

Library of the Lost

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He had spent years paying attention to his elders, and now he was one. Just yesterday, he was F. Scott Fitzgerald gazing at Lower Manhattan for the first time from the Staten Island Ferry, seeing the city rise out of its own confusion into monumental clarity, a palpable dream of transcendence. Now he was Edgar Allen Poe, once a New Yorker, too, staring at his own crypt, sort of: his university office on the Niagara Frontier.

Ludwig Fried was in the end-game, but, no chess player, so how would he work it? He needed to walk away from this near mausoleum of memory, but he wanted to leave with dignity. And he wanted to choose his own moment of truth, Hem's "grace under pressure." Refusing to become an academic zombie who perished and published, one of the walking wounded, he wouldn't make the transit from anonymity to obscurity without putting up a fight.

In an America where wide-screen TV sets were on 24/7, good words were important. Only civilized language could keep the evil of banality at bay. Someone had to preserve the language or the battle was lost. Not the Battle of Britain, but aerial combat nonetheless. Standards were slipping and he was a standard-bearer on a slippery slope.

He once had seen in a Portland, Oregon cemetery a headstone in the shape of a book with the deceased's name on the spine, perish and publish. He would find a way to leave before mini-strokes began to rob him of some words, before, in a brown study, he became the

Smithsonian Professor of Antique Letters and shipped himself, in a manner of speaking, to Washington in a vitrine via UPS. He wouldn't finish in the 18th black hole on the final green. But how not to hook or fade into nothingness?

Golf courses, despite themselves, green jackets and plaid-check pants, might be keys to larger meanings. Cosmological dimensions had infiltrated the shape of the saddle-back greens as if Einstein had mowed them himself. Cradled in valleys of luxury, protected by club-houses against the onrush of the Pacific Ocean (homage to Robert Frost, he chortled to himself), they whispered truths about the emptiness of corporate life. Oases of affluence, they would become, he hoped, bird sanctuaries in the fullness of time. Fanciful thinking, but redemptive. Life over death. Why not? But he was drifting in the current of his ruminations.

He had watched his colleagues retire for decades, the cavalcade of generations. They all had found a way to leave the "Profession," as they called it. None had died in their offices, even if it seemed that a few had. None had been taken away in straight-jackets, though some made strange faces at department meetings, walked at strange angles (one, retired to Brooklyn, Park Slope, looked for years as if he were walking backwards and sliding into oblivion), and some wore odd combinations of clothing, motley without a festive look. None kept rhythm in their dancing like Fred Astaire.

One way or other, they all had found a way to pack it in, hang up their cleats, throw in the towel, and check out without baying at the moon, cracking up, or entering biblio-therapy (so far as he knew), but Ludwig Fried, virtually emeritus in his own mind, remained puzzled

by his own fate as he stood at his office door at midnight a week after the end of the spring term, key in hand, with a possible future, however much of it there might be, still an unlocked mystery. He was, unobserved, the Frank Sinatra of the literary academy, silently crooning his sad song on the cusp of the wee hours.

He wasn't in despair about his condition, however. Or, if he was, he had been desperate so long that he considered his mood normal or simply *la condition humaine*. Rodin's Balzac stood for everyone. Besides, he had muddled through a life and career, and there was no reason why he, whose namesake and great-uncle had died pistol in hand in the Zbecno uprising against the Nazis, choking, screaming in defiance, shouldn't find a way to combat such a generally benign enemy: retirement. He thought of Camus, one of his heroes, *Le Combat!* If Fried had not become a Distinguished Professor, there was no reason why he should become a self-extinguished one.

This was his favorite time of year. The halls were empty and quiet. Nothing appealed to him quite so much after all these years as a university without students and faculty, especially after a difficult term such as this one when the Chair had intimated that some faculty, even old hands, might have to teach composition in the new "No Undergraduate Left Behind" approach.

Nothing was as satisfying as finding a parking spot without being challenged by an irate student wielding a lug-wrench if they both arrived at the empty slot at the same time. Although he was essentially a timid man, Ludwig Fried wouldn't let a student steal his slot. He had his pride. "The Buick stops here," he would say to himself, smiling, shaking slightly, even though he drove a broken down, gas-leaking

Ford Mustang, a Molotov cocktail waiting to happen. He would defend his integrity as he had defended the parking space.

“I’m not saying it will be you, Lud, you’ve served us well, your ‘Exiles By Starlight’ course has been a departmental staple, but I may have to call you in from the bull-pen in a pinch to teach Comp. Meanwhile, pitch your game.”

