

The Story of Annette's Love

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Annette Stoll grew up in a small university town in central Germany. She was a fresh, young girl with a bright complexion, carefree and quick to laugh. She attended school with moderate diligence and had a weakness for sweets and films. The playmate of her childhood was young Gerhard Jäger, about three years her senior, thin and lanky with a preference for books and serious conversation.

They were neighbors and their parents were friends. It just so happened that the two of them grew up like brother and sister. The adventures of one were also the adventures of the other—the deserted gardens, the winding alleys, the Sundays with church bells, the fields in summer, the twilight, the stars, the aroma and the breathless, dark magic of youth—all this they had in common.

Later it was different. The girl, precocious and pretty, reached the cool self-control of a bold sixteen year old. She went suddenly from the open, trusted garden of childish comradeship into the twilight of fascinating mysteries. The young Gerhard Jäger, who until recently had been her older friend and protector of her childhood now appeared awkward to her, much younger than herself, and with his indecisive pensiveness almost laughable. She liked the round, glossy things in life, and it wasn't hard to predict the course of her life—she would be secure, happy, and entirely comfortable, with a respectable husband and healthy children.

By the time Gerhard had completed his first semester at university, they had grown apart.

Then came the war. The universal fever of enthusiasm infected the town. Day after day more first-years exchanged their colorful student's caps for the gray regimental caps of volunteers. And their boyish faces looked almost enraptured, more serious, older, but also handsome in their youthful readiness to sacrifice themselves and yet still too close to school, rowing clubs, and nocturnal escapades—peace still too near for them to have a real understanding of what everything meant and where they were going.

Gerhard Jäger was among the first volunteers. It was as if the quiet, hesitant, thoughtful boy had been transformed. He appeared to glow from an inner fire that was far removed from the excess of the war-drunk professors. He and his comrades saw more than simple conflict and defense in war; for them it was the great attack

that would clean out the obsolete ideals of a self-satisfied, orderly existence and would vitalize their wintry life.

They all went off together one Sunday. At the train station there were many crying, excited, and ardent friends and relatives. Almost the entire town was there. There were flowers everywhere, fresh green twigs were stuck into rifle muzzles, the brass band played and shrieks and yells flew back and forth. As the train left the station, Gerhard Jäger suddenly saw Annette in front of the window of his compartment. She waved at someone in another car. He reached for her hand.

“Annette—”

She laughed and threw him the rest of her flowers. “Bring me back something pretty from Paris!”

He nodded but couldn’t say anything more, for the train started to move faster and the train station was a tumult of song and blaring brass bands. The fluttering white summer dress of the girl was the last memory that he took with him. . .

During the first months Annette heard little from Gerhard. Then, little by little, postcards and letters came more frequently. In fact, she wondered about it; she couldn’t understand why it should have happened so suddenly. But she understood even less why all these letters—in the course of the months more and more exclusively—were tied up with memories of their common childhood. She expected vivid descriptions of bold attacks and was disappointed every time to hear only about things that she already knew and which bored her.

Gerhard’s brigade suffered heavy casualties in the Battle of Flanders. A few days later his parents received a short report which said that out of two hundred, only Gerhard and twenty-seven others remained unharmed. On the other hand, Annette got a long letter in which Gerhard almost passionately recalled a certain morning in May and the white cherry blossoms behind the cloisters of the cathedral. His father shook his head when he read the letter. He felt committed to the higher ideals and would have been happy if his son had acted a bit more heroically. Annette laid the letter aside with a shrug—she couldn’t remember that morning in May anymore.

The astonishment of both was all the greater when they found out that Gerhard had demonstrated such bravery in the Battle of Flanders that he had been decorated and received a field promotion.

A short while later he came home on leave, wiry, thin and sunburned, completely different than Annette had imagined him from the letters. In contrast to the garrulous pride of his father he seemed to have doubled in seriousness, sometimes he seemed even absent-minded and strangely distracted. When he was alone with Annette for the first time after a strange, almost wordless hour of clumsy looks and awkward glances he suddenly took her hand and asked her if they couldn’t get married. And he remained on the issue very insistently and quietly even when the objection was made that she was still too young. He was nineteen and she was not yet seventeen.

At that time there wasn’t anything unusual about hasty war marriages and engagements—such things were part of the general enthusiasm. After the first momentary surprise Annette quickly became accustomed to the thought—she came to the conclusion that it would be intriguing to be the first of her class to marry—and she really liked the manly, active young officer the dreamy Gerhard of her childhood had turned into,

and more than that was hardly necessary. Even her parents, prosperous, good-natured, and patriotic to boot, gave their approval and were quite taken with the idea—the wedding would afford the pretense for a grand party.

The celebration took place at noon. In the afternoon during the wedding feast a special edition of the newspaper was released which reported a great new victory on the eastern front. Gerhard's father had brought in all the available newspapers and read the story to the party. Ten thousand Russians captured! The wedding guests gave themselves over to an extravagant joy. Speeches were made, patriotic songs were sung, and Gerhard in his gray uniform appeared as the embodiment of the very ideals on which they were all intoxicated.

The priest shook his hand, the teacher clapped him on the shoulder, his father cheered him on, to go off again with the same single-mindedness after those ideals, and all that were present came up in order to toast with him, "Victory, glory, and luck in battle!" Gerhard, who had become even more gloomy and silent, suddenly jumped up, grabbed his glass, and while the party sat around in silent anticipation he set it back down on the table so hard that it shattered. "You—", he said, "you—" and with dark, glittering eyes he looked from one to the other—"What do you know about it?"—and left.

