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Birgit Rathsmann & Rick Karr

Betty & Willy

I am four years old, and I am spending the summer with my Oma Betty in her apartment in the Wandererstrasse in Nuremburg, Germany. Every morning when we wake up, we lay around in her big double bed and she tells me stories from her former lives.

Oma has lived in this very apartment since she was six, just a little older than me, and all of her stories happened right here. Or across the street, where there was a big department store called Quelle, which means "source." Oma started working in the athletics department there after school and quickly developed a crush. Both of them were young socialists. They went to trade fairs together for work, and to socialist conferences for fun.

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After the Nazis took over Germany, Oma, her crush and a small group of their socialist friends got worried about a very young, very charismatic, and very smart comrade and friend. They had met him at a young socialists conference in Dresden.

"When he spoke, you could see a better future," Oma said.

It had become clear that he was not safe in Germany anymore. He had been couch surfing at different people's houses, hiding his tracks. Oma and her crush and their friends were convinced that they needed to send this friend and comrade to a safe place. So they put all their coins together and helped to figure out a way to get him to Norway.

After much anxious waiting, they received a telegram from Norway: He was safe. He learned enough Norwegian to work as a journalist there, and after Nazi Germany later invaded Norway, in Sweden.

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After the end of the war he returned to Germany, eventually taking over leadership of the German Social Democratic Party. He became mayor of West Berlin, coached JFK to say his famous sentence at the Wall, and then Willy Brandt, Chancellor of Germany.

And as chancellor of Germany, he did something incredible.

"Looking back, I know that this is really what we risked our lives for", Oma said.

It was as big a thing as it would have been if Lyndon Johnson had made reparations part of the Civil Rights Act. Or if Jimmy Carter had apologized for the genocide of Native Americans. Willy Brandt, Chancellor of Germany, fell to his knees in Warsaw and asked for forgiveness in the name of all Germans, including the ones who previously had wanted him dead. **There is a famous photo of this incredible moment.**

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Why am I thinking about this now? The gift my grandmother gave me with this story was an invitation to do wildly impractical things in the service of a future dream, even when the present is unbelievably dire. For the past year, I have spent a lot of time assessing what's worth doing wildly impractical things for, then figuring out how to do them.

Here is a photo of Oma on the day she got married to her crush, just before he shipped out to the Russian Front of World War Two, and the siege of Stalingrad. After the war, it took him two years to walk back home. Even though he had died four years before Oma told me this story, she was still totally in love with him.

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