

Shell Song



Introduction

When my grandmother, Lydia, walked the earth she wore a babushka, two housedresses at once, and cotton hose rolled down to her bulky, black leather shoes. She crowed like a rooster. Mysterious voices rode the sound waves through her world and made their way inside her head—she told us all about them. She used my crayons to color in my coloring book and turned people's faces green, arms orange and hair pink. She lived with our family and made us children laugh; but sometimes she made my parents cry.

Lydia was, to state it nicely, different. My father said that she had a nervous breakdown when she was in her early forties. They guessed that she might have been schizophrenic. I'm over forty now and I've begun to worry. Isn't schizophrenia genetic and possibly inherited?

You see I've approached that time in life when you begin to wonder about life itself, what your purpose for existing is, or to put in bluntly, What the hell are we doing here, anyway? It sometimes makes me feel a bit depressed and I think about it often. I think about it as I hurry about in my stress-filled life; a life that so many other modern women find themselves trying so hard to live. This generation has been taught to be it all, do it all, have it all, and

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perhaps even more frightening, to be, do, and have it all successfully! But is that really our purpose for being here?

Sometimes I wonder, What is success, anyway? Is it love—money—happiness—fame? I am just an ordinary woman, living in an ordinary world. I go to work every day and make an adequate living. Then I come home and try to perform my responsibilities of being a good wife and mother. My children are growing up now and moving away. They are beginning to face all the trials and tribulations that come with transitioning into adulthood. Did I succeed at preparing them for this challenge? My husband and I are always looking to the future where, perhaps someday, we will reach that mysterious goal called success. Then, will we finally know what our reason for living really was?

As I wonder about my purpose in life, I begin to ask myself if the women of past generations felt the same way. Did my grandmother, Lydia, have these same feelings of uncertainty and inadequacy? I try to picture how she must have felt. Perhaps she imagined herself trapped inside an abandoned conch shell, lying on the ocean shore. The deafening sounds of the sea are pounding loudly in her ears as powerful breakers toss her about. Crawling up and down the smooth, pearly surface, she tries to find a ray of light that will lead her back to safety. I sometimes feel that way. So far I've been able to find my way back to shore. But Lydia wasn't so lucky. And so, I began to try and discover the why:

What really happened to my grandmother?

Did a creative imagination turn into an inescapable reality?

How did she become permanently trapped inside her own shell world, a world that normal people can't seem to grasp or understand?

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People say that I am different, that I don't think the way most people do. So then, the most chilling question always surfaces: "Could it happen to me?"

And so I began a quest. A quest that would take me back to Lydia's world, traveling back in time with her across the Atlantic and retracing the path that many of our immigrant ancestors followed as they made their way to the great melting pot known as America. She was a proud German and was raised in the "Fatherland" at a time when its people were programmed to believe that they were the "Master Race."

As I tried to retrace her journey, I discovered some things about myself along the way that I believe will help me as I struggle in and out of a conch-like world. Perhaps her story will also give you a better understanding along your journey. So let's begin a walk together along an ocean shore



Part One

The Shell Awakens

May the song within your soul
break out of its shell
for all the world to hear.



Lydia Anna Maria Lenk Schettling



L Lydia Anna Maria Lenk Schettling. As she stared over the side of the ocean steamer, Lydia thought that her new name sounded just like the beautiful, rolling waves breaking against the sides of this immense ship; waves that caressed the ship with a soothing, poetic rhythm. She glanced up at Gustav, her new husband of just one week, and felt ecstatic, yet terrified, at the same time. How can that be?

They were married on May 25, 1912, a beautiful spring day at the First Baptist Church of Berlin, where they had met. Now, just a few months later, she found herself on a transatlantic ship steaming into a new life, a new adventure, and a new country—America!

