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## A Glass Shard and Memory

I SING THE THEME SONG from *The Howdy Doody Show* softly, at least as well as I can recall it after a half century, as I step in front of the television set, a hammer in my left hand. I think of the hammer as a misshapen key to open a heavily bolted door. I have a flight to catch in two hours, a conference to attend on the modern European short story, but I'm troubled by doubts, a reluctance to leave my house. It is the house I inherited from my parents; the house my wife and I lived in for nearly two decades; the house I am attempting to sell, to split the proceeds with my soon-to-be former wife. I think of the time my father, a month after the family had purchased our first television set, a black-and-white model with a rabbit-ears antenna that never seemed to stay in place, kicked in the set. Kicked so hard and repeatedly that he broke his foot and cut his ankle, requiring over thirty stitches. I don't know if this remembering is memory treachery or a vital confrontation of the past. Past and memory, my embracing lovers and cutthroat torturers. My father, I remember clearly, wasn't wearing his shoes and had on his one lightweight summer suit, a bluish-green suit he had purchased at a clothing store next to the movie theatre after seeing a Western with his wife and infant son. I know this because my mother told the story of the suit purchase and subsequent television demolition often as I was growing up, like a cautionary fairy tale, changing the story slightly for each telling. When my father silently entered the living room, I was watching *The Howdy Doody Show* with a friend, both of us little boys whistling the theme song beautifully, fully transported into the boisterous, exuberant Peanut Gallery of that children's show. Then the swift, repeated kicks. I cried, as if a hand had reached inside my heart and pulled out the tears; the other boy laughed, almost adult laughter. We were discordant viewers of an argument with mortality and a life never assembled properly. That was the phrase I used in a short story I wrote about my father, a few grieving months after his heart attack. One of the two short stories I had

ever published before losing myself in an academic world of writing about the writings of others. Back then I just wanted to be in the Peanut Gallery with my friend, to be a child even if I could not fathom the preciousness and perishability of childhood.

“Why did you do that?” my laughing friend asked, his laughter collapsing into a little boy’s cough.

Tears in his eyes, blood all over the carpet, my father sat down on an old chair near the living room window, and described what he had seen on the television screen, described the marching soldiers in detail. Poland, he said, asking my friend if he knew where Poland was, asking again, asking every child in the world. “Poland for me was a—” he said, unable to finish the tattered geography lesson.

“Dad, I want to watch television,” I said, my tears still jabbing at my words and thoughts, my father now whispering but his detailed recollection no less painful. Their uniforms, he would never forget their horrifying uniforms, or the cold faces, the fiercely wind-milling arms, the merciless boots punishing the ground. I would visit Poland years later, find the little town my father had lived in, closed my eyes and listened for the marching soldiers.

My mother walked into the living room, looked around as if doing reconnaissance for a military operation—I scold myself for thinking the image—and she shook her head. She was wearing a lovely nightgown despite it almost being suppertime. A nightgown that both of us boys wanted to touch.

“Who’s going to clean up this mess?” she said in her Yiddish accent, bending down and carefully picking up a small piece of the television screen. She held up the shard to the light, seeming to search for an entranceway to another world, perhaps a better time. My mother’s eyes, brown like mine, so often seemed to be looking elsewhere. She died just last year but she did not recognize me at the end, had called me by another name for months before her death. It was a Yiddish name, but no one I could locate in her past. Afterward I discovered that it was the name of a character in a Yiddish film that had been made not far from her village in Poland when she was a little girl, and a friend of hers from the old country claimed they both had been extras.

In my mind I pick up a shard of the TV screen, the same piece my mother had picked up, and cut my fingers, the blood flowing over the cover of an unreadable history book. I do not have a strong stomach for such things. Then, seeking an escape route, from the present and the past, fleeing in two directions at once, I strike the television set with the hammer, strike

the screen several times before I drop the hammer and pick up the largest shard of the shattered screen. I do not think of the hammer as a misshapen key any longer. I don't feel disoriented or confused, not even frightened, only sad, deeply sad. But I have a life to live, tasks to perform, and I start to tidy up my thoughts. I would have to hurry if I wanted to reach the airport in time.



About half an hour after the plane, in the middle of a soft drizzle, had left the airport, a baby in the second last row begins to cry. "Oh, darling, please don't be unhappy," the child's mother says.

A man, tapping frantically away at his laptop computer's keyboard, yells, "This isn't fair," not taking his eyes off the computer monitor.

