



A HOUSE IN THE COUNTRYSIDE. About someone who returned to find the home he came from
A FLAT IN THE CITY. About someone who left to arrive/return

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This is the story of two brothers who emigrated to the USA, in the hope of achieving the impossible in the land of opportunity: escaping their origins. They moved to Newport, Rhode Island, a new port in the New World—a small town on the Atlantic coast seventy-five miles south of Boston, embedded in hills on fertile ground with a mild climate, surrounded by white beaches and steep cliffs with a broad view out to sea.

The older brother stayed only six years and then returned home, to East Frisia. The younger one stayed until the end of his life and was famed and feared beyond death—at least among gardeners and his relatives. It's said he was a bad man, hot-tempered, arrogant and unrelenting, a perfectionist for whom nothing was ever good enough, who fell out with everyone because he stuck to his high standards when dealing with people and got abusive as soon as anyone disappointed him. One of the brothers bears my name, or to be precise I bear his, Jan Brandt, because he's my great-grandfather, and the other was Arend, the madman.

It is a Friday afternoon in late April, 65 degrees and sunny, when I land at Boston Logan International airport, climb into a silver Chevrolet Cruze and set out in search of my ancestors. I have brought along not much more than a few photos and printouts of emails from local historians—and apart from that half a dozen books: a collection of Max Frisch's writing on the USA, Geert Mak's colossal travel report Amerika, just published in German, Harry J. Eudenbach's study of estate gardeners in Newport, Thornton Wilder's story Theophilus North and Edith Wharton's novel The Age of Innocence (both of which are set in

Newport), and the great American novel of money, power and love: *The Great Gatsby*. Two thousand pages in total, which weigh only four ounces inside my smartphone.

Eleven days after the marathon bombing, Boston has returned to normality. The eight-lane Interstate 93 is clogged with traffic and it takes me two hours to get out of the city. The moment I turn onto the Fall River Expressway, though, the drive becomes extremely relaxing. I cruise along at seventy, past dense woods, blue lakes and bays full of boats. I soon cross Mount Hope Bridge, which links Rhode Island to the mainland. And then I'm there: in the middle of spring, everything around me blossoming in the most gorgeous of colors.

Mahoganies, tulip poplars and cherry trees, horse chestnuts and silver maples.

My ancestors arrived from the opposite direction but at the same time of year. When Jan Brandt reached New York on the sailing ship *Bremen* after a two-week passage on May 1, 1869 and continued from there by railroad on the Stonington Line to Newport, he probably had a similarly intense first impression—in terms of plant diversity—to mine, or perhaps even more so. He came, after all, from one of the poorest, barest, most sparsely populated parts of Germany: from Vellage, a heathland village on the River Ems, where at that time 249 people lived in 64 houses: agricultural workers, small farmers and tradesmen with their wives and children.

I don't know what made him leave, at the age of nearly twenty-four. Yearning for the big wide world? For adventure, wealth, freedom? He left no personal notes, no letters, no diaries. All I know is that he was a gardener and that the Newport of his day, during Mark Twain's Gilded Age, must have been paradise for professional plant-lovers.

America's economy was booming after the end of the Civil War. The average income was soon twice that in Europe, promising social mobility for everyman. The First Transcontinental Railroad had just been opened, accessing new markets of unconceivable size. European immigrants were flooding into the country, and with them hopes and needs. Those who earned the most out of them, the Vanderbilts and Astors and Wideners, built palatial summer houses along the Newport coast—and had their interiors and terraces decorated with flowers and their gardens planted with exotic trees and shrubs.

Shortly after his arrival, Jan changed his name to John and moved in with a farmer's family of six in neighboring Middletown. There, he worked on the agriculturally progressive Ogden Farm owned by George E. Waring, an engineer who had drained Central Park and introduced Jersey cows to the USA. John must have convinced his brother Arend, four years his junior,

to join him, possibly paying his expensive passage. Arend Brandt arrived in New York on April 30, 1872, and the two brothers took over Waring's Vernon Garden nursery on Livingston Place in Newport.

