

More Often Than Not All Very Fast

a novel by

Christopher Kloeble

Sample Translation from the German by Krishna Winston

Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag

2012

© Christopher Kloeble

PROLOGUE

I never forget. I know how it begins and how it ends, and everything in between. I have seen how a story becomes history, and the other way around.

But here no one cares about that. If the other ancients who live here are forced to concentrate on something for more than a couple of minutes, they need a nap to recover. And the attendants, who are all even younger than they look, have more important things to do than to listen to an eighty-year-old's stories. They think they should feel sorry for me. Actually I feel sorry for them. If they only knew what awaited them in life! The poor things think their lives will go along without a hitch. At some point they will realize that whatever you do things always run their course. Blood must be spilled, and not only figuratively. I try to explain this to them, to warn them. And how do they react? They pat me on the hand and tell me not to exaggerate.

My memories provide more satisfying company. They offer up the fragrance of a unique bridal gown; they let me experience the love of women, many women; they bring back the heat of a terrible, all-consuming fire; they hold out the hope that somewhere out there my children are alive and well; they remind me of the glitter of gold and the fear in the eyes of dead soldiers.

Occasionally, though, I wish they would leave me alone. My memories are always with me. It is time to forget.

PART I

A Hero and a Son

Five Fingers

The last two clouds in the sky drifted toward one another. A blurry light bulb and a puffy white something that he could not identify.

Down below stood Albert, looking up, next to his suitcase, on a patch of ground with sparse grass outside a front door in Königsdorf. He was thinking. As a kid, other children in school would accuse him of being a nerd, and call him “four-eyes.” Yet he barely applied himself to schoolwork, and he didn’t even wear glasses. It was the way he solved problems: he took the time to think them through. As far as Albert was concerned, no statement was more bizarre than *I never would have thought....* How was that possible?

But the most difficult problem he had ever faced, and the one he’d been trying to solve since he was born nineteen years ago, was now waiting behind the door in front of him.

Albert had just completed a journey of more than seventeen hours through villages in the foothills of the Bavarian Alps with names like Pföderl, Wolfsöd, and Höfen. He had taken a night train, changed to the local, and then to bus 479, whose driver didn’t miss a single stop, though no one ever got on or off. But now that he had arrived at his destination, he was not so sure he even wanted to be there.

Albert had been visiting Fred in Königsdorf since he was three years old and escorted by a nun from the St. Helena orphanage where he grew up. At the age of five (and Fred forty-six), he wanted Fred to wear his water wings so they could jump, hand in hand, into the quarry pond. At nine, he paid for Fred's groceries at the cash register, because only Albert could add up figures without using his fingers. When he turned twelve, Albert became Fred's advisor and told him to give up his dream of becoming an actor. At fifteen, he tried to teach Fred about the birds and the bees, but Fred just laughed when Albert raised the subject. Fred had never called him anything but Albert, and Albert had always called him Fred. To this day, Albert had never called him Father.

Fred was simply Fred – that was Rule Number One in Albert's life.

* * *

The cardiologist held up the fingers of one manicured hand to indicate how many months Fred had left to live. *Five*. Albert grabbed Fred by the hand and left the hospital, ignoring the doctor calling after him.

He talked a lot on the way home, primarily about the *Föhn*, the special wind, and how strong it was this year, really very strong.

"Five fingers, that's bad," Fred interrupted.

Albert stopped, groping for words.

"Five fingers are very bad, Albert," he repeated.

"It could be worse," Albert said.

"Really? How many do you have, Albert? How many fingers do you have until you have to be dead?"

“I don’t know.”

“More than five?”

“Five is a good number,” Albert said with difficulty.

* * *

Two months later, and here he was: standing outside Fred’s house, suddenly not knowing what to expect. Albert had watched most of his friends leave the country for distant lands, hoping to discover some idea of where they belonged and why. But he never understood why they had to leave home just to find out what they already knew – people end up where they belong. There was no use trying to figure out why. Which was how Albert had come to the conclusion that he needed to move in with Fred.

Three fingers, Albert thought, and pressed the bell. He bent his head; on the street, the shimmering heat was playing tricks with his eyes. He grasped his suitcase and stood there motionless. The sun was hot against his skull. There had been no thunderstorm in weeks. Fred’s lawn was brown; even the chirping crickets sounded feeble.

Ambrosial!

The door opened, and on the landing appeared a gangling, six-and-a-half-foot tall giant, looking down at him in perplexity.

They stared at each other.

"Albert!" Fred then exclaimed in a high voice, and before Albert knew it, he was being swept up into Fred's bony chest.

"Hello, Fred."

"You're fat, Albert!"

"Thanks," Albert replied.

Albert had to admit that Fred was right. After a shower, he wrapped a towel around his waist so he didn't have to see his stomach when he stepped in front of the mirror.

"Is it your vacation again?" Fred asked.

"No, not this time. This time I'm staying longer."

Fred looked at him hopefully. "Till when?"

"Until . . ." Albert avoided his eyes, "as long as possible."

"As long as possible can be a long time!" Fred said happily and clapped his hands. "That's ambrosial!"

"Yes, it's nice."

“Ambrosial! I read it in the dictionary!”

Fred seldom paid attention to the meaning of words. Even when he did, the meaning would vanish like a soap bubble, leaving only a residue of memory. But for some reason “ambrosial” had stuck with him.

Fred snatched Albert’s suitcase from his hands and marched into the house. Albert followed and stopped in the hall. The sugary scent of Fred’s house always amazed him. He could never figure out what it was.

“Albert,” Fred said, turning back to him, “are you weak?”

“No,” Albert said, taking a deep breath. “I’m fine.”

Albert hung his jacket on a hanger next to Fred’s blue poncho with the words *Property of Frederick Arkadiusz Driajes* written on the collar in a childish print. The same name was pasted next to the doorbell. No one said his full name out loud because no one could pronounce it. For most of the townspeople, he was simply Fred – hero of the 1977 Main Street tragedy – who spent half of every day sitting at the bus stop, counting cars and waving to the drivers, some of whom would shout out things like, *Hey, Freddie-are-you-stupid?* before speeding off.