Lydia was not a beautiful woman. She had a large build, yet small breasts. At 5'6", she was considered unusually tall for women of her day. Lydia's features were distinctive. Her cheeks were too full, her forehead too high, her nose, hands and feet too large, and her light brown hair too fine. Yet she had an inner beauty that escaped through the portico of her deep blue, all-seeing eyes. Even at the age of 22, Lydia's eyes saw everything around her in intense detail. She didn't just see snow, she saw each crystallized facet; she didn't just see sky, she saw its hue change from pale gray where

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it kissed the horizon to a deep, violet-blue at its crest.

Her acute perception of her surroundings carried over to her observation of people. She saw through their outer shell and into their inner spirit. Most of the time she tried to overlook the flaws that all people possess, but her sensitivity to human emotion and thought sometimes caused her problems. She basically saw humans as being good. But when someone spoiled this perception, she tended to build up an impenetrable wall that was difficult to tear down. That flaw in her discernment of individuals was partly a German indoctrination, but Lydia's scrutiny was much more severe.

Gustav was basically a good person, so Lydia ignored his flaws. She fell in love with him over a period of about one year. Singing alto in the church choir, she began to notice a confident young man staring at her every Sunday. Each week he sat in the same spot, the right corner of the third pew on the left side of the sanctuary. His black-brown eyes would lock into hers until she became spellbound by the intensity of his stare. Eventually, Gustav spoke to her. His opening line was "Sie haben eine sehr starke Stimme." (You have a strong voice.) Not exactly the most romantic line, but for Gustav, it said everything.

Always analyzing every situation, Lydia wondered why God had brought them together. They were both children of farmers. She came from a small farming town named Pyaschen Pommern and he was from the town of Felton on the outskirts of Berlin. They had contrasting personalities and outlooks on life. He was serious most of the time and thought that the best way to achieve success was through hard work and perseverance. She had a fun, silly side; yet, she could be solemn too. More than anything, Lydia longed to achieve something for herself and often wondered, How

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did she fit into this plan and why was God sending them off to a new life and land across this vast ocean?

She reasoned that the trip to a new land was for money and security. But her heart said that God used His ethereal power to bring them together because He had a grand purpose for their union. She believed that was the way God worked. Examples of this appeared in nature every day; she smiled to herself as she looked out over the ship's rail, straining to see the Promised Land.



Somewhere on a deserted beach a shell echoes the ocean's song.

Consider the pine seed, she thought. It is a soft, delicate seed hidden deep inside a hard, bristled cone. One day, God may decide to send a stiff, autumn breeze to free the cone from a giant fir tree. The wind loosens the seed from its captivity on its flight to the forest floor. There it sprouts and grows in the shadow of its mother. Or, God may choose to have a small boy pick up the cone and carry it away in a warm pocket. The boy is vacationing from a far away land. He transports his treasure to a different place and the tiny seed may come to life in new and unfamiliar surroundings. Which seed is happier? Which tree grows stronger?"

I am that traveling pine seed, Lydia decided. She would let God carry her away in the warm pocket of this ship to be planted in the rich, fertile soil of America. She smiled faintly as she thought about this. If he could read her mind, Gustav would scoff at her silliness and call her a dreamer. He only thought in practical terms. Lydia thought, dreamed, interpreted, and viewed life not just as an

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observer, but also as a willing participant.

“Lydia!” Gustav shouted, “Are you listening to what I am saying?”

Startled, she jumped and turned to her husband. “Oh, I am sorry, Gustav. The rhythm of the waves must have lulled me into another daydream.”

“I asked if you were excited about what lies ahead for us in America?” he repeated matter of factly.

Gustav’s presence was that of a proud athlete. His features and demeanor suggested someone who was competitive and sure of his ability to be successful in the game of life. He had dark eyes that hid his true emotions, yet at times, they danced with dreams and daring. It just didn’t happen too often. His angular face seemed to be chiseled from fine granite with sharply carved cheekbones and a firm set jaw. A thick mustache framed his thin, tight lips and he seldom smiled.

Lydia grinned. “Yes, Gustav, I am. It will be a much better life for us. You will find a good job and build us a fine home!”

