

Chestnuts protesting by an Open Fire.



MEMORY

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COVER

R. SAMINORA, - Paris

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BEFORE I KNOCKED

Before I knocked and flesh let enter, With liquid hands tapped on the womb, I who was as shapeless as the water That shaped the Jordan near my home Was brother to Mnetha's daughter And sister to the fathering worm.

I who was deaf to spring and summer, Who knew not sun nor moon by name, Felt thud beneath my flesh's armour, As yet was in a molten form The leaden stars, the rainy hammer Swung by my father from his dome.

I knew the message of the winter, The darted hail, the childish snow, And the wind was my sister suitor; Wind in me leaped, the hellborn dew; My veins flowed with the Eastern weather; Ungotten I knew night and day.

As yet ungotten, I did suffer; The rack of dreams my lily bones Did twist into a living cipher, And flesh was snipped to cross the lines Of gallow crosses on the liver And brambles in the wringing brains.

My throat knew thirst before the structure Of skin and vein around the well Where words and water make a mixture Unfailing till the blood runs foul; My heart knew love, my belly hunger; I smelt the maggot in my stool.

And time cast forth my mortal creature To drift or drown upon the seas Acquainted with the salt adventure Of tides that never touch the shores. I who was rich was made the richer By sipping at the vine of days.

I, born of flesh and ghost, was neither A ghost nor man, but mortal ghost. And I was struck down by death's feather. I was a mortal to the last Long breath that carried to my father The message of his dying christ.

You who bow down at cross and altar, Remember me and pity Him Who took my flesh and bone for armour And doublecrossed my mother's womb.

Memoiretorial

by David S. Warren

This is the memory issue of the Metaphysical Times; and we all have memory issues. In his poem, "Before I Knocked and Flesh Let Enter", (in the opposite column) Dylan Thomas claims to remember life in the womb, when he was kin to Mnetha, the goddess of memory, or so he says; but you have to know he was mostly making that stuff up.

Luckily for my job here, I am an expert on memory and forgetting. I even named my daughter Mnetha after the goddess of memory in the Thomas poem. At the time of naming, the child had not yet been born and I was thinkingwhat name do you give a child still in the womb? So ... Mnetha.

I remember lines from several other Dylan Thomas poems because I heard them before I read them: heard them over and over again recited in windy Welch tones by my chum John when we were windy boys walking around Vienna.

We remember what we hear, see or smell, far better than what we read or think privately. Books save the data, but they murder memory. Who needed memory once we had books? And now that we have computers, thumb drives, data banks, and global positioning systems, we don't even need to remember where we live or where we came from.

When I was so young I hardly remember that time and have had to make up a lot of it, I lived in the house my great grandfather built in the small northern New York village of Natural Bridge.

One of the first things I actually do remember from back then (or remember remembering) is the shock when I was around five years old and my mother told me that we were going to move from Natural Bridge to some place called

I thought reasonably enough that moving would necessarily mean moving the house itself: I knew about shacks and camps and chicken houses ... that they were built by dads with hammers and nails, but our lacily trimmed



house with it's stairway whose banister rail snaked down to the newel post that had a cat-sized brass statuette of one of the muses on it. She was probably not the muse of Memory, and my mother did tell me a few years before she died which muse it was, but I don't remember, and the muse herself may be gone by now. To me then, our home was not a man-built thing, but more like a kind of natural, She-Shell Mother thing. Shocked, I asked Mom how we could possibly move our home, and I would later insist that she TOLD me: a big truck, or two big trucks, would come around, I mean REALLY big trucks; and then the truck with a blower thing like a backwards vacuum cleaner on it, would BLOW our house up onto the back of the other truck ... and there we'd go.

I was disappointed when it didn't happen that way. We just left home, like ghosts exiting their mother-body. I pouted for years after that.

We hope that this issue of the Metaphysical Times is pointedly memorable, and that you never forget where you live, where you came from, or how you got here.

We have as usual asked our writers to keep the theme in mind, though not necessarily using that theme word in their writing, and I particularly discouraged the writers from offering definitions, theories, and so on, but to leave the boring stuff to the editors.



In addition to our regular writers, **Steve Katz** and **Michael Chappell** are new to the magazine, plus, this issue has a scattered population of talking nut-heads provided by Oren Pierce. Oren is also the author of the Nowella and Threadbear stories, designs oracle cards, and is an instructor of what he calls "Zen Badminton". He has been living not far from here in a converted silo since first appearing at the Dogs Plot door about two years ago, claiming to be the brother of William Bonaparte Warren who, as I have made perfectly clear from the beginning, is my IMAGINARY brother.

I pointed this out to Oren when he himself first appeared here, but the existential argument made no impression on Pierce, who continues to show up here asking after and fully expecting to find William. William has NOT shown up at Dog's Plot again, despite my invitation to come back from California or wherever for a while, at least until the smoke clears there. He can stay in the trailer and look after the chickens, the cats, and the goats while Georgia and I go off to see the ocean, or travel to promote another book, or the next edition of the **Metaphysical Times**, which will be the WEIRD issue, containing stories of the Strange, the Uncanny, the Erie and... probably more Nut Heads from



Oren Pierce who lately is often to be seen walking the roadsides around Pumpkin Hill, picking up chestnuts, and staring earnestly at their little faces. He has told me that he will not be offering any Badminton Yoga Zen instructions until Spring when the Inns of Aurora tourist come around.

My co-editor Georgia Warren has forgone her usual editorial ramble in this space, and has instead put months of reminiscence, re-reminiscence, writing, deep diving and re-writing of the story you are going to read about the woman who wore her hat.

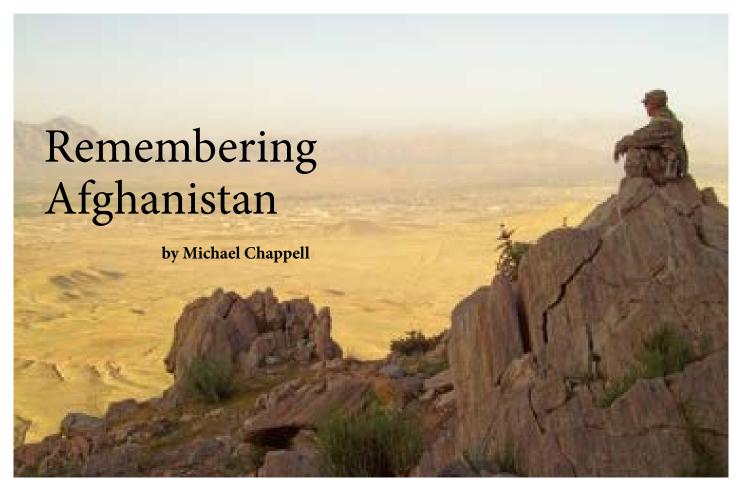
In addition to taking over the Ramble, I myself worked pretty hard with her on her story, getting it all in order until she wrote herself into the light and the realization that something she had for many years believed was a dream of a wonderful and improbable adventure was in fact a memory... a memory which in the last few months has become sharp and clear in a bout of writing. As somebody ... maybe Robert Frost ... said, we write in order to learn what we think. And having learned what we think we just might want to think again. This can go on forever, and then you die or run out of room. Do I need to rag on a little longer, or is this enough hamburger helper? I'm getting hungry, so I think I will have a glass of wine. I never ever wanted to be an editor and when I was on the Epoch staff it was a huge labor for me just to READ the manuscripts, and I sure didn't want to edit or print them but,

shit gurl; thisiz FUN.

Did I remember to mention that the theme for our next issue is Weird Stories, Strange Tales, and Erie Episodes; or something to that effect?



I don't seem to remember you.



I spent 2008 with the US Army in Kabul, Afghanistan. I was a Lieutenant assigned to the 27th Infantry Brigade, and Platoon Leader to 28 soldiers.



Now that it's ten years later, I've been reflecting quite often on my time overseas. The good, the bad, the funny, and everything in between. We rotated between three

different missions every three days. Two of those missions were pretty relaxed while the third, patrols and convoy operations, had the



potential to get very intense. During our patrol rotation we were attacked several times, [picture 4] but thanks to our training and the bravery of the soldiers that I was serving with, we all made it back home safely.



With the other two missions we were given plenty of time to rest for our own mental health, and as a result we filled that time with various activities so we didn't go crazy. I did a lot of running, I learned how to speak Dari, and I dabbled in art. Being a 23 year old, not too long out of college, I created a couple beer pong tables (even though we weren't allowed to drink alcohol). [pictures 5,6,7] I designed the first table to resemble what we affectionately called "Jingle Trucks," Central Asia's very colorful version of a tractor trailer.





The second table you see I created for an Air Force friend for her birthday, and had my interpreters get me some shellac to seal in the design I drew with sharpie. I left it outside to dry overnight because it smelled so badly, and

when I went out to check on it the next morning the table was gone.

Camp Phoenix, where we lived, was shared with several other countries. Since we lived right next to the French, I thought they had stolen the table as a prank. I was so angry, I walked up and down the rows of b-huts looking for the table, ready to start a fight. After about 20 minutes of searching with no success I returned to my own b-hut, fuming, and saw one of our Platoon Sergeants walking by.

I asked if he had seen who took my table and he simply pointed above my head. Some of the Soldiers from my company had placed the table on top of the roof of my b-hut.

picture 8] Relieved that the French hadn't stolen it, I laughed out loud when I saw it and replied, "I'm not even mad anymore, that's pretty funny!" For ten years, I was never, truly certain of who put it up there. I shared this story on social media recently as I was reminiscing, and the jokesters admitted to the prank.



Along with our training, and the traumatic events that we lived through together, the downtime we shared helped us to cope mentally. We formed a brotherhood that was able to withstand a war, and the past 10 years.

I wouldn't trade that for anything.



Michael Chappell, author Husband, Father, Son, Friend, Captain, United States Army



The woman who wore my hat

by Georgia E. Warren

Remembering Paris

I applied for and received my passport as a present to myself in 1972. I had the money for the passport, but certainly not money enough to travel anywhere interesting. The passport became my personal ticket to daydream about places I wanted to visit. I wanted to visit Greece and to stand in the center of the stage at Epidaurus. I wanted to visit Stonehenge. I wanted to someday go to Hong Kong.

Three years later in the winter of 1975 or maybe even early in 1976, I received an envelope addressed to "Georga Cunningham, Center Square, New York." The envelope got to me, somehow, although my name was spelled incorrectly, (there is only one "n" in our Cuningham) I lived in "Central Square," (the address said "Center Square,") plus there was no zip code on it. It was post marked from either Illinois or Indiana; it was hard to read. The battered envelope looked like it had been to several post offices before it finally reached me. There was a handwritten note in the envelope. A picture of a woman with the Eiffel Tower in the background was inside the folded note. I read the note before I looked closely at the picture. I remember every word: "So sorry this took so long to get to you. We had so many rolls of film we didn't get this developed until a couple of weeks ago and then I had to hunt in the bottom of the handbag I had in Paris to find your address. I spilled some makeup on your paper, I hope I got the address right."

I looked more closely at the picture. My head got dizzy and I was so disoriented I had to sit down. The woman surely looked a lot like me, I even owned a hat the same as the one she was wearing. In this moment, as I looked at this photo my world turned upside down. In a very short time one memory came back to me. One memory with hundreds of little incidents inside of this one memory. I remembered Paris. I remembered four days I

spent in Paris with my brother Freddy.

My mind flashed back and forth remembering a trip to Paris and looking over and over again at the pho-



to in my hand. The problem was *that hat:* it was just like mine even to the hat band that matched my jacket. But I was also sure I HAD NEVER BEEN TO PARIS.

Was that possibly a photo of me in front of the Eifel Tower?

Or was the memory only from a vivid dream I had and forgot?

I am a vivid dreamer. I always have been. My vivid dreams are rare, but they include realistic details, streets, people, colors, even the feeling of sand, dirt, pavement, or cobblestones under my feet. In my most vivid dreams sometimes I awake with aches in my legs from taking long walks. But in dreams I am never able to read nor can I smell.

The thought that Paris was a dream made me a little steadier. I convinced myself that I received the picture of the lady in front of the Eiffel Tower by mistake, it must have triggered the memory of the dream.

I never spoke about the picture and note to anyone. But I didn't throw them away. I put them in my safe deposit box along with some other trinkets that I had collected. Sometimes when I was at the bank to cash my paycheck, I would open the safe deposit box to stare at that picture and read again the note still protected in its battered envelope. In this isolated room I would let myself remember the places, people, scents, and the sunsets of Paris, not caring at all that it had to be a dream.

An Invitation to Paris, France

It was September 1975, late at night and I was on the phone with my brother Freddy. He was in Paris during his Grand Tour of Europe and England. It was probably around 6:30 or so in the evening in Paris. "There is a round trip ticket waiting for you at Hancock Airport for Paris. It's for 11:00 A.M. your time today. Pack enough for a few days. I'll meet you at the Paris TWA terminal." I don't remember if he even said anything else. He was like that.

I laid down on my bed not sleeping but waited until it was late enough to wake my mother and tell her about the call and that I was going to go.

She was happy for me and helped me pull a few things together. She was 66 years old but still working full time. She left me at the airport on her way to work with three and a half hours to spare. I told her before she drove away: "The next time you hear from me I will be with Freddy and we will be calling from Paris France." She smiled.

My Brother Freddy

Freddy was very talented and intelligent, you might have called him a genius. When he was an adult he lived in New York City and did some stage acting, TV commercials and was the man modeling on Simplicity pattern envelopes. He did oil paintings. He once wrote a movie script that was produced and released nationally. For his day-job he was a librarian in Brooklyn. Freddy seemed to do and know everything and had interesting and some very famous friends.

Beyond everything my brother was kind, considerate and funny.

His name was really George, but we all called him Freddy. He was the only Roman Catholic in our family. He had great respect for Mother Ann Seton and the work she did with Lepers. Mother Ann Seton lived part of her

life in New York City. When my brother found out that she was being considered for Sainthood and the church needed part of their evidence for sainthood from her life in New York, my brother was inspired to help. He was an excellent writer, especially of proposals and formal papers. This was a perfect project for him.



His work in New York helped make Ann Seton become a saint. He was invited to Rome for the canonization celebration. He immediately decided to go. Not only go, but to make the "Grand Tour" of Europe (and England) along with the trip to the Vatican. I think he was gone for months, maybe most of the year.

