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Complete Fiction and Life-writing

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Last Orders

This story considers distance, remoteness and alienation in geographic and psychological terms. I hope the protagonist surfs to a safer shore.

Ron Singer

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In this fictional memoir the mistaken funeral episode really took place, and it made me think a lot about my father's family. Then, thinking about my Peace Corps days in the 1960s, I remembered how many of my co-volunteers had died. I hope this story captures the spirit of those times, which combined idealism and serious work with silliness.

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Faber-Castell Classic Colour Pencils by Aeen Norouzi¹ Translated from Persian by Yasaman Rahmani

It was exactly twenty minutes before the New Year; approximately fourteen hours before our flight to Russia.

Going to a place like Russia was obviously a gift from the universe, as I thought, given only to me while the rest of my family was just tagging along. Not just because I had never been abroad before, but also because I was a pimply-faced teen, like everyone at that age, who would think he was the most important person on earth.

For the first time in my life I did not have new clothes for the New Year, due to (as my mother repeated a thousand times) the fact that I was in puberty and I would outsize any clothes, in just a few months. This was one of their rationalisations for the miserliness which had passed on through generations in my family and was so obvious that even a thirteen-year-old boy could sense it. The truth was that I did not care. The only thing on my mind was that colourful cathedral on the box.

I was in the third grade when I saw the box; Faber-Castell classic colour pencils 48L, all in metal. The fattest boy in our class, who was famous for eating ants in front of everyone, took the box out of his old grey backpack. Seeing him own those fine colour pencils was a bit of a shock, because if he had come from a rich family, he would not have to eat ants just to attract others' attention, as I assumed he did. The picture on the box was taken from a bizarre place. There was a huge palace-like building, with five or six colourful domes that looked just like candies and cookies that we had seen in cartoons. The walls of the palace were brick red and the variously sized domes were coloured differently from each other. They were striped in white and blue, red and green, blue and maroon, pear green and yellow and finally there was a small golden dome at the highest spot of the structure. The whole picture was so magnificent that I could never believe it could exist in real life. The ant boy insisted on the fact that his mother had seen the palace herself, but he couldn't remember its name. We ended up betting on it, and when the teacher told us that the picture was actually the Kremlin palace in a country named Russia which was ironically so near to our country on the north border, for a moment I felt betrayed. I felt so retarded. Millions of people had visited that place, and a great number of them could see that every day on their way to school, work or home, while I had even failed to acknowledge that it was real. That day, on my way back home, I wished I could visit it sometime. Although deep down I knew it would never come true.

Years later, when I visited Moscow, I felt betrayed again. It was not the Kremlin but Saint Basil's cathedral, which was always on TV news whenever something happened in Russia. Standing in front of it was really something for a child born in my family. We were of those people who never thought about going abroad. If we sorted out ourselves and cut out all the expenses, we could spend a couple of days in Dubai or Istanbul. But Moscow or Saint Petersburg were words that my parents could not even spell. The only way my wish could have come true was through a stranger who was new in our family: my sister's husband, who worked in a travel agency. The

¹Born in 1990, Tehran, Aeen Norouzi is a published writer. He won the National Literary Olympiad in 2008 and Tehran Story Award twice in 2014 and 2015. His latest work, a Persian novel titled *The Gastrointestinal System*, was published by Cheshmeh in 2017.

agency appreciated his hard work by offering him and four of his relatives a cheap tour to Russia.

The last couple of hours before that trip didn't go well for us, though. Early in the morning we were getting ready to celebrate the New Year. Our impending trip to Russia had influenced all our behavior. My mother wandered through rooms, reminding us of what we needed for the trip. For the first time, the fanfare in our home had a real meaning, as we were anticipating a jubilant event to happen in a couple of hours. Commanded by my mother, everyone had worn their best clothes to take some pictures in front of the 'Haft Sin'.² My father had put on his best jacket, looking for a proper tie. Even I had to wear a tie, in fact my father's old and small tie, to be posh, and that was another saddening thing about that day.

We had never done such things before. Of course there was photographing in all the ceremonies, as if we were celebrities who would take thousands of pictures in order to choose the best ones, but wearing our best suits and ties and seeing my mom wearing a mini skirt sounded extremely cheesy to me whereas today, it occurs to me, that to my mom the whole idea was to preserve the happiness of that day.

I put the camera on self-timer and lodged myself beside mom who was worried about showing too much through that tight skirt. My father stood behind her and affectionately put his hand on her shoulder and a bunch of her styled hair which made her uncomfortable and worry about her hair, but there wasn't enough time to talk about it in two seconds. She probably thought there was much time left to take numerous pictures, not guessing that it would be the first and the last picture of that day which was never even developed.

With much certainty I'd say, twenty minutes till the turn of the year, we heard the doorbell. It was my uncle, wearing a pair of old jeans that was thoroughly dotted with grime. He asked for me and my father to go downstairs, while my mom was talking to one of her numerous friends, boasting about the trip, which probably, they had already made!

Seeing half of my uncle's face was enough to guess that something bad had happened or was about to happen. I leaned forward to hug him, but he pulled back and said, 'So, where's your dad?'

'Probably talking to mom, but he's coming. You alright?'

He winked a couple of times, maybe out of sadness or anger, but didn't say a word. The awkward moment was taking too long till my father finally came down, with his fat feet lifting all the dust on the stairs with every step of his.

'Where's Soheila?' My uncle asked him.

'Doing some stuff. Want her down?'

'No,' he answered decisively. 'It's about Aziz! Her house's burnt down; entirely I guess!' He said. 'But she's alright.' He added after a minute's pause.

I felt my whole body go numb. Was it as unreal as every other thing about that day? I leaned my face toward the wall next to the door. Only then I could see the other person in my uncle's car, a woman sitting still, not even looking at us, but I could see her lips trembling in a fine rhythm. My grandma and her burnt house were real.

I opened the back door of the old Peugeot 405; the smell of roasted meat and burnt coal hit me. I went half way into the car, but hugging my grandmother was a bit strange at that moment. I didn't know what to say, nor did I have the energy to move and sit beside her. All I did was stay in her arms until I felt she was uncomfortable. She wanted me out. Putting my tingly buttock on the rough car seat, I finally asked, 'You alright, Aziz?'

There was pure silence. She didn't even wink. My uncle coming by the car said, 'She won't

²Haft Sin table or spread: the traditional New Year custom in Iran that consists of a ceremonial display of the seven symbols of the arrival of spring to celebrate the day of the vernal equinox.

talk.’ Then I heard my mom, crying out in the street. Maybe I should hate myself for this, but at that moment, imagining our trip was going to be canceled because of a burnt house, left me desperate, whereas seeing my grandma in that state or thinking about my childhood house entirely destroyed was not that horrible. Any good mood vanished in less than a minute and we had turned into that same boring family.

Going upstairs to take our ties off and put ordinary clothes on, I was thinking about any possible relation between being sad or angry and not wearing proper clothes. But when I saw my mom, texting on her phone so quickly, everything became clear to me.

We got there in no time. My aunts and their families had already arrived. Of course no one said, ‘Happy New Year’. No one even realised the turn of the year, or at least didn’t mention it. I could see them looking at their watches once in a while to check on the special moment but when it came, as I was counting the minutes, no one seemed excited.

The door was open, so I hurried enthusiastically, ahead of everyone to enter the house. My father yelled: ‘Whoa,’ then came forth and said, ‘Don’t just blunder like a fool! The roof might fall on you, moron.’

He said that in such a tone as if we hadn’t been embracing each other for those pictures less than an hour ago. My uncle came down and said that he had just checked everywhere, and that the doors and walls were mostly intact; the entire furniture was burnt, though. That meant he had heard my father shouting at me and it was much of an embarrassment. It was so naïve of me to think that going to Russia could change our family’s etiquette. Dad’s disgraceful action and mom’s ceaseless grumble were taking us down to the very actual level we had been in our entire lives; to our originals.

The smell of charred plastic, carpet and even fruit wafted across the staircase. I could smell the burnt oranges as I used to scorch them on the heater when I was a child. When I entered the living room, the bowl of fruit on the floor caught my attention at first. Three oranges, looking like charcoal balls, and a shrunk banana that was similar to fava bean shell, were in a china bowl, all discoloured to a brownish hue.³

My grandma came in to her own house, looking around with perplexed eyes, and suddenly started crying. I had never heard an old woman wail before. She started opening every single shelf and cabinet and emptied them on the floor, like it was a command she had to obey. She wouldn’t let go of the smallest things. Holding a pack of spaghetti in her hand, she insisted on not throwing it out. The pack had melted on its edges and a couple of spaghetti strands were half incinerated in it. My mother tried to snatch it from her, but she started yelling and resisting. Even for a woman that stingy, the reaction was out of proportion. She was trying her best to preserve the least useful stuff among all those charred rubbish. All her life was destroyed just because of a samovar.⁴

The whole situation was like a pulp fiction; a grotesque attempt to depict the contradiction between two different situations. My cousins, wearing all their new clothes, came to see their grandmother’s burnt house and we, on the other hand, were about to go on the most important trip of our lives that same night. Nobody could pick on us or ask us to cancel our trip. But they could read it in our eyes while we were rummaging through all the burnt furniture, that half of our minds were busy fancying Russia, a country where its coldness, even in early spring, was opposed to that

³ A species of flowering plant in the pea and bean family *Fabaceae*. It almost resembles green beans; the fruit is a broad, leathery pod that is green, but matures to a dark blackish-brown, with a densely downy surface. It is widely planted in Iran and the beans – whether steamed in shells or chopped and mixed with rice – are quite popular.

⁴ A metal container traditionally used for heating and boiling water in Russia, which was introduced to Iran during the Safavid Era and over time became an integral part of the Iranian culture. Samovars are found in almost all domestic and public spaces.

burnt house.

Our trip started with vexation. My mother cried in the airport and called my aunt's house with one of those free airport phones to check on her mother. I, on the contrary, was enjoying myself to the fullest extent. But everything became serious, the moment I cast my eyes on one of those blue-eyed Russian flight attendants. Before that, my mind was filled with far-fetched dreams, but then everything seemed real. Looking back, I realise how exciting the trip was, although I regret having been so young at that time. I was sixteen and a visit to Hermitage Museum could be so boring for a youngster. All I could think of was showing off about seeing Da Vinci and Raphael, or Lenin's mummified body, well-matched with a face so white that it looked as if he was afraid of all those people circumambulating him, even though one was not allowed to do so more than once and then had to exit the exhibition.

To me, Moscow was compressed in its subway and in Saint Basil's cathedral. Watching all those strangers commuting through the subway, wandering around, headed to places I didn't even know existed, was the ultimate adventure. We got off in every station just to look around. As others were occupied by the paintings and the tiles on the ceiling, I watched people. They didn't smile much or even look around. They would simply put their bottles down immediately after the last gulp. This could happen anywhere and the funny thing was that they didn't throw the bottles, just put them so gently on the floor. All the corridors were full of empty bottles like a bowling club filled with frozen-faced blond players.

