



FUGITIVE TALES

Walton Mendelson

Fugitive Tales

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I2onI4
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Renga

The brushwood gate closes
An empty road
The hagi blooms

1656

THAT SPRING WAS LIKE THE YOUNG MAN'S DREAMS. It was a time when anything could happen. The crows circling and cawing were the spirits of great generals, and omens of the marvelous. Listen to us, they said, learn our wisdom. And the graceful heron, the one that was standing in the shadow, there by that rock in the stream, was the quiet soul of a great priest poet. To know those things and to be a young man, a young samurai in Iga Province was to be like the bamboo shoot in a spring rain.

Matsuo Munefusa was twelve. He had studied and practiced as his father had taught him. And on his twelfth birthday his father gave him a sword.

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"Matsuo, I have a surprise," he grinned, seeing the excitement in his son's eyes.

They had finished the tea ceremony. Birdsong filled the air with music and the taste of tea was still green on his tongue. Matsuo nodded.

"I have obtained a position for you as retainer for young lord Todo Yoshitada."

Matsuo almost gasped, but the young samurai fought to remain calm. This was the hope of all such young men, and Yoshitada was destined to be a great lord. "Thank you father," he whispered.

Late spring in Iga Province, was sticky hot. The rains came each afternoon. It was late morning, as Matsuo walked towards the castle. He had left the day before from his home in Ueno. As he stood looking at the castle gate, his heart beat fast like the thunder of the approaching storm.

Todo Yoshitada was fourteen. He was tall and thin, handsome as befits a young lord. He was composing a haiku when he was told that Matsuo had arrived. Most of his retainers were older, and despite their deference to him none were the companion he desired.

"Show him in."

Matsuo's knees tried not to shake, as he bowed to his new lord.

"Please," Yoshitada said, pointing to a spot in front of his writing desk.

They sat together, Yoshitada confident with his station, Matsuo nervous but proud.

"Do you compose haiku?" Yoshitada asked.

Matsuo knew that this was one of the skills a samurai must possess, but his father had spent more time training him in martial arts and playing go, than he had in the skill of poetry. Matsuo blushed.

"You will learn," Yoshitada said. And picking up his brush, he wrote,

Renga

Green shoots
Spring damp soil
A warrior walks

For eight years, they were friends. Matsuo trained in the morning with the old kendo master. He read during the early hours afternoon, and then he spent the rest of his time before dinner with Yoshitada. They talked of the great war their grandfathers had fought for Ieyasu Tokugawa. They talked about the young women in the area. And they composed linking poems, called *renga*.

Matsuo accompanied Yoshitada on the business of the young lord, and he was Yoshitada's confidant in matters that concerned the lord's family and heart.

1664

The black crows circle
The bamboo bends in the wind
A man stands at the temple gate

In the early summer, Yoshitada was summoned to attend a clan meeting with his uncle in Kyoto. But illness made travel impossible. "Matsuo, you must go and represent me."

"My lord," now formal at the thought of such responsibility, "it is your family."

"It is business." Yoshitada coughed. "You must."

Matsuo bowed.

With six samurai accompanying him, Matsuo left for Kyoto. He was Yoshitada's surrogate, and they treated him as their lord. They didn't joke with Matsuo, as they normally would have. They didn't talk with him, unless he spoke first.

On their second day, they were riding through the mountains that ring Iga Province. "There is an inn about an hour from here," one of them men said quietly to Matsuo. "Perhaps we should stay there for the night."

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Matsuo agreed. They could have ridden another few hours, but shelter from the summer storms was chancy. They crossed a cedar bridge, as the sun was low against the mountains, and went into the small inn.

His men were sitting away from him, drinking saki and talking quietly. Matsuo sat with a piece of paper and a brush. He wanted to describe his lonely pride, now apart from the men around him.

A board creaked and the crickets stopped. Suddenly men burst into the room. They were bandits, quick, quiet, and stealthy. Matsuo's men jumped to their feet and yelled for Matsuo to not fight.

Matsuo instinctively grabbed his sword. He was samurai, and he could not hide from a fight. But his men stood between him and the bandits.

A man rushed at Matsuo from behind, and the inn became silent. The fighting froze in that instant. And Matsuo, twenty years old, trained for that moment, saw his right arm appear before him, his sword—his father's sword—descending in a graceful arc. The blade's silver edge, patterned with rolling waves, caught the red light of the setting sun through the open window. There was no resistance as it cut through the air. There was no resistance as it sliced through his attacker's arm. It was only then, as hot red blood showered Matsuo that he heard.

The man shrieked as his life emptied through his waving stump. Matsuo lunged forward and thrust his sword into the man's chest.

Later, Matsuo composed his report for Yoshitada, which one of his men, wounded from the battle, was to take back to the castle. It said only,

Clouds break the red sky
Heron cries
Cedar wood bridge

Renga

1666

Autumn leaves dusted the road. Yoshitada died that summer,
he had never recovered from his illness. Matsuo walked north
from the castle. He walked without his sword.

Snow will fall
It is cold
The caw of one crow

He never forgot that journey to Kyoto. Often his haiku hinted at his loss, and he began signing them “Basho.” His students said this was after the basho tree that grew beside his hut, but the basho was Yoshitada’s favorite tree.

The Flute

To TS who thought this story might have been about him

“C REED,” THE MAESTRO’S VOICE GURGLED electronically, as he whispered into his artificial larynx. “I want you to be the executor of my estate.”

Several years after the Maestro had given up performing, and three months before he died, he had sent me a note, asking me to see him on business. I hadn’t seen him for a while, not since he had first gone to the hospital.

The day nurse showed me into his studio, which had been turned into his bedroom. He was sitting up in bed. His face destroyed by the cancer and hollowed out by the operations. Most of his lower jaw and cheekbone on the right side were gone. Some effort had been made to mend things, but he could never have played again. That realization led him to stop the operations.

“Maestro, I—”

“When we first met, you called me Nicky. Have I changed so much?”

“Nicky, this is hard for me.”

"But I'm the one dying, not you. Humor me a while, and I will let you go."

"I didn't mean that."

"You did, but I understand. I've become a monster, and at our age, too young for either of us to die."

I fixed a drink. A wave of nausea made me grip the edge of the liquor-cabinet. The musty odor of medicine and decay was cloying and retching.

"Open the window. I'm accustomed to the smell," he said.

A few minutes later I felt better. I sat down on the sofa opposite the daybed.

I had met Niccolo Torcello when we were both much younger. I was then a junior partner at the firm. My wife and I were socially active, and I was one of the trustees of the Chamber Music Society. There was a cancellation during the season; Niccolo was the replacement. His solo career was just starting. He stayed with us, and became my best friend.

"The University has been very good to me." The larynx croaked. "I want you to make arrangements for them to get my collection of instruments, manuscripts, books, and recordings."

"I would have thought the Library of Congress, at least they—"

"But the University gave me an honorary doctorate."

"Of all your achievements, why should you care?"

"Because I never graduated from high school."

"That doesn't matter," I said.

"Of course, not now." The Maestro's eyes twinkled.

"It never mattered."

"But it did. Even the man who plays the triangle has at least master's degree. Then, I got my doctorate. That's why I want them to have my collections, everything except no one is to have the ... good ... flute."

I knew what he meant, the platinum flute. Who didn't know it? Every picture, every concert, every record, it was Niccolo and his platinum flute.

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As his friend, I shook my head at his vanity, perhaps even arrogance, but as his lawyer, I agreed.

"The Dean, Jeffreys, is a petty man," Niccolo went on. "When I first started teaching there, he taught flute also. All of his students laughed at him—I know, they told me. He'll want my flute. He played it several times when I first got it, and he knows how good it is. He's offered to buy it from me. He'll do anything to get it. Destroy it!"



"The platinum flute?" Dean Jeffreys asked, thumbing through the list I had made giving the particulars of the Maestro's bequeathment. "Where is it? It's not even mentioned."

"Dr. Jeffreys, I hope that you can understand my position, I gave Maestro Torcello my word, as his friend and attorney."

Jeffreys stared at me as if I had just told him that his Rolex were a fake. He was Dean of the Music School, where twice a year for fifteen years the Maestro had given month-long master classes. In spite of the Maestro's reputation and genius, to a man like Jeffreys, the Maestro was an employee, who should show his loyalty.

"What position?" Jeffreys asked. "To withhold the most famous instrument in the world today? You would deny us our right to examine it? You would keep others from playing it?"

"As I said, I have given my word to Maestro Torcello. I am not free to discuss this."

"He promised me." Jeffreys' face reddened.

"Dr. Jeffreys, his commitment was general, and other than that flute, you are getting everything. This one matter is something which has been left to my discretion."

"Mr. LaGrande, Creed, promises have been made—"

"Not by me."

"Yes, not by you, but nonetheless they exist. Endowments have been promised, and, how can I put this, careers are at stake. You understand how the University works. That flute is the cornerstone of the collection."

"You and your collection will have to do without."

"Mr. LaGrande, my collection will have that flute. How would it look if it wasn't with Torcello's other instruments?"

"On this there can be no discussion. It's final."

Jeffreys smiled. It was the sort of smile I could imagine him giving a graduate student caught making fun of him, a kind of now-I've-got-you look. "You must know how much business the University gives your law firm. No? How would it be if the senior managing partner were to lose their biggest account?"

"Jeffreys, don't play games with me."

"I'm not. In these days of budget cuts, our legal bills with your firm are quite high. I'm sure we could find other, less expensive, services." He opened his red leather appointment book. "I'm scheduled to meet with the president at three fifteen."

If he weren't bluffing, and if, in spite of our record and experience handling the University's legal matters, we lost the account, the firm would survive. We would have to lay off fourteen good lawyers, but we'd get through. I shook my head: all this over a flute.

"If anyone deserves the damn thing," I thought, "it's this jack-ass."

"What do I tell the president?"

I stood up and walked to the door. As far as I was concerned, the meeting was over.

"LaGrande?"

"Jeffreys, quit fucking around," I said as the door closed behind me.



A few days later, I met with the Maestro. I had revised his last will and testament to strengthen it against what I feared might become a point of litigation with Jeffreys.

The room was still cloying, but I no longer struggled to fight down the nausea nor did I see his face, although it was a diffi-

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cult time for my assistant. For me, it was now the little things that brought home the Maestro's condition.

The nurse helped to prop him up and I put my leather portfolio with the papers on it in his lap.

"Nicky," I pointed to the line. "Here." But he was so weak that merely holding the pen and signing was an ordeal.

I had the nurse and my assistant witness.

"That's it," I said closing the portfolio. "Your estate is taken care of."

He nodded and tried to talk. The nurse picked up the artificial larynx and held it for him.

"And Jeffrey's?" he asked.

"He'll only get what you want him to have." I had quickly come to dislike Jeffreys, but I wasn't sure that the Maestro's vanity should preclude everyone from having access to his great flute. "Have you considered giving your flute elsewhere? We—"

"Please," Nicky said, looking at my assistant, "leave us." He turned to the nurse. "You too."

