

## FLOATING ISLAND

*Willa Elizabeth Schmidt*

“Chickens, *Pupperl*? One can live from chickens and eggs?” Theo tamped down his pipe and glanced around. The café was his favorite retreat. Men reading papers, mothers with toddlers: a lazy weekend crowd. Katherine’s face was flushed with anticipation, but to Theo, the idea of clacking hens, their rolling eggs, was too pale, too slippery to be of sustenance or comfort. Theo preferred warm, solid things—a pouch of Prince Albert, poppy seed cakes from Schlosser’s, and Katherine herself, his newly acquired wife. “What would one *do* all day at this chicken farm?”

Katherine waved the *Tribune* ad: fifty acres highway to river, house, chicken coop, barn. “The country, Theo! Our own little paradise!” She dipped a wafer in her *Milchkaffee* and knew it was right. She’d saved her money; the economy was good. It was 1945.

Theo wasn't so sure. All he wanted was right here: cheerful Katherine, *Kaffee und Kuchen*, the city's buzz and hum. For forty years he'd lived in cities: Vienna, place of his birth, and Chicago, his adopted home. For forty years he'd been a bachelor until he found Katherine, his salvation. The city suited him fine. Still, Theo was a tractable man. If it made her happy, why not a farm? His wife's cooking, her talent for thrift—blessings anywhere.

He'd miss the café, and then there was Hanni. Hanni of the silken skin, the bewitching eyes—*ach*, he'd miss that. But Hanni had her own woes, and it was time. Time to go. Time for something new.

## §

Katherine loved Theo. She loved his eyebrows, the curling smoke of his pipe. *Pupperl*, he called her, little doll, and who had ever said such a thing? Not even her own work-weary mother and certainly no man. Raised in Canton Uri milking cows, Katherine was strong and thick-limbed as the animals she'd driven year after year up to the summer pasture. A farm in any country meant work, but work was not what she feared. What Katherine feared was rich men's wives, their glossy kitchens. A lifetime of their purring talk.

"You German girls, how *do* you do it?" Swiss, she corrected, and yes, she insisted, there was a difference. They prattled on, not listening. "Such tender

roasts! Such glorious cakes, on half what the last girl spent!" This was how, she wanted to say: up early to haggle and shop, crowded bus rides all over town for the leanest cuts at the lowest price. Chopping, grinding, mixing from scratch; that was the way she'd been taught at home.

Boring details. Wasn't she paid to keep those away? They studied their manicures, reached for the phone to chat with a friend. "Can't turn your back a minute," they told their distracted husbands. "Our last cook robbed us blind."

Years of those voices, some gentle, some shrill.

## §

Katherine was twenty-five when her brother and sister-in-law took over the homestead. With neither property nor suitor in sight, she saw herself at sixty: the old maid sister, a wrinkled-up milkmaid with nothing of her own. Escape became an obsession. She slaved for neighbors in her scant spare time, repeating for paltry francs chores she did at home, and when the thankless, bone-grinding years finally yielded enough for the passage, a friend of a friend's letter got her to Chicago, a job as kitchen help. She'd been thirty-three then, still young enough for children.

Katherine soon learned that American men, city dwellers, preferred pretty, talkative girls, not ones with her own less obvious qualities. She went

unnoticed, save for the occasional fatherly type who wanted a nursemaid. Whispered suggestions, groping hands in the jam-packed Elevated frightened her. She worked hard and slept alone.

After Pearl Harbor, men were truly scarce, and Katherine revised her dream. German girls were out of favor; a Swiss passport was worth gold. Impeccable references kept her in steady employ.

The New World had been a disappointment, but in her practical way, she charted a course. She put aside all she earned so that one day she'd have her own home with a little garden in one of the city's fast-growing suburbs. Then she'd make a visit back to Canton Uri, with stories and gifts for all, a simple farm girl who'd set forth across the pond with nothing but grit and two strong arms to build a life of her own.

