

indeed your dancing
days are done

Arnold Gordenstein



What follows is a chapter from Arnold Gordenstein's first novel, about the Germans, the Jews and Dachau Concentration Camp. The time is about 1952. The protagonist is Jon Aaronson, a Jewish American Army Sergeant, born in Vienna and now stationed at the American Army base at Dachau. Jon fled Germany in the 1930's but his father was captured and sent to Dachau. Miraculously he survived and, sick but alive, he joined Jon in the U.S. There he endlessly provoked the son to return to Germany and have revenge on a sadistic one-eyed Dachau guard called the "Butcher", who now runs a G.I. whorehouse and cafe in Munich. Jon secretly delivers to the man several anonymous threatening letters which he calls "love letters." However one of Jon's soldiers, a huge good-natured man named Willie Zellerman, has fallen in love with the guard's daughter Kris and flees to the cafe after he suffers several cracked ribs in a fight protecting a friend. It is Jon's duty to retrieve the man. It is his desire to educate him about the relationship he has formed.

The bar also served as an hotel desk. The tall American was on the top floor, the old man told Jon, but only paying guests were permitted upstairs. He'd send up a girl to get him. Jon asked if only paying guests could take a leak and pushed the swinging doors aside and ambled down the hall.

No dog this time. From the front this didn't even seem like the same place. Under the flyspecked hall light Jon read the new love note: "The Butcher must pay for his crimes." Not enough of something. He needed a new message. He folded it in half and slid it under the office door, feeling nothing at all. Like paying his gas bill. Vaguely expected a receipt. Returned to the drinking room and sat on the end of an empty bench and waved away the waitress. He'd not fill their till, he was only waiting. The smell of last night's beer though the floor had been scrubbed and a window was open. The air moved through the room, rustling the crepe streamers and the hanging balloons. Around the dance floor were tables and flimsy chairs. Against the walls were heavier tables and benches for the daytime trade. They seemed rooted in the earth as did the beefy nondescript men who sat in their coats and hats having their before-church coffee or their after-church beer. Jon wondered if they wore their coats for the cold or to save guarding them. He could feel a weight at the other end of his bench which tucked the seat more firmly up under him. Risking splinters he slid nearer the end where he could slip out when he wanted. He felt the way that changed the balance beneath him. At the other end the old man had asked if Jon wanted a room. Jon shook his head and stared at his hands which he kept off the table top. He felt how the other man depended on his weight to keep the bench balanced. He could dump him by simply standing up.

"You see, you are not allowed upstairs unless you have a room," the man said, looking straight ahead. Jon could answer something foul but he let it go. "Those are the house rules. I only follow them," he said. "Of course if you have special business...?"

"That's what I got, Pops. Very special." He spoke in German, using the du.

"Well, in that case..." Jon felt the man slide past the bench support. So now Jon was dependant on him. It had seemed casual yet Jon knew the subtlety of it, and he collected himself for a look that would convey all his understanding and antagonism. But when he looked down the bench he only saw an old man seemingly held together by a buttoned-up convalescent sweater, a belly that sagged onto his lap; a lifeless face that Jon seemed to look through; short brushed white hair through which he could see dead scalp; a tiny square moustache.

"If I can help you in any way. But you see there are regulations. Perhaps if you would tell me what it is you want." He seemed to be two men: his words seemed earnest enough but when Jon looked his way the man resisted his eye and stared stubbornly at the cash register across the room, his shoulders slumped forward, his monkey hands guarding his crotch. Jon felt the seesaw sensation when he shifted cheeks. Suddenly he was certain he was being fooled. Zellerman was being smuggled out the back, his car was being rolled into a secret garage, his shoes were being slipped from his feet, his eyes were being peeled off. He stood partway up and the old man flailed about for his balance while they were locked in a moment of mutual dependance. From which Jon sprang, dumping the man and going for the stairs.

"You can't go there!"

But the voice was far behind when Jon turned at the

first landing, seeing the old man hobbling to the bottom of the stairs, and shouting "you can't go up there now, not now", and Jon showed him his middle finger as he turned the corner and settled into a steady climb along German modern hallways where new electric fixtures threw a yellow warehouse light down plaster walls already cracked and scribbled with GI names and dates, up stairs already worn to smoothness from hundreds of airborne boots. Up the last flight which Jon thought was taking him into the attic where there was no light and where chalk numbers flaked off the door from his knuckles.

The face in the door-opening was a fat fraulein's. Jon was at the wrong door, he had rapped the whore's dormitory by mistake. But there was Zellerman's voice, soft but clear.

"I'm here, Sergeant, Let him in Kris."

