

Martin Kluger

Der Vogel der spazieren ging

(The Walking Bird)

A Novel, 318 pp.

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Excerpt (pages 9-32)

translated from the German by

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My father is the writer in the family, not I. In the story of my life he's the dispatcher and I'm the eternal messenger.

Many years have gone by, people have died, hearts have been scorched. But the messenger is still alive and must deliver the message that was entrusted to him.

I was an only child and so was my father; there were just the two of us. No others. Two self-made Yankees in Philadelphia, the City of Brotherly Love. Later the rest of the clan gathered around us like the murderers disguised as harmless houseguests in my father's novels. Except, of course, for Uncle Meyer. Meyer had always been there. Meyer, our savior, had dragged my father and little me across the ocean to the New World. Nobody knows exactly how many souls Uncle Meyer 'saved,' or in other words 'iced,' or 'dispatched to eternity' later when he became Boss Neidelman's messenger. The FBI has a file on Meyer. Unfortunately not even international literary interest can move those folks; the file remains classified.

I'll hold on to my earliest memories of America, in fact, the earliest memories I have of life, until I breathe my last. My father is standing on the sunny pier dressed in his European rags, having just escaped from the immigrant barracks and his own interrogation, and he's already driving a newspaper boy up the wall with questions. What could he have been asking the boy? I was a toddler and didn't understand a word (back then three-year-olds were not as articulate and intellectual as they are today), but I remember this first American newspaper boy in my life, his foxy, pointed face, his world-defying yellow and green plaid jacket, and the latest news tucked under his arm. And the tears that suddenly rolled out of his eyes. Father's questions could hurt. And I can still see

the longshoremen; they were hanging in the struts of huge cranes and singing popular songs. America, you have it better, as Goethe correctly prophesied.

Father, who in the dark dim past was alleged to have stolen a relic from Goethe's house (according to Uncle Meyer it was the gold-rimmed pink saucer from which he, that is, my father – certainly not the privy councilor – slurped his coffee every half hour), spat in his hands and got started. As legend would have it he had soaked up several languages by the age of seven; he swallowed languages like a fish; read Dostoyevsky and Kant, debated under the Linden tree with Hargensee elders about God and the world, especially about God. But he never did acquire what the so-called normal, upright burgers considered a 'real profession.' Instead he remembered the country roads on which he traveled from one little town to another.

Ah, the camouflage, the megalomania, the tall stories of the country roads.

As I dictate this I realize that all of us were without a profession, the whole clan, even Letitia. And still we accomplished quite a bit in our lives. Behold the birds of heaven, they do not sow seeds, they do not reap, nor gather they the harvest into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them.

In Philadelphia, our new homeland, Father sustained himself, me, and in the beginning even Uncle Meyer, by playing the piano at weddings and the organ at funerals. Mendelssohn's Wedding March and Chopin's *Marche Funèbre* were the pop music of my early childhood. Rain or snow, school or no school, I had to be there, like the Kid in Chaplin's film. Like Chaplin, Father bet on human emotions, the nuggets of compassion in that great gold digger organization, the United States of America. The snapshots from

those days were always taken by Uncle Meyer, with a camera that had “flown” into his hands. Later he started a red leather photo album for me. The pictures show my congenitally droopy eyelids (*ptosis*), something I had in common with Aristotle Onassis. I tried to see better by permanently raising my eyes a little upward like certain goldfish called stargazers. The result was (and is) heart rending. Also remarkable is the deceptive effect when I simply look directly at the person facing me. The slightly drooping lids lend my eyes an expression of elegant weariness or contemplation, or depending on the wishful thinking of the observer, erotic depth, sexual degeneracy. By the time we finally had sufficient means for me to have an operation, it was far too late. After all, whose eyes, whose glances, at Central High, had won out against the collected muscular competition of baseball tossers and basketball dribblers to captivate, *Body and Soul*, the much-desired, red-haired, full-titted Melissa Green? Melly was the first in a long series of romantic females who thought they recognized a certain purity and beauty of soul behind my congenital defect. I wasn't grateful to her; I left her. I left them all. For beauty is nothing but the beginning of ugliness.