## §

Theo was a gift—a late, shining miracle. One spring, on her day off, Katherine was strolling a path in Lincoln Park on her way to the zoo. She'd hoped to meet a friend, a governess from Lucerne whose people lived on Lakeshore Drive, but at the last minute Anna caught cold and cancelled, leaving Katherine to fill her time alone. Buds furred the willow boughs, the lake wind smelled of thaw. It was April 12<sup>th</sup>— a day she'd never forget.

Passing a park bench, she noticed a man scattering bread with pigeons thronged at his feet. Katherine smiled. Pigeons were useless, but she appreciated a tender heart. This fellow, she told herself, with his formal jacket, pressed trousers and heavy shoes, was from the Old Country, and she liked that too, but would nevertheless have scurried by into another future if she hadn't caught his voice, scolding the greedy birds: *"Na, was ist? Nicht so stürmisch, Luder, du! Geh', warte mal, da schau her!"*

She swallowed her reticence and turned back. "Pardon me," she ventured, approaching the bench. "You speak German...You are Austrian? Viennese?" There were Austrian girls among the domestics; she knew their folksy speech.

The man looked up, and his face spread in a grin. *"Bin ich! Na freilich bin ich! Und Sie, gnädige Frau...?"* the man responded. When she explained, he stood and bent from the waist in a fluid bow. *"A Schweizerin! Na, wunderbar! Charming Lady, the manna is at an end; my friends have flown. May I invite you to a cup of coffee? I know a café, two streets from here. Gemütlich, heavenly Torten! Come, we'll walk."*

Thinking back later on this unexpected meeting, Katherine took as omens two things: the picture of Theo surrounded by happy birds, and the ease she felt in his presence. At forty-three, her limited experience of men left her shy

as a girl, but Theo didn't seem to notice. His good humor was contagious, and she found herself chattering, laughing as they walked, her companion listening attentively and laughing too as if she brought welcome news.

He was her age, she guessed, a bit less. Boyishly slim with blue eyes framed by strong eyebrows, pale hair in boisterous swirls. At the café, each told how they'd ended up in Chicago. Theo spoke of Vienna, and his spare-time passion, photography. While he talked, she glanced at his hands.

No wristwatch. No wedding ring.

## II.

"It's good, Theo. The water is fine! If the water is good, all else can be fixed." Katherine lifted the pump's curved handle to refill her cup. They were lounging in the evening cool, on the deep open porch that looked out on a patch of lawn at the back of the house. City-bound so long, Katherine was giddy with space and plans.

Once decided, it had all gone quickly: the visit and purchase, breaking the news to her employer, squeezing their belongings into Theo's old Ford, and heading north. The farm was rundown, its buildings missing boards and paint, but the sky was vast over a path that sloped past barn and henhouse. After skirting fields half-gone to scrub and wild rose, it meandered down to the

slow-moving river. Just before dark, they strolled it together, as swallows dipped and crickets chirped, glorying in the breath of hay and manure.

"Paradise, *Pupper!*," Theo sighed, puffing on his pipe. "How did we live so long in noise and soot?" Whippoorwills trilled to their drowsy embrace. Their bedroom was rich with the sweetness of summer.

### §

Chickens ruled the daytime world. Everywhere they strutted and scratched, combed heads fussing, nattering, bobbing. Cats and kittens rummaged the straw. A neighbor who rented the barn for his dairy herd brought Theo a part-collie pup. People took to Theo, and because she herself didn't make friends easily and because she knew how suspicious country folk could be, Katherine rejoiced.

He carried eggs to town in the Ford, purchased supplies, bartered hens and brought home chicks. Shopkeepers loved his funny accent; he wasn't shrewd, but they treated him well. He visited the post office to pick up the mail and sometimes found, in a separate box, a letter bright with curlicued script. A woman's hand, anyone could see, and sometimes he made a phone call there, a call he couldn't make from home.