She handed me the larynx.

We sat for a few minutes as if waiting for something.

"I must tell you," Nicky said. "You remember how my career took off a few years after we met?"

"It was remarkable. You and your flute became famous."

"My flute, yes. It is the whole and the end of my life."

He winced, and pink spittle trickled from his mouth. I got a tissue and cleaned him. He was tired, but his eyes were still piercing. I felt his gratitude and his anger at being so dependent.

He pointed to the bottles of pills. "There's a tape."

I pushed them aside and picked up a cassette tape. "This?"

"Play it, there's a machine next to the TV."

I got the tape deck and sat next to Nicky as I put the tape in. "What is it?"

"I received it twelve years ago. It's from a former student of mine. An older man, who always wanted to be great, but who never could be. He worked hard, but I had to tell him. I knew that I had broken

his heart, but he carried on, trying to pretend he hadn't heard me, nor understood. A few months later he canceled his lessons. Then, maybe the next year, I received the flute. It was from him. There was a letter. It said that he had it on order for some time, and it had arrived only a week earlier. Since I had shown him that he could never be deserving of it, he wanted me to have it."

"The platinum flute?" I asked, amazed that someone would have given away such an instrument.

"Yes. After I had tried it, I could never give it up. It was made in England. Everything about it was perfect. The tone holes and the head were rescaled. The entire design subtly changed to take advantage of the resonance of the platinum. And the embouchure plate—that's its soul." He paused, exhausted, closed his eyes, and struggled to continue, "Play it."

I'll never forget or forgive H. Robertson Hughes, although I never met him. I've put the tape in a safety deposit box, and listened to it only once, after Nicky died. But I remember his every word.

"Maestro, it has been a few years since we last spoke. I've been diagnosed as having lymphosarcoma. It has spread too far. My doctors have sent me home to put things in order. This tape is my last task.

"I hated you, you know. Hated you with every ounce of my being. It was so easy for you to dismiss me. 'Second rate,' you said. And I practiced, I worked so much harder than you ever did. Fifty years, that's how long I had been at it, lost in one second. 'Second rate.' Maybe you were right, I see that now. But then—then I hated you.

"You must throw out the flute. You must. I lied to you. It wasn't made for me, but for you. It cost . . . no, that's my business.

"The hard part was the embouchure, it's uranium. I had to have it cast in Germany. It was plated, with a platinum insert for the hole. The flute maker never knew.

"I don't know how long it will take, that depends on you, but I know it will kill you.

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"I am not asking your forgiveness. That would be meaningless; I'll be dead by the time you would give it anyway. But dying has. . . Throw it out."

We sat silent, in the horror of that tape.

"But, the flute, I've seen you play it, every concert. How could you?" I asked.

"But the sound. The feel. How could I not play it?"

"Didn't you know the price?"

"Look at me. Don't you think I knew? This didn't happen overnight. My gums started bleeding after the first six months. When I lost a few teeth, the doctor was suspicious. He said that I had all the symptoms of radiation poisoning. He just couldn't figure out how.

"Hughes' tape confirmed what I suspected. I had long since made my decision. I only used it for performances, I thought I'd be okay, or, at least put off the inevitable."

"Nicky, it's killed you."

"I tried to play my other flutes. None were close."

"Couldn't you have had it copied?"

"I tried that also. I have three copies. When I asked why none of them were as good, I was told that the platinum flute was a quirk. Everything about it was perfect. Not only was it superbly designed and crafted, but all of the tolerances, and there are always compromises and tolerances, all of them stacked in my favor. There's no way it can ever be duplicated."

"The stories about your getting sick after performances, as if you had made a deal with the Devil, were true?"

"Yes. And the Devil's come to claim his due."

I saw Nicky every week after that. He might have given up music, but his spirit stayed.

Jeffreys did talk with the president about my firm's representation. The matter was given to an oversight committee for consideration, and I met with them to go over our billing for the past three years. On my way home, I stopped at Nicky's.

The day nurse stayed with us, holding the larynx, wiping his forehead with a damp cloth, and giving him sips of water.

The Flute

I told him about Jeffreys' threat, and the meeting with the committee.

"Sorry," he whispered. "What can I do?"

"Nothing." I put my hand on his shoulder. "You might have gotten me into this, but now it's my battle."

He had known that I would fight for him.

The nurse left the room for a few minutes. He pointed to the water and whispered, "Thirsty."

I had to hold him up and support his head while tipping the glass. Water dribbled down his chin. I tried to use a spoon, but I shook too much.

His eyes twinkled. "Creed," he said, "quit fucking around."

Nicky died the next day. The nurse said that after I left, he fell in and out of unconsciousness, and never said another word.

The Masterpiece

“I SUPPOSE I OWE YOU AN EXPLANATION,” I said, knowing that I couldn’t put it off any longer.

“From my best student? Yes, Mr. Pierce, with only your orals to go—eh, eh,” he coughed, “you owe me no less.”

He sat stiffly in his chair, his head cocked to the right. As freshmen, we used to mimic his emphatic cough, which he used to punctuate and highlight his discourse. It made him fair game.

I remembered when I first decided that I liked him.

He was late for class. I took the opportunity to imitate him. “Eh, eh, Mr. ah Richard Briggs? You would perhaps like to edify us with your explication of Wöfflin’s theory about the painterly in architecture. Eh, eh, in say the Baroque.”

Everyone laughed. My accent wasn’t quite right, but no one could do his little cough as well. “Eh, eh, Mr. Richard Briggs?”

“You never told us to read that far in the Wöfflin.” Dick went along with the routine. “I—”

The Masterpiece

"Mr. Briggs, eh, eh, do you have to read the cafeteria's hours to know that it's time for breakfast? Ah, Miss Janet Elliott, could you please, eh, eh, help Mr. Briggs?"

"Eh, eh, Mr. Alexander Pierce." I heard from behind me. Dr. Richter must have heard the whole thing.

"That was almost very good. Eh, eh. There have been one, or two, students before you whose timing was better. But for a freshman, eh, eh, it was quite laudable. Eh, eh."

"I—"

"No, no, Mr. Alexander Pierce, I enjoy a good laugh as well as the next. You will work on your timing? No?"

I was stunned. I could feel the red creep up past my shirt collar and burn my face.

"Today we will look into drawing styles, speaking of Professor Wöfflin, eh, eh. Perhaps Mr. Pierce would demonstrate?"

Dr. Richter pulled the easel away from the wall. He handed me a black marker. "Would you show us how Matisse would have sketched the desk and table, eh, eh, Mr. Pierce."

I thought of myself as a painter, but I hated drawing. My entire schedule had been designed to avoid drawing classes, to avoid drawing. This was unheard of.

"Mr. Alexander Pierce?"

I couldn't move. He took the marker from me and quickly made the sketch. Within seconds he had drawn a Matisse.

"Eh, eh, Mr. Pierce?" He turned towards us. "Fuseli?"

He ripped the paper off, and began a sketch in the style of Fuseli. "The Magic Marker was not Fuseli's stock in trade, eh, eh, but it will have to do."

No sooner had he finished it, than he showed us Seghers, Dürer, Leonardo, and Beccafumi. "The differences between these last two are not so great at first glance, but the differences tell us a lot. Mr. Pierce, eh, eh, you would like to continue your impersonation?"

"Mr. Pierce? Mr. Pierce?"

The dust from his books made me sneeze; I always sneezed in his office.

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"Mr. Pierce? You were about to explain your new philosophy of life to me, eh, eh."

"Sorry. I was just thinking about—"

"Please, don't use nostalgia to ease your struggle. I am not susceptible."

How could I tell him the entire truth—the fraud of his profession?

"It's because of something that happened at Winchester and Reynold's."

"A petty squabble?"

"No. No, this had to do with the criteria for aesthetic judgment."

I told Dr. Richter about the job. For the first few months I listed the contents of crates, shipped in for the bimonthly auction. After I had gotten to know the people and the system there, I was assigned to work with the research staff. I ran errands, mostly looking things up in their library. There were twenty-three Ph.D.'s in art history, and four of us interns. We called ourselves roaches, because of all the crawling around we had to do, looking through catalogues and auction records.

"About six weeks ago we got in the Krebs estate. Rudolph Krebs. Mostly china and silver. There were a few choice pieces. He had a Braque, with a note from Braque to Tanguy taped to the back. There were some drawings by Brancusi, a small pen and ink by Dali, and boxes of notes and letters, correspondences with a variety of artists. The big items were removed immediately. They gave me all the rest to sort through.

"My second day at it, I found a dozen loose-leaf notebooks. They were Krebs's notes. Do you know his name?"

Dr. Richter went to his five by seven card files. He must have had tens of thousands of cards, each with an artist's name or the name of a work of art. "Krebs, ah, Julian, no, no, must be twentieth century. Here, Rudolph, born 1903. I assume he died this year?"

"Yes, in October."

Dr. Richter updated the card. "He was a friend of several of the

The Masterpiece

surrealists, for a few years ... spent some time in Europe ... I've got references to him from Arp, Breton, and Tanguy. Later from Gottlieb and Rothko ... Breton spoke quite highly of him. Nothing else. He was an artist?"

"That's just it. No one at Winchester and Reynold's thought so. Not even as a hobby. This was just a basic estate sale. But his notebooks were amazing. He discussed almost every book you had us read, and more, some of them I had never heard of. He analyzed not only the theories of art but the works of hundreds of artists. He couldn't have written with as keen an understanding if he weren't an artist.

"The last four notebooks discuss his own theories and work. There were sketches, in pencil, ink, and watercolor. He was good, I mean good."

"And you found no paintings?" Dr. Richter had taken out a handful of cards and was culling through them.

"Not at first. But in one of the crates, the one they had thrown all of his personal papers and receipts in, was a six inch by five foot tube. There was a painting in it. It was his, it had his signature, and I recognized it from his sketches."

Dr. Richter leaned back in his chair and removed his glasses. He polished them, slowly, looking at me with out-of-focus eyes. "Your story is getting interesting, eh, eh."

"The painting was magnificent. The best I've seen. A masterpiece. I know you're not fond of twentieth century art, but take my word for it, there's nothing like it. According to his notebooks, he destroyed everything leading up to it."

"How did your Mr. Rudolph Krebs support himself?"

"Inherited money. He didn't have to work, and his talents lay in art. Apparently, he took some of Duchamp's admonitions about propaganda too literally. After he finished it, and had destroyed everything else, he never painted again.

"I showed the work to my supervisor, Dr. Johns, a nineteenth century nut." Dr. Richter gave me an look over the top of his glasses. "Sorry. But he was a little too crazy about the period. Anyway,

he showed it to the three contemporary guys. They all loved it, really loved it. Suddenly everyone was interested in Rudolph Krebs. They called colleagues around the world. No one could tell them a thing about Krebs. You know more than they did.