Fred left the suitcase at the bottom of the stairs and Albert continued into the cool, dark living room. He felt a déjà-vu coming on, or – to be exact – a déjà-vu of former déjà-vus.

Albert tried to relax on the cherry-red chaise longue, but no matter what he touched, his hands came back covered in crumbs, a reminder of his new duties around the house. Then his gaze fell on Fred’s map of the world pinned to the wall, with a

green felt-tip squiggle that was supposed to mark Königsdorf but actually encompassed all of Bavaria instead.

“How are you feeling?” Albert asked him.

“*Ambrosially,*” Fred said predictably. Then he asked Albert to read aloud to him from his favorite book – the silver dictionary – and snuggled up to him on the chaise, lay his head on Albert’s lap, and closed his eyes. Albert hardly moved, except to open the dictionary and begin at random, “*Billiard,*” but he didn’t get any farther than “*binding*” before Fred started snoring, looking even younger in his sleep than usual, like someone in his mid-forties. It was hard to believe that he had just turned sixty.

Albert closed the dictionary, slipped a pillow under Fred’s head, and spread a fleece blanket, much too short, over Fred’s very long legs hanging over the edge of the chaise. He made his way to the kitchen and calmed his stomach with thick slices of peasant bread, while looking out the window above the sink. He couldn’t see very far. A tall wooden fence blocking the view had been built by the neighbors to keep Fred out of their garden. In the lower left corner of the window were carved two tiny letters, H & A. They had been scratched into the glass from the outside. He’d convinced himself they were the initials of his grandmother, Anni Habom, but he couldn’t be sure. Albert leaned forward and blew on the glass. In the steam he traced with his middle finger his own initials, *AD*, next to hers. Then he stood there and watched the letters fade.

Finally, Albert went up to Fred’s room and checked to see whether he had enough pills on his nightstand, then succumbed to the mattress in his own room.

Most Prized Possessions

Albert had been in bed for no more than ten minutes, leaden with exhaustion, his mind a blank, a cloth covering his eyes to block the sun, now streaming through the curtains, when Fred burst into the room: “Are you asleep?”

Albert waved him over to his bedside and Fred plunked down beside him.

“Tell me,” Albert said, looking at Fred’s stubbly chin, “when was the last time you shaved?”

Fred blinked. “Yesterday.”

“Are you sure?”

Fred blinked again. “Absolutely.”

“Well, you missed a few spots.”

More blinks.

“Frederick . . .”

“Mama says I look good!”

Fred was fond of bringing up Anni, which was his way of signaling that some opinion or other had not been hatched in his own head but could be attributed to a higher authority. In this case, an authority he hadn’t spoken to in sixteen years – since Albert was three. Sometimes it seemed as if he was merely imagining her – having looked too often at the numerous photographs in the house – comparing his face with

hers to find the similarities. She had lived seventy years, an apparently hard life accompanied by chronic high blood pressure, as the autopsy revealed, until systolic dysfunction set in; in other words, her heart could no longer pump enough blood through her body, which was eventually done in by its own impressive size. Then Albert's grandmother died, his only remaining gateway to the past. After she was gone, he found various papers that provided an incomplete and disorganized record of her life – most important, at the time, was that she never had any health insurance. Apparently she had never set foot in a hospital or even a doctor's office.

Albert sat up and made a snipping gesture with his index and middle finger.

Fred covered his stubbly cheeks with his hands: "But my Pops had a blond beard!"

Fred claimed that his father, Albert's grandfather, Arkadiusz, had been a diver – a man with extraordinary lung capacity who repaired underground sewer lines and once dove without special equipment to the bottom of the Baltic. When Fred was hardly bigger than the belly he had occupied for nine months, his father was swept away by an underground current into the far-flung network of water mains. Whether this explanation was invented or true, from then on someone always had to flush the toilet for Fred, since his resistance to flushing was even more stubborn than his resistance to shaving. "My Pops is still traveling in the pipes!" he would plead.

Albert went into the bathroom and plugged the electric razor into the socket. When he returned, Fred was gone. Albert found him outside in the BMW 321 parked in the sideyard – a model from the late 1930s that allegedly belonged to Fred, although he

couldn't drive it because he didn't have a driver's license. Fred called it a "roadster." The mint-green paint looked as if it had been steam-cleaned with excessively hot water. The rubber tires were in shreds. The sound made by the horn could at best be described as a whimper. The scuffed leather seats smelled pleasantly musty, like the lint between his toes, according to Fred. An empty flowerpot propped against the front passenger's side door kept it from falling off its hinges.

Albert got into the car next to Fred, who was hunched over the steering wheel, his stubble shining in the sun, with the dictionary on his lap. He had opened it to the Ds—"D" as in death. He pointed with his index finger to a picture showing a tombstone made of Italian marble. "What color is that?"

"Dove white?"

"Is there also swan white?"

"Certainly."

"Will I get one like that?"

"A swan-white tombstone?"

Fred nodded. "I want a really nice stone, Albert."

"Fine," Albert replied. "A swan-white tombstone it will be."

They sat for a while in silence, blinded by the sun one last time before it dipped below the horizon.

"Everybody says dying is awful. I don't believe that. I picture it as terrific. Like a huge surprise. What I'd like best is to die with you, Albert. Except that won't be easy. I'm getting there faster."

"I'll hurry up," Albert said, and Fred beamed at him like an elderly child with bags under his eyes, gray temples, and little wrinkles around his mouth.

Then the smile disappeared: "Mama says all of your most prized possessions die sooner or later." This time his tone was very different, as if he just realized this very minute what dying really meant.

"What's a prized possession?" Albert asked him.

Fred laughed as if Albert had asked an unbelievably stupid question. "A prized possession can be anything!"

"A father, for example?"

"Yes! Or a car."

"And what's your most prized possession?"

Fred snorted and rolled his eyes. He reached across Albert, opened the glove compartment, and brought out a battered tin box. Something rattled inside. Fred bent over the box and opened the scratched lid, blocking Albert's view – as if he wanted to be sure it still contained what he expected. Then he held up a chestnut-sized rock under Albert's nose. In the afternoon light it gleamed metallic. "This!"

