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THE LAST FLIGHT OF POXL WEST

A NOVEL

DANIEL
TORDAY



The
Last Flight
of
Poxl West



Daniel Torday



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For Erin, Abigail, and Delia

The bomber will always get through.

—BRITISH CONSERVATIVE LEADER STANLEY BALDWIN DURING A PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE, 1932

Acknowledgment: Prologue

Before halftime on Super Bowl Sunday, January 1986, my uncle Poxl came over. He was just months from reaching the height of his fame, and unaware the game was being played. He wasn't technical to my uncle, either. He was an old friend of the family. For years he had taught at a prep school in Cambridge, where my grandfather had served as a dean. After a massive heart attack a year after I was born left my grandfather as much a memory to me as thin morning fog, Uncle Poxl came to fill the void. That Sunday he sat down in the living room and, speaking over the game's play-by-play, started a story he could barely clap his gloves free of snow fast enough to tell.

A miracle had occurred that afternoon. His neighbor had died a few months back, and though my Uncle Poxl was consumed with the details of the upcoming publication of his first book, he'd advised the neighbor's sons on the handling of the estate. The neighbor was an obscure literary novelist who enjoyed acclaim early and then none. Their father had left nothing more than his immense library—and thousands of dollars of debt from a mortgage on a house too far in arrears to sell. Uncle Poxl had become immoderately involved in figuring a way to help them, though it wasn't clear what expertise they felt he could lend—decades ago he'd quit a job at British Airways to take a Ph.D. in English literature, then later dropped his dissertation on Elizabethan drama to finish what would in time become the successful memoir of his time flying Lancaster bombers for the RAF. Maybe they'd assumed that because he had owned a number of houses and apartments, he had a certain familiarity with ownership. Maybe people just assumed from listening to his confident tone that my uncle Poxl knew what he was talking about.

He was falling behind in grading for his classes, and in the early spring he would hit the road for his book tour, but something hadn't let him give up this neighbor's case.

“Then today,” Uncle Poxl said as Steve Grogan missed a receiver with a pass, “the deus ex machina!”

I had no idea what he meant at the time—I was barely fifteen, and what mattered back then were the Patriots and the Red Sox, a girl named Rachel Rothstein I was after in my Hebrew class who couldn't have cared less for some wizened British war hero. But that Sunday I was too drawn in by his unerring voice, its dry gravity and utter self-belief, not to find out what happened to his neighbor's sons. Somehow his voice had found the only register that could drown out the game's clamorous announcers.

“Willie, the younger son, asked me if I’d help pack,” Uncle Poxl said. “He figured he’d give the books away.”

Poxl had noted my eyes on him now, not just my parents’. The volume of his wry voice rose perceptibly.

“We were a dozen books in when I dropped Saul Bellow’s *Herzog*. I picked it up, and a crisis hundred fluttered to the ground. Willie and I looked at it like it was—well, like it was a rabbi on a football field.”

He looked at me. The Bears scored. I missed the play and the replay.

“Julian had used hundred-dollar bills as bookmarks in every one of his books. He’d get paid two hundred dollars a review, and put half back into the books. They hadn’t counted it all yet, but there must have been near to a hundred thousand dollars in those books—he didn’t write a review every week, but he wrote for that paper regularly, and others. Maybe he thought his sons would find it all. Willie doubted it, and I did, too—we were a pile of cardboard boxes away from handing his estate to the Harvard Coop!”

Uncle Poxl kept talking, hauled along by the wonder of the thing. I’d rarely seen him so animated. This was the first time we’d spent alone with him since he’d finalized copyedits on his memoir, and his appearance at our house was a surprise, given the frigid air and snow outside. We’d assumed we wouldn’t see him again until his first reading, here in Boston, scheduled for the week after the book’s publication date. I’d been longing to see him, my eccentric European uncle who’d lived so much life. But now the Patriots were in the Super Bowl for the first time, and my tongue buzzed like it did after I woke from a nap. My mother changed the subject, and by then I’d stopped caring about the game. Would the contents of a book ever carry the same meaning again?

This image of hundred-dollar bills spilling out of the pages of books would plague me for years. I tried to watch the end of the football game, but Grogan was awful, and a three-hundred-pound Bear lineman known as “the Refrigerator” scored a touchdown, and I couldn’t set my mind to anything but my uncle Poxl and when I’d finally get to read his stories between bound pages.

* * *

As I say, my uncle Poxl would reach the apex of his own literary success in the months ahead, after his book finally made its way into the world. Every season for as long as I could remember, Poxl had taken me to the opera, the symphony, to the Wang Center to see plays and musicals. If there was a performance of Shakespeare anywhere in our city, Poxl would find a way to take me. This wasn’t the kind of thing that should have interested me—a trip to Fenway was my idea of a cultural outing—but my uncle Poxl was built like a power forward and moved as fluidly as a Bruin, and he was everything the other Jewish authority figures in my life weren’t. On Monday and Wednesday afternoons I suffered two hours of Hebrew school, where our aging teachers would ply us with tales of woe and melancholy stories of the survivors of death camps and ghettoization. I remember seeing for the first time, when I was only ten, the black numbers tattooed on a classmate’s grandmother’s wrist. I can see

even now my young brain being tattooed with anxiety and pensive fear. My grandfather had survived that period and reached the States—only to die before I'd gotten to know him. It compounded my sense then that history was some untrammelled force acting upon us, leveling any hope of heroism like some insuperable glacier flattening mountains to plains.

