

family reunion

Guy Gerlach



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What happened to the kamikaze pilots the split second before impact, Reggie wondered to himself as he sat on the toilet contemplating two, white fleshy wrists and a shiny new razor blade held delicately between the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Did they shit themselves? Reggie had shitted himself once - when he was ill and not in proper control. "I'm not in proper control of myself," Reggie explained, quite candidly as the doctor had asked him to. The doctor agreed.

Reggie now realised, as he sat poised on the toilet, he had always intended to commit suicide one day. But this was his first serious attempt; the others had only been jokes, albeit private ones, and Reggie giggled as he remembered them. That silly business with the gas fire, for instance; a dreadful smell, a headache and ending up being sick on Aunt Rose's carpet. Then there was the sleeping pill esoapado when he had taken half-a-dozen and fallen asleep before getting round to taking the rest. And then when he had driven Uncle Philip's car very fast down the M 1 with the idea of wrenching the wheel over and going into one of those spectacular spins like they did in the films (and perhaps causing a multiple pile-up into the bargain). But, as the AA man said to Reggie after a quick check of Uncle Philip's car motionless on the hard-shoulder, one should always make sure there was enough petrol in the tank before driving on the motorway.

Well, Reggie consoled himself, they weren't **real** attempts. They were just a bit of a joke. Something to pass the time. "Try to find ways to occupy your time," the doctor said to Reggie, as if it were as easy as pie. Uncle Philip and Aunt Rose were always busy, going out, laughing and things like that. Reggie knew how to laugh and did so, frequently, except when he wasn't in proper control, and then he did strange things like shit himself. "If you had to wipe it up, you wouldn't go to the toilet all over the floor, would you?" Reggie's mother said to him once. But that was

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before she died. She had said things to him since, many things. But he didn't like to talk about that; even candidly, to the doctor.

Committing suicide (Reggie didn't think of it as killing himself - after all there was no evidence to suggest he would be. Quite the opposite, in fact) had become his major concern since the doctor suggested he take up a hobby. When he first spoke about it to his mother, she had seemed delighted with the idea. Her only caution was to keep the idea to himself; not to be quite so candid with the doctor, was her advice. Reggie steered close to the subject once or twice, just to see what the reaction would be, and it was sufficient to make him realise that his mother was right. "What did I tell you?" his mother said when he mentioned the doctor's narrowed eyes and furrowed brow. Reggie always told his mother about the sessions when they met every night inside his head. She would listen attentively and try to help, not like Uncle Philip and Aunt Rose who, he thought, were rather embarrassed by the subject.

Reggie did some research and found that committing suicide was, indeed, quite a noble tradition; one in which he would be honoured to follow. Romans falling on their swords rather than accept defeat, filled his eyes with tears. Such integrity, such dignity! He spent some time looking in antique shops but found the prices of ceremonial swords quite unacceptable. Then, in a more modern vein, there was the much-taken-up option of blowing one's brains out with a revolver. There were some notable precedents with this method too, he soon discovered. But revolvers were hard to get hold of and, if anything, even more expensive than ceremonial swords.

In fact, Reggie thought, looking from the razor blade to his wrists and back again, it was the sheer number of options available that had stalled him for so long. But then again, he had always known what the final choice would be. He talked it over with his mother and she, as always, advised him as best she could. There was a point where Reggie considered giving the whole thing up, but the obvious pleasure it gave his mother, combined with the doctor's satisfaction that he seemed, at last, to have found a "sense of purpose", made him go on. His mother had been so sad before.

"Why was my mother always so sad?" he had asked Uncle Philip, who blushed deeply and found it hard to speak. "I thinkshe was very lonely.... after your father died." Reggie's father had died during the war - Reggie had never known him. As far as Reggie was concerned his father had never existed, which made Uncle Philip's explanation rather hard to understand. His father was in the Navy, on an American ship in the Pacific. "Helping the Americans to win the war," Aunt Rose had once said. His father was a radar expert. "A Japanese Kamikaze dived on the ship. Your father was killed in the explosion. He was a very brave man," said Aunt Rose. "He should never have been there. Our war was over. He should have been with us... alive!" That was what his mother always told him, as she held him to her, tears rolling down her cheeks and looking so, so sad.

