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A TRIP AROUND THE WORLD

by Georgia C. Lowenberg

Sometimes truth is stranger than fiction. Sometimes the world is small. And sometimes we're left wondering not "what if" but "what if not?"

It was the middle of February, my second week on the bridge. A few winters I was lucky and worked in the shop. I drew unemployment compensation in the others. This was the first time that I had elected to move south with the change of seasons. I remember so well having watched the migrating birds in the autumn, the great squawking wedges—wings beating ceaselessly, furiously—that littered the jagged, storm-ridden skies; waves of them, breaking on one horizon, penetrating into the opposite; seas of them, wind currents interacting with formation shifts in an angular frenzy unmatched by the steel of any Calder mobile—the realization, almost overwhelming, that I would be taking a similar course—like them, a pawn of the elements.

It was the middle of February, warm even for Oklahoma. The Western Oklahoma wind blew boisterously, incessantly—as I remembered it from boyhood days. I was running MIG, my

gas-flow meter jacked high because of that wind, my head close to the weld bead, when the dizziness hit me. Like any experienced welder, I recognized the symptom. I was getting the carbon dioxide meant to shield the molten joint metal. I came up fast, standing and removing my helmet in one near panic action that yielded to calm with my first unobstructed breath of fresh air. Then, the honking. One lone, uninterrupted, ear-splitting blare that seemed to sound forever. Oklahoma license plates. The vehicle slowed, pulled over, began to stop. Shaking his head, the flagman impatiently motioned it on. I wasn't so much aware of all the people riding by me as the solitary face framed in the rear-window of that one car for as far as my eyes could see. A very old face—my grandmother's.

She was wearing a small, dark hat—monochromatic, severe—clutching it to her head with the exuberant determination of a newly crowned beauty queen clasping her tiara. "Ach, Chonny, wie der Wind weht!": her voice in memory so clear, so resonant that for a moment I heard it above the horn of the automobile. It had been so many