This evening and throughout the night he spoke agitatedly with Annette—as if he wanted to cling to something that threatened to slip away—he spoke of youth, of ambition, of life. The whole time he only spoke of her—but it often seemed to her that he didn't mean her at all.

The next evening he went back to the front. But he had tried the whole day to be alone with Annette. It was as if he was in a fever. He didn't want to see anybody else, only to stroll with her over the squares and through the gardens and to be with her in the fields by the river until it was time for him to leave. He seemed strange to her and she was almost slightly scared of him. As he said goodbye he held her tightly and spoke quickly, stammering from haste, as if there was still much left unsaid, undone. Then he jumped onto the train that was already pulling away.

He fell four weeks later, and Annette was a widow at seventeen.

The war went on and the years became ever bloodier, until there was hardly a house in the small city which was not in mourning, and Annette's fate, which had been spoken of since the beginning, paled in comparison to the hard trials of those families where both fathers and sons had fallen. And little by little, she herself didn't notice it anymore. She was too young and the few days that they had spent together were not enough for her to look on Gerhard as her husband. For her he was only a friend from her youth who had fallen—like so many others.

It became noticeable that a certain reclusiveness came into her life. Nothing connected her to her old girlfriends anymore—for that she was no longer girlish enough. On the other hand she found that she belonged just as little among the adults—for that she was still too girlish. And so it happened that she barely knew how she should behave. Too much had happened and passed by too quickly.

But the events of the last years of the war left her no time to reflect. She worked

from dusk until dawn as a volunteer assistant nurse in a hospital. The maelstrom of the times broke in and devoured every individual.

Then came the armistice, the revolution, the time of the coups, the nightmare of inflation—and finally, when everything was over and Annette came to her senses again, she discovered to her own surprise that she had become a woman of twenty five, yet the riches of her life had not grown at all. She barely thought about Gerhard anymore.

Soon afterwards her parents died. Their estate had shrunk so much that Annette had to be thankful to get a job as a nurse in a North German city. A few months later she met a man who courted her and wanted to marry her. She hesitated at first, but as time went on she grew to like him and a date for the marriage was set.

Now she should have been quite happy, but she became restless. Something inside her, she didn't know what, was scared. She caught herself lost in her thoughts; she listened absent-mindedly when someone spoke with her. Her thoughts were hazy and scampered off into the abstraction of a blurred, somber melancholy. At night she would wake up sobbing without reason. Then she tried again, with aggressive tenderness, with passionate longing for sympathy to overcome the strange barrier that gradually arose before her.

Sometimes, when she was alone in her room and looked out the window at the naked gray houses across the way, it seemed to her as if the walls dissolved into a transparent haze and behind it doors opened; she saw alleys and pitched roofs, summer fields and hot, deserted gardens—and then an urgent longing to be home again came over her until she finally became convinced that all of her difficulties came from this: it was only homesickness and in order to conquer it, she had to go back there and see everything again.

She decided to visit her hometown for a few days, and her fiancé accompanied her.

They arrived in the evening. Annette was very excited. As soon as they had unpacked their things in the hotel she left her fiancé and went out alone.

She stood in front of the house that had been her home. She ran into the garden. Her excitement grew. The moon shone and the roofs glimmered. An aroma of spring lay in the air and she had the feeling that something was before her, a beginning—it already rose on the horizon, came over to her, wanted to be remembered, wanted a name.

She went through the fields. The grass was heavy with dew. The cherry blossoms shimmered like fresh snow. And suddenly there it was: a voice, a far-away, forgotten, lost voice, a far-away, forgotten, lost face; something ripped open deep inside her, something breathless, something impossibly distant, unimaginably exhausted, heavy, sad—she hadn't thought about it any more; now it rose up and became more powerful than it had ever been in life; quite suddenly loved, lost, but never her own - Gerhard Jäger.

She came back to the hotel, unsteady, dazed. She looked at her fiancé—how foreign he was to her! She could have hated him as he stood there in front of her, alive and healthy. Only with great effort was she able to say to him the few inevitable words. He wanted to talk to her; he pressed her to reconsider; he promised her to wait. She only nodded to everything he said and wanted to be alone.

The few days that she had lived with Gerhard now became agony and a mystery to Annette. She got out his letters and read them until her eyes were blind with tears. She

sought out a few of his comrades and was unflagging in asking them about him and what they knew of him. One of them had spoken to him frequently and had even talked to him on the day that he had fallen. Now for the first time Annette realized what the war had actually been like; for the first time she realized what Gerhard had spoken of the night of his departure; for the first time she realized what he had seen in her—a resting place, a harbor, a small fire of love in the middle of so much hate; a spark of humanity in the middle of the obliteration; warmth, faith, a foundation upon which he could stand; the earth, a homeland, a bridge over which he could return.

She became afflicted with remorse, and with love. She, for whom all this had only been a small vanity, a frivolous affection for the unusual, a little friendship and a little bit of girlish indulgence; she, who had so quickly forgotten, who barely even remembered, suddenly began to love—began to love a shadow.

She became more and more withdrawn. Her acquaintances tried to argue with her in order to help her find herself again. But it was all to no avail. If she had lived with a real person it might have been possible to free her from it; but she lived with a memory.

She became ever stranger. Often, when she was alone in her room, she talked to herself out loud. Soon she had lost her job. Later she joined a small sect that held séances. Once she thought that Gerhard had appeared to her. So the years went by. . . one day she was no more. . . the last thing that she saw was the setting sun standing behind the dark cross of the window frame.