

# **My Uncle's Last Celebration**

**By  
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I remember only vaguely when I first met him. I was a young girl. We lived on a cattle ranch in northern California. He lived in Berlin, Germany. He was introduced to me as my uncle, Joachim, but he was really my third cousin. He'd come to visit with his eighty-year-old father. The two of them dressed in suits with ties every day. I'd never seen anyone dress up that much before.

He was a doctor, dentist and skilled plastic surgeon. English was a stretch for him—he spoke in broken phrases and had a deep, gravelly voice—sometimes I could understand, other times my mother had to translate. He was kind of scary. He had a forceful personality that made me instantly afraid of crossing him, disappointing him. Yet, I knew from this first visit that I liked him and he liked me.

Joachim wrote letters to us my entire life, keeping us updated on family events in Germany. Only my grandmother and her brother had emigrated to the U.S., the rest of the family remained in the old country. He believed it was important for families to stay connected, even if they lived on different continents. He sent his children to visit us on our ranch, to get to know us and have a taste of the Wild West.

I went to Germany for the first time in 1988 for my honeymoon. My mother came with us and we spent a month visiting family and seeing the sights and history of Europe. My uncle treated us to the very best hotels, exquisite rooms with spectacular views and lavish décor. He spent days giving us tours and history lessons; history was one of his great passions.

When I married the second time, my father decided not to attend. It was Joachim who came to give his blessing as the great patriarch of my German family. He read a three-page speech he'd written in English telling us the secrets of a happy marriage. Later, my mother confessed she'd edited out the detailed section on how to have good sex. She figured it was too much information for our American guests. I always wondered what it had said.

This year, his 80<sup>th</sup> and my 40<sup>th</sup>, he announced with his usual decisiveness that after the celebration of his 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday, he would die.

I decided to surprise him with a sudden appearance at his party, and a belly dance. I arrived the day of his 80<sup>th</sup> birthday. After a long nap, I dressed for the party. The family arrived early to prepare. Everyone in my German family performs at such a celebration: skits about the person's life, songs, dances, speeches. We all knew that this would be the last one for Joachim and we wanted to make it special.

Eighty of us gathered in one of Berlin's finest hotels to honor his life and celebrate with him his last birthday. Amongst us were family, friends, colleagues, lovers, students and golfing partners.

I'll never forget the look on his face when he first saw me—delighted surprise laced with tears. We embraced and he kissed my cheek, marveling over how everyone had kept my coming a secret from him. He looked dashing in a black tuxedo, but I could see that under the finery, his body had shrunk and bent with age.

From six to eleven, we indulged in five courses of excellent German food and wine, interspersed with entertainment and speeches. After dinner, the dancing went on until two in the morning!

Joachim had written an eight-page letter, which he'd left on each person's plate. It spoke about his life: his work, his loves, his leisure, the good and bad times, some regrets, and his gratitude for a great life. He told us all goodbye. As I watched people read this letter, and the tears come, I realized how much he meant to them and that they would miss him too.

Joachim's youngest daughters, Alexandra and Nicola, performed a skit they had written for the occasion. In it, Alexandra was an angel and Nico was the devil. Alexandra told Joachim he was still young, sexy, vibrant, and that he wanted to live. Nico said, "You are old and ugly. You're falling apart and you have no more money. No one likes you anymore. You want to die." This went back and forth for a good fifteen minutes, playing out in the open his great inner struggle. Later a guest remarked to me that this openness was the trait she most loved about our family. At that moment I realized my own bare-it-all honesty might be genetic.

I danced for him after dessert was served. When the music came on and I came out, I was treated to another priceless look of surprise. He stood up and danced with me while the crowd clapped. He was such a joy to dance for, totally engaged without the slightest hint of inhibition, like the way he lived his life. I think in those moments, we celebrated that great connection that had always been there between us, that shared love of life and sensuality.

Watching him laughing and dancing, it was hard to imagine him dying. Emotions ran high from joy to sorrow, from celebration to grief, from gratefulness to regret, from bargaining to acceptance. Our shared memories floated like almost-visible strands of silk, weaving us into one tapestry honoring a great man's life.

After a day of rest, Joachim spent the next two days giving me an historical tour of Berlin and Potsdam. We visited castles, churches, museums, art galleries, opera houses, shopping districts; drove through parks; and stopped frequently for coffee and cake (two of his favorite indulgences). I didn't realize at the time that he was using the last of his strength.

One afternoon, I sat with him and his grandson, Max. To my great surprise, Joachim turned to Max and began recounting our whole history together. He told Max of his visit to our ranch, of my honeymoon, my wedding, and the other times we had seen each other. He spoke about my professions, my hobbies, and what he considered my special gifts. I didn't think anyone in the world knew all that, except my mother. I was again astounded by his memory, and touched that my life meant enough to him to remember.

Slowly, as the days went by I watched him weaken and his pain grew worse. By the end of the fifth day of my visit, four days after his party, he was in a great deal of pain and was having trouble breathing due to a cardio-pulmonary disorder. He chose to stop taking his medications for several serious medical diagnoses and quickly became so weak, he was unable to get out of bed without assistance. He began to see his beloved Isabella—his second wife who had passed several years earlier—by his bedside. I knew then it would not be long.

By the sixth day after his birthday, we were on 24-hour vigil. One of the family or a close friend was always with him. When I sat with him, I stroked his arms and his face lightly with my fingertips, a gentle massage that we both loved and often did for each other. I prayed for safe passage of his spirit.

Before I left to catch my plane, the family decided it was time for him to have a bath, an event that required all of them due to the height and depth of German tubs. I sat on his sitting room couch, listening to them in the bathroom, splashing and laughing. I could hear him joking with them about what a pathetic case he had become. Their voices and laughter rolled together and out the door, hitting me in the chest. I smiled through my tears.

After his bath, they sat him next to me on the couch. He took my hand and said, "It's better to make a good impression and then die, than it is to make a bad impression and then die." And he roared with laughter.

When it was time to go, I leaned over and kissed his cheek, wishing him a good journey Home. Joachim passed five days later by the strength of his own will. Like most things in his life, he did it his way. He made his good impression, had his grand celebration, and died. Who can ask for more than that?

He will live on in my memory and my heart. I know he's up there with Isabella having coffee and helping me write this story. How do I know this? Because he keeps tapping me on the left shoulder and whispering, "Don't forget to tell..." His memory was always better than mine.