Katherine scrubbed hen roosts, weeded the garden, and every morning she gathered up eggs. Theo helped. He fed the birds, cluck-clucking back as they pecked at his boots, shushing and humoring the ill-tempered cock. He gathered berries from bramble-edged fields, apples from the neglected trees. Much went untended: fence lines, the privy, but Katherine, in love with her husband, couldn't bring herself to prod. It was she who wrung the birds' necks, sent newborn kittens to watery deaths, shot the wild dog that killed two of her best layers.

During the summer, city friends came. Governess Anna had married too and been blessed with last-minute offspring. As she and Albert and little Timothy climbed stiffly from their car after the long drive and filled their lungs—"The air! The marvelous country air!"—Katherine promised a treat, squandered for years on the palates of strangers, lavished at last on herself and her own. "Floating Island! There's Floating Island for dessert!" After a hearty dinner—what else but chicken?—she spooned the rich custard into bowls of translucent blue and slid a fluff of meringue onto each golden pool. "Eat up, Timmie! Have more! It'll be no good tomorrow," she told the wide-eyed child, who nudged the blob with his spoon and longed to run out past the scary chickens to the barn where kittens hid.



When the guests departed, Katherine stood waving a handkerchief. "Back to the smoke pot, poor things. Better them than me!" But Theo, waving too and smiling, was silently making plans. And when the car disappeared over the hill and they climbed the porch steps to rock in the evening air, Katherine knew by the way he sucked dreamily on his sweet-smelling pipe that before long, he'd be off. To buy film, he'd explain, or a specially ground lens for the camera he was building in the workshop he'd set up in a back room, but most of all to be in the city, wander the aisles of Marshall Field's, order cream-topped strudel at his favorite *Konditorei*.

As she'd anticipated, on the following Thursday evening Theo emerged from the back with an apologetic smile. "No way around it, *Pupperl*. I must visit Kretschmer before I can move ahead. This weekend—you'll be all right?" Of course, she told him, of course she would, because she knew the city lifted his heart the way the country gladdened hers. He could pick up a few things; she'd give him a list.

So he polished the Ford and took off early Saturday, promising to be back the next afternoon, no later than Sunday night.

## III.

The August air was muggy, but Theo was oblivious. He hummed a tune as he made his way through Lincoln Avenue traffic, a schmaltzy number about springtime and kisses and wine. *Im Prater blüh'n wieder die Bäume...* The cluttered storefronts were like Favoriten, the neighborhood he'd walked as a boy. Smells too—rotting fruit, smokestack belch—brought back the swarming streets and long blocks of workers' barracks relieved now and then by pockets of green, the byzantine splendor of a massive church. The ugliness itself seemed familiar, alive.

Near Belmont and Ashland, he turned off and parked the car. Heading to Wieboldt's for Katherine's shopping, he paused often to take in passing faces, the push and bustle he missed on the farm. He dropped a dime in the hat of a legless man slouched against a wall holding a sign that read *War Vet*, another in the cup of an organ grinder who nodded *grazie* as his monkey danced a jig. Taverns open to the humid air stank of stale beer, carrying memories of his father, who'd drunk himself to death when Theo was barely out of school. Finally he found himself at the camera store.

"*Mensch*, Theo, how the hell are you?" Willy Kretschmer came from behind the counter to shake his hand. "I thought we'd lost you to the chickens! You've put on some flesh, *alter Junge*—life is good, *ja?*"

Theo knew the shop and its jowly proprietor well. He'd met Kretschmer years ago, in a Hull House photography class when he was new to Chicago. The older man had recognized his ability to frame a shot, and when Theo lost his factory job during the Depression, Kretschmer offered him hours enough to scrape by. When industry boomed again during the war, Theo stayed on; the draft wanted younger men, and the lighter work suited him. His bachelor flat was small and cheap, allowing him to survive on little. He often took meals with Willy and his fat wife Dora, Berliners who'd come over decades before.

"Come see for yourself, Willy! Take the train! Close the store a day or two; it won't run away. Air, meadows, endless sky..." A customer entered, and Kretschmer went to help while Theo turned his attention to a Rolleiflex display. The old man frowned on vacations, didn't own a car, never left his shop. Work-addled *Piefke*, Theo thought, typical Prussian who didn't know how to live. His only telephone here in the store, though he and Dora lived upstairs.