To describe his expression as proud would have been an understatement.

Albert weighed the prized possession in his hand. It was deceptively heavy and looked like a balled-up, petrified piece of rich yellow paper. An absurd thought came to him, then Fred promptly spoke out loud: "Gold."

"Real?"

He whispered, "My most prized possession."

Albert nodded admiringly and stuck out his lower lip. He was skeptical. The rock in his hand matched his conception of gold, which was precisely what aroused his suspicion.

“Who did you get this from?” Albert asked, handing the rock back to Fred.

“It’s mine,” Fred replied.

“Did you steal it from someone?”

“I never steal.”

“Why didn’t you ever show it to me before?”

“When I’ve died, you can have it,” Fred said, and looked at him excitedly. His green eyes glistened like the water of a lake that might or might not ever be deep enough to dive into. “Then you’ll be rich.”

Albert wished yet again that he could simply ask Fred a question and get a straight answer, that they could have a normal conversation without any evasions. Most of all he wished that he could believe in Fred instead of doubting everything he said.

“Hmm...,” Alfred murmured.

“Hmm...,” Fred murmured.

At that moment the neighbor’s rooster crowed. Fred grimaced and cranked the window shut. “He never knows when to shut up!”

Albert tapped on the stopped clock next to the tachometer. “It’s late. We should be making dinner.”

Papa Incarnate

That night, Albert stared at a fingernail-sized glow-in-the-dark star stuck to the beam above him. When he was little, he had watched it every night until he closed his eyes; he found it comforting that this tiny light glowed just for him.

Reaching into a drawer in the nightstand, Albert brought out a yellowed newspaper clipping. *The Upper Bavarian Courier*, April 2, 1977. Page one was the beginning of a report by Frederick A. Driajes that he had read every night for years at bedtime. At St. Helena's, Albert preferred to take the lower bunk, first of all because he was not fond of heights, but also because he could hide inside the bed slats above his head the same article he most enjoyed reading before dropping off to sleep: Fred's written account of the accident.

"The Day the Bus Attacked the Bus Stop"

On the day the bus attacked the bus stop, it was raining harder than anyone could remember. You could see every drop. I never waited in the wooden house that was built so people wouldn't get wet. Inside is a big picture of a clown from a circus called Rusch. His eyes are black and they glow, and you can see all his teeth. I'd rather wait in the

rain. That's why I have my poncho! The Königsdorf bus stop is right on Main Street. Everyone who drives through Königsdorf passes by it. All the cars have colors. But I only count the ones that are green, like my eyes. One time I counted almost more than fifty green ones. That's almost more than fifty green cars. There's a sign there. It says

479. Farther away is the church with the bell tower. When the bell clangs twelve times, it's twelve o'clock, and I go home for lunch. Number 479, which comes at 6:30, was the bus that attacked the bus stop. But it came at 6:15! Number 479 must have been going at least three hundred kilometers per hour. I can figure that out because I wait by the bus stop nearly every day, even though I've never taken the bus. . You can die taking the bus. Herr Strigl was also there. Herr Strigl is a small man with a mustache. He works as a driving teacher. But he works too fast, so he has to take the bus. Frau Winkler was waiting for the bus, too, with her little child. Mama says Frau Winkler is ambrosial. When you see an ambrosial person, it's like seeing no one else. You can't look at anything else. And if you do look at anything else, it doesn't look like much. And then there was another man in a coat. Mama doesn't know him. I always thought weird

things about him. The man is like the spider in my room. I always imagine it walking over my face when I'm asleep. That's how it was with the man in the coat. I didn't think he'd walk over my face at night, I just thought he might do something I wouldn't like. He never smiled. He always stood next to the picture of the clown, and he never said anything. The thing I wish I could hold onto is the moment before the bus attacked the bus stop. So that everything would stop and the bus wouldn't ever come. But time isn't something you can hold onto. It isn't like the roadster or my dictionary. You can't touch time. You can't hear time. You can't smell it or taste it or see it. Not properly. A clock is a clock, not time itself. That's why you can't hold onto time. But I can cut it into little pieces. That's what I did when the bus attacked the bus stop. And when I shut my eyes, I can see everything, all the little pieces of time. I see the bus coming towards me

very slowly, even if it was really coming very fast. Its wheels are turning and its windows are shining from the rainwater, and its headlights are much whiter than I remembered. I see the picture with the clown laughing. His mouth is open as if he's trying to swallow air. I see the bus swaying from side to side – it looks weird. I see Frau Winkler grabbing her baby carriage, but she can't push it because the man in the coat is trying to run away and keeps bumping into it. I see Herr Strigl yelling at the man in the coat. I see many blackbirds in the sky. I see Frau Winkler's baby making little fists in the baby carriage. But only at the beginning, and then after that – no more. I think I have to make someone dead. It's a feeling that's not ambrosial at all. There's no word for it. The man in the coat pushes Frau Winkler so he can run away. Herr Strigl grabs Frau Winkler and pulls her out of the way. The bus looks twice as big as normal, and the

headlights are bright like a sun, plus one more sun. The man in the coat runs away from the bus. Ludwig is sitting in the bus behind the wheel. I played with him when I was little. The clown in the poster looks so real. Like an ugly person laughing like a maniac using naughty words. The clock hands haven't moved on the bell tower. My mouth tastes bad and my stomach hurts. Herr Strigl makes a face that doesn't look like him at all, because Frau Winkler doesn't want him pulling her away. She wants to keep holding the baby carriage. The man in the coat runs into the little house at the bus stop. The bus is making a sound almost so high that only dogs could hear it, but I hear it anyway. The words the clown is using are very bad. They give me a tight feeling in my stomach. It's a feeling I've never felt before. His eyes are shining pitch black. Now Frau Winkler's baby doesn't have any fists. It's just kicking. The birds in the sky are still