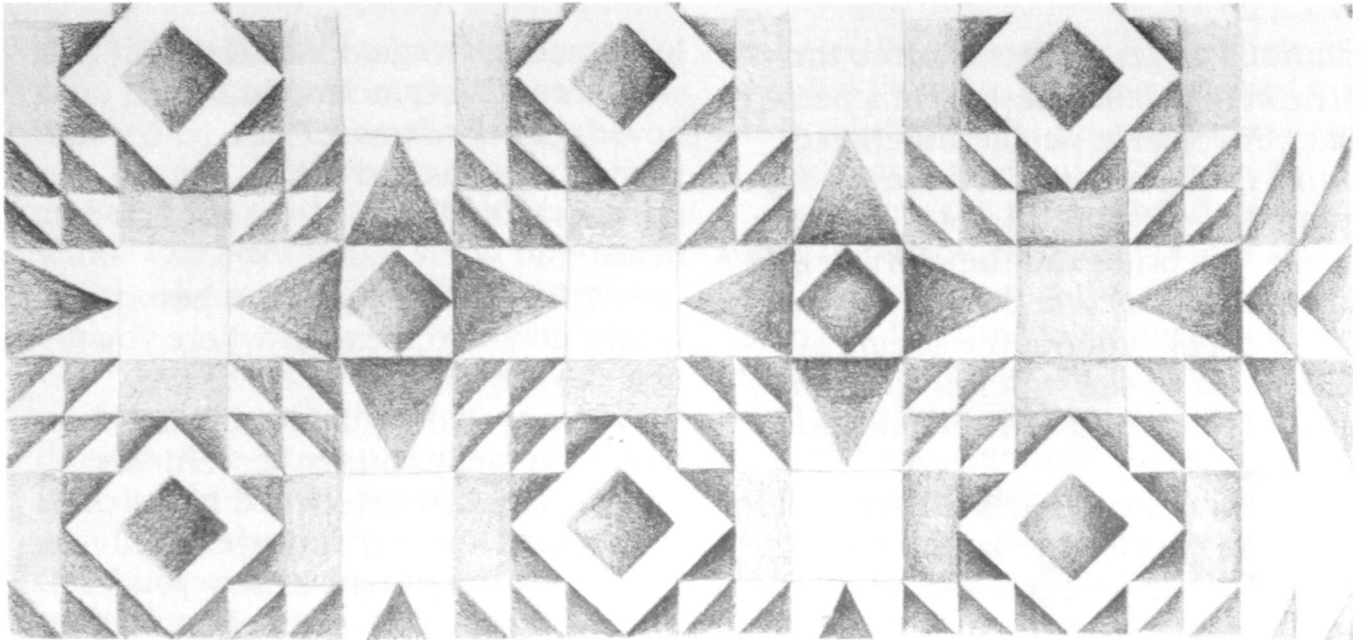


illustration by *Kirk Wheeler*

years since I had seen her, even heard her name. She was still alive!

I thought about her off and on all day. After supper, I hurried to the motel office to use the pay-phone. My voice unexpectedly trembled when I asked Directory Assistance for the listing. It was another hour before I drummed up the courage to go back and dial her number. She picked up the receiver on the first ring, her voice breathless, full of expectation. She must have been sitting right next to the telephone, probably waiting for my call since long before quitting time. I was glad I hadn't disappointed her because she didn't say "hello." She answered "Chonny!" Before I could acknowledge my presence at the other end of the line, she had repeated herself. "Ach, Chonny!"

I had purposely neglected to set

the alarm clock for Saturday morning. I nonetheless awoke long before it would have rung. I liked to sleep late weekends (7:00 a.m. was late for me), hereafter had remained indomitable. Her regular attendance at weekly Circle quiltings had done their part to handsomely swell the mission coffers dependent on quilt-sale proceeds. "We take a sack lunch, Chonny—chust like in the Old Days. We work all day. I do so love to quilt!"

As if I had needed to be told! The sturdy, old hardwood quilting frame that my grandfather Amos had made for her still stood where it had when I was a boy. As usual in the winter months, there was a quilt on it. There, in stark contrast to the conservative—indeed, somber—interior furnishings, the patterns and colors ran rampant. Sitting beside her, watching her

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calloused fingers expertly piece the intricately detailed designs in a persistent, provocative needle-and-thread tattoo, I suddenly realized the absurd contradictions: the complexity of the simple, the pride and the glory in the humble, the fancy in the life of plain. Those quilts, without the stigma of worldiness or sin, were the embodiment of her visions, the culmination of her dreams.

It was sometime in March when Grandma finished her latest creation. Devoid of the plump fabric rolls that it had once held captive in its time-tarnished clamps, the stretched splendor of its brilliantly hued, many-faceted 'show" side, the quilt frame stuck out like a sore thumb. I offered to disassemble it for attic storage (a task mastered before I had even started school), but my grandmother protested. "Nein, Chonny. It is getting so much harder for me to bend and stoop that I don't think I'll put in a garden this year. If I can figure out a way to keep the dust from blowing in and making my quilt as red as our dear Oklahoma earth, that will be my summer's project." It was an idea I wholeheartedly endorsed. But before the day was over, she had changed her mind.

If quilting was Grandma's first love, riding through the countryside would have certainly proved a formidable competitor for second place. Like so many older women of her persuasion, she had never learned to drive. She walked whenever she could, was

lucky enough to get a ride if the weather was too inclement. "But I never get out of town, Chonny! It's the farms and barns and fields—the changes in the land—that I enjoy most of all."

"Grandma," I reminded her gently, "do you remember where you first saw me?"

"Ach, Chonny, it was my first time away since your father left! My next-door neighbors invited me to ride to El Reno. But they thought sure I was seeing things when I saw you!"

The more I thought about it, the more incredible it seemed to me. Her first outing in twenty-odd years. The first time I had ever run MIG at bridge-site. The fact that we had both seen and recognized the other. I couldn't help but sense the hand of God in the whole unlikely chain of events.