The man was sprawled on the high narrow bed, one bare leg hanging down from the eiderdown, almost to the floor, the other knee up like a great erection. He was looking at Jon with a voice full of doom.

"Damn right you will. Now get up."

He threw the man's clothes on the eiderdown. But Willie only stared and groaned at the ceiling. Jon pulled at the far knee, expecting the whole body to pivot around and come to a sitting position. But instead the leg alone came up and over as he rolled onto his hip. The staring eyes widened and a deeper groan escaped.

"For Christ's sake," Jon said, stopping.

"It's these ribs Sergeant. They hurt like hell."

"Whyn't you tell me?"

"I'll get up. Can you swing that leg back?"

Jon handled the hip gingerly and fixed him so he could come up stiff without the back bending any more.

"Now see what it got you? Running off like that."

"I know Sergeant and I'm sorry."

"Never mind that sorry shit."

"I had to say it Sergeant. You been good to me. You even told me about this place first."

Jon moved towards the man then towards the door. Which way to turn? Fatstuff shouldn't be hearing this, though she seemed to only be straightening the room, oblivious to them. But when the silence persisted she gathered up the towels, swiped a table clean and was at the door. Proving she'd been listening.

"Call me if you need help, Willie," she said. "I'll be working downstairs." Passing her English test.

"We gotta get outa here now," Jon said. "Now I gotta get tough."

"I know Sergeant. It's not your fault."

Jon smiled in spite of himself. "Let's shut up and get ready then."

"Are they gonna lock me up or something Sergeant?"

"All depends on who has the last say. It was up to me I'd throw away the key."

"I know it." But he was stammering to say something else. This might never end. Jon kicked his boots within reach.

"I can't reach my feet though."

"Well that's not my problem. You call your friend. That's her, isn't it?"

"Yes."

"And that's another thing. What in fuck are you doing with her?"

"I don't know Sergeant but I can't stay in the barracks all the time. I got to have a place to come to."

"And this is it. How sweet."

Willie nodded but he wouldn't raise his eyes.

"But why here?"

"It could have been any place," he shrugged. "Only I had this address."

But that wasn't it. And Jon didn't want to hear any more about how he gave out this address one drunken night of bivouac camaraderie. "I mean do you know who these people are?"

"I know Kris."

"You think you do. What do you know about her?"

"I know she was a GI whore for a long time, if that's what you mean."

"I'll say she was. You hear about her police dog trick?"

"Yes."

"And that doesn't bother you?"

"Sure. But that's changed. I know it has."

"What if it is? She's still done all that whorehouse stuff."

"But what's that to me? I didn't know her then."

"But it's still her. And that's what she used to be. I mean when you're pumping it in there do you like to think what kind of people, horses and dogs been up there before you?"

"I don't think of that," Willie said grimly. "No need to."

"Isn't, huh? Well then we're not going to get anywhere. I say get out while you got your whole skin. God know what kind of monkey clap she can give you, not to mention how she could fuck up your head. Don't worry, you can't shake your past. No one can."

"I'm trying to, Sergeant."

"Well you can't. None of us can. I'm putting this place off limits to the whole platoon. And if I can swing it, it'll be for the whole battalion."

"Don't do that, Sergeant. Please don't."

"Never mind. It's for your own good. You call her now and tell her and get her to dress you while you're at it."

But she was in the door already. Jon wondered if he'd called her.

"You're Sergeant Aaronson then?" she said.

"What if?"

"Is there a place we can go? We must talk."

"There's a place I can go and there's also a place you can go but I don't want to mention it."

"Perhaps some other bar down the street. Or if you prefer we could talk in a taxi. Or go to your Service Club or PX."

But she couldn't use words like Service Club, GI, PX. "I'll tell you what. You talk to your people and I'll talk to mine. And I'll take this man with me."

"But we must talk, I assure you, Sergeant, you want to speak to me too."

"What in hell are you talking about?"

"This."

She was holding his love letter. His nerves jumped to

the brink of himself.

"What's that?"

"You know." Her voice seemed to come from the moon.

"Get him the hell out of here." He felt his own voice echoing in his skull.

He watched her swiftly tie his laces, ease him to his feet and nudge him toward the door and he sensed her authority. He could grab the love note from the bed, shred it, throw it out the window, eat it. But that would admit it was his. He closed a gate in his mind and rejected the note.

"I'll wait for you downstairs," Willie said. "Don't worry."

"Who's worried? Just don't you try anything fancy because I'll be right downstairs as soon as I see what your friend wants."

When the door closed Jon felt something release. There was a different balance now. Anything could be said. Yet that had its own kind of risk. He wasn't prepared for her voice, wholly out of timing and out of tone.

