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Out of the Storm

*Night comes quickly
but the snow gives off so much shine
it's not as dark as where you are
the big trees leaning in*

Joan Crate

Unmeeting

Neuschwanstein:

I caught my breath. Nothing had prepared me for the splendour of the castle. We had walked halfway up a green mountain before we saw it, hidden in the woods. The spires seemed to graze the sky. "It's gorgeous, Freidmann," I said.

"I wanted to show it to you," he answered.

We were standing shoulder to shoulder, gazing up at the graceful edifice, and I wished he would take my hand. Every woman should be brought here by her lover, I thought.

"See the swan decoration at the very top? This motif is repeated many times on the inside," he said playing the tour guide again. I took a picture of him standing in front of the drawbridge.

Editor's Comment: A good symbol. The exterior of the castle with its formidable drawbridges, barricades etc. represents Freidmann's ultimate invincibility.

He continued to lecture me. "The swan is a central symbol in Wagner's operas. He and the emperor who built this castle were very close friends. Some of the paintings inside the castle depict scenes from his works."

"I've never been to one of Wagner's operas but I'd love to see *The Flying Dutchman*."

"Why?"

"Because the characters find salvation through love."

"I never listen to Wagner. He was greatly admired by Hitler. Many of us in Germany feel his music should be banned."

He was angry about the war again. If it made him feel that way I didn't want to go inside the castle. Instead, I wanted to run down the hill, run to the American beaches where Freidmann seemed like a different man.

New York:

We met in New York at the International Conference for Pastoral Care. I was there covering the story for the *United Church Observer*. He was a Lutheran minister, divorced like me and living with his teenage daughter. He sat in the middle of the room and a little apart from everyone else, unmoved by the commotion. Dressed in a glossy black leather jacket he shone like molten rock.

Editor's Comment: Overwriting

Perhaps that's what drew me to him. He seemed solid, secure, at peace. I needed a resting place. After my husband, Paul, left, life was a rocky sea and I, shipwrecked. The first thing I did was go back to school and embark on an MA. in creative writing. I supported myself by doing some freelance journalism. That was how I came to be in New York.

But there were no castles in the United States, only lights. I was mesmerized by them, pressed against the rails of a ferry boat and gazing at the city's skyline. They bobbed and glistened like lanterns in a Mandarin garden. We were returning from a day at the beach where we had swam and made love in the sand at sunset.

Editor's Comment: Must it happen at sunset?

That day at the beach, he swept over me and I was pulled into his being like a helpless swimmer caught in ocean currents. My sister who lives on Long Island said, "The ocean never drowned anyone. The swimmers kill themselves. If they can float with the tide, eventually, they'll be washed back on the shore. But if they fight they get into trouble and drown." Afterwards, he rolled over and lay beside me holding my hand. Then, we washed each other, standing knee-deep in the ocean.

Rottenberg:

The afternoon I arrived in Germany, he picked me up from the airport in his Mercedes Benz and we sped along the *Autobahn*. "We'll stay in a castle tonight," he said.

"How romantic," I smiled.

Our bedroom was in the turret and when I went to look out the window I saw a brilliant blue peacock strutting in the courtyard.

"This place is too beautiful," I said.

He got ready for bed in an orderly fashion, unpacked and laid out his clothes for the morning, cleaned his teeth, showered. It was as if we had been together for the year. I covered myself quickly while he turned out the light and moved towards me. I had gained weight that winter. "I've missed you," I said. I was

so eager for his body against me and in me that I closed my eyes and could hardly speak or move. I waited for his response, words of yearning.

"You feel good," he said and when he was finished turned away to sleep.

In the morning I awakened to a hundred birds singing. I lay there, patiently waiting for him to touch me again. Just as I reached over, he pulled himself out of bed and without glancing at me started dressing for the day. "I want to drive down the Romantic Highway. There are two or three medieval towns which you will love. We're quite fortunate in Germany that these weren't destroyed by the bombs," he said.

I went into the bathroom to dress. After a quick breakfast of cheese and bread we were once again in his car.

Fischen:

The next night we slept in his uncle's house. I complained bitterly but Freidmann treated my desire lightly. He explained that after his father was killed he was raised by this man. "It would be quite impossible for me to pass by without paying my respects. Appearances are very important here in Germany. He's the head of my family."