Even the new young rabbi at our synagogue, Rabbi Ben Schine, who had come straight from Berkeley with a nappy beard and hair past his shoulders, calling us *dude* and trying to get us to take Jewish mysticism, sat nodding solemnly as these stories were recited, fingertips tracing his copy of *Night*. I recognize now, of course, why we were being inundated with these truths. But I was fifteen and what I needed was a hero—and hope. We might be able to see God's body in the Kabbalah's ten Sefirot, but it was 1986, barely forty years since our grandparents' generation sat desperate and fateless in their East European neighborhoods. *Never again*, our teachers incanted to us Monday after Monday, Wednesday after Wednesday. But when I picture myself in those rooms in the basement of our shul, even now I can only hear the incantation's reciprocal: *It will happen again*. Beware. Be always aware. But I was growing to see myself as an exception then, too, for I was learning on those outings with Uncle Poxl West that I had an antidote in my family: There was more thunder in my uncle Poxl's senescent face than in one strand of Rabbi Ben's unkempt mane. Trailing him like the sweet whiff of cherry tobacco from a pipe smoker's coat was the fact that he'd been a pilot for the Royal Air Force, a Jewish war hero, the only one I'd ever heard of.

I would've followed his broad shoulders into the ballet without embarrassment.

Though his teaching job held a certain prestige, Uncle Poxl was an aspiring writer when we started on our trips. It was all he'd wanted in his later years, to get down stories based on recollections of his youth, and all he did with his free time. But in more than a decade, three novels had been rejected by New York editors. No matter how proud he was, his shoulders slumped a bit farther forward with each turning away. Regardless, my parents felt it an inherent good that Uncle Poxl serve as my monthly Virgil through the vague cultural life of downtown Boston—no accrual of rejections in New York could undo cultural currency in our small city, and any time spent with Poxl would do me good, they said.

What I learned from my uncle Poxl on those outings didn't come as we listened to Daniel Barenboim play the *Moonlight Sonata*. After each event Uncle Poxl would drive us out to Newtonville where over sundaes at Cabot's he would read passages to me from his latest project, this one not a novel but a memoir. After his return from a trip to London for the funeral of a captain he'd served alongside in the RAF, he'd finally decided he would write a memoir of his life during that time. He'd felt more comfortable writing fiction, but if it was a memoir the world needed, he'd write it. It wasn't much different from the novels he'd read to me from in the past. They were full of strange, awkward depictions of sex, scenes that, looking back, I now realize I was too young to be hearing. This new book felt overwrought at times, a feeling I wasn't too young to pick up on. But with this new project suddenly the scenes he'd written were vibrant, absent the hesitations and wanderings of his earlier works. The sex scenes, while still graphic, were somehow easier to hear. Even today I feel a pride that

borders on embarrassment intuiting that those scenes were crafted to make my younger self accept them.

“This next section,” Poxl said one night after four long hours of *Don Giovanni*, “is the most gripping scene of all, when the reader sees what we were really up against. The story of when the ‘S-Sugar’ bomber went down in a lightning storm.”

His hands flew up near his curly auburn hair. Uncle Poxl had one of those pointy red Ashkenazi faces whose very shape carries confidence and import. The bridge of his nose was so thin it simply faded into his high red brow. Atop his head he wore a trademark porkpie hat, the brown felt of which was always brushed. The hat’s name wasn’t lost on him: “It’s the closest to anything *trayf* I ever come,” he said. Out from the hat’s sides stuck shocks of his remaining translucent hair, which took light like a polished garnet. Lambent crimson ran to his cheeks through gossamer veins. But there was nothing varicose about my uncle Poxl’s face: He was hale and lissome, a man of indeterminate age but whose virility was discernible in the very color of his cheeks. He wore a black tweed Brooks Brothers suit with narrow lapels and a collar he’d popped against the Boston winter. He saw no need to smooth it down now that we were inside spooning pralines and cream.

“My squadron flew into a thundercloud over Lübeck,” he said. “That’s when the S-Sugar began to fly into the thundercloud, too. Crack, boom, blue lightning! You’ve never seen anything like it.” He asked him to read it to me instead of telling me about it—he’d written it down, after all, and I wanted to hear—and so he put his face to the loose pages before him and read. The world around us dropped away as I listened to my uncle Poxl read from his book. His hands spun dense nimbus clouds in the air between us as he narrated the bomber’s bravery. This was an entirely different kind of war story than the ones we read at Hebrew school—a story not of survival, but of action. It was as if he was crafting his great account before my very eyes, and I don’t know that I’ve been so close to history since. My uncle Poxl was born in a small city north of Prague but he had a diplomat’s accent—his cars had rumbled in his parks, too, and unlike the living survivors we met or whose books we read in Hebrew school, his tongue wasn’t thick and muddy with Slavic consonants. As he described in the middle chapters of his book—I’d heard each of them as we talked over fudge and whipped cream—he had been sent to London by way of a year in Rotterdam. By the time the Luftwaffe began bombing the East End, he was enlisted as a squaddie. Poxl was a Jew who had flown for the Royal Air Force during the war and lived to write about it. Though he carried in his broad shoulders the complicated burden of his own actions in those days, he had wrested his fate from the inevitable bearing down of history upon his fellow Ashkenazi Jews. And not only that but he’d lived to write about it, too.

