

Dora Heldt
Three Women at the Lake
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Dora Heldt: Three Women at the Lake (Drei Frauen am See)

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Lübeck

Marie

"And look at this one," Marie's voice was so weak that Hanna had to lean over to make out what she was saying. "That's me with Jule. And that's Blacky, her rabbit. I was so jealous of her for having one. I couldn't have a pet, after all, because of my allergies." She coughed. Hanna looked at her worriedly and gently laid her hand on her forehead. Marie slowly settled down again, then gratefully drank the water that Hanna held out to her, before turning her attention back to the photograph album. "That must have been in 1972. Jules got Blacky for her tenth birthday."

Hanna had never seen such a fat, ugly-looking rabbit. Due to the angle the photo had been taken from, the creature came up to the hips of the little girl with curly blonde hair, which couldn't be possible. But it certainly wasn't cute, whatever angle you looked at it from. "Quite a chubby rabbit, isn't it?"

Marie smiled wearily. "It died a year later. Jule wasn't sad for very long, though. I think she was relieved she didn't have to keep going out in all weathers on the hunt for dandelion. We buried him beneath a cherry tree in the garden, and it was a very entertaining ceremony. Jules' brother played a Christmas song on the recorder. He couldn't play any others."

She stroked her index finger carefully over the blonde girl's freckled face. Then she turned the page. "Summer on the Lake, 1972" was written there in a child's sweeping handwriting, above a collection of pictures with that faded tone typical of photos from the '70s. One of the snapshots showed two girls sat on a jetty, their bare feet dangling in the water, the evening sun on their faces. One of them was blonde, pale and delicate, quite clearly Marie, and the other tanned, tall and sturdily built. "Who's that?" asked Hanna, tapping her finger on the picture. "With the long dark ponytail?"

"Friederike." Marie nodded. "She spent every summer with us on the lake. Look, here she is again with her mother, Esther, my mother's best friend. My mother was also Friederike's godmother. We were like sisters growing up."

Two young women, perhaps in their mid to late thirties, on a small wooden table beneath some fruit trees. The lake in the background, and on the table a bunch of summery flowers, a pitcher filled with a drink that looked like punch, and glasses with handles. Laura van Barig bore a strong resemblance to Marie; the same clear features, the same eyes. Except that she was slightly tanned, not as pale or as delicate-looking as her daughter. Her hair fell loosely over her shoulders, and she was wearing shorts and a narrow-fitting, sleeveless blouse. Esther's hair was pulled back tightly, and her long black dress didn't fit with the summery surroundings. Nor did her serious expression, especially as Friederike was stood behind her in a yellow bathing suit, dripping wet.

"We had all gone swimming, and Esther came to pick up Friederike."

"And it seems she was annoyed that it was taking so long," completed Hanna. "That's what it looks like, anyway. Your mother was a beautiful woman. You look a lot like her."

Marie looked at Hanna lovingly, then turned back to the photos. "Esther always had that look on her face. My mother had been friends with her for her whole life, that's why she probably didn't even notice any more. Even as a child I found Esther's moods tiring. Oh well." For a moment, Marie was lost in her thoughts. "That summer, Esther was only there for a few days. That's why Jule was allowed to come. Look, she was such a good swimmer. And unlike me, she was never afraid of the water; I was always scared of fish and water lilies, even back then. And most of the time I found the water far too cold too. But Jule....," Marie pointed at a photo in which a girl in a light blue swimsuit was making an elegant dive from a row boat. "She was always so brave. I took that photo from the jetty. That was the summer I got my first camera – that's why there are so many pictures."

She turned the pages, and Hanna followed the summer of three ten-year-old girls. The photos spoke for themselves: Jule's face catching the rays of sunlight, the glittering lake with water lilies blossoming on its banks, the wooden jetty where they watched the sun set in the evenings, tanned legs covered with mosquito bites, campfire breadsticks, the girls on lilos, floating on the lake, Friederike with a cat under her arm, Marie behind her mother's oversized sunglasses, Jule with her sun-bleached curls, her face covered with freckles, a glass in her hand with yellow liquid sparkling inside it.

"Peach iced tea." Marie smiled at the memory. "We loved the stuff. Even today, just the smell of a peach reminds me of those summers. It's strange, but I think we only ever drank it there at the lake house, nowhere else."