"When will it end Sergeant? You yourself must stop it or it will never end. I know it's you Sergeant. It always happens when you're here. And only the American Army uses that size of paper. The neighbors even got your license plate numbers."

His head swam with the suddenness. "What kind of shit is this?" he said, trying to slow her down. "What're you talking about?" He wondered if he'd admitted anything yet. He hadn't done anything. They were only love notes, only marks on paper. Someone else's paper. Lines of ink. Which could say anything, could be baby scrawls. You could as well blame the typewriter. Or his typing

instructor. Or the jeep that carried him to town. Or Zellerman himself in his AWOL hideaway. It was all of these. And it was also Father. And the Nazis who drove him, the fucking Nazis, oh those fucking Nazis, it was especially them.

"You know what I mean. It must stop."

"No I don't. I don't know what you mean." He tried to herd her out the door-opening without touching her.

"He may seem... invulnerable to you. But he's not. He's just a stupid sick crazy old man. And he's scared to death now that he lost his dog and he'll die soon enough by himself."

Scared? That couldn't be. Jon couldn't imagine him feeling anything at all.

"Anyway his heart will quit before very long if this continues."

"Lookit lady," Jon said. His voice seemed higher and coming from somewhere between his buzzing ears, behind his eyes. "We'll all die only some of us sooner than others. I don't know what shit you're trying to pull but you're not going to get nowhere with it."

"What I'm asking is for you to stop. I don't even know if you're planning something else but I beg if you are don't do it."

So now he was planning something? That felt good. He looked down in the street: church traffic moving neatly between lines. Then at her flowered housedress and the mottled skin of her hands. Everything seemed normal, he could risk a little. "Now I'm not saying it's me and I'm not saying it's not. But what if it is?"

"If it is then I'm asking you to stop. I beg you. Let it end now. It won't stop unless you stop it."

"Me? Why me?"

"You might ask yourself the same thing about continuing. Why must you?"

"You don't know why anyone would want to get back at him?"

"You mean his past?"

"No, I mean his future."

"And what will this do?"

"Maybe it will right the balance."

"No, it will just tilt it to the other side."

"Maybe, but at least it will be on the other side this time."

"But this wouldn't end it Sergeant. In a way I suppose it would be all right if that was the end of it. One stupid terrible old man would be small loss. But he's not that much worse than anyone and he's not worth a whole other string of lives. Because it wouldn't end there."

"What do you mean by that?"

"There are others. And they'll get you in turn."

And what did that mean? Some kind of screwball organization? Night meetings, drawn curtains, passwords? Masked Marauders. So she had him pegged for murder — on both ends of it. At least she was in the proper depth. "It's awfully nice of you to be so worried about me."

"It's not just you. He has a son too. And he's already written to him to come home and protect him. I know him. He's crazy, he'd do anything."

He had children? Nuts too? He once clambered between knees and was held by fond arms and fucked women and came with come like other men? Jon had assumed he was the end

of his line, like mules. And while his victims writhed in their dead sleep or groaned in agonies of unpaid revenge they went on living and living, raising children and going to work and coming home and counting their money. And if you didn't know you couldn't tell them from people. But Jon knew. He inhabited another sphere and Jon had access to it. "So what are you telling me? Forget it?"

"That's what it sums up to though I don't know how any better than you. There were deaths. Of course there were deaths. But the dead are all dead and this is a different business. One generation must simply stop killing back. It is wholly up to you now, Sergeant."

"I must stop it? Did I begin it?"

"No, and that's why it should be easier. You're only finishing someone else's work."

"Then what happens to everything else?"

"What else?"

"You know what." He watched her eyes which remained on his for a moment only, then began twitching away the memories.

"Yes, I know what. I don't really know, Sergeant. Perhaps it just runs out."

"Runs out? Just like that?" He felt the hollow place behind his voice and knew his reluctance to reveal the spirit of the words.

"Perhaps just like that."

"So all those things, all those crimes just never get punished?"

"Many crimes don't."

"This one will," Jon mumbled. This was ridiculous. He wasn't even coming close. You couldn't bargain this, couldn't even talk about it. It avoided language. He felt

the unspoken excess shoot a hot column of resentment up into his brain.

"Just think about all that for a minute and you fill up. And you tell me to stop? Bullshit McCarthy. You should have told them."

"And your name. You must be Jewish."

She'd said it. For the first time he realized where he was. They could swarm in and overwhelm him at any moment. He should rush her, take her hostage, edge out into the hall and down the steps, one hand palming her boobs as he made his getaway. But they'd all be out there, waiting for her cue.

"What if I am?"

"I know what happened. We all do. But what can we do about it? It's done. Sergeant, we still have our lives after all. This might be only a way for you to avoid living yours."