Father played his marches on grand pianos in the living rooms of Society Hill and on the Hammond organ of the Laurel Hill cemetery while I, Sam the Kid, had to look sad as a dog when gazing into happy eyes and stoical as a cat when gazing into sad eyes. I had to shake hands, pretend congratulation or sympathy, and pick up dropped ladies' handkerchiefs so as to smuggle Father's amorous notes into them: *Tonight at Mincie's, sweetie*. We were unbelievably, ridiculously poor, and had never been to the movies, but there was always enough time for Father's hurried copulations with the bridesmaids and

widows of Philadelphia, which he called (if he spoke German, and that he did only when he was beside himself) ‘*Schäferstündchen*’ (an intimate tête á tête) in good Goethe-style.

We lived in a low-ceilinged, ghost-ridden room in the attic of a crumbling two-story brick building that was as narrow as a towel. It had a small backyard garden that we were forbidden to set foot in under threat of instant eviction. Of course I dug around in the dismal plot, filched smelly herbs, and sold them at Penn Central Station. With the money I bought Father lined notebooks and worms for his homemade fishing rod with which he fished in the Schuylkill River. Hardly a ray of light entered this house; we lived like night animals, as if in a painting by Breughel. Our street was Mount Vernon Street in the Spring Garden District near Strawberry Mansion, at that time a Russian-tinged neighborhood. I should add that not too far away was the even more eerie Edgar Allan Poe House with its dark stairway and tapping walls – a fact that Father deliberately withheld when he gave interviews. The Leningrad profiteer, quack doctor, and angel-maker, Leon Zelenski who, once he reached the shores of the New World had taken the name Dr. Lou London, was our tyrant and landlord. Father baptized the house ‘Lenin Castle.’ Whereupon the Leningrader promptly raised the rent. The souls of the embryos sliced out of bodies by Dr. Lou London with indescribable garden tools haunted me nights; they cried in German, in my mother’s tongue; they accused me of not having come to help them so that they could be born and have some sort of life; they swore revenge. The branches of the chestnut tree outside our window cast warnings on the wall of the room, eerily enlarged by father’s midnight lamp, by the light of which he brooded over his secret plan. Father put his hairy index finger to his lips indicating that I should be silent, ‘Be patient, Sam,’ he said softly. ‘It won’t be long now...’

Father was following a plan. He had brought his plan literally, and I mean, letter by letter, he had brought it to America,. Even Uncle Meyer didn't know about the explosive force of this bomb.

Meyer lived on American air and three bummed cigarettes a day; Sundays he would secretly put his cabbage roll – which was now called *stuffed cabbage* – on my plate; he slept under Father's bed, later under mine. He stayed away from weddings, concentrated on funerals, helping the pallbearers, hanging around, listening. He avoided his sponsors, the good Quakers who had made America possible for him and for us, didn't borrow a penny from them, and no Camels either. He didn't want to be seen by them as Meyer Nobody, and certainly had no wish to attend their very sincere, silent Meetings, which were only endurable if you had at least an approximate idea of who you were and what you were doing on God's earth.

With the sure instinct of an East European Shtetl loafer he waited for the funeral of funerals: And then one dark November day, his own savior, Neidelman Junior was escorting Neidelman Senior, alias Black Friday Neidelman, to his grave, accompanied by the wind-wafted sounds of Father's *Marche Funèbre*. Junior recognized in Meyer, that squat, little scarecrow of a man with the instincts of an East European vagabond, his new delivery boy, his messenger of death, his teller of fairytales.

Neidelman had Uncle Meyer outfitted with new clothes and properly equipped – armed of course, too – and put him up in an almost luxurious, compared to Lenin Castle, two-room apartment in Point Breeze. The Depression that had gripped our small New World just after our arrival was gradually giving way to the usual kleptocratic mania.

I spent the longest, most beautiful hours of my childhood in Point Breeze. I manipulated those long hours the way only children can, stretching and extending them, doing everything to keep them from ending. How I loved those long, lazy, meditative hours of the gangsters: Meyer and the other Neidelman men sitting in the deep green upholstered chairs with the ingenious ashtray holders, that typical American invention. The cigarettes were filterless, back then they still smelled sweet and heavy, like girls' thighs (I imagined); they smelled of the South, of sin. The highly expressive way the men had of holding a cigarette. 'Between thumb and index finger,' Uncle Meyer taught me early on, 'everything else looks effeminate.' The dollar bills and the shiny money clips, the evening sun on the bills. The evening sun in the whiskey glasses. The tiny shot of whiskey in my Hershey chocolate milk. The fingering of the good luck charms, engraved rings, key chains, rabbits feet, hearts and saints, the Ace of Clubs stuck in Meyer's hatband, newly drawn every morning and folded three times. The silence. The quick glance at a wristwatch. The phone ringing in the hall. The secret jargon. 'Jamie's gotten to be a stranger, don't you think?' Long pause. Then Meyer saying: 'Does one of you happen to know Jamie's shoe size?' And on the radio my favorite program *I Love a Mystery*.