"They set a base price of three hundred dollars. Three hundred dollars! Can you believe it? It should have been millions. They said, 'Who was Krebs? ... He was a nobody ... Just luck.' When they couldn't make an unknown Krebs into a somebody, they turned their backs on him. I knew enough to not argue with them. I figured that I was a couple of weeks away from owning it, and if the price stayed around three hundred, so much the better for me."

"You bought this painting? Mr. Pierce? You bought it?"

I got up and walked to the window. Outside the snow was old and dirty. I hid my face from him.

"No. No I didn't. My father died three days before the auction, I had to go home. I gave six hundred dollars to a work friend at Winchester and asked him to buy it. I said if it went higher to go for it, I'd reimburse him. While I was away, my friend talked to the experts, they convinced him that I was a fool to want a painting by an unknown, not for more than the base price."

I sneezed, and sat down. "The auction went smoothly. But when they got to the painting a couple from upstate started bidding on it. My friend backed out at five hundred, he couldn't believe that I would have wanted it that much.

"When I got back, a week later, and heard the news I was crushed. I got the names of the couple and their address. I called them, hoping that they'd sell it back to me. I told them that I wanted to stop by and take care of some overlooked paperwork. After all, I didn't want to sound excited.

"I drove up that afternoon. Mrs. Chase—the Hartford Chase's she explained—met me at the door. We chatted for a while, just small talk. Finally, I asked about the Krebs. Mrs. Chase lit up, 'So beautiful.'

"She asked if I wanted to see it. I said yes, and she led me into the kitchen.

The Masterpiece

“‘There’ she pointed to the table, ‘magnificent. I knew it would work. I knew it the second I saw it.’

“On the table . . . she had cut it into eight rectangles. The late afternoon sun flared off their glossy, laminated surfaces. ‘What have you done?’ I whispered.

“‘Place mats.’ She grinned.

Twenty-three Ph.D.’s, and god knows how many others, had been consulted. None of them had faith in their feelings; they liked it, but Krebs was a nobody, and feelings have no place in the world of academe. So a masterpiece was lost. Not one of them was sorry. Not one.

“And now, Mr. Pierce, that’s why you’re walking away from your doctorate?” Richter asked.

“Yes.” I hesitated, “It’s all a fraud. I don’t need any of it.”

“If we are not prepared to accept the existence of a single, isolated, masterpiece, you, Mr. Pierce, are. And it is we who need you.”

“But—”

“Place mats, eh, eh.”

Otto Roeper

I WAS EXCITED BY THE OFFER to visit Otto Roeper. Dr. Kline was writing his biography, and I was to go along. It occurred to me that it was because I was typing the manuscript, and it wouldn't hurt if I had some personal experience with Roeper. Perhaps I should have taken offense, but I had been working with Dr. Kline for seven months, and I knew that if the book was to be completed, he needed all my help.

This was Dr. Kline's eighth book. We have a little club, Kline's Ghosts, we call ourselves. There are eleven of us. Kline went through three assistants on the first book, and two on the second, before he figured out how to keep us happy, at least until the book was done. I don't know if all books get written like Dr. Kline's, but it's a shoddy business if they do. He thinks he does all the research and writing, while we type and catch those "pesky goblin droppings," his words. Actually his research is slipshod at best, and his writing is pedantic. His agent hated the first draft of his first book. It went through several incarnations. Finally, he was forced to give

free rein to his third assistant. The agent liked it; the book sold well; and the system was established.

This was Dr. Kline's fifth visit to Roeper. "I have always written about the dead. This time my man is alive, it's marvelous."

Dr. Kline rented a car for the occasion, and drove the hundred and twenty miles, chatting the entire way. "Did I tell you what Otto said to Pound? He knew him before the war..." He had told me the story many times. If true, it was demeaning to both Roeper and Pound, and it showed Dr. Kline to be quite insensitive. But, it was apocryphal: Pound and Roeper were living on separate continents at the time, and never knew each other. "Otto loved Hollywood... Errol Flynn was a friend... He had affairs with... I can't wait to get to that section. What a character."

I knew "that section" would be a difficult time for me.

When he was twenty he went to New York. I have read that he sought out the advice of successful artists and gallery owners. He may have—Dr. Kline thinks that Roeper's success was due in large part to people thinking that he had taken their advice—but I don't think he ever followed a word of it. Look at his work. It has a direction that he discovered in his twenties, and although his work changed through his long career, it has continuity. He never strayed from his path.

When Otto Roeper was thirty, he was the favorite of the art world. He had shows; he was interviewed; and, he was consulted. He hadn't asked for any of the attention. He was a painter, no more and no less, and painting was his life.

Critics mused at his ever changing palette, however. They saw in his work a mirror to society's dynamics: the coming of age of our culture. They wrote about his keen insight and his "modern synthesis." While other art movements were dependent on individual charisma, he removed the "chaff" and, revealing the truth, combined the "emergent integrants" as a reflection of...

As far as I can tell, Otto Roeper only wanted to paint. He may have accepted the accolades of society's patrons, but he had never asked for them. Everyone came to him, artists, students, actors,

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politicians, and the wealthy. He was the Delphic fount. They took back koans of hidden knowledge. He never told them that only he held the key to their understanding. In a letter to his dealer he once said that “if they are silly enough to seek me out, and gullible enough to believe me, then why shouldn’t I have had a little fun?”

He continued to paint. His work sold for a lot of money, and it always sold. His friends saw him making a fortune and assumed that was his motivation. I think he would have painted for nothing.

“... His house is always crowded. It’s exciting being there. To be so close to Roeper. Well, you’ll feel it.” Kline hummed when he wasn’t talking.

The house wasn’t crowded, but there were a several people there besides us. Roeper sat in a wheel chair by the window in his studio. The room was shrouded in the stale odor of old age and medicine. It was hot. A nurse hovered around, checking and poking him every few minutes.

“His wife died ten years ago.” Dr. Kline whispered in my ear, as the nurse finished taking Roeper’s blood pressure and writing it down in her journal. “He has a live-in nursing staff, as well as his secretary, who manages the estate.”

At ninety-one all Otto Roeper could do was sit. His hands shook too much to allow him to work, and he had a cataract in his right eye. David Feller, his secretary, held forth at a table in the corner; with a rear-projection slide cabinet behind him, his talk sounded like a tour guide’s set piece.

Dr. Kline sat with the others, taking notes, and asking questions. Occasionally the secretary would leave the room, to return with some book or diary from Roeper’s library. They took a break at noon.

“Isn’t this great. I’ve scheduled another visit next month. Of course you’ll come. It’s good to really know your subject.”

Roeper ignored everyone in the room. I thought that he perhaps suffered from a dementia—he reminded me of my father

just before he died—and didn't know we were all there. The discussion in the corner was too unreal, and I knew I'd hear about it from Dr. Kline. I moved my chair next to Roeper's.

"He'll like it if you talk to him," the nurse said as she tucked his blanket tighter around his legs. "He's actually quite interesting."

"Mr. Roeper? How are you sir?"

He fixed me with his good eye. "It's Otto," he whispered. "Not sir."

We talked for two hours, uninterrupted by the others.

"I'm getting tired." He held out his shaky hand. I took it. "Thank you for talking with me."

The drive home was difficult. Dr. Kline was excited about his next chapter. He was the darling of the day, they all knew about his book, "Of course, I didn't bring it up myself."

While he talked about Roeper, his paintings, and the book, I ignored him. I wondered why he didn't know about Roeper's pain and frustration, the sheer terror, at being unable to paint—captive to that wheel chair by the window.

"...I like visiting the old man," Kline droned on. "It's intellectually invigorating..."

It took a year to finish the biography. There was quite a celebration when the book was published. Roeper's secretary was there, basking in reflected glory. He had quit working for Roeper shortly after our first visit, to collaborate on the biography. He and Dr. Kline have decided to work on another book.

I haven't seen Dr. Kline since then. There are now twelve Kline's Ghosts. I never told him, but after that first visit, I saw Otto Roeper every weekend, until his death last month.

A Death in the Family

MOM KNOCKED ON MY DOOR EARLY.

I was already awake, thinking about school, and looking out the window. There was frost on everything, the trees, the brown wood shingle roof next door, the dark, rusty chain link fence that went around our yard. I liked to climb on the fence—it was six feet high—even though Dad said that I could die from tetanus if I got cut on it. I had a shot for tetanus. I think Dad was just trying to scare me.

“May I come in?”

The door was already open before I could answer, and Mom was standing on the hardwood floor between the door and the faded, dusty rose carpet. It had been laid in strips, each about two and a half feet wide. The light beige lines of its seams stood out where it was most worn.

“I’m up.”

“No, I want to talk with you.”

“Sure,” I said, making a point of looking out the window. I

A Death in the Family

wanted her to know that I was doing something when she came in, and I would have to stop to talk with her.

“You know I’ve been away visiting Granny and Gramps.”

“Yeah.”

“I told you that Gramps was sick?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, he was very sick. I didn’t want him disturbed with you kids—”

“So?”

“That’s why I didn’t take you . . . and . . . you’ve got school.”

I knew she was trying to tell me something. The sun poked through the clouds, low through the trees, and sparkled into my room. I liked watching it, like fireworks exploding into thousands of red, blue, gold, and white dots. I could never actually watch one dot; I tried, but they disappeared when I tried to focus on them.

“And, I am going to go back.”

“How come?”

“Because . . . because Gramps died. And there will be a funeral for him.”

Every time Gramps visited, he brought candy and gum, mostly gum, shaped like cigars. They were always pink or yellow. Mom yelled at Gramps when he gave me any of it, so we would hide it from her. He would sit for hours at the breakfast table, with his leather satchel next to him, and the table covered with thick train schedules, each one had rubber bands around clumps of pages. When I would come in he would reach into the satchel and pull out a handful of contraband.

“Hide this somewhere,” he would say. And I would look around the small room, my hands full of treasure. He would cheer me on. “Yes, there, that’s a good place.” He’d make me promise not to have any of it when she was around.

“Your father will stay here with you and your brother,” mom said.

“Yeah.”

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“Do you understand what happened to Gramps?” She looked like she was going to cry.

“Yeah.”

“You understand that you’ll never see him again.”

“Yeah.”

She sniffled, wiped her cheeks.

“Well, it’s getting late, hurry and get dressed.”

Granny and Gramps used to spend Christmas with us. We could only open the presents when everyone was ready, after breakfast, after everyone had gone to the bathroom, and then, one at a time. After most of the presents had been opened, Mom would say that she wanted more coffee, which had to be made, and Gramps would announce that he had to go to the bathroom. It took forever. Then Mom would come in with a pot of coffee, and yell for us to look out the window. Coming around from the back of the house, across the drive, was Gramps, dressed like Santa Claus. He was a thin, short man, and I knew that although he could probably have fit down the chimney, he wasn’t Santa. The white beard never stayed in the same place for more than a few seconds, so he had to keep pretending to scratch his face, while adjusting it. Over his shoulder he had a white laundry bag with presents in it.