My Dream Vacation in Paris

Connecting from Syracuse to the big TWA airplane at John F. Kennedy Airport went without a hitch. Flying was still pretty classy in those days. I was almost thirty years old, I had a drink or two, decent meals, and plenty of room to stretch out and sleep. I don't remember how long the flight lasted; I slept most of the time. While I was awake I was brushing up on the French I took in college.

First day: When Freddy said he'd be some place he always was, and on time. He was waiting for me with a big sign saying "Georgia," just like they did in the movies. He was ready to take me to the flat that he had rented for me to stay. We took the Metro. Now I was really getting excited. He had gotten to Paris just a week or two before, he knew the right train to get on, and his French was impeccable. I might have noticed that this should be impossible; but, heck he was Freddy, he was a genius, so I didn't think about it at all.

We ended up in a part of the city called Montmartre. It is traditionally the art part of the city, where some of my favorite artists had lived and painted: Pablo Picasso, Vincent Van Gogh, Matisse, and Toulouse-Lautrec were just a few. So of course Montmartre was where we stayed. These few days in this area would have cost my Freddy, a fortune. When I suggested that my trip was costing him too much money, he said that me he had also been to Monte Carlo and won a lot of money. He said that he never before had enough money to give me a big present, but now he did and this was it.

The flat in Montmartre was a walk-up in a brick building that looked like it was covered in white frosting. It was a long and narrow flat. First when you walked in was the kitchen with a small eating table at the end, and on the table was a vase with Sun Flowers in it. Looking back with forty some years behind me, Freddy must have put the sunflowers on the table because of my fondness for Van Gogh.

After the kitchen there was a living room and beyond that a tiny bathroom and bedrooms. In the living room was a rope we pulled on and a ladder came down. We climbed up and sat on the roof.

Oh my goodness what a sight from the roof. I said to Freddy. "They sure don't call Paris the 'City of Lights' for no reason."



Of course "Doctor Freddy" reminded me "Ville des Lumières" meant "City of Enlightenment," not "City of Lights" but from a rooftop in Montmartre when the sun went down that city was something so bright and so special and so red that it could easily fit into any painting or a dream.

I certainly could understand why my brother wanted me to go to the apartment before we did anything else.

The four days went by fast. We went everywhere by the Metro or by foot, mostly by foot. Freddy was a walker. His home was New York City. In New York City... you walk.

Second Day:
We went to some antique shops. Most of them were down a few steps from the street. He bought a painting in one shop. It was a small panting of a man's face, very dark, very dirty, and, I thought at the time: expensive.



I myself bought the painting we are using for the cover of

this magazine from R. Saminora, who was painting on the banks of the Seine River. I remember him distinctly. All the other artists were dressed like imitations of 19th century painters. He wore jeans, a t-shirt, and red suspenders (and NO beret). Freddy told me Saminora probably had a dozen of these paintings almost finished under his chair and finished them in front of customers like me. I didn't care: it was rainy in the picture and there had been a rainy, foggy, mist early that morning and in my mind it was exactly what I wanted, what I was experiencing.



The other thing he had to show me that day was Le Dome Cafe (108 Boulevard du Montparnasse). He said it was Hemingway's favorite spot to talk with other writers. We would have coffee there.

Well, we didn't. It was jammed with tourists. Freddy said he knew another cafe just a few blocks away. He knew about this cafe, here in a city he'd never vsited until a week or two before.

This was going to be a long walk. It didn't matter. I was with my big brother Freddy and we had never in our adult life had time to talk like this. It was just wonderful. He talked about meeting Pope Paul VI. He talked about his job. He told me about some of the things he was writing, and he listened to me. He truly listened to me. He even asked me about my last days at Kent State. He wasn't home when I came back suddenly from graduate school in 1970. Nobody ever talked to me about what it was like to witness the shooting there. Now in 1975 somebody was talking to me and asking me about my experience.

The third day: We visited a church Freddy really liked in Montmartre: Sacré-Cœur Basilica. It had beautiful art and wasn't a "touristy" place according to Freddy. That night we went to the Moulin Rouge. I could have stayed just in Montmartre for months and never see all the wonders just in this one section of the city.

The fourth day: I wanted to visit some famous places, including the Eiffel Tower. Freddy did NOT want to go there with me nor to the Arc de Triumph nor Notre Dame Cathedral. I took a day to myself looking at all the touristy stuff. A couple from the mid-



west U.S. were at the Eiffel Tower with their camera and offered to take my picture. I was thrilled, I gave them my home address and they said they would send it when they got home.

When I got back from my "Tourist Day" Freddy was slicing long fresh loaves of bread, Brie de Meaux, Roquefort, and Chèvre (Goat) cheese and putting it all on elegant porcelain plates. Plus there were some bottles of very nice wine and a pot of coffee.

I found the photo of Andy Warhol and Liza Minelli on line while writing this. It is titled: "from October, 1975 at a party in Paris." In the background of the photo is Paul Raffo, my brother's partner. Andy Warhol, had flown in JUST for the evening, he arrived with Liza Minelli. I had met him at "Club 54," with Freddy, when I was a graduate student doing a work project in New York City. I met and got to knew Liza well when I was rehearsing for a play in New York that was never produced. One night after rehearsal, as a lark, we sang together, at Club 54. She was a good friend of both Andy Warhol and my brother.

Robert Saminora, the artist who created the painting I bought along the Seine River, was invited. He was so nicely dressed, that Freddy had to tell me who he was. Some people came and went quickly. For a while it was crowded. The priest from Sacré-Cœur Basilica stopped in. I had never seen Freddy as relaxed and happy as he was that evening.

Liza Minelli and I talked about how different our lives had become. We drank wine together, and late in the evening we sang together (*She told me* she came there for that one evening just to see me). It was so natural singing and talking: not like a dream.

Early the next morning it was time to leave. Four days in Paris and with Freddy went by slowly and quickly at the same time. So much had been jammed into these days. Now I was going to fly back fly back to Syracuse, NY. Freddy asked if I would mind if he tucked his little painting into the back of my painting so I could take it home with me; he would get it when he came back. I said okay and we tucked it under the brown paper backing on my painting, then taped the paper back. He rode the Metro with me to the airport and waited until I was ready to go on board.

On the trip home I relived all the things I did and recalled the friends my brother invited to the get-together at the apartment, the Moulin Rouge, and just everything we did in this amazing city.

As I sat in the airplane I remembered the feel of the sidewalks under my feet, brushing up against other people, so many people, going places. Some tourists, some just people coming and going to jobs and shops, people in the evenings, dressed up and busy laughing and talking. All of this bustling around and I was right there with them.

I still remember the smell of the rain in Paris. The fumes from cars, the smells of baked bread, coffee, all the smells of Paris faded away in the rain... except for the flowers. There were flowers in windows, there were street vendors selling flowers. Even along the streets you would see flower boxes outside of stores. The misty rain during my days in Paris and the sweet smell of the flowers have stayed with me over the years. I have never remembered smells from a dream, yet even looking at my painting gives me a sensory memory of Paris in the rain.

My Dream Vacation was over

I got home and my brother Jim was there. He was furious with me for going away. He began to yell at me. I told him I'd forgotten to tell him. (I didn't forget, I knew he would have not wanted me to do anything like that on the spur of the moment). It should not have made any difference. My mother was not old or feeble, she was still working, and nothing bad had happened. We had called her when I got to Paris. She was happy the flight went so well and that Freddy and I were together.

But Jim still just yelled and yelled. It was terrible. I was never been good at handling it when he yelled at me. I would do anything he wanted me to if he would just stop. When I was a little kid I would put my hands over my ears and pretend I couldn't hear him. This time I just couldn't pretend.

I told him I would never go anywhere again, if he would just stop yelling at me.

I told him I would never talk about it again, if he would just stop, I would do anything if he would just stop yelling at me.

Paris was over and I forgot about the phone call from Freddy and the trip.
It stopped.

Nobody ever said: "You did go to Paris." Nobody ever said: "You never went to Paris." Not even Freddy.

I had my painting. I believed Freddy sent it back to me as a gift from Paris. His painting was hidden in the back of my painting and he did take it out when he came back to the US.

When I thought about what I decided was a dream I blamed it all on looking at pictures in books, my French classes in college. I blamed it on Freddy telling me about his Grand Tour of Europe and England. I wasn't there.

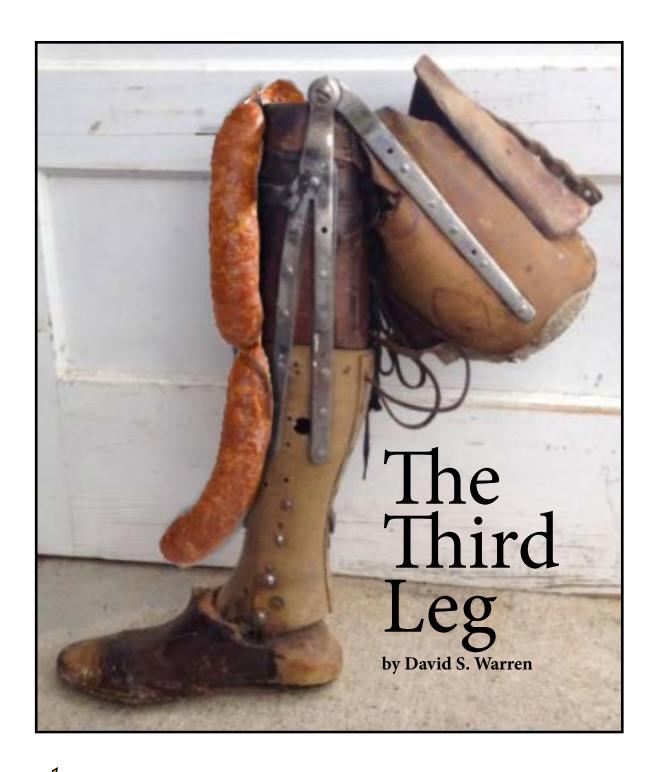
I wasn't a person who went places. I never would be.

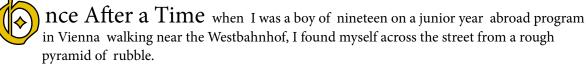
In 2011 my HSBC bank branch was closed. I no longer had a safe deposit box. I emptied some little treasures I kept there, the picture in the envelope was one of them. The picture of the lady in front of the Eiffel Tower had faded over 36 years. It could have been any youngish woman and certainly it did not look like the old woman I had become. I don't know what happened to the picture or note after that. I might have scanned it and it might be the picture at the beginning of this story, I am not sure. Maybe I just copied it from somewhere because I had a hat just like that one.

One day I found my passport in an old overnight bag. It was one of those hard cases that ladies used to take on trips. It was red plastic faux leather, I took the passport out of the case and threw it away. I didn't want to see that in forty years there may have never been a single stamp in my "passport to daydream."



Some things
I remember, but
just don't recall them.





Near the top of this ruin, the tail section of a small airplane protruded ... as if nobody had noticed it yet and maybe the pilot was still in the cockpit. This was twenty years or more since World War Two had ended.

I stopped short and stared at the plane.

"Waran gooken zee?" (or something like that) demanded a man with stiffly outstanding yellow hair a suddenly loomed between me and the ruins.

What was I looking at?

I glanced at his grey face, and I didn't rightly know what I was looking at, so I moved on.

Before that year in Europe I barely knew WW2 from WW1, Austria from Australia, or Vienna from Vietnam.

But I did know the world of fly fishing fairly well: I knew that since the Korean war, the Communists had cut off the export of bamboo from their Bay of Tonkin area, which was important to the world of fly-fishers because the only really suitable bamboo for the crafting of traditional, high-performance fly-rods came from Tonkin, and the solid fiberglass rods of the time did not have the resilience, the spine, and the delicacy of six sections of split Tonkin bamboo wrapped and glued together by a wizard of rods. You don't need to know all that yourself, but it is the deep context of the story I will tell here: not a story for the weak of stomach, and that is not because any trout were slaughtered in the living of it.

I came to Europe knowing also that the eastern Alps are the native territory of the Brown Trout: the fish which, if trout fishing is a religion, is the sacrament, the symbol, or the god or goddess - depending on your religio-piscatoral sect. As I would learn that year, the most extreme cults of fly fishing, like any religion, can be a cover for something very dark.

If I had not been more or less a member of the cult myself, none of the story I am about to tell would have happened, and I wouldn't have been able to make this stuff up.

I had been prepared for the fishing vocation by my father who, after he was twelve years old, had no father to guide him, and for whom trout fishing was about family, also by my mother's father, who was never in the military, but for whom fishing was a blood sport as serious as battle itself, and especially by my grandfather's friend Doctor Waldo Howe, who lost both legs serving as a medic during World War One and had afterwards pretty much forsaken his medical practice in favor of professional fishing with a intense devotion and a technical sophistication that he might otherwise have devoted to medicine, eventually becoming the North American fly casting champion and writing for outdoor magazines.

Doc Howe taught me respect for fish, along with the gospel of Fine and Far Off: long lines, small flies, light

leaders, and a stealthy approach - respectful of the fact that trout have an oversized optical lobe to their brains and, aided also by the lens effect of water, have super-human vision, seeing us when we can not see them.

I traveled from the states with my fishing vest containing a box of my home-tied dry, a reel of Cortland

333 double-tapered, floating line and a miniature "spy camera" from the Johnson Smith Novelty Compny with two rolls of film ... planning then to buy an Austrian fly



rod in Vienna, and to ask the tackle dealer where I should go to find some legendary and hallowed trout water.

What I would later happen into - as I have already suggested and as will become obvious - was unholy to say the least.

Year of the Bear

On the way to Vienna I got to be friends with John Irving - a fellow student who would later publish twelve or maybe seventeen novels none of which would be ghost-written by me, despite what you may have heard or read. Irving knew already that he was THE John Irving, and he knew his literary predecessors, including Hemingway... all the way from trout fishing to bull fighting. I hadn't read all that stuff. Unhappily, I was a philosophy major.

