A Mother’s Battle

Imma Von Hof; July 1914; Germany

As I cook, I fear that the heat in the kitchen will melt the carefully decorated cake that I made to celebrate my precious Hubert. It is a family recipe that has been passed down from my Oma, to my Mama, and now me. A perfect cylinder, three layers high, draped in chocolate cream and nuts. It is a special treat for my special boy who likes to think that he is a man. But no matter how old or wise he thinks he has become, I know that the cake will bring him back to the boy that he is and always will be. That is the magic of a mother’s baking. It is a ticket that helps us forget who we are today and to return to the child that is still buried within us.

Atop the stove, the five sausages pop and sizzle in their pan, filling our small stone home with the scent of spices that my children have loved since they were only knee high. Good German children they are. My three little bratwursts that I have cooked with care. I have watched over them, protected and turned them from the heat to ensure that they are cooked evenly. The world, like an unwatched pan, can be a dangerous place. It is all too easy to become burned if they are not attended to.

Raising children, like cooking, is an art of love. It is in the timing and attention to detail.

Since even before he could hold his fork and knife, my precious Hubert has been devouring my cooking. No matter what I put in front of him, he has been a happy, plump faced, golden haired boy. Always wanting to please his Mama. The other women in town used to ask me why I am lucky enough to have my oldest be such an agreeable child. I always laughed and just hugged him close. “Some things in your life you get to choose,” I told them “And some things are God’s will.” But to be truthful, I have never known which one actually made Hubert my perfect little boy. But that is why I love my kitchen. Among all places, it is here, as cramped and overheated as it is, that I know I have control.

Quickly, I reach over the sausage pan and feel the little pinches that come from the hot oil spitting on my arms. As I flip the little potato patties in their oil, I feel the ghost of my Oma leaning over my shoulder, whispering to me her secrets. “Watch
the edges, Imma. When they are golden, it is time.” It was from Oma that I learned how to cook for a family. It was my Oma, even in her old age, that showed me that cooking and eating was love. When I see my only little Elli, my only daughter, with her dark hair braid hanging down her back, I see my Oma. Two souls so alike but separated by a void that cannot be crossed. It is when I cook, that I lose myself between the past and present. When I can feel like their souls can meet.

I carefully lift the lid on my cabbage pot and a column of steam rises into my face. Cooking cabbage is a craft of patience. Two hours, no more, no less, boiled in a mix of vinegar, sugar, and spices. When the season is right, I add apples to the delight of my youngest Ludwig. It was not long ago that he would stamp in a fit and cry, not willing to wait for the slow process to blend the flavors. Patience has never been his strong suit. Always wanting what is just out of reach. A boy who wants to be just like his older brother.

“Imma,” I hear Erlich call from the table. The present suddenly comes rushing back to me. “You must be done cooking by now! Your son goes to war tomorrow, not market!” The three children laugh at their Father. “Come, sit and be with your family.” I love my dear Husband Erlich, but sometimes I think of him as my fourth, rather hairy, child.

Without turning from my stove I call back, “Patience my darlings. Love cannot be rushed!” I smile and continue my work to the rhythm of my family’s laughter and chatter from the seating room. Sweat drips down my forehead and sizzles when it hits the stovetop below. Cooking in heart of July feels like a prison for some women, but the temperature in my kitchen does not change the rumble in my family’s bellies.

With a meal prepared and resting on the platter in my hands, I turn and I am surprised to see the four faces that are waiting for me. Faces that are so familiar to my thoughts of them while in the kitchen, but aged by years that have come with reality. It is a reminder that no matter how hard you hold on, time cannot be stopped. Hubert still has a head of golden blond hair, but his plump cheeks have narrowed and transformed into a strong German jaw. His army coat hangs from the back of his little wooden chair. Little Elli has grown into a beautiful young woman.
that has a line of suitors waiting for her in our town and the next two over. Little Ludwig with the same impatience in his lively green eyes but his body has kept up with that desire, growing taller each day. I hope the sausage will fill his body out like his brother and not go straight to the belly like his father.

Before I can set the platter on the table, Ludwig stabs a sausage with his fork. “Lugwig!” I snap. He looks up and slowly places the sausage back in the pool of grease that it came from. “You will wait for your father.”

“Sorry Mama,” he sheepishly replies. He always has been the sensitive one of the bunch.

“Now Imma,” Erlich pronounces as he sits tall in his hair and rests his hands on his belly, “Hubert will serve us today.” The Father looks over at his son. “It is he after all that we are celebrating. Our son is heading to war. It is about time that he is treated like the man he is.”

I nod, place the platter on the table, and take my seat between Hubert and Erlich but cannot held myself from adding, “The man that he is becoming.”

To my delight, sweet Hubert chooses to serve his father first, followed by his mother, his sister, brother, and finally himself.

“What a fine father you will be,” I say through a quiet smile. “Once this war comes to a close, you can return home, take a wife, and make me the Oma that I always have wanted to be.”

In a playful protest, Elli asks, “Mama, are we not enough for you?”

But before I can reply, Erlich shouts “Oh, your Mama, like a good German woman can never have enough children’s bellies to fill! If it were up to your mother, this whole room would be full of brothers and sisters for you all. But it’s a good thing that I had a say in the whole business. After you have all gone to bed, she was always pleading with me, ‘Erlich, one more girl!’”

I feel my cheeks turn rosy red as I interject, “Oh, Erlich, that is enough. That is not table talk.” The four faces around me all erupt into laughter as my face turns what I am sure is a new shade of red. “Eat my darlings, while it is still hot,” I say over their laughter, trying to save my face.