And write about it he did. Each time he finished a new chapter he would take me somewhere new and recount to me his finest similes, the clearest arisen memory, the complicated feeling that arose from the things he remembered things he’d obviously spent most of his adulthood trying to forget—all for the sake of literature. For the sake of those who came after him. We talked about the fact that this is why men write: to leave behind their stories for those who would come years later.

“The pages are flowing from me faster than ever before,” Poxl said one afternoon. We’d just gone

to stare at the Renoirs at the Museum of Fine Arts. He had an innate knack for spotting celebrity, and that afternoon, like two little kids spying on the neighbor's wife, we watched Katharine Hepburn as she studied the great painter's brushstrokes. But now we were again at Cabot's, and he had promised to read to me from the middle of the book, pages he'd only recently completed. I asked him what the new scenes were about.

"Well, until I started writing, I'd entirely forgotten about the day I enlisted. The officer called me into his office," Poxl said. "'Weisberg,' the officer said, 'we need to talk. If you're shot down over Jerry soil, a man with a Jew name like yours will be torn to pieces.' So that's how they came to call me Poxl West—the kind of name men remember." He looked at me, and I looked back. I implored him just to read to me, and as he always did, he shuffled the pages in front of him and settled back into his tale.

I sat and stared at my uncle as if he were the only hero we'd seen that day. Who needed some prune-faced old actress I'd never even seen in a movie when my uncle Poxl was there to recite his stories? Even when he stopped midsentence and stared at the shimmering window behind me, an oceanic blankness coming over his face, as if he might stop, I felt I could read the story he was telling in the ageless lines of his sharp red face.

By the time I was a sophomore in high school he had finished the book. As I've said, this one quickly found a publisher. A small but prestigious press bought it, offering a respectable advance. A book tour was arranged, he completed his copyedits, the first edition was printed, and before he even had a chance to give that first reading in Boston—not three short months since that moment when he came to my parents' house and interrupted the Super Bowl—the book began to get real notice. Before we saw him again we read the review on page twenty-three of *The New York Times Book Review*. The reviewer was laudatory and honest: "*Skylock* is not a perfect book. There are some odd formalities in its language at times, and its second half is stronger than its first. But the story Poxl West has to tell is truly unique, a history we need, and there's something undeniable about the quality of its details, the precision of its observation. Having finished it, I don't think I've been so moved by a book in recent memory." Without even talking with him I could imagine my uncle Poxl's response: "There are some criticisms in there, Eli, sure. Even *The Great Gatsby* isn't a perfect book. But my book! Reviewed in *The New York Times Book Review*. *The New York Times!*"

I imagined the glint in his eye over a sundae we would share later that year. I knew even if I chided him, nothing would sway Uncle Poxl's new, implacable optimism in the wake of its publication. He had received an advance against future royalties, and notice in the paper of record.

Now my uncle Poxl was a writer.

Before the ink had dried on the newsprint in the *Times*, Poxl had moved out of his tiny apartment in Somerville and rented an apartment in Manhattan—the place was in Spanish Harlem, but it was a nice place in New York. Though he held no Ph.D., having been ABD for longer than I'd been conscious, he was offered an adjunct class at Columbia in the fall. He planned to take a leave from his job teaching ninth-grade English. He had syllabi to write and readings to conduct. He'd called my father on

afternoon when I was at a basketball game, and I can still feel how my skin prickled with jealousy that I hadn't been the one to answer. I could only hope and imagine he'd honed those very passages of his book on those Cabot's trips of ours. Somehow I'd been a part of the writing of this book—I'd touched history, fame, and heroism all in one small passive reach, and though it later nudged me down my path, it gave me no solace at the time. Uncle Poxl was to be a known writer, but as a result of Brahmin cultural outings were to take a hiatus.

I wrote him a letter congratulating him and briefly bemoaning not seeing him or the Rodins at the museum for a while. He wrote back with the promise of complimentary copies of his book—which I wouldn't receive until we saw him for his reading in Boston. Those books hadn't arrived. I allowed myself to assume he was simply too busy to send them along, or his publisher had forgotten to fulfill his request, but my parents could see the disappointment on my face each time mail arrived without copies of his book. I tried to remember what Poxl had written, but there were so many gaps to be filled, and what is the memory of words compared with reading the pages of a book? I longed to hold the object. I wanted to see Poxl West's name on the cover.

But what I did get was that letter. I hadn't flown his mind entirely. It was written on stationery, and the top of which was embossed *The Algonquin Hotel* in red letters, the color of which matched his face.

"As soon as my tour is over," Uncle Poxl said at the end of his handwritten note, which I still keep in a desk drawer today, "I'll take you down to the island of Manhattn. We'll go to the Galerie S Etienne and I'll show you the Schieles there—oh, the Schieles there! What a treat you're in for, Elija. You'll come down to New York. Then you'll really see something for once."

Skylock

The Memoir of a Jewish RAF Bomber

ACT ONE

1.

I grew up in Leitmeritz, a small Czechoslovak city forty miles north of Prague. My father owned a large leather factory called Brüder Weisberg. It was a business he ran for his family, out of filial duty and love, and if this story is to be about something, it is love, not war. And if we are to understand romantic love, we must first understand the languid, sedentary love of family.