"That's easy to say if you're a fucking German."

"I am a fucking German and I know my debts, Sergeant. All too well."

"Well pay them then and shut up."

"I tried to. Once I tried to personally repay them all. But I stopped, not because it was too much but because the ones I owed weren't around to collect. They were all dead. And they're not yours to collect either."

"They're mine all right."

"No they're not. You're alive. That happened to other people."

"Other people my ass."

"But you're too young."

"My Father wasn't," he blurted. Then it was all said. And once he claimed Father's death he was into a channel where he thought he'd stay. He saw her face sag and he felt the leverage that gave him. His eyes even flushed with tears. He realized the depth of sympathy he wanted and the distortion he'd allow to get it. For a moment he felt he'd killed Father by betraying him. Yet he felt a mad freedom in his new orphanhood.

"And it happened here," she said. "I'm so sorry. Is there something I can do?" Her mouth was wide and ugly.

He moved away to avoid the temptation. To accept her sympathy he'd have to accept her. Which would somehow make her innocent. Which would make anyone innocent. And anyone guilty.

"Don't be an asshole."

"Anything. Just let me help."

"You? Help me?"

"Sure. Like it or not we have a connection."

"You and me? Are you crazy?"

"Perhaps. Perhaps the greatest craziness of all."

"Let me the hell outa here," he said, hauling at her arm and reaching for the door. But he'd grabbed only sleeve and the arm was lost within. Then he had the pudgy arm and the skin moved around the bone the same way the sweater had covered the arm. Momentarily he expected the skin to come off in his hand. Then the sweater was open and the shape of her breasts kept it apart. He backed away in surprise as if he'd opened her body and exposed her shiny viscera.

"Maybe we have a connection sweetheart but not the one you think. And there's only one thing you can do for me." He reached across the clumsy distance and palmed her

breast, thumbing in the housedress for the nipple.

"If that would help you're welcome to it."

"They're not bad," he said, cupping and searching. "I thought they'd be soft."

"Sometimes that seems like much," she shrugged, "but at other times..."

But nothing was quivering in his groin and his mind was busy yet. "If you would shut up," he said. He slid a hand down her flank and underneath the housedress. He felt the yank in his cowering penis and considered rewarding her with that. If nobody came along he could finish her off with ten or fifteen strokes, quick and furious, against the wall, holding one thigh along his side. He tried to ease down from his mind to see if his sex was operating. He placed his attention in the hand that fondled her breasts and with the other reached for the near buttock. But as he hauled her closer he stepped on her foot so the two of them stumbled against the wall. As he pressed against her, rubbing and squirming, kneading and pressing, he felt her give in to him and sink against him. Another world was on him, swarming all around him. Then he realized she was watching him.

"Go ahead. Why are you stopping?"

But her eye took his attention from his hands. He let his eyes blur the skin of her cheeks which glowed like the pink of spring apples onto the domed breasts down the cushiony belly and into the whiskered snug but he could only hold it together momentarily.

"Go on," she said. "If you think that will help."

But it wasn't help Jon needed, that wasn't what he had in mind, he didn't want her cooperating. He backed away, deeply shaken. When he looked back she was on her

knees.

"If that won't work then I simply beg of you," she said. "I plead with you."

He laughed in surprise. He'd walked into one of his own favorite movies. She was way up somewhere far out of his reach. He could either raise her up and look deeply into her pool-like eyes. Or he could reach for the whips.

"Stop it please: Please!"

But Jon had already stopped. She was playing to some grandstand that didn't include him. He expected a crowd to burst in the door. She could still holler rape or assault or something. They could still trace those letters, they could still find the typewriter in the Guard House. Maybe his love notes still lived in those keys, were still printed on that platen. Tell-tale carbons in the waste basket. He'd give her three. "Get up," he said. "One!" Then, "Two!" Those wailing sounds she was making, she could claim anything. "Three! Get up!"

"He's frightened. His heart."

"What the hell do I care?" The hot words rose in his gorge, the giddy feeling of his brain ajar. "What am I supposed to do about that? Don't any of us have any feelings? His voice had moved outside himself and left him trembling. He couldn't trust his hands to haul her to her feet. He saw her watching him from under his shadow which gestured wildly across her face.

"Please! It can't end unless you end it. I know what you feel is right for you, but it still must end."

But it wasn't right for him, it was right. "Let me out of here," he said. "What I do is my business."

"Mine too."

"Why yours?"

"He's my father."

"Your what?"

"Sure." She hung her head and recited the rest of it, about her and her little brother being bombed by the Americans and how he left the country for Algeria when the war was over, vowing never to return while the Americans ruled Germany and his father for whom he would do anything, anything...

