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—Tim O'Brien

Rumors from the Lost World

Stories by Alan Davis

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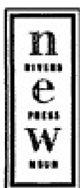

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SHOOTING THE MOON

I had baseball cards and books about time travel, my brother Edward had the television, my father double shifts at a factory job, my mother housework and a secret wish for a baby girl. We reached for nothing greater, but my grandfather was different.

Once a week I walked him to the local library. If I got lucky, he entered quietly in his flannel shirt and overalls, waved his black glove, and chose a few books. On the way back to our white frame house, he swung his rubber-tipped cane for balance, the crook on the end like a bishop's crozier. On the front stoop, cuffs tucked over the shoestrings of his work boots, he lit up one of his King Edward cigars. "You kids know nothing. They've filled your head with crap."

He paced his attic room, as foggy as a London street in a Sherlock Holmes melodrama. Cigar smoke swirled away through tiny gable vents and his face with its squints and wrinkles came clear in the flare of a match. He was an atheist and a socialist; somewhere in his book-lined haunt above my bedroom was a newspaper article about George Bernard Shaw he liked to read to me. Sitting on a packing crate, I wasn't able to make much sense of what he read, but it was heady stuff, and I swayed in his rhetoric as his black glove tapped across the page. He wore the black fur-lined glove because surgery left the hand freezing on the outside and burning on the inside. My father was often away nights, working his double-shifts, so my mother trudged up the stairs with a porcelain bowl of hot water balanced against her good hip. Grandpa needed his soak.

Even so, there would have been no heated discussions about nursing homes had he submitted gratefully to this Florence Nightingale act. Her two boys weren't old enough to minister to him, only to listen as she braced the slopping bowl of scalding water and planted a foot on the next step, groaning and gathering a breath, but she appreciated the man who sent me to the corner store for cigars. He gave me tip enough for a box of Good N' Plenty, licorice candies with pink-and-white sugar shells. The man who sat at our formica breakfast table with his magnifying glass, reading quietly for hours, accepting refills of coffee with a professorial nod, was comforting to her. She thought his political opinions were nothing more than the cantankerousness of a man whose favorite team had lost the World Series.

Nothing was further from the truth. When I was unlucky, he worked himself into a rage before we even reached the wooden red-shuttered library. On our final visit there, he scowled at Mrs. Douglas, the front-desk librarian who knew my mother, and vainly searched the card catalog for radical primers. "They've got books in here that make goddamn fools out of people," he said, loudly enough to be heard across the long room. "I

don’t want my boy here to grow up to be a fool. Do I have to take him downtown to get him a book worth reading?”

After a few minutes of this, Mrs. Douglas got on the telephone, gesturing emphatically, speaking at a staccato pace, and my mother soon arrived in the wood-paneled station wagon. Through the library’s plate-glass window I saw her try to parallel park. She wasn’t very good at it, especially when aroused. She kept turning the wheel too abruptly. The rear tire kept bumping into the curb. I knew she would lose patience and leave it that way, angled out like a gangplank into traffic.

Mrs. Douglas hovered behind the counter, stroking her chin. It was the gesture she used on any patron who got out of line. “Ruth,” my grandfather shouted to her, “why don’t you just sit down on your ass and play the fool?” My fingers ticked on the frayed binding of a green *Reader’s Guide.* The library was hardly the local hangout, but a couple of my classmates were there, staring oddly in my direction. A middle-aged member of the Ladies’ Auxiliary put down the latest popular novel and crossed her arms. Had God (who in my imagination looked something like Mickey Mantle, right down to the pinstriped uniform) entered the library at that embarrassing moment and promised to make the old man vanish, I would have taken cover on the far side of the card catalog and told The Mick to have at it. My grandfather was the kind of straight-backed old man who attracted scorn instead of pity; he would never surrender to reason, fatigue, or even to my mother.