When I had a photo of me taken in front of Saint Basil's, I felt blessed. I wondered if any of them, walking around the Red Square, had a story like mine. Which of them had seen that illustration on a colour pencil tin box? I felt unique, and it made me happy.

The journey was not entirely void of dark moments, though. Despite all our efforts to behave like those civilised Europeans, our originality popped up every now and then. This got bolder when it came to my parents. My father kept skipping the museums that we were supposed to visit, just to save the entry fee. Food was another catastrophe. Most nights we had to eat the canned-food we had brought from Iran, instead of going to restaurants and getting familiar with Russian cuisine. I can remember the mornings in which my mom served herself with nearly all the salami in the hotel's buffet, in order to make us little sandwiches which she would wrap in big white tissues and dump in her purse. My sister and I objected and our new son-in-law probably just smiled in embarrassment. But later, when we were starving in the streets of Moscow and Saint Petersburg, these little wraps would save us.

One night before our departure, I made my second wish. My brother-in-law and I were waiting in a queue at a McDonald's while the rest were looking for an empty table. There were not more than five or six people in the line. When people reached the cashier, they would quickly order and then exit the line. Everything looked ordinary, even to us as tourists. But a moment later, the woman ahead of us said something in Russian to the girl who was before her in the queue. The woman was obese and hulking, wearing a tacky black t-shirt, whereas the girl was petite with a pony tail. Their entire conversation, which we guessed was about the turn in the queue, took less than thirty seconds. The woman grabbed the skinny girl by her pony tail, pulled her out of the line and dragged her along to the end of the queue, and then threw her right behind us and returned to her place in the line. Neither did the girl make a fuss, nor did she try to escape from the woman. In the whole process, which lasted less than a minute, no one even turned his head to look at them. It was only us, always craving for a fight in the streets, who looked on. I turned my head and looked into the girl's eyes. I had become reckless for I knew I'd leave that country in less than a day. I can still remember that moment. She looked as if nothing had happened. Her large slant eyes were empty of any emotion, looking straight at a point I couldn't locate; so I turned my head back to see if she was looking at the woman or something specific, but there was absolutely nothing.

Faber-Castell Classic Colour Pencils by Aeen Norouzi. Translated by Yasaman Rahmani.

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The woman had ordered her food and was already gone.

This brief incident is the weirdest recollection I have of that trip. That moment I wished I could get close to a Russian, preferably a tall blonde girl. The differences between us and Russians made me think of them not less than aliens. All I wanted was to talk to one of them and ask her how they could manage to behave like that.

Two years after the burning incident, my grandma passed away in a new apartment which her children had bought her. When she died, she was alone at home, perhaps thinking about her old house.

Every time I heard something about Russia, I remembered her death. She never got to know anything about a place like Russia, but her death was forever associated with it in my mind. While we were busy with her memorial service, the result of the university entrance exam was announced. I had spent the entire year wasting my time, so I couldn't be dissatisfied with the outcome. I thought the best major that would fit my grades was Persian literature, and I went for it. Two years later, when I constantly cursed myself for my choice, Alena came to our university. She was a short Russian girl who had come to join a handful of other international students at our university. The rest of them were all from China who tried to behave so politely that sometimes I thought there were no common grounds between us. It looked as if we couldn't communicate much except about the courses, and that too with extensive gesticulations. But Alena was nothing like that. From the very moment I saw her, I thought she was different. Unlike most Russians, she was neither tall nor blonde and her slant black eyes resembled those of the Koreans. That was when I realised, no one can ever be as lucky as he wishes. There is always something missing. The incident in my grandma's house the night we were going on a trip and the first and only Russian girl in my life having dark hair were ironic enough.

Approaching the semi-dream girl of my life took me two months. Coming from a strange place was enough to make a celebrity out of her on the campus, despite her lack of any special beauty. When I told her that I had once visited her country, she was surprised and happy, but not as much as I had expected. I had imagined that the moment I broke it to her, all the ice would melt and she would find nobody closer to her than myself.

Every time we met, I talked about Russia, as if that was the only common thing I could find between us. People mostly warm up to certain subjects. Like soccer results, only to let your conversation with an old college friend, for instance, last for a minute or so. Our relationship was sliding down to the same state, but I couldn't let that happen, so I tried teaching her some Persian poems and proverbs to get her to talk.

Alena was busy studying. The professors were easy on her so that she could pass the courses. Some of her classmates practised the lessons with her before the exams, and I talked to her once in a while. Then gradually I realised I couldn't keep her out of my mind. I wasn't mature enough to think that we had met by chance, but now that she was there, I couldn't resist the temptation. So I asked her out. I took her to the best restaurant I knew. All I could think of, as a special treat for her, was booking a table in the terrace to make our date a bit romantic. It was late April, but it didn't feel much cooler than August. The sun shone as if its rays came right through our scalps. She was dressed so casually as if she was headed for the university without any makeup or hairdressing. The only different thing was her light blue scarf which let her auburn wavy hair show off and wander, but that was nothing like I imagined or expected.

I began to talk about our professors and mock them to break the ice, yet every time I stopped talking, an awkward silence ensued. There was something in her eyes waiting to slip away but her lips only opened to form a false laugh and I had to come up with another pathetic jest.

Finally when the main course arrived, I burst out and asked, 'Don't you want to talk about something? Anything?'

She paused and began to play with her food, then looked into my eyes for the first time on that day and said, 'You know, I wish my studies were finished, so I could go back home.'

'Is it that bad in here?'

'Not at all, actually it's about Sergey waiting for me there.'

Apparently, the amazement on my face was so obvious that she instantly added, 'My boyfriend, kind of fiancé,' with a wicked smile.

The irony was back. She probably didn't even sense that the lunch we were having was a date. A foreign classmate who couldn't even speak a word of Russian had invited her to a mediocre restaurant to have lunch on a sunny day. Of course, it could be anything to her but a date. As logical as it seems now, it was shocking at that moment. I tried my best to act normally, and I convinced myself that it worked and Alena didn't realise anything. But that was probably another rationalisation I made.

I put my fork down and instantly asked, 'Really?' with a fake smile. 'Do you have a photo of him?'

She grabbed her cellphone and there it was on the wallpaper. A bald-headed hulkingman, who wasn't looking right at the lens and looked drunk. I stared at the photo for a minute until the light of the screen dimmed and then I looked at her, at her tiny lips, puffy eyes and long brown lashes as if it was the very first time I was seeing her.

With a muffled voice, I said, 'I would like to see him someday, hopefully.'

Those were the most absurd, yet sincere words I ever said to Alena, knowing that I wouldn't ever see her again. I laid my eyes on the half-eaten pasta, wondered what could make me feel better at that moment. The answer was already there on my mind. I wanted to walk in the Red Square looking at those magnificent domes like I wished when I saw that metal box as an eight-year-old boy, but this time it was Alena who was walking next to me. With her fake smile and those black eyes that had joy and sorrow at the same time.

In spite of all that, I had to pay the bill and drive her back to her apartment and say goodbye to her after a short awkward talk.

Yasaman Rahmani, born in 1992, is a doctor, writer and translator. In 2015, she was awarded the Tehran and Zayandeh-Roud literary awards for some of her short stories.

Bitter Secrets

Claudine Jacques (1997)¹
Translated by Patricia Worth (© 2018)

What was most striking about Tomass was the visible size of the knotty muscularity on a compact, stocky body. The hands were thick and short, slightly webbed, the feet huge with spreading toes, chest straight, and head sunken between the shoulders. An abundance of frizzy hair stood tall and dense, endowing him with a certain majesty, and he had the vanity to adorn it with an exquisitely carved wooden comb.

Most often he wore an old faded pair of shorts, but now and again would don a piece of cloth that he would tie round his hips. At his neck on a string of plant fibres was the ever-present magnificent pig's tooth in a perfect double spiral: a sign he was the chief.

The impression of massive strength was tempered by the nonchalance of his gestures, an easy smile that revealed dazzling teeth and the extreme calm with which he performed all acts of daily life. His deep dark eyes always appeared to see beyond things and people. And often he would remain for hours lost in his thoughts, not eating or drinking; no one would dare disturb him. Of his four children, only Little John seemed to have the absolute trust of this formidable father. The oldest, Harry, a strapping young fellow of about sixteen who showed promise of having the same bulky stature, would shrink back at his father's approach, staring at him fiercely, insolently. On the contrary, the two daughters, Sarah and Tressy, did not have the courage to look their father in the face, and with oblique glances would try to guess his wishes.

Each girl had a deliberately chosen role: Sarah took care of the house and Tressy the crops. Sarah was beautiful with a slender waist, high breasts, long legs, a round face and large brilliant languorous eyes. Tressy was heavy, strong and brave, and though she was only fourteen, certain women in the neighbouring villages had already set their sights on this child who could help them in marrying off their sons. But the boys would hang around Sarah, keeping a distance out of fear of the father. There had been nothing more than lingering looks, signs engraved on coconut palms or messages passed through sisters or girl cousins. But there was also that story about the mother who had disappeared when Little John was still a baby. Since those days the wildest rumours had been going around, exaggerated over the years. Their family was spoken of in hushed tones; everyone imagined the unimaginable. To pass time they would frighten one another, out of necessity, to go deep into the fantastic. Under oath they would tell scraps of lies resembling truth. And nights followed days without any of them able to crack the strong man's secret.

That evening, Tomass had announced he was leaving for Ambrym²; he would be away for ten days. A *kastom*³ ceremony awaited him up there. It was then that the white ship moored in the Bay of Dolphins. The seaside village was in high spirits and the news spread at lightning speed as far as Port Resolution. It was a significant event, and all over the island there were groups gathering to go to the beach where the foreigners would no doubt be coming ashore.

¹ Claudine Jacques was born in France, moved to New Caledonia as a teenager and is now a published novelist and short story writer inspired by island life and her cattle station. 'Secrets amers' was first published in 1997.

² A volcanic island in the archipelago of Vanuatu.

³ A pijin word referring to traditional Vanuatuan culture.

Sarah and Harry left without further thought. It would be two hours on a bad road to get to the ship, and they couldn't dally if they wanted to be among the first to get there. From a hilltop they eventually spotted it, a majestic ship that seemed to capture all the sun's rays. Around it some small motorboats had been put into the water, and a few were already heading towards the beach.

Harry hurtled down the slope that led to the bay, not worrying about the dangers he encountered on his way. Sarah, more careful, more skilful, slipped behind him to use the track he had made. When they got to the beach, they separated. Sarah settled in with other girls on mats near the village houses. Harry joined the boys in the banyan tree roots. They all stood perfectly motionless, closely watching the arrival of the white men.

When the first officers appeared, a collective frisson stirred the island's population. These men were altogether different: only their faces and hands could be seen; the rest was covered in cloth. Were they ashamed of their bodies, protecting themselves this way from the gaze of others? One of them, the oldest, went ahead alone to the village. The chief, accompanied by six warriors armed with clubs, came forward a few steps to meet him. All of them were naked. Some had decorated their hair with brightly coloured feathers, others wore broad plaited armlets and anklets placed indifferently on the arms or legs. The talks were long, facilitated by a youth who interpreted simultaneously as they spoke. This boy had not long been back in Tanna from Port Vila where he had gone with a pastor to study theology, and had a mastery of English and French.