On that train or bus, the young Irving asked what had been the most interesting year of my life so far. I said it was the year before, when I had been in Alaska ... where once I was sleeping in a wilderness cabin and a bear tried to break in. I will tell you about it sometime, or maybe I already did. I often do. Good stories like that don't happen all that often. Irving may play it down, but everybody knows he has always had a thing for bears. So we talked Bears. And he told me about the very large South American rodent that he and his high-school buddies had mailordered on speculation that it could become the school mascot. As you can imagine, the animal got loose and it ended badly, though I don't remember exactly how. Ask Irving. He has a Facebook page.

By the time February came we had done a lot more

traveling together with our friend Eric Ross, and had decided to get motorcycles which we would ride to Pamplona the following summer for the Running of the Bulls, as in *The Sun Also Rises*, which I had not read.

Early in March before I got my motorcycle, Irving got his: a wasp-waisted Yugoslavian Jawa. Irving was no trout fishing cultist, but, knowing the lore, volunteered to drive to the mountain trout stream as an observer.

I used to think I remembered that the Jawa had a side car in which I rode, but old Irving says it had no such feature, and the picture I took of him with my spy camera, sitting on the Jawa doesn't show it, so I guess he is right.



The truth is in the details, but the details are a cloud around everything. Let's just try to make it through.



Into the Cloud

One early Spring afternoon we rode the Jawa to a back street somewhere between the inner and outer Ring Strassen of Vienna to "Die Brüdern Forellen Fish Fang Gesellschaft" meaning "The Trout Brothers Fishing Business" as "Fish Fang" is literally "Fish Catching"......rather than "Fang of the Fish" as it might seem. I mention that because language eventually became a problem as things went.

The Fish Fang shop sign hung from a three-dimensional wooden trout with a high forehead like that of a whale. It had the remains old paint colors, and watchful eyes on both sides.

We passed under that baroque trout and through the door into a haze of smoke which smelled as much like sausage as like tobacco. Weird sausage. Never will I forget that smell.

Through that haze I saw a few tubular rod cases covered in green felt and hanging by leather straps from chamois-horn racks. I noticed fly reels along with half a dozen meerschaum pipes in the glass cabinet under the counter.



But I did not at first notice the man with a overhanging moustache and braid-trimmed jacket... until he rapped a pipe on the counter: three sharp raps.

At that signal, the twin of his moustash poked through the curtains from the back room and the other trout brother stepped into the room.



"Heil Peter", said one of the invisible mouths.

I knew enough German language and culture by this time to understood that he was not calling either of us Peter or hailing us as their leader: but that "Heil Peter" refers to the proto-baptist fisherman-saint of the Jesus story, and is the traditional Austrian greeting when one fisherman encounters another.

"Guten Tag, Gruss Gott." I gave them back, speaking German 101 for the two of us boys. My German wasn't exactly a clear, flowing stream, but my accent was good enough that I was often mistaken for a borderline Hungarian who understood German much better than I really did, so (as in what followed here) people were likely to say things I scarcely understood.

I was able to explain clearly enough, or so I

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THOUGHT, that I had come to buy a fly rod and to get their recommendation for a place I could lease a leg of trout stream, Leg, (literally "beim" in German) being, I thought, the equivalent of our "stretch" or "leg" or the more technical British " "beat" in trout water terms rather than the literal translation of "beat" which would be "shlag", which as a VERB is literal translation of to beat, but which, as a NOUN, I knew, imeans "whipped cream" in German - as in "cafe mit shlag obers": Coffee with whipped cream globs; Although in other situations, to make it more confusing "ober" means waiter.

After I tried to say that we wanted to hire or rent or lease a leg on a river somewhere, the Brothers Trout checked their reflections in each other, then unanimously recommended we make the expedition to Waidhoffen an Der Ybbs, which they assured us would be sehr rewarding. They would arrange the booking.

I agreed, and we went on to choosing a rod.

There wasn't all that much of a choice on the racks...... but I'm sure now that if the Forellen Brudern had actually thought I was serious about fishing instead of something quite other, they could have brought out a decent, pre-war rod, rather than selling me the limpest worm pole I would ever own.

Heavy Breathing

A few days before Irving and I headed off to Waidhoffen a half dozen of us boys gathered in Marco Walshock's room near the Graben. The Graben, or "Grave" is at the

dead center of the old walled city, where thousands of the Great Black Plague dead were buried

... and where in later times a monument to the dead was erected: a stone tower carved in deep relief so that it looked like it consisted only of struggling bod-



ies climbing each other and in a story I once wrote Irving stripped naked and climbed the tower. I forget now what was or is at the top, but to make one thing clear: the alleged Irving action just plain did NOT happen, and I am

sorry about any confusion or embarrassment I may have caused myself.

So we boys sat and stood around the stove in the room Marco rented in the apartment of a expatriated Hungarian countess whose family hunting trophy mounts lined the hall way. Marco was allowed to use the bathroom in the hall, to make tea in the Graphin's kitchen, and he could heat his room by feeding coins into the stove there.

We had cognac in our tea and we smoked up a thick smudge with Austrian national brand cigarettes. We were bored AND excited.

Being bored and excited at the same time is hard to endure without help, but in those days drugs other than booze and tobacco were not so common among college kids. That doesn't mean we were resistant to self-harm for higher purposes. We had our ways.

That particular evening somebody suggested we try the hyperventilation thing: You bend over with hands on knees, breathe way too much and too fast for a minute or so, then stand up and hold your breath while someone wraps his arms around your chest from behind and squeezesuntil you pass out, maybe have a dream or a near death experience, or maybe just fall and hit your head on the stove.

I can't remember how it went for me. The other guy is supposed to let you down easy. Could be I'm the one who hit his head on the stove. I don't remember who was my hugger nor do I recall any visions or dreams, but I do remember that before or after me, it was Eric Ross who gave John the big squeeze and eased him to the floor.... where John flopped like a carp a couple of times then stood up and said something that sounded like "French Fries", but could I suppose have been Fish Fang.... or pretty much anything... then he went to the door.

By the time we asked where he was going, the door had already closed behind him.

A half hour or so later John came back with a cut over one eye-brow.

His upper lip was swollen stiff.

Talking from only the lower part of his face, he seemed to be saying he had been set upon by a bunch of people who had stolen his leg...... and he insisted that we had to go back with him to wherever and deal with those guys.

The leg allegation didn't make much sense, and we were not really aching for a fight, but several of us went along with Irving, hoping not to find the guys who had assaulted him.

Luckily we didn't.

We went home to each his own; and I didn't hear anything more about the events of that night until after our trip to Waidhofen.

Saddle the Chickens We're Riding Out!

So as we used to say, saddle the chickens, Wir ritten aus!

The two of us in G.I. surplus field-jackets, me on the rear saddle, sling-bag and rod case over my shoulder; we invaded Neider Ostereich. Here on the page you see the photo I took with the "spy camera" that I had brought along to Europe, something from the Johnson Smith novelty catalog that made everything look like a grainy still from an old documentary movie. I wish I had brought along a few more rolls of tiny film.

If I had taken more pictures on that trip they would not show that Lower Austria hadn't suffered a lot of war damage.

Old men with scythes mowed the road-side ditches. They or someone, had already cleared brush and picked up all the sticks from under the well spaced forest trees, where the grass grew and was now being cropped by rust-colored deer.

The village of Waidhoffen at that time was much smaller than it appears to be from a current Google Earth fly- over. A town square, a few onion domes, the small castle inn where we had reservations.



We checked into the castle and slept in a stone chamber beside the river without vowels: the chyrglng Ybbs.



The next morning we followed directions given us by the Fish Fang Brüdern to the home of the fellow they had referred to as the Mayor (or maybe they said "Major") from whom we were to pick up the Fish Fang permit.

The man who opened the mayor's door had a moustache so much like the Fang Bruder's moustaches that I didn't know whether he was actually one of them, or a third man related only by moustache. It seemed all very cartoonish. Still does.

"Nur Ein Rod?" Only one rod? he says. I supposed he wanted to emphasize that we had a permit for only one rod. He scowled at the two of us and gave me a map showing our leg, or beat, or stretch of the river that day: from a bridge right in the center of town, to a country Inn a dozen bends and maybe a kilometer upstream.

From the bridge, we could see the ringed dimples made by several trout rising out in the main drift and, directly under us, two grayling rippling in the bridge shadow. I had never seen a grayling before. They are related to trout and but look like a flying fish or a Disney invention. Holy Trout!

It was shining, it was lovely; and to the sound of music unheard, I rigged up with a Light Hendrickson dry fly, then, flipping line off my reel, walked right into the water up to my knees....no hip boots or waders. I didn't use waders or hip boots back in the U. S either, but the streams back in the upstate New York were not fifty percent glacial melt water either. No fish flew at my fly in that bridge pool, where they were probably made shy by the clumsy approaches of casual tourist-fishers.

Having fished around a few bends... after an hour, or maybe it was three... I was in my usual deep state of concentration when fishing, now well over my knees in

a long slow run, occasionally bringing in and releasing a nine or ten inch Brown Trout ... more often an American Rainbow Trout.... a surprise to me, not knowing at the time that Ernest Hemingway had introduced Rainbow Trout to almost every suitable territory he visited, from Kilimanjaro to Australia and Europe.

From shore, using the spy camera, John photographed me casting. The photos are lost, but anyway, the poor resolution and my distance from the camera make it so you couldn't tell whether I was standing in a river casting or kneeling on a road, trying to wave down a ride.

The last of the pictures showed me in the water nearly up to my boneless parts. Numb in the legs as I was....you could just about have amputated one of them without me noticing.

I do remember the mayor - or the major - as he passed us on the other side of the stream. Scowling still.

I don't remember old Irving calling from behind me.

He says that finally got my attention by catching my backcast and holding on until I turned and then he pulled me in. I barely remember that at all.

I know I was dumb and stiff, standing there. He says he had to take the rod and wind the line back on the reel for me. I remember being momentarily puzzled by the question of why he was handing me the rod, but I did manage to slog after him across a meadow to the Inn beside the road. We sat at a table in the afternoon sun.

We probably ordered coffee and something to eat. Irving has said we gave them some trout I had caught and they fried them up us. Might be a fish story. I didn't even have a creel, and would not have been bringing fish back to the castle for the night. I hope we had hot goulash, because my pants were wet and I couild use some right now, with lots ofd smoked paprika.

Back at the castle I changed into dry clothes, wrapped myseldf in one of those foot-thick down comforters then passed out in a chair..

Next day, we headed back to Vienna by an improvised, upstream route, cutting over a high pass to get to the Danube valley.

A half an hour out we asked directions of some guys fishing at a bridge. They pointed toward the pass, but invited us to climb off and go at the stream, because the owner was gone and would be away for three days. We thanked them for the information, but continued on and up.

Before topping the pass we drove through a village where most of the people, (or at least a good percentage of those walking along the road) were blind or leading the blind, or both.

Irving brought up the village of the blind and the night of the hyperventilations, one Friday a week or two after the Waidhoffen trip, we went (as we often did) to the Deutches Weinhaus for steak and eggs.

Das Deutches Weinhaus

The Detuches Weinhaus had more stories below ground than it did above: basements under wine kellers, over root cellars over dungeons, over graves.....lined with the stones abandoned city walls. Eric Ross, Mr. Irving, and I went there regularly on Fridays for the closest we could get to an American truck driver special diner breakfast, for supper. Steak and eggs. "Steak mit eier." On the Friday after our return from Waidhoffen, we finished our Steak mit eier on the street level of the Weinhaus, and then went down to drink beer in the first kellar down.

We sat a few benches away from a man talking to his beer mug. He had spiky blond hair and a starkly grey face. I wouldn't necessarily suggest he was the same man who had loomed up in front of me out by the West Bahnofff, but he was a dead ringer.

After a couple of chugs from his mug Eric popped back up and went off to piss, or worse. We were both of us frequent shitters, ever since that bad meal aboard the Orient Express. Irving had contracted the same weird bug at the same time, but was apparently cured of it by nearly dying of typhus in Greece. Or was it Typhoid Fever?

Eric was gone for longer than whatever he did in the bathroom usually took.....but Eric seldom went anywhere at all without taking a side-trip.

When Irving and I had just about finished the pitcher of beer, Eric reappeared: face flushed and nostrils flaring.

He had gone all the way to the last basement, he said....and down there he saw a bar boy sitting in the corner and YANKING HIS WANGER! Eric pronounced that very loudly, as you can see.

I looked around a bit embarrassed, and the grey face man straightened up, yelling: "STOP LOOKING AT MEINE MUTTER".

We didn't want to look at his invisible mother anyway, and John said that since Eric couldn't even go to the bathroom without ending up in the fucking sewer... he himself would go get the pitcher filled.....but we went with him..... and so we got up, got that next pitcher, and took it down another level into the deep Deutches Winehouse digs.

Damn, it was loud down there with the stone echoing voices and the thump of mugs on oak.

At some point John wondered loudly if I remembered the VILLAGE OF THE BLIND we had driven throughon our way home from Waidhofen? And of course I did.

Did I remember that one bunch of blinden being led by a one-legged man? THE FUCKING HALT LEADING THE FUCKING BLIND?

No, I didn't remember that, though maybe I do now.

......and I then that or something caused me myself to wonder aloud..... what was had he been mumbling that night at Marco's...... about some guys STEALING HIS LEG?

He didn't remember then what he had been mumbling on that other muddled evening, but from what he shouted out that night deep in the Deutches Weinhaus, I managed to gather a fairly detailed account.

So the first thing he recalled of that adventure: he was standing under the Forellen Brüdern shop sign with its wooden fish, dangling.

The shop lights were on low and Irving could not see inside very well, but he could have noticed the faintest white, near glow, of the meerschaum pipes on the counter.

He stood for a moment under the sign looking all around, down, and up, wondering how he got there.

While looking up, Irving noticed the hairline crack outlining a door on the back of the wooden fish, and a small hole that a finger or something like a cane tip would fit.

Irving had a finger, but the hole was eight feet up, and he had no cane.

In the wounded city of Vienna at that time it was not difficult to find a cane or a crutch.

Irving ran into a Bier Haus he had passed down the

street and found a guy sitting with his cane and a mug of beer. Approaching the table with a pretend limp, he put five bucks or so worth of loose groshen on the table and asked if he could rent the cane for fumpf minuten, in order zum Wasser Kloset um to farhen. Something like that. Sure it was a lie, if it was even comprehensible to a German speaker. After Irving agreed to first use the cane to fetch the man another beer, he did that and went back to the shop.