She strode through the door and said something to him in an angry whisper, and even now it’s hard to tell what happened in the conventional style of reminiscence. “Bitch,” he answered. “You’re a little fascist, that’s what you are, a little bitch of a fascist, working your husband to death to fill your house with crap.” She slapped him so hard he raised his bad hand instinctively. The black glove flew in a small arc and landed five feet away. I picked it up and held it just so by one of its fingers. It felt soft to the touch, as though the fingers had somehow worked it smooth from the inside. Looking at nothing else, I followed it to the back seat of the station wagon, where a cop was placing a parking ticket under the windshield wiper. I tried on the glove, still warm and moist, and cursed the capitalists before losing my nerve and laying it to rest on the seat. My grandfather, face flushed, a welt already showing on his lower cheek, limped past the wagon, his right arm twitching. “Goddamn fascist bitch,” he muttered.

My mother wedged herself behind the wheel and stuffed her mouth with a stick of chewing gum. She noticed the ticket and her jaws started working double-time. Without a word, she turned on the wipers. The ticket fluttered to the asphalt. She gunned the motor and whipped the station wagon around, nearly sideswiping a VW bug. The car’s owner, opening a door for his wife and child, gave her the finger.

She gripped the steering wheel with one hand, elbow resting on the window well, and waved a cigarette with the other. “I’m sorry you had to see that,” she said. “Grandpa’s just old, poor thing. He’s had his disappointments.” She flung her wad of gum into the street, took a deep angry drag on the cigarette. “It’s too goddamn much. I’ll tell you one thing. He uses that kind of language again, he’s gone.” She stubbed out the cigarette. “Your father wants to put him somewhere, great. Otherwise, he can live on skid row with the scumbags and loonytunes.”

That evening my parents argued in their bedroom below me. “I’ll go there first,” my father shouted. “That’s for people who can’t function, who have to be spoonfed, have to be wiped.” My mother said something quietly, but in that tone of voice that could vibrate right through you.

“We don’t always *earn* our afflictions. Sometimes they just *happen,”* my father answered, so loud I could tell he was drinking. “We want a girl, you can’t have more kids. Is that your fault?” They were up and down all night, using the toilet, opening the refrigerator, the conversation flaring up over and over again like a fever. Above me, my grandfather paced out the disturbing rhythm of his own thoughts. He had big dreams as a young man, hoped to go to college, become a labor leader. “He wanted fame and women,” my father once said, “never mind the fortune.” Something obscure happened, though, something to do with the Great Depression. He ended up spending his life on county roads, repairing watches. Then his eyes went bad and his wife died.

“I like living in the attic,” he told me once, smiling for my mother. “It’s a quick way to get off the face of the earth.” He waved his cigar. “I’m closer to heaven in case of a stroke.”

“Where’s heaven, Grandpa?”

“It’s on the left side of the moon. You can’t ever let them shoot the moon. That’s where you go for coffee and beans when you’re out of luck.”

The day after that last confrontation at the library, he came down dressed in baggy slacks and a rust-colored turdeneck that climbed the pale skin of his abdomen. A tattered socialist newspaper under one arm, one white-knuckled hand holding tightly to the banister, he descended upon Edward, my younger brother. Wearing a blue Detroit Tigers cap, Edward was folded fetus-like into the recliner, entranced by a game show.

“Turn off the damn television,” my grandfather said.

Edward looked at me. I raised an eyebrow in silent complicity, forgetting the yellow smell of the newspaper, the mustiness of the attic room with its narrow metal bed, the sound of that scratchy voice echoing from the rafters. I only remembered how often, under duress, I read a radical primer instead of a book of high adventure, how often my grandfather scoffed at my baseball cards. For an awful minute, I only remembered standing in the library, blaming him because he somehow wasn’t what people expected.

Edward, who was no gendeman, doffed his cap like Al Kaline, his hero, after a home run. “Grandpa, sit down and shut up.”

“All right,” he said, to my amazement, and sat on the sofa. He pulled out a cigar and tore off its tip. “We’ll watch it together, you and I, we’ll see what we can see.” I suppose he intended to pontificate on the evils of consumer capitalism, but the whirling wheel of the game show, the incessant detergent commercials and the moderator’s patter hypnotized him. He fell off to sleep, head thrown backwards, mouth open. Edward planted his cap back on and called my mother. She tried to work a plastic sheetcover under him—he was becoming incontinent—but he woke. “What the hell?” he mumbled, rubbing his eyes. “Where’s your husband? He’s never home, is he? Too busy filling this goddamn coffin with gadgets.”

