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Echoes

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It was a lazy summer afternoon as Beata Wittgenstein strolled along the shores of Lake Geneva with her parents. The sun was hot and the air still, and as she walked pensively behind them, the birds and insects were making a tremendous racket. Beata and her younger sister Brigitte had come to Geneva with their mother for the summer. Beata had just turned twenty, and her sister was three years younger. It had been thirteen months since the Great War had begun the previous summer, and this year her father had wanted them out of Germany for their holiday. It was late August 1915, and he had just spent a month there with them. Both of her brothers were in the army and had managed to get leave to join them for a week. Horst was twenty-three and a lieutenant at divisional headquarters in Munich. Ulm was a captain in the 105th Infantry Regiment, part of the Thirtieth Division, attached to the Fourth Army. He had just turned twenty-seven during the week he spent with them in Geneva.

It had been nothing short of a miracle to get the entire family together. With the war seeming to devour all the young men in Germany, Beata worried constantly now about her brothers, as did their mother. Her father kept telling her that it would be over soon, but what Beata heard when she listened to her father and brothers talk was very different. The men were far more aware of the bleak times ahead than were the women. Her mother never spoke of the war to her, and Brigitte was far more upset that there were hardly any handsome young men to flirt with. Ever since she had been a little girl, all Brigitte had ever talked about was getting married. She had recently fallen in love with one of Horst's friends from university, and Beata had a strong suspicion that her beautiful younger sister would be getting engaged that winter.

Beata had no such interests or intentions. She had always been the quiet one, studious and far more serious, and she was much more interested in her studies than in finding a young man. Her father always said she was the perfect daughter. Their only moment of dissent had been when she had insisted she wanted to go to university like her brothers, which her father said was foolish. Although he himself was serious and scholarly, he didn't think that that degree of education was necessary for a woman. He told her he felt sure that in a short time she would be married and tending to a husband and children. She didn't need to go to university, and he hadn't allowed it.

Beata's brothers and their friends were a lively lot, and her sister was pretty and flirtatious. Beata had always felt different from them, set apart by her quiet ways and passion for education. In a perfect world, she would have loved to be a teacher, but when she said it, her siblings always laughed at her. Brigitte said that only poor girls became schoolteachers or governesses, and her brothers added that only ugly ones even thought about it. They loved to tease her, although Beata was neither poor nor ugly. Her father owned and ran one of the most important banks in Cologne, where they lived. They had a large handsome house in the Fitzengraben district, and her mother Monika was well known in Cologne, not only for her beauty but for her elegant clothes and jewelry. Like Beata, she was a quiet woman. Monika had married Jacob Wittgenstein when she was seventeen, and had been happy with him in the twenty-eight years since then.

The marriage had been arranged by their respective families, and was a good one. At the time their union had been the merger of two considerable fortunes, and Jacob had enlarged theirs impressively since then. He ran the bank with an iron fist and was almost clairvoyant about the banking business. Not only was their future secure, but so were those of their heirs. Everything about the Wittgensteins was solid. The only unpredictable element in their life now was the same one worrying everyone these days. The war was a great concern to them, particularly to Monika, with two sons in the army. The time they had shared in Switzerland had been a comforting respite, for the parents as well as the children.

Ordinarily, they spent their summers in Germany, at the seashore, but this year Jacob had wanted to get them all out of Germany for July and August. He had even spoken to one of the commanding generals whom he knew well, and gently asked the enormous favor of having both of his sons on leave and able to join them. The general had quietly arranged it. The Wittgensteins were that great rarity, a Jewish family that enjoyed not only great wealth but also enormous power. Beata was aware of it but paid little attention to her family's importance. She was far more interested in her studies. And although Brigitte sometimes fretted over the constraints their orthodoxy put on them, Beata, in her own quiet way, was deeply religious, which pleased

her father. As a young man, he had shocked his own family by saying that he wanted to be a rabbi. His father had talked sense into him, and at the appropriate time, he had joined the family bank, along with his father, brothers, uncles, and grandfather before them. Theirs was a family steeped in tradition, and although Jacob's father had a great respect for the rabbinical life, he had no intention of sacrificing his son to it. And like the obedient son he was, Jacob went to work at the bank, and married shortly thereafter. At fifty, he was five years older than Beata's mother.

The entire family agreed that the decision to summer in Switzerland this year had been a good one. The Wittgensteins had many friends here, and Jacob and Monika had attended a number of parties, as had their children. Jacob knew everyone in the Swiss banking community and had gone to Lausanne and Zurich to see friends in those cities as well. Whenever possible, they took the girls with them. While Horst and Ulm were there, they spent as much time as they could enjoying their company. Ulm was leaving for the front when he got back, and Horst was stationed at divisional headquarters in Munich, which he seemed to find vastly amusing. In spite of the serious upbringing he'd had, Horst was something of a playboy. He and Brigitte had much more in common with each other than either of them did with Beata.

As she fell behind the others, walking slowly along the lake, her oldest brother Ulm hung back and fell into step beside her. He was always protective of her, perhaps because he was seven years older. Beata knew he respected her gentle nature and loving ways.

"What are you thinking about, Bea? You look awfully serious walking along by yourself. Why don't you join us?"

