

## CHAPTER V

### TANTE KET

by

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Tante Ket's "shack" as it stood in 1975 (Gone now)

Remark: *Tante (aunt) Ket is Catherine von Hatten living from 1849 until 1835*

Old brown Shep stirred lazily in the warm afternoon sun and let out a few welcoming barks as we came toward the gate of the small country yard. He didn't bother getting up, merely thumped his tail in his dusty bed, while I timidly raised the hinge-like latch. The creaky gate swung open and I walked into the yard with my eight-year old brother, Clarence, following close behind.

We knew we had nothing to fear from old Shep, but kept a cautious eye on Fido, the English Bull, tied on a chain a clothes line post near the stoop of the house. While he let it known with loud, ominous, vicious barking, jumping and straining at his chain that no one was welcome here, we edged, hand in hand, towards the door. We stopped. Calculated the length of the chain and moved a little closer. A half-dozen chickens, scratching in the ground for grain and scraps near the stoop, flew up at the sound of our steps and scattered to a safe distance.

The door opened slowly, cautiously, then wide. Framed in the doorway stood old Tante Ket, her ample, faded-blue-gray- mother hubbard-clothed figure filled almost the entire opening. Her once dark brown eyes lit up with pleasure when she saw her visitors. Fido let out a few last low growls, like thunder left over from a storm, as his mistress told him to be quiet and invited us in.

Her voice (almost as creaky as the door) accompanied a welcoming hand gesture as she said, "Kids, Kids, come in and sit down!"

Still hand in hand, we walked through the door and looked around for a place to sit. Tante Ket just stood and watched us for a few seconds as she wiped her hands on a long grease-stained apron and moved the spider (an iron frying pan) to the back of the stove.

Then pushed a shabby plush-covered footstool toward my brother and said, "Here Clarence sit down." Clarence willingly complied, pulled a piece of store string (that generally bound goods we'd purchased at Greiling's General Merchandise) from his pocket and proceeded making patterned knots with it.

I wasn't about to have Tante Ket determine where I should sit and quickly decided it would be the old rocker. I moved the big grey and brown cat snoozing in it to one side and edged in next to it. The cat stirred, and as he debated whether he should contend with less room or get off, I took him on my lap and stroked his fur. Old Tom purred like a kitten.

"What do you like? A piece of bread?" Tante Ket asked, looking at us from one to the other.

"Yes, Tante Ket, yes" I answered eagerly, "Bread with butter and sugar!"

As Tante Ket waddled to the far end of the room to the cupboard for our bread Clarence continued knotting his store string, while I stroked old Tom and looked around the room.

All was familiar in that it wasn't the first time we'd come to visit or great-aunt. Familiar too, because of some of the same items and artifacts in our home. But not so many things in one room. Here kitchen and living room were all in one. More living room than kitchen with its stacks of old magazines (mostly religious), pictures of the Sacred Heart and Virgin Mary in wide wooden frames that covered much of the faded rose-patterned wall paper.

Next to the holy pictures was one of our uncle Conrad, father Ripp the priest our mother Lizzie's brother. In a gilded frame (just like the one that hung on or sitting room wall at home) his intense, gold-wire-bespeckled eyes followed you around the room. Just like at home.

On the wall near the bedroom door was a foot-long crucifix with a metallic figure of the Christ hanging on it. And beneath it, a small holy water font that Tante Ket kept filled with water she'd gotten on Holy Saturday (the day before Easter) and taken home in mason jars. Blessed by the parish priest, and scooped from large wash tubs, it was usually sufficient for the ensuing year. Sufficient for dipping fingers in and making the sign of the cross whenever one passed a font...

The cupboard, an oil cloth covered round wooden table, and black wood-burning stove that Tante Ket fed hardened creosote tree knots and roots remnants of the Peshtigo fire from our nearby land made up the kitchen part, and was her source of heat in the winter. But for cooking in summer, she fed the dual-purpose stove less heat-producing wood. One small eastern corner of the kitchen was devoted to her plumbing facilities: A battered zinc sink with an iron hand pump, wash basin, and smudged roller towel.

Through the doorway to the small bedroom, I could see a picture of The Holy Family hung over the high wooden bedstead, with a spray of braided palm stuck between the picture and the gray wall.

A black cat, one of the twenty-some Tante Ket had and apparently a favorite, was busily washing himself on the tattered faded-patch-work quilt that covered the bed.