"Chonny! Gehen wir nach Hause!" Her voice startled me so that I literally jumped in my seat. I knew by the enthusiasm in her voice that she wanted me to drive her not back to her home, but to the old house, the family home. Distance-wise it was so close; as measured by the passage of time, so very far removed from our lives now. Clenching my hands around the steering wheel, I watched my knuckles turn a ghostly white. Ghostly was a word I seldom used. It suddenly seemed inordinately appropriate.

We stood on the roadside shoulder, across from the property that had once been ours. The house my grandfa-

ther had built rose stalwart and proud from the Oklahoma earth, a sentinel to the fertile fields that sprawled to the sun, the crops that waved us welcome and restlessly rustled in the Oklahoma wind. Our own house stood opposite it—equally statuesque, almost as imposing.

“Ach, Chonny, we gave your parents the land to build on as a wedding present. How proud Amos would have been had he lived to see the ground-breaking. Your father wanted the excavating and grading done the old way, so he hired Old Abe Risser for the job. I’ll never forget the sight of your mother in her short skirts with you two little boys, watching the work. The heavy, powerful draft horses that trod full-circle, cutting east to west the entire length of the foundation because they couldn’t go up and down the same earth ramp nor turn inside the hole. It was a splendid team that did the work. Amos knew horses; Ezra learned from him. Even your mother—an outsider to our lifestyle—allowed that your father had picked a good team.”

Grandma leaned forward, shading her eyes with a wrinkled hand. She squinted against the sun’s rays. Wondering what she was watching so intently, I shifted my focus. Then I saw them, too: the horses trodding full-circle, entering the near ramp, cutting down; the raw physical beauty, the massive strength and grace of motion, the controlled surge of magnifi-

cence as the ground yielded to their combined efforts. Old Abe touched his hat in greeting as he urged his team around. My father had chosen well.

Back in the truck we talked about the home place, the places I had lived, my work across the rivers. “Chonny! I just made up my mind. Instead of gardening this summer, I’m going to make a trip around the world!” I was stunned. Surely she would forget the idea!

But the next Saturday she greeted me with the same joyful proclamation. “There is so much to do to get ready. Always before, I’ve worked with scraps from the women at Circle or cut the good from used garments. This time I want to sew with new pieces. To think of it. At my age!. My first trip around the world! Du sollst mir helfen!”

So that afternoon, like an obedient child, I drove her from store to store, shopping wherever fabrics and sewing supplies might be sold. Her face beamed with pleasure. Her unrestrained spirit was so contagious that I soon found myself selecting materials with the same eager abandon that she demonstrated. Only I added a new twist to the fun. Choosing colorful cotton bolts, I let my imagination run wild. “Blue is my favorite color, Grandma. Blue is for the oceans and the skies.”

“You need lots of greens. Green is for life—the forests, the prairies, the Sahara, the pyramids on the Nile. Some purple, too: the mountains’ majesty,

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the fruits of the vineyards in Germany and France and Spain. Pink is for the flamingoes on the Florida coast.”

“Ach, Chonny!” Clapping her hands with childish glee, she chose bolt after bolt of fabric, piling the bolts chin-high in my arms until I staggered under the load.

“But sunshine and shadows, Chonny. We mustn’t forget the shadows!”

I seized upon a rich ebony: “For the coalfields and the miners working the mines. Brown is the color of strength—tree trunks that reach to the sky, horses to till the Amish lands. Gray is for the Rock of Gibraltar, the storm clouds rending the autumn skies, the wings of the migrant birds fleeing the cold and snow and ice.”

She bought a half-yard of this, three-quarters of that, a yard each of several others, two or three yards of some. I knew nothing about sewing except that there was absolutely no apparent rhyme or reason to her purchases. I supposed it didn’t really make any difference. She was a very old woman, and she was very, very happy.

The next week I took her a suitcase—soft, medium-sized, a conservative blue—that I had spied sandwiched between other odds-and-ends at a garage sale just inside the City Limit sign. I had checked it for wear and stains; negative for both. The price had been right. “This is for your trip around the world, Grandma,” I explained, opening it for inspection. “There’s a lot of room inside.”