And, listening, Jon felt a sudden wave of fear and nausea as the remainder clicked into place. For all of this had been arranged too and he had allowed the mesh to happen merely by persisting in the channel most natural to him, by moving on his feelings as they had moved on theirs. He had felt a pulling away within himself and now he was there, in the next intensity. Only this time he might be out over his head and he was no swimmer. He felt his isolation and all the heavy weight of the end of the line. All the generations of the Aaronsons were summed up in him and no new ones in sight. And now they had separated out the last survivor and they were about to close the books, while they survived and survived. He felt himself being carried out farther and farther from the shore, his feet reaching desperately for the merest ridge of sand to found himself on.

"Spare his life Sergeant. Only that. It will cost you nothing."

Then his toes felt land. "Send him along. The son. Whatsisname."

"Ulric. You don't mean that."

"See if I don't." That he could handle. He was good at war.

"Sergeant, this may not be the place to say it but let our fathers finish their own god damn battles."

He discovered a path to the door and fled. He descended, regretting he hadn't tried those boobs one more time. Someone was descending ahead of him but Jon was busy with his thoughts. She'd figured out the love notes somehow. It wasn't the paper size and all the Gangbusters crap. Someone fingered him. He had a spy and it was Zellerman. He wondered if there really was a crazy brother and what that meant to him. He tried to visualize him but could only bring up a comic Kraut careening through the Rhineland, bazooka in hand. Momentarily Jon envied him and yearned for a similarly clear mission. He should move fast with one eye watching his rear. He was racing a train from Tangiers. Suddenly he realized the figure ahead of him might be coming from the same place. He caught him under a hall light and spun him around.

"Hear what you wanted Pops?"

But the old man looked up at him sideways and giggled, though the face didn't move otherwise. Jon tried to penetrate the puzzle of the old man's mask. He seemed to be looking through it. The flatness confused Jon and the sideways look, the feeling that he was looking at a dead man. He wondered why grandpops didn't wear his coat like the other men downstairs. Suddenly a buzzing of blood rushing upward. He felt like he'd looked away from a flame: in his sweater only, the man must live here. And his head was sideways to present the near eye. The other one he'd been looking directly through for it was glass. A sudden thinness at the back of his head, a chill in his armpits. Jon backed down the hall shivering violently. The dead eye seemed to glow after him. That was it! That was the eye. That was the marble that plugged it all, all of it, that was the eye that had existed only in stories and letters, in the mists of past time, in the lives of strangers and refugees and survivors. But that was the eye that someone had thumbed out of its socket, that was the eye itself and

Jon was over again deep into that alien territory. He'd never visualized this meeting because he never thought they might inhabit the same world. He felt again the bench they had shared, pressing under his thighs while they depended on one another for balance. He had missed his chance to reach over the beer mugs and fork out that other eye and perhaps the first one again for interest, spilling it all out, gushing it, risking the ultimate murder that might be at the end of that series and then leaping from the bench, tipping it over and with it the gasthaus and somehow burying it under the weight of the world. For that was certainly him and he certainly lived on the same earth as Jon Aaronson, sagging beer belly, rest home sweater and all. But there should be a sign of the differentness. His cheeks were wax, his eye was glass and an old man's sweater held together the unspeakable mass of guts. He might fool the Zellermands but he couldn't fool the son of Aaron and that was both his gift and his burden. And now he must find a way to live in the same world with that glass eye, that dropped chest, that dead scalp, those heavenly guts. And the way might be to remove them from the world. Something dropped into place when he thought that.

He found Zellerman quietly sitting in the front seat of the Road Master, waiting for him.

* * * *

A Mercedes tour bus blocked the sign. When Zellerman leaned across Jon to read it he gave Jon a dose of his breath. He searched the four languages for the one he understood.

"Dachau Memorial Park?" he asked.

"That's right. Like a ball park. Come on."

But Zellerman didn't budge. His arms were wrapped around his belly but his eyes were busy, darting between

thoughts. His lips pursed questions. "This is the place?" he ventured.

"This is one of them. You know about them?"

"Sure. I didn't know they were so close though."

"It's even closer than you think. Come on."

"It was right here? Right by the city?"

"Eight kilometers. Over that hill."

"Then they must have snuck them in at night or something."

"Open cattle cars. Right flat-ass through the downtown Munich freightyards. Right down from Goethe Strasse. You could probably see them from upstairs in your girl friend's gasthaus. Now will you come on?"

