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A Story (which Zanny keeps interrupting) about the Potters

Kevin Bergeson

Mr. Potter was very old and loved to tell stories. He lived in Georgetown with Mrs. Potter and she had already heard all of his stories many more times than she cared to, but Mr. Potter was very forgetful.

One Monday evening after supper when Mr. Potter had done with the dishes (it was his turn Mondays), he found Mrs. Potter reading a book. He thumped his cane on the carpet and said "Mrs. Potter, have I ever told you about when I made this cane from a branch I found"

"in the Black Forest in Germany? Yes, you have told me that story many times," Mrs. Potter said. And she moved her book closer to her face.

Mr. Potter felt a little sad, but didn't say anything.

Kevin Bergeson

[Zanny: *"You can't just pretend those things never happened, can you? I could not believe it and I was there feeling it and tasting it. It almost felt hostile in a way, but inevitable. No, there aren't any visible effects (although in the Dark Ages they said it caused acne)—and yes, it was dark, dark as the woods when the moon is new—and really, there's no earthly way to prove it at all. The sun still rises, life goes on, and the mail still comes every day. But the most astonishing thing is how much it all hurts."*]

On Tuesday evening after supper when Mrs. Potter was doing the dishes (Tuesdays it was her turn), Mr. Potter tottered to her side and said "Mrs. Potter, have I ever told you about when I played Yorick"

"in the fire department's production of *Hamlet*? Yes, you have told me that story," Mrs. Potter said. And she turned up the radio.

Mr. Potter felt a little sad, but didn't say anything.

[Zanny: *"You know, it affects everything and affects nothing. Nothing is different—nothing you can see. Like when a play ends and nothing that has happened has really happened. No infections, no babies on the way. All is as before except in that mysterious little part of your brain where you store memories and images. The past is in the past, in your imagination—it doesn't even exist. Not really. But somehow you still feel strange when your mother calls."*]

On Wednesday evening after supper, when the Potters had thrown away the plastic and foil from their TV dinners, Mr. Potter sat forward in his La-Z-Boy and said "Did I ever tell you about when I dreamed about how to"

"make a new kind of can opener and patented the idea and sold it to KitchenKraft Korporation for seventy-six thousand dollars? Yes,

A Story about the Potters

you have told me that story,” Mrs. Potter said. And she stared harder at the television.

Mr. Potter felt a little sad, but didn’t say anything.

[Zanny: *“But what about when you wake up and what you were dreaming about seems infinitely more significant than whatever you plan to do that day? Do you wonder if you ever really do anything, but something in your imagination just spurs you on?”*]

On Friday evening (I decided to skip Thursday) when Mr. and Mrs. Potter were waiting for the waiter to come with their falafels and baklava, Mr. Potter leaned forward on the white formica but before he could say anything Mrs. Potter said “Yorick isn’t even *in* the play, stupid. You don’t see him, just his skull. He’s not a character—just a small, white prop with hollow eye sockets.”

Mr. Potter felt a little sad, but just adjusted his bib and thought of ways that bones are like memories.

[Zanny: *“Do you ever feel that people who just do whatever it takes to make lots of money—so they can spend the rest of their time at beach resorts and ski lodges—have the right idea? Or get an awful sinking feeling that all you have dedicated yourself to achieving doesn’t mean squiddlypoop to anyone else? Or did you ever think the professions are all corrupt and the best way to experience life is from the safety of a dark basement or a fog of psychoactive chemicals? What about that funny feeling you get after making a tactless blunder—when you have thoughtlessly exacerbated a bereaved person’s grief or a shy person’s self-consciousness, or laid bare your own little bit of bigotry? Do you ever wish there were*

Kevin Bergeson

something as frenzied and ecstatic as sex, but free of taboos and politics and health risks and moral considerations?"]

Maybe the ice broke during their dessert when Mrs. Potter showed her husband a poem she had written and he pretended to like it. It was this:

you are Dead
and i'm Not
do you wander somewhere, Shade?
gak. poo. rot. schmoo.

Mr. Potter smiled and said "When I was little I used to wonder if I was really a dog or something dreaming about being a person."

Mrs. Potter put her hand on his and said "When I was in the sixth grade I made a sundial wristwatch out of cardboard. I wore it to school. We went on a field trip and I kept pestering the teacher about which way north was."

Mr. Potter put his other hand on her hand that was on his and said "Really? When we were kids we used to just beat up dogs. Tell me something else."

Mrs. Potter put her other hand on his other hand and said "No matter how you draw shapes on a page, you never need more than four colors to color them all and not have any shapes of the same color touching. When I was younger I read that somewhere and spent a whole Saturday with crayons and paper trying to disprove it."

Mr. Potter extricated his hands and took a ballpoint pen from his dinner jacket and drew the Buddhist eightfold-path-symbol

A Story about the Potters

on a napkin and triumphantly showed it to Mrs. Potter. She said "Vertices don't count." Mr. Potter didn't feel the least bit sad crumpling up his tissue-paper mandala.

[Zanny: "You know there is something real. When you're with friends or family laughing or crying, or getting funny little thrills from a sunrise or sunset, or madly dancing in moonlight, or getting all enraptured over some painting or symphony, or making something beautiful, or otherwise feeling utterly alive, don't you have to admit you don't know it all?"]

The Potters rode the Metro home sitting close together. They took the orange line all the way from Capitol Hill to Rosslyn and smiled when a tourist asked them if the seats were orange because this was the orange line. They walked across Key Bridge, stopping to read the graffiti and admire the spider webs hanging above the Potomac. Back in Georgetown, they laughed at the expensively dressed college kids coming out of trendy bars. They stopped and listened to a man playing a trumpet and put a dollar-fifty in his instrument case. They went to the corner of M Street and Wisconsin Avenue and chased each other around the lamppost. Things they did would make good memories, and maybe even good stories.