The atmosphere relaxed once the chief and the officer shook hands in a sign of agreement. There were whistles and shouts; the old women, curious, were the first to come up, then the children started running onto the beach and mingling among the foreigners. The women brought watermelons, coconuts and pawpaws. The white men unloaded bags of rice, condensed milk and fishing line, and exchanges were accompanied by laughter and quiet chuckling. The celebration could begin.

It lasted all day.

The organisers had come to explore the terrain for Club Med, and the next morning they had to view a part of the island to prepare a tourist itinerary for the Mount Yasur volcano. The authorisations were acquired according to *kastom*, and then the discussions about services to provide and their cost were easy due to a lack of reference, each man believing he was getting a better-than-expected deal.

Strong, energetic guides were needed. Harry was the first of the young men to leave the banyan roots. Proudly he walked onto the beach and stood tall, his feet planted solidly in the grey sand, eyes fixed straight ahead, and waited to be noticed. All present turned their focus to him.

The son of Tomass was appointed.

A meeting was arranged for the following day. In the evening, the white men went back to the ship.

In the morning they returned. Two small Japanese pickup trucks in a pitiful state awaited them. Harry climbed into the tray of the first one and sat up against the driver's cabin. Sarah quickly jumped up beside him. He waved her away but did not want to push her off in front of the foreigners, and just turned his head, whistling through his teeth to show his disapproval.

The vehicles set off. Trundling along, they took a dirt track bordered with coconut palms, poincianas, guavas, beach hibiscus, bamboo, tree ferns, huge grapefruit trees, bananas, and

gigantic banyans, and crossed swamps planted with reeds. After an hour on the road they came to the foot of the volcano, and the dense vegetation, flaming and luxuriant with myriad shades of green, abruptly gave way to a desert of grey and beige sand with dunes shaped by the wind.

A dull rumbling could be heard, and from the top of the dry mountain came plumes of black smoke. The earth shook with each of the monster's explosions. They had to go round a salt lake with its dead trees, and soon the vehicles were abandoned so they could attempt the climb. From here, rocks and stones replaced the sand and the little group now had to move cautiously.

*

Sarah's charms had not gone unnoticed. Even wearing a shapeless mission dress, she possessed a simmering grace. Her frizzy hair formed a halo round a broad forehead, and she had large black eyes with long curling lashes, a small nose with rounded nostrils, full well-defined lips and a delicately sculpted chin. Her neck was slender and her joints fine, her hands had long thin fingers, and her body swayed to the rhythm of her steps. The youngest of the officers, moved by this display, could not take his eyes off her. And when she stumbled, she quite naturally grabbed the hand that came to her aid. The young man drew closer and became intoxicated with Sarah's floral perfume and peppery smell. She watched him sideways, intimidated by such an unusual presence, then checked to see where Harry was. She saw him, his back to her a few hundred metres away, she sighed with relief and her whole face lit up as she smiled at the stranger before running to join her brother. Eventually they arrived at the top of the fiery mountain. The spectacle took their breath away.

An immense hole, its walls covered in ash, and in the abyss, three cavities vibrating with the movement of molten magma. A vision of hell made even more terrible by the sound of incessant explosions, the sulphurous smell of smoke that was sometimes white, sometimes black, and the danger of lava flows. A gripping contrast in this paradisiacal world: not far away, as the crow flies, was the peaceful expanse of the ocean; a little closer, the forests they had passed through; and here, this dome of stones, rocks and slabs of petrified lava.

*

For different reasons, they each remained silent. Sheltering behind Harry, Sarah felt with confusion the call of the volcano. This great open mouth was trying to drag her in. Her head suddenly spinning, she grabbed her brother round the waist but he brutally pushed her away. This indecent girl certainly had no manners and only the close presence of the white men stopped him from disciplining her as she deserved. But she would get what was coming to her.

Lying on the ground, Sarah dared not move; her body was in harmony with the vibrations caused by the explosions and she was shaking all over. The young officer approached, she did not see him. She was staring vacantly into the distance at an unknown world. Did he understand her profound confusion? He shook her roughly, slapped her, then softly dabbed her face with water from his flask. She snapped out of her lethargy and her first conscious gaze was on him. They would never forget that moment when their two hearts connected. Around them a crowd formed, obliging them to step back into the world of others. Harry, bitterly angry and jealous, had already begun the descent, fuming.

Martial Delattre carefully helped Sarah to get up. With tender hands he tried to brush away the dust sticking to the skin, the hair and clothes of the beautiful Indigenous girl.

Surprised by such a sensitive touch, she did not stop him, she did not move, trusting like the child she still was, defeated like the woman she had become.

Hand in hand they descended the mountain until they reached the trucks. Silent disapproval greeted them. But nothing could spoil this moment, and in the jolts on the way back, standing against each other, their bodies were already becoming acquainted.

On the beach, the island's inhabitants were in a festive mood and had prepared a great laplap feast for the visitors. Yams, taros, sweet potatoes, bananas, pawpaws, roast pigs and coconuts were laid out on large wooden platters. The women and children, sitting off to the side, were already eating. The men sitting in a circle were drinking kava to celebrate this great occasion with dignity. Sarah recognised Tressy and Little John in the distance. She ran up to them and made herself comfortable on the mat. She would have loved to tell her younger sister everything, but was prevented by the chattering presence of the other girls. She grabbed a handful of warm food, placed it on a banana leaf and realised she was hungry. Just for a moment she thought of nothing but the sensual pleasure of eating. Then, lying down next to Tressy, she fell asleep.

*

In the evening, songs and dances began. The men in a kava-induced frenzy infected the women with their intoxication, who joined them in the spasmodic rhythms. Fearing things would get out of hand, the captain gave the order to return to the ship. Only one man missed the call: Martial Delattre.

Martial had eagerly waited for Sarah to wake and had seized the moment of her planned walk to the waterfall to follow her through the long grass. The moon was full. Sarah wove around and through the shrubby vegetation with ease, followed by an impatient shadow. Eventually she stopped and let him catch up. Martial grabbed her and wrapped his arms round her, kissed her passionately, laid her on the ground and, in a wild embrace, had her. She let herself be taken, with no apparent reaction. Her silence surprised him, he tried to make out her features, noticed her eyes shining with tears, understood the gift she had just given him and was moved by it. Then gently he consoled her by awakening within her a sensuality that was aching to come alive. All night long their bodies were joined in increasing pleasure. At the first light of dawn, Martial promised he would come back for her the next time the white ship returned.

She listened to his voice as to music, her eyes half-closed, her head on his shoulder. In bad English he told her stories of foreign lands. She spoke in *bislama*, asked him questions, then more questions. They understood each other, lay against each other, alone, happy, hidden.

The siren from the ship gave them a glimpse of a gloomier reality. Martial had to leave. She let him get dressed, then in a whisper begged him:

‘Don’t forget me. I’ll wait for you.’

He leant down to her, held her head firmly between his hands.

‘I’ll come back for you. You’re mine for ever.’

He sealed his promise with a passionate kiss, then stood and left, running in the direction of the bay where the siren was sounding again.

*

Sarah went up the hill from where she had looked down on the white ship for the first time, but everything was different. It was carrying away her beloved, and leaving her heavy with love and confusion. In a few hours the carefree child had matured into a woman torn. She was learning to love, to suffer. Returning to Port Resolution she felt her life was taking on a new meaning.

Harry was waiting for his sister. His rage had only increased since the episode on the volcano. In addition, he sensed that Sarah had given herself to the white man, which aggravated his fury. When she arrived at the great hut, he threw himself onto her, punched and kicked and taunted her with insults. Sarah screamed in pain while trying to crawl outside to get away from him. Old Molly, passing by, raced up and came between them. Out of respect for the old granny, the only woman he liked a little, and because his anger had subsided, Harry left peacefully, without remorse.

Sarah took a few days to recover. She was limping and her face was still puffy when Tomass came back.

He looked at his daughter with interest. Despite her swollen eyes and the marks reddening her skin, she glowed. It suddenly seemed he had left behind a little girl, only to find himself unexpectedly face to face with a woman whom he admired, though it disturbed him. Sarah looked so much like her mother that she could have been mistaken for her. The revelation hit him like a punch in the ribs.

He drew closer, assessed her condition, then asked:

‘Who did this?’

Sarah could not risk speaking.

To accuse Harry would be to give away the reason, and she could never tell her father. He might kill her.

‘I ... I fell,’ she replied feebly.

Tomass knew the marks came from deliberate blows but he did not push it, to his daughter’s great surprise.

‘You look like your mother,’ he confessed.

Sarah, who had kept her eyes lowered since her father’s arrival, at last looked him in the face. Never before had he made a direct allusion to the mother who was missing. Her look went straight to his heart.

Rather than let her see that he was growing troubled, he rose and left. A few hours later, he returned with some plants that he kneaded and mixed with clay and coconut oil, forming an ointment; he placed it on each bruise.

For days he took care of her until the wounds totally healed. The detached affection that united them transformed into a stronger feeling. A new bond was born of their conversations. But each time Sarah tried to find out more about her mother, she would come up against a stubborn silence. And, also, the young woman would dream of Martial and wish she could talk to this father she was getting to know, and announce to him that one day, soon, she would be leaving with a foreign man to conquer another world. She knew that the next time the white ship returned, Martial would ask for her hand in marriage, or abduct her. In her naivety, there was no doubt about his return. So she tried to calm her impatience with long walks in the coconut grove. Accompanied by Little John, she would walk as far as the lookout and scan the horizon in the hope of spotting the large ship.

The father tolerated his daughter’s walks less and less. He sensed a danger that he could not describe. Every evening he watched for her return, and it was not until he could hear Little John’s laughter that he would breathe easy. He no longer went to the other side of the island where he used to meet with a woman he had seduced. It was as though the name of his happiness from now on was Sarah.

Harry had not come home since the discipline he had inflicted on his sister, and no one was complaining. Tressy had just been asked to marry according to *kastom*, and her father had refused, for Sarah had begged to keep her young sister close to her for a while longer.

The weeks that followed were easy, slow, monotonous, but time is only what you make of it. Noticeable changes were occurring in Sarah's appearance and behaviour, her breasts were getting heavy and her concave belly was slightly rounded. Nothing was yet visible in the roominess of the mission dress, but Sarah was worried and set off to find old Molly, who at a glance confirmed her condition: she was indeed pregnant.

The young woman told her the whole story, happy to be able to trust someone with the secret buried within her flesh.

Old Molly listened with horror to Sarah's revelations.

'My poor child, my poor child ...' she said.

'Molly, he'll come back, I'm sure he will ...'

'Yes, he'll come back, but listen to what happened a few years ago in this village. Listen carefully ...'