“Bull-shit,” he mouthed in silence. Comp was no work for an intellectual of Staten Island, a son of history, even in exile. Not exactly a son, maybe an orphan of history. His parents had left Prague in 1939 and brought him to Staten Island. His first memory was of the Statue of Liberty. He didn’t remember Europe, but he knew he had the faintest trace of an accent when he uttered words like “bull-shit.” Anger rekindled ancient emotional candles, and English often failed him in these moments. So he had gone through life cursing inaudibly. This was, in many ways, the human condition: muted resistance.

The bulletin boards were bare. No crazy “Call for Papers” sent disturbing signals through his central nervous system. Few made sense to him, and the ones that did weren’t usually meaningful. And sometimes he misread them. One he had read as “Pen Is History.” Well, it made some kind of sense. After all, Jane Austen had said of men in *Persuasion*, “The pen has been in their hands.” But where was the article? “The Pen is History.” Otherwise, it was ungrammatical or an error. Then he saw that it was “Penis History.” Gender Study, Feminism, Marxism, Lacanianism, LGBTQ -- he couldn’t be sure, but there it was, the penis writ large on the walls of academe.

He stood by himself in the silence. Only the rattle of a janitor’s cleaning cart disturbed the quiet. But there was some comfort in that.

Not even Ludwig Fried wanted to be entirely alone in the universe. Besides, he knew Roberto. He gave him a few Flor de Besana Doble Corona cigars whenever Ludwig returned from visiting his aged mother in Lauderdale-by-the-Sea where he always made it a point to walk to the end of the Anglin Pier at least once on a moonlit night to see if he could read his fortune in the sparkling cursives of the waves. It was as close as he could come to a Gershwin moment: by the sea...by the sea....

Ludwig would say to him, "Roberto, I didn't see any mermaids, but I found these cigars for you." Roberto always smiled when Ludwig said this to him. He supposed he would have smiled if he simply had given him the cigars, but he had to say something.

In truth, he was pleased that he could give these faux Havanas to Roberto. It wasn't easy to be with his mother all the time, and he needed a set of missions to get him out of the condo. Buying cigars for the night-janitor was one of them. And he liked the fact that Roberto, unlike his colleagues, always smiled. Most of them frowned most of the time as if they were poised to get yet another rejection slip or were on the verge of sending out an article they could see changing into a rejection slip in their mind's pigeon hole.

He and Roberto even exchanged a few words from time to time. Roberto knew that Ludwig had a mother in Florida. In fact, Roberto also had a mother in North Miami. They asked each other about their mothers. They understood that they had this in common: they would not let their mothers die unvisited, isolated, alone. He wished he could talk to Roberto about *The Old Man and the Sea*, but he would have to wait a few years for Roberto's English to improve. Maybe they could go fishing together in the Catskills then.

He hadn't been able to say much to Roberto, but he had found a way to make himself understood. He let Roberto know that he liked to collect old books and would appreciate it if Roberto would leave end of term discards at his door. He never knew when Roberto would turn up, but he was reliable. This had been going on for a few years, and Ludwig had quite a collection. He didn't save all of them, but still he had a few shelves of the verbal castaways. He thought of them all together as the Library of the Lost.

A few were stacked at the foot of the door tonight. He picked them up, turned the key, and entered his office which, except for the musty odor of the books and ancient off-prints, might have been mistaken for a dentist's office. Ludwig liked the order, but not the impression of hygienic space. Teak paneling and parquet floors would have suited him better. But this was a State University.

Still, he wasn't a prisoner yet. He had found a way, with the help of a Phillip's screw-driver, to open the windows, and there were certain evenings, such as this one, when it made all the difference to be able to breath Western New York's fresh air. It wasn't the High Peaks of the Adirondacks, but it wasn't Flatbush either.

As he turned the screws, he felt as if he were letting the dead air of insulated and encapsulated thought evaporate into the night. His office, only the second story in a Mussolini modern brown-brick high-rise, was one of the few that overlooked a secluded copse of lilac and wisteria bushes. He looked out at the crown of the mature bushes. They glistened in the moonlight at 11 P.M., according to the clock-tower in the distance.

Some of the lower branches lifted and fell in the windless night—a covey of doves or lovey-dovey undergraduates, he couldn't be

sure. No matter, it was a sign of life, a life-sign, the tell-tale, perhaps, of some new life-giving revelation and resolution in his too cloistered and sequestered life. He breathed deeply and sucked in the ambrosial air, if not a beaker full of the warm south, a delicious nectar nonetheless.