After a few moments of warm silence, Elli unobtrusively asks, “Papa?”
“Yes my little Hase?”
“Do you know Franz Blatt?” she asks with her eyes on her plate. Perhaps still looking for her words.
“Yes, what about him my Hase?”
“He has asked if he can write me while he is away.”
I put my fork down and put my hands in my laps, trying to conceal my mask my feelings bubbling below the surface.
“And what did you say?” Erlich calmly asks as he brings his napkin to his bearded chin.
“That I would ask you Papa.”
“Ah,” Erlich slowly replies as he places his napkin on the table and slowly folds it. All eight eyes around the table are on him now as he put his hands around the edge of the table and straightened his arms. I always feared that his little chair would collapse under his weight.
“His father and I were classmates you know. He used to help me with my arithmetic and I him with his writing. His mother is a good woman who comes into the shop every day you know. She buys only quality cuts for her family.”
This is the way that Erlich always is with us. He has never been a man to give a straight answer. His stories are one of the reasons I fell in love with him all those years ago. He likes to say that it is the romantic in him coming out. That always makes me giggle inside. I managed to marry the most romantic butcher in all of the Rhineland. “Last time she came in she even ordered a roast...” he continued. “Papa!” Ludwig blurs to stop the story before it gets rolling too far from the target. “You are rambling again.”
“I know all this Papa,” Elli adds with a heavy breath. “But what is your answer?”
“He is a good boy. A smart head on his shoulders,” he pauses to add dramatic effect and lets his eyes dart around the table to each member of the family before returning to his daughter. “But of course he can write you my little hase. I have known that he has loved you since he was eight years old and saw you behind the counter. A father sees all things you know.”
A wide smile spreads across her face. “Danke, Papa, danke. I will visit him after supper to tell him the news and bid him farewell.”

I smile and reach under the table to find Elrich’s strong hand and give it a squeeze. Our girl was becoming a woman.

I see Hubert scoop a large fork of cabbage into his mouth. He knows what question is coming from me but he cannot stop me from asking. “Are there any girls that you will be writing while you are away Hubert?” I ask him.

He chews, not only his food, but also his words. After what feels like an hour he finally swallows and replies, “Mama, you know that it is not that simple.”

I now feel Erlich’s hand squeeze mine back, this time not in celebration but as a reminder.

“What is not so simple about it? If you want to be a man, you need a wife! Tell him Erlich,” I plead and look to my husband.

“Let your son talk,” he replies and turns his eyes towards Hubert.

Shaking his head slowly. “You knew when I became a soldier that I was pledging myself to my country. My duty is to my motherland and Keizer. I must be true to them first. My own life will come later.”

“There is nothing more important to your country than raising a family. Have your father and I not done enough for our motherland?”

“But of course you have Mama,” he quickly replied. “But that is why I must go and fight. To protect what you have created. To protect Elli and Ludwig. The honor of our home is under attack.”

I feel myself scoff at the idea, “You head to Paris tomorrow but no Frenchman has ever come to my kitchen to insult my honor. But now, you have to go fight? My honor is you and children.” I shook my head in despair and looked towards Erlich but his face was like stone. “Mustn’t I protect my honor as well?”

“Your son is doing right by his country Imma. These are matters that go beyond our family and beyond your kitchen. Men must fight.” I feel Erlich pat my leg but the distance between us is plain. “And you must be proud. It is your duty to be proud and support your son and all the brave men who will fight for their country and Keizer.”
I hold back my tongue from my husband and his demeaning words. Instead I look to my son. “Hubert,” I quietly say. “I support you. But you must know that I weep for you. Every night you were away in training, with your father snoring besides me, I wept for you. A piece of my heart goes with you. All I ask is that you protect yourself. As you fight for your country, also remember your Mama waiting for you.”

Through the tears that began to pool in my eyes I see him reach across the table, asking for my hand. I reach out and give it to him. His hands are tough like a man, but still soft like the boy I have known.

“I will Mama. You have my word.”

“They say that the war will not even last until Christmas,” Ludwig interjects, not understanding the emotion of the moment. “What an adventure you will have Hubert! How I wish I could join you and the rest of the men.”

“Now Ludwig, your job in the war is to help me in the shop when your brother is away. But you are right,” Erlich adds. “A few months will pass and our son will return home with his mates as a hero. He will be ready to take on the responsibilities of being a true man. War will prepare him for that. Though, I must say that no war could have prepared me for the challenge of raising this bunch.” Elli and Ludgwig chuckle but Hubert and I remain focused. He has always been such a good boy.

“Christmas?” I plead.

“Christmas, Mama,” he replies and pats my hand gently.

“Grandchildren by 1915?” At that, Hubert smiles slightly and pats me on my hand.

“One step at a time Mama.”

After dinner, I retreat to the kitchen where the cake is still waiting as a final surprise to punctuate our supper together as a family. But when I look at the cake, I think of my Oma, I think of family and it does not feel right. Cake is meant to celebrate the past and look towards the future. But when I look at the cake, it feels like it is mocking me. To serve it would mean to celebrate the coming of a war that will take my son into a pit of uncertainty for months. While I may not know much about history or killing, I know that war is rarely something that makes for a brighter future. I cannot bring myself to carry the cake to celebrate the cloud of smoke he is
walking into. I quickly bury the cake in the rubbish and bury it with the other scraps from the table. I will serve cake at Christmas.

**SPICE Analysis & Theme Overview**

This narrative primarily focused on the social, political, cultural SPICE Elements. Social elements are focused on through the emphasis placed on developing a strong family structure. This narrative served as an introduction to the family and their relationships. A common theme through all of the narratives will be how the Von Hof family is impacted by the war. Nationalism is also a central element because it shows the feelings of pride and duty towards their nation that propel them to war. This issue will also be explored throughout the family's narratives. Culture is also emphasized by demonstrating the role of food within German culture. The theme of this story is that war, while perceived as important, is not worth risking the lives of the people important to you.