My great-grandfather moved back to Germany in 1875 and married his fiancée Thalke. His father-in-law had not allowed her to emigrate and had promised him a generous dowry if he returned, plenty of land and a general store in a good location. That triple enticement must have been too great to resist. Arend, however, didn't want to abandon the dream of another life, a self-determined one. He found a new business partner, gave jobs to a number of German immigrants, founded the local garden show society, won prizes and earned a fortune growing Japanese chrysanthemums for the nouveaux riches and vegetables for transport to the expanding West.

Today, Vernon Avenue is in a residential area with a baseball field—and it's also a dead-end street strewn with potholes. As I cruise around Newport in my Chevrolet Cruze, I think about this marked contradiction: gigantic villas with trimmed and watered lawns at every turn; tourists strolling from one antiques store to the next on Thames Street and Spring Street or picking up trinkets at Bowen's Wharf, carved whale tusks, "jewelry with intention," "mineral make-up" or "gourmet chocolates". And yet most of the town's streets are more like fields of rubble.

I continued along the bumpy roads to the Red Parrot restaurant, where I had arranged to meet Harry J. Eudenbach, a well-built man fifty-year-old who looked younger, wearing a green sweater and green pants. Eudenbach, a qualified plant expert and landscape architect, is one of the town's twenty head gardeners. I hoped to learn something from him about my ancestors' professional background, because he had just written a book about the lives of the estate gardeners here, a historical work, a reconstruction of the past based on documents and interviews: *Estate Gardeners of Newport – A Horticultural Legacy*. „The later part of the 19th century could be called the synthesis for estate gardening in Newport“, he writes. „Between 1870 and 1900 there were over 200 'cottages' listed in the Guide to Newport Directory, all of which would have employed gardeners. Horticultural excellence was being stretched to its limits with estates competing for the acquisition and development of rare plant species.“ Eudenbach's approach is quite literary and not unlike my own; he is concerned not only with precision but also with awakening his readers' empathy and understanding. He hopes, Eudenbach writes in his preface, that his presentation of history

will enable readers to put themselves in the shoes of the people he portrays in the book, and to imagine what it is like to live in a time when things moved at a far more leisurely pace than today. In actual fact, Eudenbach did resurrect a bygone world in my mind, a world where trees grew together above the roads, flowering clematis entwined entire houses, and thirty-foot elms wandered apparently weightlessly from one place to another; a world where men spent six days a week getting the rarest seeds and varieties into the town, building gardens like works of art, cultivating the most beautiful orchids, roses, and geraniums, and giving them wonderful names like “Fairy of Newport,” “Mayflower,” or “Garland.”

His book changed the way I saw the city: Not only did plants adorn the estate houses, their names gave the estate houses something plant-like about them, like Rosecliff, The Elms, or Fairlawn. Nature and culture formed a single unit in Newport. Eudenbach counts my great-great-uncle as one of the founding fathers of this type of gardening philosophy, and yet he occupied a particular position within this circle: as a self-employed florist who worked in very close conjunction with the town’s head gardeners and was brought in whenever large parties called for a suitably impressive floral backdrop.

In the Red Parrot, Harry Eudenbach ordered steak and fries, I ordered a veggie-burger, and after I called him “Mr. Eudenbach” several times he told me to call him Harry, just plain Harry, like everyone else. We talked about our families, our origins, and about researching and writing, and we found amazing things in common. Most people he interviewed, he told me, were very open and grateful to him for writing down and honoring the history of their ancestors or role models. But some didn’t have an awareness of their own history. While he was gathering material for his book, a few people had been reluctant at first. There were some, very few, who had been very cautious because they didn’t know what he wanted from them, why what they had to say about themselves might be important for other people.

“I know the feeling,” I said. “I came across the same reaction.” I told him about where I’m from, my research, my novel. “Some people thought their life was uninteresting for others, not worth mentioning. Others were scared everything they said would end up in the newspaper the next day. I always thought that was to do with where I’m from, with East Frisia, being so remote. But it sounds like it’s a universal problem.”

“My ancestors are from Germany too,” Harry said. “From the Rhineland. From a place called

Eudenbach near Cologne. The Eudenbachs from Eudenbach. My great-great-grandfather emigrated to the U.S.A. in the 1880s, to Philadelphia, and moved from there to Newport with his family. All the Germans here knew each other. It was a big community.” He couldn’t tell me much more about Arend and John than what was in his book, he said. Although he knew their names from his research, he told me, he knew almost nothing about them, even less than I did, only that his family and mine must have been in contact. On June 30, 1933, his great-uncle had buried my great-great-uncle in the island’s cemetery.