Now Father had bundles of questions for Uncle Meyer; he wrote them down on his lined slips of paper (Father was afraid of unlined paper), put the pieces of paper into an envelope and sent me to Point Breeze with it. In those days that meant an hour of walking. The streets, the languages, the street corners, the puddles, and the elevated train, none of these were new to me in the New World, for the Old World, as I said before, lay in the dark. Did I remember nothing at all of the little Weimar person I had been, of that

town's cobblestones, Mama's hand maybe, or Paris, the Eiffel Tower, the Place des Vosges, Southampton? No. I had become a new little person in Philadelphia, had never been anywhere else and wasn't dragging a knapsack full of old, sad clothes, around with me, like the Russians and Galizianers on Mount Vernon Street and their children and children's children. And yet, sometimes, when I looked at my reflection in the window of Fred Koenig's fish store on Spring Garden Street, I had an uneasy feeling – no, I'm embellishing (a professional disease of messengers and translators) – I was *sure* that I wasn't me, Sam the Kid, but a totally different person who had taken Sam's place and had cheated the real Sam, or whatever his real name was, out of his happiness in the New World. The genuine Sam, said my guilty eyes under the drooping eyelids and over the dead codfish in Koenig's shop window, is languishing in a dungeon, sentenced to life in prison and hourly whippings for arson. For a fire he did not start. Naturally I didn't tell Father anything about these, thank God, rare fits and depressions. Anyway Father didn't especially like me. I was a burden to him. My mere existence reminded him of times, years, mistakes, stains. It's a wonder he hadn't sold me on some country road or drowned me in the Seine. During those hard first years in Lenin Castle we kept out of each other's way as much as possible. Maybe he too felt that I wasn't his real son, the Original Sam. I confided in Uncle Meyer. Meyer sank into his green armchair. With a sigh he sorted through Father's questions, quickly and brusquely noting the answers in the margins. Then he said enigmatically, 'Identity means guilt. We've always known that, Sam. Nobody has to explain it to us.'

I'll try to briefly describe Meyer Mushkin, he deserves it. He had a small, strong physique, almost square. He ate like a horse, drank like an ox, and smoked like a

chimney. He had never seen the inside of a school, yet he possessed the quickest intuitively perceptive mind of any human being I ever met (only cats react faster). Books weren't his thing, but newspapers and magazines were, and among the latter especially the *Reader's Digest*. Those first desperately poor years in Philly did not diminish his square appearance, at most they made him now look like a slightly shaky clothes rack for gnomes' baggy rags. He was five foot two, but wore orthotics and later hailed the Swinging Sixties with their high-heeled men's boots as a true epoch of progress. Meyer's thick, dark red, curly, wiry hair did not exactly exude *gemuetlichkeit*, nor did his tiny, round, pitch-black eyes which Boss Neidelman – never at a loss for a nice comparison – called *Meyer's muzzles*. The mouth God had thought up for Meyer was that of a diva, orientally olive colored, full-lipped, curved, always a bit pouty. His teeth, on the other hand, which he rarely showed until the fifties (when he had them capped) inspired fear; they were pointed like the teeth of a predator fish. Freckles danced around Meyers bulbous nose.

He made the best of it. In his heyday Meyer had two walk-in closets in his house on Rittenhouse Square. They contained four hundred made-to-measure suits. On the first day of every month his British manservant Barkley carted them off to Applebaum's Dry Cleaners in a delivery truck especially acquired for that purpose. In contrast to many Old World people (like our neighbor Chaim Elender, who now called himself Chip Hollander, or Moshe Gewirtz who became Morris Worthington), Meyer Mushkin did not assume a new name. His Quaker pals, to whose priestless, pacifist faith he soon converted, were full of praise for the integrity of their new friend. Their motto was: Be more than you

appear to be, do your work silently. Meyer took this to heart; he worked quietly, always screwing on his silencer.

I'll say it again: these are assumptions; nothing has been proved. In the life of a man, I've learned, anything, absolutely anything is possible, but nothing, absolutely nothing can be proved. Meyer was charged several times but never convicted, not even after he mysteriously fell out of favor with Boss Neidelman whose connections allegedly reached into the White House.