“Ach, Chonny!” she said with delight “Wie klug! Solch eine nette Idee! Danke! Danke!” I was, of course, pleased that she liked my present, but bewildered, too. What was so clever about anticipating a need for luggage? Why had that purchase been “such a nice idea”? Then I realized the irony of it. She knew that I knew that she wasn’t going anywhere at all. The trip around the world was only a fantasy game that we played together.

The next Saturday wasn’t as happy—for her or for me. It proved difficult—emotionally draining, in fact—to break the news. “The signs of spring are everywhere, Grandma. The last of our men have crossed the Rio Grande and are on their way up. Cookie’s riding the rails from a ‘bo camp in California. This weldor—and the gang’s complete. We’ll go out as soon as I get back.” I paused, giving her a chance to grasp the meaning of the words I could hardly voice. “They tell me the Sandhill Cranes are already on the Platte. Great noisy flocks of them are gathering corn from the stubble, reaping the harvest the machinery missed. I’ll be watching them, Grandma, thinking of you. For when the migrant birds next fill the fall skies, I won’t be far behind!” There was nothing to smile about—nothing to make merry over—the rest of that day. Not even her trip around the world.

I drove in for the last time on Easter Saturday. The house was festive

with bright bursts of yellow daffodils and preseed-glass heirloom bowls brimming with Easter hay and eggs tinged the soft, mottled natural shade of red onion skins, the type that had colored my boyhood with a charm no commercial tablet dye could ever expect to rival. The fragrance of anise bread blended with the musty grape smell of brilliantly hued lavender and purple iris. "Kulich and paska, Chonny! All your Easter favorites!"

After dinner, we went back to the home place. This time, we stayed in the car. Slowing down, I could again see the horses at work. One look at my grandmother's face and I knew that she was watching them, too. I was glad for that vision because Mennonite fields would be empty and quiet on Sunday. It was the Lord's Day, the farmer's day of rest.

Just before we left for Easter Sunday services, I surprised her with a carefully chosen neck scarf. A soft, powder-blue devoid of pattern, it would complement the somber navy-blue coat and hat that had become traditional with her. There were tears in her eyes when I draped it around her neck and folded it across her throat. "Ach, Chonny, wie schon! You spoil me so. What a special start to a special day!"

It was a special day. The sun shone bright from cloudless azure skies, promising to alleviate the morning cool. There were fruit trees in bloom. The verdant green of the land-

scape was interrupted only by nosegays of flowers and the occasional glint of a robin's breast or the flutter of a butterfly. The church radiated the same serenity, a splendor of rebirth unique unto the springtime. The organ chords swelled in a lofty crescendo. Jacob Lowenberg's fine tenor voice matched them note for note, sending tremors through the walls and tiny tingles up and down our spines. So beautiful, so perfect, was the blend of music and voice that we exited the vestibule after worship to find believers of all denominations huddled on the church steps. "We only stopped to hear the singing," one man offered in explanation.

"Happy Easter!" another voice rang out. The greeting was echoed by Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike. The atmosphere was festive and friendly.

We ate dinner at an Oklahoma City restaurant acclaimed for its lavish buffets and ice-sculptured masterpieces. "Ach, Chonny!" was all Grandma could say—over and over again—until several well-dressed couples edged close to us in the dessert line. "Well, I've made two trips around the world, you know!" The woman's voice was sophisticated, her manner aloof and pretentious. "Excuse me," my grandmother blurted out. "I heard you mention your trips around the world. I'm about to make my first!" There were indulgent smiles before the group distanced itself. Grandma was too intent studying the elaborately decorated eclairs and Napoleons to even

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heed their departure.