And just under eighty years later, Harry had brought him and two hundred other estate gardeners of the Gilded Age back to life with his book.

Now we were sitting here, their descendants, looking back at that era.

“At that time, the town was full of wealthy people who held extravagant parties, and flowers were always part of them, as decorations,” Harry explained. “It was a profitable business. What distinguished Arend and possibly many German emigrants was their longing for self-employment, for independence.”

I told him what I’d found out about Arend Brandt, told him about the employees and the dismissals, about the immigrant relatives, most of whom had taken to their heels shortly after their arrival in Newport, how he never had children and his wife Lina died. “My relatives who still live here say he was crazy.”

“I guess that happens when you’re alone and spend all day focusing on only one thing.”

“Then I’ll share his fate.”

He shrugged. “You’ll have to find that out for yourself.” As a parting gift, he advised me to drive by the Brandts’ house, 76 Van Zandt Avenue, and ring the doorbell. The man who lived there now, Joseph Sullivan, had never worked as a gardener himself, he said, but his father had been a gardener, a famous one in fact, Gladiola Joe.

An hour later, I drive a slalom around holes in the road and building sites, a lump of asphalt hitting the car’s underbody every few minutes, before I turn off Broadway for Washington Square—a triangular park surrounded by buildings of indeterminate age. House number 10, where Arend once ran a flower shop, no longer exists. In its place is now the Bank of Newport, a cube of bricks and pillars that instantly reminds me of the Swiss architect and writer Max Frisch’s dictum: “How aggrieved is many an American that his country has no real castles, no real gothic, no real antiquity ... and how American (in an alarming sense) is the homesickness for history, to which we owe the American bankers still building classical

pillars today, American universities (built after the Second World War) costuming themselves in gothic or Italian romanticism; it is quite gruesome.”

I park the car on Bellevue Avenue and decide to walk along the cliffs to visit one of the gruesome but impressive villas for which Newport is world famous. I pass Marble House and Rosecliff, both built in the Beaux-Arts style and used as sets for the 1974 Great Gatsby movie. I have to climb on a bench to see the terrace facing the coast on which Robert Redford says the key line “Can’t repeat the past? Why of course you can.” And what I see from there is not a repetition, but a preservation of the past. I have a similar experience in The Breakers, the largest and most opulent house on the coast. I am the only person in the neo-Renaissance interiors, lined with marble, gold, and alabaster; cordons are stretched in front of the furniture to protect it, and the billiard tables and bureaus are topped with plastic.

As I ascend and descend the staircases I begin to long for the sight of living people. I’ve had enough of the ghosts of history for one day. I go back to the car and drive to Arend’s house on Van Zandt Avenue, not far from Brandt Street. A young man in a bandana opens the door a crack and asks what I want. I introduce myself and explain who I am. He says, “Just a moment,” and closes the door. A little later a white-haired man faces me, wearing a green sweater with an embroidered clover-leaf. “Brandt?” he says, “the madman?”

“Yes,” I say. “And you must be Mr. Sullivan, the son of Joe Sullivan the gardener, Gladiola Joe.”

“How do you know that?”

“Harry Eudenbach told me.”

“I know him.”

“I’m trying to find out more about my great-uncle. As far as I know he lived here, in this house, and sold it to your father.”

“He willed it to Adam Osterlein, his lawyer, and he sold it to my father in 1930. The house was a pile of rubble back then.” He asks me inside to show me faded photos that prove it, photos from the 30s, the Great Depression, showing windows with the glass missing and gaps in the fence. “But the trees Arend planted, the handkerchief trees and paperbark maples, they’re still here—and he is too, of course.” He points out at the garden, at a few bare trunks, and from there my eyes fall upon the other side of the street, the graveyard. I say goodbye to Mr. Sullivan and his son and walk over to my great-uncle’s gravestone. In the

shade of a giant rhododendron, I stand and read the message he left for me and all
posterity: "Behold and see as you pass by / As you are now so once was I / As I am now so
you shall be / Prepare for death and follow me / At rest."