

A Visit with Katie Luther

A dramatic monologue by Hilda Demuth-Lutze, author of *Kingdom of the Birds*

(The scene takes place in Wittenberg in the year 1540 at the home of Martin and Katie Luther, who have been married for fifteen years.)

(Katie Luther enters)

Willkommen! Welcome to Luther House. Do come in. I must warn you that *Herr Doktor* Luther is not available this afternoon. This morning he preached at the town church, lectured at the university, and met with a committee. Now he is alone in the study, busy with his writing. He is never to be disturbed until the supper hour.

(pause)

You have not come to speak with Martin Luther? You want to talk to *me*?

(chuckles and shakes her head)

God has blessed me richly, but I'm no theologian. I'm sure you would much prefer to meet with my husband. You must come to supper so he can make your acquaintance. No, it will be no trouble. At Luther House, we always have room for more.

(looks to the left as if hearing a voice)

Yes? What is it, child?

(to audience)

Excuse me, please.

(leans down as if speaking to the "child")

Margarethe, have you forgotten how to greet guests?

(pause)

That's better. Now, why the tears?

(pause)

Tell your brothers you are certainly old enough to help them. What are those boys thinking? Say farewell to our guests, and then you may go.

(straightens up)

When I was Margarethe's age, I left my brothers and my home. My father had just remarried, you see, so I was sent to a convent. Soon I could hardly remember life outside the walls. I was content to work and pray and prepare to join the Order. When I was sixteen, I took my vows at the convent where my mother's sister was a nun.

(pause)

I had been taught that a cloistered life was more godly than a worldly life. If the writings of Martin Luther had not been secretly shared among us, I might still be a nun. Instead, here I am, blessed with a husband and a houseful of children!

(counting on her fingers)

Hans, the eldest, is fourteen. *(she hesitates)* We lost little Elisabeth in her second year. *(quickly)* Magdalena is eleven, Martin nine, Paul seven, and Margarethe six. We've also adopted four of my husband's nieces and nephews. How the room rings when we sing hymns together before our evening prayers.

(looks to the right as if hearing a voice)

Yes, what is it? Students interested in lodgings? Take them to inspect the quarters and then send one in speak to me.

(to audience)

My training in the convent has served me surprisingly well. Unlike most other women, I can read and write. It gladdens my scholarly husband's heart that I can read the Scriptures and teach our children. And when he is away from Wittenberg, he writes wonderful letters home. But do you have any idea how difficult it is to live with a writer?

(pause)

I thought as much. The chairs, the window ledges, and the floor of that study are littered with letters and manuscripts and books. Before we married, Doctor Luther was here alone, a bachelor with no sense of how to keep house. As he wrote to a friend, all he brought into our marriage was "old books and smelly clothes."

(holds out her hands)

I have done my best to turn this abandoned monastery into a family dwelling. I rise so early that my husband calls me "the morning star of Wittenberg."

(looks to the right as if hearing a voice, then says to audience)

Excuse me, please.

(to the "student")

Willkommen. I am *Frau* Luther. I trust the rooms will be satisfactory for you. Very good. Then let us discuss the fees.

(pause, then a frown)

You were not expecting to pay? *Herr Doktor* Luther invited you to come and stay as long as you please?

(pause)

Young man, I must tell you that *Herr Doktor* Luther is not in charge of the student quarters. However, for you and your companions I will lower the price.

(pause)

Very good. Tell your friends that supper is served promptly at five. You may also tell them that I brew the best beer in Wittenberg. Good afternoon to you.

(after the “student” leaves, she shakes her head)

That husband of mine is generous to a fault. One time he said, “God put fingers on our hands for the money to slide through them. Whatever a person gives away, God will reimburse.”

(smiles wryly, holding out her hands)

I told him that God put fingers on MY hands so I can catch a few coins to keep this household warm and fed.

(pause)

Still, I must admit that Doctor Luther delights in the company of the students, and how they hang on his words! After supper the visiting scholars stay at the table to discuss theology and other matters. I am the only woman present at these Table Talks, and some of our guests do not quite know what to make of me.

(with a sly smile)

Once I overheard two students whispering about my lack of schooling, speaking Latin so I would not understand. I turned to them and asked a question--in Latin.

(looks to the left as if hearing a voice)

Of course you are not interrupting, Aunt Lena. Do come in.

(to audience)

I present to you the hidden treasure of Luther House, my aunt, Magdalena von Bora. She joined our household soon after Hans was born, and I cannot imagine how we could get along without her.

(turns to talk to "Lena")

Yes, in addition to the new boarders we will have these guests for supper.

(whispering)

No, I haven't counted yet, but I'm sure we'll need another ham. I'll meet you in the kitchen.

(to audience after "Lena" leaves)

I've heard it said that two women can never share a kitchen, but Aunt Lena and I have no trouble doing so. Perhaps that is because we have both lived in community with other women.

(pause)

Yes, Aunt Lena is a “runaway nun,” just as I am. I suppose you would like to hear the famous story of my escape.