Twenty years ago, when Hanna had first met Marie, she knew nothing about this gentle, quiet and talented photographer. Marie had been commissioned by a big magazine to photograph Hanna during her concert tour. She arrived ahead of time, and had waited for over an hour on a bench in the foyer of the concert hall. As soon as Hanna came out of the sound check, her gaze had rested on this calm-looking woman with the friendly face. It wasn't until some time later that Hanna had realized what so fascinated her about this stranger: Marie had the cool, clear aura of someone whose inner and outer beauty were in perfect alignment. It wasn't just her delicate appearance, pale complexion and those deep, dark blue eyes; something had radiated from Marie which touched Hanna to her core: She had fallen in love with Marie, who was eleven years her junior, before she had even found out who she was. Hanna had spent the subsequent photo shoot as though she were in a trance, letting Marie's pleasantly deep voice envelop her, following the professional instructions while Marie consistently checked the results on her camera. Then she had asked Hanna to position herself in front of the large windows in the foyer, to walk outside, look over her shoulder and smile. That had been an easy instruction to follow, and when they looked at the photos together afterwards, Hanna knew that it had been exactly the same for Marie.

"I always loved the house on the lake." Marie coughed again. "I can't even remember when we first went there together. Can you?" The next bout of coughing was pushing its way up. Hanna reached for the glass of water, but Marie waved it away. "I'm fine, just give me a moment."

Hanna put it back down. "It was, wait ... in the year 2000 that I first went out to the lake with you." Hanna tenderly brushed a strand of Marie's hair out of her face. "We spent the evenings sitting on the deck by the shore. I had that closing concert in Lübeck, you remember, at the Schleswig-Holstein music festival. And afterwards we drove out to the lake and you showed me the house. And then you went onto the jetty..."

"Oh yes," Marie closed her eyes. "I remember."

The memories came flooding back at once. It was the final concert of Hanna's tour, sold out months before, but Marie had the wonderful fortune of a front row seat that evening, almost bursting with pride over this beautiful, magnificent and gifted woman at the piano. The people in the auditorium lay at her feet, a pianist at the pinnacle of her career, filling concert auditoriums all over the world.

As she sat there, listening to Hanna's virtuosity with tears in her eyes, she was filled with boundless gratitude for her love of this woman. Marie had been trying, back then, to ignore the dizziness that overcame her from time to time. She hadn't been feeling particularly well, even days before the concert, but she didn't want to let her health problems spoil the time which she was finally able to spend with Hanna, after three long months. Marie had a lot on her plate; she had back-to-back bookings as a photographer, and was on the road a lot. So she was very tired, but overjoyed too, in that concert hall in Lübeck, with the knowledge that she would be heading out to the lake house with Marie afterwards.

After the concert, Hanna had quickly changed out of the black evening dress into light-coloured trousers and a white pullover. As she came out of her dressing room, she was holding in her arms a large bouquet of roses, which she carefully placed on the backseat of Marie's small car, before getting in and squeezing her hand. "Come on, let's go."

Marie had intentionally not yet told Hanna much about her upbringing. It was just a hunch she had, because Hanna seemed indifferent to material things, and Marie wasn't sure how she would react if she knew what an affluent family she came from. It was only a few weeks before that Marie had told her she didn't actually live from her photography. And she had been so relieved that Hanna didn't seem bothered. They had known each other for three or four years by then; their relationship had developed slowly and in private, first they exchanged letters, then they met up whenever Hanna was in Germany on tour. And there was also something else that she didn't want Hanna to know about.

Less than an hour later, as they drove through the large iron gate up to the house, Hanna looked around wide-eyed. "Oh," she whispered. "I was picturing a little wooden house with a crooked veranda and colourful window shutters..."

Marie smiled. The white lakeside villa stood on a piece of land of park-like proportions. The sloping lawn ran down to the shore, and from the decking there was a view out to the boathouse and the jetty, at the end of which a ladder led invitingly into the water.

"Do you like it?" Marie parked the car in front of the entrance and looked at Hanna. "To me it's the most beautiful place in the world."

A few weeks later, after Marie's death...]

Notary's office, 2. May, Hamburg

Hanna

She opened the door leading out onto the small balcony in front of the conference room, and stepped outside. Before the curved balcony railings, between two pot plants, stood a small, white wooden bench with blue seat cushions. From here, Hanna had a good view of the entrance to the notary's office; she nodded contentedly and sat down. Everything was prepared, the drinks were laid out, and she had even remembered cognac, which one or two of them would presumably need. It was time.

It was strange how much she knew about the three women who were on their way here right now. And yet none of them knew a thing about her. She had seen so many pictures of them, knew their dreams, their triumphs and defeats; so much life in thirty years. Only the last ten years were missing, and Hanna was intrigued to find out how this time had treated them.