*

'A woman from here, the most beautiful on the island, the one who was most desired and who was snatched away by a man in a hard-won fight, came to a dreadful end. She too had believed in a foreign man's love and had given herself to him, but when her husband learnt of the betrayal, he chose the worst torture for her.

'Listen ...'

'Naked, her hands tied and her feet fettered with vines, he dragged her by the hair through the lava dust. She howled in fear and pain when the stones tore her skin; she begged, implored, but he would hear nothing. Long streaks of blood stained her legs, her belly, her breasts. Not for one moment did he let her go, not for one moment did he stop. Step by step, always at the same slow pace, he crossed the sandy desert and climbed the mountain. Further back, a silent group was following; a blind old woman, supported by two others, was crying as she stumbled over the rocks. The explosions were continuous, and plumes of white smoke were rising from the crater. With his hand gripping her hair powdered with ash dust, he kept going up the mountain, indifferent to the sun and to the woman's tears and groans as he dragged her like a sack.

'When he reached the top, he stopped at the edge of the hole, looked awhile at the slippery slopes down to the molten magma, grabbed the inert, shredded body in his arms, held it tightly for a brief moment then cast it into the abyss. He let out a great cry, the sound of a wounded animal.'

All at once, old Molly fell silent. Her eyes, blue with age, were streaming tears; she wiped them away with the back of her hand then continued:

'He disappeared for many months, then one day he returned and life began again for him, but he remained alone, with only his children around him. The woman I accompanied was your grandmother, and afterwards I took her back to the village of her birth to be with her brothers. She died a short while after. I've kept this secret for a very long time.'

Sarah, dumbstruck, dared not understand. The blood had just drained from her veins. She kept her eyes on Molly.

'Who was the woman? Answer me ... Who was it?'

'Your mother!'

‘So, it was my father who killed her ... My father ... Tomass?’

‘Yes, Tomass killed her!’

‘But why, why?’

‘My little one, like you, your mother wanted to go away with a foreign man, like you she was pregnant, she was expecting another baby. The man who seduced her had promised her better horizons, and when he came to get her ... She was dead.’

*

Sarah was aghast, all of a sudden conscious of her own fate; she understood the call of the volcano. She too loved a man who had come from elsewhere; she too wanted to leave and go far away, like her mother ... She too, in her own way, was going to betray Tomass.

*

A cruel, raspy laugh came from behind the woven pandanus screen. Harry, Harry had heard everything. He now knew of Tomass’s terrible secret and Sarah’s transgression. In one leap he was beside the two women, and shouted:

‘I’m going to kill Tomass and I’ll kill your baby when it’s born.’

He tried to hit Sarah but she recoiled; he changed his mind and went off shouting terrifying threats.

‘Molly, if your story is true, I’ll have to warn Tomass as soon as possible.’

Sarah started running as fast as she could. She ran past Tressy and Little John who were preparing the copra oven. A bit further away, Tomass was cracking some coconuts.

She yelled:

‘Father, Harry wants to kill you. He knows everything.’

At that moment, Harry suddenly appeared. Tomass grabbed his machete and confronted his son’s anger. He was aware his son had hated him since the disappearance of the mother he adored. Now that Harry had learnt the truth, Tomass knew he would have to fight him. The two men of equal strength sized each other up. Armed with a club, Harry attacked first. The fight was on, violent and murderous. Tomass initially tried to avoid the blows without delivering any, but soon, to defend himself, he had to attack as well. Blood spurted from Tomass’s eyebrows and blinded him. Harry took advantage, raised his weapon, but Tomass was quicker and cut off Harry’s hand at the wrist. With a howl like a wild animal, Harry saw his hand fall, severed, detached from his body. He staggered and collapsed. Tomass came closer, grabbed the club and crushed his skull. Most horrible of all was the sound. Harry breathed his last. He would suffer no more.

Tressy, Sarah and Little John dragged his body into the copra oven and revived the fire. No one cried.

Tomass lay on the ground, trying to recover. They stayed there all night and in the morning went back to the house together. They would still have to remain silent. They would also have to try to break the vicious cycle of fate that seemed to hang over their family. They would have to reflect on their common future.

Sarah thought about Martial, about the caresses they exchanged, the desire that sharpened her senses, the baby living in her belly, promises for the future.

Then she mused about her mother and the similarities of their fates. She thought about her father.

And suddenly she made the obvious decision: she had to forget the white man, his light eyes, his smooth hair, the inflections in his warm voice. She would not be sailing away on the

big ship. She would stay with her people. With them she would be able to thrive, and her son, carrier of another blood, would bring one more stone to the structure of their family.

Sarah looked at her family's painful progress in its entirety; she could explain her mistake and forgive her mother's death. It was through her that everything had to change.

The months passed. Sarah gave birth to a little boy, his skin almost white, and gave him to Tomass.

'He's your son now. Like Little John. Like those who will follow. Give him a name.'

Tomass did not reply straightaway. He took the tiny baby in his giant hands, raised him up to heaven and implored for him the clemency of the guardian spirits.

'He will be named after me, Little Tomass.'

Sarah knew then that Tomass had positively acknowledged her son.

*

That very night she slept by his side.

The big ship had just moored in the bay but it was no longer of any importance.

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The Girl with the Book Mushtaq Bilal

I

A new person had appeared in the J. Club: the girl with the book. Akhtar Saleem Malik, an old member of the club, had always had a special interest in new arrivals. Sitting in the Coffee Corner that day, he saw, walking on the lawn, a girl of medium-height, holding a thick book covered with an antediluvian newspaper. Afterwards he saw her in the library, and occasionally in the Coffee Corner. She sat alone and always with the same thick book covered with that ancient newsprint. No one knew who she was, and everyone called her simply 'the girl with the book'.

Locating her proved less of a problem for him than finding a casual way of starting a conversation. She was dining in the garden when he approached and took the adjoining table. As he sat down he realised that the girl with the book intrigued him for two reasons: the air of serenity and tranquillity that surrounded her, and that big book of hers which now lay open on the table.

He took his mobile phone from his pocket and without dialling any number put it to his left ear. 'Yeah, I was about to call you ... Okay, that's fine, tell her ... Or if you could give me her number, I'd ring her ... Wait a sec., let me get a pen.'

He rose from his chair as if he were going to attend to a matter of great urgency and approaching her table, indicated with a gesture that he wished to borrow the pen with which she had been writing notes in her big book. She did not reply so he took it anyway and wrote something on his left palm. 'Thanks.'

She glanced at him and then dropped her eyes at once.

'Looks like an interesting read.'

'It is.'

'You been here long?'

She closed the book but kept her right hand on the page she'd been reading. 'A week.'

'Welcome to Islamabad.'

'Thanks. There isn't much to do here.'

'It's a bit of a cliché to say the place is boring, but maybe you're right.'

After dinner he asked her if she would like to drive to Lotus Park for a walk and she agreed. Stopping at a red light, he glanced at her sitting on his left and realised that there was a subtle variance between the image he had in his mind of the girl with the book, reading on a lawn, and the person now sitting next to him. He started to explore this dichotomy but was interrupted by the brutal honk of the car behind signalling that the light had turned to green. After their drive resumed, he took her right hand in his left and placed it on the gear stick. She let him do that without any resistance or comment, and he lightly caressed her little finger with his thumb.

They walked side by side in the park and seemed to feel comfortable in each other's company but, despite his occasional comments, in English and Urdu, on the capricious weather of Islamabad and her enviable grasp of languages other than her mother tongue, there was no

'The Girl with the Book.' Mushtaq Bilal.

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real conversation. He had no desire to murmur sweet nothings to her; instead, he had hoped to entice her into revealing important biographical details by telling her his own. After an hour or so she asked him if he could drop her at her residence on his way to wherever he was going and he, who had been looking for an opportune moment to exhibit the chivalrous side of his nature, readily agreed.

At home, he thought about her – about her mournful air, the tempting sheen of her skin, her well-shaped breasts, and about their next meeting – for he was certain that they would meet the next evening. As he slid into bed he wondered what kind of books she read, and if she was as ardent a reader as he was. As he fell into sleep he recalled her ripe breasts but most of all he thought about that big book of hers with its demonic cover.

II

A fortnight later they had made the sort of progress which most people would have achieved after the first handshake. Malik told her that he had a degree in literature, and a position in a university; that he reviewed books, mostly literary fiction for a weekly magazine; that he liked running and swimming; and that he owned a flat in Islamabad. From her he learnt that she was born in Lahore, but had lived in Karachi since childhood; that she was likely to stay another couple of months in Islamabad; that she was going to get engaged soon and her would-be fiancé, who happened to be a journalist with a European paper and so always on the move, might perhaps drop by in Islamabad for a day or two. She wasn't sure if it was a French or a German paper and had admitted her ignorance with a rare smile. Malik also learnt that her name was Fehmida Alam.

On an unusually hot Sunday afternoon, after they had eaten a delicious lunch in the airconditioned pleasantness of the J Club, Malik suggested they drive up to Murree. It was that time of the year when people from all over the country, in order to seek a temporary refuge from the simmering heat of plains, stampede by the thousands towards Murree. Fehmida and Malik ambled across the festive Mall, buzzing with a flurry of activity, looking at people dressed in their best clothes, newly-weds, walking hand in hand, packs of young boys ogling and hounding girls, kids running berserk, and parents quarreling with each other. They walked up to Kashmir Point and she looked through her binoculars, as though she were trying to locate something specific. She offered Malik the binoculars without removing the strap from around her neck and he, without any hesitation, accepted. The frugal length of the strap forced him to bring his face close to hers. Shortly thereafter a minor adjustment in her posture brought her left cheek in contact with his three-day-old stubble which must have been abrasive but she didn't try to move away.

On their way back they talked a great deal, asked each other disconnected questions, forgetting next moment what they had just asked, and an hour later entered Islamabad. He was about to ask her about that big book of hers when she said, 'So, where are we headed?'

'To my apartment. If that's alright.'

Silence.

He removed his left hand from the gear stick and extended it in front of her the way one extends one's hand in front of a palmist. She hesitated for a fraction of a second and then, timidly, placed her right hand over it. He held her hand, placed it on the gear stick, and pressed

her pinky ever so slightly with his index finger and thumb. She reciprocated the gesture, without looking at him, and in a greater measure.

She found the apartment airy, well-lit, a bit too spartan, perhaps, and dominated by clumsily shelved but neatly labelled books: fiction, poetry, history, religion. Malik threw himself on the sofa and closed his eyes. She sat close to him and asked him if he knew how to read palms.

‘A little,’ he lied.

‘Read mine then.’

He opened his eyes and sat up. He took her extended hand in his and suddenly put his right arm around her and kissed her on the lips.

‘What kind of girl do you think I am?’ she cried, pulling back.

‘You’re a real sweetheart,’ he said, a little embarrassed that he had made an unwanted advance.

‘I’m not the kind of girl you think I am.’

‘What kind of girl do you think I think you are?’

He realised the futility and stupidity of continuing, kissed her forehead and put his arms around her, brought her close and lay down on the sofa.

‘It feels so nice on your chest.’