flying. Herr Strigl won't stop pulling Frau Winkler. I don't know where this is coming from, but I can hear Mari or Marine or Mina. I'm feeling sick. Frau Winkler's eyes are red and wet from the rain, but maybe she's crying, too, and she keeps hitting Herr Strigl because he won't let her go. Now I want to do something, like my Pops. I don't want to be nothing, I want to tell Frau Winkler and her baby and Herr Strigl that they have to run away. I want to smash the clown. I even want to help the man in the coat, but now I can only do a little because the bus is coming much too fast and everything's much too late. Then I realize I'm not wearing my poncho anymore. It's lying next to me on the ground, and I think that without the poncho, maybe I can move faster. So I run. Herr Strigl wants to grab my shirt with the hand that isn't holding Frau Winkler, and I think he's trying to be nice. The clown goes har-har-har, and again

goes har-har-har, and he sounds like Black Pete. The blackbirds are acting as if the bus weren't attacking the bus stop at all. They want to circle, because, Mama says, they're waiting for even more birds. I hit Herr Strigl in the face to make him let go of Frau Winkler, and I feel all my fingers, and for a very short moment, it feels ambrosial. But I know you should feel very bad when you do something like that. Now Frau Winkler is free, and she falls down. The bus windshield is breaking and Ludwig is flying through it, as if he can really fly, and all the little pieces of glass are glittering, very pretty. Herr Strigl's eyes get very big. Now the bus is going much slower, and from where its wheels are turning something comes shooting out that looks like bits of fire, and the bus is still coming much too fast for a baby and for me and for Herr Strigl and for the man in the coat. The big hand on the bell tower moves a little, I think. The man in the

coat hides in the house made of wood. I lift Frau Winkler's baby out of the carriage, and it cries so loud that my ears hurt. It feels like a little dog, and I wish my Pops were here to carry us away. It's very hard not to be nothing. Ludwig flies into the pipe on the side of the hut by the bus stop where the water runs down from the roof, and the many little pieces of glass look like hail. Herr Strigl is frozen and just stares at the bus coming at him. He looks like a tree that's oblivious to the chainsaw. Har-har-har goes the clown. I yell to Herr Strigl that he should go away, but he stands there as if he is asleep with his eyes open. Frau Winkler's arms reach up to me. The man in the coat is in a corner of the wooden house, and I yell that he should go away. Man in a coat, I yell, go away! The bus is coming! But the man in a coat doesn't do anything. Now the big hand on the bell tower moves to the right. Ludwig's neck looks as red as real blood, but

his mouth is one big smile. I feel like I don't have any strength left, so I imagine – inside myself – that it's not me, no, it's my Pops. With all his muscles he still has a lot of strength, so much that he can save everybody before the big hand on the bell tower stops moving. And then I'm my Pops, and it's an awful feeling because I realize how little my Pops can do, but I jump, and the bus puffs out a blast of air, which pushes me far away. The bus falls over on top of Herr Strigl and the baby carriage and the man in the coat. There's a screeching that bores into my ears, and it's the bus attacking the wooden house, and the clown, and the har-har-har finally stops. The bus smashes into the bus stop and gets stuck, and it stinks like a gas station, and the wood makes a sound as if it's not feeling very good, and then it comes apart because it's all broken, and there's a hissing like a snake, and then it gets all quiet. I hear Frau Winkler crying,

*and I hand her her baby. Ludwig and Herr
Strigl and the man in a coat aren't there
anymore, and I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm not
like my Pops, it's true, I'm nothing. I'm
nothing, and that's the whole story, that's*

*all, and I didn't see anything else, and I'm
sorry, I'm sorry, and I never want to say all
these things again, and also not tell this
story, ever again, no, I don't.*

Reading the story now, as a nineteen-year-old, Albert saw several things that disturbed him about Fred, especially his way of exaggerating and portraying things in a way that made it impossible to say for certain whether it was a question of his mental limitations, his personality, or a combination of the two.

But in his childhood, Albert remembered very well that he had loved Fred so much because people called him a hero. In those days he looked up to Fred as a bigger hero than He-Man or Raphael (the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle with the red bandana who was named after another Raphael that Sister Simone raved about). At St. Helena's, Albert would boast about Fred, which incurred the envy and hostility of the other orphan boys who not only did not have a hero-father but did not have a father at all. So why was he at St. Helena's in the first place, if Fred was so great, the boys would ask. And Albert would just ignore them. Sister Alfonsa had prepared him for this, and he followed her advice. So instead of sticking out his tongue, he told himself that the other orphan boys were just jealous and of limited intellect. That helped. After all, he was the only one of the younger boys at the orphanage who even knew what the word *intellect* meant. Even in those days Albert never called him Father. As a one-year-old Albert had

called him Ped, then as a two-year-old, Fed, and finally, several months later, he learned to say Fred, spit flying through the air triumphantly. Anni had taught him that. He often wanted to call him Papa, drawing out the second A in a way that opened up his throat and cleared his head. But after Anni died, Sister Alfonsa wanted him to keep using the same name. And even though just saying the word “Fred” twisted his tongue and made him sound like a rusty doorbell, he complied with Sister Alfonsa’s instructions, because despite his intellectual maturity, he was still a small child who believed that adults knew everything and always gave the right advice – Fred included.

It wasn’t until he was five that he realized something was wrong.

During one of his visits to Königsdorf, Fred and Albert were cuddled up, as they often were, on the chaise longue in the living room, watching television. It didn’t matter what program was on; the important thing was to get up close to Fred and feel his body’s inexhaustible warmth. On one particular evening, Albert got up to use the bathroom, while Fred’s gaze remained glued to the television. After Albert flushed the toilet, he came hopping back into the living room, happy as a lark, and that’s when he saw the truth.

Fred was lying on the chaise longue, but his gaze was not focused on the television. He was staring at the screen with the desperate expression of someone stranded on a desert island, waiting to be rescued, scanning the horizon for a ship.

The next day he asked Sister Alfonsa, “Is Fred crazy?”