Meyer had led Father and me to America. And he was destined to rescue us a second time, as will emerge in these pages. Meyer Mushkin was the twenty-year younger brother of Amelia 'Mali' Mushkin: tramp, interpreter of dreams, and a witch who bathed in milk, who would become my father's mother – the grandmother I did not get to know, who visited me at night in my dreams, speaking a language I didn't understand.

Oh Mali, legendary Mali, may your ashes rest in peace, if you knew, if the dead only knew. In some ways you are the focus of the story I have to tell. Socrates said we must practice dying by parting from things, by separating from people. But the memories remain. They don't die with us; they dissolve and recreate themselves, like clouds. You will experience it: Through the sheer will power and obstreperousness of a thirteen-year-old, your great-grandchild, you will once again be among us, we'll meet again.

* * *

At Orly Airport on that humid Sunday afternoon in late August, just before I was finally allowed to welcome my daughter Ashley Inès Djuna, Ashy for short, I had had an

unpleasant transatlantic telephone conversation with old man Hutbinder. He told me in his periphrastic way that he was about to put the words *finis opera Hutbinderi* to the realm of paper that threatened to become the first authorized biography of my father. I tried to calm down by looking out of the window. Checking on what the clouds were doing, that always helped. Mid-high little sheep were grazing deceptively merrily above the gables of Montparnasse, but they were merely the advance guard of the portentous revolutionary masses rolling in from the Porte d'Orléans.

So Hutbinder had really come to the end of the tunnel. And he was authorized. While I, unauthorized, was hiding from myself – in the deepest recesses of my desk – a small file folder that held a meager nine-and-a-half pages. It was my intention to destroy the web of legends, lies, and falsehoods that Father and Meyer had patiently, systematically spun. And – by the stones of the First Temple! – I intended to begin at the beginning, that is to say very far back, if need be with Abraham, with Isaac, with Yahweh, in person. Certainly with the woman who was my mother. Through my agent Bruno Fetterly, a greedy secret source in Weimar had promised new information on that topic. So far Father knew nothing of my plans. Nobody did.

On the other hand, how often had Hutbinder driven me crazy with his announcements from Santa Monica, and then it had turned out to be nothing after all. Franz Hutbinder was Father's first German translator (I became his successor). About the same time I was learning about the erotic effect of my *ptosis* by trying it out on Melissa Green at Philly Central High, Hutbinder was already volunteering to become Father's biographer. More about him later.

Ashy's plane was supposed to land at five o'clock, so I still had some time to put the final touches on her room at the end of the dim hallway – it had formerly been my ping-pong room, before that my parents' bedroom. After putting a plate with an orange on her night table, I tacked up a poster of a 'singer' (who consisted mostly of makeup) on the wall above a supposedly 18th-century secretary from Madrid now painted bright yellow. I had talked my Spanish teacher out of it (she wasn't using it anyway). Lovingly I put my old edition of La Fontaine's *Fables* on the pillow, it wasn't illustrated but spoke for itself. Then I crowned it with another orange. The third one I ate. It woke up my appetite and so I went downstairs to Audrain.

I was very nervous. Today, the cloud drama, usually a meditative show that saves me at least two joints or three Ricards and is worth half a Valium tablet, only brought out my sensitive paranoia, my fear of the beckoning demiurge, of me 'being the intended one' (Dear angry God, if you should exist despite all expectations, let me not be 'the intended one'). It was the family disease. Signs, portents, warnings, a leaf falling on its tip, a stopped railroad station clock, a cross-eyed mailman, an unpeeled grape, sour milk, certain numbers, certain birds, just to list a few of the more harmless examples – and buckets of evil floating above our heads, close to tipping over. And, no, others were not meant, *we* were meant, *we* alone.

I hadn't seen my daughter for two years. Letitia, her mother had forbidden it. So that the child 'could find herself,' she said, meaning of course, for Ashley to find the way to her, to her. But the opposite had happened, over there on the other shore of the English Channel.