‘Then I should take off my shirt.’

‘No, no!’

He took off his shirt.

The next morning he awoke to the sound of her weeping.

‘It’s wrong, it’s a sin, an unpardonable sin! I’ve made a grave mistake. Now you’ll think I’m a whore.’

‘I don’t know what you’re talking about.’ There was a nail-clipper on the bedside table. Malik picked it up and started doing his finger-nails. Fehmida Alam’s innocence touched him but it was clear that she was extremely unhappy.’ ‘Let me do your nails too,’ he said.

‘You would not want to be with a corrupt girl like me.’ Tears began to flow. ‘But please don’t hate me, I am not as bad a girl as you think.’

‘Why would I hate you, love? You’re such a sweet little angel.’

‘No, I’m corrupt, sinful. Oh lord, forgive me!’

‘I think He’s too busy to listen to you.’

It was frustrating to have a beautiful girl sitting next to you, weeping, and whose feet had snuggled into your lap. Malik put his arm around her and she hid her face in his bare chest.

The next evening he found her – contrary to his expectations – in good humour. The mysterious book of hers was gone. She didn’t mind if he put his arm around her on their evening strolls, which grew lengthier. But on sultry summer nights, when she let him make love to her in his dimly lit apartment, he would have to work hard to get her aroused, and she would clench her teeth and shut her eyes during the culmination of the act.

A fortnight later, he drove her to the airport to catch the 4 p.m. flight to Karachi. Her sojourn in Islamabad had come to its end. They found themselves stuck in a traffic jam just outside the airport. They sat in the car with their hands together on the gear stick.

‘Will you miss me?’ she asked.

‘Why don’t you just stay here?’

'I want to but I can't. God knows, I want to stay here, I want to stay with you, live with you, but it's not possible, I can't.'

Why can't you?'

She made no answer and looked out the window.

Half an hour later, at Domestic Departures, she said, 'Let me just hug you one last time.' She hid her face in his chest and broke into a flood of tears.

During the next month Fehmida did not return any of his phone calls. Malik realised how deeply he had become infatuated with her. He decided to fly to Karachi where he would attempt to gain access to that big book of hers. He was certain that the contents would help him understand certain aspects of her behaviour.

After checking into his hotel room, well air-conditioned against the oppressive heat of a Karachi summer afternoon, he went to the Central Library of which, he knew, Fehmida had a membership. The reading hall seemed to have sound-proof walls for the quietness of a morgue hung in the air. He spotted her eventually, in a secluded corner, sitting on the floor, reading. Around 9 p.m. she left the library and proceeded towards the parking lot. Malik, who had until now maintained a safe distance, walked up to her and, despite his thumping heart, said quietly, 'Hello, Fehmida.'

She turned around, and he registered the guilty look on her face. He said quickly, 'Let's sit in your car.'

Her left hand rested on the gear stick and he placed his right hand over it.

'You shouldn't have come here! Why have you come here, why? It was so hard trying to forget you, it was so difficult I thought I would die and now you're here!'

He squeezed her hand and tears began streaming down her cheeks. 'I think you should leave,' she said, sobbing. 'It's hardly the place to talk. Give me your address and I'll visit you in the morning.'

He wrote down the name of the hotel and his room number on a piece of paper which she pushed inside the glove box. They sat there, silently, for a while before they had regained their composure.

Morning dawned. Night fell. And Malik – who had endured a frustrating day and an even more frustrating evening, for Fehmida Alam had not shown up, nor was he able to locate her in the library – found himself asking the concierge how he could procure the services of an expert thief. The concierge, a certain Mr Faisal, had spent all his life in Karachi and knew some of the sleaziest parts of the city like the back of his hand. Without hesitating, he scribbled down directions for Malik.

Around midnight, Malik arrived at a small black wrought-iron gate and, as directed, knocked twice on it with a coin.

'Enter!'

Malik pushed the gate open and saw a man bent over a table looking at a wristwatch through a monocle.

'Apologies for bothering you at this hour,' Malik said.

'Not at all. My hours – like my work and habits – are rather unconventional.' The man removed the monocle before turning to Malik.

'Unconventional?'

'I don't belong in the mainstream of thievery. In twenty years I've never stolen anything of monetary value.' Malik was genuinely surprised. 'My specialisation is in stealing things of

emotional value. And I wouldn't be doing this if it weren't for servicing society. So what's brought you here, my friend?'

'A book.'

'A book?'

'A thick book covered with an old newsprint belonging to a young lady.'

'That would seem to qualify. Write down the address where the book is located, and your address, and you'll have it by early tomorrow.'

The next morning while he was having breakfast Malik received an elegantly wrapped package delivered to him by a courier. He undid the layers of paper and twine and found a thick book covered with newsprint. He lit a cigarette, opened the book, and realised it was in Urdu. He read the title and muttered under his breath, 'So, this is what you've been reading!'

Mushtaq Bilal is a Fullbright Fellow pursuing a doctorate in comparative literature at the State University of New York at Binghamton. His work has appeared in various academic journals, as well as the Washington Post and the Los Angeles Times. He is the author of *Writing Pakistan: Conversations on Identity, Nationhood and Fiction* (2016).

Between the Lindens Nicholas Birns

November 1944
Southeastern Pennsylvania

I was born Yoel Meyerowicz in Berlin, Germany, in 1928. My father was a prosperous lawyer. We lived in the Bernauerstrasse, in a nice townhouse. We were Jewish, but that hadn't seemed to matter so much. Nobody bothered us. Nobody disturbed us. In fact, much later, my father revealed to me that he actually considered converting to Lutheranism, attending the nearby, and ironically named, Zionskirche. But he did not feel that it was necessary. In any event, my father was not a man of faith. He was an ethical man. He believed in doing well by family; doing good for others; living a sober, high-minded life. He valued culture, art, music, and the company of good friends. But he did not worship any transcendent deity, even that of his ancestors.

I was too young to really remember German politics before the rise of Hitler. But I do remember, when Hitler first gained a parliamentary plurality, my father saying to me, 'You will outlast this man. This man is not Germany. Your Germany will be different from this man's.' My father was very active in the resistance against Nazism. He was acquainted with, though not good friends with, Kurt Weill, and when Weill and his collaborator, the playwright Bertolt Brecht, were accused by the Nazi regime of obscenity and undermining the state for their play, *Dreigroschenoper* (*The Threepenny Opera*), my father led their legal defense. It did not avail, and both Brecht and Weill fled Germany. My father stayed on because he simply could not believe that Hitler would stay in power. Every internal fissure in the Nazi party he saw as the *coup de grâce*, the unravelling of the Nazi order. When Ernst Röhm was purged, when General Fritsch was the object of unseemly and bizarre accusations and court-martialled, my father thought, *this was the crack-up, this was the Götterdämmerung*. The Hitler regime would soon fall, and Germany could go back to the prosperous, tolerant country that he knew. He even attended more than one event at the 1936 Olympics, saying it was not Hitler's Olympics, but Germany's, Berlin's.

By 1938, though, the fall of Hitler was clearly not happening, and even my father realised that we had to get out. By then, I was nine years old and had been attending elementary school for three years. One of my best friends was the son of a man who became good friends with my father. They were Gentiles. The school so far had resisted compulsory race separation laws, but the threat was coming. My friend's father warned, 'You must leave. We will do anything to help you. You must get out. We will take you over the mountains. We will row you across the Bodensee to the Swiss side. We will do anything. But you will die if you do not leave.' Fortunately, we did not have to go to such extremes. We were able to simply take the train to Paris, another train to the Calais coast, the ferry to England, and we were out.

We did not have a visa for England, though, and we had to be out of the country in three days. We were going to America. America was not exactly enthusiastic about taking in huge numbers of Jewish refugees, but my father got himself a job teaching at a college near Philadelphia. We

took the long voyage from Southampton, docking in Brooklyn. It was January 1939. A couple of train rides later, we were in our new home, a suburban town in southeastern Pennsylvania.

I had supposed my father would be teaching at a law school. After all, he was a prominent lawyer in Berlin. Instead, I learned that he had obtained a job at a women's college of horticulture which was located in this Pennsylvania town. I did not know what 'horticulture' was, but my mother explained it meant gardening. My father was a brilliant man and I knew that he could do anything. His legal work meant that he had a good knowledge of English and French, and he spoke English well enough to teach in America. But I knew he was unhappy, in exile and under-utilised.

In America, I was no longer Yoel. I was Joel. We were no longer Meyerowicz, but Meyers. We settled in, living in a small bungalow. Our town became my only America, just as my only Germany had been urban, cosmopolitan Berlin. Around the middle of the last century the community ceased to be mainly residential; a large factory opened which made a certain substance that was of great use in mining, a substance also used in insulating houses and sustaining structures and therefore very valuable in a country where houses were being built as the population grew. The main base of this *Zauberstoff*, as my father called it, this miracle substance, was in French Canada. But a major American node of its production was right here.

The town consequently had a gritty, industrial quality to it. By the time my family came, there were some worries that the *Zauberstoff* was making people sick, mainly whispers and subcurrents, but audible enough so that, when my father called the substance the *Zauberstoff*, I was never sure whether he was being genuine or sarcastic. But even these slight rumours had led certain people to sell their houses, which is why my family could buy the bungalow so cheaply, and why the opening at the horticultural college had almost instantly been granted to my father.

But that did not affect me. All that I knew about the town was taught to me by my sixth-grade teacher, Miss Johnson. She noted that I spoke with an accent, that I was from another country, and, perhaps, that I was Jewish, and I think she decided, on those grounds, that I merited a special welcome. She particularly praised my voice. 'You have a wonderful voice, Joel,' she said. 'Do you sing?' I responded that no, I did not sing, my mother was the musician in the family.

On the long voyage from Southampton, my father had told me America was a place of refuge and sanctuary. America had built, he said, a Statue of Liberty for all those who had sought succour on its shores. Since we all knew some English – my mother the least – and I studied at school, he said the country would be open to me. But I did not find America that way. I did not find there to be one America. There was just the small community where I lived, where I did not really know anyone. Miss Johnson was the face of America to me.

At first, I was an outsider at school. I did not know the language idiomatically. I did not know the games. I did not know the jokes. But as time went on, and after Miss Johnson gave me confidence, I became accepted by the other boys. Everyone had a certain role. One was a good athlete. One was good at math. One was very gregarious. One was good at card games, which we played when Miss Johnson was not looking.

In seventh grade a new boy came in. His name was Stooboo. He was strong, muscular, charismatic. He was also phenomenally stupid. Indeed, in Berlin, he would have been the laughing stock of the class, because of his *lumpen* stupidity, the vacancy in his blank, cerulean eyes. German schooling may have been top-down and conformist, but intelligence was respected. Even in my school, Stooboo was clearly such an outsider that he teetered on being hero or scapegoat, celebrated or scorned. Yet his combination of brute strength and impalable

personal presence won the day. At first, I thought he was Italian-American, as most of the workers at the factory that manufactured the *Zauberstoff* were of Italian background, and many of my peers at the school were the children of these workers. But Stooboo's hair was fair, although he was clearly not rich. His every move showed he was from the wrong side of the tracks, a quality which might have ostracised him in nearly every other circumstance, but here give him the frisson of the extraordinary. Soon, he dominated all of us. The boys who had each had their own specialty now sat in the thrall of Stooboo and did whatever Stooboo wanted.

