Grant Cogswell

Paris in '73

I

She left him in Paris in 1973, in a Metro station that sat directly three hundred feet under the Seine, just where it curves south of the Hotel de Ville. I was six years old at the time, and I can remember that if you looked from our apartment window maybe a quarter of a mile down the street you could see the rim of the trench the river flowed in. The river always stank and always was brown, and it moved sluggishly as if just waking between its stone and concrete banks. I imagined the bottom to be hard cement too, and it was not until much later that I realized this was impossible.

The Metro station was under reconstruction, perhaps because of the river. There were holes gouged in the smooth tile, through the walls and even into the wet black dirt of the ancient riverbed itself. There were pools of water on the platform, streams dripping down from pipes, thick tile dust moistening into sludge and still more holes, and cracks, everywhere.

My mother and father were yelling at each other, at first

during and over the bursts of jackhammer noise but after a while pausing angrily, waiting and looking around at the cracks in the walls before it was quiet again, and then the shouting would resume.

The French were rooting for her. She was young, tall, American, and a brunette. My father was (and still is) a stout Kansan, bald and blond-bearded, looking Bavarian and possibly violent. I was learning as we traveled that the Germans hate the French and the French hate the Germans (or anyone who looks German). So now the French stood back, commenting and jeering and watching my mother and father yell. I stood between my parents, closer to my father because it had always been that way. When I think of my teenage obesity, the places my father and I went together and where we are now, the rainy August night in Oxford when I rolled in the warm grass with a barmaid whose name I did not know, but whose mouth I explored with my own and whose birthmark I found in under five minutes, I think now of the way my mother stood at the edge of the yellow line, her arms out at her sides, with my father several feet back from the tracks, and how as the train arrived I instinctively stepped back away from the gust of wind and bumped my head on my father's belt buckle.

He turned and looked down at me and grabbed my wrist tightly. His big, red fist reminded me of the one I had seen on posters around the university that spring, posters I didn't understand the meaning of, only the rage. "Some people are angry and desperate," my father had said, "and they need to feel strong."

She hesitated a moment and they were both quiet in the rush of bodies that moved around us. Then she stepped onto the train and sat down next to a long-haired blond boy in a green fatigue jacket. The doors slid closed and we watched her run her hand over his hair, pulling one strand out and high towards the top of the window. The train moved and she dropped the hair. We watched her shift in her seat closer to him and place her hand on his smooth

neck. I next saw her thirteen years later, in the Greyhound Bus terminal in Murfreesboro, North Carolina.

II

With my mother suddenly gone my father hired a German art student named Helga as a maid and sort of live-in babysitter. On the wall of her room, which had been my room before my mother left, there was a poster of Castle Neuschwanstein with big white letters along the bottom that read DEUTSCHLAND. Helga was blonde and slimly elegant like a ballet dancer. She stood with me once, looking at the poster with a glass of white wine in her hand, and said, "It does not need to say 'Deutschland'. It is Deutschland."

"It's a picture," I told her.

"You are an American," she said to me later, sauteeing her Swiss-buttered carrots, a recipe she knew by heart, "and you should be like one. It is not right that you should grow up here." She often drank at the cafes with the American students and had picked up their expressions. "You don't speak like an American. Say 'grovey'."

"Gravy," I said.

"Americans say 'grovey'. You should know that."

Under our apartment was a shop which sold gas heaters. To the left as you entered was a cafe with a big red and white striped awning and lots of outside tables. To the right was a gourmet restaurant, this one with a green awning. The restaurant gave away little lead figures of two hand-painted frogs, one mounting the other, to amuse the customers. I did not understand why two frogs would want to do this, and I asked the manager of the restaurant. The manager had one missing eye, and he left the empty socket uncovered. But he laughed at my question so hard that the blind socket began to ooze, and I ran out of the restaurant and only

returned on the nights when we all ate dinner there.