I don’t remember if he had presents for everyone or just for me and my brother.

“Santa, would you like some coffee?” Mom would ask when the bag was empty.

“No, thank you. I’ve other stops to make . . . Ho, ho, ho.”

I knew it was Gramps, but I wondered if he knew the bag was empty when he said that.

I liked getting the presents, but it was kind of silly if they thought I was fooled. I guess all the grownups thought it was fun.

When Mom said that Gramps was dead, I knew I’d never see him again.

The house was big, and it had a dressing room with a fire place, two walk-in closets, and a porch of the master bed room. Sometimes, even in the morning, they'd light a fire, using the gas jets. David had lit one while Pauline had been talking with the kids, telling them their grandfather had died. She sat down in the green stuffed chair in front of the fire.

"How'd they take it?" David asked.

"Fine," Pauline said, crumpling a handkerchief in her hands, and dabbing at her cheeks.

"Okay."

David sat down next to her. He felt guilty that he wasn't going to the funeral, although he hadn't wanted to go, and was relieved to be staying, even if it meant staying with the children.

"Should I get the coffee?" he asked.

"No, I'll make it. I just need a few minutes."

David got up to put his tie on. He looked at the clock on his dresser. The meeting wasn't until nine fifteen; he didn't have to rush.

"You all right?" he asked.

"I don't think they understood, not really."

"Should I talk with them?"

"No!" Pauline looked up at David. He had turned around from the mirror, his hands frozen in the middle of their ritual. "I just mean that I think they are too young, no matter what you or I say, they won't understand."

David turned back to the mirror. He couldn't remember exactly where he was with the tie. It looked like it wouldn't come out right, the thin end would be too long. He undid it, pulling the ends up and down, finding the right place to start over.

"Well, I can ... maybe tonight ... I'll talk to them."

"Don't scare them."

"Hey, I was a kid once." David said, looking through his leather

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covered jewelry box. He couldn't find the tie clip that matched the cuff links he had put on. "Damn, I'll bet—"

"What?"

"Sorry," he took a deep breath, "just having trouble finding things. Anyway, I can remember when my father told me that my grandfather had died. I understood the way he explained it. We'll do just fine."

"Promise you—"

"I won't scare them. Promise. But they need to understand. Death is an important part of life. Better they learn about it now."

David adjusted his collar in the mirror. "Perfect," he thought. He put his wristwatch on and check its time against the clock.

"Can you get the coffee ready. I've got to pull some papers together before I leave, and I'm starting to run late."

Pauline left the room quietly, while David folded the handkerchief for his coat pocket. He had learned his rookie year as an account executive just how important appearances were.

He was closing his brief case when he smelled the coffee. He checked that he had everything—copy, layouts, projections, statistics—and stood up to go down stairs. The fire was still on. He knew Pauline was likely to forget it. As he stooped to turn the gas off he remembered last Christmas, when Pauline's father had dressed up as Santa Claus. Gramps was already ill, but he insisted on doing Santa anyway. David smiled at the image of the lumpy Santa, trudging through the snow.

"The kids will miss him," he thought.

Good Friends Never Change

SHE STOOD INSIDE BLOCKING THE DOORWAY; hesitating, debating with herself whether she should turn around or stay.

“It’ll be good for you,” Dr. Williams had told her. “You need to get out on your own.”

“I can’t,” she argued. “I can’t let her see me like—”

“You’re scared. Some of that fear is normal. You’re seeing someone you haven’t seen since college.”

“It’ll happen again. I know I’ll have an episode. I know.”

“You’ll do well. Trust me. Enjoy yourself.”

Judith carefully put away her sunglasses. The coffeehouse hummed with the white noise of a hundred people talking. She had never been there before, and it took her a minute to figure out what to do.

At the counter she selected a small raspberry tart, which she could pick at hiding from her ordeal, and ordered a decaf coffee. She was hungry, but embarrassed at the thought of meeting

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anyone while eating. In the corner by the large window she saw an open table. She threaded her way through the crowd of raggedy, dirty students.

“We would never have been caught dead looking like that,” she thought.

The table closest to her, along the side by the window, was occupied by two young men playing chess. Judith twisted in her chair, turning away from them, to ward off their silence and concentration. She thought of Mely, her best friend in college. Judith had written several limericks about her. *Mely, with a long e—Amelia—good for a limerick, steely, really, squealy*. Judith tried to recall at least one of them. She couldn’t, they were lost in the depths—

“No,” she stopped herself, “I should never have agreed to come.”

Judith’s hand gripped the braided leather straps of her purse. She saw that the hem of her dress had ridden up an inch above her knee—a line of dark brown across her tan stockinged leg—to put it in place would mean letting go. The white noise became bright and piercing, each word, each of hundreds, outlined and staccato, was a painful reminder of her mistake.

Her hands cramped; her nails dug into her palms. “I knew, I knew, I knew,” she chanted.

Through the window she saw a woman waiting to cross the street towards the coffee house.

“Mely.” Judith couldn’t let Mely see her trapped like this. “What did Doctor Williams call it? He said . . . he said—”

The light turned green. Mely started walking. It had been fifteen years, but to Judith she looked unchanged, forever young, and happy.

Judith took a deep breath and stood up—too fast. In one continuous disaster, her coffee spilled; then, unable to stop it, she watched the table fall against one of the chess players, and roll in slow motion, crashing to the floor. Its gray marble top cracked.

The chess players turned. The closest one noticed a spot of red

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at the edge of her hand. He started to help. "It's okay," he said, stooping down to pick up the table. "They're all real wobbly."

Judith kept her eyes away from him, searching inside herself for strength.

"I almost knocked one over—"

Judith ran out the back door.



Amelia stood inside the front door, allowing her eyes to adjust to the light. Most of the tables were full, and the coffee house sang with the enthusiasm of a hundred college students.

She had eaten on the plane. At the counter, she ordered glass of iced coffee, thinking that she would be hungry for dinner—dinner with Judith. Then she looked around. She couldn't find Judith.

In the corner by the large window she saw an open table. She threaded her way through the crowd of students. Their clothes were torn, patched and return—their uniform.

"We must have looked like this," she thought, smiling.

The table was damp when she sat down. A drop of cold coffee dripped from the crack in the marble onto her leg. She shifted in her chair towards the two young men playing chess at the next table.

Amelia stared out the window. "Judith's late," she thought. "She was always late. Some things never change."

Sitting

DID GRANDPA MANUEL UNDERSTAND?

Did he know that I was a kid, who sometimes laughed at things I didn't appreciate or know about?

He was my favorite, and today I feel how much I learned from him. That's today. Grandpa has been dead for five years, and I never told him.

There were special holidays, July Fourth, Veterans' Day, even Statehood day, when he would put his uniform on and sit on a bench in the plaza. There, he would stare at the flags and salute—just sit and salute, all day!

I was thirteen that first time I spied on him.

"I saw your grandfather." My best friend Maria Susanna said to me, breathless from bicycling. "You got to see him."

"Yeah," I said. "He's in his uniform. Grandma's been letting it out for him, but she said she can't no more, so he looks kinda fatter. He's—"

"No." Maria Susanna giggled. "You have to see him."

Sitting

“What?”

“Come on.”

I got my bike and told mom I was going for ice cream. It took fifteen minutes to get to the plaza; not just because mom wouldn't let me on the main streets, but the rains had come early, and three streets were flooded out. We had to go all the way around and come in from the far side of town.

We leaned our bikes behind the trash bins, under the granite steps that led up to the main floor of the Courthouse.

“Quiet,” Maria Susanna whispered.

I knew that no one could hear much, with all the cars honking, fire crackers, and the marching bands. But if you were going to spy on someone, you always had to be quiet.

We crept around to the front of the building. July was always hot, and with the rains, it was muggy, too. Standing with my light brown arm, bare against the legal-gray granite of the Courthouse, the polished stone sucked the heat away. There was a big cypress between us and the front of the plaza where Maria Susanna said I'd see Grandpa Manuel. It cast enough of a shadow that the ground under it smelled musty, not sun-baked like most everything else was. Soft green ferns grew in clusters, and I tried to step around them as we moved closer.

“There!” Maria Susanna screamed in a whisper, as if I hadn't believed her. She moved a branch down, out of the way. “See?”

Grandpa Manuel was in his sixties then. His black hair was turning gray, and he sat with other men who were also becoming ghosts. None of them talked or moved, but only Grandpa Manuel sat there looking up, saluting the flag.

“That's what he was doing an hour ago.”

“Oh, God.” I felt humiliated. All my friends knew who he was, and they'd see him, too.

Maria Susanna giggled.

I turned to her; and speechless, I tried to plead for understanding. He's old, I thought. He was in the war. He's not me!

“Let's get some ice cream,” she whispered. She knew what I was thinking, that's what makes friends best friends.

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We didn't talk until we had our ice cream and were walking around the block, away from the Plaza.

"I can't believe him," I whispered, trying to catch a drip of chocolate before it got to my hand. "I really can't."

"I know," Maria Susanna agreed. "He's half Indian, too."

Of course she knew that, but I didn't talk about it much to anyone else, I mean, that made me one quarter.

"Most of those men are gringos."

I could only nod in horror. I had seen pictures of him as a young man, in a baggy suit, and a thin chain hanging down from under his pin striped coat, all the way to his feet and then back up again. He was thin; his hair was black and shiny; and his eyes sparkled with defiance and manhood. It was easy to laugh at his clothes—even he did, "Can you believe we dressed like that?" he always asked. If I looked at Grandma I could see the way she looked at him in the pictures then him sitting in his chair with the photo album on his lap. She still saw him that way. The best picture was him standing in front of his 1949 Packard, with his arm wrapped protectively around his brother Pete's shoulder. I never knew my Uncle Pete. He died many years before I was born. "Tough guys." Grandpa laughed. "Wish I'd of kept the suit."

But looking at those pictures, laughing at the clothes and listening to Grandpa's stories over again, we never laughed at him.

A drop of cold, sticky, ice cream dripped between my fingers. I changed hands and licked the chocolate off.

I knew what they had done to Chicanos back then. So it was a mystery to me how he could sit with them or salute the flag.

That night, I joked about Grandpa Manuel when he came over in his uniform. Even after mom sent me to my room, I giggled.

Every holiday after that, I'd see him sitting in the plaza, saluting. Every time I laughed.



Sitting

It was funny, Manuel thought, how things change as you get older.

On the bench, too small for four men, they sat, tightly together, packed, like their memories; they shared an unspoken camaraderie that grew as much from their history together as from their myths of it.

They had been young men in the same unit during the war. They had lost the same friends, had survived the same horrors, and had shared the same escapades. For forty-two years they had gotten together for the Fourth of July.

If he could have remembered, he would have been surprised at just how much his thoughts had changed since he was photographed in his zoot suit a year and a half before he was drafted.