Ashley was born in Montevideo, Letitia's native city. Five years later we transplanted her to Paris. Then Letitia and I separated (we weren't married, of course). Ashley went to England with Letitia. I stayed in Paris, which had never meant much to me, and meant even less without my Montevidean child. But where else should I go? Letitia left Ashley behind in an English boarding school when she went to spend some time in Jerusalem, where she was arrested. During those years I lived through one amorous nightmare after another, even had an affair with a pale blonde (the women in my life were all dark as devils). All this time Father remained in Lenin Castle, planted a little tree in the little garden, acquired a big ass, and wrote novels to forget his own wanderings, obliterating them with printers ink, as though they had never taken place.

Ashy would soon be thirteen and would develop an 'awareness' – how awful. And good heavens, I already saw them all, the youths of modern times, pining for her on the boulevards and outside our house, mumbling, disoriented, feeling their way through disaster on tiptoe in slow motion, most of them looking like their own sisters. It made me feel apprehensive to think that her birthday was on the same day as Father's.

I was born on a warm October morning in Hargensee, a small idyllic town in what used to be known as Germany, Father had revealed last year to an amazed audience when he appeared on the 'Dick Cavett Show.' Even Cavett, who's generally pretty unflappable, acted ill at ease, almost peeved. Who was this man American readers had been taking to their hearts and nourishing for decades – a *fucking Kraut?* Hutbinder's biography was casting shadows ahead of itself. Presumably he had to have Father's blessing for every single sentence he wrote; this couldn't have been a picnic for Father's eighty-three-year-old Boswell. But this much was certain after the Cavett Show: Father

was now prepared to throw some crumbs of truth to the people. It's possible that he had an inkling of my intentions and wanted to cut me off. It's possible that he had lost track of things. It's possible that he was simply getting old. Allegedly he was sixty-six. As usual he would be celebrating his sixty-seventh birthday at Lenin Castle, in the company of Meyer and Alan Altshuld, Junior, with coffee and almond shells and the music of his beloved George Frederick Händel.

‘Will Ashy understand me?’ asked Audrain.

I shot him a look.

‘Oh excuse me, Sam.’

Like her mother, Ashy spoke four languages: Spanish (mother tongue), English (father's language), French (language of exile), and a little German. The fifth, a now-dead language, a magic hodgepodge of tenderness and exuberance that we three had spoken to each other in happier times. I was thinking of reviving it in the next ten months. And I had another surprise ready for my daughter. I finally intended to learn Spanish. I had, for various reasons, some of them irrational and some of them good, never learned Letitia's wonderful universal language. Spanish was resistant, it was full of portents, as dangerous as sour milk. It brought trouble and tears; it was a sore point. *Lo siento*. Audrain knew that.

‘How are you coming along with your Spanish?’

‘Slowly. With difficulty. Something in me is still refusing.’

Audrain switched to his, to our favorite subject.

‘How's your father doing?’

‘A Yakuza cut off Perrone's earlobe with the tip of his sword.’

‘A Yakuza? In Philadelphia?’

‘In Tokyo, Perrone is in Tokyo.’

‘You’re kidding.’

‘I’m only on page forty-five so far.’

‘But that’s outrageous! He’s never left Philadelphia before. What’s going to happen to Heinrich?’

I shrugged. At the moment Heinrich’s fate was the last thing that worried me.

‘Your father isn’t sick, is he?’ said Audrain. ‘Do you have any explanation?’

Audrain, the proprietor of *Roi du Cous-Cous*, the restaurant on the ground floor of our house, watched me as I ate. We were speaking French, which I’ll try to translate here in simplified form. Audrain’s couscous was a bit like warmed over porridge, but I swallowed the thick pap because I didn’t have much time before Ashy’s arrival and my kitchen had long been dead for me. When you live by yourself, the kitchen is the loneliest place in the world. Ashy and I had agreed by mail to eat our evening meals in the more unpretentious restaurants of this (reputedly) gourmet citadel of Europe. We probably wouldn’t get beyond the *Roi du Cous-Cous*.

No, I didn’t have an explanation for Paul Perrone’s excursion to Tokyo; it surprised me just as much as it did Audrain. On principle I didn’t read father’s annual novels before translating them. I translated sentence by sentence; it gave me a dancer’s feeling to be writing his books along with him. *Dream dancing, Pops, with you*. I still thought some day I’d be allowed to find coded messages intended only for me in those lines; a ‘Do you remember?’ or a ‘Hello, son, how are you?’ or a ‘Kala! Nag! Kala Nag! Please take me along, O, Kala Nag!’