The door was easy enough to open using the slightly crooked handle of the rental cane. A large key hung on the inside of the door itself.

He flipped it off, caught it, closed the fish door, and let himself into the shop ... still not knowing why he was there, and with no intention he could identify, but with nothing more than a sort of bodily knowledge, or maybe it was just narrative sense - he entered.

The air was thick as if that peculiar sausage tobacco smell were visible. Something compelled him past the pipe-laden counter, and under the chamois horn racks, through the curtain to the back room, where there was only a night light. He felt his way along the wall to a closet where he found two wooden legs, both of them left legs with a knee joint. When he bent the leg, he could look into the hollow of the lower leg, or he could if he had a lighter or something, and maybe he did, but just then he heard the front door open and close. to the curtain, still holding the leg, he saw that one of the brothers, and that he was going to come right through to the back no doubt already suspicious since Irving had left the key in the door, as Old Irving then realized..so he waited until the last moment, and, head down so he would not be recognized, burst low through the curtains, leg and cane under one arm, bowling past the Fish Fang Brüdern.

He ran for a few blocks and ducked into the bier haus where he had rented the cane. He returned the cane with dankes, then sat at a rear table trying to hide the stolen leg between his own two.

But of course you can't run into a bar carrying an extra leg without being noticed ... in this case by two drunks who had been sitting at the bar and facing the door when he dodged in .

After some discussion they went to Irving's table and demanded to see his third leg. .

"Only meine Frau mienem third leg sehen kan" he once told me that he said to those guys, although recently he asked me if he had ever said that. How do I know?

Maybe he DID say that and maybe he should have avoided the wisecrack, because the drunks were not amused. and they convinced themselves that he had stolen the leg off a poor organ grinder.

One of them tried to wrestle the leg away from Irving, so John dropped the leg and threw that guy on his back, but then the other guy was on him and while Irving dealt with him, the first guy ran off with the leg, then some more guys came off the bar..... so that's when he got out of there made his way back to Marco's place on the Graben to collect us. And you know how THAT went.

Enough About Sausage

Irving never got to see what was in either of the hollow legs at the Fish Fang shop, but it was clear enough to him already, if not also to you, that the whole Fang Bruders business was a smuggling operation based on the sympathy people have for obvious war veterans and the resulting lack of scrutiny they got in customs. It seems that by that time ... the early sixties ... there was getting to be a shortage of one-legged war vets. So ... gratuitous amputations.

It is chillingly to think that if Irving had not hauled me out of the Ybbs that day when I had been standing numbed up to my nuts in the river... if I had instead followed the "Mayor" up the Ybbs, or stopped in at Blindenstadt maybe, I would have been on my way to a hollow leg, and a whole other career. I Could have written a whole book about it.

But my strongest memory of all this ... more than the trout of the Ybbs or or even the airplane embedded in the pyramid of rubble, is not even an image so to speak, but a smell: the very strange sausage smell in that Fish Fang shop. I suppose hashish is what was smuggling from the east but

I cannot help but think about what went in the other direction

and how they disposed of the amputated legs?

But you know what I am thinking, so that is enough about sausage.

People who knew me before the war, don't remember me until I do my Elvis impression.



Vertical Before Dawn Strips the East

Crows caw unseen in the sticks of woods, songbirds gone south, my Saint Anthony statue glows in the dark so I can find him and somewhere in the broken day of London my sister

fastens her mouth on coffee on a break from management at the children's hospital, tosses her tuna-mayo to doves in the stone park. Trout fattened on our brother's

ashes in a small lake in the Poconos blow their clearstreamed cantus firmus* through the waters, the gills' respiratory surface a layer one cell thick.

Unsure of a precise destination, a walker stops to ask directions to the city center. A black cab speeds toward Admissions. My sister's limbs coordinate, to point in the direction

the man came from. Not by that estuary but near a river's source, I live in a town of frank and friendly talk where no one knew my brother. The planet effervesces

us; few live where we were born. Amid the northern quiet of an inland stateside college town before the students wake, I see children playing what we'd be when we grew up.

Blue-eyed and red-tempered, Tommy said a firetruck. He was four or five, the decade Dick and Jane. Fireman his siblings yelled, fireman. So he said he'd be a statue.

Mary Gilliland mg24@cornell.edu

This poem first appeared in Stand magazine (2006), University of Leeds

"cantus firmus" (Latin) = "fixed song" (English) = a plain chant or simple Gregorian melody having a defined form and use in church tradition; a plainsong base around which polyphonic vocalization is built



Anton Checkov

DISREMEMBRANCES OF THE RUSSIAN TWILIGHT

First Ghost:

I remember there had been a series of yellow telegrams, all signed by stationmasters, all grumpy and whimsical, and I remember the bank of indolent steam from the cab, its taste of quinine, the way it clung to my wool suit.

Second Ghost:

Not faces exactly but the applause of angels, out of synch, a louver rattling in the tailwind

when we stopped people shuddered the door open, broke apart bales of sacking, strewed it on the wet ground for traction

clambered through the freight, the bruised-orchid light, and amid crates of herring, golly, of oysters abob in a mousse of slush and seaweed

they found him resting in his coffin, shoulders hunched, dressed as if to make house calls, but unsmiling, rigid, bereft of shoes and stethoscope, and lifted him up

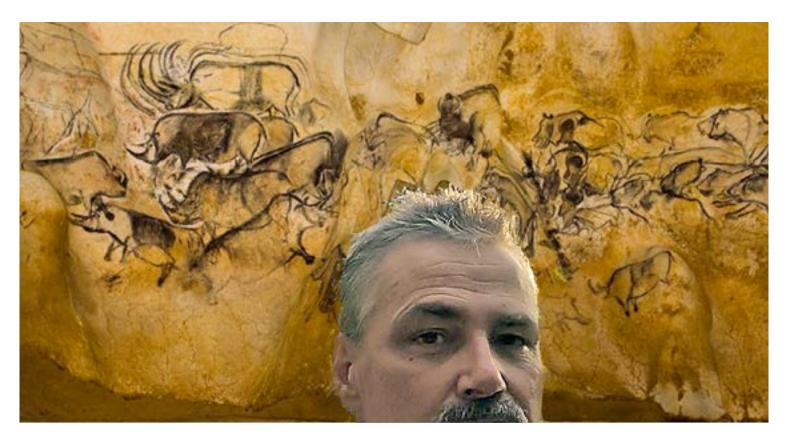
passed him

through the door in silence, to leave, as the hurt rode against them, the car lingering in liquid darkness, cold, the creak of the wheels.

Third Ghost:

I remember that as the cart jounced away I thought it would be good to bake something really special, walk through the orchard, smell the souring apples before the frost turned them to stone; it was then I heard trouble, like rocks clacking, and I knew I should rest, that it was a rest day now, forever.

Chris MacCormick



Dear Diary, 10,000 B.C.,

somewhere near Lascaux (translated from the original): Standing watch at the mouth of the cave of my ancestors, stone tools, charcoal and finger paint pots at my feet, shivering in this tattered megafauna pelt, the fire long expired and still too dark for me to finish mural outline of these two huge, flightless predator birds that made a crunchy brunch of three blood kin, Roc, Ka n Pupu – my mom.

It was majorly traumatic. Gigormous sobs with beaks like monstrous hinged arrowheads come busting out of the high grasses – the sickening sound of skulls getting cracked open like Dodo eggs.

We all ran, I dunno, I dunno. A long time.

Lucky find, this grotto. After we set fire to a sleeping bear and clubbed some huge rats to death, we pretty much had the place to ourselves and plenty to eat.

I sure do miss Mom and brothers.

Dad's gone now since I dunno, I dunno, bunch of hot and cold times ago. We were all walking along on some nasty turf and he just fell through the surface into a pit.

I mean, the ground just opened up and swallowed him. There were wolves stalking us so we had to keep walking, and we heard pops moaning and groaning down there but no way could we help him. I doubt very much he survived. He was such a good guy, a dedicated first responder, not into big game hunting (who wants to fuck with a mammoth, even a baby one? was his question whenever we ran into a herd of them); he was smart to go after the harmless but edible creatures of medium size and tasty, very able with both spear and stone axe, great storyteller. Lotta nights we were paralyzed with fear, especially if we couldn't get a fire going and he calmed us down with tales told in a gutteral language we barely understood but he was a very good mime so we always got the narrative thread - usually something about hunting or fucking or making fire. I think about that time cousin Gah was dragged off into the woods by a pack of jackals. Something growly like jackals anyway even if they sounded like a bunch of laughing hyenas and Gah screaming bloody murder. He was only a little one. Me and my brothers got up to fetch him and the Da grabbed us by our skins and threw us down, warning us with so many gestures and loud noises that if such things would come right into camp and grab one of us, what was gonna stop them from making a happy family meal of the whole tribe?

I feel like I failed him today. We were robbing a platypus nest – the kits are yummy – and those giant f--king birds came from out of nowhere, just ran us down and that was that for Mom and my two bro. Only reason I'm alive is my incredible cat-like reflexes and an uncanny knack for finding hiding places, like this cave. There are only seven of us now, my two sisters, who are my significant others till I can find one of those Cro-Magnon women – pretty scarce these days – my little brother, and two second cousins half-breeds, males, Cro-Magnon and Neanderthal on Dad's side of the tribe.

The Cros, twins, are peaceful but kinda dumb and prefer roots and vegetables to meats. Ever now you gotta kick their ass to get them pay attention on a hunt and gather. My back teeth are killing me – had to bang one of them to bits with a spearhead other day. Stank like old meat. And this damn dark. Gotta keep alert, tho. Wanna finish my drawings after sun-up.

Shh! – what the hell was that? Hope that barbecued bear didn't have family nearby. Man, I can't wait till this whole epoch is over and done with. Some times I wonder why we ever stood up on two feet and walked off the Savannah. Gotta go back inside. Later.

Franklin Crawford

Administrator/Writer/
Photographer
tinytowntimes.com
TinyTownTimes.com
(on FaceBook)



I am afraid we have been here before.

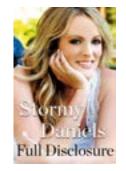


The scandal does not seem to be with Stormy, but one that is generated by a host of people that think there should be a scandal.

by Gabreal Orgrease

When I was up to page 58 in Stormy Daniels' book,

nothing much salacious had happened, but my preliminary conclusion was that if Trump ever learned to background vet people then he would have never ever have tangled with her. In short, she has more smarts, grit and class than he will ever have. I now purchase books on pre-order for political reasons,



that I want the sales to go up on the charts by my one AG-Fa (against fascism) vote.

One quality with Stormy Daniels' writing is that she has a post-DH Lawrence kind of freshness about her body, and about sex. I remarked recently how some Christians seem to think that something happened to atheists to make them that way, when the reality is that with most atheists they simply never had a life to make them feel guilty or sinful or in need of salvation. Stormy is like that with sex. One after another. Like, who cares?

For a whole world of people that have either stuck up sexual attitudes, or endured a growing up of sexual repression, or feel a need to secretly do kinky stuff, she simply does not exhibit in her prose any guilt, angst or regret.

She even does not seem to regret meeting up with Trump's dong (it is not gold gilt). Though I did read recently that she regrets having made fun of how it looks. She is more concerned about his behavior of months of leading her on about a potential but never realized appearance on The Apprentice. She relates the non-relationship as kind of on the level of being bit by a nasty cockroach in the vitals every month or so for a few years. A nuisance readily forgot once hung up on. But one that keeps calling with coy but inane nothing much to say.

The scandal does not seem to be with Stormy, but one that is generated by a host of people that think there should be a scandal. Pretty bright lady. Though I'd not go so far as to say she is writing high literature, it is worth reading for contemporary context. If she comes out with a book of sappy poetry I'll reconsider.

I experimented by reading her book on the train. When surrounded by a gaggle of chatty young preppy ladies I put it away, but otherwise I have nothing much to report for the social science.

A friend who knows about these things says the he once paid her twenty dollars for a lap dance. I asked my friend if he was participating in the Make America Horny Again Tour. This friend also says that he can pay a hooker in Key West \$100 to call my wife and say something incriminating. I'm still waiting.

In chronology, Christine Blasey Ford's recent encounter with Kavenaugh came after Stormy had written her book. There is a whole lot of reflection on the manner in which a noticeable number of males in our culture behave like little shits.

When I was younger, and lived in Maryland, we had a friend who was in the habit of crawling all the strip joints he could find in DC. Since he knew where all the good, and bad, places were I would on occasion go out with him and he would show me around. Fourteenth Street headed up from the Capital was always busy at night. What interested me though was that the closer you got to the Capital the more stunningly beautiful were the ladies of the night. Breathtaking.

My stepfather it was said, by some and not by others, spent some time in California working on set for porn movies. I always imagined that he had an important support job, like a fluffer. But growing up

pornography was what showed up in the brown envelope in the mailbox, was often black n' white, or those little eye tubes you could look in and wiggle while the naked lady danced, some exotic stuff hidden in secret places, or the Marquis de Sade, which is not recommended on my list for pre-teen readers.

I end off after reading Stormy's book much more interested about her horse stories.



Gabreal Orgrease

XXX



I will always remember him as a large boy humping watermelons.

Burn the Timeline

by Franklin Crawford

We wanted to mark the day
Of our first meeting – celebrate, honor, all that
I said: "Okay, but you know,
Our memory banks are fast retreating.
How best refresh the hour of our first greeting?"
We decided on a number – a span of time
Rich and deep and wide
One both factual – and meaningful – to our
minds.

At first I thought 'sure, that's fine' when Actually
The shit made me uneasy.

Like you get when you know

Something or someone – even a pet –
Is watching you through
the vaporous dusk
Of early evening.
(And there's nothing you can do
Because it's only you, looking at you).

Without thinking I said: "No. No!" We must not mark our days that way. Please just let today be the day Of our first meeting ... And let every hour of every one that follows, too, Be the moment of our first knowing. Otherwise, we pin our lives Like butterflies cruelly mounted and framed Under glass - it's vulgar, it's crass, it's not us! Time is a disease; these two fragile Beings that twinned make us three, we will see How terribly fleeting the hours are – Nostalgia will make cowards of us ... Now is the hour of our first meeting Hold my hand, let's burn these numbers slowly. Burn this anniversary!"

