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Giza

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TREVOR J. HOUSER

GIZA

WHEN DID I first hear of Dr. Haas?

The woman I kissed outside the hospital on 99th and Madison told me.

Her son's brain was trying to kill him, too.

It was close to midnight two summers ago. She was probably in her late thirties like me except with gray, almost white hair, and incredible green eyes like two gobs of Burmese jade. She shared her last cigarette with me and talked about Dr. Haas as if he were from a distant planet put here to alleviate the immense, deep sea pressures of cerebrospinal fluid in our Earthling children.

Except he was from Austria.

For some reason, I liked the idea of someone named Haas. Haas who was from Austria.

He seemed real. He seemed like someone who would shake your hand in a firm but friendly way, then calmly look over some CAT scans as he lit up his meerschaum pipe.

I imagined Dr. Haas fly fishing for trout in the northern Bohemian forest when he wasn't figuring out rare brain diseases. Maybe that's all he saw out there. Tangled webs of cold mountain streams. Blue-gray fistulas

gurgling, and swirling down-current, forming life-threatening eddies and unwieldy rapids, all of it rushing off to somewhere vital and heartbreaking.

Then I kissed the woman on 99th and Madison against the wall of the hospital. Or maybe she kissed me.

It happened very quickly.

Afterwards she went to her hospital room with her sick boy and I went to mine.

CARTOGRAPHY

I HAD HEARD Dr. Haas lived on a remote volcano overlooking a lake in the Guatemalan Highlands of the Sierra Madre de Chiapas, and that he sometimes performed his surgeries in the open mountain air.

I also heard he had been chased out of Austria. Then somewhere in Africa for practicing medicine without a license.

Some call him a murderer. Others call him a saint.

The woman who I kissed on 99th and Madison drew me a map on the back of the New York Post, showing me where he was. As she drew it against the wall of the hospital I watched her cigarette dangle from her mouth in a surprisingly elegant way. It was about to rain. A summer storm from the vast, gimlet-eyed Atlantic.

“The roads are pretty bad, but there’s a train, I think,” she said, handing me the map. I noticed she had good penmanship, which in some way comforted me about the future in general. I imagined my four-year old son and myself on the back of some rickety bus, climbing through the cloud

forest. Green, green, blue, dark green. Not long after that the woman kissed me.

Or I kissed her.

THE VIEW FROM OUR DECK

I WAKE UP IN the middle of the night and walk down to the kitchen to find some Old Fitz, or a little sherry. I pour some and check on my son who is fast asleep. Outside there are clouds and the moss and the werewolves hunting my son's cerebellum. I bend down. I kiss the part where his little shoulder meets his neck.

I put on a big Pendleton blanket and go to our deck.

Moonlit roofs peek over the dark trees like shrinking blue glaciers. Our lumpy backyard goes out to a small thicket of rhododendron and sticker bushes where my son has a fort made of old trellis with little six-penny nails sticking out. Past that is the Hendricks' place. A tall stand of oak. Then beyond the trees and Padilla Bay is Guatemala.

It's just a bit of water and then Guatemala is there, waiting.

My son's life as a tax attorney or stunt driver lies somewhere out there. Somewhere in the jungle, just below the volcanoes and the jaguars and the tamarind trees.

PALM SPRINGS

MY WIFE KNOWS about Dr. Haas, too, but she's not a believer like me. After one of our blowups about Guatemala and experimental surgery with

questionable Austrians I tell my wife there's a conference I forgot about and leave the next day. I tell her I'll be back before her trip to Palm Springs with her mother where they happily curse my existence over bottles of midlist chardonnay.

I buy a train ticket to Seattle and sit next to the window.

I watch the early morning trees and the mist go by, the car filling with smells of black coffee and wet newspaper.

The woman from 99th and Madison is waiting in the lobby. Her gobs of green jade are watching me as I walk up to her not sure what to say.

"Hi," I say.

"Hi," she says.

