Verdammt Saubere Nüsse

My friends teased me about my name, but I didn't care. Wolfgang was an old family name. I was not the first, nor would I be the last to have the name Wolfgang. When my friends weren't teasing me about it, they called me "Wolf." That I liked.

The German pronunciation was "Vawlf-gahng." Since my family was German, you'd have thought they would pronounce it that way, but they didn't. Over the years, it had been anglicized. That was just as well, because the teasing was bad enough with the English pronunciation. If my family had called me "Vawlf-gahng," I would have never heard the end of it.

As it was, my grandmother was the only one who used the German pronunciation. She had been born in Germany, still had many relatives there, and clung to the pronunciation she had grown up with. Besides, I was a junior, the third son of her fifth child. She had called my father Vawlf-gahng all his life, and she wasn't going to change for me. Any time my father and I were with Grandma, he was Vawlf-gahng and I was Little Vawlf-gahng. It didn't even matter that I was now married.

My wife Carol thought it was sweet, but we're talking about my grandmother. If she had wanted to call me "dummkopf" it would have been fine by me.

My grandmother lived much longer than her body thought she would. She lived with my aunt and uncle in an older neighborhood of well-kept shotgun houses with front porches, a sidewalk, a band of grass with trees every twenty-five feet, then the street. My aunt was Grandma's only daughter and they were very much alike, except for their gardens. Grandma wanted produce—corn, or as she pronounced it, "kern," beans, squash, and the like. My aunt raised flowers, beautiful, beautiful, flowers.

The only other source of contention of which I was aware was neatness, as I found out one night when my aunt and uncle, wanting a well-earned night out, asked if Carol and I would stay with Grandma. We were charged with keeping her company and being there in the event of an emergency.

She was in bed when we got there, several pillows propping her into a sitting position. After my aunt and uncle left, Carol took the chair on the far side of the room and I dropped into the one closest to Grandma. We chatted about the usual family gossip—who was getting a divorce, who

was getting married, who was off to college in the fall. In a while, we ran out of gossip. That's when Grandma let her hair down.

"Vawlf-gahng," she said, then gave a jerk of her head, indicating I should get closer even though I was only three feet away.

I scooted my chair imperceptibly. She raised her head and stared at me.

"I want to tell you something," she said. Her eyes took on a sharpness I hadn't seen in a while.

"Your aunt," she said, making it clear that the person about whom she was speaking was, at least for the moment, *my* aunt, and not *her* daughter, "is a clean nut. She sweeps the sidewalk every morning. Not just her sidewalk up to the house, but the sidewalk in front of the house. The *public* sidewalk, "public" becoming a pejorative.

I noticed the scorn in her voice. Grandma was a neat person, always tidy in appearance. Apparently, however, she felt she didn't pass muster with her daughter, *my* aunt.

"She sweeps everything on her sidewalk, then she sweeps the public sidewalk in front of her house, from the edge of her property on one side," her left hand went out to indicate one side of my aunt's property, "to the edge of her property on the other side." Her right hand rose so that she held both in front of her and far apart.

After a quick glance at Carol, she returned her hands to her lap and continued. "If a leaf blows onto her public sidewalk while she is sweeping, she sweeps it up, too. If it blows across the sidewalk and keeps going, she goes after it. If she has to go all the way down the street to the corner, she will chase it until she gets *that* leaf. She will pass all the other leaves that are not on her sidewalk, until she gets that one. She ignores all the leaves that didn't cross her sidewalk, but she brings back every leaf that blew across it."

My aunt was about sixty-five, short and heavy, with white hair. The image of her running down the street after any leaf with sufficient chutzpah to cross her sidewalk made me chuckle.

But Grandma frowned. These clean nuts were nothing to chuckle about.

"Vawlf-gahng," she remonstrated, "pay attention. I do not tell this to everyone.

[I knew this was true. My siblings always told me I was her favorite grandchild. Well, favorite in Louisville, anyway. The overall favorite was my cousin Malcolm, in Atlanta. This had been documented the previous Thanksgiving when the full family—aunts, uncles, cousins, all

Grandma's progeny, along with their spouses—gathered for dinner. There were so many we had to sit at two tables, but Grandma made sure Malcolm was on her right, and I across from her.

As dinner wound down, Grandma asked my uncle to pass her a roll.

"Why do you need a roll, Ma?" asked my uncle. "You've still got one on your plate."

"I want to give it to somebody," Grandma replied.

We all looked at Malcolm. He, in his delicious Atlanta drawl, asked, "Why's everbody lookin' at me?" Malcolm's wife ruffled his hair, then patted his back. Everyone knew he was about to be the recipient of a roll, whether he needed one or not.

Yep, Malcolm was number one, but I didn't mind. He was my cousin and a good guy; when he was in Atlanta, I was number one, and Grandma hadn't told him about the clean nuts. This was my story.]

She had my attention, again. Carol walked around the bed and stood next to me, her arm around my shoulder.

"There's three of them clean nuts in this neighborhood," Grandma declared, jabbing a finger at me, "and *your* aunt is one of them.

She had been holding her head off her pillow while she told me about this cadre of clean nuts. I was sure my aunt was their leader. As I imagined the meetings they might have and the topics of conversation, Grandma dropped her head onto her pillow, exhausted.

She muttered, "Verdammt saubere Nûsse," then dozed off.

"What?" asked Carol, swiveling her gaze from me to Grandma and back to me.

I smiled. I bet Malcolm couldn't translate that, either.

By Erv Klein Read more at
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