I continued to stroke old Tom, and look around, while Clarence pushed his toes back and forth between the loosened threads of the braided rug near his footstool. We were getting a little impatient for our treat as Tante Ket seemed to be taking an exceptionally long time in preparing it--as though she wanted to prolong our visit.

We enjoyed visiting Tante Ket now and then. She was always good for something to eat and loved to talk. And we liked to listen. On occasion she would decide we were simply TOO unkempt and dirty and needed "Arsch waschen"--her colloquialism for a bath. She would arrange with one of our older brothers to bring us to her, since we couldn't be depended on to go by ourselves for this ritual. We would object loudly, but to no avail. The water was heated, the big wash tub she kept in the lean-to shed was ready and waiting. Also the strong home-made soap.

**Tante Ket was really our great-aunt, grandmother Elisabeth's sister Katherina, and our mother Lizzie's aunt.** Her little house stood on the land adjoining our grandparent's homestead and our farm was only a quarter-mile up the road. But we weren't allowed to leave it by ourselves very often. We could, however, visit Tante Ket without anybody being much concerned about us.

While considered 'a little queer' by the towns' people, key also knew her to be harmless--even helpful at times. It was not uncommon for her to watch for school children, struggling through the snow in a cold Wisconsin blizzard, and beckon them to come in and warm up before they would continue homeward.

Hot coffee, bread or cookies, and they were on their way. Sometimes, when the storm was really raging, Schott and Tauschek children, who lived two miles further eastward spent the night in the loft of Tante Ket's little house.

"Ket von Hatten, the stupid thing," the country folk would say, "She wouldn't get up on her wedding day." We knew the story. Heard it from our cousins and others but it made no difference to us. We liked to get our 'Stück Brot' (piece of bread), especially when she put home-made elderberry jam on it, and listen to her tales and reminiscences. Stories about her early childhood in Alsace-Lorraine, that faraway place across the big water. Stories about 'olden days'. But she never told the story about herself.

Gossip had it that some forty years earlier everything was set for her wedding. Her dress, veil, and bridesmaids' dresses were made. Her mother and sisters had worked for days readying the meat, and baking pies, cakes, cookies and breads. The banns of marriage had been read in the church three preceding Sundays.

The groom had the ring. The three-piece brass band, readied and waiting to play for the Wedding - the celebration with beer drinking, eating, and dancing on the cleaned-off-wooden threshing floor.

Then, when they went to awaken Tante Ket on her wedding morning, she simply wouldn't get up, wouldn't get out of bed. The dumb thing...

In the course of time, Tante Ket, who had been living with her older sister Elisabeth, helping with the children and house work, moved to a place of her own above Schauer's store in the upper village of New Franken, not far from the newly-built St. Kilian's church. She attended mass and vespers, did sewing for the townspeople, but kept pretty much to herself. Queer, but harmless...

In later years my grandparents, Mathias and Elisabeth Ripp, took responsibility for Tante Kit's welfare and built the little two-room house on the home land fronting the country road that subsequently became highway 54. She had insisted on a "Katzen Loch" (cat hole) under the house where her many cats could go in and out. And here she lived alone with her cats, dogs, chickens, small garden, and lilac bushes that filled the air with their pungent fragrance each returning May, forming a barrier between her and the road...

Finally, Tante Ket returned with two thick slices of homemade bread, heavily spread with fried-out pork fat, salted and peppered. We rose eagerly to take them - it didn't matter that it wasn't the butter and sugar we'd requested. And we didn't bother washing our hands, nor did Tante Ket suggest we do.

Clarence returned to his footstool and I to a kitchen chair, munched our bread and waited for Tante Set to settle her ample form in the old calico rocker, and tell us about 'the olden days'.

She took old Tom (who I'd put down when I went for my piece of bread) onto her lap, rocked gently for a moment, just looking at us, then began to talk, while we waited

Now, sometimes in the past, she had told us about worldly things, like when she was a young girl, ladies weren't suggested to have ankles – their dresses had to go down to their feet. We always understood her sing-song Lottringer dialect because, except for the lilt and inflection, it was similar to the Bavarian we spoke at home. So we wondered, with anticipation, what she had in store for us today. We soon learned it was religious personages. She talked about Pius X who'd died in 1914 - four years earlier. Four years, that was a long time ago. She talked as though she'd known him personally. Our eyes grew large with wonder at accounts of miracles the great men had performed. We hadn't heard much about him around home, though we did hear about the current Pope Benedict XV, who lived on a throne far away, and we were supposed to honor and respect him.