"We have so little time together," I said.

"I'll sneak into your room in the middle of the night," he laughed. "Don't worry."

But he didn't. I stayed awake listening to the wind rattle the shutters and remembered our time together in New York.

Editor's Comment: Again, the incurable romantic

Suddenly there was an explosion under my window. Too loud for a car to be backfiring and too deep and hollow for a gun shot. I listened for more noise. Nothing. Then ripping through the air, a second bang. I leapt to the window and heard a third crash followed by a blue flame. It must be small bombs exploding, I thought. Here I am in Germany. I can't even speak the language and we're being attacked. Pride kept me from running into Freidmann's room and I shivered in bed until morning.

Editor's Comment: Thank God!

When I went down for breakfast, Freidmann and the old man were sitting at the table. "Did you hear the noise last night?" he said.

"Yes. I was terrified. What was it?"

"My uncle says there was a wedding here yesterday. It's a custom that after the bride and groom have retired for the night their friends fill balloons with gasoline. They light them so that they will explode in the air over the bedroom of the bride and groom."

The old man's eyes twinkled as he waited for my laughter and a nod of understanding. I could tell he loved the story. I gave him a crisp smile and secretly hated the young bride who knew a tenderness that I was not allowed to give or receive.

Editor's Comment: Is this much pain, desire intrinsic to the modern single woman of the nineties. What happened to the hard-won autonomy and independence of the feminist movement?

New York:

I had to interview the speakers at night because we skipped most of the conference together. Feidmann refused to accommodate himself to a schedule. We discovered a jazz joint and I found out he shared my passion for American Blues. He didn't know much about progressive Jazz but loved the idea of improvisation. As he tapped his foot and sipped wine, I thought he enjoyed feeling somewhat dissolute. He hated order, especially when it was imposed from the outside. "Following rules is so important, even in Germany today. It's that sort of mentality which created the Third Reich," he said. As he spoke his cheeks flushed and I sensed the deep shame he felt about his country's history.

When at last the conference was over I mailed my material to the editor, and Feidmann and I took a couple of weeks' holidays and toured museums and art galleries. His camera was full of me. I felt like a New York model as he flashed one photo after another. Later, back in Toronto, missing him and lonely, I received a thick packet of pictures. It seemed there was another woman staring back at me, flowers in her hair, transformed and beautiful.

Toronto/Edmonton:

Somehow, after meeting him in New York, I survived another hard and lonely year. Since there was a dearth of teaching jobs in Toronto, I applied out west and was accepted as an instructor of creative writing at Grant McEwan College. That meant leaving my home, my roots, my family.

When I arrived in Edmonton the summer was over and the magpies remained, the only birds in the city, alone and squawking. Winter was already snapping at everyone's heels. People told me to carry a candle in my car because it would give off enough heat to keep a person from freezing to death in a snowstorm and they argued about cures for frostbite and said how all the roses in my garden would die if I didn't see that they were covered. The space frightened me. If I got lost on Mount Pleasant Avenue in Toronto I could turn the car into the driveway of a friendly neighbourhood drugstore

or pizza parlour and ask for directions. But I could drive down the Whitemud Freeway forever and never even see a gas station. I missed the jostle of the crowd on the Bloor subway. Even in West Edmonton Mall there was so much space people kept a respectable distance from each other. As the winter wore on, I became more lonely, gained weight and grew more wrinkles around my eyes. Then the *Observer* phoned and asked me to cover another story, this time in Tübingen. I was to interview Moltmann, a well known German theologian on nuclear disarmament. I wrote to Feidmann.

He answered my letter, apparently thrilled that we could be together again. "I'd like to see the Berlin wall," I had written.

"That's much too depressing," he wrote back. "Let me take you down the Romantic Highway. It's a road that meanders through towns which date back to the middle ages. I'll take you on a tour of castles." I began having fantasies of a courtship carried on back and forth across the ocean and toyed with the idea of signing up for German lessons in case I should end up living in that country.

When the winter was over the west spread herself before me with all the fire and sweetness of the prairie flowers. Driving across the flat land to the mountains, all I could see to the left and right of me was warm brown earth like an undulating ocean. The prairies reached out and drew me down, embraced and anchored me in the soil, moist and fecund, as a woman's body holds a man. At the end of that summer the world seemed full of hope and new longing. I flew to Germany.