(pause)

Very well. I was twenty-four years old when eleven of my sister nuns and I determined that we would leave the convent, which was against the law, of course, and punishable by death. We wrote secretly to Martin Luther, who made plans with an old man who delivered supplies to the convent. One dark night Herr Koppe smuggled us out in his covered wagon, huddled among the barrels. Seventeen years later, a whiff of herring on a spring night reminds me of that Easter Eve.

(pauses, wrinkling her nose)

In Wittenberg, Doctor Luther found places for us to stay until we could find husbands or return to our families. He sent me to live with his friends Lucas and Barbara Cranach. You must know of the artist Lucas Cranach and his studio, of course. I learned much from helping Barbara, whose duties included feeding and housing dozens of apprentices and entertaining noble patrons from all over Germany.

(looks to right as if hearing a voice)

What is it? The farmer is here? Send him in, send him in.

(to audience)

Excuse me once more.

(to the “farmer”)

Good day to you. I trust you are here to report on the cattle. Well, what price is that buyer willing to pay? *(beat)* Hmmmm. No, that’s too low. Let us see whether another week will change his mind. How are my hogs? *(beat)* You will remember what I told you about feeding the piglets, won’t you? *(beat)* Excellent. Good afternoon to you. I hope to get out to the farm soon. Yes, I will bring the children!

(beams at the audience)

We have just bought a farm near Zuhlsdorf. My husband owns the property, of course, but I do not trouble him with details about the day to day operations. It’s difficult to manage the farm from here in town, but I have hired good workers. Again, my life as a nun prepared me well. The convent’s holdings included a fair amount of land, and we supported our community by managing orchards and gardens and livestock. Now my dear husband calls me “Lord Kate” when I talk too grandly about my estate.

(shakes her head)

How I wish I could convince that man to spend more time in the country. There he could read and write without the constant interruptions, the students and colleagues and complete strangers who demand his time. All those years of overworking have affected his health, you see. He suffers not only ailments of the body but also spells of melancholy. I treat the physical ills as I can with herbs and ointments. And I do my best to coax him out of his dark moods.

(pause with a sigh)

Once when he spent days alone in the study, I dressed in black as if I were in mourning and walked into the room. He asked me who had died, and I said, "God." When he scowled and called me a foolish thing, I told him, "God must have died, or Doctor Luther would not be so sorrowful." I am pleased to report that within the hour he left the room to join our children out in the garden.

(looks to the right as if hearing a voice)

Good afternoon, Master Melanchthon! Yes, he is in the study. Go right in.

(to audience)

As you can see, our friend Philipp Melanchthon has special privileges here.

It's hard to believe now that he once disapproved of our marriage.

Melanchthon was afraid that a wife would distract Luther from important responsibilities. And the idea of a former priest marrying a former nun?

Luther's friends might call that poor judgment, but his enemies would surely call it mortal sin.

(smiles)

Melanchthon was not the only one who had misgivings about me. During those early times in Wittenberg, some people feared that I would never find a husband. Not only because I was older than most brides, but because, in Doctor Luther's words, I was "too proud." I did have one suitor, a young nobleman, whom I met at Melanchthon's house. I was sure that Jerome and I would marry, but after he returned to Nuremberg to speak to his father, I never saw him again. Apparently, a runaway nun would not be a suitable bride for that distinguished family.

(pause)

My heart ached for Jerome, but now I understand that God had other plans for me.

(raises her chin)

I made up my mind that I would have a husband of my own choosing or no husband at all. I told Luther's friend Nicholas Amsdorf that I would marry only him or *Herr Doktor* Luther himself. Poor Amsdorf thought I was joking--and perhaps I was.

(shrugs)

Still, I'm glad my little joke was passed along to Martin Luther. When he came to Cranach House to propose marriage, the two of us must have sounded as if we were discussing a business venture. No, I was not "in love" with the man who became my husband. And while I do not know exactly what he expected, a few weeks after our wedding he reported to a friend that "Katie, by the grace of God, is in all things more compliant, obedient, and obliging than I had dared hope."

(With a smile)

Fifteen years later, my husband would never describe me like that. Yes, Martin and I have certainly had our share of squabbles. We are both quick to express opinions, both slow to let go of ideas. But always we have given thanks for our blessings and prayed for patience, knowing that God can help even the two most stubborn people in Wittenberg. I say truthfully now that I dearly love Martin, and I know he loves me.

(looks to the left as if hearing a voice)

And now you really must excuse me. Aunt Lena is waiting in the kitchen.

Don't forget--supper is served promptly at five. *Auf wiedersehen!*

A Note from the Author

Many thanks to Constance Bretscher, who gave me permission to borrow ideas and passages from her monologue "I Am Katie Luther." Several historical figures mentioned in this monologue, including Martin Luther, Philipp Melanchthon, Nicholas Amsdorf, and Lucas and Barbara Cranach, appear in my historical novel *Kingdom of the Birds* (Minneapolis: Kirk House Publishers, 2010), which takes place nineteen years earlier during Luther's exile at the Wartburg Castle. Readers can learn more at www.kingdomofthebirds.wordpress.com

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