* * *

Now that the name Paul Perrone has been mentioned, every reader – whether he’s a Canadian lumberjack, a Scottish shepherd, an Indian engineer, or merely a German secondary school teacher – will know who my father is. He’s Jonathan Still, inventor of the best-known detective character of modern times. all in all, *summa summarum*, one-hundred-eighty million copies sold worldwide (exceeded only by Agatha Christie, Lenin, and the Word of God). Repeatedly made into bad films, and for many years now killing time for civilized humanity four times a month via television.

But don’t try to borrow money from me; all the dough belongs to the old man; I just get by. The mantra of my life.

Translated into twenty-nine languages, not counting the pirated copies in the Eastern Bloc; lord and master over twenty-nine word slaves whom he would summon to a secret conference at the Rittenhouse Hotel in Philadelphia every fifteen months at his publisher’s expense so that he could attune them to the fine points of his latest manuscript. Those sessions were always wild. The envy and jealousy among the translators – there were even three women (Hebrew, Esperanto, and Braille) – was exceeded only by their obvious hatred – suppressed in a fashion by the generously flowing California champagne – for the bald man who with his lean six foot frame lorded it over them in all respects. The multimillionaire, there in the Rittenhouse Ballroom, busy explaining to them the little personal idiosyncrasies of his English syntax. How they hated him for this syntax and for his pedantic analysis of it, how they sweated and

suffered and grimaced, feigning attentiveness while secretly calculating how much he might have paid for his shell-shaped cufflinks, his dark blue mohair suit, the Jaeger-LeCoultre Reverso on his wrist, and the custom-made horse-leather shoes. An ordinary translator was paid six dollars per page at the most. As soon as the master had climbed into Altshuld Senior's limousine (Father never learned to drive a car) and was driven off, they left in droves like lemmings. In the days when I was still going to these affairs, they made a big detour around me in my precautionary sunglasses and the invisible fool's cap of the slightly feeble-minded prince. How strange, how characteristic of everything that happened later that, of all places, I should have met Leti there for the first time, Letitia Weintraub from Montevideo. She was seventeen back then, the sole Uruguayan winner of some Quaker scholarship. She sliced the roast, served the translators, wearing a yellow and green plaid apron. Brought that apron along when she moved in with us at Lenin Castle.

Citizen Jonathan Still, recipient of honorary doctorates from the University of Pennsylvania, from the University of Southern California (Hutbinder gave the Laudatio), and from Case Western Reserve; honorary citizen of Philadelphia, honorary chairman of various non-profit organizations and funds, a list of which would have been longer than my arm, a one-time friend of Frank Lloyd Wright, Otto Preminger, Billy Graham, and Buddy Rich (who looked amazingly like Uncle Meyer). How did he stumble on his goldmine?

That Sunday afternoon, bent over my couscous, I couldn't come up with anything except hearsay and legends. Part Three of the legend (we'll deal with Parts One and Two later), which had also been fed to Hutbinder, went like this: Fleeing from the police, the

German police, worse yet, the Gestapo, Father made his way to Paris on foot, accompanied by Meyer and little me. Like the suspects in Father's novels I 'can't remember a thing.' I was little, maybe three years old, as Hutbinder condescendingly told me. He said we lived in a pension on the Rue de l'Université, in an attic, of course, and of course in *one* room. Father left the room only at night to drink fresh water from a street pump. Meyer Mushkin, on the other hand, was active during the day; he spent all his time in cemeteries, standing around, listening. And what do you know, it paid off. A refined English gentleman, accidentally or not accidentally a Quaker who was visiting Balzac's grave, took pity on the gnome. They talked in German about Balzac's *Lost Illusions* (I would have liked to have been there), in the course of the conversation Meyer probably played Rastignac, the utterly lost, would-be revolutionary *Sturm-und-Drang* character, tossing in a few tall stories of the road as well. In any event the gentleman, crazy about Meyer, arranged a meeting with some other gentlemen, American Quakers from Philadelphia, the world headquarters of the Quakers, again at Balzac's grave in Père Lachaise. Very simple, the Americans said, there was this 'American Guild for German Cultural Freedom' which helped out endangered German poets, even getting them entry visas for the United States of America. They would put in a good word for Meyer with the committee. Even back then Meyer already played his aces deliberately, almost unselfishly. That would be wonderful, he said, but other poets ought to be given this opportunity. He himself faints three times a day from hunger and doesn't know whether he would even be able to reach the safety of the American shores. Stop that, the do-gooders said, the Guild offers you thirty-eight dollars a month; all that's required is a

little sample of the author's written work; after all, one can't know all the German geniuses by name, there were so many.