Dinkelsbuehl:

"There's the city wall," he said as we got out of the car. "Let's climb up and look at the view."

By this time I was tired of the cobblestones and was tripping on them. He wasn't taking any pictures and posed only when I asked him. Ahead of us was a young mother with two little girls playing about her skirts. Her husband walked beside her carrying their baby boy. Because their hands and arms were so full of children they couldn't touch. But their shoulders brushed against each other while they walked. He smiled at her and she looked up laughing. She's not very beautiful, I thought. She wears no makeup and her teeth protrude a little underneath her thick lips. "You must take a picture. See. They are dressed in Bavarian clothes", said Feidmann.

I had already noticed the full blue skirts and the white crinolines and pretty blonde braids of the children. But that is not what had impressed me. No. It was the pleasure that she took in his gazing on her and the joy

they felt in their love. I was jealous and blocked her way on the narrow street. I snapped my camera with a loud click while the children squealing like frightened sparrows ran and hid in the folds of their mother's dress.

Nurnberg:

He wouldn't stop talking about the war even as we stood in the city square. "I want to take you to where the Nurnberg trials were held."

"Then we can see the Berlin wall?" I said with a touch of sarcasm.

We were standing in front of the cathedral and watching the clock with its little mechanical figures. At the sound of the chimes they appeared and marched in a circle. "Some day documents will be produced that will exonerate Germany and prove that the Allies were just as much at fault in starting the war," he said with passion.

I bit my tongue. He had told me in New York how his mother sent him to the prison before her husband was shipped to France. As a boy he travelled for miles with a few of his father's personal effects, pajamas, a sweater, his toothbrush, a few family photographs. He remembered how he sat by the railroad track and cried. That was the last time he saw his father. A glimpse through the bars.

Editor's Comment: With the description of the Canadian West and the German towns I sometimes wonder if I'm reading a travelogue instead of a short story!

Neuschwanstein:

"You'll love this castle," he said. "It's my favourite place in Germany."

Surely this is the place he'll at last take me in his arms, confess his longing and loneliness, beg me to leave my home and country. All great writers achieve a new perspective in another land; didn't Margaret Laurence write her first book of short stories in Africa? Instead, Freidmann recited the history of the castle. "It was built by Emperor Ludwig the Second. Some say he was a philosopher who needed a beautiful place like this for study and meditation. Those people think in a fit of romantic despair he drowned himself. Others say he was a cruel despot who unmercifully taxed the peasants and drove them to hard labour. They killed him by drowning. His death will always be a mystery."

Poor Freidmann. I watched him gazing up at the spires, encircled by a rainbow. (There had been a sunshower as we climbed the hill.) No wonder he's drawn to this place and has been so aloof, I thought. He's like the emperor who stayed inside his castle and watched the artist paint the pictures of the Lohengrin Saga instead of walking among the peasants and getting to know them.

Editor's Comment: Yes. He does have problems with intimacy. But must she make excuses for him implying he is like the German poet/emperor/ mystic, Ludwig?

On our last evening, he took me to an historic inn for dinner. "The mail coach used to stop here, to change horses," he said. We ate a meal of German sausages and beer. While coffee was being served he explained that he had to spend the rest of the night with his daughter. I had forgotten he lived with her.

"She's writing her final exams and is very upset. I want her to study in the States."

"What does she want to be?" I asked trying to muster a show of interest.

"A doctor. I hope she does well."

"You're the one who wants to go to the States," I said. "You were different there."

"Yes. I know. I love America. There's too much order, here. Too depressing."

Editor's Comment: Here the writer shows her incredible naiveté. The protagonist actually believes he's spending the night with his daughter

When we were finished dinner he took my bags upstairs to the room. "You'll be comfortable here? Don't you think it's good for you to be alone for a night to get yourself organized? You'll be busy in Tübingen doing your interview."

"Don't worry. I have some things to do. Laundry and so on."

"*Gutte nacht,*" he kissed me lightly on the lips.

I wanted to fall on him, beg him to remember all that we once shared, demand an explanation. Instead I said, "Thank you for the dinner," and quietly closed the door.

Editor's Comment: I wonder, do you know any strong women?

That night I dreamed I was driving through the prairies. My car stalled and I froze to death.

The next morning after a quick breakfast he took me to the train station.