After that I spent my time at the newsstand, the cafe with the red and white awning and the bench beside the big oak tree, where almost every day a man brought a guitar and an accordion and played for the coins people tossed into his velvet-lined accordion case. Sometimes, my father says, I danced and got money too. The man played songs all mad with flowery torrents of words, announcing them in a thick Scottish brogue: 'Subterranean Homesick Blues', 'Fishfly Stomp', 'Buttertown Stage', 'Blinded By The Light'. I'm starting to remember, I think, that it was the crazy lyrics of the songs as much as the notes of the guitar or accordion that made me whirl and leap like I'm told I did.

In the summer my father would get home long before it was dark, ambling slowly up the sidewalk and swinging his heavy leather briefcase. As I ate raisin cake at one of the outside tables or picked through the grate at the bottom of the oak tree for lost coins, he would cough loudly and come over to me and gather me up out of my activity and onto the stairs. Then the three of us would eat together, looking out the windows at the traffic, the afternoon light, the nuns from the seminary eating hot dogs across the street. Helga and my father would drink wine and stay at the table until long after it was finally dark and I was in my bed next to the cobwebby airshaft.

Sometimes on those nights I could hear them talking, if the wind was right, quiet and low like old, old friends, about the mountains of Germany and the plains of Kansas, and, I imagine, about my mother, and about the strange events of their lives of the kind that people talk over on warm nights with a bottle of wine between them.

I picture her telling him her idea. "I have made a film, a movie, and in it I have pictures of people in Frankfurt, and of the Black Forest and gypsies—near Heidelberg I found them—and it

closes with a picture of Neuschwanstein. I want to sell it as a travel commercial." He would smile and she would continue. "It does not say 'Deutschland' in it anywhere. It shows it. That is what is important. No narrator, no one says anything."

"Subtle," he says.

"Ja, subtle."

Later he would tell her, "My aunt came back from the dead."

Helga is thinking she heard him wrong. "Back..."

"Back from the dead." He pulls out another cigarette but does not light it, setting it on its end and turning it over and doing the same again and again. On a night fishing in Puget Sound, my great-uncle Ray had told my father about the time he saw his dead wife. My father was seventeen. It was dusk, and that boy could not see his uncle's face clearly, but the man gestured wildly with his big, hairless hands ("Uranium prospectors' hands," he said of them) and told his story in the twilight.

My father says, "Aunt Rachel died in 1945. She was an assembly worker in a shipyard up in Seattle during the war. A riveter's gun slipped off the metal and put a rivet right through Aunt Rachel's windpipe." Uncle Ray was downtown at the bank, three days after the funeral, about to withdraw his wife's account, when he saw her face in the window of a city bus. "The bus went right by, and there she was, dead a week and staring right at him." Then he walked two blocks, found a bar and drank whisky shooters until he passed out. That night he was treated for shock at the Yesler Way Mercy Clinic.

She says, "It must have been someone who looked very much like your aunt."

"No, it was her. I don't know how, but she was. My uncle believes it, but he doesn't believe it, if you know what I mean, and so do I." My father had placed his young hands on his Uncle Ray's hairless ones and sworn to never tell anyone. But Uncle Ray had

died in 1971, the winter we moved to Paris, and now he could talk about it. "It's true, it really happened, I know it did."

My father did not tell her he too watches bus windows for dead relatives as well as live ones, like sometimes his wife.

Sometime she must have told him about her uncle, this one a Gunther, who crawled into her bed one morning just before dawn when she was seven years old, "His age," she would say, looking sideways towards my bedroom. "I loved my Uncle Gunther and I trusted him, so when he said, 'I want to be with you,' I opened the covers and he crawled under." Then he began to feel her chest, looking for the ghosts of breasts that were not there yet. "It scared me very badly," she told my father. "Scared of men and of life and of everything." I see her fumbling with her wineglass and looking down, saying, "He was a molester, but it felt like..."

"It was rape," my father says.

After more stories they would pick up the dishes and wash them in the tiny kitchen, their laughter echoing off the tile and the sound of the wine bottle slamming down after a swig onto the counter, the cutting board, and finally into the trash, coming loud through the walls. After that they would both go to their rooms. My father would come into our room quietly, closing the door behind him. He would lay down awake for a long time, and then get up and go to the bathroom, and come back, and still be softly washing the room with his awake-breath when I fell back into sleep.