"What's wrong?" I ask the stranger, regretting my question as soon as I had uttered it. I rub the bandages on two of my fingers, concerned that I hadn't cleaned the wounds sufficiently, that maybe I should have gone to the hospital and gotten stitches. I have the paper I am going to deliver at the conference on my lap, wanting to prepare for my presentation.

"I am writing a report on the consolidation of my electronics company, which means getting rid of at least a dozen employees. I find it all incomprehensible, yet I have to write the report. For what?" he says, his fingers tapping rapidly at the keyboard. I look at the laptop's screen as he types, and read his awkward, rambling sentences, sentences that seem to have nothing to do with an electronics company, then turn my head away. "For what? For what?" he continues to say as he types, his typing like a frenzied pianist unable to end his concert, despising the indifference of his instrument. I decide that as soon as I reach my hotel room, I will put antiseptic on the cuts, before going to the conference. I recall the first academic paper I ever delivered, on Kafka's early short stories. Three decades ago, a lifetime of stumbling through the past and memories. That was almost the end of my academic career. My first paper, six months of research and writing, a hundred splendidly crafted footnotes, and it was almost all over then and there. "Kafka, in my estimation, was the greatest writer of the twentieth century," I had started out, in my nervousness staring at my paper, the words in front of me transforming, unable to read them, the presentation turning into a hand-shaking improvisation. "Kafka was a fucking great writer. Kafka was a great fucking writer. Kafka was a fucking superb prose stylist . . ." I had tried to translate my words into German but that only made my presentation more grotesque. I smile at the horrid recollection, viewing some

old, grainy film with wretched production values and a director who had lost all sense of filmmaking. Standing in front of a roomful of academics, a keen doctoral student ready to make his presence felt, I had turned into an academic Lenny Bruce, I later described to the head of the history department. A delving into my parents' past, some reluctant sighs of forgiveness, a leave of absence, and I was back on the academic horse again. The paper was published, a few months later I was reinstated, and Kafka was Kafka, no longer burdened with the that fucking epithet. Now I looked around for Kafka, curious to see if he had made it onto this flight.

The tallest flight attendant I had ever seen pushes her metal dolly through my thoughts and toward the back of the plane, distributing soft drinks and coffee and juices. I ask for apple juice and wonder what the height requirements are to be a flight attendant, the minimum and maximum. Surely this woman exceeded the maximum. She has to bend over not to hit her head against the ceiling of the plane. I mention something about professional basketball and try to make a joke about Gregor Samsa getting transformed into a madly dribbling basketball star, utilizing his abundant legs.

The child begins to cry even louder, like someone ordered to test the limits of the human voice. Like a scientific experiment on crying.

I am in the middle of three seats, the computer man to my right and a woman, wearing a uniform I can not identify, perhaps some sort of religious order, to my left, looking out the small window. She kisses the window, kisses it as if it were the lips of a lover. This woman, I speculate, is terrified of flying and finds comfort in thoughts of an imaginary lover.

Unable to concentrate on my academic paper, I remove a travel-oriented magazine and the sickness bag from the pocket on the back of the seat in front of me. I read the instructions and look inside the sickness bag as if expecting to find something interesting, like a kid looking for a prize in a box of Crackerjacks. I lose interest in the sickness bag and start to read the magazine. There is an article on European art galleries. The largest photograph of any art gallery discussed is one in Munich. How odd, I think: I was born in Munich. But that was many years ago, a few months after the war had ended, the Second World War. Munich, I was born in Munich, to Polish-Jewish parents, I say to the giant flight attendant, telling her that my ex-wife is tall, but nothing like her height. She tells me she is not that tall, but I have eyes, I see her magnificent stature. The woman seated to my left says she was briefly engaged to Gregor Samsa, and I do not want to talk to her. The man typing his report says he has fantasies about playing pro basketball, slam-dunking, making the winning basket in overtime, but he is so pathetically unathletic-looking it isn't funny.

“When will we be landing?” I ask, attempting to sound calm and unafraid, to block out the passengers on either side of me.

Just then the smallest flight attendant I have ever seen approaches. “This plane does not land,” she says, “until I am as tall as she,” pointing to the tall flight attendant. I notice that both women have similar eyes, large and the blue-green of a tranquil lake. My parents rarely took me for outings, but once we went to a relative’s lakeside cottage, and these eyes are the colour of that calm lake in the middle of summer. Also, the colour of the one lightweight summer suit my father ever owned. He tended to favour darker, heavier suit and sports coats. When he had his heart attack my father hadn’t spoken in close to three months. As he was dying, he started to sing a Yiddish lullaby.