She lent over the balcony balustrade, because there was a woman stood at the foot of the building, talking loudly on her phone. Hanna couldn't make out what she was saying, but it could easily be one of them. She looked around the right age, had her blonde curls tied up into a ponytail, and kept peering around as she talked on the phone, as though she was searching for an address. Could that be Jule Petersen? She could imagine her looking like that; the woman had a very likeable face. Hanna couldn't wait to find out whether the perceptions she had gleaned from Marie's stories would match the reality. She would like Jule, Hanna was sure of that, for she liked uncomplicated and pragmatic women, and Jule was fixed in her mind as being one. Whether she would be able to get on with the controlled and perfectionistic Friederike, Hanna wasn't yet sure. Especially as, according to Marie's descriptions, she had a tendency to be unsatisfied with everything: a character trait that Hanna abhorred. The woman she was most looking forward to meeting, however, was Alexandra; to her she seemed – at least based on what Marie had told her – the most interesting personality of them all.

Hanna backed away a little; she couldn't let herself be seen from the street. Would she even recognise Marie's former friends? She had seen Jule and Friederike only once, very briefly and from a distance, eight years ago at Laura's funeral. They hadn't come to the meal, and had left immediately after the service. They had exchanged just a few words with Marie as they walked out to the cemetery, and she had been so consumed by her grief that she barely noticed who was stood before her. Alexandra had merely sent a sympathy card, as though she were just performing her duty. Strange, Hanna had thought to herself back then, that Marie seemed pleased by it regardless. She would have expected something else.

The woman on the telephone laughed loudly and slowly went on her way. Hanna watched her until she had disappeared out of sight. So it wasn't Jule Petersen after all.

She glanced at the clock. Another half hour to go. Over the last few days, Hanna had repeatedly tried to imagine how this meeting would play out. They didn't yet know that they would all be seeing each other again here, after such a long time. Anything was possible. Hanna had no way of judging how they would react to this encounter, so she was prepared for anything. But the one thing that absolutely couldn't be allowed to

happen was for these women to completely dismiss Marie's dying wish. After all these years, whether they liked it or not, they would have to listen to what Marie had thought out for them. She saw a woman approaching the building and immediately recognized her: Alexandra Weise was very photogenic. And she had barely changed. She walked slowly towards the entrance door, looked at her watch and sat down on the bench outside. She unbuttoned her jacket. An expensive suit, Hanna could see that even from up here, it fitted her perfectly, and she was wearing something white beneath. Alexandra put her large handbag down next to her and crossed her legs. She was very attractive. Her brunette hair was in a loose up-do, and she radiated the kind of ease you only see on women who are successful, independent, and no longer thirty. Hanna immediately understood why Marie had been so fascinated by her. She had always suspected her to be a little in love with Alexandra. Marie had always disputed it, but she had never attempted to hide her admiration for her: "You know," she had once said, "Alexandra has always been so extraordinary that I just felt proud to be her friend. Because then a little of her sparkle rubbed off on me. And the best thing about her is that she isn't even aware of her beauty. She's beautiful, but to her that's irrelevant."

Hanna watched Alexandra for a while as she bowed her head over her phone, seemingly writing a few emails. Somehow, despite her coolness, she seemed a little nervous; continually brushing a strand of hair behind her ear and scanning her surroundings. Making the decision to end Alexandra's wait, Hanna made her way downstairs.

"Mrs Weise?"

Alexandra jumped as she heard Hanna's voice. "Yes?"

She was a whole head taller than Hanna, but that was down to the high heels. Hanna looked up at her with a friendly expression. "My name is Hanna Herwig, I wrote to you. Thank you for coming."

Alexandra's handshake was firm, and she was a beautiful woman up close too, even with the delicate creases that were beginning to show around her eyes. "Oh, Mrs Herwig. You are..., you were..."

"Marie's wife." Hanna gave the hint of a smile. "We became civil partners some years ago. And since then it became possible for us to marry, too. Would you please follow me?"

Alexandra's confusion was almost tangible, even though she immediately got a grip of herself. "My condolences, Mrs Herwig, I'm so sorry, when I heard about Marie's death..."

"Come with me." Hanna pointed towards the entrance door. "We don't have to stand around in the hallway, after all. There's a conference room upstairs, and everything is prepared." She strode swiftly ahead, and Alexandra had to hurry to keep up with her.