My father was often away teaching at the horticultural college. My mother, aside from going out shopping, would mostly stay home – she was not confident in her English – and play the piano, play Beethoven. She would play *Für Elise* over and over, insisting she was striving for ultimate mastery of the piece. One day I interrupted, saying there was something I had to ask her. She looked at me, her eyes wide and receptive. I was thirteen, and afterwards I realised she thought I was going to ask her about the facts of life. That was not what I had in mind, though. I said, 'Mother, tell me why we had to leave Germany. What did Hitler hate about us? We weren't even really Jews. I learned no Hebrew; I attended no synagogue; I was like all the other boys. Why did he hate us?' My mother looked at me and said, 'Yoel', – she still called me Yoel – 'it was because our eyes were brown and their eyes were blue. Because of that they hated us, and that was the only reason.'

By that time, America was in the war. The newspapers were full of Nazis and Japanese, and our games at school, led by Stooboo, were all about fighting them, though not Italians: there were too many Italians in the school for that. For a time, I had a fear that, because I was from Germany, I would be cast as the Nazi and forced to play the villain. But even the doltish Stooboo had some sort of understanding that I was not a Nazi, and should not be made to be one. Nonetheless Stooboo's dominance made sure that he controlled the games; he was always the commanding officer and the other boys were always privates.

By the age of fourteen, I was beginning to discover girls. There was one I particularly liked, an Italian-American called Emilia Panapinto. She had not been around before, even though her family lived in town. From the first week she was at school I looked at her, doe-eyed and yearning. Just one time, she looked at me. I wondered if I should speak to her but I was too shy.

On Wednesday of the second week in January 1944, my father received a telegram from the US Army, asking him to immediately report to the local recruiting office. He did so. He came back, flushed with pride and excitement. He whispered – though he hardly needed to whisper, since only my mother and I were in the room – that the recruiting officer had told him that the great cross-channel offensive that had been rumoured in the papers for over a year was going to start in mid-1944. The US and Britain, he said, hoped to be in Germany within a year after that. They needed people who could speak German. They needed, in particular, people who knew Berlin, its geography and infrastructure. My father said they were particularly pleased that he knew just where the Olympic Stadium was, and its various entrances. He said, 'I will be on the first jeep into Berlin!' He gave up his position at the horticultural college and left for a military base in central New Jersey. Occasionally, he would come back home, but only on weekends.

After my father left, I found some writing of his. I did not deliberately snoop, but I certainly did not hesitate when I opened a folded piece of paper that had fallen on the floor and saw his handwriting. It contained four sentences, each separated by a blank space. They were in German, but I knew what they meant, and my Americanised inner self translated them without thinking into English:

My principal identity is as a German.

My principal identity is as a Jew.

My principal identity is as an American.

My principal identity is as one who hates Hitler.

I felt a renewed sympathy, even some compassion, even some condescension. I, after all, knew *just* who I was. I was an American: an American boy, on his way to becoming an American man.

My father's absence liberated me even more than I had anticipated. I had thought that I would have my mother to myself. But once my father left, I began to desire *less* time with her. I felt that, now that the house was no longer a place of disappointment and frustration, I could go out more. I could make more friends.

I decided I would talk to Emilia Panapinto, the Italian American girl on whom I had a crush. I went to school that day and walked up to her locker. But somebody else was there. Stooboo was talking very earnestly to Emilia, and Emilia was smiling and laughing. I realised that Stooboo wanted Emilia. And what Stooboo wanted Stooboo got. He was omnipotent. Stooboo and Emilia would see each other every afternoon after school. They would hold hands, they would go to the local shop and sip an ice cream soda together. I did not say anything. I could not even look at them.

That summer I left town for the first time. There was a summer camp up in Hawk Mountain to the west of us, and my mother, sensing that I wanted to be away from home more, sent me there. At Hawk Mountain I learned how to skin a fish, how to set up camp, how to listen for the hiss of a snake. I learned how to blaze a trail. I felt more self-confident, and as the scout leader put it, 'self-reliant'. More than ever, I felt fully an American, at home with American nature, in the American woods. I was no longer just a German Jew in a semi-squalid Pennsylvania suburb, metaphorically buried in *Zauberstoff*.

The scout leader told us the reservation was created a few years before, by a wealthy woman concerned with the environment, to save birds of prey, hawks and eagles, from extinction. It struck me as odd that we should be trying to save birds who thrived by eating other, smaller and more innocent creatures. It seemed to sanction the worst parts of nature, the aspects of nature that reminded me too much of mankind. But when I first saw a broad-winged hawk, demure and compact, its talons gripping a tree branch with equal parts vulnerability and determination, I saw another form of life, one which appealed to me because it lived by different rules than I did or ever could live by.

Seeing that I was interested, the scout leader lent me a pair of binoculars. He encouraged me to look for a red-tailed hawk which, he said, was hard to find at this time of the year. 'But the birds are there if you get up early in the morning and have eyes to see,' he promised. I strove to get up with the sun. For several days I made no discoveries, although another boy found three baby broad-winged hawks that had tumbled out of their nest. Two died from concussions, but the third was rescued. Yet I only cared about catching sight of a red-tail. On my second to last day at Hawk Mountain, my efforts were rewarded. I saw a red-tail! Its feathers were striated and robust, the russet crest of its head staring out, alert and unbowed, its eyes inner circles of black

set off against an olive periphery. In a place in which I could never live, among a killing species alien to me in its blood and fiber, I felt weirdly at home.

America was *my* country. And I came back to school in the fall of 1944 with a new hope – only to see Emilia with Stooboo once more, holding hands, and then having to sit at separate desks in separate corners of the room, as the laws of gender still meant boys and girls sat apart, even though puberty was now rampant among us all. I braced myself for another year of having to not look at them. But in early October, something very interesting happened. Emilia and Stooboo had a huge fight in the hallway. It was so loud everybody came out to watch, even the principal. Emilia screamed at Stooboo, in both Italian and English. Stooboo, normally stolid in his domineering stance, in turn lost his temper. He yelled at Emilia, his face beet red, and his eyes seeming to pop out of his head. Emilia yelled back that she hated him, that he had hit her and hurt her. She said he was possessive, that he didn't understand her.

A couple of days later, I felt a gentle tap on my shoulder. 'Joel.' It was Emilia. She asked me if I wanted to go for a soda after school. I said I was not sure, I might have to go home and check on my mother because my father was away now. She said, 'Yes, I know. He is in the army.' I was impressed that she knew this. I realised that, to her, whose father was still working in the factories, my father was a man of greater prestige. I had spent so much time thinking about how diminished my father was from his life in Berlin that I had not realised he was still luckier than most Americans.

After we had gone together to the soda shop a few times, I got up the courage to invite Emilia to my house to meet my mother. One crisp October afternoon she came over to our little bungalow. My mother served cakes and tea and then went to the piano and played *Für Elise*. I had heard this thousands of times before, but Emilia was transfixed. 'I've never heard anybody *do* something like that, Mrs Meyers!' she exclaimed, and smiled at us both. I asked Emilia if I could walk her home, but she refused; her father was going to pick her up. When he arrived, Mr Panapinto waved from the car but did not get out.

The next week, Emilia said to me, 'You know, I've always wanted to go to that park just past the soda shop. The park with the nice linden trees.' I told her that in Berlin, where I came from, there was a whole street called *Unter den Linden*. I had loved this street. So on Thursday afternoon after school we shared a strawberry ice cream soda and then went to the park. There was, as Emilia had said, a big stand of linden trees, and we walked between the rows. I thought, in the old country it was *under* the lindens, but here in the new country it was *between* the lindens. I looked at Emilia and wondered if I should hold her hand, if I should try, even, to kiss her. We were sixteen, after all. My passion and desire were waxing, even as the November skies and the falling leaves of the trees signalled the waning of the year, the year which had seen America winning the war against the Nazi enemy.

As we walked between the lindens, I moved my hand towards Emilia when suddenly out from behind the trees leapt a menacing shadow. It was just after Halloween, and I thought it was somebody playing a prank. But it was no joke: it was Stooboo. He looked at me triumphantly and grabbed Emilia's hand. They both looked at me.

His blue eyes. Her brown eyes, like mine.

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Last Orders Lyn Jacobs

This was her first time away from home. She had been desperate to get away, and it seemed a fantastic opportunity at the time, but now she regretted coming this far north as the station was like a remote island. If she'd got her driver's licence first she could have escaped for week-ends like the other staff but as it was she was stuck. It was months before her work contract allowed for travel-time to see friends in the city.

Initially, she'd found ways to fill in off-duty time: walking the shorter tracks, occasionally taking the scary but spectacular ridge-top ride among some of the world's oldest rocks, or tagging on to observatory tours. The male staff was generally older and more practised at being busy. Despite the heat they seemed to enjoy themselves, like boys at school given an up-hill task. Immersed in the workings of the place, they spent hours under trucks fixing things, plumbing long runs of water pipes, improving the wild-life sanctuary and maintaining the now stock-less property. She felt out of it, disengaged and bored when they talked water-management, stock, fauna or plant-identification, and she got lost when they discussed the station's observatory that mapped distant stars. The two other young women on alternating hospitality shifts were in their twenties and avid readers. They disappeared as soon as the mail-bag arrived with new books, spent long hours on phones or computers (she was still saving for hers) and only surfaced for work. She sometimes passed them in the laundry or bathroom, but between the setting and clearing of tables, cleaning and catering to the needs of the stream of one- or two-night stayers at the Lodge, many of whom were international visitors, interaction was minimal. The overseas guests were often retirees and the occasional young ones were invariably fixated on each other.

She wished she'd come later, when she'd done a few things with her life, or maybe had some language skills to permit engagement with guests. Everyone else seemed to have travelled extensively or, if passing through, had some definite purpose in mind – like studying geology, remote property management, or astronomy with the ageing guru who ran the place. The one person who, like her, seemed here by accident was leaving tomorrow, having straightened out whatever sent him outback in the first place. He didn't give much away but he was a fellow-waiter whose occasional comments had given her something to say in letters home. Tonight was his last duty roster. On this quiet night in a bad season the place looked to her as dusty and tired as she felt.

She'd shown into the dining room one feral family: young, ill-matched and at odds over two aggro children whom she overheard the mother sharply describe as 'dysfunctional' (whatever that was) 'because we don't smack', something the father pointedly ignored; several older couples; one tattooed bkie staying in the caravan park; a Malaysian family; and three middle-aged women who might have once shared jobs, like school-teaching or nursing. It was not yet seven, she had a head-ache, and while ostensibly polishing cutlery she had already used her ever-tightening black apron to wipe away tears.