It went on this way until fall, when the days got shorter and often it was raining when my father came home at night, in the dark. Helga studied a lot then, and after dinner she would go to her room, studying math and French while I leafed through her big books and looked at the full-color prints of the Renaissance paintings. Things slowed down, were less alive, and my father and Helga were waiting. She rushed through her assignments towards spring, when

she would bring her degree with her back to Frankfurt. He was waiting for word on a job he wanted with Rockwell in London. The television stayed on in the evenings until we went to bed.

When word from London finally came, just before Christmas, no one seemed to notice. At the dinner table one night my father said, "It looks like I got the job."

Helga, looking down at her butter-sauteed carrots, her masterpiece, said, "That is good. You will like London."

And so, we went to London, where we lived until the summer after I first got drunk with my father and he told me that he and Helga had been in a strange kind of love.

At the airport Helga kissed me briskly on the cheek and forehead and hugged me tight, and smiling with wide wet paths on her face turned to my father.

"I have met a man," she said, grinning.

"Oh, good," said my father, and they kissed each other on the mouth, twisting themselves as if in a struggle, for what I could not tell.

"Watch out for his dentures," I said.

My father kept the job with Rockwell until twelve years later, when cancer was found in his lungs and he had to quit. He was remarried, two years after we left Helga in Paris, to a woman he had known as a child in Wichita, also separated, and burdened with a child and looking for someone to carry her into middle age.

"It was supposed to be like 'The Brady Bunch'," I told a friend much later, when I began to see what actually had happened. "We pretended for ten years or so that we had been together all along, with no acknowledgment of our differences, no attention paid to the missing parents." It didn't quite work, but it got us a long way in relative safety.

Helga graduated with her art degree, returned to Frankfurt

and kept in touch for a couple of years. Her last card,which we received just before Christmas of 1976, told us she was working for an advertising agency, struggling, but would sleep on the streets before moving back in with her family. "Good for her," my father said, and pinned the card up on the bulletin board next to our Girl Scouts of America Bicentennial Calendar.

I was sixteen years old the first time I got drunk with my father. "I could have made love to Helga, but I didn't want to spoil things for you," he said. "She was beautiful, she lived in our house and she was alone. But I never slept with her. We loved each other, though. Through you, mostly."

I was never aware of this at the time, but I suppose I had it half figured out by the time he actually said it, having heard some of the things they said and having to imagine others, knowing that at some time they must have been told, it seems like the right way for things to have happened.

III

I grew up fat, lost weight, ran track in my senior year of high school, and once went into the bathroom with a pack of razorblades and a bottle of my stepmother's favorite bourbon with intentions of killing myself on the toilet, getting drunk, cutting my wrists and letting my blood flow out. All of us, my father, my stepmother, Helga, myself, seemed to be reaching for something lost, something just out of our grasp, that if found would make our lives whole again. It seems that as the years go by, sometimes we come upon times that make our pasts more our own, that, like the Talking Heads song says, give us back our names. Fiddling with our big old French radio we kept in the guest room when I was sixteen, dialing through the stations from all over Europe, I suddenly heard something familiar. It was in French, a language I had forgotten almost entirely by the time I entered junior high school.

It was one of the accordion man's songs and I half-whisper-sang it, not understanding what the words meant, but remembering their sounds, and the story they told of the fisherman's drowned sons.

Also there is the more recent thing that makes me remember Paris, for the first time making me feel as if it was me who had been there; a month ago I took a bus to Murfreesboro, North Carolina, and I met my mother and three-year-old half-brother I did not know I had until I got off the bus. He looks like me in the dappled light that falls through the trees that grow in great stands around Murfreesboro, and there is a way he turns his head as if cautious, that makes me want to protect him from all the crazy shit the world has in store. His father is gone, on whatever device it is which pulls people from their natural obligations. It was a strange and wonderful week I spent in Murfreesboro, and I feel very different now than I ever have before. But that is a different story, and also one about a strangely physical kind of love.