My father was among the most well-to-do Jews in Czechoslovakia. We lived in a large house on a hill above the streets of Leitmeritz. Its long stone façades overlooked the city all the way down to the Elbe, over the tufted green hills where I played as a child and endured the bullying of instructors at a strict gymnasium. When I was young I worked at my father's factory. I learned the trade, and on holiday accompanied him to the aerodromes, where the fortune he'd accrued allowed him the luxury of flying private aeroplanes. One day, I was to take over the factory.

Every Sunday, while my father flew his planes, my mother took me into Prague to see her mother, my grandmother. We arrived at the main train station and she walked me through Wenceslas Square across the Charles Bridge and up to the castle mount to buy some *smazeny syr* before crossing the city to my grandmother's town house. Black bulbs at the top of the cathedral stood out, imposing against the marbled sky. Walking up the cobblestone streets we passed cafés and bars where men stared at my mother's beauty as we passed. From the top of the mount we witnessed the drone of the Vltava pushing in its absolute grayness, bisecting Prague like some great creature finding it easier to keep watch over a city divided.

On one particular visit when I was thirteen, the city was overwhelmed by a gray, damp chill. It was late October and cold enough to erase most odor from the air. Only the pungent smells of meat held the power to waft by on our walk to my grandmother's immense town house in the Zizkov district. Cobblestones made a trail from the river, and beneath my feet I saw 2 ... 4 ... 16 ... 132 ... 17, 42 and on into infinity millions of cobblestones smudged to a variegated mix. The sky throbbed with fast passing clouds. I walked with my arm in my mother's until she stopped. I looked up and saw pasted on a stone wall posters drawn by the Art Nouveau painter Alphonse Mucha.

My mother stood staring.

She was an amateur painter, a habit my father supported with a complicated reluctance I could not understand. On our trips to Prague she would always divert us when my father was absent, eager to s

what art she could. While she stopped, two men paused alongside us to look at these posters, as we walked. Green vines enwrapped the bodies and breasts of stark naked women, in their hands bunches of grapes. One of the men next to us said to the other in a shallow, informal Czech:

“Wouldn’t you like to have one just like her?”

“Flat up against a wall like that,” the other replied.

They both laughed and looked at my mother, expecting to have offended her.

She smiled at them.

She was not embarrassed by the nude women before us. The men’s lecherous leers and ugly comments did not faze her.

They looked at me, and my skin prickled.

They walked away.

I watched a change pass over my mother’s face: The skin about her eyes drew back and I saw there a kind of giddiness my father at all times looked upon with impertinent disdain.

We walked to my grandmother’s. She lived at 30 Borivojova, in a town house painted canary yellow. The components of its face were those chisel-cut rectangular stones one might find all across the city. On the front steps leading to the door sat a pair of angry lions. Inside the entranceway the air was close. Grandmother Gertrude, whom we called “Traute,” held my head to her bosom. She kissed me on my cheek and rubbed the invisible stubble over her upper lip against my nose. I longed to go away and departed for the lav, and when I reached it, I tended to myself. In the cobblestones that rolled out of my memory came Mucha’s women—only overlaid by that scrim of stones, they grew even more angular. This new image seared itself across the backs of my eyelids. I felt the warmth of the painted bodies come to life under my skin.

While I was cleaning up, I heard footsteps.

I froze.

They veered off into a room nearby. As I moved toward the sitting room where I’d left my mother and grandmother, I noticed the door to a little-used room off the main dining room was open. Inside, I found my mother standing before half a dozen paintings propped along the far wall. A burlap tarpaulin that must have been used to cover them was strewn across the floor. The angular girl in the painting before my mother sat with her legs spread, her hands below her small breasts and a mossy tuft just covering her exposed pink sex.

The two paintings next to it contained more of the same.

My mother took note of my presence. She blanched. Her shoulders drew back. A look crossed her face.

“I suppose I’m glad to see you like them,” my mother said. “They’re the work of a great painter, an Austrian called Schiele.”

I looked away from the first painting and to one of an emaciated, naked older woman who appeared to be writhing in pain. My mother pushed it off to the side to reveal a portrait of a similarly angular woman with her legs spread as if to form a wishbone, between them heavy brushstrokes of dark gnarled

brown. My mother explained that she had posed for Schiele when she was young, during summers spent in Neulenbach, outside Vienna. There she would go to his atelier to see him with his woman Wallie. She took my mother to buy beautiful hats until Schiele was sent to prison.

But I could not listen to her words—for on the face of the second Schiele girl, I saw something fantastic, something I hadn't noticed in the midst of my preoccupation with the fact that certain deep brushstrokes had been used to create the deep pink roundness of the areolae on that girl.

The face in that second painting was very young. But it was clearly my mother's.

If that realization wasn't enough, these paintings were the exact images overlaid by cobblestones that I'd seen when I'd closed my eyes in the bathroom minutes earlier.

I blinked hard.

It was as if I had crafted Schiele's style in my mind just minutes before. While I marveled at the coincidence, my mother said that before her marriage to my father was arranged she had sat for "her Egon" when Wallie was away. She had been the subject of a number of his paintings. Grandmother Traute had tracked down the others some time later, wishing them to be kept private.

"So what do you think, Poxl?" she said.

Again that look crossed her face.