“Hey, ‘Gunsmoke’ is coming on,” Edward said, turning up the set. Chester, the gimpy deputy sheriff, was trying to keep order until Matt Dillon returned from Topeka.

“Look, this can’t continue,” my mother said. “Why don’t you form your own society or something? I don’t see you refusing the food we put on your plate.” In fact he ate like a bird, lived on coffee and toast. “Besides, we’ve achieved everything you’ve dreamed of.”

“But you don’t have *dignity*, you don’t have *respect,”* he said, nodding with conviction.

He tried to retreat to his room, muttering under his breath, but couldn’t negotiate the stairs. He sat down on the bottom step, feet planted on the hardwood floor, and covered his face with his hands. “Oh hell,” he said. “Oh hell.”

When my father heard the story, his face turned an ugly color. He tossed a few union leaflets on a sideboard. A family portrait, an oil painting, hung a little lopsided on the wall. In it, my grandfather was absent and we were all much younger, smiling like Christians because the painter had been one. “That’s it,” my father said. “He’s brought this on himself. I wash my hands of it.”

Even my mother, who devoted so much of her life to keeping things clean, never put it quite that way.

At the Sleepy Hollow Care Center, he had a tiny airy room. Outside his window was a flower garden, part of a public park, in season well-tended and full of salmon colors and greens and blues.

When we paid him a visit, he had nothing to say, just worked his jaw and stared at the flowers.

My parents inscribed his favorite Shaw quote on the headstone, one he repeated often, especially when mocked or contradicted: “Some people see things as they are and ask why. I see things that never were and ask why not.” On the day we buried him it rained. I stood in the drizzle beside his grave, staring at the words on the tombstone and daydreaming into the spit-shine of my best shoes until the service was completed. Afterwards, we went for pizza.

Without him in the attic as ballast I floated away, and my mother, after a prolonged but successful quarrel with my father, sent me to Bible School, of all places. Talk about Jesus got mixed up with diatribes about the workers’ struggle for dignity, the batting average of Mickey Mantle, and the plot of *The Time Machine*. By the time I went off to college, the thought of that inscription in the cemetery made me cringe.

One cloud-swept autumn afternoon, I told Sally, my wife, about the inscription, expecting her to grin. “A neat old man,” she said. “You know that’s the quote Bob Kennedy used on the campaign trail?” She nodded, staring from the wraparound porch of the restaurant to a bevy of geese flying south in formation. She had worked hard for Kennedy, followed his every notion in the papers. “How come you never talk about him?”

I stared at her. It was true. After a fashionable renouncement of my family, I decided politics, especially Shaw’s creaky socialism, lacked existential truth. I felt profoundly sorry for my grandfather. His illusions had made his life miserable. I shrugged. “You saw what happened to Kennedy,” I said, stroking my goatee sagely as geese plummeted

through tatters of cloud the color of cigar smoke.

Even long dead, he continued shouting. I'd wake, thrashing upstream in my dreams, to the odor of cigar smoke and attic mustiness. He wanted his story told, he wanted someone to listen to an account of his ungentle passage through the world, but instead of sitting my wife down and talking until I got hoarse, until vocal fry punctuated my memories, I'd take off my glasses and palm my hands over my eyes, then journey to a lake cabin with a redwood deck. Stones dropped into clear water, making concentric circles. My grandfather sat beside me, rocking on the porch. I have his weak eyes, you see, use them as much as he did. In another exercise, my eyes open to the darkness inside my hands, I saw him walk past me, swinging his rubber-tipped cane, staring at the fence, the cow-pasture finish to our deadend street. He hooked the cane on a strand of barbed wire and climbed. On the other side, he paused, surveyed the high grass, gathered a breath and went on, into a field of black-and-white cows.