On an evening such as this, mid-May, Cole Porter tickling, he liked to think, the ivory somewhere in the cosmos, with the days still to lengthen for a month, thoughts of retirement, an ending, of any kind, of anything lovely and enriching, however implicated in things unlovely and deadening, hard heartedness and hardening of the ardent arteries, seemed perverse and untenable. The evening called for music.

He turned on the radio, tuned, of course, to the listener-supported station and recognized Mendelssohn's "Hymn of Praise." Its significance made him weep virtual tears, a celebration of the 400th anniversary of the printing press. The music was telling him that he had been right to save the books, but how many could he save, and would the next generation read them? And when he retired or was forcibly ejected, it might come to that, what would prevent the new "hires," as they now were called, from tossing them all into the trash-can, the proverbial "dust-bin of history."

He was in the midst of a struggle against the dawning of an Electronic Age in which Smart-Phones were clutched like holy relics, and if he lost, even Gretchen, his German born mistress, wouldn't be able to offer enough succor to overcome most of his grief for the loss of vellum, sheepskin, and elegant fonts.

He relieved her national guilt; she offered comfort. It had worked for a few years. She had shored him up when the flame of his life had scorched his roots and singed his creepers. "Mistress," he knew, wasn't really the right word.

She was an advanced graduate student, a Fulbright, who couldn't bear to hear or utter the word *Achtung*. Ludwig had helped her with some professional matters at first, and she had been helping him in other ways ever since. He was her practical stylist; she was his burning bush, one of their many private lovers' jokes. She could help, but there were limits.

When he needed her and couldn't hold her, her words shored him up against an imagined ruin.

"My Ludwig is an unsung hero, an invisible resistance fighter, but I shall sing his praises one day, and the image of his hand clutching a book, always will be ignited for me against the night of German history. He will burn brightly in me. I shall be his burning bush. Come, light my fire."

Her words were in his mind: "You are my condemned Jew. I will hide and save you. My honey-pot will be your Secret Annex, and they will not find you. Open the bookcase. Come to me. Come into me. Come...now." These words, saved in the hard-drive of his mind, always moved him. He once, when a creative flame still flickered, had written a short story, "A Brief Life," about a heroic Mexican school teacher who taught illiterate peasant children that the pencil was mightier than the taco. Gretchen understood that he was, in his own way, a resistance fighter, or, at least, a man who would resist losing his parking spot in life. He was a word-smith, and he would smite the enemy in the smithy of the classroom.

He set the tracts and tomes under the glare of the goose-neck lamp on his desk. What had Roberto left for him tonight? Who had abandoned them in the hallway? Did they tell a story? Could they help him face the end of all that he had loved? Was there a way ever to say

"Finis"? He opened Edward Newton's *The Amenities of Book-Collecting and Kindred Affections* and read in Newton's chapter on Association Books: "In the slightest inscription there is the record of a friendship by means of which we can get back to the writer." He was touched. Newton was his kind of guy.

As inadequate parking was the major problem of the university, so the failure of friendship was the shortcoming of departmental relations. "E. E. Shortcomings" was his private name for many of his colleagues. People even were wary of meeting at the Mr. Coffee machine.

Alienation, like smog, was in the air. It came with the territory, a sign of alleged strength, especially if you wanted to be an administrator. Intimacy was the equivalent of admitting a fondness for an old-fashioned poet like Longfellow. For years he had wanted to read "My Lost Youth" at a department meeting: "A boy's will is the will of the wind." Few dissertations could hold a candle to this one line, but he had been too embarrassed to say this aloud. It made too much sense.

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He had read in *The Beau Fleuve Review*: "Anything goes because meaning does not precede language, language produces meaning. There is as much value in making nonsense as there is in making sense." He recognized the name of the author, a survivor of Majdanek, whose fate made him want to weep, but Ludwig was puzzled by these words. Did not those who "perished," if that was the right word, possess specific identities even if they possessed nothing else? Could you turn a tragedy of history into a comedy of language?

Ludwig Fried shook his head and quaffed the aromatic air. He looked to see if there was still any wiggling beneath lilac bushes. Lust

and faith in humanity were the great antidotes to gloom. He needed to see Gretchen, and he wanted to give Roberto a cigar. He would be making his rounds soon.

Each book had a provenance and could be connected, in some way, with the history of a lost colleague. Half had projects. Half were committed to leisure and leisure suits. Some had repaired to the golf links of Southern California. A few had returned to the favored watering holes of the Ivy League elite, islands off the coast of Maine, Berkshire and Adirondack camps.