The view outside offered little relief. The place ached for rain but tonight she didn't care a damn if grass ever grew again, and she could not crank up a skerrick of interest in what the patrons ate, drank, or demanded as their due. Her mind was off-duty, somehow remote, and the only thing that kept her from opening the door and just walking was that this station was at least 100ks from anything. She had nowhere to go, no transport and she could not ask Paul (the

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<http://fhrc.flinders.edu.au/transnational/home.html>

deserter) for a lift. Behind the bar she felt him watching her avoid the customers' eyes.

The patrons, who'd travelled multiple kilometres that day, were glad of the stop and prospect of a meal. They ordered drinks, checked out the place, sized each other up and hoped that the food this far out was okay. By seven-thirty the vegetarians were fed, one couple watered and other first orders lodged in the kitchen. Stragglers wandered in but both front and back of house were fragile tonight. The cook, sullen, harassed and slightly drunk, was audibly naming the ingredients he did not have for items on the menu, and waiting staff managed trips between table and kitchen, finding innovative ways of telling people that spinach and pine nuts were 'off' while not saying that the cook was losing it and stuffing the chicken with anything that was to hand. The anticipatory atmosphere in the restaurant dimmed to a resigned simmer as Paul kept the drinks coming.

Stirring herself, the girl headed for a couple who reminded her of her grandparents. He was tall and thin and she was small and grey-haired, and they looked like they might have been fit once, before they got old. Scrabbling with her order book, she trotted out the routine enquiry about their day and, as usual, failed to register their response. But astonishingly, they then asked what sort of day she'd had, and as she tried for a reply a thin lament, a short-hand summary of the trickling discontents of the day, the week, and last months, spilled out. Unbidden, in a graceless lurch, the unsatisfactory story of her short life with its pent-up hopes and fears expanded like leaked gas – a sackful of woe arrived right there on the table. She knew she had crossed a line but could not help the alarmed guests as they attempted to steer pathways back to soup, steak or chicken breast (however the cook could manage it). Her speech rate increased, the tone, volume and pitch of her quavering voice rose in a wail, articulating the costs of long-distance phone calls, too many departures and the terrible shortcomings of the world as she knew it. The damned wall, that had been her safe enclosure, ruptured. For an instant she halted, teetering on a very far ledge.

The couple were on their feet as Paul stepped in to hold and herd her away, like a cattle dog cutting out problem sheep. But the deluge saw her rising on the words, no longer lethargic but agile, buoyant, leaning forward with bent knees to sustain her balance as she surfed through the restaurant and out beyond the door, and was borne, with gathering swiftness, towards the station creek-bed, down its mainstream and beyond, heading south for the sea, free in the knowledge that, whatever, tomorrow was going to be different.

Dr Lyn Jacobs retired as Associate Professor in English and Australian Studies at Flinders University after teaching for twenty years. She now combines research into Australian poetry and prose, and Australian literary responses to Asia, with grandparent duties.

IBS Rides the Internet (A Fictional Memoir) Ron Singer

It has been explained to me that even my title is open to confusion. My intention was to suggest an analogue to a story by my namesake, Isaac Bashevis Singer, which is about a misadventure from the days before cell phones (and the Internet). In 'The Briefcase' the narrator is scheduled to give a lecture in Washington, D.C., but when he checks into his hotel he discovers that he has brought the wrong briefcase from New York, not the one containing his notes. Frantic phone calls summon both his wife and mistress (pardon the anachronism) and a comic denouement ensues. I forget if he ever gets the notes.

Anyway, when I told Zoe, my daughter, the gist of my own misadventures and mentioned my intended title, she informed me that IBS commonly stands for Irritable Bowel Syndrome. Are acronyms taking over the world? Wondering what my own initials, RTS, might stand for, I Googled them, and found references ranging from several Regional Transit Systems to *Radio televizija Srbije*.

Although I'm not a complete technophobe, I confess to an aversion to social media. The fact that I'm 76 may account for this aversion, but I do have my reasons. For example, I think social media are (is?) making people solipsistic and, in some ways, stupid, thereby exacerbating the global crisis of democracy. I only mention this aversion because it underlies the string of misadventures that comprise my narrative, which is now poised for lift-off, here at Cape Carnival.

The triggering event was a Facebook notification that arrived last Saturday evening, which indicated that I had received a Google announcement from the wife of John Solomon, a former colleague. A legend in the classroom, John was also an old friend and, until his knees gave out, my favorite squash partner. When I last saw him a few months ago he was slowly emerging from a supermarket, looking as if most of him was giving out. When I asked how he was, he told me he was suffering from heart disease and other unspecified ailments – unspecified, because he was still an ultra-Stoic.

As soon as I saw the notification, I said to Liz, my wife, 'I think John may have died.' She nodded, and returned to the *Times* crossword, which can be demanding on Saturday. When I tried to open the announcement, Facebook led me through an unfamiliar process that I imagined would lead to John's wife's message. It didn't. Strangely, it led to a different message, which happened to be about the death of a different old man, Tim Parker, a friend from my Peace Corps days in Nigeria during the 1960s.

This message came from someone named Robin Parker-Simmons, whom I guessed might be Tim's grandchild. Since I don't seem able to re-access the message now, I'll paraphrase it: There would be a funeral tomorrow, Sunday, for Timothy J. Parker, who had died at age 78. The venue would be Thomas B. Goode & Sons, Funeral Home, on the upper west side of Manhattan. To facilitate further communications with the family, would I kindly provide Robin P.S. with my e-mail address? I replied, indicating that I planned to attend, and providing the address. (Remember that!) I pushed buttons and hoped for the best.

This last-minute funeral would require certain adjustments to my Sunday schedule. I had signed up for a midday squash round robin (another coincidence!), which would have to be

curtailed. Luckily, the courts were only a dozen short blocks from the funeral home. Liz and I had also been invited to our daughter Zoe's house in Brooklyn for Sunday dinner at six, but unless the subways were even worse than usual there should be ample time for me to get there after the funeral. Since I now had a big day ahead, I made myself get into bed early. But Tim's death caused a lot of vivid memories to bubble up.

To call Tim Parker a friend is a stretch. In the mid-1960s, most Peace Corps Volunteers (PCVs) in Africa were teachers who worked at schools miles apart and rarely saw each other. Although the P.C. supplied us with Honda-50 motor scooters, some PCVs secretly purchased bigger machines. An engineering graduate of a mid-western university, Tim, sporting leather regalia, bombed around on a big Norton modified for the tropics. Our clique of scooter and motorcycle riders dubbed ourselves the Ekiti Brothers, after the province where three of us worked. In a way, we were sort of a thinking man's Hell's Angels. Not that we were violent. I mean, Tim was a particularly gentle soul, and we were all in the *Peace Corps*, which most of us had joined to avoid the Viet Nam war.

We were once in a roadside bar, a typical mud shack with a corrugated tin roof, when, before we could even order our drinks, the ragged young proprietor cried, "Ah, Americans! Yes! Let me show you something!" He rushed to the back room and a minute later returned with a 45-rpm record, which he carried with the utmost care, like a crown on a cushion. With equal care, he placed the record on a small plastic machine and set it going. When we heard the scratchy lyrics, all five of us, including the Brother known for the least self-control, managed to limit our glee to broad smiles:

When it's pea-picking time in Georgia,
Apple-picking time in Tennessee,
Cotton-picking time in Alabama,
It's girl-picking time for me!

After expressing suitable appreciation, we ordered the usual local beer. 'Warm', we specified, since, by then, we had all become acclimatised. When the beer came, we settled into a desultory debate about the singer's identity. For some reason, we didn't ask to look at the label, and only years later did my musician son-in-law inform me that it was Jimmy Rodgers. He also corrected me: the first line was, 'When it's *peach*-picking time in Georgia.'

Recalling those days prompts both pride and mortification. The pride comes from my accomplishments as a PCV. For instance, I helped a colleague who had some construction experience lay out tennis and basketball courts at our school. Since then, whenever I see a Nigerian in the NBA, I enjoy a moment of pride – unearned, since, as far as I know, no basketball pro ever attended that school.

Associational thinking applies not only to dreams but to night thoughts. In this case, the 'court' theme brought me back to John Solomon, my still-living ex-squash partner. John introduced me to the sport during the summer of 1979 when we both happened to be in Oxford, England. In his delightful, peremptory manner, he suggested we meet early the next morning and that I bring along my sports kit. When we met, he silently led me past the house of the Master of the College where he was an alumnus and through the gardens to a building that looked like a big shed. Stepping over a high threshold, he flipped a switch and I found myself in a big boxlike

structure with white walls and red lines. 'Here', he said, extracting a racquet from his own kit. 'Let's get started.' Thus began 39 delightful years, and counting, of squash.

Back to Nigeria, 1965 or 1966. An even more laudable project than the courts was helping to raise money for a social club where the elite from the town's multiple ethnicities (Yoruba, Edo, Ibo, Hausa-Fulani, etc.) could amicably drink and play darts or ping pong. Of course, this feeling of accomplishment has been marred by the fact that my tenure witnessed the ethnically-fueled political crisis that led to the horrific Biafra war.

As for the Easy Rider act of the Ekiti Brothers, it was innocuous enough, I suppose, although we certainly made fools of ourselves. If we did any real damage, it was probably to the already war-tarnished reputation of the United States.

Perhaps our most outstanding folly was an eight-millimetre home movie that we made over the course of about a year. Although this movie was supposed to be a sort of lampoon of the real *Easy Rider*, it was closer to the *Keystone Cops*. The main action had us riding around the countryside, stopping to whoop it up at bars like the one where we heard the song. Instead of provoking violence from local bigots, however, our antics provoked unfeigned hilarity in the delighted onlookers and contributed to the local economy.

The film's plot, such as it was, conflated the resource-looting theme of *Heart of Darkness* with the work of Dr. Albert Schweitzer. A main prop was a big piece of wood, painted white to resemble, faintly, an elephant's tusk. Wearing a pith element, a long-sleeved safari shirt, and baggy pants belted at the chest, my character was called Dr. Cyril Schmutzer. In several scenes, I tried to lobotomise one of the Brothers, on the theory that this would turn him into a virtuous Christian. When I finally succeeded, the guy who played my victim, a recently deceased, non-observant Jew, made a very funny tropical zombie. We called this concoction The Lesson, because we framed it as a blackboard lecture on morality by Dr. Schmutzer. Tim, the gentlest, kindest Brother, played a feral gang member.

I forget how the movie ended, but I do remember what happened to the only copy. After his Peace Corps days, the guy who shot it (who went on to become a documentarian of minor note) moved to Roxbury, in Boston. When his apartment was robbed, he spent days and nights searching through dumpsters and garbage cans and posting reward notices, all to no avail. Oh, well, *ars longa*.

At some point, my night thoughts segued into memories from family history on my father's side, many of them ludicrous. A notable one was the funeral of my aunt Rachel. In the course of repeating it over the years, I may well have mythologised this event. Since for some reason I attended it alone, and since I have lost touch with that side of the family, there were no witnesses. As Liz, who is an artist herself once remarked, after listening to another supposedly true story, "You're a writer, dear. You make things up."