"How can he be dead?" I said, finally telling her the story one late afternoon. "I can still *see* him. He's still there, sitting at the kitchen table, pinching off the tip of a cigar, quoting Shaw or Carl Sandburg." All afternoon we had sandpapered our bedroom wall and spackled nail holes, getting it ready for a new coat of paint. The cigar-smoke color of the paint as I rolled it onto the walls, or maybe the intoxicating effects of its fumes, set something off in me. I couldn't stop talking. "So I stood in a hard rain beside the grave," I finished, "wearing my best boots, and then we went for pizza."

"Boots? You wore boots?" Jaunty after a job well done, she grinned. But it was clear she had listened, really listened. "Somehow I can't imagine you in boots."

"Shoes. Okay?" I clicked my tongue, a little irritated. "You find the rhythm of the story, a few details change. The point is, I had something on my feet."

"Sure," she said. "I get it." Then she furrowed her brows. *"Pizza?* You went for *pizza* after a *funeral?"*

"Yeah," I said, and bit into my lower lip. "What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing." She shrugged. "We have to eat, I guess. In respect for your grandpa, though, I hope you skipped the anchovies." She put down her putty knife and went off to rinse her hands with turpentine. When she returned, her mood had changed. "No, look, I'm sorry. Really. I'm sorry he was so unhappy." She rubbed her eyes and sniffed her knuckles, as though ready to cry. "If it's any consolation, your father was right, I think. We don't earn our afflictions. Sometimes they're just given to us, we have to live with them."

That was it. My grandfather was alive in somebody else's head, the head of someone I loved, and I knew she would keep him there, tell people about him from time to time. Air him out, so to speak, let him move through the world in a way which was still very difficult for me. She smiled, shrugged, and padded into the kitchen to start dinner. I worked on details in the bedroom, touching up the baseboard, smoothing out the rough spots, but by nightfall the job was finished, the paint mostly dry.

I joined my wife. Candles were flickering on the dining room table and the good china was laid out like a message from a more perfect world. Sally had pulled out a silver wine bucket, a wedding gift forgotten for years, and filled it with ice and a bottle of *vin*

ordinaire, the only sort of wine we drank. After dinner, we brought the candles and the last of the wine to the new room and toasted my grandfather. The room was pale gray and satisfying to sit in, like being a child again and walking with him to that red-shuttered library on an overcast afternoon, his mind filled with the plight of the workingclass, mine with the necessity of traveling back and forth in time.

RAMPARTS STREET

Emily, after rejecting the eighties and its gold-plated bait, has come to the idea that she can learn about herself and her times by learning about her mother, getting in touch with her roots. Emily even flirts with taking a course in Italian, a language her grandfather spoke with gusto. English, though it served him well enough, never gave him pleasure. He liked to roll Italian phrases in his mouth, feel how they forced his lips to puff out and pucker with male pride. In English, he was much diminished.

For Emily's sake, her mother tells and retells the story of a rainy February evening in 1942, when two government agents tore apart the house with carnival glee, as though Mardi Gras, which vanished with the war effort, had to be replaced with something more physical than periodic blackouts and air raid practice, the self-important warden with his metal hat and flashlight smirking as he lectured the nineteen-year-old girl. "A single match could give away our position, sister."

Emily takes the story to heart, cites chapter and verse. "You were an American, Mama, New Orleans born," she says, rubbing her fingers together like her father. "You went at things the way your ancestors did, hardscrabbling, getting in the door without asking. Isn't that what the Vietnamese are doing, the Mexicans, the Cubans, the Haitians, all the immigrants?" Emily gave up managing a health spa in the suburbs of New Orleans to work with displaced people. "The same people who want to keep them out are the ones whose fathers wanted to keep us out, at least until they learned how to use us as strikebreakers. And now they want to cut the capital gains tax and give another break to people who don't need it. Isn't that right? Am I getting it right?"

In response, her mother swirls her teaspoon in her coffee-and-milk. Each time she tells the story, she manages to recall more of the truth of what happened, because, God knows, on that overcast February evening she couldn't explain herself the way she can now, after chewing it all over for so many years.

"But you were valedictorian the year before the war started. Isn't that right?" Emily says. "You gave the commencement address. You knew a thing or two."