He had looked at his father, gnarled and stooped, his health and dreams beaten out of him by a society that saw him as third class—not a man, not someone who had been proud, who had dreams, and who had raised his family to be God-fearing and good. His father laid brick for thirty-seven years before his fingers could no longer do the work. People moved to the Southwest and built homes. His dreams soared, only to melt like the wings of Icarus too close to the heat of reality. People cheated him. He tried to go to court, but each time he lost. Each time something of himself disappeared, and each time Manuel saw his father come home a little more stooped.

Summers, he'd help his father. Worse than the money problems or disputes, worse than the heat or the bone-aching pain, were the humiliations: of having to pee in the bushes like a dog, or having to park around the corner; or the gestures like having things wiped clean after he or his father touched them, or having a cup thrown out after they had drunk from it; or the shared sympathy from a righteous housewife who said she knew that Spics really were good people, too.

At sixteen, Manuel knew he wouldn't let people step on him. At eighteen, he went into the Army. He learned to depend on the gringos around him, and they learned to trust him. In spite of

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the racism he saw coming from above, he knew that he and his friends, his generation, would see things change. After the war, he discovered that the ticker-tape parades hadn't been for him. He might have fought for his country but his country wasn't going to fight for him. The white and colored drinking fountains in the South were as segregated for him as they were for the Negroes; the opportunities for good work, education, or housing were as out of reach for him in the North as in the Southwest. So he went back to his parent's home, and he worked with his father.

Reluctantly he joined some of his Army friends to celebrate the Fourth. He honored them and the friends they had lost; he felt pride in having done his duty, of having become a man; but his heart was cold toward the country that asked much but gave so little. A few years later, his brother Pete died in the Korean War and another memory was added.

His own prejudices—of course they had some justification he would argue—were toward civil servants and politicians, “just gringos,” and organized, therefore militant, blacks; although most of his Army friends were one or the other.

In 1964 Manuel visited a friend in Los Angeles. Not realizing he was lost, he had parked where he could and started looking around for his friend's house.

“Stay where you are!” a man yelled at him. “Don't move.”

Manuel stopped. A police car had pulled along side him. He looked around.

“I said don't move,” the policeman in the passenger's seat ordered.

The car stopped and the two policemen got out. One of them grabbed Manuel and pushed him back into the car. “Casing houses?”

“I—”

The policeman spun him around and kicked his feet apart. “Spread 'em and shut up.”

Manuel placed his face flat on the roof, removing from them the opportunity to slam his head down.

Sitting

"No ID?" The policeman finished frisking him.

"I have my driver's—"

"Where?"

"In my shirt pocket." Manuel fought to keep his voice level. He slowly brought his right hand up to his chest. "Here." Manuel pulled it from his pocket and handed it to the policeman.

"Arizona." The policeman flipped the card across to his partner. "Ain't valid here. Right Bob?"

"Sure ain't."

"But—"

"Shut up!" Together they grabbed Manuel and pushed him up off his feet.

Manuel tightened his stomach muscles, preparing himself for the beating he knew was coming. At eighteen, he might have spit or called them names; at forty-three, he prayed.

Suddenly, they let him down.

"Sorry buddy, thought you were someone else," one of them said.

They straightened out his collar and got into their car.

"Yeah, honest mistake," the policeman in the passenger's seat said as they drove away.

Manuel stood, shaking, out of breath, his heart pounding. He turned away from the street. Walking toward him were fourteen black men, Black Muslims, dressed in short-sleeved, white shirts and black pants. They waved at him and turned around. Half a block beyond them, partially hidden behind the limbs of a eucalyptus tree was a marquee. "Masque 23," it said in simple black letters. One by one they disappeared back into the building.

Manuel waved back. "Only in America," he mumbled.

A few years later, after the death of his father, he took a customer to court. The man had reneged on payment. Where his father, a quarter-century before, had run into the futility of fighting, Manuel won.

Manuel worked hard. He watched his children grow up. He comforted them when they were hurt; he chastised them when they took part in hurting.

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One Fourth of July, sitting on a bench with three of his Army buddies, he realized that times had changed, as he had. Some changes were big and cosmetic, others, smaller, less obvious, were significant. He couldn't change prejudice, which existed in men and in the very fabric of the country, but that same country had embraced the need for change.

Pete was dead. Tens of thousands of young men were dead. Killed in war, never to have families, never to grow old; never to see that in spite of man's innate inhumanity, some things could get better. Manuel raised his hand to salute the flag. Hot tears streamed down his cheeks. At least, he felt, he had had the chance to try to make a change, and that chance was precious and rare in the world.



Grandpa Manuel's Army friends were at his funeral. They drank, and cheered, and told old stories. I was offended that they didn't seem to mourn Grandpa's passing.

It's been five years. The bands are loud, the cars are honking, and kids are lighting fire crackers in the streets and parking lots.

I'm sitting with Grandpa's friends on the bench. We sit silently. I feel tears of shame burn my cheek as I remember laughing at him.

"He's still here," one of them whispers to me. "Always will be."
He handed me a handkerchief.

The Sacrifice

for Jill Sands

“SUICIDE?” MY SISTER ASKED in the car on the way from the airport.

“That’s what the coroner said.” I was glad to be talking with Marty while driving on the freeway; so I didn’t have to look at her; so she couldn’t see the look in my eyes.

“I know Lois was sad sometimes,” I heard the catch in her voice, “but why would she kill herself?”



Lois had never married, and Marty and I were the only children her brother had. When we were little we would visit her at least once a week when she was in town. She was a second mother to us. But it wasn’t until I had moved away to attend college, then moved back, that we became friends. Lois rented me the old servant’s quarters above her garage for a percentage of the royalties off my first book, which I had started during my last year of college. I had

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two rooms with a full bath in between, and in return for doing the grocery shopping, access to her kitchen. It was during those eleven years that I learned more about Lois.

“Write a book about me after I die. Tell everything.” She would make me promise after her *seizures*, that’s what her doctor called them, *seizures*.

I was reading on the back patio when she had the first one I had ever seen. She was playing the piano. Everyday she played. One hour of scales, one hour of Bach, then three hours of whatever piece she was trying to learn. Since I can remember, the room was off limits to us in the mornings, although that never stopped us from hiding outside the French doors to listen. In the afternoons, when she gave herself up to the fun of making music, we were allowed in. There was a fireplace, used almost every evening, and full, stuffed chairs for company. On the white walls were framed copies of reviews and programs from her days as a soloist. And the room smelled of smoke and perfume, the same perfume she had worn everyday for thirty years. I had tried to get her to tell me why she had given up performing, but she always evaded the question—always, until the first seizure.

She had just started playing the Chopin Ballade in g-minor, which had been her signature piece. She had recorded it twice, once on her record of encore pieces, and once on what was to have been her definitive Chopin.

“No!” she yelled. “I can’t. You know what you’ve cost me.”

I ran to the door, thinking that someone else was in there.

She started to cry. “Everything,” she whispered. “You’ve cost me everything.”

My hand touched the brass, fish-shaped door handle. I hesitated, looking through the glass panels. No one was in the room with her.

“I’m sorry,” she said, staring into the open piano. “I do love you.”

I stepped to the side of the door, to listen unseen.

The Sacrifice

"Again?" Then quietly, as if cajoling an unruly child, she begged, "Please, you know I try. Give me another chance."

Even through the door I could feel the tension ease as she gave herself up to the music. But it was different: more lyrical, more uneven, and lighter with a playful touch. It sounded as if she were playing on a different piano from her 1873 Broadwood. Gone were the massive, full chords. She lingered, trapped in middle voices. Lightning flourishes that had been her trademark, were slower; she teased them, occasionally hesitating as if she were going to change her mind mid-passage. Her tempos changed as much as her dynamics.

"Better?" she asked, waiting for an answer as if from the piano itself. "Yes," she smiled. "I thought so too."

She collapsed, hitting her head against the protruding, though unused, music holder. I ran in. "Lois?" I lifted her away from the piano. A red welt marked her forehead. "Lois?"

"It was better," she mumbled. Then she opened her eyes. "Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't know it was you."

"Are you all right?"

"Of course. I—"

"You passed out. You're not all right."

She smiled faintly. "Believe me, I am."

"I'm going to call your doctor."

"Please?" She grabbed my hand. "Please don't. I'll tell you. And, maybe, when I've died, you'll have something marvelous to write about."

She looked older, tired and fragile, in a way that our different ages didn't account for.

"Would you like a drink of water, or something?" I asked.

"No. Yes, iced water with a touch of sherry in it." She looked at me carefully, assessing whether I could keep her secret. "Let's sit on the porch, and I'll tell you."

I helped her to the wicker chaise lounge on the covered patio. "I'll get your drink." I said walking over to the small bar.

"It's Frédéric," she whispered.

FUGITIVE TALES

“Frederick?” I asked, pouring the sherry into the glass.

Her eyes had filled with tears. She reminded me of Marty, coming home from a dance in school, and telling me of her greatest, truest, love. I handed her the watered sherry. “Frederick?”

“You will promise to write about us?”

“I . . . I’ll try. It’s hard to promise.”

“It’s a beautiful and tragic story. I’m sure you’ll do it well.”

“I will,” I conceded. “But who’s Frederick? You’ve never talked about him before. Have I met him?”

She looked at me as if somehow I should have known. I felt embarrassed.

“Chopin,” she whispered.

My look of astonishment must have been something, because despite the mood, Lois laughed. Thinking back on that moment, I still can feel the pride I felt then that our friendship was strong enough that instead of taking offense, I laughed too. But I did think she was joking with me, until she stopped and held my hand. It shook.

“Yes, Chopin. He visits me often. And I play for him.”

“Were you talking to him earlier?”

“How did you know?”

“I was outside the doors. I thought you were arguing with someone.”

“I was.”

“Chopin?”

“He hates the way I sometimes play his music. He hates the way everyone plays it. He wasn’t crazy you know.”

“I never thought he was.”

“But that’s how most people play it, as if he had written for Hollywood. Sometimes, I forget, and play it the way I used to. It gets him very angry.”

I got up to get a drink. I knew this was a story I’d never write. “Was he angry today?”

“Yes.”

The Sacrifice

"You've always avoided telling me why you gave up performing. Did it have anything to do with him?"

"He wanted me to rerecord everything, to show people how his music should be played. I tried, but—"

"Was that the record project that was never released?"

"They laughed at me." Tears welled up in her eyes. "Laughed."

"Who? The record people?"

"Well not to my face. But my agent said they'd call him. Telling him that I'd lost my mind."

"Why give up performing?"

"Frédéric made me. He found me—it's been almost a hundred and fifty years since he died—about twenty years ago. At first I thought it was my imagination, stress. I gave up my European tour to rest. Then he visited me almost every day, unless he was mad. He got mad often. It was frustrating for him. He had looked for someone who was able to respond to his—spirit. He had looked so long. Then he found me, and even though I knew his music, I played it wrong."

"You're Chopin was always your signature. How could you play it wrong?"