But in truth
I said none of these things
And we blew out the candles
And got back to our forgetting.

STAIN

by Daniel A. Lovell

I'd already been in bed four hours before I found out what the mattress pad was for. You don't ask too many questions about hospital beds, in general, and I didn't ask any about this one.

They let me have a laptop, and the hospital has free wifi. My assumption is those things are supposed to make up for the horror I'm sitting on right now, just barely covered by the ratty mattress pad.

To be honest, I'm not sure why I'm here. I mean, generally speaking I understand there's some degree of imminent danger when your blood pressure is roughly equivalent to your car tire pressure, but I haven't been admitted to a hospital before. I don't know what I'm supposed to expect them to do for me here that I can't do for myself.

I've been treated like a pincushion or a lab rat. I have needles and tubes stuck into me. I have wires stuck to my chest, and beeping in the hallway corresponds to my heart rate. I distinctly heard it speed up when the mattress pad slipped and I saw what was beneath.

I pee in a plastic pitcher in the bathroom. They claim they're measuring my output, but every two hours a nurse assistant comes to my room and pours the pitcher into the toilet. Nobody is in there long enough to write anything down.

Speaking of the toilet, I'm pretty certain random passersby are using my bathroom while I'm in bed. The room – it's a private room in the cardiac care unit – is set up so I cannot see the bathroom door from my bed and its mattress pad. And with the tubes and wires attached, I can't get up quickly enough to check. I'm drifting between wake and sleep; sometimes I think I'm imagining there's anyone there at all.

They brought me a cheeseburger for dinner. The alternative was a concoction they called macaroni and cheese. They brought a tiny carton of milk, some apple juice, water, and hot tea -- decaffeinated. I've been told caffeine and salt are to be avoided now, along with fats and cholesterol. They have given me a list of things I can't eat or drink anymore. Coffee is on that list, along with steak, pepperoni, bacon and sausage.

They've run a lot of tests. I have had CT scans on my brain and my guts. I've had my heart x-rayed. I've had EKGs, echocardiograms. They've drawn blood three times today. They've given me a lot of pills.

In the next room, an elderly lady can't figure out how to use the call button to summon the nurse. She has been yelling for 10 minutes.

"Nurse! Nurse!"

She's done this off and on most of the evening. They've told her to use the button on the wand attached to her bed. They've called the button a "bell," which seems to confuse the elderly patient. She says she pushed the button but heard no bell. I silently thank God that her button isn't attached to a fire-alarm-style bell. Her voice is grating enough.

I bet she's not a quarter of an inch from a mysterious horror. I bet she doesn't have a mattress pad and her imagination separating her from the unspeakable. I bet she doesn't feel like a prisoner in a third-world country, forced to repose in others' sickness. I turn my mind away from the mattress pad and turn up the volume of the Yankees game.

"Nurse! Nurse!"

Edith has to use the bathroom again, I wager.

I've learned that Advil is designed to increase bliss through ignorance. The theory, apparently, is if it doesn't hurt, it's not a problem. Well, Advil stopped my head from throbbing. And I attributed the headaches to brown liquor anyway. I thought I was taking Advil to forget about the extra glass of Scotch from the night before. I was really covering up something else: My blood pressure had crept so high that I was like a zit ready to pop.

In truth, I count myself lucky. I hate doctors, so I don't visit them. I haven't had a proper checkup since college, and I've only been to a doctor at all twice since then – once in the emergency room and once at the clinic because I had bronchitis. I always thought I knew my body well enough to know if I was sick. In truth, it was a good theory; so far, doctors and nurses alike say I appear perfectly healthy.

The cute dietician who visited me this morning seemed uncomfortable telling me to change my eating habits. Levels of everything in my blood were fine, she said. There was nothing shocking there. Just the same, she said, she felt compelled to advise that I limit my salt intake. No more salt on the table, avoid packaged baked goods. Start reading food labels and cut back sodium as much as possible. She also told me to limit my cholesterol and fats. Every cardiac patient should eat less fat and cholesterol. She told me grains should make up the bulk of my diet.

I wanted to talk to her about how the human body works. I wanted to ask her to sit down and explain to me how cholesterol gets into the human blood stream. I wanted to point out it was stress that caused my cholesterol level to be high – not cheeseburgers. But, frankly, I felt it in poor form to lecture anyone from atop this mattress pad and what it covers. And what if I shift and she smelled what I smell when I move? I would look like another crazy old man with crazy old man ideas.

I won't start eating more grains. Of that I can assure you. I'm willing to cut down on my salt and even cut down my caffeine. But Katie is recommending change for change's sake; she doesn't know what I eat or why. She knows I'm a cardiac patient. And that means cutting my cholesterol.

Katie is the first attractive person I've seen here. They are all friendly in their way, but in some cases, they are too friendly. At 3 o'clock this morning, the nurse on duty came to take my vitals. Her visit turned into 15 minutes of

chatter about her own high blood pressure, her divorce, and the fact that she had to babysit after work.

Hospitals are not for resting, a friend tells me. So far it's an adage proved correct. First, I was told I shouldn't try to go to sleep before 11 p.m., as the nurses who come on during the shift change at that time will wake me to take vitals. So last night I waited for them to come until 12:45. I fell asleep at 1:15.

I awoke in a state of terror around 2. I don't know what happened; I woke just in time to see two nurses leaving my room, turning off the lights behind them. It scared me to realize I didn't know how long they'd been there, or what they'd done whilst there. I allowed myself to dwell on those possibilities until sleep overtook me again.

They woke me up about once per hour last night. Because I'm a particularly bad sleeper, that means I slept in 45-minute bursts all night. It felt like a sleep deprivation study.

They drew my blood again at 5 a.m. They came by at 6 a.m. to drop off the day's menu. At 7 they were back for vitals. By that time, I had finished trying to sleep – Edith was yelling for the nurse already.

I haven't used the bell to call the nurse yet. I keep trying to think of reasons to do so, but nothing seems important enough that I need to talk to anybody about it with any urgency. When I arrived, it took four hours just to get access to the wifi connection, but by that time I'd already looked under the mattress pad, rendering the happy discovery of free wifi almost worthless.

The worst part of what's under the mattress pad is I don't know what it is. Part of me is embarrassed to mention it to a nurse. What if they think it came from me?

I assume someone crapped the bed. Perhaps they died in this bed. All I know is that it isn't just a stain.

When I stood up to pee in that plastic pitcher, the mattress pad slipped. And that's when I saw the dark brown spot, soaked from the mattress through the sheet, and into the mattress pad. I was immediately struck by it – I was scared that I'd done it. After examining the "pajama pants" they gave me when I first came in, I determined it wasn't mine. I ran my knuckles across. It was wet.

I hurriedly threw the mattress pad over it again. I dropped my heart rate monitor to the floor and tripped over the wheeled stand holding my IV drip. I needed to get to the bathroom.

Inside, I washed my hands and splashed water on my face.

Who would do this?

Why do this at a hospital?

I grappled with the possibilities, with the implications. What kind of hospital is this anyway?

I wanted to call a nurse and scream.

Instead, I erased it from my head. I carefully replaced the mattress pad. I covered the whole mess with a sheet. Then a blanket. I climbed back into bed. I could smell it. Whatever it was, I could smell it.

It's a fluke that I'm even here. I've gutted out every cold, flu and sinus infection I've had for 10 years. I even devised my own bronchitis cure, which works in less than 24 hours. It consists of lemon juice, hot sauce, honey and guaifenesin pills, all mixed with coffee. You have to drink it fast, or else you'll taste it. If you taste it, you'll throw up. It's disgusting, but one or two doses of that and your body will give up being sick out of pure fear of having to drink more.

So it was uncharacteristic for me to go to the clinic when I thought I had strep. The aching bones, the headache, the fatigue were things I'd dealt with. I felt the swollen glands. I decided it would be smart to get an antibiotic and be done. I'd be better in three days, I figured.

Instead, a simple check of my blood pressure set off this unfortunate series of events. I had to actually find a real doctor. Then there were tests and prescriptions and more prescriptions. And then the "consultation" with the cardiologist when the prescriptions didn't work.

When I heard "consultation," it sounded like I was going to get a stern talking to about my diet, my exercise regimen. Instead, I ended up here. The kindly Middle Eastern doctor told me I had a choice: I could go to the hospital or have a stroke. I couldn't go home; he wouldn't let me. So here I sit. In a bed with a stained mattress pad. I didn't

make the stain. Nothing I did caused the stain. I can't get rid of the stain. But it bothers me. It torments me. It nags at me and won't let me forget it's there.

I wonder if it will kill me, whatever that stain is. I wonder if it was the last thing that exited the last occupant of this bed. He said his final words and shat his final shit. Then they moved him out on some type of death conveyor belt to make room for the new meat.

I figure there's a metaphor here. I haven't done a thing with my degree in literature, save for seeking out metaphors in life. So maybe, just maybe, that stain is like whatever sickness this is that threatens to kill me. A vile, creeping, stinking death that has hidden just under the surface, waiting to destroy me. I catch its scent on the air and know it's hiding, but I don't know what it is or why. I can't change it. Or maybe that stain is a metaphor for something else inside me, covered just superficially. Just a peek under the surface would reveal Dorian Gray's visage. Or maybe it's life and the whole world and infinite time.

Maybe I'm just the king of a shit empire, sitting on a shit throne in a shit palace.

Ah, my oatmeal has arrived. Hail to the king.



Daniel A. Lovell

is a former investigative reporter and editor, a musician, a songwriter and a dad. He has won several awards for his work in newspapers and community leadership, and has released several albums as a solo artist and with his band, Nightlite Mary.



by David Rollow

"You've been unfaithful."

"Not in a million years! I wouldn't dare!"

"You have. You've left traces of my inspirations lying around."

The writer sulked. She wasn't wrong. In the flush of inspiration he'd typed up a report of her most recent visit, while still at the office (he had a day job to support himself), and he had unthinkingly left by the typewriter a second sheet for all to see. He didn't use a carbon, so to anyone not overwhelmed by curiosity it would have seemed to be only a blank sheet of rough yellow paper. But the very same day, his neighbor in the office next door, himself a writer, came in to use the phone—why couldn't he have used his own phone? Had he been snooping around?—and grabbed the first handy piece of paper to write a phone number on. It was the second sheet. A few hours later he was back, paper in hand...

"Well, writer," he said, "I've found you at your work."

"Where did you get that?" the writer said, inwardly groaning as the entire scenario flashed through his mind.

Days of paralysis followed. The writer knew his Muse would never visit him again.

"The damage is done, of course," she said to him now.

"I never intended—"

"That's no excuse. It's too late."

"You mean—"

"I'm afraid so. This is goodbye."

The writer had rehearsed this conversation again and again in her absence, so he wasn't surprised at the line she took. After all, while she was the Muse, and his inspiration, he wrote her lines, and however often she might complain that they weren't good lines they were the lines she had to speak.

"Don't go!" he said. "I can't live without you!"

"You'll live," she said. "It's not the end of the world."

It was the end of the world.

"I'm sorry," she added, "but art is a jealous mistress. I can't have you sending me off to bed with other men."

"Bed?" the writer asked.

"Figuratively speaking, of course. My inspirations are for you alone. I'm your Muse."

"What are you saying? Do you mean to suggest that, figuratively speaking, you could be faithful to me?"

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"I didn't mean to suggest anything. I'm saying 'goodbye.' Goodbye. I have to go now."

"Stay with me!"

"I suppose you mean I should move in. Cook your dinner. Right? A hard day at the office for you, a day over the stove for me? I bring you a martini at the door, you drink it, then write busily away while I get dinner on the table. I find agents and editors for you. I suppose you want me to go to bed with them, too."

"You haven't even gone to bed with me!"

"Goodbye."

"I can't write when I've had a martini. Some writers drink, but I've never been any good after even one beer."

"Doesn't it loosen you up? It sure loosens me up. Although I lose the ability to sing in tune. All right, no drinkie then, just din-din. And after that you'll be asking me to do your laundry—"

"There's something wonderful about the smell of freshly folded laundry—"

"That someone else has folded. Then there are the buttons that come off your shirts, even your pants. You have a plastic baggie full of them. I've seen it. As if you're going to sew them back on yourself! What a joke. You'd want me around all the time."

"What's wrong with that? Why wouldn't it be all right for you to be at my elbow, or my ear, whispering . . . whispering the news . . . What's wrong with wanting to be together?"

"I'm not that kind. I have other responsibilities." She drew herself up. "I belong to the world."

"You're my Muse."

"And you're my writer," she said. But she hardened again. "You're not the only one, however. No man could carry such a weight. You have to strike while the iron is hot. I come and go as I please. There is a time and a place for everything. If you are not for yourself, who will be for you? If you are not for others, what good will you be? I'm your Muse, but I'm my own woman, and I've gotta go—"

The writer was relieved to hear her spouting these familiar, prosaic clichés once more, a sure sign that she was still his.

"If not now, when? And I won't have you making an easy woman of me."

He knew he was close to the edge. She was his, but only within limits, and a misstep would plunge him into the abyss.

"Goddess," he said, almost in a whisper.

"What did you say?"

"I always thought you were a goddess."

The Muse was pleased.

"It won't happen again," the writer said.

"You're free to think of me as a goddess, if it pleases you."

"Oh, I do. But I meant I wouldn't leave my papers lying around loose . . . it was just a second sheet . . . I didn't think . . ."

She said nothing, looked stern. Her feathers were standing still.

"Please, O Muse, I implore you, don't forsake me when I am in greatest need of your song!"

She inclined her head, her interest slightly quickened by his invocation.

"Yes . . . ?"

"O Muse, mistress of the wellsprings of fantasy, where the human imagination replenishes itself, the source, the Pierian Spring of fable and song . . ."

"Do go on," she said.

"Sing in me the song the world delights to hear. Bring me those winged words, like the sweet notes of that harp you always carry with you—where'd you get that harp, by the way?"

"I'm glad you asked. For a minute there I thought you were waxing poetic. That's not my style at all. Well, as you know, we muses are the daughters of memory; it's not all singing and dancing, I mean. There's a lot of hard work to being a Muse, and it takes a long time to become one."

"You have to learn? It doesn't come naturally?"

