Sketch

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So Marty Please

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So Marty Please

“MORE butter, Marty. That’s not enough!” Nora looked at me disapprovingly, and Vati and Mutti nodded agreement. They always did when I tried to spread a normal amount of butter on my bread. I remembered that we had been told during orientation to do everything the way our Austrian family did, but so much butter seemed wasteful. And besides, it tasted greasy. “Here, let me show you.”

I hoped I wasn’t frowning as I watched Nora triple the amount of butter. I really didn’t want even the bread. I had learned the hard way to plan ahead, and I knew if I ate that huge bowl of soup and bread, I would never be able to finish the main course. As usual, it was useless to protest. I could hear our leader repeating, “You will be asked many questions, but essentially you are going to Vienna to learn, not to teach.” I had thought my biggest problem would be answering questions about segregation and foreign policy!

Nora handed me the now well-hidden slice of bread. I sank my teeth through the thick, soft layer, then through the more-resistant dry bread, and chewed experimentally. I could still taste the caraway, even with all that butter.

“Now, doesn’t that taste better? You act like you were saving for a war,” Nora chided lightly.

“You laugh now,” Vati murmured. “It wasn’t always so funny.” The rest of the family didn’t seem to notice the comment, but I felt a little uncomfortable as I finished my bread and soup. We all tipped our bowls to get the last spoonful.

From the serving cart beside her, Mutti took a bowl of salad — cucumbers with sour milk — and served Vati a large portion. She sawed a thick slice of his special black bread,
bracing the loaf against her body. Vati never ate a full meal at night. Said it gave him bad dreams.

Now for the rest of us. Mutti’s eyes were bright and smiling — that special look that said I was to be introduced to another Austrian dish. She lifted a platter from its hiding place on the lower shelf of the cart and placed it in the center of the table. Yes, it was new — six round somethings about the size of tennis balls.

“So, Marty. Please.” Her gestures and the inflection in her voice told me what she couldn’t explain in English. I handed her my plate, and she returned it with two of the tennis balls.

“They’re called Marillenknoedeln,” Nora volunteered. “I’ll show you what to do.” She cut the first one in half, and I could see that the center contained some sort of fruit — like a peach or apricot. She dug out the pit and cut each half of the knoedel into bite-sized pieces. Pointing with her knife, she said, “This — in the center — is an apricot, then potato dough, then little pieces of bread. What’s this called, Marty, when you take dry bread and break it all up — then cook it inside the stove with fat?”

“Crumbs?” That’s what it looked like, anyway.


I cautiously sprinkled sugar over the bites of knoedel with light-hearted stubbornness, waited for the comment I was almost sure would come. Uh, huh. “More sugar, Marty. A Marillenknoedel isn’t good without much sugar.” I added the entire spoonful.

While the rest of the family watched, I carefully loaded the first bite onto my fork with my knife, hoping I was doing it correctly, and guided the fork into my mouth with my newly-trained left hand. The food was tangy, yet sweet, and the soft, flavorful apricots were in perfect combination with the firm, rather tasteless dough. “Ohhh, this is wonderful. Sehr gut.” It was delightful, and Nora was right — it did need all that sugar. “You must tell me how it is made so I can prepare it for my family at home.”
Mutti beamed and went on with the serving. A salad for each of us, and—what's this? She was making two salami sandwiches. Surely Nora and Mutti couldn't eat sandwiches and two of these rich knödeln. They began to eat, and the Knoedeln remained on the platter.

As I finished the second one, I mentally congratulated myself. "I'm getting good at this. I'll bet I can even eat the cake which is sure to be on the bottom shelf and still not feel completely stuffed."

I was about to place knife and fork across each other on the plate when Mutti said, "So, Marty. Please. Have more." She nodded toward my plate, so recently emptied.

"Oh, nein! Genug, danke. Ich kann nicht!" Even in my bad German, I was certain the "No" left no room for question. But I felt defeated already. We had been through this ritual before. Sure enough, after the usual—"Yes. It's necessary." "No, thank you. Really." "Don't you like them?"—I found two more knödeln on my plate.

I forgot the German conversation around me and concentrated on my task. Two more, and they were approaching basketball proportions. I wasn't tasting flavor any more, just counting bites. As I recklessly dumped sugar on the fourth knödel, Vati said, "She has a good education. I could see that from the beginning—always eats everything on her plate."

Thirty-five bites. Thirty-six. Done. I sighed and felt like a hero—tired but triumphant.

"So, Marty. Please."

_Martha Elder, H. Ec. Sr._