But Pope Pius X, that was something different. He must have been almost as great as those in the holy pictures on the wall, I said. And why didn't she hang his picture too? Tante Kt answered that she never could get a big one, but did have a small one.

With that she got up, put old Tom on the floor and went to the bedroom where we heard her open a dresser drawer. She returned shortly with a small picture and clipping from the Saint Anthony Massinger, a Catholic magazine about five years old. Showing it to us, she pointed out this was indeed a very great man. Did she ever meet him? Clarence wanted to know. No, she didn't, but he was pretty real to her. Even dreamed of him at times...

Without another word, she went to the stove and put a few pieces of wood in it. When the flame flared up – low because of the August heat - she pulled the iron spider, with a few pieces of salt pork cut small, to the front and gradually set it to frying. Added a little flour to make "Einbrenne" - a light brown gravy, and proceeded to slice a head of cabbage on a small wooden board, thus indicating she needed to start making supper.

Clarence looked at me questioningly. Should we leave? Fidgeting with the string in his pocket, and shoving his feet restlessly on the braided rug, he waited for me to make the first move.

"Yes, Clarence come on, going home" I said, getting up from the kitchen chair and moving toward the door.

Tante Ket, continuing to slice cabbage, turned her head with the skimpy grey bun at the back, and said, almost pleadingly, 'Yes – but please come again soon".

We promise we would indeed come again. Soon. Leaving her slicing momentarily she followed us to the door, saying, "Get well, Kids"

"Yes, you too" I said, by way of saying goodbye as we walked out onto the stoop.

Shep wagged his tail as Clarence petted his head saying, "Brave dog, nice dog!. Fido growled as if he would have the intruders move on and out of the yard. Some yellow transparent apples, laying on the ground, caught my eye and I nudged my brother to come with me to the old gnarled tree about a dozen feet from the house. We picked up a few, warm from the late afternoon sun, and began munching.

As we walked along the road, shuffle like, raising a cloud of dust with our bare feet, we turned and looked back to see Tante Kat come to the gate. Watching us go home. When we got to our driveway she turned and went back into the house.

The years moved along. School taught Clarence and me English and our Bavarian dialect became a thing of our childhood.

The war with Germany somehow made us feel it was something to be ashamed of, and I especially, made a concerted effort to forget it. Clarence clung to the language more closely, just as he clung to the slow pace and security of the farm.

I, on the other hand longed to know what lay beyond the small Bavarian farming community, population two hundred. I'd read about big cities like New York, Los Angeles, Detroit. Read about them in 'True Story' and 'True Romance' magazines I'd borrowed from the Heim cousins, who lived a quarter mile eastward on highway 54. And managed to keep hidden. Read in the privacy of the little house with the quarter moon - behind the big house.

In these stories the country girl always went to the big city, found adventure and life... And I did just that.

I'd met Jerry, who came from Brooklyn, at a small private college in Katonah, New York to which we'd both gotten scholarships. We married, had children, and settled down to a fairly uneventful life.

Jerry enjoyed going back with me to my farming community almost as much I did. To me, it was home. My roots. To him a different way of life, charming, appealing. The slow moving, folksy people a refreshing change from his fast-moving business friends and associates. He enjoyed their home-made breads and preserves, their party-line wall telephones with receivers they put to their ears, whether it was their ring or not. Their friendly gossip and little superstitions.

He realized their lives were quite narrow, with boundaries reaching not far beyond the nearest city of Green Bay. But, there was no artificiality here either. You always knew where you stood. You always knew where your neighbor stood.

Jerry loved the wide and open spaces of the country road and we walked down some part of it each time we returned. He liked to tell his friends in Detroit his wife had relatives all along highway 54. That she was related to practically everyone in town and the countryside. And as we visited my assorted relatives, aunts Anna, Lena, Katie, Maggie, Laura, and uncles Pete, Theodore, Martin, Bill and Kilian, along with various cousins, he learned about their lives. Their good luck and bad. Their qualities and faults.

And so he learned the legend of Tante Ket. Tante Ket, who had died the year we were married. Uncle Kilian found her one morning sitting in her calico-covered rocker, as though asleep - 1935.

He had been checking on her daily since she was getting very old, but was still insistent on living alone. Alone, with her cats, dogs and memories.