The customer left and Willy was back. "Staying over, farm boy? Dora will be delighted." Theo smiled. "Thanks, Willy. I've made arrangements."

Kretschmer gave him a look. "Aha," he said, less jovial now. "Theo, Theo, you never learn. *Bist verrückt?* Her husband could smash you like a worm under his heel. And Katherine—you're damned lucky, *Junge*, even if she did *schlep* you off to that godforsaken chicken place. With Katherine, you'll never starve. Don't be a fool."

Theo fixed his gaze on a showcase of Zeiss lenses. He knew Willy didn't approve, but he knew he could count on him. It wasn't likely Katherine would phone since Theo was never gone long; still, in an emergency, she could reach him through the shop. It wasn't a lie, not really, because sometimes he did bunk at Kretschmers. If plans changed. If Hanni left a message warning him away.

## §

Two more hours. He lingered over coffee at the café, then stopped at the corner bakery, savoring the sugared air. Cradling a wedge of *Mohnkuchen* and a loaf of day-old bread, he made his way to the nearby park. Chickens were well and good, but he missed his pigeons, vagabond fowl with no point but their own scruffy survival. He found himself an empty bench, threw down the crumbled bread and was instantly circled by a jostling swarm. Satisfied, he leaned back, took a bite of cake, and contemplated the evening ahead.

Shortly before seven, he strolled back to where he'd left the Ford. Driving southeast toward the lake, he hummed along with the radio, parking finally on a quiet cul-de-sac off Lake Shore Drive from which he walked, whistling now, to a street lined by a row of stately townhouses. *I'm looking over a four-leaved clover...* Twilight shadowed his sprint up the stairs.

Hanni met him at the door, drawing it shut as she folded him in her arms. Her slim face was crowned by a silvery toss of curls, and when he held her close, she smelled like roses. She wore a summer dress of light, flowery material, with narrow straps over her shoulders. "How fine you are," he whispered. "And you, *mein Schatz*," she smiled, stepping back and looking him over. "Well cared-for. A bit of meat at last on that scrawny frame."

Hanni's husband traveled often, providing opportunity enough, but their meetings were fewer since Theo's marriage. Hanni was unhappy, not only with Theo's absence but with life in general. She missed Vienna despite years in Chicago, and with her son away at University, her husband taken up with work, she took solace in memories—memories and wine. This evening she'd cooked dishes Theo remembered from long ago holidays at home: veal paprikash, parsley-laced *Knödel*, Emperor Crepes soaked in raisins and rum.

After dinner, he brought out photos: cows along the river path, the farmhouse porch with its lilac fringe, himself spreading feed for the chickens, and Katherine, cheeks bronzed under a wide straw hat, sturdy arms hefting baskets of eggs. Hanni studied them in silence, stopping longer over the last. "You love her, don't you?" she said finally, her eyes fixed on the image. "She's good to you."

Theo worked at relighting his pipe. "*Freilich*, Hanni. Of course. And isn't it so, that you care for your husband, who is good to you, as well?"

Theo had seen Georg just once, on the day he'd first met Hanni. They'd come in to buy a camera one Saturday when Theo was working at the shop. A gruff, solid man, all business. Not your typical Viennese. Hanni his opposite: fluttery, talkative and charming, thrilled to meet a compatriot. When she stopped by later, she was always alone.

In the bedroom afterwards, sentimental songs played on the Victrola as he loosened her hair and touched his lips to the curve of her neck. *Im Prater blüh'n wieder die Bäume...* "We're there, Theo," she murmured dreamily as they sank onto the cushioned bed. "At the *Heurigen*, sipping wine beneath the trees, strolling through the park in spring..." Her eyes shone; happiness made her irresistible. Theo slid the straps from her shoulders and kissed her fragrant

breasts. He too felt longing, not for the fetid alleyways of his memory but for the musical fantasy world. Roused by Hanni's throaty singsong, he made love with the passion of youth.