Whatever, her mother says. It was 1942 and Mama motioned me close. "Come upstairs, child," she told me, though I was a high school graduate, already rebelling against the social constraints my father insisted on. "I don't want them going through the tin box." This was World War II, remember, fought so long ago people called it The Good War? Against the Germans, the Japanese, the Italians. Errol Flynn came once to the Municipal Auditorium to sell war bonds.

"It's a scream," Emily says. "You know I'm right, don't you? New Orleans has always

been the country's salad bowl. Greeks, Italians, Irish, blacks, French, Spanish, Eastern Europeans. You name it. The whites thinking they could do what they wanted to blacks, the Irish and the French thinking they were better than Mediterraneans. Am I right?"

Well, her mother says, we saw newsreels of the Blitz, used ration stamps, had to line up for meat, sweeten our coffee with saccharine, do without ice cream and cake. We knew something was wrong. Patriotism seemed like the answer. Anyway, I couldn't figure why Mama wanted the box hidden away, but no matter. I was obedient. It was GI green, about the size of a breadbox, full of our papers. Birth certificates, death certificates, marriage certificates. A world in a breadbox. And my father's alien registration, paperclipped to a miniature Italian flag—those bright sun-filled colors, so different from the war effort. You know we had to mix bright yellow food coloring into the margarine to make it look edible?

I shoved the box into my closet, because the two agents downstairs, even though they were tearing our house apart, wouldn't search the room of a girl, an innocent daughter. So Mama figured, anyway, leading me back downstairs. "Not a word," she said. "Not a peep."

At nineteen, I was the youngest of thirteen children born to Mama, and the only one who still lived at home. It was a Tuesday, I remember, a meatless Tuesday, and Olsen was as thick as a steak, a good half foot taller than me. He slit open a sagging chair, the one in front of our gramophone, a console bought second-hand and polished to a high mahogany sheen. The chair would be worth maybe a dollar on the street, but it was the one nobody else sat in when Papa was home.

"You toiletface," I said. My mother put a hand to her mouth, my father started grinding his jaw, but he was afraid to speak. It was the first time in my life I used such a word, the worst I could think of, though God knows I heard it often enough, something my brothers called my older sister. But the effect was different, a little scandalous, very vulgar, in the mouth of a bashful child, five foot two. I was no bigger than Charlie Chaplin. "What right you have to come in here?"

"Every right in the world, sister," Olsen said. Grinning, he pulled one of my long dark braids. "That's some head of hair you got, sugar." He looked over at my father, sitting stiffly at attention, perspiring in his frayed, worsted suit. "We're just making sure you all cooperate with the war effort." He slashed the chair until stuffing came out, then overturned a steamer trunk. Worn keepsakes, sweaters, shawls, and doilies spilled across the floor.

Seeing red, nothing but the motion of my blood, I rose to my toes and pummeled Olsen in the back. "You damn palooka!"

Shoulders hunched, he pivoted, frowning, and took one long steady look before bursting into a low-registered laugh. Gasper, the second man, came up behind me and hoisted me to the couch, sat me down with my parents. "That's enough, Joe Louis." My father, jaw grinding, studied the frayed carpet in that self-conscious way people have when they're embarrassed for the furniture. As for my mother, she was no Sicilian, but she knew what poverty was. She also knew we were just a bad break from more of it.

"They put up with that shit?" Emily's face gets puffy with anger. She snaps open her

purse and digs in it, as though searching for the cigarettes she no longer smokes.

What could we do? her mother says to her, staring at chipped china, drip-drying in a wire drain next to the sink. New Orleans was a military center. Soldiers all over the place, Army hospitals on the lakefront, Nazi subs at the mouth of the river. We were supposed to roll bandages, knit socks and sweaters, save tinfoil and coat hangars, old license plates. There was the rationing, the blackouts. We didn't know we had any rights. Olsen and Gasper had official business, they said. "Why do you have a radio but no transmitter?" Olsen said. "Where's your transmitter? You have a short-wave?"

"We listen to Beethoven," I said, "but you wouldn't know him, would you?"