"That's the thing about inspiration. It's fickle, as you very well know. We have to prepare ourselves by years of study and practice. It's not enough to be admitted to the Castalian College. Once you're there, you have to learn all the stories. It wouldn't be so terrific if we went around passing out stories that people already knew, would it? And of course, some of us have to learn all the songs, too. I was never able to sing by myself, though—I can sing in a group, but I don't like soloing—so I went into prose. Oh, the harp, as you call it. (It's actually a lyre.) It's a late corruption introduced by my paterfamilias, Apollo, when he relocated us to Helicon. We each get one at graduation, along with the traditional laurel wreath. The original lyre is supposed to have belonged to Orpheus, Calliope's child, who used it to charm the birds out of the trees. It was taken away from him when the maenads tore him to pieces. I wouldn't know about that. Mine's really just a toy."

"I thought it was me! I thought I just couldn't hear the tune!"

"It is you. You're tone deaf, as a matter of fact. That's why I was assigned to you. I just strum a little for effect. Nice, don't you think? Gives the act a little class. And

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without it, who would recognize me? I'd be just like all the other girls."

The writer remained faithful to the Muse from then on. It would be gratifying to report that inspiration never failed him afterward, but the Muse has a great many demands on her time, and as she reminded him herself, inspiration is fickle.

During one of the Muse's fickle phases, the writer was more alone than he'd ever been before. He sat at his work table in a blaze of light. The page before him was empty, his mind a blank. A phalanx of sharpened pencils lay across the empty page, each poised to tell its own story, each a pointer to another world. The range of possibilities was enough to stop him right there.

He understood the reasons all too well. Hardly a sentence that came from his fully charged fountain pen or his ultra-sharp pencils went in the direction he'd planned. His subterfuges were many and effective in one sense--he did manage to write sentences. But they were sentences deflected by the walls of the invisible city whose gates were locked to him.

After vacillations as wide as a road-trip to California (she had called him from a phone booth on Hollywood and Vine to say "I want to be a star!"), the woman he had been living with finally moved to New York without him, and not long after that they broke up for good on a drizzly weekend in Atlantic City. The writer, deserted alike by Muse and lover, doubly alone, sat forlorn waiting at his worktable for something to come to him, but it seemed that he, although still a few years short of thirty, was written out. Clearly, he had made the mistake made by so many aspiring writers of failing to store up the basic capital of experience. He had no Muse, he reasoned, because he had no material.

It wasn't like you could just sit in your room waiting for inspiration to descend from on high, even if on high was ultimately where it came from, for whatever came from that source had to be supplied with the lineaments of corporeality, and no amount of raving against the vegetative state in the tones of William Blake would get you anywhere if your characters weren't fleshed out, down to the last hangnail, and living in plausible if not recognizable environments. You had to map the material provided by the Muse on to your actual experience, and it had to be from somewhere real. She brought raw material, but it had to connect to something in your life. The writer knew loads of facts about his city, its mores, its history, its deep prejudices, and its money. However, he had no interest in writing about this city and thought he had to invent another one, parallel to it, indistinguishable from Baltimore.

This parallel, imaginary city was a major seaport and shipping center. It had an international airport, but unlike

the one in the city where he actually lived, it was accessible directly by subway underground, recently constructed at great expense, including a tunnel under the basin. Through the heart of this city, which had been laid out along wandering paths before anyone had thought of an urban grid, tree-lined parklands snaked whose only model was nature. The ocean was near, gulls sailed squalling over the local landfills and were almost as common as pigeons. In the main park downtown, an equestrian statue stood, but who it represented even the writer didn't know. In an old part of town brick row houses that had once been inhabited by blacks, who had been forced into cheaper neighborhoods, were now being renovated by young white couples with small children. In the artistic district, brick town houses that had once been inhabited by blacks were now not being renovated by young people in the arts, supported by trust funds, who would one day also be forced to move to cheaper neighborhoods now inhabited by blacks.

He collected street names and mapped them against one another, so as not to have a taxi or a private detective take a wrong turn. He knew the one-way-system of the city by heart. He knew its grand boulevards and he knew its secret cross-town connectors. He might as well have been playing Monopoly.

For the Muse didn't descend. She didn't knock on his window. She didn't ring his buzzer.

With the Muse gone, the writer worked without rest, hardly stopping to eat, just as if she hadn't deserted him. After all, it was a weakness in a way to think he needed a Muse. A more determined writer, more sure of himself, with a deeper sense of his own autonomy, would have been glad to write without prompting from outside. It was a matter of doing it, that was all. The idea of inspiration was a childish, infantile fantasy.

What was the Muse but his fantasy of an inscrutable other, inscribed on the body of a woman? The Muse is a woman because inspiration is cyclical, on and off, like the lunar cycle, which is also why the Muse is a moon goddess. She comes and goes.

The writer would have liked a more regular Muse the way he would have preferred to be married, a steady state, but inspiration wasn't like tap water in the kitchen sink, which could be turned on and off at will, its source a distant but inexhaustible reservoir, and if you wanted it hot it would warm up as it passed through the water heater. Access to the springs of the Muses was cyclical and irregular and unpredictable. Being a writer dependent on the flow of inspiration was like being a woman before the advent of the birth control pill, irregular, moods unpredictable, a womb in motion, fertile only for a few days in her cycle, desire tidal, increasing for a time, then falling off.

"I like variety, don't you?" the Muse said. She didn't mean varying lovers.

Evenings, he put on Billie Holiday's Lady in Satin, one of her last albums, where her voice, cracked and croaking, was at its most heartrending. As he sat listening to her sing, fat tears rolled down his cheeks. "For all we know, we may never meet again," she sang, and the writer agreed heartily, and wept. "I'm a fool to want you," she sang, and with that he agreed even more strongly. "Fools rush in, so here am I."

Who was he weeping for? It might seem that he was suffering because his girlfriend had dumped him, but if he was honest about it, he'd grown tired of her ups and downs, her lack of direction, and her kitsch esthetic. It had all come to a head during their weekend in Atlantic City. Atlantic City, for God's sake! She had to see the boardwalk before it was demolished to make way for Vegas East. She had to see Park Place and Ventnor Boulevard, and they had to stay in the hotel used as the setting for the Bob Rafaelson movie ("Atlantic City") with Jack Nicholson and Bruce Dern. What they found when they got there was a place of such banality that it was just banal and couldn't be raised to the heights of banality by being surrounded by quotation marks. It was a boring place, and the writer was, when he was honest with himself about it, bored with his girlfriend, who, when you came right down to it and faced reality, was bored with him.

So it wasn't that hard to say goodbye to her, nor for her to say goodbye to him.

Now that she was gone, though, saying goodbye wasn't turning out as easy as he had thought it would be. No sooner was he alone with no one to call his own, reduced to depending on his own resources (which meant that he had to take up jogging), than the writer felt bereft of all that he had never in fact possessed: a true love, a companion with whom he could share all the interesting double features in the revival movie houses that abounded in his city, someone to cook for, someone to go out to dinner with, the sense of belonging to a couple who were going places—now that was a joke—him, part of a fun couple!—and of course he was no longer invited to dinner parties because he was too extra to be a suitable extra man. It was like he had six fingers on each hand.

One woman friend of his ex-girlfriend, a nutritionist, wanting to draw him out, engaged him in a bizarre scheme to write about Nouvelle Cuisine for her mentor, a world-renowned nutritionist and physician, but his article was turned down as "too academic." Long afterward he used it as the basis for a story about the post-war career of Dr. Franz Kafka, balneologist, expert on eating disorders and health spas. The central scene was a visit to the restaurant and spa in Eugenie les Bains of one of the movement's founders, Michel Guérard, where Dr. Kafka (the inhabitant of a parallel universe in which he did not die of

tuberculosis or become a posthumously renowned fiction writer) astonished the chef by refusing to eat, explaining, "I always wanted someone to admire my starving," and saying, when invited to visit the baths, "I did not come to take the waters."

According to their publicity flier, the word "privation" isn't in the Guérards' vocabulary. How strange that idea was, when the whole cuisine was a starvation diet.

Lady sang, "I'm so unhappy, but oh, so glad," and the writer nodded along with her. He agreed with the truth of "You don't know what love is till you've learned the meaning of the blues—till you've loved the love you had to lose."

The album revolved on his turntable every night for a year, but the Muse didn't respond to this or any other invocation.

Then one night, a young woman clerk in a bookstore, on asking to see his ID, said, "You've changed," looking back and forth between him and his picture.

"I know," he said. "That sparkle in my eyes is gone."

Something broke loose inside him when he said that, and he went home, made a fresh pot of coffee, and sat down to write, Muse or no Muse.

For that was the only way he would ever get her to show up.

"Unrequited love's a bore," he wrote, "and I've got it pretty bad. But for someone you adore, it's a pleasure to be sad."

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by Rhian Ellis



When I was a child we lived in a house with an intercom. It looked like a telephone but it was made of a tortoiseshell kind of plastic, and instead of a dial it had a set of buttons, numbered one to eleven for all the rooms of the house. You could speak into the handset and your voice would come out of a speaker in whichever room you chose. This house also had a complicated and thorough system of dumbwaiters. Someone small enough—me, at the time—could climb inside and show up in any one of several rooms or corridors, or simply sit there inside the walls, listening.

Since my mother was a medium, and held séances and gave readings at home, she found these features handy. Sometimes she let me work as her accomplice. I'd rap out ghostly messages from my place behind paintings, I'd fling objects across the room, I'd whisper through the intercom's cracked wiring. Sometimes I'd hold the handset on the other side of a box fan, and speak through that, which gave my voice an interesting, otherworldly sound. Once my mother dressed me up in a lace tablecloth, doused me with talcum powder, and had me stumble around the séance room, posing as somebody's dead child.

My mother was not, however, entirely a fraud. The floating trumpets, the ectoplasm, the spirit rappings: all this, she said, was Theater. Every profession has its necessary theater—teachers with their apples and rulers, doctors with their tongue depressors and white coats. People demand a show. This was especially true in New Orleans, where we lived at the time. In that city you couldn't go to a parade without having candy and beads hurled at you, or being flashed by somebody in a fright wig, even on the Fourth of July. My mother's theatrics, she said, were a kind of misdirection. If she could shock and astound, she'd crack open a tiny hole in people's skeptical armor—only briefly, perhaps, but long enough to sneak some truth in. People believe first, disbelieve later. Or anyway, that's what she said.

But I, for one, couldn't always disentangle the real from the fraudulent, the truth from its trappings. Sometimes it seemed as if my mother's fakery was just a more interesting and beautiful version of what was real. Sometimes it seemed that the truth *needed* the lies, as if there wouldn't be any truth without them. At any rate, whatever my mother was doing, it was a rare and powerful thing, perhaps even a form of magic. It enthralled me.

* * *

We lived in New Orleans until I was ten. My memories of that time are scattered and odd but mostly good: taking baths in the kitchen sink while my family sat around the table, playing backgammon; a sugar skull given to me by a customer of my mother, which I left under my bed until one day when I found it half-dissolved and swarmed over with ants; the green velvet walls of the séance room; and helping my mother, when I was three or four, to attach the fabric to the walls with a staple gun. Our house didn't have air-conditioning, so every room had a collection of fans—ceiling, box, oscillating, paper—each with its own prevailing winds. Summers, we'd stagger from room to room and fan to fan, windblown and exhausted. To escape the heat, my grandfather and I went to the movies. I remember buying pickles in brown paper and eating them in the chilly dark. When the movie was over and we stepped back outside, the heat would feel intensely good for a while, damp and intimate but slightly threatening, like the breath of someone leaning in too close. Later, when my mother and I left for good, I would miss this heat more than I missed the house, or the city, or even what was left of my family by then.

This was my family: my mother and her parents. My

grandparents were kind, shy people; my grandmother was a librarian at my school, Saint Ann's, while my grandfather—a gentle old man with a fringe of white hair on his forehead—kept house. He'd sold his stationery store around the time I was born and now puttered around in his tennis shoes, always sweeping and pulling weeds. The house belonged to my grandfather. It even looked a little like him: tall, hunched, dapper.

The man who was my father did not live with us. He was my mother's dentist and a good friend of hers, but no one, she said, she could marry. Anyway, he was already married. He visited us now and then, and would sometimes hang around during his lunch hour, wearing a white dentist coat covered with little blood spatters. My mother fixed him sandwiches and he made polite conversation with me. He called me "Squirt." I was not supposed to let on to him that I knew he was my father.

It was an awkward situation. My mother loved him. I could tell by the way she pretended not to: she avoided his eyes if anyone else was looking, and made a big deal about "forgetting" her dental appointments, as if they meant nothing to her, but she always called to reschedule. He might have loved her, too, though my mother didn't think so. "Two people never love each other at the same time," she told me once. She had just returned from a dental appointment and was sitting in the kitchen holding a teabag to a tooth, and frowning. "One loves, and the other is in love with *being* loved. The fun is in guessing which one's you."

Bottles of perfume and silk scarves had a way of appearing around the house, and we were never short of toothbrushes. But if they ever planned to get together, if he ever thought about leaving his wife, I knew nothing about it. I would be surprised if he did. Run off with my mother? She did not seem to be the running-off-with kind. She was tall and bossy and had a big nose; I couldn't picture her collapsing in someone's arms, or galloping away on horseback. In any case, by the time I was seven or eight he was gone, to an army base in the western part of the state. And that was that. I never saw him again, though before he left he gave me a checkup and a set of windup choppers. To tell the truth, though, I was relieved. I didn't like what he did to my mother. He made her moony and wistful, made her want something she could not have.

It would have been easier for her, I think, if he had died. She had special access to the dead. Living, but disappeared, he was completely out of the picture. If he'd died she'd at least have bits of him, now and then: his

voice, flattened and tinny and small, floating from her trumpet, or a whiff of his aftershave in a darkened room, or—best of all—his ghostly fingers, probing her mouth for signs of decay.

* * *

Those years, the years we lived in my grandfather's house, my mother practiced a particularly outdated and quaint brand of spiritualism. She didn't know. This was the seventies, and by then most mediums had turned into "psychics" or "tarot card readers," and spent more time developing their ESP than communing with the departed. The few remaining spirit trumpets—the big tin cones that amplify the voices of the dead during séances were preserved in museums or stashed in attics, but my mother had one, and sometimes it even levitated for her. I think she suspended it from a horsehair; it was lighter than you'd think. Modern psychics have no use for the dead at all. The living is what they care about, and lottery numbers, and horoscopes. My mother wasn't aware of this trend. She learned what she knew from books. She ordered her equipment out of an obscure catalog from somewhere up north. I remember it—the pages were rough newsprint; the printing type, minuscule.