Maybe if he kept moving he might avoid questions, for movement itself seemed a kind of answer. He'd already heard within himself the questions about what were they doing here and what were they looking for, questions so fundamental he wasn't sure if anyone had to say them or if their inevitability simply thought them into being. But they were as unanswerable as the other one about why he was in the Army in the first place and perhaps they shared the same answer: he was in the Army in order to be here, now, and they were here now because he was for the hundred intertwined reasons, in the Army.

"Now will you come on?"

Zellerman closed his car door gingerly and followed Jon to the gate where he exchanged shy gummy smiles with the German guard, Jon waited down the path but Zellerman passed him, hurrying to the fork where he waited for guidance, his great shoulders hunched, awaiting a load.

"Come on." Jon shouldered him along when he stopped to read the rustic four-language signs by the mass graves,

the gallows, the whipping post.

"This was a... waiting camp or something?"

Jon wanted to force a laugh but that was only one of the phoney ways he could be. "Yah, a waiting camp. The last wait. Yah, a secret camp. Out in the open, eight K's from Munich. A rest camp. Some rest." The man was forcing him to detach his feelings from his words. He wasn't trying to bridge the gap between their responses in the gradual way that was the only way to come together. He found himself trapped behind a tour group, listening to their leader. "... 2000 in this grave..." the man is saying. When Jon tries to push through he feels their comfortable elbows and shoulders and looks for a chesty Frau to nudge. Someone is praying in the group and someone is crying. 2000 of them. Jon measures the burial pit with his eye to see how deep it must go. All those arms and legs, boobs and crotches, hornily intertwined. The space the ovens must have saved. "Come on," he says, pushing through the group, feeling an urgency to regain something lost here. He has to find something he can translate to the man. He looks toward the ornamental front gate, a remnant of the pretty little railroad station. Searches for traces of the old track to show him, but none survive. His eye paces off the steps to the fence but tourists are there, he can't step it off now. He decides where father's Mezuzah and gold teeth should be buried. But only if those buildings are permanent. And had it all really existed or was it a stage set, moved monthly to equalize wear on the grass? He isn't certain this is really the place. His mind flicks from the present setting back to the old one only both are dreamlike and neither one is substantial. He is by the crematorium sooner than he remembers. He sights down through the swung-open steel doors of the long neat building. A trolley track on the floor, half filled-in with tar,

ending in the last room, where the litters rolled into the ovens. Zellerman's lips are forming the German words on the building. "What's that?" he asks.

"The bakery. Come on."

A strong breeze sweeps through the rooms, tickling Jon's nose so he steps quickly inside. He has no hanky and can't afford a sneeze. He glances up at the rafters as he enters and checks the door latches after. He is careful to not turn his back to the doors. A neat sign in four languages identifies the dressing room, then the shower room. There are several cleaner, whiter squares on the plaster walls. Jon wonders what signs once hung over them.

"And this?" Says Zellerman.

"You got eyes. It's a dressing room. And that's a shower room."

"For a bakery?"

"Sure. Hooks for your clothes and everything." He translates the smaller signs which told the people to leave their valuables with the guards for safekeeping and that their clothes would be dry-cleaned while they bathed. Jon strums his thumb along the cold radiator rungs, then reams its unconnected end with a finger. "Terrible heat. Must have had awful drippy noses. But the other rooms were warmer." He sees Zellerman's puzzled look and briefly snorts back a moment of laughter which he can't control. He feels the lack of some kind of tour guide, some intelligence that knows the facts and withholds the emotion. Only he is the tour today. So he begins a monologue: "You see the frosted windows. That's so the girls won't peek. God forbid someone sees your wee wee." On one of the windows he finds an initial someone has scratched in the paint. He wonders if that had ever served as a peephole or if it was more recent. Zellerman is examining the heavy bar on the next door. "The bar on that

shower room door was to hold in the heat in there. Wait! Don't get ahead!"

But the big man is already swinging the door open.

"Hold on. Just the shower room. You haven't seen all this yet." He must slow him down. This is his place. Jon searches around for something else. He looks for rust in the shower heads, searches for rags in the pipes. But Zellerman has already noticed the shower room windows which are shattered and battered despite the reinforced glass and has already turned a hot water handle which comes off in his hand. Searches the floor for drains. He is taking over Jon's place. His voice falls dead on the cement floor.

"Nothing hooked up."

Jon reaches up and touches a shower nozzle and it falls off the wire from which it had hung. "Never was," he says.