Her mother and sister were far ahead by then, talking about fashion and the men Brigitte had found handsome at the previous week's parties. The men in the family were talking about the only subjects that interested them--which these days were the war and banking. After the war, Ulm was going back to work at the bank again, as he had for four years before. Their father said that Horst was going to have to stop playing, become serious, and join them. Horst had promised that as soon as the war was over, he would. He was only twenty-two when war was declared the year before, and he had assured his father that when the war was over, he'd be ready. And Jacob had said several times recently that it was time for Ulm to get married. The one thing Jacob expected of his children, or anyone in his immediate circle actually, was that they obey him. He expected that of his wife as well, and she had never disappointed him. Nor had his children, with the exception of Horst,

who had been dragging his feet about working when he went into the army. The last thing on Horst's mind at the moment was marriage. In fact, the only one interested in that prospect was Brigitte. Beata hadn't met a man who had swept her off her feet yet. Although she thought that many of her parents' friends' sons were handsome, many of the young ones seemed silly, and the older ones frightened her a bit and often seemed too somber. She was in no hurry to be married. Beata often said that if she married anyone, she hoped he would be a scholar, and not necessarily a banker. There was no way she could say that to her father, although she had confessed it to her mother and sister many times. Brigitte said that sounded boring. The handsome young friend of Horst's she had her eye on was as frivolous as she was, and from an equally important banking family. Jacob was intending to meet with the boy's father in September to discuss it, although Brigitte didn't know that. But so far, no suitor had emerged for Beata, nor did she really want one. She rarely spoke to anyone at parties. She went dutifully with her parents, wearing the dresses her mother chose for her. She was always polite to their hosts, and immensely relieved when it was time to go home. Unlike Brigitte, who had to be dragged away, complaining that it had been far too early to leave the party, and why did her family have to be so dull and boring. Horst was in complete agreement with her, and always had been. Beata and Ulm were the serious ones.

"Have you had fun in Geneva?" Ulm asked Beata quietly. He was the only one who made a serious effort to speak to her, and find out what she was thinking. Horst and Brigitte were far too busy playing and having fun to spend time on more erudite subjects with their sister.

"Yes, I have." Beata smiled shyly up at him. Even though he was her brother, Beata was always dazzled by how handsome he was, and how kind. He was a gentle person, and looked exactly like their father. Ulm was tall and blond and athletic, as Jacob had been in his youth. Ulm had blue eyes and features that often confused people, because he didn't look Jewish. Everyone knew they were, of course, and in the social world of Cologne, they were accepted in even the most aristocratic circles. Several of the Hohenlohes, and Thurn und Thaxis were childhood friends of their father's. The Wittgensteins were so established and so respected that all doors were open to them. But Jacob had also made it clear to all his children that when the time came for them to marry, the spouses they brought home would be Jewish. It was not even a subject for discussion; nor would any of them even think to question it. They were accepted for who and what they were, and there were many eligible young men and women in their own circles for the Wittgenstein children to choose from. When the time came for them to marry, they would marry one of them.

Ulm and Beata didn't even look remotely related as they walked along the lake. Her brothers and sister looked exactly like their father, they were all

tall blondes with blue eyes and fine features. Beata looked like their mother, in total contrast to them. Beata Wittgenstein was a tiny, frail-looking, delicate brunette, with raven-dark hair and skin the color of porcelain. The only feature she shared with the others was enormous blue eyes, although hers were darker than her brothers' or Brigitte's. Her mother's eyes were dark brown, but other than that minor difference, Beata was the image of her mother, which secretly delighted her father. He was still so much in love with his wife after nearly twenty-nine years that just seeing Beata smile at him reminded him of when her mother was the same age in the early years of their marriage, and the similarity never failed to touch his heart. As a result, he had an enormous soft spot for Beata, and Brigitte frequently complained that Beata was his favorite. He let her do whatever she wanted. But what Beata wanted was harmless. Brigitte's plans were considerably racier than her older sister's. Beata was content to stay home and read or study, in fact, she preferred it. The only time her father had actually gotten annoyed with her was on one occasion when Jacob found her reading a King James version of the Bible.

"What is that about?" he asked with a stern expression, as he saw what she was reading. She had been sixteen at the time and was fascinated by it. She had read quite a lot of the Old Testament before that.

"It's interesting, Papa. The stories are wonderful, and so many things in it are exactly what we believe." She preferred the New Testament to the Old. Her father found it less than amusing and had taken it away from her.

He didn't want his daughter reading a Christian Bible, and he had complained about it to her mother, and suggested that Monika keep a closer eye on what she was reading. In fact, Beata read everything she could get her hands on, including Aristotle and Plato. She was a voracious reader and loved the Greek philosophers. Even her father had to admit that if she had been a man, she would have been an extraordinary scholar. What he wanted for her now, as he did for Ulm and even for the other two sometime soon, was for her to get married. He was beginning to fear that she would become spinsterish and too serious if she waited much longer. He had a few ideas he wanted to explore in that vein that winter, but the war had disrupted everything. So many men were serving in the army, and many young people they knew had been killed in the past year. The uncertainty of the future was deeply disturbing.

Her father thought that Beata would do well with a man who was older than she was. He wanted a mature man for Beata, a man who could appreciate her intellect and share her interests. He wasn't opposed to that idea for

Brigitte either, who could use a strong hand to control her. Although he loved all his children, he was extremely proud of his oldest daughter. He considered himself a man of wisdom and compassion. He was the kind of person others never hesitated to turn to. Beata had a deep love and respect for him, as she did for her mother, although she secretly admitted to the others that their mother was easier to talk to, and a little less daunting than their father. Their father was as serious as Beata, and often disapproved of his younger daughter's frivolity.