She smiled sardonically but kept her mouth shut to conceal her teeth, then gave him a clumsy hug. Displays of affection had not been much prized in her childhood,

and Sister Alfonsa was famous for being hard to get to know. Albert himself had witnessed an incident in which an enterprising orphan called Rupert had mistaken her smile for encouragement; he was scrambling up the rickety roof of a garden shed to the tune of Sister Alfonsa's exclamations that he should *go right ahead* with his mountain-climbing; nothing bad could *possibly* happen to him; his idea was utterly *brilliant*; *all* the boys should try and break their necks in this fashion. It took fifty "Our Fathers" for Rupert get a better handle on sarcasm. It was easy to gain the impression that everything Sister Alfonsa said was devoid of emotion. But even as a child Albert sensed that this was only partly true. Sometimes it seemed to him as if she had wandered into St. Helena's by mistake. Something about her did not fit, but he couldn't say why. His intuition told him that it had something to do with how seldom she left the building and how often she listened to Frank Sinatra.

"Is Fred crazy?" Albert asked again.

This time Albert expected an answer in the affirmative. Sister Alfonsa closed the door to her office and led him over to a beech chessboard on a small table. Wooden stools were positioned on either side. She had only recently begun teaching him to play chess—an honor she conferred on one orphan every couple of years, a boy or a girl who in her estimation possessed the proper potential or, as she expressed it, "seemed bright enough." Alfonsa's teaching method dispensed with actual chess pieces. As far as she was concerned, checkers were perfectly adequate if you had a good memory.

Albert hesitated. He was in no mood to play, but he could tell he had no choice if he wanted her opinion. A tiny window let in a bit of dim light; it was one of those

gloomy autumn days. Albert slid onto a stool, which did not allow his feet to touch the ground. For a moment his hand hovered over his bone-white troops before he opened with a classic gambit (Pawn to King 4). The nun mirrored his move (Pawn to King 5) before taking her seat.

“You think your father is crazy?”

“Yes.”

“Well, maybe we are, too.”

“That can’t be.”

“How do you know?”

Albert made his next move (Knight to Bishop 3), which she again imitated (Knight to Bishop 6).

“All right,” she said, “let’s assume we’re not crazy and Fred is. Isn’t that just a theory?”

Albert wrinkled his brow (Knight takes Pawn). Sister Alfonsa did not wrinkle hers but made the same move.

“What’s a theory?”

“A starting point,” she said and smiled. “In our society those who are stronger have power over those who are weaker. A clever little fellow like you decides that Fred is crazy. And since Fred is hardly in a position to challenge you, the conclusion must be that you are correct.”

“But I *am* right.” (Pawn to Queen 3).

“So guilty until proven innocent?” (Pawn to Queen 6). “But what if you’re wrong? What if *we’re* crazy? What if the whole world is ruled by crazy people who lock up healthy people like Fred to keep them from finding us out?”

“That’s not possible.”

(Pawn takes Knight and ditto)

“Says who?”

“Says me.”

“All children are crazy.”

“Why?”

“I’m the stronger one here, so I’ve just made that decision.”

“I’m not crazy!”

“Now you are.”

Albert banged the checker onto the table next to the board. “I don’t feel like playing!”

“That was just an example.” She ruffled his hair. “Do you honestly want to know what I think?”

He nodded, squinting up at her and hoping for a hug.

“Both of you are *perfectly* crazy.”

Bright though he was, Albert probably understood less than half of what she said, but he sensed at least this time she was speaking out of admiration. She meant “perfectly” in a positive way.

“That’s good,” he said, and just to be sure, he tacked on, “Right?”

“Right. He’s something very special,” she said, “and that’s why you can’t call him anything but Fred. He’ll never be a regular father.”

“I can explain it to him!”

Sister Alfonsa smiled her special smile again. “No one can do that. Not even you.”

A week later Albert ran away from the orphanage for the first time. A month later, he lit out four times. His subsequent escape attempts amounted on average to twenty per year. Initially the bus drivers foiled him, refusing to allow such a little tyke on board, so well-mannered, unaccompanied by an adult. Fairly often he was ratted out by other orphans. But even when he managed to succeed in escaping, the nuns never lost their composure – they knew exactly where he was headed, and why.

“I’m your son,” Albert told Fred the first time.

“You’re Albert,” Fred replied.

“And I’m your son,” Albert repeated, “and you’re my father.”

“I’m Fred.”

“And my father.”

Fred blinked.

“Do you understand what I’m saying?” Albert asked.

“I always understand everything,” Fred said.

“What did I just say?”

“You said: *Do you understand what I’m saying?* I did understand you, Albert.”

“What about what I said before that?”

“You said, ‘*And my father.*’”

“Did you understand that?”

“Yes,” Fred said, “and I’m hungry.”

“I come from you,” Albert said. “Without you, I wouldn’t exist.”

Fred replied, “Thank you. That’s nice. Should we make some pancakes with raspberry jam? Pancakes with raspberry jam are ambrosial.”

Back at St. Helena’s (there was always a back-at-St. Helena’s moment) Albert warded off disappointment by reading the newspaper account of Fred’s heroism once more. He liked to imagine the baby that Fred saved was him, not a girl named Andrea who, together with her mother, left Königsdorf for good after the accident. He always hoped, and sometimes believed, and occasionally was certain, that Fred would in fact save *him* one day, that in the middle of the night he would storm the dormitory, switch on the lights, run to Albert’s bed, and carry him away.

But as the years passed, his hope dwindled. Boundless yearning didn’t help either. Time and again he ran to Fred, in defiance of Sister Alfonsa’s contention. *This time it’s going to work*, he persisted in thinking, *this time Fred will get it* – but when Fred invariably failed to understand, everything remained as before. Albert was the unrecognized son of a man named Fred, who didn’t even need a last name. Fred, well, he was just Fred.

* * *

Albert set aside Fred’s account of the bus accident and put on a bathrobe. Out in the yard he lit a cigarette. Smoking was something he could risk doing only when it was very late. Otherwise, Fred would admonish him, “Smoking makes you sick!” and

Albert did not want to provoke him. The smoke eddied into the night. Then the BMW caught his eye, and he flipped the butt over the garden fence. It flew in a high arc onto Main Street, like a falling firefly. Albert walked over to the car and gave the fender a kick, anticipating the pain, but felt nothing. He tried again with the other foot. Nothing. Then he began banging the hood with both fists, hoping someone would come along and try to stop him. Maybe he could beat someone up or get beaten up instead. But no one came.