The computer man taps harder at his keyboard, utters protests and curses in profusion, the woman kisses the window more passionately, refusing to abandon her imaginary lover, Gregor Samsa or whoever, and I think I can see the outline of a face on the window, a handsome face, and I prepare for a long, sad flight.



“I force myself to believe that life has meaning. For my mother and father. Not for myself. For me, life means shit, is a fucking pile of nothing shit ....”

The woman next to me in bed says this after we have made love, lying there in the dark, but I don’t say anything, let her release her diatribe at the wall she is facing. She tells me she is fifty-eight, my age, and was born in Germany. What if we had been born in the same city? Why, I ask myself, am I afraid of such a coincidence? Why even contemplate it? She has aged well, looking like late forties. She tells me I have a boyishness in my eyes, mischief, but she thinks I’m sixty. I don’t contradict her, merely touch the little remaining hair I have as if that will restore both my long hair and my youth. She had told me she was a poet, had just published her fifth book, a book about making love after the cessation of hostilities. I asked her to explain what that means, but she did not seem to hear me. I had never heard of her, but I certainly don’t know the name of every published poet. I tell her for the first time that I’m an academic, an English professor, but she says nothing to my revelation. We had met in the hotel’s bar, she writing furiously in a notebook. She looked up at me and said, “I have been anthologized profusely.” I wanted to criticize that sentence, to circle it on a term paper and offer my comments. She had recited half a poem before

we started to make love, as she undressed slowly at the foot of the bed, and gave the other half afterward, her face turned away from me. I liked the second half of her poem better than the first. The words “the unruliness of God’s compassion” were in both sections. The image I liked best, however, was “madness forms a soft pillow to ease the harsh sleep.” I told her, my head on her breasts, that madness does indeed form a soft pillow.

“What are you doing here?” she asks, turning suddenly to face me.

The question frightens me. “This particular hotel?” I respond.

“In this city. This cold, rainy city,” she says.

“I came to a conference to deliver a paper. I couldn’t. I broke a television set in my hotel room.” I feel like I am giving a report to a police officer investigating the damage. “I agreed to pay the damage and check out immediately. I told the hotel manager that I was sure he’d gotten worse from a partying rock band, but he didn’t crack a smile.”

“Why’d you break the television set?” she asked.

“I saw something that distressed me . . . .”

She asks about my bandaged fingers, the cuts I received from the shards of the TV screen. I tell her about the children’s shows I used to like. Not just *Howdy Doody*, but others. She liked *Mr. Dressup* and *The Friendly Giant*. I try to place the years those shows were on the air, how old I was when I watched them. I also enjoyed those programs, I say, but my earliest TV recollections are of *Howdy Doody*.

“My son could not bear life,” she tells me, turning away from me again, watching a frightening children’s show. “He had his grandmother’s, my dear mother’s, concentration camp number put on his forearm when he was fifteen years old. Difficult to comprehend why he did that . . . .” As she speaks she looks at her left forearm.

“I read a story about a man, a professor, a tormented history professor, who went to a tattoo parlour and had a concentration camp number put on his forearm—his mother’s number,” I say, more like delivering a lecture. She asks who the author is and I tell her I can’t remember for the life of me, but the title of the story I’d never forget: “The Apostate’s Tattoo.” She smiles, because her father called himself an apostate, but an *alter kocker* apostate. Never lost his Yiddish accent, she says. Either did my mother or father, I think, but do not say aloud.

I trace a finger down her back until I reach the bottom of her spine. Then I journey back upward, to the top of her spine, as if the boniness was a treacherous trail I have to stay on, dare not depart from. She keeps talking about all the horrors that were before her eyes and mind, clearly to her on the dark wall. I don’t know what she is saying, but I leave the dangerous

trail. I put the finger to her lips, and she licks and kisses my finger. Not tentatively but fiercely, ferociously, as if attempting to drown me in passion. She moans, trying to hold back a sound of pain. Moans again, then releases the painful sound. "I love you," she says to me, and cries, cries for her mother and father, she explains, who had met a few months after her mother had been liberated from Auschwitz. Strange, I say, I dreamed about the Second World War a few nights before, a dream that had left me trembling and unable to speak for the entire morning. Then I once more remembered the time my father kicked in a television set. I hoped it isn't genetic, I say. Our meeting was not an accident, the woman says. She tells me of a horrifying dream of a plane flight that was scheduled to land at Auschwitz and attempt a rescue, but could not land.

"Who was the pilot?" I ask, and prepare to make love again with the woman. I do not tell her my mother had also been in Auschwitz. I want to tell her the truth, an important truth before we make love again, but I am unable to reveal that fact of history.