"He's a dago. Who else would you listen to?"

"Beethoven?" Gasper furrowed his brows. "He's not Italian, is he? Verdi, that's your man. You listen to him, sweetheart?"

"And Caruso. We listen to Caruso. You wouldn't know him, either. You're stupid."

My mother squeezed my knee with a large-veined hand. "Just be quiet."

"What are these questions, Mother?" my father asked in his heavy English, his long big-boned face twitching a little, his downtumed nose engraving sadness onto his features. He required me strictly to be home by ten, allowed chaperoned dates only, and suspected my volunteer work at the USO. He forbade me to attend late-evening get-togethers, especially dances for servicemen. He didn't trust soldiers with his baby, and the more I argued the darker his face became, like the skin of an eggplant. "I have every right in the world to go to that dance," I had been screaming, almost in tears, when the two men knocked.

Outside it started to rain, a sudden gale from the gulf. Winds thirty miles an hour, the tops of big oaks waving like people adrift in lifeboats. It was better than Beethoven, those storms. Before the war, I'd sit by the window, lights out, the night turning off and on, sheets of rain plinking the glass, the ballgame droning on the radio for my brother's benefit, sheet-lightning punctuated by shouts of victory or disgust. When the war came, he got sent off to the European theater, where he met one of his heroes, a pitcher from Mississippi.

"Look, Mister," Gasper told my father, who was running his watch-chain through his fingers like rosary beads, "we're fighting fascism. You should be glad we're vigilant."

"Yeah, right," Emily says, retrieving one of her own father's butts from the ashtray and breaking it apart.

Fascism? For all I knew, Olsen was a fascist. He was certainly dressed for it in his wrinkled, shiny black suit. He pulled out a cigarette, without permission to smoke, tapped it in his palm, and struck his match. "What's a little discomfort, a little annoyance, compared to freedom?" he said. "You all don't know how good you have it. Suppose you were still over there in that stinkhole? You think you'd get a place like this to feel at home in? You think you'd get all that good Spam to eat when there wasn't enough meat to go around?"

My father studied the jiggling glint of his watch-chain.

He had the shakes. When he was little, I found out later, his parents spoke of innocent men dragged by dead of night to stakes in the scorched uplands of Sicily, where predators and insects and the sun would kill them. In America, it was rumored that the government relocated people into prisons in the desert, that Italians were never safe from a beating or the kind of grilling that convinces you you're guilty.

"If it's not our country, too," I said, "then what's my brother doing over there? Why don't you send him home? He's fighting for his country."

"Which country is that?" Olsen said.

"Olsen," Gasper said. "That's enough." He furrowed his brows again, bushy, gray things like caterpillars, and walked to our tiny picture window.

"The point is, sister," Olsen said, "they're not in Italy. They might have some trouble with that."

"When we get to Italy, they'll be there," I said, "protecting a coward like you."

Olsen turned to my mother. "You got any coffee? How about a little hospitality here?" He sat next to my father, in the spot my mother vacated when she went for the coffee. "Where's your registration papers, old man?"

"This is his country," I said. "He's been here since he was a kid. He's been here forever."

Gasper, staring at the rain, turned from the window. "I wish that was true, sweetheart. The truth is, I'm sorry about this, but he was born overseas, he never naturalized. There's a man here who says he likes Mussolini."

"Who says he likes Mussolini? Mantegna? Was it Mantegna? That's a lie."

"Maybe that's true, sister, maybe not, but how come he never naturalized?"

Even today, Emily's mother doesn't know for sure. He was born in 1877, came by boat to America. He was still a child, spoke Italian for years, part of that huge melting-pot immigration that filled those aging sway-backed houses in the French Quarter chock-a-block with Italians. His parents grew produce in Kenner and opened a small grocery on Ramparts Street. He learned English waiting on customers. It wasn't a bad life, certainly an improvement over the arid soil of Sicily, the scourge of absentee landlords, the life of an indentured farmhand. In South Louisiana there was rent, hard backbreaking work, French Creoles and Irish who called them dagos and worse, there was the heat. But it was paradise compared to Sicily, where bandits and bloodshed in the uplands restricted travel one way, while the fertile coast had nothing for peasants. America had always been a bright shining dream.