Meyer ordered Father, the worthless son of his sister, to make himself useful for once in his life and to put something down on paper. After all, you've read Dostoyevsky and Kant, Meyer said. Thirty-eight dollars was one thousand two hundred francs, nothing to sneeze at.

That's how it started.

Unfortunately Father's early 'stories' have not been preserved. According to Meyer they dealt with all the things he hated, primarily dogs, cats, and rabbits. The Quakers were delighted. Meyer was considered the 'next angry man.' But none of the other exiled writers ever got to see him or to read as much as a single line of his. For a couple of months Meyer – actually his ghostwriter – almost became the talk of the town. Father paced up and down in the hotel room, his coat draped over his shoulders, his hands buried in his pockets, as though he were waiting for the departure of his train. Then he sat down at the rickety table and went on writing. By then we were already in Southampton. I have no memory of Southampton, not the tiniest memory. The freighter, the ocean crossing, all *tabula rasa*. It was as if only the tears of that New York newsboy had at last breathed life into Golem Junior.

The Americans wanted to arrest Father on the spot. He never expected that he'd have to take his clothes off. In his underwear those tough dogs of the Immigration Service found three pages torn from a Parisian mathematics notebook full of scribbled unreadable symbols and letters, circles, and curves. They were very suspicious of a

German (according to Meyer both he and my father were traveling on Hargensee passports). ‘*Planning to build a bomb?*’ they asked.

They should have investigated where ‘Hargensee’ was actually located. Because not a soul knew; it wasn’t listed on any map of the German or any other empire; it seemed not to exist. Hargensee, Father’s and Meyer’s mythical village, their Camelot.

“Oh yes. Yes, yes,” Father was supposed to have replied absent-mindedly. Meyer managed to clear up this situation too. With father as his interpreter, Meyer is supposed to have said, Gentlemen, the members of our family have always been known for their love of peace; they abhor all things military; one might say, they avoid anything military; basically, all they want to do is to go home. This man is my nephew, Meyer is supposed to have said. And at that the Americans laughed. Meyer was just two years older than Father, but he still had every single strand of his wiry red hair and looked younger. This drawing, Meyer said, concluding his arrogant speech, isn’t a bomb but the sketch for a story about dogs and rabbis.

But it did turn into a bomb. When *Never a Stranger* was published (as usual translated awkwardly into German by Hutbinder under the title *Sprich nicht mit Fremden* [Don’t Speak to Strangers]) no one could have predicted that. Only Father’s publisher, Alan Altshuld, allegedly had “seen it coming” from the beginning. The critics didn’t know quite what to make of the book. It wasn’t Chandler, it wasn’t Hammett; it didn’t have their class. It wasn’t Spillane. Father absolutely refused to use the first person singular in his fiction. Nor was it a field-forest-and-meadow whodunit. Hang it all, what was it then? It was almost unbearably suspenseful, bloodthirsty, quite disgusting, spiced with a good shot of paranoia. Everybody in it thought they were being followed. There

wasn't a single character in the whole book who wasn't leading at least a double life behind a mask of uprightness. Peaceful neighbors turned into evil ogres; harmless chicken farmers became predatory beasts; and Marybeth, a young blond woman from the Salvation Army poisoned half of Philadelphia with polluted tap water. The readers found it all *oddly, eerily* familiar, as though they had heard it 'somewhere' (in a previous life?) before. It was on the tip of their tongues, but they couldn't put their fingers on it: They had read a fairy tale.

The camouflage, the delusions of grandeur, and the cock-and-bull stories of the road –this had been his school. The rest he stole.

Father had a habit of reading a lot but always secretly, behind closed doors, on the toilet, in the garden shed. It was as if he were afraid of being caught with a book. We didn't talk about books at home; they were just as taboo as my mother was. He put the books he loved, the ones I was supposed to read, on my pillow. I went along with his wishes, devouring Kipling and Thomas Hardy and still more Kipling in my own secret nooks and corners. God knows we didn't read 'girlie' magazines, Father and I; yet reading in Lenin Castle had something masturbatory about it.