"Did you hear me today?"

"Yes?"

"Then you know. It's in the differing tempos between the right and left hand, in the dynamics, in the sense of it."

"But the music, it's written out. Doesn't that tell you—"

"No, it says almost nothing. What he wrote—like mere scales—a skeleton of the music. How do you show the soul of something?"

"And they laughed?"

"Yes. It made him so mad. It was through me that he sought to have his music played and heard like it should have been. And no one cared."

"It was beautiful."

"I know. But that's just for us. He got so frustrated that he won't let me play in public."

FUGITIVE TALES

That had been seven years before. And for the next eight years she, they, continued to refuse to play publicly.

My book was published. It didn't do well, but it allowed me to start paying Lois back. And it kept the door to the publishing world open for everything I've written since. I moved away three years ago, into the country. Lois's seizures had become almost daily occurrences, and gotten to be difficult things for me to work around. That first time, I felt goose bumps when she told me the story, but later I doubted it, although it wasn't long before I truly believed her, and through her I think I've even talked to him. Lois was heartbroken when I moved, but I think he understood.

I visited often. She seemed to wither during the last year, exhausted by his demands and frustrations.

When Doctor Georgeson called to tell me that Lois was dead, I think I understood. Chopin's spirit was too bound to Lois's. He couldn't rest, and she couldn't help him, not until she understood the depth of their bond. I might argue that it was a mercy killing not suicide, but who would believe me?



It was a simple, private funeral. Marty's husband stayed with their son back in Seattle. My wife had handled the arrangements with the funeral home. I had tried to tell her about Lois once, but she couldn't believe it, and I never brought it up again.

The service was beautiful. They played Chopin during the reception.

The Sin of Knowledge

THEY'LL NEVER HEAR, Beth thought as she rang the bell a second time. She tapped her feet in the dead leaves on the stoop, and pulled her fur collar tighter around her neck. *Never.*

The old-fashioned brass bell pull was mounted in the center of the oak door. It was usually loud, except now. It was muffled by the crowd of people inside. *Julian*, Beth thought. She knew she should never have left him alone with mother, *Not tonight.*

Beth gave it a third yank.

She turned to where the cab had dropped her off in the drive. Too late, it was gone.

"Okay, okay, I'm—" Glass broke on the other side of the door. "Damn."

The door opened a crack. Light and noise flooded the yard in a sharp wedge. "Come in."

Beth was caught, confused, but she recognized Anne's voice, *the party.*

FUGITIVE TALES

"Beth! Come in. I've had a small accident, just step over."

Inside, Anne pulled at Beth's gray suede coat with one hand while pushing the heavy door closed with the other. "Let me take your coat. I'll put it upstairs in our bedroom. Make yourself at home."

Beth looked around for a minute, trying to fight down her vertigo. Most of the people she knew—they were a friendly crowd—but a few were new. *One of them, from Scribner's*, she thought, *one of Anne's writers*, Beth smiled, they were usually more interesting than Beth's regular friends.

"Drink?" Donald Lerner yelled from across the living room. "I'm bartender, first round only though."

Beth walked to the corner where Donald stood next to a table full of bottles. "The red coat makes you look the part," Beth said.

"Anne's idea. She said if I never wore it she would throw it out. So, what can I get you?"

"I don't know. There's too much."

"Sherry? A gentle start. Anne bought a good Spanish bottle."

"Thanks." Beth took the small glass. She held it to her lips, hiding behind its edge. "Who is everyone?"

"Anne will be pissed, but since you've asked, the guy in the chair by the bookcase, that's Nigel Beniton. Anne's newest. She says his book will go into at least three printings."

"Giving away my surprise?" Anne asked, startling her husband and Beth. "Come on Beth, you've got to meet him."

For five years, since Beth's husband had walked out, Anne had made it her crusade to find a replacement.

She grabbed Beth's arm and pulled her away from the safety of the corner and marched her across the room. "You'll just love him ... Nigel, this is Beth." Anne had to raise her voice to be heard. Beth rocked back and forth, embarrassed by Anne's enthusiasm. "Beth this is the love of your life, Nigel Beniton."

With that, Anne turned and strode away, knowing, as she always did, that she had made a successful match.

Beth watched as Nigel looked for a place to set his glass down on the small, magazine covered, table. A red flush crept from behind

The Sin of Knowledge

his white shirt collar. He fumbled with his glass, unable to put it down, and started to stand.

"Please don't get up," Beth said. "That's so old—"

"Sssorry," Nigel stuttered. "Itsss habit. I wwwas ttaught well."

He slid a chair away from the wall for Beth. "Ppppplease."

His face and ears burned crimson. "The ssstutter gggoes away when I'm nnnnot nnnnervous."

"Don't be, not on my account," she put her hand on his, "you're the famous author." She hadn't wanted to like him, another one of Anne's special men, but Nigel was different, different from Anne's usually glib, party-types. His embarrassment made her want to laugh. Her face twitched as she tried to restrain herself. She covered her face, pretending to smother a cough.

Nigel laughed too. "Th," he took a breath. "Thank you." And another. "Maybe I wwwill get through this."

She pulled her hand away. *Get through this?* She felt her throat tighten. She shook her head back and forth. *No no, no. I knew this wouldn't work*, she thought. "Am I annoying you? I—"

"Nnno. Sss ... sorry. It's Anne. She ... ttold ... mme—"

"Anne? ... It's Anne's idea!" Beth interrupted. "I understand. She told me too that there was someone I had to meet." Beth flushed. "It's my turn. I'm sorry. Let's start over."

"Yes ... let's. You know ... my work?"

"Right now, I wish I could say 'yes,' but no. Donald said you were Anne's latest. What do you write?"

"Histories. Twentieth century European."

"Histories?" She had read a lot of history, it was her secret passion. She had wanted to understand her father, a German soldier, an officer, in the Second World War. "Beniton! I didn't connect your name. I'm sorry, I do know your work. You've something new?"

"*The Wardens*. It's dddue out in a week. I can get you a copy. Signed, if you'd ... like."

They talked for an hour. By the makeshift bar Anne nudged her husband, "See, I told you."

FUGITIVE TALES

"You've said that every time."

"Yes, but have you ever seen Beth sit in one place so long? No? This time I'm right."

Nigel had brought over the bottle of sherry, and had kept filling her glass, although never more than a third at a time. Beth's mind wandered. She wondered if Nigel's stutter had completely gone away, or if she were so used to it, she didn't hear it. He was talking about the German effort in the mid-thirties to legalize their villainy. She had gotten lost in the argument and in the data. Drowned in the noise of the party, the phone rang. Then Anne was shaking Beth's shoulder.

"Beth . . . Beth. It's Gerta. It's your mother, she—"

"Julian!"

"No, your father, she said he's dying," Anne dropped her voice, "again."

"I've got to go. Can you call a cab?"

"I'll drive you." Nigel said, holding her hand. "This time of night, it could take a while."

"No."

"Nigel's right. It's better if he takes you."

"Oh God, no," Beth said in resignation.

"I'll get your coats."

The five minute drive went in slow motion. *Hauptmann Rooling*, Beth stared out the window watching the night lights, cold and impersonal. The lights spoke to her. They beckoned her to join them, to hide in their white oblivion. She knew they'd accept her. She had always known they were waiting for her. *Hauptmann Rooling*.

"We're there." Nigel gentle voice pulled her back. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Beth slowly looked around, prepared as if she had awoken from a bad dream. But the night was quiet, the houses dark, and there was no ambulance. "Thanks. I can see myself in."

Nigel ran around to her side of the car and helped her out. "I won't hear it. I'll see you in."

"No, please? No."

The Sin of Knowledge

A yellow light burst from the porch. "Beth? Kindchen, is that you?"

"Yes mama," Beth yelled. "Thank you," she said to Nigel, freeing herself from his helpful arm. "That's mama. I'll be fine."

"Let me—"

"No." Beth looked at Nigel's worried face. "I'm sorry. It's just that . . . this isn't a good time."

"Could I . . . see you again?"

Beth found it hard to swallow. *What about Julian? And Hauptmann Roeling?* she thought.

"And a friend," Gerta yelled back from the porch. "That is goot. Please, come, I would like it to meet him."

"Mama is Julian asleep?" Beth asked, hugging her mother. "And Papa?"

Gerta placed her arm around Beth. "Like Christ on the Cross your papa suffers. . . . Who is it your friend?"

"Mama, please?"

"Vhat better time is for with friends?"

"Mama this is Nigel, he's a . . . writer. Anne introduced us. Nigel this is Gerta, my mom."

The lines on Nigel's face had disappeared with Gerta's intercession. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Mrs.—"

"Roeling. A friend of my Beth's is always welcome. Please."

Gerta led them into the dark house. "Beth, you make it him comfortable." She kept her hands in the pockets of her white pinafore, churning pieces of Kleenex. "I must see to Papa."

The house had been converted from American colonial to Austrian traditional. The woodwork was painted, brown and grained, and wainscoting surrounded the living room. A large Persian rug covered the floor with indiscernible maroon and blue patterns that had been scuffed down to inky puddles. A brooding painting of Christ before Pilate hung above the fireplace. Nigel tried to blink away the invisible disinfectant mist.

"Sit. I've got to check on Julian. Then . . . would you like a drink? Coffee?"

FUGITIVE TALES

"If it's no trouble, I'd like coffee. Julian?"

"My son."

"You're . . . married?"

"I was. He walked on me." *The day I told him I was pregnant. He didn't even take his things. He just left.* "That was almost six years ago . . . I'll get your coffee."

Nigel went to the shelves next to the fireplace, rows of worn books, their spines were creased and broken from too much familiarity. Book marks, like multi-colored flags, almost fluttered along their tops. He stooped to examine a row. They were all in German, and they were all theological. The Bible, the lives of saints, most of whom Nigel couldn't place, treatises on Christian morality, and dozens of obscure German philosophers.

Nigel ran his fingers along the books, mindlessly humming the jingle for a local furniture chain. He noticed that behind the tightly packed lines of books were more, a second row facing out. What he could get to, without having to remove all the books in front, were novels. "Guilty pleasures," he mumbled, and smiled at his discovery.

"Do you want cream or sugar?" Beth interrupted.

"Sorry, it's an old habit. Books, they're my life." He sat down. "I didn't . . . mean . . . to be . . . snoopy."

"Papa has always been religious. It's his life, that and painting. That's his," Beth said, pointing to the mantle. "Did you say if you wanted cream?"

"No, black is fine. How's your father?"

"He's really sick, but I don't think he's going to die, not tonight."

"You have a doctor?"

"Papa's got cancer in his bones, and some sort of dementia, the doctor had a long name for it. There's nothing they can do for him. And he wanted to be here to die. He hates hospitals and doctors anyway."

"Maybe I . . . should leave?"

"No, Mama would be mad. And," Beth stared into the coffee

mug still in her hand, “I’m glad you’re here.” Without allowing herself to see his reaction, she put the mug down on the end table. “I want to see Papa a minute.”