Out of breath, he sank into the passenger seat and opened up the glove compartment. He took out the battered tin box and placed it on the dashboard. The gentle glow from the streetlight blurred some of the dents and gave it a coppery sheen. Albert would have been happier if the box had contained not a shiny rock but some solid evidence or mementos, Anni's diary, family photos, or some sort of revealing documents. He knew nothing about his ancestry, his family, nothing about his mother. Albert had countless questions, but now his only resource was Fred. He contemplated the fingers of his left hand. Whatever hope he had was shrinking rapidly.

He opened the tin box and picked up the lump of gold. An ancient, scratched, clunky Walkman was lying beneath it. He set aside the gold and examined the tapeplayer. Inside it was an audiocassette. The yellowed label read *My Most Prized Possession*. The looping schoolgirl's handwriting bore no resemblance to Fred's scratchy scrawl. Albert pressed the ON button. The little red light next to the minute indicator came on, and he pressed PLAY.

First, a crackling, then—gradually gaining in volume—a rustling that struck him as sounding vaguely familiar. Like someone trying to keep still. He hit FAST FORWARD, stopped and listened, pressed REWIND and turned up the volume, then tried the same thing on the other side. Nothing. He lay the tapeplayer back inside the box and placed the gold on top of it.

Hoisting himself over the console between the seats, he slid behind the steering wheel and pulled out one of Fred's calendars from the door pocket. It fell open to a page filled with scribbling in magenta ink. It smelled sweetish, like the air inside the house; he could feel the bumps that Fred's notations had made in the paper: *Monday 5/24/02: 76 green cars, 8 green trucks, 0 green motorcycles. Tuesday, 5/25/02: 55 green cars, 10 green trucks, 2 nice green motorcycles, 1 green tractor. Wednesday, 5/26/02 . . .*

Albert tossed the calendar into the back seat, leaned against the window, and looked up at the stars. He reached over for Fred's gold and felt the weight of it in his hand as he fell asleep.

Hansel's Breadcrumbs

Coming to a dead end was nothing new for Albert. He had been trying for years to discover something about his origins, especially his mother's. Far from being discouraged by the fact he was half-orphan—or two-thirds orphan, if you considered Fred's mental endowment—he found the circumstances motivating. On previous visits, he never failed to spend some time poking around the attic; he was filled with excitement every time he scaled the ladder. There was always the possibility of coming across something he missed. The very concept of a storage area seemed to promise so much in the way of delayed truths. Somewhere up there, stored in the memory of the house, a definitive clue had to exist as to what had become of his mother. But the only clues that managed to emerge were a photograph and a bottle-green barrette that still had two red hairs clinging to it. One of the hairs went missing at St. Helena's when he fell asleep with it in his hand; the next morning he couldn't tell it apart from his own red hairs on the pillow. He kept the other hair in a folding make-up mirror that he had bought at a flea market, and he always carried it with him. At times, when he was alone, especially on his way to see Fred, he would run the hair over his lips, and it would itch like a healing wound. He found the photograph two days before his fourteenth birthday, stuck inside an old leather wallet between two Canadian dollar bills bearing a portrait of the Queen gazing calmly into the near future. In the photograph, Fred had

the look of a schoolboy caught playing truant: His head bent, he was squinting up at the camera. His right hand was buried in his pocket, and he was holding his arm oddly sideways. Holding his hand was a freckled young woman, whose chin-length, curly red hair was perched on her head like a whimsical hat. This woman appeared in none of Fred's other photographs. Her expression was a blend of pride and frivolity, as if she might step away from the camera at any minute.

Albert pored over the picture for hours, using a magnifying glass and screwing up his eyes. A stamp on the back said it had been shot in 1982, the year before he was born. He climbed down the ladder to find Fred in the living room, eating raspberry jam straight from the jar.

"Who's this?" Albert said, holding the photograph a few inches from his face.

"Who?" Fred asked.

"This woman next to you. What's her name?"

"She's pretty."

"Does she have a name?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"Well?"

"Fred, we don't have time for this. I'm sure Sister Alfonsa is already looking for me. She'll be here any minute."

"Is she coming for dinner?"

"No, for me."

"Are you playing hide-and-seek?"

"Kind of. Just tell me the woman's name, okay?"

"She's the Red Lady."

Albert rolled his eyes. "Don't you know her real name?"

"No. But maybe it's in the dictionary."

"Did you like her?"

"The dictionary?"

"The woman, Fred, the woman."

"Yes, she's pretty."

"Did you . . . kiss her?"

"Mama says you mustn't kiss girls."

"She's a woman, isn't she? And good-looking. And when you really like a person, you give the person a kiss, don't you? You give me a kiss sometimes, too."

"Yes, but you're not the Red Lady. You're Albert."

"Well, did you kiss her or didn't you?"

"She kissed me."

"Did you do other things, too?"

Fred wrinkled his brow.

"Did she touch you?"

"Sometimes."

"Down there?"

"Down where?"

“There!”

“No!”

“Fred?”

“Mmm...?”

“Can you tell me where the Red Lady went?”

“Yes.”

“Really?”

“Totally really.”

“Where?”

Fred pointed to the front door.

Not long later, Albert was zapping through channels in the living room, trying not to think, when the doorbell rang. He didn't bother getting up; he knew who it was.

* * *

Back at the orphanage, Sister Alfonsa was punishing him – under strict supervision – by having him tie his shoelaces two hundred times: knot, bow, double bow, untie, and then again from the beginning. Just knowing the Red Lady existed gave Albert the confidence he needed to tie his shoes fifty times. Which to him was a decisive indication that she was his actual mother. Besides, Albert had red hair, too. But fifty marked a dangerous point, the sound barrier of Christian penitential shoe-tying, after which one's fingertips go numb, one's skin becomes raw with little scars, and the laces dig into the sores. With the image of the Red Lady floating before his eyes, Albert continued tying and untying his shoes with his abraded hands and didn't break off

before he reached the requisite number. He held the orphanage record, in fact. If all his misdeeds were added up, at the age of fourteen, he had tied more than four thousand shoes – not counting the ones he had to tie to avoid tripping over his own laces.