“Camps” was a charged word. It was high Protestant for “summer place” with roots in the 19th Century, but it was indecent to call them “camps” after the Nazi period. But, then, his parents had sent him to a summer camp, Leonard and Leonore, Kent, Connecticut, foothills of the Berkshires: by Leonard Lake these vows we make... In truth, his camp had been wimpy, a kind of middle class suburban sub-division stretched out like a Mercator projection on the hill that sloped down to the lake: friends, friends, friends, we shall always be. He, too, would have preferred the chiseled head-rocks of Maine.

So how could he be cynical about the retreats of his brethren who happened to be gentiles, as he happened to be Jewish? Parents, not anatomy, were destiny. Dislocation was everything. Still, he did look down on plaid pants and L.L. Bean trout-fishing vests that were worn by people who couldn't snag a smoked salmon or hook a gefilte. It was one of the privileges of living in a world of contradictions. If one couldn't be absurd anymore, if Camus now stood for moral rectitude, it still was possible, with Whitman, to contradict oneself.

Greek islands as well, of course. One canoed on the upper Great Lakes. Another fussed with surrealist poems in one foreign city after

another—string-theory and string beans in Cahors, anti-matter in Cascais; and postcards came with cryptic references to an opaque past. Some had stayed put in the Niagara Frontier. So far as he could tell, they were the ones who developed memory loss problems and inoperable sciatica. The ones who clung most to the past were the ones who seemed to forget the most about it. It was worth writing about. His best essays were, after all, about Home. “Home, Home, and the Deranged,” a Jamesian “germ,” if not an idea.

He didn’t belong in any of these places. Father long dead, mother aged and far-away, he belonged only where he could make sense of life where the *Ich* met the blind *Es* of history, where life and literature could be defended. If he had failed to act on a historical scale, he could make something of his small hysterias where he was.

Unhoused by history, he had lived as an urban nomad, moving from apartment to apartment. After the Holocaust, who could believe in mortgages? What could equity mean in an unjust world? Nearly orphaned, he hadn’t wanted to marry and risk parentage. The family of man was threatened. He was a marginal man who wrote in the margins: where he belonged. He lived in words.

The ones who had decamped seemed to be the experimentalists who believed in the erasure of self and history. The humanists mainly had stayed. Both sides, it seemed, if that was the story that the discards told, had been more than willing to let go of the past. Not Ludwig.

In the end, neither meaning nor non-meaning seemed to matter much to what added up apparently to the bi-polar structure of the department for which there was no available mood stabilizer. Nil versus humanism hadn’t really mattered to them finally. It was more of a So

what? Big deal! I've got my annuity. "But what about the pen?" he cried out mutely.

He took two more books off the shelf. One said in its gracious Preface: "After the interruption of the war, two Folger Fellowships made it possible to work in the pleasant, efficient, and friendly circumstances of the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington." There it was, "friendship," again. Another, a poetry chapbook, mottled, began: "hand wash import poisonous crystalline/emodin genie from rhubarb nylon...." Unfortunately, he thought, it went on.

He felt that he had discovered a theme: it didn't seem to matter whether his colleagues had been on the Folger or anti-Folger side. Either they drifted into Arizona oblivion or stayed and went to pieces. In both cases, they let go of their books. They were more than willing to say a merry farewell to the past, his own included. He wouldn't admit it to anyone, but Roberto had brought him, unknowingly, a few of his own inscribed books that had been set out as discards: "To Joe, in friendship, Ludwig 'Lefty' Fried." It embarrassed him to realize that he once had had a jaunty side. He remained as a remainder.

These colleagues, who were not collegial, had been, he realized, his failed family revisited. Maybe it was man's fate, each person acting as a self-contained Copernican world with the self in the center. But when man's fate is your fate, he thought, it's a real kick in the balls, the epicenter of man's feeling life, the crown jewel in one's Tower of London.

But he wouldn't let them get away with it. He would kick against the pricks and thorns of the academic nettle. He would resist. He rested his weary head on the desk. Richard Addinsell's "Warsaw Concerto" was now playing, recalling all the heroic anti-Nazi movies

that he could think of. He didn't have to think, though. They floated into his mind. He wouldn't retire. He would defend his books. He would keep the flame alive.

If they tried to get him to leave his office at some point—it was something the Chair could do, they could put him in with graduate assistants—he would defend his micro-shtetl, his Alamo, so everyone would know what was at stake. Ready to fight, he saw himself brandishing a machete, pistol smoking, vodka-soaked wick ignited. He and Roberto would make a stand in defense of the old values—the ones Orwell had fought for in Spain, the dignity of the individual.