Aunt Rachel had been a committed member of the Workmen's Circle, a progressive, pro-labor group that still exists. I remember the funeral as a duet. The first voice was that of the presiding official, a sort of secular cleric. A very short man with a small mustache and an extremely nasal voice, he based his eulogy around the cliché that life is like a book. The line I remember is, 'If some of us leave behind large, even massive tomes, full of adventures and accomplishments, Rachel's book is a slim volume containing but a single theme, her beloved family.'

I think I must have been in college at the time, and both of Rachel's sons were already grown men. I remember them as a pair of big round heads in the front row of the room in which the service took place. At this point in their lives both were fat, like most of my dad's family.

While I was trying not to laugh at the ridiculous eulogy, I was also regaled with a private lecture. This was a shouted whisper in my ear by an uncle-by-marriage sitting behind me. Family legend had it that this man, a large, stooped, beetle-browed German-Jew who married into our Ashkenazi family, was a dull-witted lawyer whose practice depended on the Albany connections of his clever wife, another aunt, who was either a secretary to powerful politicians, or scrubbed their floors.

'Ronny', the lawyer kept saying, in a deep, loud whisper, with his strong accent, 'why don't you ever visit me at the office? Come up some time! I'll show you around, take you out for a nice lunch.' He repeated this invitation, or plea, several times, only shutting up when Rachel's sons simultaneously swiveled their heads and made exaggerated shushing gestures. I remember tears running down their faces, which I suppose were prompted not by indignation over the loud whispering or by the eulogy but by their mother's death.

At around two a.m., I mentally strolled through the paternal portrait gallery. It was quite a collection. Among my uncles were a hard-drinking longshoreman who lost a leg to diabetes (they all had this disease) and who was married to a jolly, forbearing Polish woman who looked like a polar bear; and the eldest brother still alive, by the time I came along, a cab driver and bookie, bald, saggy and fish-faced. When my dad would take me to see the Knicks or fake wrestling at the old Madison Square Garden, I remember this uncle leaning against his cab door, near the 50th Street entrance, counting money and chewing on the stub of a disgusting cigar. His wife, as I recall, managed a department-store cafeteria, Macy's or Gimbel's.

My dad's sisters were also what were then called 'characters'. In addition to the two already mentioned, there was a zany former ballerina married to a Hungarian anarchist whose day job was as a fur cutter. Since fur-cutting was a seasonal, piece-work occupation, this sallow, seedy uncle-by-marriage seldom seemed to be employed, leading to my industrious father's jokes, such as that his brother-in-law never went out on a job in winter (too cold) or summer (too hot) or autumn (a leaf might fall on his head). (What about spring?) The name of this uncle-by-marriage was Manny, which prompted my dad to refer to him as Manual Labor. I think I inherited the paternal gene for waggishness.

At any rate, by the time I dragged myself out of bed that Sunday morning, my main worry – selfish, as usual – was how I would manage to get through the round robin without injury. (The motto of aging squash players is, 'live to play another day.') In the event, the squash session, though truncated, went fine. During a break, when I told my partners where I was going afterwards and mentioned the odd pathway by which the invitation had arrived, one of the younger players explained that this was how the Facebook messaging service worked. He said that he had once had a similar experience, where he tried to open one message and found another one.

Reassured, I finished playing, showered, dressed, and started for the funeral home. At five minutes to two, half a block from Thomas B. Goode & Sons, I started searching for familiar faces. I saw only one, a medium-sized old boy wearing the costume of an academic: tweed jacket, glasses, and a woollen tie. Although we were heading in the same direction, the man did not look like an Ekiti Brother, or, for that matter, anyone else I had ever known. Nor did he acknowledge me. Of course, we might both have changed beyond recognition.

As I walked through the main entrance of the funeral home, the uniformed doorman did not ask me to open my backpack. This was a surprise, since you might think that these days funeral homes were inviting targets for terrorism. The shabby vestibule and the receptionist carried me back to funerals of the past, including Aunt Rachel's.

Since I had no idea what had become of Tim Parker over the years, I anticipated that, for me, the eulogy might be what my duller pedagogical brethren sometimes call 'a learning experience'. But maybe one of the Ekiti Brothers who had kept in touch would say a few, or a few thousand, words, about those disgraceful old days.

'Can I help you?' asked the receptionist, a heavy-set man of a certain age. Even his smile seemed muted, a hedge against the presumed grief of his interlocutors. When I approached the table, he did not stand up. 'Yes, thanks,' I replied. 'Timothy Parker, please. I'm an old friend.'

The man looked baffled. Checking his handwritten list of the day's funerals, which was very short, he shrugged. 'I'm afraid I don't see that name. We do have a service at two, but the deceased is...' and he gave a different name. 'Are you sure you're in the right place?' He mentioned a nearby, rival funeral parlour.

'Huh!' I said. Extricating my old-fashioned print date book from my backpack, I showed him the name and address of his own establishment, which made him raise his eyebrows and think for a moment.

'You know,' he said, 'our two o'clock is on the fourth floor. Why not go up and see if you recognise anyone?'

'But ... why?'

He shrugged. 'Stranger things happen. People change their names and so on. It will only take you a minute.' He pointed toward an elevator at the rear of the lobby. Mostly from curiosity, I walked across and pushed the button. Running the elevator when it came was a young man, also in a dark suit, who seemed to be playing a card game on his smart phone during our slow ride.

When we reached four, I found myself in a generic, old-fashioned chapel with pews and some religious paraphernalia. Although by now it was a few minutes after two, people were still milling around, greeting each other, signing a guest book and beginning to get settled. Their faces wore the usual range of funeral expressions, from solemn (the majority), to determinedly cheerful (some) to devastated (a few). I spotted the tweedy professor and a round-faced young fellow of about twenty who looked familiar. But neither they nor anyone else looked anything like Tim or the three other Brothers who, as far as I knew, were still extant, and whom I thought I might have recognised in their current incarnations. Obviously, I was at the wrong funeral.

After a minute or two of wandering around staring at people, I noticed a big bouncer-like guy giving me the eye. So I threaded my way against traffic, and took the elevator back down to the lobby. Still at his table, the receptionist beckoned me over.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I checked our database.' With a shrug, he gestured to a desktop computer that I could see through the open door of an office. 'No record of any funeral for a Timothy Parker during the last six months.' I thanked him and left.

Back on the street, I felt at loose ends. I was not due at my daughter's house for three hours and she had told me she was working a co-op shift this afternoon and her husband was taking my grandson to a Pokémon tournament. Walking toward the subway entrance on Central Park West, I cut through the small park that abuts the back entrance to the Hayden Planetarium, which, in turn, abuts the Museum of Natural History.

What could have happened? When in doubt I call Liz, my go-to confidante. When I told her about the non-funeral, she was as puzzled as I was. ‘I’m right behind the Planetarium,’ I said. ‘Since I have three hours to kill, I think I’ll walk across Central Park to the library.’ I was referring to a private library we belong to, on East 79th Street. ‘It’s such a nice day.’

‘Good idea.’ She thought for a moment. ‘Wait a minute! Didn’t your friend Tim die a while ago? Am I crazy? I think we were on vacation somewhere and I sort of remember reading about it in the paper.’

‘Huh! Now that you mention it, I vaguely remember the same thing. Or was that a different Peace Corps friend?’

‘No, I think it was Tim.’

When we had repeated our plan to meet at Zoe’s house and disconnected I decided I was too tired even to walk to the library. I would just take the subway home. If the train gods were smiling, I could drop off my squash kit, have a nap and still get to Brooklyn on time.

This plan worked. At five forty-eight, I was walking up the hill from the subway when who should I see coming down the hill but Liz. The fact that we met right in front of Zoe’s house – Liz had taken a bus from her studio – seemed like an uptick in fortune. We hugged, rang the bell and went inside to a cheerful dinner. Our nine-year-old grandson ate everything, laughed at all my jokes, and joined in the conversation, a large part of which focused on my Internet misadventure. Liz repeated her hunch that Tim had died previously.

This pleasant dinner and the swift resolution of my confusion confirmed my sense of a turn in fortune. The resolution was my son-in-law’s doing. After listening patiently to my account of the mix-up he cleared it up, elaborating on what my squash partner had said. ‘Liz may be right,’ he explained. ‘When Google messages accumulate, and you try to check one, they sometimes key you into an old one. That’s what must have happened. I bet if you searched your friend on the ‘Net, you’d find out he died a while ago.’ To his credit, my son-in-law did not show a trace of the condescension that I, an ignorant old fool, deserved. Such a simple explanation for such an apparently complicated string of errors!

He was right. When I got home, a search readily yielded a paid Death Notice for Parker, Timothy J. that had appeared in *The Times* about a year before. Included among the relatives of the beloved deceased was a grandson, Robin Parker-Simmons.

That might have ended the *IBS* saga, but – surprise! – it didn’t. This morning, six days after the non-event, I received an email from Robin. It occurred to me that this might be a response to my belated acknowledgment of the funeral invitation, in which, you may remember, I had provided contact information.

The first part of the email was sweet. Tim had often reminisced about me and the other Efiti [sic] Brothers. (A Freudian typo?) He had mentioned what a smart, funny guy I was. Then came the kicker:

The other day, Mr. Singer, I gave your contact info to the other surviving member of the gang, Peabody Farnsworth, whom I met at my grand-dad’s funeral. Mr. Farnsworth emailed me, and said he wanted to get back in touch with you. My bad, for not asking your permission first!

Oh, no, after half a century! Pea Farnsworth, the butt of all our jokes, and, if I say so myself, a ridiculous buffoon! During one drunken episode, this sloppy prep-school groupie had belched

and farted simultaneously, prompting Tim to quip, ‘Shot out in front, and blown out behind.’ We must have repeated this witticism a hundred times.

Extrapolating, I’d guess that by now Peabody Farnsworth, Esq. was a retired, thrice-divorced insurance executive, who maxed out his credit card every month and suffered from obesity and related ailments. But I didn’t have to guess. Scrolling through the rest of my emails, I found one from peafarn@gmail.com. Before I open it, let me guess what it says:

Yo, Ron Singer, how’re they hanging, Bro? After all these years! Remember me, Old Pea Farnsworth? Since Tim, Jerry and Ben have all bought the farm by now – sad, very sad – you and I should get together *pronto* (while we still can)! From time to time, I train down to the Big Apple from this dull CT ‘burb, so what say we knock back a few brews and swap some lies about the old days? Remember ‘The Lesson’, Bro, in which you starred as that brilliant *savant*, Dr. Schnitzer?

Aside from three minor details, my guess was right: Pea lived not in Connecticut but Westchester; instead of ‘a few brews’ he suggested dinner at an expensive restaurant; and he referred to me, correctly, as Dr. Schmutzer.

Thus are we all dogged, for better and for worse, by the mistakes of the past.

Ron Singer has written and published extensively about his family, and Africa. He is the author of *Uhuru Revisited: Interviews with Pro-Democracy Leaders* (2015).