Lydia worked in a chocolate factory in Berlin when she met Gustav. It was hard labor in deplorable conditions. She worked six days a week from 6:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. The factory was filthy—years of sticky chocolate residue clung to the floors, walls, and machinery. The bittersweet odor of cocoa beans and sugar permeated the hot air. Even now she had a difficult time looking at chocolate, when as a child she loved its rich, distinctive taste.

Lydia had wanted to be an artist. She loved colors and the way they magically blended together on a stark white canvas to form a living image. When she was a young girl, her mother, Anna, had shown her a book of famous paintings that were in a faraway

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museum in France. The beauty of the colors and brush strokes captured a permanent record of people, places and simple objects that fascinated her. When her family moved to Berlin, she visited its National Museum of Art as often as she could. It was one of her favorite places. They never had enough money for oils, but Lydia did pen or pencil sketches whenever she could. She had some talent, but lacked the confidence and support from her family to pursue her interest; and unfortunately, she had been born the wrong gender.

Gustav was a cabinetmaker. He was the lone, surviving child of a large farm family of thirteen children. All of his siblings died from the plague before the turn of the century, except for his sister, Martha, who died from consumption in her teens. His father, Frederich, needed his son to help with the farm, but Gustav wanted a better life for himself. He knew he would never be happy farming, so like many prodigal sons before him, he defied his father's wishes. Being her only living child, Gustav was the all-encompassing focus of his mother's world. Amelia Donut Schettling encouraged him to become a cabinetmaker because that is what he wanted to be, and Amelia wanted what Gustav wanted.

Gustav completed his apprenticeship and was working for a small company that made cabinets for businesses. He was happy to have a trade where he could use his hands. He was a man who preferred hand work to head work. Working with the pungent aroma of freshly sawn wood was such a pleasant contrast to Lydia's job. He, too, could have been working in one of the dozens of sweatshops that were now sprouting up across Germany, Europe and into the new world. The United States of America had totally embraced this new mechanized society. The industrial revolution was at hand!

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Even though Gustav was a man of common sense, he was also an adventurer. After a few months of making the same boxy cabinets, all measuring exactly 10 feet, 3 inches wide by 6 feet, 2 inches tall by 2 feet, 1 inch deep, he was ready for a change. He dreamed of owning his own business. He had heard the stories of fulfilled dreams and ordinary men becoming wealthy in the land of milk and honey across the Atlantic, and he wanted to be part of it.

So, he began looking for a sponsor through their local church. Immigrants who were being sponsored were more readily accepted and prepared to begin a new life in a strange land. The Baptist church in Germany was second fiddle to the Lutherans, but they made up for their lack of numbers by their richness in faith and community. Germans who had already settled in the United States established churches there and they wanted to reach out across the ocean to bring their fellow countrymen into the fold.

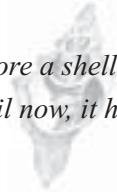
Heinrich Schmidt, a businessman in Dallas, Texas, became the Schettling's sponsor. Consequently, Lydia and Gustav did not take the usual route to America through Ellis Island and New York to find their dream. They traveled from the port of Hamburg to the port of Galveston and then by rail to Dallas. Heinrich, wishing to enhance his prestige in the community, sponsored the immigration of several couples. Lydia and Gustav were couple number eight.

"Look, Gustav, I see the shore, I see the shore!" Lydia shouted out.

He strained to make out the coastline. After four days in crowded, unsanitary conditions aboard the ship, he thought he'd never set foot on solid ground again. "Yes, Lydia, I see it," Gustav replied with a sigh of relief. "We have finally arrived in our new country, America!"

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Lydia danced around the deck of the ship, giddy in anticipation of the adventures ahead. Surprisingly, Gustav grabbed her around the waist and joined her, twirling as one; full of joy, excitement, and hope for things to come.



Upon the approaching shore a shell begins to stir the sand upon which it lies. Until now, it had been motionless.