Sister Alfonsa believed her methods would change his behavior. And Albert let her believe so. But six days after she brought him back to the orphanage, he was on the bus to Königsdorf again, running a cloth over the photograph, then slipping it into a plastic sleeve, carefully sealing the open end with several layers of scotch tape, before stowing it away, nestled between two shock-absorbing editions of the *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, in a briefcase made of fake crocodile leather that he had also purloined from the attic. The zipper made a satisfying *z-i-i-i-p* when he closed it.

He arrived in the village around mid-day and headed immediately in Fred's direction, carrying the briefcase under his arm and snapping his chewing gum, as only a teenager can do, for emphasis. But today he was seeing someone else – a potter named Klondi who lived in a large farmhouse, much in need of repair, right next to Fred. No one but she was allowed to set foot on the second floor, because only Klondi knew which floorboards were safe to walk on. When she was not turning vases and coffee cups and ashtrays on her potter's wheel until all hours of the night, Klondi – identified on her passport by the more bourgeois name Maier – took greater interest in the garden behind the house than in the house itself. During the day she could be found in all kinds of weather – in the middle of spring thunderstorms or a November fog – transplanting a rhododendron or trimming a hedge.

“Hello?”

Albert was standing before a three-meter-high rose arbor arching over the front gate. The scent was intense like the incense that wafted through the St. Helena's chapel during Sunday Mass.

"Anybody here?"

He preferred not to say her name. Certain words left a stale aftertaste. *Klondi* was one of them, *Father* another.

"Yes, somebody's here," an arborvitae on his left responded.

Albert spat his chewing gum into an empty terracotta pot and speculated, as he followed the voice, how many cigarettes Klondi must have smoked in her life to develop such a scratchy bass. She was kneeling in a flower border, slicing slugs in two with garden shears. White slime squirted from the halves. A cigarette was clenched between her teeth on one side of her grim smile. Her hair, coiled on her shoulders in two schoolgirl braids, did little to conceal the flower girl who had long since become the flower woman.

"Can you explain to me why I spare the snails?"

Albert contemplated the dying slugs; they were literally draining away. "Maybe the snails seem friendlier?"

"I'd be more inclined to say: survival of the sexiest." Klondi laughed – or coughed – it was hard to tell. "Have one?" She offered him a half-empty pack of Gauloises.

Albert shook his head.

"Good boy. But you're taking that gum with you when you leave."

“Huh?”

“That frigging bubblegum. In the terracotta pot.” She rose to her feet as if she were not a day over sixteen and brushed the dirt from her knees. “It’s bad enough with all the butts lying around.”

“Okay,” Albert mumbled.

“Is that for me?”

His grasp on the briefcase tightened. “No. Maybe. Yes?”

“What’s going on?”

“Can I show you something?”

He followed her to a granite table in the center of the garden, which she patted with her hand. He unzipped the case on top of it and handed her the photo. She held it up to the light.

“Do you know this woman?”

“No.”

“Are you sure?”

“Absolutely sure.” She blew smoke through her nose. “Why?”

“It’s not important.”

He wanted to take back the photograph, but she had not yet let go of it.

“Not important? Albert, in the eleven years that you’ve been coming to visit your father, you’ve never once set foot on my property. I have a feeling there’s nothing more important to you right now than the woman in this photograph.”

Albert looked at the ground and saw that he had stepped on one of the dead slugs. He rubbed his sneaker on the grass.

“Could it be your mother? She looks like you.”

“She does? Did you know her?”

“No. We’ve never met. When you were born, in the early eighties, it wasn’t a good time for me. I preferred giving people a wide berth.”

“Why?”

She cleared her throat and, as if she had not heard the question, tapped her dirt-smudged index finger on the gap between Fred and the Red Lady. “You’d fit perfectly into that picture. Right here.”

Albert looked at it closer. She was right.

“So you don’t know . . .” he began, but did not know how to finish. *Where she went? Why she abandoned us? Why she didn’t care about us? What she was thinking?*

“I don’t know a thing,” Klondi said, drawing pensively on her cigarette, as if it held information she could inhale. “Mothers are overrated, Albert. If you want to know, I think you can count yourself lucky to have grown up without one.” Then she handed him the picture, and he immediately filed it in his briefcase. “Don’t be an ignoramus,” she said. “*No one* in the village knows anything. Your father, in this respect, is an immaculate Virgin. There’s just *nothing* to find out. Let it go. This is life – thousands of puzzle pieces that never come together to form a whole and yet they fill you with false hope that some picture of truth exists. Those blasted puzzle pieces are nothing more than Hansel’s breadcrumbs.”

* * *

Even Klondi's *no one* and *nothing* were spoken too lightly to deter Albert at such an early stage, so he continued to play the youthful detective. Roaming through the local beer gardens after guests had consumed their last mug was the best time to catch potential informants unawares – according to a radio detective series that he and a couple of other orphan boys would listen to secretly at night. Eventually, a dirndl-wearing waitress would shoo him away with sounds like *PSSST* and *GIT*, as if he were a stray dog begging for scraps. Still, he would knock on gates, grilles, doors with milk glass panes, open doors, locked doors, doors that children dressed up as the Three Kings had marked in chalk with C+M+B – and present his “wanted” photo to anyone who seemed to care. He made photocopies of the picture and pasted letters on it cut out of the newspaper – *DO yOu KnOw ThIs WoMan? InFoRM tHE drIaJes If yoU Do!* – and posted it on the bulletin board in front of the town hall, at the bus stop shelter, on telephone poles and switch boxes, and above the logo of an American fast-food chain on the only advertising poster in Königsdorf, across from the only supermarket – until the community of Königsdorf, in the person of a man in a green uniform, universally referred to as the town cop, forbade him from putting up anymore posters on public property under penalty of “a good smacking.”

That's when *no one* and *nothing* became quantities to reckon with.

Then one morning, toward the end of another summer vacation that had yielded no results, he was sitting in the second row at morning Mass, head bowed, chin on his chest, hands clasped, praying, when he found himself wishing that he had never come

upon the photograph in the first place. What was it, after all? A two-dimensional, artificial, randomly ambiguous reproduction of reality, a mere snapshot of someone who meant less than *no one* and *nothing* to Albert, even now.