"Let the boy to his tea," Grandmother Traute said. She had arrived in the doorway—when she couldn't say. "He hasn't had a thing to eat."

My grandmother sent me off to my tea. Voices rose from the other room and then cut off altogether. Something passed between my mother and grandmother. They returned to the drawing room. We ate. Mother sent me off for our coats and I heard corrugated words pass between them again. Soon we left without my learning what had transpired.

* * *

Then we were going home to Leitmeritz. My father planned to stay on another night in Prague to step skyward one more day in his new plane. It struck me only later just how often one or the other of my parents was in Prague alone, each taking trips south almost weekly. Though in the years to follow I would learn from my father how to handle those small propeller planes that prepared me for the Tiger Moths I would later train on, my mother and I now rode the train home alone.

"Now that I know what you thought of the Schieles," she said, "tell me. Would you want to try your hand at painting one day?"

I'd only ever shown interest in books, and in my father's leather. The latter was the only viable option for me. The former could survive in mind only as a potential avocation.

"I'll take over Brüder Weisberg one day," I said.

"Well, yes, but you could paint on the side."

"If I was going to do anything," I said, "I'd write, or at the least study books, I suppose."

Her eyes grew gray. I did not know a thing about painting, but I knew my mother well enough to see I'd disappointed her.

I tried to say I could show her some of my writing if she wanted. But her eyes only darkened. She was staring out at the fallow fields alongside our window. Stands of sunflowers grew diffuse in the thickening evening light.

“Your grandmother felt very strongly against my having posed for Schiele when I was a girl,” my mother said. She continued to stare out the window as she spoke. “I was just the age when a woman was supposed to have her marriage arranged. My parents decided your father was the man for me. His family still lived in Prague then. They were a good family. This was before the riots, just before you were born, before we moved to Leitmeritz for good. But that summer I lived in Neulenbach and Eggenbrunn—” She stopped for a second. Not looking at me, she started up again. “The painter Schiele, whose work I’ve introduced you to, showed me how to paint. He suffered for his art. He was jailed after everyone in town complained he was corrupting their— that he should not be painting the portraits of women he was painting them. It was only after his death that *Vater* would even let us keep his paintings in our house. Then Grandmother Traute became obsessed with tracking them all down, owning them.”

Again she stopped and looked out the window.

We both stopped talking. My mother went to sleep. She was a small woman with the curly rust-red hair a minority of Ashkenazi Jews are blessed with. A pair of earrings dangled from her lobes, each with a piece of amber the size of a child’s shooting marble. I put my head against her clavicle as she always had when I was a child. In her half-sleep, she pulled me to her, then took the amber from her ears. She clacked them against each other in her left hand. Only when the knocking of amber quieted did I know she’d passed fully into sleep.

I put my finger to her ear as I had when I was a child, as I would never stop longing to do. She lay against the door, stilled, sedentary, a woman frozen, having been captured in paint and only half-released back to the world moving past her. Her earlobe grown soft, ceding to the amber’s pull, drooping, awaiting the next trip to Prague.

2.

My name has appeared as pilot at the top of more flight manifests than I could possibly count. But you will not find a written record of the most memorable time I rose skyward. It was little more than a year after that trip to Prague with my mother. After many years left standing in a field at the aero club my father belonged to, watching him fly off and waiting for minutes, hours, until his plane appeared again in the sky—he a distant cloud obscuring the sun as I waited below—when I turned fifteen we drove down together to fly in his new Beneš-Mráz Be-50 monoplane. Business must have been going well, a real fortune accruing, for this was the first plane he owned outright. For weeks prior, my father had quizzed me on flight safety, and I had complied. And now here we were.

There was an overcast sky that early-spring morning. We’d left Leitmeritz before the sun rose above Radobyl and spoken little in the morning haze coming down, and we were alone at the aero club.

when we arrived. My father liked very much to teach me about the leather business, but there was newfound energy in him that morning—one I'd observed many times before and now could finally share for the first time. In the small hangar I was overcome by the smell of petrol filling the air. As my father went about his work, prepping the parts of the wooden wings of his new plane, we talked with a freedom I rarely experienced with him. His hands were busy, and when your hands are busy, liberates your voice.

“Do you like the books you're studying at the gymnasium, Leopold?” he said. Only my father called me by my full name. Everyone else just called me Poxl. “Your mother tells me you long to study books. Perhaps you'll be a writer.”

“I didn't tell her that,” I said. “I want to take over the business. But I told her that if I were not to take over the business, I'd be more interested in books than I would in painting.”

His hands stopped moving along the wood of the ailerons he'd been working on. I watched him make twin fists, knuckles pink against white skin, and then release them. Then he began again at his work.

“Yes, your mother and painting,” he said. “Very hard to get her off that topic once she's begun.”

I agreed with him and though I thought of mentioning the Schiele paintings, asking him about my mother's life before I was born, before they met, I quickly thought better. I recognize now that of course my father knew more about my mother and her business than I possibly could have gleaned, but I was her son and a teenager, so what really could he have told me? Here we were together. It was precious time, this time alone with my father, and I had none of the petulance of a teenager the morning before. I had a goal and that goal was to get into my father's new monoplane and see our world from above.

And so we flew.

