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**Hannelore**  
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## Vern Rutsala

### HANNELORE

All through your childhood she was like a rumor, a few hints caught in the aftermath of hushed talk, your mother suddenly busy at the sink, your father unduly curious about your school day. Remember how she turned up in only a couple of faded pictures in the album—a vague face in the background, sketchy features scarcely evident in the dim sepia. And though you have no direct memory of her presence your sense of her persists, a long skirt swirling out of the nineteenth century, a darkness, a sense of loss, a casualty.

Remember that car trip that went on longer than the usual outings. You knew it was serious because your father wore his suit—he kept tugging with his fingers inside the collar of his starched shirt. There was a hushed sadness inside the car, your father speaking softly and your father driving without telling his usual jokes or commenting on the merits of the farmland you passed.

He stopped the car in a gravel parking lot in front of a large brick building. It looked cold and the windows seemed vacant as blind eyes. You knew she was there. Only your father went in. You and your mother walked around the small town and stopped for ice cream in a little drug store. When you got back to the car your father wasn't there and then he showed up walking slowly and looking down, scuffing his good shoes through the gravel. After he got in the car it shocked you when he started crying. You had never seen him cry. "She's just not there," he said several times as your mother stroked his shoulder. Then he blew his nose and drove off. All the way home the feeling in the car had the fuzzy sadness of Sunday nights when school loomed the next day and the frail freedom of the weekend was lost. Only it was worse than that.

Later, you learned she had waited in Germany for seven years for her husband to make enough money for her to join him in America. Working in copper mines and on roadgangs, he eventually felt able to take a homestead and sent her the passage money. You have thought of her days of waiting—the teasing from her brother, the gossip in the town—and what her journey to this country must have been. We can't conceive such distances and hardships, complaining as we do when a plane is an hour late or the flight attendant runs out of those little pack-

ages of honey-almonds. A small woman in her twenties, she came by sea and over land without knowing the language, unsure of where she was going. She never deigned to learn proper English, which suggests the kind of half-world she lived in. The harsh winters, the childbirth, the fretting loneliness, watching her children become increasingly alien as they went to school and came back speaking words she couldn't understand, making fun of her old-fashioned ways.

Not long after you got married your mother told you about her wedding night. There was no money for anything like a honeymoon so the newly weds were at the old farm and had gone to bed when Hannelore came struggling into their room with a folding cot and insisted on spending the night.

You remember dim bits of the farm—the house looming like a barn with cold-smelling rooms, rough floors, the attic where you found a broken cast-iron bank in the shape of a train. There was the thick light and heavy odor of the real barn, too, and the threat of the irrigation ditch you had to drive over and the wide blond fields. You have glimpses of these but not of her. The Depression took the farm. Something darker took her.