Where the Gold Comes From

The next afternoon Albert called Fred into the kitchen for lunch. He was shaky from his early morning errand that produced a startling revelation, and his back was still aching from sleeping in the car.

Within seconds the door burst open. The sun was shining, but Fred was wearing his diving goggles. He usually wore them when he was waiting at the bus stop in the rain. They had belonged to his father, and Fred loved them. Sometimes Albert would fill the bathtub with cold water, add a packet of salt, and announce, “Voilà! The Pacific!” Then Fred would put on the goggles and jump in, splashing around like a drunken frog, and complain about getting water up his nose.

Albert had made scrambled eggs. Fred gobbled them up but not the tomatoes. He pushed the tomatoes to the edge of his plate.

“Eat your tomatoes,” Albert said.

“No. They don’t taste nice at all,” Fred said, then stood up quickly and washed his plate.

“Eat the tomatoes,” Albert said again. “You won’t get any bread and honey.”

Fred swore he’d eat the “healthy tomatoes” *next time*, so Albert made him bread and honey, anyway, deliberately ignoring Fred quietly whispering to himself, “That was a good trick.”

Albert’s best trick was mixing Fred’s medication in with his eggs without him noticing.

After lunch Albert dropped the lump of gold on the kitchen table. “This morning I went to a jeweler in Wolfratshausen. He said we could almost buy a whole house with this.”

“I’ve already got one.”

“Frederick, you’re going to tell me *now* where this came from.”

“I found it,” Fred muttered and played with the clasp on his goggles.

“Where?”

A look of stern resistance crossed his face.

“Sometimes I feel like a headmaster,” Albert said and sighed.

Fred shook his head. “No, you’re Albert.”

“That’s all?”

“That’s quite a lot!”

A lot was rarely ever so little, Albert thought, pouring himself a glass of milk.

"Albert!" Fred took the cassette from the tin box that Albert had lay next to the sink.

"You've got a cassette, too!" His grin twitched. "A really similar one."

Albert emptied his glass so quickly that milk ran down his chin. "It's yours. That's your cassette."

Fred held his breath. Silence. Then he grinned again.

"Do you have trouble falling asleep, Albert?"

"How did you know?"

"The cassette sounds ambrosial like the sea. Mama says it's ambrosial to sleep by the sea."

"Where did you get that cassette?"

Fred bit his lip.

"Did someone give it to you?"

"No."

"Let me guess. You found it."

"Yes."

Albert rolled his eyes. "Where?"

Fred licked his lips like a contestant on a quiz show who knew the answer. And before Fred even spoke, Albert knew what he was going to say.

"The same place I found the gold!"

"Oh, *that* place," Albert said ironically and set down his glass. "Frederick, listen.

This is very important. I really need to know where 'that place' is."

"It's dangerous."

"What's dangerous?"

"Everything!"

Albert remained silent for a moment. "What if we look after each other? The two of us searching for gold? That would be something, wouldn't it?"

Fred, lost in thought, was staring at the lump of gold. "It's dangerous," he said.

"Is it a long trip?" Albert asked.

Fred shook his head. "It's deep."

"What do you mean?"

"It's way under."

"Under what?"

Albert's eyes fell on the letters on the windowpane and he suppressed the urge to throw something at it. He was just about to leave the house to smoke a cigarette when Fred said, "You have to dress appropriately."

"You mean, you're going to show me after all?"

Albert wanted to hug Fred but stopped himself when he saw genuine concern mixed with childish severity in Fred's eyes.

"So what do we wear?" Albert said.

Fred looked away quickly and said, "I'll show you."

Way under

They set out within the hour. Fred shifted promptly into a sturdy hiker's stride. Albert had trouble keeping up. As always when Fred left the house, he was wrapped in his royal blue poncho, which fluttered like a mantel and heightened his appearance. His traditional Bavarian felt hat sat at a rakish angle. His lumpy, well-worn rucksack, whose contents included a dictionary and various other booty, didn't seem to weigh him down at all. Albert, on the other hand, had allowed himself to be persuaded to put on a plastic raincoat and was now sweating profusely. He was carrying a cloth bag, not very sporty-looking, into which he had packed a couple of sandwiches, as well as a tupperware container with bananas and peeled carrots, a bottle of sparkling apple juice, Fred's pills, and a pack of cigarettes. In his pocket he had the compact mirror.

They followed Main Street for a while, then turned right onto Ludwigstrasse, a narrow side street punctuated by an occasional dried cow pie. This was the same street where Albert, as an eight-year-old, taught Fred how to ride a bicycle without training wheels for the first time. He remembered running beside him, pushing him along, shouting encouragement, then treating his scraped knees with ointment after every fall and wiping away the tears – until at the very end of Easter vacation, Fred was riding the bike without support, the headwind bringing a flush of pride to his face.

Fred finally came to a halt halfway down the street, pulled a crowbar out of his rucksack, kneeled down, and forced its flat end under the edge of a manhole cover.

“What are you doing?” Albert shouted.

Fred turned to look at him, and the manhole cover slipped back into its groove with a mean clank. “This is where we have to go.”

“Are you serious – down there? We can’t just climb into a sewer.”

“Why not?”

Albert sighed, “It’s not allowed.” He took away the crowbar. “And you shouldn’t be playing around with this. You could hurt yourself.”

“But you said I should show you where the gold comes from.”

“The gold? Down there?”

He nodded frantically.

“Isn’t there some other way?”

Suddenly Fred was standing over him, grabbing the crowbar in Albert’s hand. He wanted to pull Fred’s hand away, but Fred was holding it in an iron grip.

“Let go!” Albert said.

Fred’s felt hat slipped forward and covered his eyes. His lips opened and closed silently. Albert leaned back with all his strength.

“Stop it Fred, now!” he yelled.

Fred let go, and Albert stumbled backward, the crowbar landing a few inches from his feet.

Albert picked up the cloth bag and turned away.

“You can’t go!” Fred yelled. “We’re not there yet.”