Zellerman is now looming before him, wanting something more from him. Suddenly Jon must escape. Wonders what he'd meant to do here. He'd shown the kid everything now, now he owned him. Feels the thick door behind him, searches for the latch with sightless hands. And would he have time to slam that door, drop that bolt before he crashed his huge bearishness down on Jon and locked him in, behind all those sound proof doors? Suddenly aware of his heart and lungs, working hard. Gasping for breath. Blocked the door but Zellerman somehow passed. He'd lost control of everything, of the Underground Tour of the Real Germany that he'd waited for the ideal tourist to show, lost control of his tourist, his dupe, and now he is losing control of himself and doesn't know where he'd meant to go with this. "Get the hell out of there," he says, bolting into the oven room. Zellerman looks slowly back at Jon as if he is seeing him for the first time. But the German guard is at his side.

"That is your auto blocking the gate? It is in the Kommandant's place." The guard politely touched the brim of his cap. A signal, Jon thought, though Zellermann was slowly shaking his head at everything now. Jon touched his hip for his pistol as he looked for something to duck behind. He'd take on both of them if he had to. But no weapon. And he suddenly realized he didn't know what baby brother Ulric looked like.

But the German was already leaving. "We close in twenty minutes please. Twenty minutes," he said, the voice very far away and drifting, becoming the voice of Zellerman now "... this is the place. Here's where it happened. Right here."

John forces his mind back from where it had been. "Of course shithead!" he shouts. "What the fuck did you think?" Then, appalled at himself, he lapses into a bitter silence. A new impulse to latch all the doors and to not let him out till he promises to forget today. And if he won't promise? Then another image emerges, of Zellerman slipping down gently in a rising haze of gas, slipping down gently out of sight. But Jon is on the wrong side of the door for latching. And it is all out of his hands by now. This had been Jon's place, his heartland, only he'd let it get away. Now it is passing to the small-fry and the museum-keepers, guided packaged tourgroups, wives and children, to the Zellermans, the whiners, the moaners, the creamy pink unsufferers, the tourists and collectors of the hells of the world, all the professional sobbers observing their official universal sorrow. But they aren't to be trusted, no one can be trusted with his feelings. He must regain control. He strides to the first oven and pulls a pallet out. The wheels screech beneath it and a ration of old air drifts out from deep inside the oven. Zellerman is holding his chest rigid, protecting his lungs against the penetration yet peering deep into the gloom in the back

end of the oven. Burnt out flashbulbs inside and in the dust on the back of the door someone has scratched a Kilroy. "Just a bakery, friend, where they baked their bread. To a turn. Sure made a lot of bread here." As Jon withdraws the pallet farther the man's chest and shoulders seem to collapse from the strain of breathlessness and Jon feels his own rising impulse to unload himself, to do it now, to unburden himself and be done. "That's right, sonny", he whispers. "Nice and deep. Two at a time. Or babies by the dozen. Grab the live ones first before they begin struggling. Grab for the ankles so you won't wind up holding somebody's hand. Imagine the fat ones sizzle. If there were any fat ones. Baked to a turn. Your father-in-law."

Then the whole face seems to surround him, the pained creases protecting the eyes, the contortions of the horrible mouth. "Father in law?"

"Sure. Her father. Who the fuck you think that old guy is?"

"Him?"

"Sure, him. Why not?"

"Then she knew."

"Nah, she didn't know. Maybe only a million pounds of meat roasted next door every day. How could she know? You worked in a kitchen. What's it smell like when you burn the day's hamburger? Nah, nobody knew."

But the big man has passed Jon's level of response on the fly and is demanding more. He had been shaking Jon's arms and jolting his head on his neck for moments before Jon realizes that he had been asking questions and more, demanding passage.

"Now I mean it. Now tell me. They really did it? Everyone did it and it was here? I mean it really happened?"

How could they do it?" Until finally it simply falls apart as the big man realizes the unanswerableness of the questions at the same time that he joins the Sergeant in understanding the need to ask them. And he recognizes, finally, the cavern below their lives that the questions open. He lets go in mid-shake, though his hands remain up and apart, and he seems to speak for them "They're sorry. I'm sorry. Awful." Then the face seems to explode with the foretaste of the bile that rises up and explodes over his boots before he can stumble away. He gains speed when the fresh air meets him, does a dance at the execution ditch so the flow will not hit his boots, then gushes more freely as he passes the gallows, no longer bending to protect his clothes, letting fly in midstride at his boots, his knees, down his shirt front.

* * * *

He'd gotten up even better than Jon had expected. In a way he held the feelings for both of them now. And was this what Jon had meant to do when he brought him here? He was a little awed and envious that the other man could still move to those feelings. So that now he was Jon's man. But to have him was a grave responsibility too. And he wasn't wholly sure who was master and who was man.

Jon fanned back his scrubby Jewish butch with the blade of one finger and sucked his fleshy cheeks flat. Then he realized he was the last one in the building and the man wasn't coming back so he stepped outside quickly and slid along the wall to the corner. Then something shifted in the atmosphere and it was night.