"Where the rich get richer," Emily says.

Anyway, he couldn't explain to the men why he never naturalized, though he tried. He made box-like gestures with his hands and clawed at the air, reaching for something tangible, something plausible, as though kneading dough, but finally shrugged the question away. "I have my papers," he said.

"Well, why didn't you say so? Let's see them," Olsen said. He waved at the mess in the

living room. “Nobody likes this, but it’s like a hurricane. You don’t want it to happen, but it just does. It’s nobody’s fault, you understand. It’s like that rain outside. You don’t make a big deal about a rainstorm, do you? That wouldn’t do nobody any good.” He leveled his gaze at Papa. “Especially the people waiting out the storm.”

“I know where the papers are, you big jerk,” I said. “I’ll go get them.”

My father sat very still, as though posed for a picture. He was terrified. That I could use the language I did without a stern reprimand was evidence enough. Imprisonment, deportation, the loss of his family. He was uncharacteristically paralyzed. How it must have shamed him, his own daughter going up the stairs for the tin box, Garibaldi-proud, his watch-chain still jiggling in his lap.

Upstairs, the tin box wouldn’t open. Mama had the key. I sat on the edge of my bed, defeated. It was a standard-issue tin box, though, and finally I shrugged and carried it before me, hands outstretched, like something intended for the Church. Maybe it was all an elaborate Carnival hoax, maybe the box was full of trinkets. Maybe I’d walk to the top of the stairs with an armful of beads and doubloons and everyone would laugh at our little joke, scream out the classic Mardi Gras refrain: “Hey, Mister, throw me something!”

Downstairs, my mother was serving coffee and cinnamon toast. Coffee was a precious commodity in wartime, hoarded for special occasions, and the cinnamon was pre-war.

Gasper smacked his lips.

“You like that?” I said.

“Your mother’s a saint,” he said, sipping hot coffee with chicory. “Those the papers?”

“Give it to me,” my mother said, “sit down.” I put the tin box on her lap. She took a key from a single large pocket stitched to her plain dress and opened the box. On one document I saw the embossed stamp of a notary public. She slipped the registration from the box, leaving the flag buried among other official notices that our family existed.

Gasper studied it, rubbing his eyes, then turned to my father. “So, you used to live on Annunciation Street.”

My father smiled for the first time all evening, sensing something in Gasper’s voice that passed right over me. Earlier, almost in tears because he refused to admit my volunteer work at the USO was part of the war effort, I had to bite my tongue and sit on my hands. Now I sulked, suddenly quiet, but nobody noticed. What had happened down here when I was upstairs, staring at the magic box whose contents might save us so much trouble? Does coffee and cinnamon toast make such a difference? The key to the adult world, the world I wanted entrance to, was the size of the topsy-turvy room I sat in, and it was a room full of lunatics.

Outside, water dripped from the gutters, splashing on the long, slick leaves of our elephant ear plant. I smelled coffee and cinnamon on my mother’s breath. She wants a glass of wine, I thought, reading her mind.

“Salaparuta,” Gasper said. “Where’s that?”

My father’s hands went into motion again, an artful improvisation to conjure up

language. "Western Sicily," he said. "Near Gibellina, Ninfa, Belice River. Le isole, siamo cosi buoni." We are so good-natured.

Gasper smiled and nodded. "All right, then." He tugged at his rumpled coat, dark under the armpits. Olsen stood too, pulling at his crotch. "What about that gramophone? There's something funny about it. Should I take a look inside it?" He caressed the dark mahogany.

My father stiffened, but Gasper placed a hand on his partner's shoulder. "Let it go. We've got other business." He turned to my father. "Good evening."

"Auguri infinitie buon Viaggio," my father said heartily, clasping Gasper's hand, as though consummating a business deal. Infinite good wishes and a good journey. He caught me studying his face and stared for a moment at the broguings on his wingtips. After that night, I never had quite so much trouble getting out for USO dances. I didn't see him anymore as the domineering Sicilian he tried to be, or as the helpless immigrant he was that rainy night, but as a man, one who could be cajoled, who loved the world and its chicanery.