Kind of queer, wouldn't get up on her wedding day. Yes, Jerry knew that story too.

On one of our periodic visits to New Franken, as we were seated around the big kitchen table with uncle Kilian and his wife Laura, the conversation turned to Tante Ket. Natural enough, for they now lived on the Ripp home land where Tante Ket had also lived.

"I see Tante Ket's house is still standing," I said, "but it looks pretty rickety."

"Yah", uncle Kilian, a small smile starting at the corners of his mouth said, "but it didn't look much better twenty years ago. We knocked down the partition between the two rooms and keep the plows and hay rakes and cultivators in it. Keeps them dry in winter. And in summer we pasture the cows in the orchard, and the yard well, it just kinda goes wild. They're a couple old lilac bushes yet that look kinda pretty in spring, but they don't need much looking after."

For a few brief seconds I saw again the purple flowerettes and smelled their pungency--so close to the fence, so close to the road...

"Funny thing about Tante Ket, never married, just wouldn't get up on her wedding day," I said by way of making conversation.

Aunt Laura rose from the table, went to the side-board for more sausage (the homemade kind), sliced enough to fill the platter and urged us to eat more. Eat. Fried potatoes, and pickles—her own, with dill and garlic.

"More coffee?" she asked, pot poised, "sugar and cream?"

"Yes, please, but just cream," I answered.

Uncle Kilian accepted a refill, added a spoonful of sugar and began stirring slowly, deliberately. He looked down at his cup as if this stirring were of prime importance. Then he picked it up when the coffee appeared just right. Half way to his mouth he put it down and again began stirring, slowly, deliberately.

Then, just as slowly, deliberately, he said, "But she did get up on her wedding day."

Startled, Aunt Laura looked at him, "What do you mean, Kilian?"

"Yes, what do you mean?" I asked, equally surprised.

"I mean that's just a story the Ripp family cooked up years ago."

We waited expectantly, scarcely touching our food, as uncle Kilian, in his slow, quiet manner stirred and sipped his coffee while he unfolded the real story about Tante Ket: She had been engaged to **John Meuer**, who owned a farm in Humboldt, about three miles south of the Ripp farm. He was fifteen years older than she and it came as something of a surprise to the country folk that shy, quiet-spoken John was finally getting married.

But they were happy for him because a farmer has got to have a wife. His mother wouldn't always be with him. So, John courted Tante Ket for about three years, came over to

see her every Saturday night with his horse rig. Like everybody else in those days. Tante Ket had her big hope chest full of crochetings, patchwork quilts, bed sheets, towels - just like all the other unmarried girls. Then they set the wedding date.

Uncle Kilian paused at this point, as though he were trying to remember, or made a decision.

Then went on, "I was just a little Schaefer, but if I remember right that wedding was coming off kinda late in summer—maybe August or September. Anyways, it does't matter. It was gonna be a big thing, but then all weddings were big them days. Everything was ready for the wedding, just like you heard tell."

"Yes, uncle Kilian" I interjected impatiently, "but what happened? What really happened?"

"I'm coming to that. You see Tante Ket was purtner thirty by then, she'd been kind of a home body, helped my mother with us kids and in the house, and waited around for John to pop the question, which you know he finally did," uncle Kilian said irrelevantly, like he was still having a problem telling the real story.

"Anyways, Tante Ket lived right here in this house. Of course it looked a little different at that time ...well, it was the night before the wedding, I don't know what day in the week - it don't matter, when John came over to see Tante Ket."

"They went in the parlor as usual, and about nine o'clock I went up to bed. Before I fell asleep—I was excited about the wedding next day I heard the door shut and somebody go out "

"Then purty soon I heard a lotta noise downstairs. Such a commotion! And somebody was crying real loud! I got up and stood at the head of the stairs so I could hear better. I heard Tante Ket say something to my mother like, "What'll I do, what'll I do! John don't wanna get married, and everything's ready, and ohmy, how the people will talk! How they'll talk:'

We held our breaths, flabbergasted, as uncle Kilian went on, "Then I remember my mother answering in Lottringer – she and her sister always talked Lottringer together - 'we gotta think of something, we can't face the people with you jilted, and on the night before your wedding yet! Ohmy, ohmy, how they'll talk, and talk!'

"Purty soon I heard my mother ask Tante Ket what made John back out. She said he didn't give any reason—just that he couldn't go through with it. He knew the people would talk so he said to say SHE backed out--changed her mind. It was easier for a man.