My father sat in the cockpit and I sat in the passenger berth behind him, both of which were open, and he called out to ask me if I was ready, and when I said I was, we began taxiing. As the nose of the plane began to lift, I could feel the middle of my stomach dip toward the balls of my feet, and then the ground was lifting away from us. The field drew in at its edges below us and the Be-50 made a mighty racket, a whirring I could feel shaking deep inside my ears—but here it was! The gray of overcast skies pushed cloud masses against my eyes, and with the wind stiff and bracing against our faces in those open seats, the smell of petrol blew away. Instead, there was now the smell of droplets of water in my nose, the fresh morning smell of clouds. My father veered west, and soon we were passing the sky above the old city of Prague. From thousands of feet above we could see every block—down below was my grandmother's house in Zizkov among the many terra-cotta roofs, I knew, and to the west the castle mount, and what I remember most then was how I longed to talk to my father about it. I wanted to tell him what it looked like to see that city from above, how close it all seemed and how absurd that a walk from the Charles Bridge up to Grandmother Traute's should feel significant, not seeing that one was but a thumb's length from the other.

But even a shout was lost in the racket of the air in those open areas, and my joy at that flight can

in my simply sitting back and taking it in, knowing that my father was taking me skyward. While I had a certain genius at business, in all other venues in life I could remember him only as passive—was as if he was saving up all his energy and mastery for the two things he cared for most: selling his leather and flying his planes. I do not blame him for it; I know he didn't see that it could make my mother feel he did not give her the attention she deserved, or that it might make me want and need more than he could give.

As we flew southward all the way down to Český Krumlov, where we could see the great oxbow of the river, my father's right hand shot out to the leeward, pointing at the massive medieval castle at the village's center. The cloud cover began to burn off, and while wisps of cloud might appear far ahead that's not what I could see, and it's not what I remember. What I saw for that whole long flight each time my neck grew too stiff to continue craning, to look out at the land below, was the same thing I would see every time I flew with him in the years ahead, the same thing I would see when my father bought a Tiger Moth biplane the following year, that same invisible guide that would be emblazoned on my eyes whenever I flew: I saw before my eyes the back of my father's helmeted head.

3.

March 21, 1938.

Hitler marched on Austria.

The Anschluss was under way. I was eighteen. Much to my surprise, my father came to me that afternoon not to keep me close, but to present me with an unexpected wish: I was to leave for Rotterdam as soon as arrangements could be made. There was business to be done there with his Dutch counterpart in leather sales. But that was not the immediate reason for my flight. My father felt it wasn't safe for me to stay in Czechoslovakia. I was a young Jew with a future to protect. He himself refused to leave. He would take care of Brüder Weisberg, and see to his planes down at the aero club, but I was to leave. He and my mother had had an arranged marriage. I was to have an arranged emigration.

Until that moment my life had had a single trajectory: I was to take over the tannery. I'd had a good education that might allow me to cultivate interests like my father's in his aeroplanes or my mother's in her painting, or the life of books that held my interest more, but my central concern was the factory. And so in my mind it was equally settled: I would stay, no matter what my father's arrangements.

On a Tuesday two weeks later I had lunch at my uncle Rudolf's. His daughters, my cousins Nira and Johana, had departed for a new life in London the year before. My father's demands ran through me like current through a wire. I excused myself as soon as I could. I would plead with my mother to convince my father I should stay. And I would have succeeded, had it not been that that afternoon I discovered more about my mother than I'd ever hoped to know.

The first thing I saw on my return from my uncle's was a large, hard suitcase our maid Josefina had

packed for me days earlier in advance of my planned departure. I walked into the hallway, where I had sat since it was first packed. A pair of wool pants was folded on top of a sweater on the luggage. Then I saw a pair of canvas pants hastily left crumpled on the floor, covered in variously colored splotches of oil paint. My father did not own such a pair of pants, and his only hobby was flying. If a pair of his pants were to be soiled it would surely not be by oil paint.

I saw my mother next.

She was on her knees. This is not a position to which I was accustomed to seeing my mother, who knelt for no one. The only time she'd ever acted against her will was in accepting her arranged marriage to my father. My view of my mother was obstructed by the most unpleasant sight. When her eyes opened and she saw me, she stopped the business at which she was engaged. She stood back up upright. This action only doubled the discomfort I was already feeling.

I'd never before seen my mother naked—I'd seen that young version of her in the Schiele portrait years earlier, I suppose, but surely I had not seen her so in person, and not at such lascivious business. None of the involved parties had the wherewithal to alleviate the awkwardness of the moment. My mother did not cover up, but simply said, "Oh—Poxl. Oh."

The hairy thing in front of me was not my father. What he revealed to me presented a proper exclamation point to their act, evidence that was now rapidly becoming detumescent without achieving its ends. My mother stood and turned her back to me, which, again, did very little to alleviate the awkwardness of the situation.

My failure to speak or depart from the doorway in which I stood also did little to help. I know I'm not without blame for not simply fleeing right then, but what would you ask of an eighteen-year-old upon finding his mother in such a state? My luggage sat in the hallway opposite from where I now stood. Until that very moment I'd not allowed myself a real thought of leaving Leitmeritz.

Now it was the only option.

I would not be able to keep this event from my father. What this, coupled with what was now clarifying itself about that Schiele afternoon with my mother years earlier, was coming to show me was that a different kind of trauma was accruing in my parents' home. I looked up and before my eyes was a flash of memory of an afternoon along the Elbe, but as quickly as it arose, it disappeared. The eggy smell of river water entered my nose and evaporated.