My mother's jaw was set, though, the squiggles around her eyes as taut as wires. "It was none of their business," she said. "Those papers are personal." The idea of a brown-edged piece of paper with an official stamp being personal made no sense to me. Through the picture window, the asphalt glistened like dark soil. Olsen and Gasper walked under the streetlights to their car, Olsen with a notebook in one hand. I could see him stand beyond the elephant ear plant, the great wheeling shadows of its leaves washing over him. He unclipped his pen, made a notation, and pointed down the street.

Emily, leaning over the sink, staring into the backyard at begonias, snorts out a lungful of air. "Did Grandma even ask those goddamn jokers for identification?" Emily shakes her head sadly. "I can't believe you all let them get away with that shit. They might have been thugs—plenty of those around, just like in Italy. Am I right about that? Or maybe they were just vigilantes. You know, entertaining themselves, having a little fun, the way men like to do?"

You let it drip-dry for years, her mother tells her, the anger gets shaved away. Nowadays you think the only important thing is placing blame or realizing yourself, a woman coming to herself, but there's so much water under the bridge. V-J Day on Canal Street, church bells, whistles, horns, people screaming their lungs out. Air conditioning, television, the Superdome, the bridge over Lake Pontchartrain. Nothing was ever the same after the war. Well, live and let live. I do know I carry some sort of history in my bones. Mama died in 1947, I got married in 1949 to your father, Papa died in 1953. A heart attack. At the hospital, they wouldn't give him oxygen until the doctor arrived. By then he was dead and I was seeing my own blood again, screaming at the head nurse. "You goddamned Olsen!" I remember screaming. They sedated me. When I woke, your father was there. He wanted to know who Olsen was.

"It's early enough, Mantegna's shop is still open," Mama said that night, forcing some coins into my hand. "Go get us some flowers."

"From Mantegna?" I said, confounded by what I was hearing. "The jerk who caused us all this trouble?"

“You don’t know that,” Mama said. “Now go.”

I got a bunch as bright as the Italian flag. I walked back to the house under that February sky, where clouds were mountains in the moonlight, and moss hung from live oaks like witch-hair. Louisiana became the sky and the trees, not the shops or the swaybacked houses, certainly not Olsen or the government. I even had to fight an impulse to jump on the trolley and light out for the USO dance. Back home, my father was asleep, or at least alone up in his room, but my mother was hard at work with cleaning rags, threads, and a needle, with antimacassars, old sheets, and a shawl, putting things back together. Manic after my errand on the wet romantic streets, I walked to the top of the stairs with the flowers. “Hey, ma’am, you want me to throw you something?” I shouted, my voice a little too bright, like a waxy apple.

She straightened, the barest flicker of an exasperated smile fighting against her mood, and I tossed the bunch down to her, flower by flower. One for Elizabeth, who died in 1914; one for David, 1922; one for Robert, 1936; one for Frank, Jr., 1939, one for Thomas, who was still alive, but who would die in the war, in 1944; one for Anthony, who died the year after my mother, in 1948; one for Leonard, who had three strokes and passed away in 1959; one for Louis, who was institutionalized for years before a fatal heart attack in 1979; one for Richard, whose liver gave out in 1983; one for your Uncle Joe, one for your Aunt Mary, another for Aunt Emily, your namesake, and one for me. One for Papa, one for Mama, who gathered them all up and found a vase.

I wasn’t even twenty when all of that happened. Now I’m close to seventy. Time flies, doesn’t it? That wartime night, though, when I was still nineteen, I remember I turned on the radio. While Mama filled the vase with water and bright flowers, the radio filled the room with scratchy big band music. So I jitterbugged, working off my anger with twirls and acrobatic maneuvers. Had Papa seen me, the USO would have been history. Mama stared at me for a minute, not exactly smiling but with her full lips a little lopsided. That was a kind of victory. Then she motioned me over and we got to work again, syncopating our business to the quick tempo of jazz.

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