But her work had a large following, especially among the old and morbid. One of these people was a woman named Beryl Kemper, who was obsessed with the thought of her own death. When she and my mother got together for one-on-one sessions, which they did every other week or so for several years, she'd often whip out her left hand and display the break in her lifeline.

"What do you think?" she'd ask my mother, breathless. "Do you think I have three more years? It looks to me like I have at least two. Look at that crossline there."

My mother, neither fortune-teller nor palmist, would politely push Miss Beryl's doomed hand back into her lap. "You know that stuff's bunk. Besides, your left hand's what you were born with, and the right is what you do with it. You can guess my advice, Beryl."

They'd drink coffee and gossip for several minutes, then my mother would take both Beryl's hands into her own, as if to warm them. "Your mother's here, dear," she might say, looking right into Miss Beryl's eyes. "She wants you to take better care of yourself. There's an empty pot on the stove, she says. Does that makes sense to you?" Beryl ate it up. She didn't need evidence—a floating guitar or a tipping table—as some people did. The session

would always end with a long chat with Miss Beryl's dead daughter, via the intercom. I would put on a gaspy, choked voice, because Irene had died of the croup when she was a little girl. For a baby, Irene could impart a great deal of wisdom. I would sometimes read from *The "I AM" Discourses*:

Out of the heart of that Great Silence comes the Ceaseless, Pouring Stream of Life, of which each one is an individuized part. That Life is you, Eternally, Perfectly, Self-sustained...

Beryl knew it was me. How could she not? But she'd always cry to hear "Irene's" voice, and she seemed comforted by my mother's prayer, which ended, "And there is no Death, and there are no Dead. Amen." If I met her in the kitchen as she was leaving, she'd squeeze my shoulder and tell me to come by her house on my way home from school, so she could give me a Mallow Cup. Whether what had happened was "real" or not didn't matter a bit to Miss Beryl. She—and really, all of my mother's customers—swallowed it whole, and why not? My mother made their lives more interesting and more meaningful. From these old women I learned that belief didn't have to be something you got after weighing the evidence; you could just have it. Belief was a decision you could make.

Miss Beryl lived on Carondelet Street, which wasn't on my way home from anywhere. But sometimes I wandered around after school, chasing cats and looking for money on the sidewalk, and one day I decided I would stop by and say Hello to Miss Beryl, and maybe get my candy. Mostly, I wanted to see the house where a dead girl had lived. I had never known any real dead people, let alone dead children.

I knocked on the door, and after a long wait Miss Beryl answered, surprised to see me and without any makeup on. She let me in, though, and I stood in her front room while she burrowed through mounds of things, looking for her Mallow Cups. On the wall, over the piano, there was a blown-up picture of a child's face, a girl's. There was something odd about the eyes.

"That's Irene in her casket," said Miss Beryl. "I had a man paint her eyes in."

It was chilling. I stared and stared at the photograph, unable to get enough of it. Her pale hair was clasped with two silver clips, and the fingers of one hand curled along the bottom of the picture, the nails dark. Her painted eyes

could have shot bullets.

When I said good-bye and was back on the sidewalk again, I noticed the Mallow Cup Miss Beryl had given me was so old—its yellow wrapper faded to white—it might have once belonged to Irene. The chocolate gave way under my fingers into a sticky, powdery mass, and the marshmallow in the middle was tough as cartilage. It smelled like an old book. I ate the thing anyway.

For a long time after that I could not think about death without remembering the photograph of Irene Kemper in her casket. That picture became death to me: to be dead meant being suspended over someone's cluttered piano, twice life-size, eyes forced open in an unnatural, unblinking gaze, forever.

* * *

If I were to die, I often wondered, what would my mother do? How would she feel? These questions haunted me. Until I was eleven or twelve, I was sick a lot—so sick that I sometimes thought I would die, though I never mentioned this to anyone. My illness was mysterious: every couple of months I'd begin throwing up everything I ate or drank, and couldn't even brush my teeth without vomiting. This would go on for a week or more. I'd lie in bed almost unable to move, falling in and out of sleep, under the flick flick flick of the ceiling fan. If I touched my fingers to my lips they felt like something else, not like lips at all, but like a bit of carved ivory or bone. I'd listen to the voices of people in the street outside and not remember what it was like to be well. The doctor didn't know what it was. Except for the throwing up, I was fine. He gave me a bottle of pink stuff I couldn't keep down and some advice: Don't be so nervous! Take some deep breaths if you feel like you're going to heave-ho. Lots of fresh air can't hurt.

Before he left, the doctor would pat my hand and tell me it would pass, and it would. After a week or so I'd wake up and see a glass of water by my bed, and it would look good. I'd sit up on my elbow and drink a little, then a little more. Later, when I woke up again, I'd notice the sunlight in the leaves by the window, and the shadows on the wall, and the bright blues and reds of the books on my shelves. Once, I smelled my grandfather cooking chicken downstairs, so I crept down to the kitchen, joined my family at the table, and began to eat without saying a word. My mother and grandmother glanced at each other, then at me.

"I had a little chat with the doctor," said my mother. "He said it's all in your head." She gave me an accusatory look.

"My head?"

"What's that supposed to mean?" asked my grandfather. He frowned, brandishing his silverware.

What she meant was, I was doing it for attention, though not necessarily on purpose. The very thought made my heart pound with shame.

"Utter baloney," said my grandfather.

"She knows," said my mother, still giving me a look.

I swallowed my chicken. Could it be true?

The next time I was sick, my mother's manner was brusque and distracted. She set a glass of water on my night table and squinted out the window. It was raining.

"I'm *not* doing it on purpose," I whispered. My mouth was parched, dry as paper.

"Oh, I know," she said, still watching the rain. "But you don't see me or your grandmother getting sick, do you? We have work to do. We couldn't possibly lie around in bed."

I closed my eyes, trying to cry, but no tears came.

"You're not much of a trooper, are you?" said my mother.

* * *

I didn't die, of course. Instead, my grandmother did. It was a shock to all of us; she seemed immortal, not old at all, though she must have been seventy then. One spring afternoon she did not come home from work at Saint Ann's. That night my mother called the police, who found her bicycle the next day, propped up against a fire hydrant in a not-very-nice part of town. Foul play was suspected. And though they found her a few hours later, alive but incoherent, wandering along the riverfront, she died in the hospital before we could get there. She'd had several strokes.

My mother screamed in the hospital waiting room. *How could this happen?* she wanted to know. How could a sick old lady walk around town for an entire day, without anyone helping her?

Unfortunately, they said, there's no shortage of sick old ladies in this town. And anyway, somebody did help her. When the police found her, she was clutching a sack lunch some kind person had given her: an egg salad sandwich, a nectarine, and three sugar cookies.

They handed the sack lunch over to my mother, who pressed it to her face and wept.

But that was all the grief she allowed herself. By the time we got home that afternoon, she was, to all appearances, over it: she threw herself into housecleaning and funeral preparations with the energy of someone organizing a carnival ball. My grandfather, shrunken and pale, climbed the stairs slowly and shut himself in his bedroom. I wandered from room to room, crying and hiccuping. In the parlor my mother swept past me, smelling of lavender furniture polish. She turned and put her large hand on my head.

"Poor Naomi. Silly Naomi. You're crying for yourself, you know. Your grandmother hasn't gone anywhere. She's right here watching you." She pointed to the corner, where there was a large vase of peacock feathers. "You're making her sad."

I wiped my tears with my fingers. There was nothing in the corner, as far as I could tell, except for the feathers, which drooped and were clumpy with dust. I tried hard to see something else, a shimmer or a quiver or a glow, but there was nothing.

"It's your grandfather you should be crying over. Stubborn fool has no faith. I don't know how he gets through the day, I really don't."

She squatted on the floor with her cleaning rags, her cotton dress pulling across her muscular back. A bead of sweat slid down her neck.

"Come, help," she said, and tossed me a rag. "In a couple of days this place will be full of weeping librarians. And don't think for a minute they won't notice the housekeeping—that's all they'll notice. That and the finger sandwiches. Right, Mother?"

It was a bit eerie. A few hours before, I had seen my grandmother lying dead on a hospital bed, looking not at all like herself—gray-faced, her hair tied on the top of her head with a rubber band—and now my mother was chatting with her as if nothing had happened, as if my grandmother had simply misplaced her body but might find it again at any time, under a sofa cushion or in the back of the fridge. Until that moment, spiritualism had been a fun sort of game to me, but suddenly the momentousness of it unfolded darkly in front of me: it could allow you to raise the dead.

I rubbed hard at a table leg, watching my mother. A dark lock of her hair slipped down over her forehead; she left it there. She was beautiful, in spite of her big nose and broad, mannish shoulders. I wanted to put my arms around her and bury my face in her bosom, but I knew if I tried anything like that she'd give me a shove and tell me to act my age, so I didn't. Instead, I knelt alongside her and worked hard at polishing the table leg.

She glanced over at me and nodded approvingly. "Good girl."

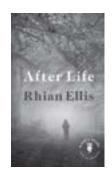
I rubbed harder. I loved her so much. Over the next few months, my mother's mediumship acquired a new intensity. All sorts of exceptionally peculiar people—and not just old ones, either—began hanging around the house: a young man with hoop earrings, a woman who scolded me for my "prickly aura." And others: hippies and

Read Chapter 2 in its entirety at metaphysicaltimes.com



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Author of *After Life* available at BarnesandNoble.com





It was far out, long ago, and out of sight.



Caffein

by Steve Katz

I was fifteen when my father died. He'd been sick for seven years already, was rarely home, usually bed-ridden in some dreary hospital in the Bronx, or upstate at some rest home. That was treatment for a heart condition at the time — stay in bed! Had my father been around, my fate might have been different. Without a father to slap me into the future I felt like upcoming life had been placed on the far side of a high slick wall. I couldn't bust through it, nor could I scale it, but against its unyielding concrete I constantly slammed the enigmas of my adolescence.

Mr. Jacobs, who was the father of my classmate, Vernon and his little brother, Hubby, was office manager of an import-export company, Amtria (American / Austrian) Trading Company. Because he took pity on me, or maybe sought to take advantage of me, he gave me a job at the Broad Street office on Saturdays and on some late afternoons. It was probably illegal for them to hire a fifteen year old.

I was a gofer, a messenger, the kid to blame when things went wrong, generally an office boy. If coffee spilled, I wiped it up. I opened envelopes. I stuffed envelopes. If a file was missing, I hunted it down. I cleaned windows, tidied the desks. My favorite task was to leave on a postal trip, or to deliver a document, or to buy office supplies, just so I could get out into the population on the streets.

That winter the canyon of Wall and Broad Streets were particularly cold, full of snow and slush, winds that cut like knives. I sloshed around in galoshes, kept the papers dry under my mackinaw, moved invisibly among invisible people breathing ghosts into the air. I walked past the steps of the stock exchange, rested at the foot of skyscrapers. Everyone inside the buildings look competent and busy, in identical suits and ties, women prim and neutral. It was on one of the most frigid, blizzard-like days that I discovered coffee. Returning to the office after a delivery. I let the wind blow me into a Chock full o' Nuts. That was the major coffee joint in the city, I'd never been in one before. All praise goes to William Black, who founded this chain of black-owned businesses, and to the great Jackie Robinson, who signed on as personnel manager. I straddled and settled down on one of the stools at the counter. It was all blue and yellow in there, and it smelled of coffee and sugar. The waitress, a light brown woman with straightened hair streaked with blonde, asked me what I wanted. I hadn't thought about it, didn't even know why I was in there. "Regular coffee?" she asked after I didn't respond. I heard someone else oder a light coffee, so I said "Light." "What else?" "A donut," I said. I was proud to that out. "Whole wheat?" "Yeah." "Sugared?" I nodded affirmative. The storm mixed it up outside,

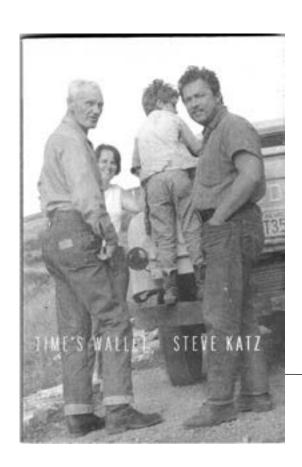
snow blowing horizontally down the canyons. People skidded on the sidewalks, were whipped akimbo, out of control in the wind, I felt warm, snug in Chock full o' Nuts. I wanted to return to the office never.

The waitress brought my donut and my first cup of coffee. I checked the other people at the counter, sipping comfortably. The cup was heavy. The cream swirled through the dark liquid. The acrid smell was a tough barrier. I tried to sip, but it was too hot. The waitress, who seemed to know I was a virgin, enjoyed watching me. "Put some sugar in it, sweetheart." She dumped in some sugar from the dispenser, then heaped my teaspoon, handed it to me and I dropped in more.

It was cool enough now to taste. The sweetness made it familiar and welcome, the bitterness gave it an edge and mystery, the cream and warmth made it feel like the protection from the cutting slants of wind on the street. Perfect! I bit the donut. It was soft and crunchy. I haven't tasted anything like it since. The world looked great. My first cup of coffee was beyond delicious. The clutter of storm outside flew down the street on wings of jubilation. "Good stuff, huh, sweetheart." "Thanks," I said I laid down a tip and stepped out to part the wind. "The snow melted off my face. I headed back to the office, ready for anything.

Near the termination of my career with Amtria Trading Company the office called and asked me to come in on a Sunday. They were moving, and needed me to help with the furniture. I had sprained an ankle shooting hoops in the schoolyard, and didn't feel ready to do heavy work, not on a Sunday. I told them about my injury, and that I wouldn't be in for a week. When I did return Vernon's father greeted me with my pay envelope, which contained a pink slip. "You have outlived your usefulness with us," he said. The shock backed me into a seat. I was fired. It was the first time I had ever been hired and now I was fired.