The meeting room was on the second floor. An impressive space, dominated by two leather sofas placed opposite one another and separated only by a low table bearing a luxuriant bouquet of flowers. Alexandra's gaze fell on the four cups alongside the flowers. She wrinkled her brow, then looked at Hanna: "I didn't completely understand what this meeting is about. Could you tell me?"

"In a moment." Hanna nodded once more and pointed towards one of the sofas. "Why don't you take a seat? Would you like a coffee or tea, perhaps some water?"

"Nothing for now, thank you." Alexandra sat down on the sofa. "I've barely spoken to Marie over the last years. Her death came as quite a shock. As did this request for a meeting."

Hanna had remained on her feet, and looked at her keenly. "I can understand that. Nonetheless, if I could just ask you for a moment more of patience."

Footsteps could be heard on the stairs, then voices. The door opened and the notary's secretary stepped in. "Mrs Herwig, your visitor has arrived." She opened the door a little further and let the newcomer into the room. A blue dress, blonde curls, a smile emblazoned on her freckled face. Hanna knew immediately who was standing there in front of her. She really had barely changed; the same girl-like figure, the same facial expression. "Hello, my name is Jule Petersen, I..."

As her gaze fell Alexandra, her smile immediately vanished. "What's going on?"

Alexandra had slowly risen to her feet. She folded her arms in front of her chest and looked as though she had been hit in the stomach with a baseball bat. The two women stared at one another in disbelief. What Hanna saw before her gave her an inkling of what must have happened all those years ago; the deep wounds clearly hadn't healed in the slightest. Alexandra had gone as pale as the wall, while unbridled rage sparked in Jule's eyes – Hanna almost couldn't avert her gaze from the two of them. But it was important for everything that was about to come that they stayed. She simply had to make it happen, regardless of how great the shock was right now. It had to succeed; she owed Marie that. She took a step towards the two of them, then Jule spun around and gave Hanna an indignant look. "I'm not sure whether this is a good idea. I don't want to..."

"Take a seat first please." Hanna urged Jule gently towards the sofa opposite. "Coffee, tea, water?"

"Nothing, thank you." Jules stayed on her feet next to the sofa. "I'm sure we can make this quick."

"No." Hanna smiled. "Unfortunately we can't." She sat down on the individual seat and looked back and forth from Jule and Alexandra, who were still standing opposite one another in bewilderment. "We're waiting for someone else, then I'll ask Dr Eisendorf to join us, so you can find out why you're here."

"I don't think I want to know." Jule turned around so that she wouldn't have to look at Alexandra. "In fact, the more I think about it, the more convinced I am that I don't want to know. Thank you, Mrs Herwig, but I think it's best if I go now."

"No." Alexandra's raw voice sounded sharp. "You won't. We're not sixteen any more. There'll be a reason why we're here, and we can at least listen to it."

Deliberately ignoring Alexandra, Jule headed towards the door. But before she got there, it opened. "Mrs Brenner has arrived, please go through. I'll let Dr. Eisendorf know now, okay?"

"Yes, thank you." Hanna stood up and looked at Friederike. The perfect Friederike Brenner was suddenly stood in the room, just an arm's length from Jule. Ten minutes late, dressed in cream-coloured trousers and an elegant but soiled blouse, the sleeves ripped. The trousers had dark stains too, and a hole on the knee,

and one of Friederike's hands was completely covered in plaster. She pushed a rebellious strand of hair behind her ear, which didn't improve her appearance any, and looked around the room with her eyebrows raised. "Hello," she said, turning to Hanna. "You must be Hanna Herwig. I'm Friederike Brenner. Alex, Jule, I can't believe it! It seems today has turned out to be completely catastrophic. If it gets any worse, I think I'll need a cognac."

"My God!" Hanna looked her up and down. "What happened?"

"I ended up beneath a bicycle courier." Friederike rubbed pointlessly at one of the numerous stains on her blouse. "My knee has been tended to, and so has my hand, but even the shock of all that wasn't as great as the one I'm having right now. Jule, were you leaving?"

"I..." Jule was visibly overwhelmed. She turned around to Hanna. Then her gaze wandered back to Friederike's deranged appearance, and she lowered her arms helplessly. Hanna walked past her and closed the door. "Let's sit down now, and then we can discuss everything calmly."

As Friederike limped slowly over to the sofa, Jule hesitantly sat down opposite her. Alexandra was still standing next to the sofa. All three of them were taking great pains to avoid making eye contact, and the room crackled with tension and unease. At that moment, Hanna was no longer as convinced as before that she would be able to fulfil Marie's dying wish.