He didn't give a damn about the European cultural connection, he later snapped at Bruno Fetterly, my highly sensitive German professor at Oberlin College, Ohio. Fetterly had dared to point to the influence of Leo Perutz in Father's first book, with the mistaken assumption that he'd be praised for his perspicacity. Jonathan Still was as American as apple pie, said my annoyed father. By that time he'd already checked the umbilical cord that connected him to Hargensee (wherever it might be) and the eastern European country roads, and he never intended to claim the bloody thing again. But twist and turn it as he

might, the addictive potion Jonathan Still doled out to his reading public all over the world never quite stopped tasting of fairy tales – and of his distant childhood as I imagined it, of bittersweet almond shells, flying fish, dancing cinnamon sticks, talking bushes, cardamom, oil, myrrh, the sad stones of the country roads, and a longing to find the way back home.

Of course he had made use of Leo Perutz. At the end of *Never a Stranger*, just as in Perutz's *Master of the Day of Judgement*, it turns out that the narrator himself is the 'brain,' the seducer, and the instigator of the murder. Moreover he's easily recognizable by all who knew him or better yet, those who survived him, as our landlord, Leon Zelenski alias Dr. Lou London. To that he added a suitable shot of horror and terror from our dead neighbor Edgar Allan Poe and a flattering, pleasantly surprised, almost childish view of America – Father's readers loved him for it. And last but not least, the first appearance, still as a secondary character, of the remarkable detective Paul Perrone.

Never a Stranger was published by a practically unknown, close to bankrupt small New York house on East 8th Street, Porcelain Press, which was striving to make the cuisine of the Far East attractive to American housewives. Alan Altshuld, an amateur cook and an amateur Buddhist, who had been disowned by his family, managed the tiny outfit practically by himself. He hadn't been dealt a lucky hand (Pearl Harbor interrupted things) and now he was sitting on a small mountain of unsellable cookbooks and a big mountain of debts. Copies of his own book, *For They Know Not What They Believe*, which on the occasion of Alan's seventieth birthday Father would force on the twenty-nine foreign publishers of Perrone, were sitting, like lead, on the shelves of the three bookstores that had ordered them. Then Alan made one last attempt: he put an ad in the

newspaper, announcing that Porcelain Press was looking for the “great novel of the South.” But everyone was always looking for that. With my help, newspaper reader Meyer forced open Father’s desk, grabbed the manuscript which Father would have kept polishing till the end of his life, and brought it to Altshuld in New York. The publisher didn’t quite know what to do. Quaker Meyer encouraged him, appealing to his humanity. The contract of all contracts was drawn up. Altschul was by now so broke, he couldn’t pay Father even as little as a nickel advance. Instead he offered Father higher royalties – for *Never a Stranger* and three additional novels. *Twenty* additional novels, Father demanded. He was suddenly quite sure of himself. They both got rich, but Father got richer.

There remained the question of the author’s identity.

Father intended to make Paul Perrone the hero of his next twenty books; the detective had become his imaginary friend (of necessity an only child has to populate his own small world) with whom he conversed for hours at a time as he introduced himself to his female bed playmates. More than anything, Father would have liked to publish under the name ‘Perrone.’ Altshuld opposed this; he didn’t want any *Dago*, any ‘maccaroni’ as an author. For a while Father played with various adventurous and peculiar life stories; after all, here he was in the land of unlimited opportunity. Boxer, cowboy, and cop still corresponded with the usual ideas of a Little Moritz Immigrant, but what old devil was riding him when he thought up foundling, hermit, and wandering monk? In the end he settled for the enigmatic: *He was born in Philadelphia where he lives in seclusion*. Let the readers talk about it and puzzle over it. The readers didn’t care one way or the other.

After only a few years every cover of his books carried the promotional slogan: *A Paul Perrone Extravaganza*.

Father's self-baptism was performed at the New Palace movie theater on South Street in Philadelphia. This time even I was there. We had gone to see *I Wake Up Screaming* with Carole Landis. Meyer paid for Altshuld's movie ticket and bought me peanuts. First they showed the Weekly Newsreel – pictures of war, of the roundups, of human corpses under dead horses by the side of the road. The machinery of the master race was running at full speed. I felt shame with every single peanut I ate. A boy crying next to a dead woman under a dead horse, wasn't *he* the real, the genuine Sam whose life I had stolen? When would he come to take revenge?

Then Father, not usually one to smile, smiled.

"Still," he said. "Jonathan Still."

Meyer didn't understand.

"*I'm still here, ain't I?*" Father said. And that was how Yehuda Leiser (that was Father's real name) became Jonathan Still.

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