I left the office. It was my last day on Broad Street. I headed for The Chock full o' Nuts. The waitress recognized me and brought a light coffee and a whole wheat donut, and I sat there like a workingman with the workingman's blues. I was fifteen years old and I had outlived my usefulness. How was it possible? I drank the coffee. This time it made me a little jittery. The donut was good. I was dizzy. Fifteen years old. Oulived my usefulness. I'd read Dylan Thomas. I'd read T. S. Eliot. I'd read Archibald MacLeish. Do not go gentle, must not mean but be, this is the world ends. It was then the first time I ever realized I would have to be a writer. If you are fifteen and have already outlived your usefulness you'd better wise up and become a writer. There was nothing else I could do.



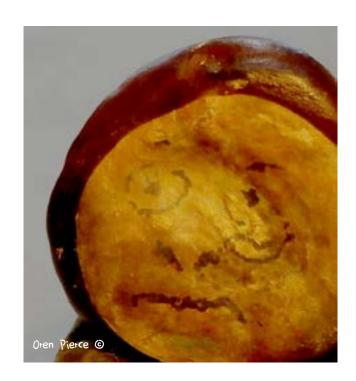


Caffein, a episode from Steve Katz'

TIME'S WALLET

Novelist, poet, and filmmaker, STEVE KATZ is the author of saw, Antonello's Lion, Swanny's Ways, Moving Parts, Creamy & Delicious, and Kissssssss, among other books. He has taught creative writing at Cornell University, Brooklyn College, Queens College, The University of Iowa Writer's Workshop, Notre Dame, and the University of Colorado at Boulder, from which he retired in 2003. A native of Manhattan, he lives in Denver, Colorado. Caffein, the story printed here, is from his recent Time's Wallet, which he calls a series of "memoirrhoids". His next book, which he has promised will be his last, entitled Kahoots, and will presumably be a series of hoots

Could use about three more pots of coffee for the road.





That was when I first heard God. Back then, it was always unannounced and could happen anywhere—the graveyard next to S.U.N.Y was my favorite —I went to God plenty of times. When Reagan was reelected, of course, in that snowstorm: God was really good that night. It was the big band with hand-drummers and the Devil-May-Care singers, three black girls and three white for backup, and two fat guys playing tambourines. Forgive me, but that's how we talked back then. Nowadays God won't allow it, everything has to be vetted and God's lawyers are serious about this: good thing I'm still allowed to say how good the music was and always will be. Everybody knows about the choirs of angels, and you've seen the paintings of Fra Angelico, how beautiful their horns and harps of gold and tongues of flame but, hey, God has never even used a microphone! Angels are optional. And today the Street Kids, they have their own scene with wild dance styles and all. But God! Holy Geeze! God is still out of sight.



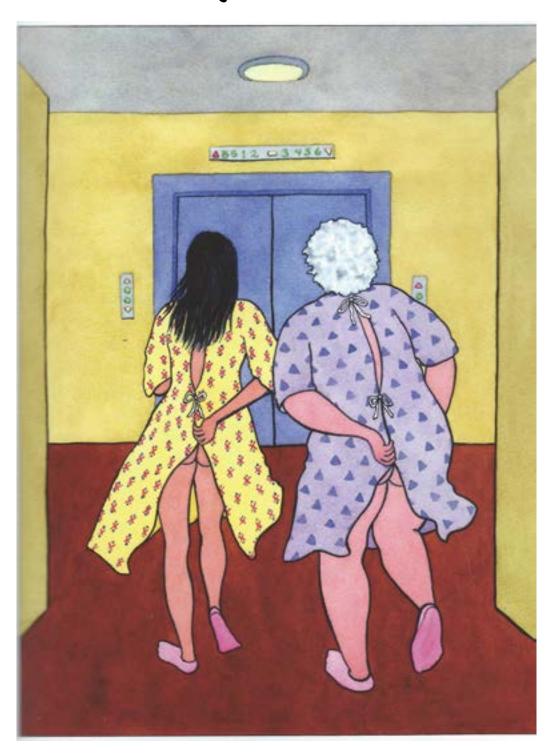
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Cody

A story from

The Whore Next Door

An Illustrated Memoir
by Annie Campbell



DURING THE LAST DAYS before my due date, San Francisco had an unusual heat wave with the temperature reaching 104 degrees.

I had gained only five pounds during my pregnancy, but walking in that oven-like heat made me feel like I had gained two hundred. My toes were so hot and swollen they looked like red potatoes and felt like they might explode. I could hardly wait for the heat wave to be over and my mysterious baby too reveal itself.

The night before my baby was due, despite the ridiculous heat, I felt strangely energetic and cleaned the house thoroughly. I put polka-dotted sheets on the little mattress in a laundry basket that would soon be my baby's cradle, and shoved a tiny cotton nightie and diapers into a bag to take to the hospital. In the morning, I woke up around seven and promptly had a major diarrhea attack – just as I had the morning Storn was Born.

Although I had no labor pains yet, I knew the baby would come quickly, so I called Joan, who had offered to be with me during the birth. When we arrived at St. Luke's Hospital, two male student nurses with tattoos covering their arms got the job of dealing with me.

A doctor came and quickly examined me. "She's already dilated seven centimeters," he announced. "Break her water, and hurry this thing up."

Within minutes my body slammed into full labor, and the nurses rushed me to the delivery room. "Fuck! This really hurts!" I said more than once. The doctor turned to the student nurses whose eyes were practically popping out of their heads and said, "She's not typical."

The pain was intense, but I refused any drugs. I looked at Joan's ashen face and hoped she wouldn't faint. Only twenty minutes after the nurse broke my water – my 6 ¹/₂ pound daughter Cody was born. I was thrilled!

Because I had been walking to work in the broiling heat, I'd developed a little sore between my legs. The doctor ordered a test to make sure it wasn't some horrible contagious disease. Then a nurse took Cody away and explained that without the test results – I couldn't stay in the maternity ward with the other mothers and their babies. I burst into tears.

I was still sniffling when a nurse deposited me in my room and introduced me to my elderly roommate, Doris, she had just had some sinus surgery. Her face was so puffy and distorted that it looked like a giant piece of popcorn.

"What's the matter?" she asked me.

I explained why Cody had been taken to the nursery and why I couldn't see her.

"That's ridiculous!" Doris said, "We'll sneak down and take a peek at her tonight."

Things quieted down around nine. Carefully holding our open-backed hospital gowns closed over our butts, we snuck into the hallway. A nurse appeared. We ducked behind a big laundry cart until she left, then darted into the elevator. Walking down the long dark hallway outside the nursery, we peered through the large widows at row upon row of babies in dimly lit plastic beds until we finally found Cody.

"She is the most beautiful one of the whole bunch!" Doris exclaimed.

I thought so, too. Tiny pink Cody had exquisite hands with perfect oval fingernails, lots of downy blond hair, and an untroubled sleepy expression. I hated to leave the nursery, but Doris pulled me away and we made it back to our room without a mishap.

I was young, strong, and healthy. Cody and I went home together in the morning, and that night Storn, John, Ben, and Mick celebrated her arrival with me.



CODY *is* an excerpt from my illustrated memoir *THE WHORE NEXT DOOR*. Click on the link below to see the first 10 illustrated chapters of my book on Amazon. Use the "Look Inside" feature.

I hope it amuses you!0http://www.amazon.com/Whore-Next-Door-Illustrated-Campbell-ebook/dp/B00Y423ZNO/ref=sr_1_1?ie =UTF8&qid=1438538873&sr=81&keywords=ANNIE+CAMPBELL

Lily, Mister Bluebird, and the Beginning and End of My Singing Career

by Nancy Vieira Couto

"Nancy, I want to ask you something," my cousin Lily said. By the look on her face, I could tell it was

important. "How would you like to be a flower girl at my wedding?" she continued. I didn't know what a flower girl was. I had heard people talking about sweater girls, and I sort of knew what they looked like, but I didn't think I could look like that. I was only four years old. "You would wear a pretty gown," Lily said, as if she were reading my mind, "and you would carry a bouquet of flowers." I was still worried about the sweater, but I liked Lily. So I said OK.

I still remember that day and how confused I was by this

very grown-up request, how I wanted to please Lily but didn't really know what I was getting into. Most of my cousins were older than I was, and a few of them were already grown up. Lily was grown up,

and she and her boyfriend, Charlie, were getting married in June, a few days before my fifth birthday. Charlie was different from the people in my family. He had lighter hair, blue eyes, and a mother from Cuttyhunk. Even though I was very young, I could tell that he and Lily were in love.

Later I learned more about the responsibilities of a flower girl. I learned I would have to walk into the church next to the ring bearer, who was a boy I didn't know. I think he may have been related to Charlie, but his name kept changing. One day it was Norman, and the next day it was Ronald. I think Norman was the first choice, because he was my age and we would have looked cute walking down the aisle together. But, because Norman refused to be in the wedding party, his older brother, Ronald, agreed to perform the ring-carrying duties. (I may have gotten their names mixed At the rehearsal I did almost everything right. The Communion part confused me, though. I was too

young for Communion, but I didn't know when to stay in the pew and when to follow the others. The bridesmaid, whose name may have been Rita, came up with a solution; she would scratch my gown with her fingernail when it was time for Communion, and I would know to stay seated. "Like this," she said, and she scratched my skirt. I noticed her red nail polish and hoped her long fingernail wouldn't snag my gown. I loved my gown. It was yellow and, as Lily had

promised, pretty.

One afternoon before all of this, before the rehearsal and before the wedding, my mother took me to see a movie called Song of the South. I don't remember much about the plot, only that it involved cartoon animals as well as real people. I caught on right away that of the three main cartoon characters one was dumb, one was smart, and one was smarter. In the cartoon segments, which were mostly scary, the bear and the fox (dumb and smart) were always doing terrible things to the rabbit (smarter). Unlike Norman and Ronald, the three characters all had the same first name, Brer. Because Brer Rabbit used his head and not his feet, he was able to escape from his enemies over and over again. I didn't understand everything that was happening, but I liked the briar patch segment after my mother explained it to me. The part I liked best, though, was when Uncle Remus walked along singing "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" while cartoon birds and bees and butterflies flew around him and landed on his shoulders. I especially liked Mister Bluebird. Although I had never seen a bluebird in person, I always had bluebirds on my birthday cakes along with pink roses. (My father worked for a bakery, so I always had bakery cakes with my name written on white frosting. I don't think I had ever seen a homemade cake.) Later my mother bought me a record with all the songs from the movie on it,

and I learned the lyrics to "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah" by heart.

On the day of the wedding I walked down the aisle with Ronald-or-Norman, and maybe-Rita scratched my gown very gently, without doing any damage. After the ceremony we all went to a photographer's studio and had lots of pictures taken. And then, because there was still time before the reception, we went to Buttonwood Park for more pictures. My mother had bought a roll of Kodacolor film specially for the occasion. She wanted to take outdoor photos in the gardens across the road from the pond. Lily, the maid-of-honor, and maybe-Rita walked along the garden paths in gowns as long and willowy as the columns in front of the savings bank. The men looked on as if they were expecting something to happen, but nothing happened except that my mother snapped some photos with her box camera. I remember that the flowers--I think they were hydrangeas--quietly nodded their heads when they saw us.

Many years later, when I read Keats's "Ode on a Grecian Urn," I thought of those pictures, not the photographer's formal wedding portraits but the Kodacolor photos that my mother had taken.

Except for the blurry hydrangeas, everything was new and intensely still on that sunny June day under the "happy, happy boughs." Between the wedding and the reception all of that love was "still to be enjoy'd."

The reception was held in a rented hall, a large room with a stage at one end and folding chairs set up along the walls. Some of the women were arranging paper plates and napkins on the food table and setting out platters of chicken-salad sandwiches, bowls of chips, and bottles of soda. Although many of the guests hadn't arrived yet, the band was playing, the singer was singing, and people were dancing. My mother wasn't there. She had gone home to get a dress for me to change into; obviously she was also worried about the possibility that I might snag my gown or spill something on it. Left in the care of my aunts and cousins, who were still too excited to pay much attention to me, I joined a small group of children, including Norman-or-Ronald or possibly both of them, and, not knowing one another, we talked and played warily.

Here's where it gets interesting.

The music stopped and the band left the stage. The singer left, too. The set was over, and they were taking a break, but I didn't know about sets and breaks. Naturally we children climbed onto the stage, and the boys began to examine the drums, and I'm not sure what the other girls examined because I was fascinated by the microphone. I had been watching the singer, the way she held it as if she loved it, and the way she swayed from side to side while she sang. I wanted to try, so I grabbed the microphone, which was way too tall for me, and I started to sing the only song I knew by heart, "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." I swayed from side to side, and I sang, but not too loud because for me it was a private pretend moment. The hall was suddenly very quiet. I was sure nobody could hear me because I wasn't a real singer and the microphone was only something to hold on to. I sang all the verses, all both of them, and when I got to "Wonderful feeling, wonderful day!" I stopped singing. And then something surprising happened. Everyone in the hall--including my aunt Mamie, my cousin Lily, and maybe-Rita--started clapping. I should have been happy, I suppose, but I remember feeling that my privacy had been violated, although I wouldn't have used those words. So that was what a microphone was for! I felt betrayed.

My mother was surprised when she arrived a few minutes later and asked if she had missed anything. But I wasn't about to perform an encore, and the musicians and the real singer were already reclaiming their space. That was the end of my singing career but not the end of "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah." It won the 1947 Oscar for Best Original Song, and James Baskett, the actor who played Uncle Remus and spoke the voices of Brer Fox and, I think, one of the butterflies, won an Academy Honorary Award. Song of the South was a success at the box office, both at the time of its original release and when it was re-released in 1972. Since that time, though, the film has been widely criticized

for its portrayal of African-American former slaves in the Reconstruction-era South, and for that reason it has never been released on DVD in the United States. I'm sure the criticisms are valid, but at the age of four I was not ready for a realistic depiction of life in one of the ugliest periods of American history. On the other hand, if Keats was right when he wrote that "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," Song of the South can be faulted for not being true and thus, despite the charm of the animated singing creatures, not being beautiful. I'll go along with that. Everything was not satisfactual, not really.

But when I think of Uncle Remus singing "Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah," and when I think of Mister Bluebird perched on his shoulder, it's not truth or beauty that I'm seeing but a celebration of the human spirit.

And to that I say "zip-a-dee-ay."

I threw my memories down an abandoned well that day





Our Next Issue

When you least expect it.

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