## §

In the morning, there were tears. "*Ach Schatzi*, our little visit is over so soon, and now you must go, and I am again alone. We are islands, islands in a frozen sea. Tell me, Theo, how shall I live?" He held her, stroked her damp cheek, promised to write soon. He'd be back, he said, he would always come back. And he knew when she was out of reach he'd yearn for her, but just now, in the face of so much drama and weeping, more than anything, he wanted the farm. The farm and Katherine, Katherine with her agreeable calm, her steadfast accommodation to the ebb and flow of life.

## IV.

On a spring morning, Katherine is busy in the kitchen, chopping vegetables for the noon meal. Theo went out some time ago to feed the chickens; she wonders what can be keeping him. Such a dawdler—did he decide to take a walk to the river? She finishes her preparations and glances again out the window. Still no Theo.

Finally she pulls on a sweater and strides out toward the chicken pens. The April air is uncommonly mild, the sun already shedding warmth. No welcoming bark lets her know if Theo is somewhere out back or slowly coming closer; their last dog, like the one before, had met its fate on the ever busier road.

As she approaches the clot of foraging chickens, she sees something strange: Theo's straw hat, upside down on the ground. Then Theo himself sprawled long, with the toppled pail next to him. Birds crowd his sides, poking and muttering, gobbling up the scattered feed. Theo is flat on his back, blue eyes open to the beating sun.

The chickens squawk and scatter as Katherine kneels in the muck. No pulse at his wrist, no breath on the hand she holds to his lips. "Theo, no, oh no, no," she cries, her voice a rising moan. She starts toward the house, runs back to Theo, finally up to the house again where she telephones the doctor, who scribbles a note and sends for the ambulance both of them know will arrive too late.

## V.

Seasons went by and Katherine hung on. The work was unrelenting, but she needed to stay in the place where they'd been so happy, the habitation of



her own best years. Past fifty, she was still robust and healthy, though no longer able to labor tirelessly as she had ten or even five years before.

Neighbors brought supplies or took her to town; she'd never learned to drive. Old friends from the city visited often at first, then less, because the trip was long and they missed Theo's infectious laugh. They too were growing old and busy with their own concerns. Evenings she walked the river path, past ever more tumbledown coop and barn, past cows and rotting privy. For a time she lived undisturbed, alone with her clouded thoughts.

Finally there was a healing, tentative but stubborn, a scarring over of the wound. Gradually she found energy beyond daily chores to contemplate how she might improve her situation. The highway past the house was busier than ever, especially in the warm months; she would sell eggs, she decided, and chickens, to passing tourists and Sunday drivers.

It proved a judicious plan. Some days she ran out completely and had to turn customers away. She considered keeping more chickens.

The best part was the people. Only when she'd resumed regular contact with people did she understand how lonely she'd been, how much she'd relied on Theo to bring her the world. Now she learned to meet it again, face to face.

Most of her customers were in a hurry, but Katherine didn't mind. The brief exchange broke her solitude, sent her back to her chores refreshed. Older people in particular often wanted to talk, to hear about the farm and about Katherine herself, but she didn't encourage this. They were friendly, kind even, but she wasn't given to chatting with strangers, and after fifteen minutes, pleaded some pressing task.

Only once was there something unusual, a small, seemingly insignificant event that made a deep impression and haunted her long after.

On a Sunday in September, with children back in school and the tide of vacationers ebbing, she looked out her kitchen window to see a large black car pull into the driveway, a glossy sedan with Illinois plates. Drying hands on her apron, she hurried out. It was late afternoon; the sun had tilted westward.

A man and woman opened their separate doors, the heavy-set, balding husband striding toward her, his wife staying near the car but sending her gaze over house and yard and ultimately over Katherine, carefully taking in everything around.

"How much a dozen?" The male voice was brusque; Katherine caught traces of an accent. When she named a price, he went to consult with his wife, who murmured something without looking at him. "Make up your mind. We

don't have all day," the man barked, and Katherine realized he was speaking German.