A child came around the corner and ran into Jon, bouncing off before he could clutch her, running away terrified, calling to her father in a language unknown to Jon. He thought he saw Zellerman's back disappearing in the darkness beyond the gate where he would be sick in the

woods and then return, sheepish, apologetic and obedient. Jon was full of trembles he couldn't hold together, ghosts of earlier visits, specters of memories. There is no place to go in that direction except to the gate so he returns to the shower room and walks along the tarred-over rails which ended in the ovens. Or did they run the other way, curving out of those dark ovens to the tracks that crossed the fancy train station in the yard, joining tracks that fled across the countryside and trundled boxcars back across all of Austria and Poland and Hungary and Rumania, back to home in Vienna? And what had started them there? And what stopped them for Father short of death? Though now it sometimes seems he'd prefer the death. Jon feels his own complicity, his own rails ending for him too, short of the ash pits but trundling still in his mind. Six million of them, he sighs, but the number only clicks dully in his tired, addled brain which spins wearily, wanting to whirl away to some peaceful mountains, some restful shore. He quickly scans the wall to see if there are any new names since his last visit but a hundred layers of whitewash have covered a generation of autographs and once he has seen the new names in a dozen languages, the cities and the dates, he knows he wants more than names. Yet what is it he seeks? For all that language no communication. If he writes his name in Hebrew with a Jewish flag beneath would that be it? That deepcut "revenge" is nowhere on the wall. If it ever was. And did that oblige Jon to write it? But could he even spell the word in Jewish? And would that say what he wanted? And why hadn't they written it themselves? Was that Jon's duty - to express for them what they hadn't done? And if he phoned one of the names? Would they say on the phone what they wouldn't write on the wall? The whitewash has covered layer upon layer of them and all possibility gone of discovering those feelings. There are only names and cities and sometimes the year. Like votes. But what were

they voting for? Following the inscriptions along the wall he has become dizzy and he realizes he has sought his Father's name scratched deep with fingernails in the plaster, so deep that endless whitewashing would only prove the permanence of his mark. If only it were there he could put his fingers in his Father's mark, touch it with his own living flesh, kiss it gently. That would be some comfort. Suddenly Jon realizes a man is standing beside him, waiting for him to leave. He too is reading the names and he has a pencil concealed up his cuff. If Jon steps away perhaps the man will write something. He returns to the oven room to give him his chance.

But the guard is there. "It's time, sir," he says, reaching with the ghost of a motion for Jon's elbow.

Jon snaps up his elbow but misses. "Fuck off," he says.

"At six P.M. precisely we lock up," the man says.

While Jon glares at him the tour leader leads his group by, shaking his head. Some of the people are giggling and making circles at their heads.

Inside the man is gone, perhaps covertly watching him now, Jon thinks. There is the word "help" in English but old and smudged and far from the new name which he now finds: Jon Ericson. Oslo. He was a Jon too. There weren't many of them. They had to contact. But the man is nowhere in sight and Jon wonders what he'd expected from him. But there had to be more. He looks back down the rooms along the buried rail but it disappears in the oven room under the feet of the departing tourists. And was the rail so unbreakable, welded so single and without joint, he thinks, stubbing his toe on the steel ridge of the doorframe so that his corn throbbed, that there was no break in it between Vienna and Salzburg and Munich and Dachau? Jon remembers the frozen bodies that Father had to

pry loose from beneath the railroad cars. And had they really fallen there or leaped, or fled? Jon loiters at the curve of the path, looking for Jon Ericson, his friend and brother. He thinks he sees him disappearing behind an oversized chimney. Jon cuts quickly behind the little buildings towards the fence through which he sees the tarpaper barracks. Maybe he should let them lock him in. Maybe this is where he belongs. He follows the fence along, looking for an opening, peering inside. The tumbledown buildings are scorched and invaded by tall bushes. He remembers how in the confusion of the liberation they forced their former guards in there and set some of the buildings afire. But the Americans stopped them. Only why hadn't they used that energy some time during the long years in the camp and before?

He follows the fence through bushes and he realizes he expects to find an overlooked body there, perhaps an Aaronson, perfectly preserved through ten years of freezes and thaws. The moaning carsful trundle through his mind as he follows the curving fence and he begins to expect to find it, there were so many of them. Here where the tracks curved and screeched around this bend the screech would only blend with the other noise. Presently the tracks meet the fence which he is following. The tracks disappear beneath the bottom strand of a gate. On the gate it said the camp is sealed for health reasons. The gate is chained and padlocked and held shut by four-by-fours resting in steel elbows. He is aware of the tunnels which father said are beneath the earth where he is standing.