

Geliebt

I find myself moody with the leaves crunching beneath my feet like my grandfather's cornflakes. I miss his strength and no-nonsense approach. He was a German prisoner of war in one of these ruined barracks, on old Camp Crowder. Grapevines and blackberry briars guard them. Once they were white and sat behind kept lawns filled with vegetable gardens and flowers.

I often wonder how he felt listening to the American music played by the military bands, They were trained here and sent out to do their duty with different units. Perhaps they marched down this very street.

Did they watch the WAC's as they drove past? Their hearts and thoughts on wives, mothers, and sisters. Did they wonder if they would ever see them again? Did they hunger for human touch, their names murmured in the night?

Strangely, I don't remember Beetle Baily ever having a comic strip mention of them. The strip was set, here, living long after the post was abandoned, I have also seen the murals painted by the soldiers sent here to learn the use of the newly innovated radar. None of them have the prisoners faces included.

The corpse of a tree stands guard at the edge of a yard. Its limbs are gone, soaked up by the earth. A lightning strike has left a jagged black mark. There is a darker black in a crook where a limb had been. I stand on an abandoned cinderblock and peer inside.

It is filled with debris from the animals living there. I run my flashlights beam around inside. A dull glint reflects back. I take a rod, still marked red and black, I use it to touch the back of the hole. There is a click of glass as the rod taps it, methodically I begin moving it toward me. Inch by inch it comes. A waterfall of nutshells fall to the ground along with discarded bird nests. Finally, I can touch the bottle and pull it out. It is a greenish color with a label... Jägermeister.

Unscrewing the cap, the smell of paint comes from within. There is something inside. Using tweezers, I pull out a rolled piece of canvas. Painted on it is a beautiful woman with blonde hair. Brilliant blue eyes look into mine. One word is written beneath it Geliebt.

I know the face. For many, many years she had played the piano in our church. She had married an American Army cook. She had four sons and a daughter. Hellen rarely spoke of the war or what she had endured.

The next Sunday I call her youngest son aside and hand him the bottle and give him the tweezers to pull the canvas out. Staring at it tears slide down his face.

"It is mama, where did you find this?"

"It was in a tree at the old German POW camp." I explain.

"This was painted by Mamas' first husband. She was told that he had died. Papa never minded when she spoke of him. Karl was a part of her. Mama would cry and wonder if he was even buried. I must go to her grave and tell her Karl did not die." He said.

I reinsert the picture and put the lid back on and gave it to him. He leaves, the tears dampening his face, my face. Perhaps our grandfather's had known each other and talked about home.

My-grandmother had worked in the offices of the officers. She saw grandfather working in his garden one day, she stopped to speak to him and they became friends, A couple of weeks later she opened the trunk of her black Packard and he had climbed in. She created new papers for him and gave him a new name. They were married for 75 years. He died first and, on their stone, she put his new name. but beneath it she wrote his birth name and beneath it...Geliebt. Translated, meaning, beloved.

Grandpa did not speak of the war. So, I wondered how he must have felt so far from home, never seeing his family again. Now I know, the painting in the bottle says it all. Had he left a wife behind? He never said. I have copied the painting and will hang it beside my grandparents wedding picture.

Now, Herbet can tell his mother Karl survived and loved her. The message of love in the bottle stands as a timeless reminder that the heart never forgets.