Both approached now, the woman girlishly slender, with striking eyes and wisps of silvered hair around her face. She smiled at Katherine. "We'll have two dozen eggs please, and if you have fresh chickens, two of those as well." Though the woman spoke English, Katherine was momentarily speechless.

She could have been listening to Theo. Not Theo, of course—the voice was a woman's—but the same intonation, like a hidden caress. Now it was Katherine who, handing over their purchases, turned loquacious. Were they from Chicago? Had they been on vacation? Anything to make the voice go on. The man muttered something and stalked back to the car, but the woman stayed where she was.

"My husband," Katherine went on, "my late husband, was Viennese. I think you must be too." The woman stared at her and didn't answer for such a long time that Katherine wondered if she'd said something wrong. Deep lines around her mouth and large dark eyes revealed her to be older than Katherine had first thought.

Finally she shook her head, as if waking from a spell. "You're quite right," she said. "I am, yes, from Vienna, though it's been years...My husband too, but

he," she glanced in the direction of the car, "he will never go back. He is devoted to his business. And my son—completely American. Our grandchildren too...I go over sometimes, visiting, but it's not the same, not at all the same." She looked up at the sky, shading her eyes. "So lovely here. You are fortunate. No need for anything else."

The car horn made them jump. The man stuck his head out the window. "*Um Gottes Willen*, Hanni, can we make it home sometime today?"

The woman counted money into Katherine's hand and turned to leave, but Katherine rushed after her. "Please, if you don't mind...When you come by again, next spring, anytime, I would be so happy if you could stop in. For coffee, and my specialty, Floating Island, do you know it? Delicious, with good fresh eggs. I would be happy to prepare it, for you and your husband. Promise me, you will stop?"

Surprised, the woman turned and stared again. Then she came close and pressed Katherine's hand and, hesitating only a moment, leaned over and kissed her cheek. "I'm sorry," she whispered, "about your husband. You are kind, so kind. *Danke vielmals*, thank you, thank you so very much," and ran back to the car, which took off in noise and dust the instant she got in, leaving

Katherine wondering had that meant yes or no, and why the woman's eyes looked so full, so ready to spill over in tears.

She never saw them again, nor had she expected to. But she wondered sometimes what it was about the woman, beyond her eyes, her melodious voice, that touched her and made her so difficult to forget.

## VI.

Hanni lounges on her couch, absorbing fireplace glow. The couch is new, of costly Moroccan leather. She slides her toes along its satin skin and reads old letters. She fingers envelopes, the envelopes the letters came back in.

She had waited. When no word came, she herself wrote, three or four times, to the box with the made-up name. They'd always been discreet, she and Theo. Twelve months later, a packet was returned with a cold black stamp: *Addressee Unknown*.

She re-reads them now, her curling script, the futile pleas, and tosses them one by one into the fire. *Wien, Wien, nur du allein...*The record is old, scratchy from use. She hums along, eyes streaming, and reaches for the bottle of Bordeaux.

Islands in a heartless sea. *Addressee Unknown*.

## VII.

In the end it was all too much, and Katherine gave in. Professors, business people wanted weekend retreats; she secured a decent price. She returned to the city to work until she could draw her Social Security, imagining sometimes the wealthy old women she fed and washed must be, with new names, the same bossy matrons she'd once shopped and cooked for, now grown infirm.

When she turned sixty-five, she packed her belongings and flew back to Uri, where her brother had recently given the land over to his son-in-law, a strapping young farmer from the next village. In a neighboring town, she found a flat with a view of Lake Lucerne. For years she still hiked the eight kilometers to the family farm and sent Christmas cards to Chicago friends. When the letters stopped, they assumed she had died.

Gone the work, the chickens; vanished, her brief and perfect love. She'd been to the New World and back again, leaving not a trace. Only a small boy remembered, into his own old age, a farm with kittens, the privy, the river. White froth on a yellow soup: luscious to look at, impossible to eat.

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