"A little later, I heard somebody come upstairs, and I ran back to my bed. My mother asked if I was sleeping and I said no, so she said I should put on my pants and come down stairs. I don't think I'll ever forget this, but there in the sitting room was my father and mother, Tony and Conrad, and Tante Ket.

"All looking mighty sad and worried. My sister Lizzie, your mother," and here he looked directly at me, "came down a few minutes after me, and they told us all to sit down. Your mother got all excited when she saw Tante Ket crying, I guess she didn't hear all that

commotion before. Anyways, my father explained what happened and it was too bad but we would have to keep the shame from the family name. He then told us the plan. Tante Ket just wouldn't get up on her wedding day, changed her mind. That's all. But, we must never, never tell anybody. Never! And that's how it was. You know the story."

Uncle Kilian stopped talking, like a clock that had run down.

"You mean to tell me," I said dumbfounded, "my mother knew this story and never even told my father?"

"I don't know if she ever told Matt about it, but you kids never learned about it. I never told anybody before, not even Laura.

"You sure didn't, Kilian, what a closemouthed man I married! Forty years we been married and he lets me believe that silly story about Ket!"

"Well, I'll be damned, I'll be damned!" was all Jerry could say.

"In this town we didn't dare tell anybody," uncle Kilian tried to explain, "you know how people talk, 'specially way back then. But, she's gone quite a while now and I just felt like telling you. But it wasn't easy because I keep remembering it my father said to us...but I think they'd all understand." A sad expression came into his blue-grey eyes.

"I know they would, uncle Kilian, I know they would" I said.

We tried to make small talk after that, but not very successfully. Tante Ket, at peace in the country churchyard a mile and a half away, suddenly came very much alive, especially to me. One more thing I wanted to know I said before we left for Aunt Maggie's, my father's sister who was expecting us "John – what happened to him? Did he ever marry?"

"No, no he never did. He lived with his mother 'till she died, and then his widowed sister, Mrs. Tillman, kept house for him. He died an old batch. He's buried about a hundred feet from our family plat in the church cemetery, where Tante Ket is buried."

We started to leave. We must come again, uncle Kilian and aunt Laura said. We would, but now we really had to go. It was awfully nice seeing them again, and the food was delicious. They mustn't work too hard. They wouldn't, they responded. Most of the land was rented now. Indeed we would phone before we went back to Detroit. With that we shook hands, thanked them for a lovely lunch, and went out into the warm afternoon sunshine.

Everything was the same, yet not the same. A gentle wind stirred the leaves in the nearby orchard that extended toward the old shack that once was home to Tante Ket, her cats, her dogs – her memories.

"We'd better get going," Jerry said as we got into our Nash. "Right," I answered, 'let's get on our way." We drove about a mile with neither of us saying anything. Finally, I broke the silence with, 'Isn't that the **doggonest** thing you ever heard? "

"Yeah, simply unbelievable, the usually verbal Jerry answered. Sensing my nostalgic mood he drove the five miles to Aunt Maggie's on highway 57 in Bay settlement, in virtual silence.

Aunt Maggie, who I'd lived with for two and a half years as a child, a bent-over little old lady with greying black hair drawn up into a pug on the top of her head, welcomed us with open arms and larder. No, no we didn't want any food, but thankyou anyway. Just visit a bit. Maybe later. We'd eaten at uncle Kilian's. And how was she, we asked. Pretty good, ailing a little, but for a woman her age, pretty good. She kept busy. Was she still hooking rugs? Oh yes. see this pretty one with the bear design. Just finished that. Yes, indeed everyone was just fine in Detroit, just fine.

About an hour and reels of conversation later, I casually mentioned that we'd passed Tante Ket's house on our way to uncle Kilian.

"It's pretty much of a shack now." I'd said, "They use it to store machinery--you know, plows, rakes, cultivators."

Aunt Maggie's ears perked up and a familiar expression came into her blue-grey eyes at this bit of information. She had something 'joicey' to relate. "Ach yah, that Ket", and she proceeded to tell Jerry the story about Tante Ket. It didn't matter she'd told him at another time.

"That dumb thing didn't even get up on her wedding day. Just simply wouldn't get outa bed when they went to wake her up that morning. Ach yah, she was always kinda funny. Queer like. Cats and dogs, that's all she lived with. Just cats and dogs."

"Yeah, I know," Jerry answered as his eyes met mine across the room...