The coffee was hot, dark, and bad. It was like his mother’s, coffee grounds boiled with egg shell, a little egg yolk, and a pinch of salt. But it felt good to wrap his hands around the mug and smell it.

A book, hidden in the second row, caught his eye. It looked to have a dozen slips of paper marking it—odd for a novel, he thought. He put the coffee down and knelt next to the shelf.

The books in front were solid, and most of the row started to come away with the three books he was prying out. He sneezed, and pulled out a crumpled handkerchief from his pants pocket. Now one-handed, he fought hard not to let the books get away from him.

Through the toothless gap in the shelf he worked his prize out from the back. It had a dark, red leather cover, with gold edged pages. The title on the spine was worn away, but on the front cover, debossed, with flecks of gold leaf still stuck in the crevices, it said *Mein Kampf*.

Nigel thumbed through it. The markers were old photographs, mostly of children playing, all pre-war. A clump of photos fell out onto the floor. Across the back of the top picture, in round, blue letters, it said “Kadett Reuling.” He turned it over. Staring at him was a young man. Haughty—the select—wearing the uniform of the Ordensschule.

Nigel reassembled the photos, and replaced the books. He sat back in the over stuffed, dark, blue-green chair, and he fought the vertigo. The sherry? The closeness of the room? No, Rooling. His discovery tore at him as he icily sipped the hot coffee.

He knew Hauptmann Reuling, Oberinspektor in the SS. He had lived with him for twenty-three pages in his newest book.

“Nigel, Mama wants you to meet Papa,” Beth whispered from the doorway to the kitchen. “Mama . . . wants . . . you . . .” Her voice fell away.

“I dddon’t thhhink I . . . shhhould.”

Understanding

POLKA NIGHT WAS TUESDAY at the Blue Gentian.
“You ready?” Gerta asked, adjusting her dark blue dress in front of the full length mirror on the closet door.

“You promised ve could eat dinner dere. I’m hungry as oxen.”

“Ach!” Helmuth mumbled from the bathroom. “Alvays you vait til I am shaving to ask.”

Helmuth wiped off the thin lines of shaving cream, gently touching a crease in his face, “The light,” he thought. He rinsed his shaving brush, and set it at the back of the sink next to his soap mug. Then he rinsed and wiped dry the shiny steel blade. Pulling the strop tight against the hook in the wall, he ran the blade along the smooth brown leather. It swished in an even, metric, pattern, reminding him of his cadet days, of other younger cadets marching in formation at a distance, while he shaved. He carefully folded the blade back into the bone handle, and set it in the medicine cabinet next to his morning razor. He closed the door—flashing his face at him again. “The light.”

“Papa?”

Helmuth turned off the light. “Ya, I am soon ready.” Last week he had promised they could eat dinner out. It was the anniversary of Manfred’s birthday, he would have been thirty-seven. Helmuth didn’t like to spend the money, but Gerta had been right, sitting at home on that day was wrong.

It was a coincidence that it was polka night.

There was another night at the Blue Gentian. For nine years Helmuth had gone by himself on Thursdays. Without an explanation, Gerta understood, one day a week when old men could share brighter memories. She envied Helmuth his Thursdays. He had invited her a few times, but she knew those memories were for the men, not their wives.

Three years ago Helmuth stopped going. Just like that. He had come home early one Thursday.

“Papa, is dat you?” Gerta yelled from the living room, when she heard the back door open.

“Ya.” He hung his overcoat up on the hook next to the door, and started up the steps.

“Vy you home so early?”

He stopped. “Why? You ask why?” he thought. “Ach, is nothing.”

In the kitchen he opened the white metal cabinet door above the counter and took out the bottle of brandy. He poured some into a cup.

“Have a brandy,” the man had said. “To our friendship.”

Gerta always kept a pot of coffee warming on the stove. Helmuth filled his cup with it, the smell of brandy and coffee mixed in front of him. He walked through it into the living room.

“You all right?” Gerta asked, turning off the TV.

“Is nothing.”

“Papa, you don’t lie so goot.”



FUGITIVE TALES

"My name is Fritz," said the man on the next stool. "Fritz Heydrich."

Helmuth turned, confused, he had just ordered a beer and was counting out his change.

"Ach, ach . . . I," he spilled the remaining coins on the counter, "enough, ya?"

The bartender flicked the coins one by one across the glossy wood into his large hand, "Ya."

Helmuth turned to Fritz. "Call me Helmuth."

They shook hands.

"Cigarette?" Fritz asked, extending the open red and white box of Regents, "These are very good, better than we had in Germany."

"I quit."

"So? So did I."

Helmuth looked at Fritz. He had a thin, red scar that ran down his forehead through his left eyebrow, and down his cheek. It was hard to keep his eyes off it.

Fritz clicked his heels together, in mock salute, "Dueling." He nodded. "In youth, things seem so easy, so obvious. Cigarette?"

"I—"

"I heard, you quit. But a smoke is good with beer. No?"

Helmuth pulled the foil flaps away, and took out a cigarette. "A secret. Ya?" He smiled mischievously at Fritz through the yellow blue flame of Fritz's lighter. It clicked shut.

"Good," Fritz said, "It's good to have a secret between friends."

"You sound, forgif me, almost American," Helmuth said.

"My father was in the diplomatic corps. We were in England until I was eleven. He retired, and we moved back to Mainz, where my grandfather lived. I learned English at the same time I learned German."

Helmuth signaled the bartender to give Fritz another beer. "Please," he smiled, "ve were neighbors, I vas in Veisbaden growing up."

Understanding

Fritz gestured to the crowded room. "This is something."

"Ya, every Thursday. Is goot people. I never see you before?"

"I just moved here. First time."

After that, Helmuth met Fritz almost every Thursday night at the Blue Gentian. Helmuth's friends understood Helmuth's infatuation with Fritz. Fritz was the stereotypical prewar German aristocrat, proud and attractive, who with a wink of his right eye—holding an invisible monocle in his left—could accept his duty, no matter what it was. They teased Helmuth. But truth was they were jealous.

Over the months Helmuth opened to Fritz, as if they were old friends. He told him, a fellow SS officer, things that not even his wife or children knew. Things about the war, things he knew Fritz understood. Fritz graciously accepted his role as confessor.

Gerta noticed the difference. She prayed that Beth and Peter would see their father like this. But Peter hadn't been home or even called for ten years, and Beth was away at college.

"Maybe this summer," Gerta wished, "Beth will see her papa like I know him."

It was hot and muggy, and the air conditioning at the Blue Gentian was broken. The front door was held open with the chrome cylindrical ashtray from next to the stage where the polka band's equipment was. Even with the open door, no air moved through the room.

There were two shot glasses in front of Fritz when Helmuth arrived. Fritz slid one towards Helmuth's place. "Have a brandy." He raised his glass. "To our friendship."

"Ya, to friendship." Helmuth drank it down before sitting.

"Ach, it is too hot."

As if granted permission by Helmuth's observation, Fritz removed his sport coat. "Please, take off your coat too," he pulled at the front of his shirt like a bellows, pumping air in, "it helps."

Helmuth removed his coat.

"Here, I'll hang them up," Fritz said, reaching out to take Helmuth's coat. Fritz's bare arm hung timelessly before Helmuth, the edge of a line of blue numbers peeking up at him.

FUGITIVE TALES

"I don't understand," Helmuth whispered. He reached out to touch the tattoo, but stopped. "Vat are you?"

Fritz sat back down, his coat in his lap. "I am a German, like you."

"No."

"Yes, like you. We were neighbors."

"Not like me." Helmuth's eyes stared at the Fritz's arm. "No."

Fritz smiled, "Well, you are right in a way, my family was much better connected. But I would never let something like that come between friends."

Helmuth grabbed Fritz's arm and turned it over on the counter. "Dese are identification numbers." He pushed the arm away. "You haf betrayed me."

Fritz lit a cigarette, leaving the pack out. He stared into the rising cloud of smoke in front of him. "Like you, I was an officer in the Schutzstaffel."

"No."

"Yes, in youth things are so easy, so obvious. But I grew up. In 1943 I was transferred into the *Verfugungstruppe*. The killing had to stop, I thought. So I refused. . . . They made an example of me, and sent me to the camps."

"But—"

"They showed me my case file. There were orders, special orders . . . to make sure that no matter what, I was not to be allowed to die. And believe me, many times I wanted to."

"How could you turn your back on your duty?"

"I had to. I thought others would join me. They didn't."

Helmuth lit a cigarette. He looked into Fritz's eyes, expecting to see what he had seen a million times in every camp. But they were welcoming, gray, and watery. Fritz smiled.

Helmuth sat back away.

"No. My friend, no," Fritz said. "We are friends."

"I don't want your forgiveness."

Fritz laughed, "I didn't offer it. Why should I? To a friend. You did nothing to me back then."

Understanding

Helmuth jumped off the stool. It rocked back and forth, fighting against gravity. "I don't want it. Nefer." He reached into his pants pocket, pulling out a single, neatly folded, dollar bill and two quarters. "I pay," he said, slapping the money onto the counter.



Helmuth never went back on Thursday nights, and for several months he refused to go on Tuesdays. He asked his friends if they saw Fritz, but they said he had stopped coming the same time Helmuth had. He never explained what had happened, he couldn't. That would have meant acknowledging the past.

"Papa," Gerta yelled from the landing, "I haf your suit on da bedt."

Helmuth was standing next to the bed, staring down at his suit. Gerta had put his white shirt and his tie next to it. For a second he saw it as his uniform, pressed and brushed, waiting to work its magic, button by button, making him—

"Papa?" Gerta yelled to him.

His fingers tips traced circles in the plain, blue wool, searching for vanished dreams. He was scared to go to the Blue Gentian, although he knew he would never see Fritz again.

"Papa?"

"Ya, I hurry."

Helmuth dressed. He stood in front of the mirror above Gerta's dresser to adjust his tie. His eye glanced down at the rows of pictures, the family. Gerta had moved the picture of Manfred to the front. He picked it up to see his son better. It had been taken by a neighbor on Manfred's thirteenth birthday. Peter was four, and Beth was two. They were sitting in their backyard. He remembered thinking at the time how odd it was to have summer in December. They were smiling, all of them.

"I miss you Manfred," Helmuth whispered as he kissed the photograph. "I... I love you."

FUGITIVE TALES

The restaurant was crowded by the time they got there.

“Good evening Herr Reuling, Frau Reuling,” the maître d’ said.
“We’re running behind, would you mind waiting at the bar?”

“Tanks,” Gerta said, pulling at Helmuth’s arm.

Helmuth looked at the bar, each stool, and not until he was sure that Fritz was not there, did he start towards it.

Gerta didn’t see him nod to himself as they sat down. But he had been right about one thing, he and Fritz were not alike.

