

Cadigan Prize Submission 2018

Creative Nonfiction

Germans

by Alexandra Schneider

Germans

Over Thanksgiving my grandmother found out that our family hasn't been Catholic since the beginning of time and freaked out a little. We're still German, so she didn't, you know, die. But the catastrophe still remains: we haven't always been Catholic Germans.

My uncle thought an ancestry.com membership would be a great birthday present for our matriarch. Thanksgiving usually was the last time the family would be together before our favorite sagittarius turned 84 years old. Uncle Rob presented our results after dinner with the grandeur in which he talks about his favorite truck or child, as if they aren't one in the same to him. My grandmother was washing the dishes; she was tired, she barely spoke after dinner out of exhaustion from cooking all day. When she saw our family results, *she perked right up*.

"It says we're Jewish, that's not right."

Uncle Rob was bent over the table, hovering above my grandmother as she sat at the kitchen table inspecting the print out.

"Of course it's right," Uncle Rob said because he couldn't be *wrong*.

"No. We're Catholic." My grandmother stood up and continued with her dishes.

Aunt Cat looked it over. "No Mom, that's us. It looks right. Turns out Schneider has Jewish roots."

My grandmother shook her head, and I looked at the three doorways leading out of the kitchen, all with crucifixes looming symmetrically overhead. *Oh sh--*

"No, we're Catholic!" My grandmother said, voice rising. "I'm Catholic, your father was Catholic. His parents and mine: Catholic. Their parents: Catholic. Your great-great grandparents? Catholic!"

“Well,” I said, “then somebody’s a bastard way up there on the tall branches of our family

tree. Shall we guess whom?” I regretted it the moment I asked.

Everyone looked at me. Even my cousins in the doorway, who typically didn’t stray far from practiced replies and pleasantries about dinner, stared.

“Take the goddamn trash out, Alexandra,” said my dad, handing me the black bag.

I took out the trash and removed myself from the seismic point.

When I returned Aunt Cat was popping a beer, my dad had crossed his arms to prove whatever inconsequential point he usually offered, and my Uncle Rob was yelling back at my grandmother.

“But, Ma, we’re all baptized, what does it matter?” Uncle Rob incredulously pleaded.

“What does it matter?” Grandmother asked three times, her voice growing in shrillness each time. “It means I didn’t have to bother to baptize you all, that’s for sure. It means I didn’t have to make sure you all prayed your stupid night prayers when instead I could’ve been watching Charlie Rose! It means I could’ve slept in on Sundays instead of getting up for the 8 a.m. mass at Saint Peter’s for 84 years! God, that’s hours and days of my life I’ll never get back! If I don’t make it to 90, you know why Robert!”

My grandmother had long abandoned the pot she was cleaning and headed out the front door after getting something from the bureau in the living room.

“No more 8 a.m.,” I said, not learning my lesson, “that’s gonna be nice.”

“Jesus Christ,” my dad said.

“Dad,” I snorted, “that’s the problem.”

A series of groans and curses flowed freely from my family's mouths' with an ungodly amount of satisfaction. I took my cue and followed my grandmother.

I found her outside--and this is true, I'd swear my last name on it--she was smoking a cigarette.

"This is new," I commented from behind her, letting the screen door snap shut.

Without looking back to me, my grandmother deadpanned, "No, it's not."

I glanced around me out of certainty that I couldn't have actually heard that, but only God could be my witness and our relationship was under apparent question.

I asked, testing my luck, "Can I have one?"

She wordlessly handed over the goods, and I lit one.

"I came out here to see if you were okay."

"No, you didn't. They sent you out here cause they can't stand your jokes."

"Well...yeah."

"I think it's what makes you smarter than everyone else." She took a long drag from her cigarette.

"Oh." I didn't know what to say. She had never said anything like that to me before.

"Thank you, Grandmom." She nodded.

"Are you okay?" I asked.

She didn't answer me for a long time and at some point I thought she wasn't going to take me seriously.

"We don't talk about it, but your Great Aunt Jeanie had cerebral palsy."

"O-Oh." She was right. We didn't talk about that.

“I got her ready every morning, took her to church. I was the one responsible for her while Mom worked.”

“What about your dad?”

She turned to me. “Did your dad not tell you? I thought he would’ve.”

I shook my head. There were a lot of things I didn’t talk about with my dad. She continued. “He left.”

I felt sick. Partly because I couldn’t imagine someone hurting my grandmother, four-foot-nine but the feistiest thing I’d ever seen. But I was also sick because I was jealous.

“I always liked going to church,” she said, “it filled the time.”

I laughed but quickly stifled it in horror. “Sorry, it’s just that’s why I like Mass, too.”

She nodded. “Things are complicated. But being Catholic never was. There were rules, rituals. Everyone before me was Catholic, so damnit everyone after was going to be too. I could control that much.”

The wind blew, and it stung like the sharp slaps typically exchanged in the car ride over to church. My dad liked the yelling back and forth and back and forth. He fed off of it like Uncle Rob and his being right. I liked it because I liked spite. I loved undermining.

“It doesn’t really matter, Grandmom. You know that right? It’s just a stupid present with a stupid percentage of German and Irish and Catholic and Jewish.” My grandmother wasn’t silly or dumb or fretful. I didn’t recognize her like this.

She sighed. “Yeah I know that. I--I just haven’t thought about *Jeanie* in a while.” Her voice dropped, and I was afraid I’d have to pick it back up. That tended to be my job, or so I liked to think. But my grandmother was better at it than I.

“You know,” my grandmother said, “now I want to know who that bastard was.”

I burst out laughing and saw the air in front of me in a puff of joy. “I could do some investigating. Go FBI on our family tree.”

“No, let Rob do it. It’ll feed his ego for a while so I don’t have to.”

I laughed again. “You know, I like your jokes. It makes you smarter than everyone else.”

“Where do you think you got it from?”

She stepped on her cigarette and turned to me again.

“Alexandra Schneider, what are you doing? Smoking?”

“I--you--”

“I *never* want to see that again.”

“Yea-yes. Okay, Grandmom.”

She abruptly went back in the house, leaving me on the front porch wondering, again, if I really heard that.

My cousins and siblings and aunts and uncles and Dad and seemingly everyone under the sun all stared at me as I walked back in the living room. My grandmother was already yelling commands into the air for kitchen clean up. “I fixed it. You’re welcome. Hold the applause.”

I sat in the front seat next to my Dad as he drove us home. He admonished me for my quips. We took turns challenging our octaves, and I wished I was at Mass or had my grandmother’s luck.