He would keep plying Roberto with quality cigars. He would ask him questions about his mother. In the end, soon, they would be like brothers. They would stand back to back and hold off the enemy. A few more steps, and it would be solidarity forever, Gdansk on Lake Erie, not *The Tin Drum*, but resistance nonetheless.

He heard the clanking of Roberto's cleaning-cart. He opened his drawer and took out two aromatic Canary Island Flor de Plata Cigars: "*Tradicion Tabaquera de Las Islas Canarias.*" Yes, "tradicion." Not "Fiddler on the Roof," but Roberto in the halls!

Roberto knocked. Shaking somewhat, Ludwig Fried opened the door. When Roberto saw the two machine-gun bullet thick cigars, he smiled as broadly as Ludwig ever had seen a man smile, as if he had come face to face with Pancho Villa. He threw his head back in laughter, his gold-chain necklace and cross, the Christian chai, flashing in the neon hallway. He looked like one of the heroes of the Jarama, the face of all the Loyalists who had died in Spain, 1936, Ludwig's birth year. He thought of Lorca, *Homage to Catalonia*.

Ludwig was moved by Roberto's humanity. He knew that if and when the time came when the department tried to oust him, one way or the other, to get rid of him like a discarded and useless book, Roberto would stand by him, by his side, a *campesino* in arms.

He stepped towards Roberto, put his head on his strong shoulders, shoulders that had mopped a thousand floors of people he could mop the floor with under the aspect of eternity, and wept. He held his arms away from Roberto's body to make sure he didn't crush the cigars.

Roberto let him weep and then stepped back from him, looked Ludwig in the eyes.

"Yo, bro, I understand," he said.

Ludwig gathered himself, gave Roberto the cigars, shook his hand, and said good night. He returned to his desk and dialed Gretchen's number. He needed her tonight. They would go to a place where, for a moment or two, words didn't matter. And with this thought came another. If ever they were able to get him out, he would carry on the fight wherever she could get tenure. And he would continue to teach, especially the dispossessed and homeless.

They were everywhere: Calcutta, Harlem, the townships around Jo'berg. He had seen them. He had smelled the paraffin burning in the shacks and hovels. In Turkey, he had seen walls in the holes. In New York, he had seen holes in the walls. He had seen too much and said too little for all that he had said.

He had been a quietly subversive professor, but a professor. If you hadn't been pushed off-center, you lacked vision and were indifferent to the outrageous and violent age in which you lived. Like his namesake, he wouldn't surrender.

He ran down the steps to his car, his feet traveling across the gravel with youthful abandon. He would put the pedal to the metal and make the sputtering Mustang fly. It had new spark-plugs and would take off like a fire-cracker, at least for a few weeks, and could, if pushed, get up Mt. Parnassus. He turned the ignition key, and the clunker roared like the MGM lion. He took the curves like DiMaggio, the Yankee Clipper, rounding and sailing the bases. He was on her tree-lined, deep delved street before he knew it.

He knew Gretchen, his, not Goethe's, would be waiting for him with open arms and kimono. He brushed aside fragrant lilac branches and wisteria vines as he hurried towards her secluded carriage house, her bower of bliss, as she called it, her Dove Cottage, as she called it, depending on her mood. He paused to push his nose into the whorl of the yielding peonies which, though they drooped, were redolent with life.

The door was open, and he could see candles glowing in the recesses of her living room, her own Hanukkah festival of lights. He loved beacons, torches, buoys, light-houses, channel markers, hurricane lanterns, fire-flies—all the lamps and pulses that illumined the nights of the world. She was humming "Lily Marlene." She was inventive when it came to making love, especially when she knew he needed to be rescued.

"I have something special for my Ludwig tonight," she said, pressing him close.

"Let's use the good book," she said, pointing to the hefty Oxford English Dictionary that lay open. She would place it under the lower arch of her back and rise up to him on top of it, a pedestal of pleasure.

Flesh would meet words, words would meet flesh. The roots of words would mingle with her silky tendrils. Eros and etymology at one. It was an old game for them, but the words were always different.

“My resistance fighter needs to be ignited, baby, light my fire.”

“You’ll stay by my side, won’t you?” he asked.

“Here I am, your blue angel.”

“Will we go down together?”

“Now, my Rilke, our two solitudes will light up this text and all the books that we love. Text? Sex? Yes?”

“*Ach ja*,” he said, almost getting the accent right. □