Reggie got up and with his left hand put the plug in the bath and turned on the taps. He went to the door, locked it and then after a moment's indecision, unlocked it again and opened the door so that it stood fractionally ajar. He stood back, examined the arrangements with a critical eye and was satisfied. He returned to the toilet and sat down to watch the bath filling and the mirror of the cabinet slowly misting over. All the while, the blade remained secure between thumb and forefinger of his right hand. He felt quite excited.

"When you do it, make sure you do it properly. Don't be too impatient, Reggie darling." With these words his mother had left him the night before. But Reggie still remembered how she looked - radiant, positively radiant; it made him so happy to see her like that. And so he had followed her instructions to the letter; an innocent visit to the village chemist's had procured the razor blade, a pleasant lunch and plenty of amiable chat with Uncle Philip and Aunt Rose had allayed any possible suspicion. So now he was sitting on the toilet, naked, watching the bath filling up and quite, quite happy. "See you about six then, Reggie dear," Aunt Rose had said as she rushed out the front door. "Don't make a mess, there's a dear," and she blew him a kiss. Reggie didn't see where it landed.

He got up to turn off the taps. The sudden silence as the water ceased to flow upset him a little and for a moment he

thought he might lose proper control. It surprised him he was so tense. He had overheard Uncle Philip telling one of the neighbours that he, Reggie, suffered from tension. "Relax, Reggie," his mother was always telling him. The others too. But when he had relaxed that time, he had lost proper control - the pills he was taking had made him shit himself that day; pills for tension, the doctor had said. Well, he'd finished with those pills anyway. You just couldn't go round shitting yourself at the age of twenty three. He hadn't said anything about that to his mother.

Reggie tested the water with his left hand. It was good and hot, as he liked it. His skin seemed very pale, shockingly pale. He searched for the memory to check whether his skin should look like that. Yes, he could see it now, the skin was certainly very pale, almost transparent. Everything was fine, then. He felt much better, more in control. He stepped into the bath and then lowered himself gingerly down into the water. It ran over his skin, hot, giving him a momentary rash of goose-pimples. The blade glinted between his fingers, a wafer-thin sliver of steel. He remembered the advert and giggled at a private joke.

Reggie lent back until as much of his body as possible was beneath the water. "Make sure you do it properly", his mother had said. He was determined not to let her down; he wanted everything to be just right. He examined the memory in detail one last time. He mustn't forget the position of the head and the blade on the carpet was very important. Satisfied that everything was ready, Reggie broght the blade firmly across the wrist of his left hand. A gout of blood squirted out into the clear water. A cry came to his lips but he bit it back. There was no cry; he would have heard it. No, there was no cry in the memory. More prepared for the slight pain, Reggie took the blade into the fingers of his left hand and deftly sliced across the puffy white flesh of his right wrist. Again, a spurt of blood, shockingly red. It was the real thing.

He transferred the blade back into his right hand and then tossed it onto the carpeted floor of the bathroom. The echo of his mother's words came back to him. He was being very careful to do it properly. The memory was very strong - it was just like that. He watched the water changing colour; his skin looked very white

in contrast. He felt happy. Yes, it was just like that.

Reggie lay in the bath bleeding out his life. It was good to actually be committing suicide at last. His mind wondered over the conversations he had had with his mother, the doctor, Uncle Philip and Aunt Rose. So many words had done so little to relieve the tension and now, here he was, with it all simply gushing out of him. As the minutes passed he grew happier still with the passing of the memory, such a heavy memory. When the memory had gone, he could relax and, oh - how wonderful that would be. And the lazy thought of such a release reminded him of a final detail he had almost forgotten.

Reggie lent his head back onto the rim of the bath and turned it towards the door. Then he allowed a smile of contentment to come onto his lips. Now, Uncle Philip or Aunt Rose, whoever it was, would find him, Reggie, in just the same way as he had found his mother those eighteen years ago.