, it was a little warmer. Every morning, a silk maroon scarf tied neatly around the collar of his gray wool coat, Matt would steer his new red folding bicycle down the narrow path along the vegetable gardens. Slowly the cabbages, the butter lettuces, and the pale green *kohlrabi* grew larger under the gray sky of northern Europe. Children ran by, their packs half-

falling off their shoulders. He hardly noticed now that it was always gray and often raining. As he sat firmly on the little bicycle seat, the cling of the hand-bell echoed before him in the crisp, still-cold air. He was pleased to learn that *quark* was not only a subatomic particle but also a particularly delicious fresh cheese.

One morning, something happened, and a blur of green wool passed before his eyes. Over the handlebars he flew, down onto the moist earth.

A young woman with short brown hair and brown-rimmed glasses in a hooded loden coat stood over him apologizing. She seemed genuinely upset. She was a law student at the university, she said. She had been thinking about a lecture she had just heard on the laws governing intellectual property rights and not paying attention. It was all her fault. She was so very sorry. Could she perhaps give him her address in case any repair would be needed to his bicycle? As Matt brushed himself off, he observed that besides being serious and conscientious she was rather pretty. Her name was Anna, she said. Anna Hürter.

As he walked her down the allee "to make sure she was quite all right," he wanted to invite her to dinner, but the words would not come out. It wasn't until later when, stopping by her flat one morning to collect a trivial sum for an entirely imaginary bicycle repair, he managed it, his voice quavering like any stupid

seventeen-year old's. To his surprise, she accepted with a quick flash of a smile, then just as quickly closed the door.

Instead of going on to work, Matt Coleman strolled all the way down to the Marktplatz, past old-fashioned trams creaking around narrow corners and shopkeepers rolling up the external wooden blinds he knew were called *Rolladen*. On the square where the furrier shops had been all the winter, Italian ice cream vendors were setting out their wares. On impulse, he walked in and ordered himself a cone of chocolate, rum raisin, and his new favorite, Malaga.

She had chosen patent law to please her parents, who owned an Edeka Supermarkt out in the Eifel, but after she graduated she hoped to work for a clean environment. She never watched the first or second channels on the television, only the more intellectual third program, where she preferred documentaries about the crimes of the Nazis and the conditions of life in the Third World. Together with the other members of her study group, she went to demonstrations where--he had read this in *Der Spiegel*--police agents circulated in the crowd, taking photographs for the already voluminous files of the *Bundeskriminalamt*. Her only concession to pleasure was a love of travel: she had been to Berlin and Prague and hoped next spring to go to Paris, which she pronounced *Pah-reese*.

"But aren't you afraid?" he asked her one evening. "To go to these demonstrations, I mean?"

Her brown eyes, usually so soft, stared back unmoved. They were having supper together in the Poppelsdorfer flat as now they often did.

"Someone must do these things. If no one does, what kind of world will we have to live in? A world ruled by men such as your Nixon?"

Her fierceness took him aback. It reminded him oddly of Mara. As he helped himself to another sheaf of white asparagus, Matt pondered her question, which he was not all sure he had understood.

When his head cold failed to yield to hot tea and repeated snifters of *Asbach Uralt--she* bundled him up and took him to the sauna. Naked except for the towel he sat on, he found himself surrounded by ten or fifteen other people, all sweating quietly together. Slowly he breathed in the hot, dry air. From time to time one or another inhabitant would get up and ladle a green liquid over what looked like a bucket of hot coals, creating an intense if fleeting burst of pine. He tried not to be self-conscious about the way that he, alone of all of them, did not know quite where to look.

"Come," said Anna, her brown curls drooping in the heat as she took him by

the hand and led him to a large swimming pool. Side by side, they swam through white plastic flaps into the forest. The ancient pines of the Eifel looked down on him as he breathed with pleasure the cold mountain air.

"So, are you feeling better now?" Anna said.

They were sitting in the restaurant in their white terrycloth robes, two boiled trouts with parsleyed potatoes and some white woodruff-scented wine on the table before them.

"Much better," said Matt Coleman, wishing he could think of something romantic to say that wouldn't sound purely silly. "Can we come here again next Sunday?"

In the old Peugeot, its top down, he took her to the Louvre and to Chartres, to the egrets, the gazelles, the flamingoes of the Jardin des Plantes. As the clock tolled three from the Church of the Madeleine, Matt Coleman raised himself on one elbow in the moonlight and watched over Anna Hurter as she slept.

But still, there were days when just the feeling of a warm breeze and the sight of a woman with high cheekbones at the other end of the square was enough to make him feel like a cat hurled down a well.

One night after working very late, Matt stopped at the grand cafe on the

Marktplatz so as not to disturb Anna when he got home. As he was about to sit down, he noticed a tall, thin man at a corner table.

"Why, Shelby," he said in surprise.

For Shelby was alone.

Matt Coleman hesitated. Should he join him? He had never talked with Shelby without Gloria being there. With her enormous warm-heartedness and generosity, she had always been kind, but perhaps he had mistaken pity for friendship.

"Shelby," said Matt Coleman, "may I--? Or--? "

Shelby flung an arm to one side. His face was thin and pale.

"No, no," he said impatiently. "I don't care. Everyone will know soon enough."

Matt Coleman felt a great foreboding. He was sure he had never heard Shelby say /before.

Shelby looked back with large, flat eyes.

"It's the sun," he said. "She says she just can't live without the sun "

Matt Coleman fastened the top button of the gray wool coat, furlled the maroon scarf about his throat, and went out. It had started to rain. Fierce gusts of

wind blew the water across the square. All along the Poppelsdorfer Allee the turn-of-the-century streetlights were blurry dots before his eyes, and several times he stumbled as he made his way.

As the apartment door clicked shut behind him, he had the oddest sensation that Mara was thinking of him at just that moment. What was her life like now? Was she happy? Did she regret her decision? A thousand things he wanted to say crowded his brain: that he hoped she was well; that he had survived and re-ordered his life; that he still loved her, would always love her.

"Mara," he said out loud.

But nothing came--or rather, not nothing exactly, but something worse. He could see Mara, he could see her long hair, he could see the black eyes above the wide cheekbones, but there was no feeling to the image.

She was gone. She was finally gone. The image in his mind was distant and clear as a photograph of someone else's wife.

Slowly, Matt Coleman rose and walked down the dark, empty hall.

"Mateus?"

Anna was sitting up among the pillows reading, a tasseled silk bed jacket around her shoulders. On seeing him, her face filled with alarm.

"Mateus--what is wrong? Please tell me."

He could not answer. Now that the pain he had lived in for so long was gone, the world itself seemed strange. She was a part of him now, this pale, anxious young woman with her soft brown curls and generous, uninjured heart.

Yet as he reached out to take her in his arms, he found to his horror but not surprise that the air between them was slowly filling up with particles, undiscovered and perhaps undiscoverable, all heavier by far than heavy water.