It was dusk before we started back. The weather had changed dramatically, a chilly wind reminding us that it was still only early spring. The truck windows shut tight, the heater on "low," I asked Grandma if she was comfortable. But she had fallen asleep, evidently exhausted from the weekend's activities. We were crossing a bridge on Interstate 40 when she stirred. The traffic was heavy, car and truck headlights penetrating the river mist in an eerie effulgence. Lightning flashed on the horizon line. There was a sultriness in the air that warned of impending storm. "Have we crossed yet, Amos?"

"Almost, Grandma," I whispered. "It's all right!"

"Is this the Chordan, Amos?"

"No!" I shouted, rattled by her use of my grandfather's name. Then, swallowing hard, I regained by self-control. "It's only the South Canadian, Grandma." She didn't hear me. She had dozed off again.

It was downright nasty by morning; the cold, damp air penetrating and cruel, the wind making it worse. Grandma insisted on going out to the truck with me despite all of my protests to the contrary. I could see that she was still very tired. Her now-swollen legs bulged beneath the old-fashioned cotton stockings. Although she had relented and donned her coat and hat—even the new silk scarf—I was sorely concerned about her. "Schreib'

mir, bitte!" she implored above the wind.

"But you'll be making a trip around the world, Grandma!" I teased. "Will you get my letters?" Her ensuant laughter was so hearty, so spontaneous, that I was left with the vaguely uncomfortable feeling that perhaps, after all, the joke was on me. I'll never forget her reflection in my side-mirror as I pulled into the street" the frail figure standing curbside, bent by the wind, the blob of navy accented by the slightest touch of powder blue, the bony fingers holding onto the prim little hat. "Ach, Chonny, wie Wind weht!" Her lips formed the words as she waved her last goodbye.

All that summer I wrote to her—sometimes in English, sometimes in childlike German. I was sure my German efforts would bring a smile to her face: "Liebe Grossmutter. Wie geht es Dir? Es geht mir ganz gut..." On the bridges I dropped my face plate and labored in my own world, watching the weld metal; ripples and ridges coalesced into furrows or feathered-border quilting motifs. Sometimes I saw strands of my mother's braided hair. The weld beads crossed and re-crossed the rain-swollen Nebraska rivers until the migrant birds embarked on their journey south. As promised, I followed them back.

I purposely avoided alerting her to my coming. I didn't want to excite her until I was actually there. When I saw the collection of dirt on the side-

walk, I knew. I knocked on the neighbor's door instead. Frieda opened it almost immediately. "Come in, Johnny. You never used a return address, so there was no way we would let you know. Even Ezra didn't know how to find you. Come in and sit down."

I remember only bits and pieces of what she told me. Grandma died a month ago. The preacher referred to her as "a saint on earth." Jacob Lowenberg sang. The church was packed. Frieda held a suitcase out to me. I did, indeed, recognize it. "I bought that for her trip around the world," I muttered, shaking my head in a combination of grief and disbelief. "She never got to use it."

Frieda's eyes sparkled. "Oh, but she did, Johnny! First she stored her fabrics in it, then the quilt blocks. After the quilt was finished, it went inside. The suitcase kept the red dust out." She opened the luggage, lifted something out, spread it on the floor. There the great concentric squares formed a vibrant color parade sufficient to pale any rainbow. It was truly a work of art, meticulously planned and executed. My eyes feasted on the dazzling array of colors.

"Your grandmother said it was a 'choke'—she couldn't pronounce her English J sound—between the two of you. Oh, my, how she laughed when she talked about the colors! 'Blue is for the oceans and skies, green for life...' It's a very old pattern, Johnny, but one

that your grandmother had never made before. The Amish know it as 'Sunshine and Shadows,' but the Mennonites call it 'Trip Around the World.'" I almost passed out on top of it.

I sometimes see her on the bridges: hers is the face in the empty rear-window of the car that passes me by. Sometimes I see her in town: the phantom silhouette in my side-mirror. At night I read the Bible before I go to sleep. You see, I'm working on another bridge now—the same one my grandmother built before me. It's a long, high one. It has to be. It runs all the way to Heaven. ■

GEORGIA C. LOWENBERG of Lincoln, Nebraska, makes her second appearance as a short-story writer in this issue.