The Birthday Present

I WAS BORN IN ARGENTINA IN 1947, and lived there through my sixth year. Until my twenty-first birthday I had one strong memory that was more of a bad dream, that haunted my nights and left me feeling uneasy about the world, but it recurred less and less often as I got older.

It was December, and the summer was magnificent: most of the plants in the garden had emerald green leaves and I could lie in the grass and look up through them at the lazy azure sky. Bursts of red or yellow or pink flowers punctuated the garden like the pieces of papaya that Maria Theresa put in her hot, sausage and bean casseroles. The heavy perfume seemed intoxicating in the heat, and often when I didn't come for supper mama would search the garden for me. In the middle of the yard was a white-washed flagstone pavilion with a low wall around it. Most of the year, from September through March, Maria Theresa served our meals outside.

Maria Theresa stayed with us in a little bungalow, next to the

FUGITIVE TALES

main house. She cooked and served. She liked having me in the kitchen, where she taught me how to cook. She would put a chair in front of the stove or the sink for me to stand on. In spite of Maria Theresa's large white apron that she made me wear, moma could tell when I had been cooking because my dress always got dirty.

Whenever I can, I still make some of the dishes she taught me.

But in my dream I remember being excited. It was summer, and almost Christmas, and in a few weeks, on January 7, it would be my birthday. It was a magic time for me. But this was December 18. Papa, mama, Peter and I were sitting in the pavilion. Mama was worried because Manfred hadn't come home the night before or all day. I think papa was worried too, but he kept saying that Manfred was sixteen, "he is a man, and men that age—"

"In Germany—" mama would start to say.

"But this isn't Germany. Here young men look at the beautiful girls, and—I am sorry—I shouldn't be vulgar."

Dr. Hoffmann appeared. In our neighborhood, he was almost everybody's doctor. He was tall, with gray hair, and he had a scar, "from dueling" he once explained. I must have had a crush on him, because I remember hiding from him whenever he stopped by. Then he would call me, "Mein kindchen," and I would run to him and jump in his arms. This time he didn't call, but took papa's arm and led him away from us. I couldn't hear what they said, but papa fell against the wall and Dr. Hoffmann had to help him back to the table.

"Frau Reuling." He took mama's hand and held it for a second almost to his lips. He looked quickly at papa then at Peter and me. "Perhaps they should not—"

"They must hear it too," Papa whispered. "Would you?"

Dr. Hoffmann bowed to papa, "Please, forgive me, but, I must tell you that Manfred—"

"Manfred? Papa, what—"

Papa took mama's hand. "Shhh."

The Birthday Present

“Manfred has had an accident.”

“He is at hospital.” Mama started to stand up. “I will get—”

“No. I am sorry, but . . . it was fatal.”

My dream always blurred then—sometimes I saw myself in my Sunday clothes, sometimes mama held me and tried to explain while we both cried—but always it raced unerringly towards its horrible conclusion, where I stood looking up at Manfred’s casket, relieved that whatever was in it I couldn’t see. Then the minister came over and picked me up . . .

Peter never forgot special days, at not least mine. He always sent me a long, soulful letter. It was through me that he and mama talked. Because of papa he never wrote to her, and papa never asked after him, even when he knew I had a letter from Peter.

Peter was twenty-three, but he had become an adult a few months before his fifteenth birthday, on the anniversary of Manfred’s accident—a year before he left home. When I came home from school that day Peter was different—quiet, withdrawn, and cynical.

Mama had made a goulash with dumplings. In the kitchen we sat at the second-hand dining room table with its peeling veneer. The foot of the leg in the back, by mama’s place, was broken off, and papa had braced it up with books. The table was rectangular, and it would have fit the kitchen better if it were turned around, but when papa tried it we kicked the books out. So the table had to stick out, and mama always sat very still, protecting the books, afraid that she would move and cause some calamity.

Mama had to call Peter three times before he came to table. Usually we kidded him because he was there before she called.

“Papa?” mama asked, holding out her hand for his plate. “Goulash?”

“Always papa.” Peter mumbled.

“What?” mama asked. She spooned extra sauce over papa’s plate. “What is dis papa?”

Mama was curious, as though she had missed something.

Peter stared blankly at the casserole on the table.

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"Tell mama," papa said.

Peter tossed his napkin onto his empty plate.

"Peter?"

Mama handed papa his dinner. "Is all right, papa." She picked up my plate. "Dis is a difficult night."

"I know vat night it is," papa said, not taking his eyes off Peter. "But no son of mine vill act dis vay in my house."

Mama looked at Peter, hoping that her gentle gaze would somehow resolve what she sensed no amount of talking would.

"Always, it's—" Peter stopped himself. Tears filled his eyes, and he looked sorrowfully at me and mama.

Mama put my plate in front of me, and she sat down. She put her hands in her lap. Without looking, I knew she had begun to twist her fingers slowly around and around each other, like an old woman with her rosary.

"Apologize for dis," papa ordered Peter.

Peter put his hand on mama's arm. "I'm sorry mama. I didn't mean to disturb your dinner."

Papa tucked his napkin into the buttoned collar of his shirt. "Goodt. Now ve eat."

"No. It's not goodt! Ever since I can remember, we tip toe around to make sure that papa isn't disturbed. Always it's papa. Papa this . . . papa that."

"Mama? Vat is dis?" papa yelled at mama.

"Don't yell at her," Peter said back.

I'll never forget the look in Peter's eyes. I don't think that I've ever seen it again, not even when papa was really dying and Peter came home. It was a look that gave meaning to the idea of being beneath contempt.

Papa's face got red, and as he jumped to his feet, he knocked over his coffee. He left the room, and we heard him stamping up the stairs. I think mama wanted to protect Peter because she understood what was happening, but her duty to papa and the spreading stain distracted her.

All time stopped until papa was standing in the doorway.

The Birthday Present

"Now, ve will going to da garage." Papa's heavy leather belt hung loosely from his clenched fist. "Now!"

Peter matched papa's stare, but he quietly stood up and then followed papa out.

I never heard a sound from the garage.

Later, when mama and papa had gone to bed I sneaked into the kitchen and cut a piece of apple strudel and piece of cheese. I wrapped them in a damask napkin and went out to Peter.

I opened the side door of the garage, and I whispered, "Peter?" As if papa could have heard me.

I shivered in the cold. I was afraid of the garage. Neither Peter nor I ever went in it, except, like now, for punishment. It was always dark, even in the sunlight; it smelled musty and rotten; and spider webs stretched from stud to stud, to hold the garage upright. Always, their invisible, sticky, threads found any bare skin and clung to it, making us itch and scratch.

"Peter?"

At night, with moonlight piercing the clouded windows, the garage was especially cold, and it was unusually still. I saw Peter standing by the window staring out into the frosty shadows of the garden. "I brought you some strudel."

Peter turned to me, he didn't look hostile or angry, just empty.

"And some cheese. I wanted to bring a coat or blanket, but—"

"Papa," he interrupted. "I know."

"What happened?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"But—"

"Nothing."

Peter was never the same. His grades in school got bad; he stopped seeing his friends; and, although he never confronted papa again, dinner time was always tense.

Sometimes when he seemed in a good mood and we were alone together I would ask him about that night. But he never explained.

I came home early on my twenty-first birthday. Mama was

cooking, and I went first to the kitchen to say hello, then I looked at the dining room table where she always put the mail. She knew there was a letter from Peter—it was on top—but she said nothing.

“Dear Beth,” I read silently, as I crumpled the envelop and sat on the sofa:

Happy birthday. Today you’re finally twenty-one. Grown up, and I’ll bet you’re real pretty. I’ve been saving to get you something special, but I couldn’t figure out what that would be, so, if you won’t think me crass, I have enclosed a postal check—don’t return it, and don’t buy anything for mama, it’s just for you. All right?

Tell mama that I am fine. I am still working at the bookstore, and I have made a few more friends here. My painting is going well, and I think maybe I will be able to get a show soon.

And, yes, I have a girl friend. You would like her, she reminds me of you. She said that I shouldn’t send you money. We kind of had a fight over it, but I don’t think she will be mad when I get home tonight. Anyway, you’re my sister, not hers.

It’s my lunch break. I had to write this here at work, so if the letter is late getting to you, you’ll understand that I got interrupted.

I don’t know if you remember many years ago, the night papa got so mad at me—it was the anniversary day of Manfred’s accident. Do you remember?

You brought me a piece of strudel I think. Did I ever thank you? Probably not. And you kept asking me what had happened. Well today I will tell you.

You were only five when Manfred died. I was seven, and to me he could have done no wrong, he was sixteen and a god. Such are older brothers. Well, some. I’ve probably been a disappointment.

Papa always told us that he had been an officer in the Wehrmacht during the war. I remember some of the boys in the neighborhood. They were all German—good Germans—whose fathers were all military heroes, at least that’s what the boys said.

On Manfred’s sixteenth birthday Papa announced that we were moving to the United States. He was real proud. There are photographs of us all toasting to the move.

The Birthday Present

A few days later, Manfred started coming home with bloody noses and split lips. I followed him around, trying to find out what had happened. He wouldn't tell me. On the day of Manfred's accident I was hiding behind the garden wall when papa and Manfred had a big argument.

"Willhelm said you were an office drudge."

"Vat you say?" Papa asked.

"Willhelm and some of the others said . . . they called you an army dog."

Papa got red in the face and he tried to talk. I could look over the wall and see. He just puffed and stammered.

"Papa?" Manfred tried to calm him. "Papa?"

Papa stopped pacing and stared at Manfred.

"It's just some boys talking." Manfred said. They didn't mean anything. I—'

"I vas Oberinspekkter in da Schutzstaffel. I vill talk of dis no more!"

Papa left the yard. Manfred stood there, horrified. I had no idea what any of this meant, not then. I climbed over the wall and ran to him. 'What did papa mean?'

"Nothing," Manfred said, and he pushed me away from him. "Nothing." He started across the yard.

"Can I come?" I asked.

"No."

"Please?"

"No."

That was the last I ever saw Manfred alive. They said that he had been playing too close to the edge and had slipped. I heard the doctor tell papa that he had probably lived at least a day, wedged into the rocks, before he died of shock and exposure.

I know better. It wasn't an accident. I saw his face when papa told him. But I was stunned by his death, and that overshadowed my curiosity about papa's wartime service.

You know how mama gets on anniversary of Manfred's death. Well, that day I had come home early and saw mama going through some

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papers. She didn't see me. But when she left to the grocery, I found the papers. Some of them were papa's.

Beth, he lied to us. He was no mere soldier. He was SS. And worse. I looked up Oberinspektor. His job was to oversee the concentration camps, to see that they were efficiently killing people!

That's what killed Manfred. That's why I left home. And that's what I've never told you before.

Love, Peter.

I must have suspected papa of something like this before, but now I could no longer deny things. "Papa, I loved you," I thought, as I wiped my eyes.

"Peter?" Mama asked. "How is he?"

I folded the letter and slipped it into my pocket. "He's fine mama. He's fine."