"You want to get a drink?"

We drink at the hotel bar in a high booth. Back home my wife is packing for Palm Springs. Sticker bushes and sogginess pressed against the storm windows. There are three other people drinking at the bar. Maybe one of them has a child like ours, I think, slowly dying somewhere faraway like Bismarck or Lake Charles. Or maybe their sons are normal and they're just having normal drinks. Sometimes I can remember what normal feels like, but usually it feels just out of reach, like an old photograph of you at some dinner party you don't recall, but you're there in the photograph eating some sort of quiche, so you must've been there.

The woman from 99th and Madison and I talk about Dr. Haas and our sons and keep ordering drinks until it is late in the evening. In between drinks I catch her drawing a map of Guatemala on her cocktail napkin.

She's a believer like me.

Believing in things is rare and powerful like uranium.

She tells me she has a room for the night so we order dinner up to her room. I call my wife from the hall and say, "I won't be home tonight after all. Just having drinks with some colleagues then I'll crash at the hotel."

The two of us go up to her room.

We eat dinner and then we turn off the lights and get into bed. We drink Old Fashioneds and look out the big windows at the nighttime city of Seattle, twinkling like a luxury cruise ship.

The woman from 99th and Madison lies her head on my shoulder.

"Do you ever feel like what you do isn't really you, but you keep doing it anyway?" she says.

I want to pull the covers over us so our bed would turn into a submarine that we can ride in to Guatemala together. Our sons would become fast friends. At night, we would turn on the floodlights and watch the krill and the goblin sharks, and I would hold her just like this, and take one more sip of my drink before leaning over her in the darkness.

THE ANNA MARIE II

THE SHIP IS white and looks like an upside-down church. The deck is like a sacrificial altar to the Western Pacific. The captain, who is my oldest and least sober friend, is drinking sanctimonious light beer with me, surrounded by old ropes and sun-blasted piles of fish guts.

I open another light beer.

I am waiting for Guatemala to happen.

My wife and son are currently surrounded by juice-fasting retreats, self-hating yogis and an insatiable death-heat. My mother-in-law is making a second round of margaritas about now.

They are talking about how I have a tendency to be antisocial, or that I'm drinking too much, as the bone-white desert pulses and melts all around them.

"Did you see the skeleton of that horse?" says the captain whose name is Marty. He is on acid again. "It looked like it was trying to get up, but something was wrong with it and it didn't get up," he tells me, looking off into the middle distance. "Like it hadn't planned properly, you know?"

"I think my son is going to die," I say.

Marty throws his beer at a seagull, or maybe a star.

"Will you help me?"

"Help you what?"

"How long does it take this thing to go about two-thousand miles?"

Marty looks at the ship, then takes a deep breath like he just saw someone bet their mortgage on black.

MOUNT VESUVIUS

THE DAY AFTER they return from Palm Springs I tell my wife I want to take our son for a haircut so we say goodbye and get in the car and drive away. I look at the house in the rearview mirror. I look at the lumpy yard and the trees until the ground rises up behind us and everything disappears like

Pompeii.

“Where are we going?” my son asks.

“The ocean,” I say.

“What about mom?”

“She’ll probably meet us later,” I say looking straight ahead so the lie seems more casual, easier to accept somehow.

We meet Marty at the docks and climb aboard his upside down white church. As we slip out of the harbor I feel the breeze on my face. I smell the kelp and the mermaids washing their hair down below.

“This is some of the nicest water you’ll see,” says Marty. “It reminds me of my ex-fiancée’s inner thigh.”

By lunchtime we push through the Strait of Juan de Fuca where we check into our rooms of the North Pacific. We have courtyard-facing views of Cape Flattery. The king-sized waterbed stretches out for miles in every direction. From room service I order up a peanut butter and honey sandwich for my son, and a corned beef for myself. We eat together, watching the birds swoop and the water churn. Deep down I’m afraid my son is dying. When he stops breathing he will not look at me as I hold his face up against mine. His cheek against my cheek. He will just lie there. He will be gone. I will cry in someone’s kitchen or hallway. I will cry in an Uber.