My bag was already packed.

A visa to Holland had already been arranged.

A rucksack with my books was sitting on our porch.

I walked across the room and lifted the trunk, but its lid was not latched. I'd not thought to latch it—the main intent of my actions was overwhelmed by my trying not to look at this unclothed man—and its contents tumbled to the floor. Now here they were, all the clothes I was about to take to Rotterdam with me, crumpled on the hallway floor. While I assumed the beast before me could do no worse than receive oral pleasure from my mother in my father's house, effectively exiling me from my childhood home, the hairy golem proved me wrong.

Not only did he charge over to pick up the contents of my trunk but he *still* had done nothing to cover himself. His paint-splattered canvas pants still sat in the corner opposite. In charging over in a disrobed state, and rapidly going flaccid, he also pronounced quite explicitly that he was not a Jew himself—as evinced by a rather ugly piece of pachyderm skin, which proved that, unlike Abram five thousand years earlier, he'd not made the essential covenant with the Lord that my people had made with every male birth since.

I had to put up a hand to stop him from taking another step.

He stopped.

All this time my mother continued to stand in a corner. I latched the trunk and collected my rucksack and was out of the house and down the hill to the Leitmeritz station without having said a proper good-bye to my mother or my father. The smell of the river lodged in my nose and piggybacked along with it was the image of that cuckolding suitor of my mother's, and a heat rose up into my cheeks I couldn't cool.

I got on the next train south.

As I left the house that day I expected anger—but marrow-deep anger follows action after a lag of days, not hours. The sulfurous river smell returned to my nose as I descended the hill toward its source from our house, and before me was the memory that longed to gain purchase:

I was too young even to know how young I was, before my father ever took me up in his plane. My cousins and I had just returned from an afternoon sunning along the Elbe, one town over, in Schalholstice. This is where our fathers' leather was tanned, where the current was strongest and could lend the most power to the mill wheel. My father would select the hides of cows in Prague, in Brno, in Budapest, or travel to the port in Rotterdam, and the raw hides would then be dipped into these huge oak barrels dug into the ground and covered over with straw. From there they would be taken to the factory for finishing, packaging, and shipping.

We reached those huge circular vats dug deep into the muddy soil alongside the river, where the mill wheel of Brüder Weisberg turned day and night. And there between sunken vats my mother was holding my father's hand. They were only bodies against the backdrop of leather tanning vats looming above holes in the brown ground. My father stood stiff. His shoulders were held perfectly parallel to the ground. None of the ease I'd witnessed in watching my father full of life before flying his plane was evident. He looked stiff—and uncomfortable. My mother tugged his sleeve toward her French cuffs I knew so well pinned together with links adorned with Czech amber, the liquid solidified millions of years long since passed. My father did not move. My mother pulled herself by his sleeve pushing her chest against his arm. She was flirting, but he was not flirting back. Even as young as we were then we could see it. They were standing only a few feet in front of the nearest vat to one side, closer even on the other.

Still my father did not move.

Only now, as my mother went around him, she lost her footing. Her foot dunked straight through the straw into one of the vats. She and my father both looked down at it. My cousins and I were too f

to smell it, but we saw the way my father's shoulders dipped perpendicular to the horizon as he lifted my mother from the ground, expertly held her in his arms, and ran her to the river to soak her in its waters. I recognize now the opportunity that had passed—that my father never had a chance to loope up, to give my mother the love she wanted. But I suppose it's too hopeful to imagine he would have changed. Who could say how many more times this scene had played out, or one like it, my mother needing something my father couldn't, or wouldn't, give. But I didn't see all that then. What I saw was my father acting when action was needed, carrying my mother riverward. The last thing any of us saw—was I the only one to see it? Did Niny and Johana see it as well? Or was it so dark none of us could see it, and I've only invented it in my memory over the years?—was the look on my mother's face: the relaxed eyes, the taut, smiling lips of a woman who has achieved happiness so momentary it is a flash more fleeting than the look captured in a painting.

My cousins and I did not say a word to one another. We walked back down to another part of the river to swim.

4.

In Prague I was forced to wait for the evening train. When night came, we rode out of Hlavni Nadrazí. Lights scattered across the Zizkov hills like trails of a thousand small fires burning. Holland lay before me, five hundred miles west. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them again the Vltava flowed dark alongside my window. In the distance, the peaks of St. Vitus Cathedral pronounced themselves against the night sky. The church was lit from below as if to say good-bye to her departing Semitic son. A flock of waterbirds lifted off the dark water in unison. The moon lit the river not yet signifying a bombing, but only Czechoslovakian night.

I arrived in Rotterdam two days later and was let off at the station not far from the harbor. My mouth was full of a long night's cigarette smoke, my head not a fit for my brain. Already I'd fared poorly—the bag our housekeeper had packed was lost on the train. I only had money enough for a couple nights' sleep in a hotel until I could find work. Once I was settled I would seek out whatever business connections my father had set up for me there. First thing, I found a room above a small restaurant called Café le Monde on Schiedamsedijk, and at the café a job busing tables.

The first night there was a Saturday, and as the dinner crowd thinned, a group of musicians filed in with their large black cardboard instrument cases. They set up outside, and inside the café I could feel only the thud of the double bass. Toward the end of their set I went out front. They were a quartet, a pair called the Tennessee Sisters, backed by two men, and they played a kind of music I'd never heard before. That bass and a banjo backed up two young women, who sang high harmonies.