The bags were heavy but he carried them easily and with a smile as he did when he first met me. A young university student was sharing a compartment and since he spoke English Freidmann asked if he would see that I got off at the right stop. Then he took me back down to the platform to say goodbye. To my surprise he kissed me and when I looked up at him there were tears in his eyes. He said something which I couldn't hear because the whistle blew. I scurried back to my seat and rushed to the window for a last glimpse of him. He was stuffing his handkerchief back into his pocket. He saw me, waved and smiled. As the train began to move I realized that was how the soldiers and their wives strained for a last glimpse of their loved ones: the Germans, French, Canadians, British. We're all the same.

Then his figure receded quickly into the distance even though I stood on tiptoe to see him, a tiny dot fast diminishing.

Editor's Comment: fair ending but verging on the romantic — last kiss etc. Try again.

When the waiter brought the cheque I insisted on paying, "My treat," I said. After a brief argument he agreed and I stood trembling with rage in front of the cashier. "How can he spend our last night with his daughter?" I wondered.

"Did you enjoy the dinner?" asked the cashier.

"Yes, thank you. It's a lovely old inn." I was having trouble making change as I carefully counted the unfamiliar silver.

"Too bad you're not staying for the night."

"You have rooms?"

"Of course, this is an inn."

I glanced back at Freidmann who was buckling up his coat. "I'll take one, a single." Just as she handed me the keys he came over.

"What are you doing?" he said.

"I've got a room for the night."

"But I was going to get you nice place in the suburbs close to my house so I could drive you to the train tomorrow."

"Please don't worry."

"As you like."

He carried my bag upstairs and asked, "You'll be comfortable here? See you in the morning."

There was an awkward moment when I thought he was going to kiss me.

Then he was gone. I closed the door of my little room. I didn't cry. I unpacked. Then, I pulled out the chair from the desk that sat under the window and gazed out at the moon, the same moon that would be shining over Edmonton when I returned home.

I rummaged in my suitcase for a pad of paper. I began writing this story. I worked all night because I knew I could sleep on the train. In the morning I settled the bill and left a carefully worded thank-you note for Freidmann.

Editor's Comment: Here the writer goes overboard in an attempt to look like a feminist, even though it is apparent she is not.

The taxi driver spoke good English and when we got to the station went out of his way to direct me to the right platform. I boarded the train, and tried not to notice the woman ahead of me who clung tearfully to her husband as they kissed goodbye. I settled into my seat and the train pulled out. We sped by narrow streets and old buildings crowded together.

When I get back home summer will be over, I thought as I leaned back in my seat and settled in for a nap. Flashes of sun played on my closed eyelids and I could see the familiar landscape, clean and spacious, covered in white gleaming snow.

Missa Solemnis

The altar boy holds the long taper high in the air, his extended arm quivering, standing on tiptoe in order to reach the top of the white Paschal candle. The priest meets the coffin at the door, says a brief prayer and proceeds with the mourners down the aisle. He approaches the altar table and bows to the crucifix while the men place their burden near the lighted candle. Then he turns towards the congregation and makes the sign of the cross.

Kyrie: Lord have mercy upon us.

Joshua stares at her face. He has never seen such stillness, such heaviness, such impassive leaden weight as in those closed eyes, that set mouth, those rouged cheeks. He imagines her breathing, waits for the rise and fall of her chest, the gentle lifting that would signify breath, life.

He and his wife were the first to venture from Trinidad to Canada. Once settled he planned to bring all five brothers and sisters and finally his parents, even though they complained they were too old to make such a change. None of them realized how lonely it would be. Edmonton, hardly a large cosmopolitan centre, had a fair-sized Arab community but not a large black district. They moved into Sherwood Park, a predominately white Anglo-Saxon bedroom community where they most certainly did not belong. But the rent was cheap. His wife cleaned houses, something he abhorred. She picked up after other people's spoiled children, washed out their bathtub ring, scrubbed greasy pots left soaking in a cold sink because the woman of the house was out working for another TV, a fur coat or a second car.

The two of them sacrificed for the others back home. In this country they lived simply without the amenities they saw others enjoying. But when he felt exhausted, cheated, bitter, Angela cheered him up with a playful poke in the stomach. "C'mon, ole man," she'd say. Though he was not much older than her she teased him because he took his family responsibilities so seriously.