The lead singer was called Maybelle Tennessee. Her face was the color of untreated pine, dusted with ground cardamom. Her dark hair wasn't quite black and was kinky as if even the ends of her hair longed to stay as close as they could to her head. There was a gap between her two front teeth with

enough to slip in a chapbook of love songs, and in this slight imperfection she was only more alluring. Next to her ear, a brown-pink scar drew bright against her earthen skin before she sang. I stood there and watched. Here I was, alone in the world, listening to two Dutch girls sing American folk songs.

After their set, I cleaned the tables out front, where people had sat to listen to them.

“Do you have a deep, enduring love for the American folksinger Bill Monroe?” Maybelle said to me. She said it in English, of which I knew only a little.

“Am not a waiter,” I said, using the tiny bit of English I had learned from my grandmother’s American cousin. “I find one.”

“I do not want a waiter,” she said. She spoke to me in German now, having picked up on my accent. “I saw you listening to us. From looking at you I thought you were an American and perhaps a fan of the brother-duo singing music. But you are not.”

“I am not,” I said.

“You should know!” she said. “He is the greatest American folksinger of all American folksingers. Bill Monroe, one of the brothers in the Monroe Brothers, along with his brother Charlie Monroe. They are the finest of all brother-duet singers in America, the Monroe Brothers.”

“I don’t know their music,” I said. And with a boldness I would never have had back in Leitmeritz as a young man on his own in a new life, prepared not to repeat the mistakes he’d witnessed in his father’s reticence, I said, “But I’d like to hear more of it.”

“We’re here every Saturday night,” she said.

Although I’d begun working at the café I did go to see Johann Schmidt, my father’s business associate, who might have provided me some lucrative work but who told me he would be leaving for the United States in only a matter of weeks. He was sorry he could not be of more help, and he handed me a wad of guilders to absolve himself of whatever guilt he felt. It was enough money to give me some freedom for a month or two, and I did my best to convince him I was simply grateful for his generosity.

The following Saturday, the Tennessee Sisters were to play again, and again I listened. With every song she sang it seemed that the lead singer was looking right in my eyes. I’m sure, looking back on it, that every man there felt that way, but I only knew then that I did. I was leaving for a walk along the Nieuwe Maas when I saw some boy about my age attempting to talk to her. Accosting her, more like a growl. He was speaking loudly when I approached, and when he saw me, his voice dropped to a guttural growl.

“Finally, he has arrived,” Maybelle said. She and this dark boy both turned to look at me. “Are you going to go listen to some of the music of Bill Monroe and his brother Charlie now, as you promised? The new LP from Decca Records just arrived from America.”

The boy thrust his hands low in his pockets. His shoulders moved forward and there was a bulge down where he held his hand. We had not talked again since that first meeting. I did not want trouble with this boy.

“You were going to meet me at the front of the café,” I said, picking up her meaning. The pink scar

beside her cheek drew brighter as she smiled, took me by the arm, and took a couple steps away from the guttural boy.

“Next time we will decide to speak in either Dutch or German,” she said.

We walked quickly away before the boy could speak again. We walked all the way to the Nieuwe Maas, gas lamps lighting the path to the harbor.

“Will you tell me your name, then?” she said. “I am Françoise.”

“I thought it was Maybelle Tennessee.”

“That’s my stage name. I’m Maybelle, and my partner Greta is Lilly. These names work better with Tennessee than our own.”

“I’m Poxl,” I said. She looked at me. “Leopold Weisberg. Leopold, Leopoldy, Leopox, Leopox Poxl.”

We walked together up the Nieuwe Maas. I told her about Leitmeritz and about my passage on the train from Prague just the week before. We walked near each other as we passed under the lights along the harbor’s edge. Uneven cobblestones lined the embankment.

“What was that boy after?” I said.

“Something he could not afford,” she said. She was looking at her hands when she said it. Now she looked up at me. “But,” she said. “Thank you.”

Now she grew quiet, as if in showing her gratitude she’d ceded some ground to me she wished she hadn’t. In our silence she walked upright and reserved for the first time. In the quiet of the haze lifting off the river, the air lightened between us. I noted something I’d not seen on that evening of our first meeting: In Françoise’s ears were earrings similar to those my mother wore—pellucid amber, shape like playing marbles, casting tawny shadows on her cheek. Mist grew thick around the yellow glowing gaslights, comingled with Françoise’s earrings. I found myself telling her that my mother had earrings just like the ones she wore.

“It’s not a good idea,” she said, “to tell a girl you’ve just met that she reminds you of your mother.”

I spent some of the wad Johann Schmidt had gifted me on dinner and she talked to me about music I’d never heard of.

“Bill Monroe is not only the greatest American folksinger,” she said. “When he was a young boy he was cross-eyed. He could not see. This is why he learned to play the mandolin the way he did.” She paused and took a breath. “When I was a child, I was cross-eyed, too. My mother saved all her earnings for many years. We had my eyes fixed. I believe it is why I can hear the music of Bill Monroe so clearly. But you can’t tell they were ever crossed, can you.”

“No,” I said. Over the smell of meat I could detect the heavy scent of patchouli oil on her skin. “No, I would not ever have known.”

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