“Feast your eyes on that Anna Marie II!” Marty shouts. “That’s open ocean my love, stretch your lovely legs!”

PEACEFUL SEA

The Anna Marie II creaks and heaves over the white caps. I watch my boy's face pointing towards Guatemala like a rare and beautiful compass. He's healthier on the move, I think. We all are. Velocity. Evolution. It's good for the blood.

"Are we going pretty fast?" asks my son.

"We are," I tell him.

"Do you think we're going faster than a motorcycle?"

"Oh yeah."

One time, far above 99th and Madison, one of my son's doctors took me aside in a waiting area near a candy vending machine. It did not smell of sea air. There were no birds or tiny puffs of cloud overhead. Just a woman slumped in a chair softly crying behind us. The smell of warmed-over hospital food swirling under a gale of code blues.

"This morning your son underwent a combined transarterial and transvenous embolization of his VAGM," said the doctor. "The catheter access was achieved by passing the microcatheter from the arterial side into the recipient draining vein. We used Onyx, a liquid embolic agent to occlude fistulas comprising the malformation. We estimate about eighty percent occlusion has been achieved. Do you have any questions?"

"Yeah," I began, "when will he and I be able to go scuba diving off the Grand Banks?" "When will he do this crazy spin move that no one sees coming and sack the rival team's quarterback thereby cementing his chances with the homecoming queen? When will he be able to take off that shitty

hospital gown and put on his Captain American PJs and eat frozen waffles and watch whatever the fuck movie he wants in our bed back home? When will I stop eating avocados over the sink, and sort of smooshing them into my mouth while crying uncontrollably?”

But I didn't ask any of those questions.

I just looked at the doctor and nodded.

Then I went up to the ICU to feel my son's hot breath against my cheek.

PSALM 23:4

CORTES BANK IS a shallow seamount of sandstone and basalt, ninety-six miles southwest of Los Angeles. It is renowned for producing some of the tallest waves in the world. A crystal blue valley with stunning 70-foot cliffs crashing off in the distance.

No islands in sight. Just a couple small boats and jet skis and surfers swimming out toward the walls of water that crash and rise up and crash all over again.

Marty yells out to the surfers that he wants to join them, but they tell him it's too dangerous and basically to fuck off.

“Goddamn it,” says Marty. “You can't learn anything by being scared.”

He puts on his swim trunks and jumps in.

“Where the fuck are you going?” I say, but he can't hear me.

“Is he really going out there?” my son asks.

“He'll be back,” I say, not entirely sure.

I look out at our own private valley, a dusty emerald green at the edges

then transforming into shifting molten blues, dark at first, then ultramarine, then Egyptian blue, followed by a burst of intense cobalt around our boat.

“Let’s go,” I say, giving his head a fatherly rub. “Not way out there. Just into this water here. This might be the most perfect water we’ll ever see.”

We get in slowly.

Mostly I hold him and we laugh in that nervous way you do when you’re in the middle of the ocean. I wonder about hammerheads and white tips. Occasionally we stick our heads underwater. It’s clear visibility to about 80 feet. Darting schools of silver mackerel and sunny green surf grass swirling like Nebraska cornfields. A wave, not of fear or elation, but of jealousy comes over me. None of the fish had ever heard of Vein of Galen. Not one sea lion ever had a future ex-wife doing interviews on the *Today Show* about how she always knew there was something “off” about him.

I realize the ocean is full of death, but no fear.

I realize this as our legs dangle high above the giant undersea canyon that plummets and stretches out to Tokyo and the graves of a million Malaysian fishermen.

But then I let the jealousy go.

There’s too much to think about already so I just let it recede out of me like low tide back in Padilla Bay when all the busted crab traps and goose-barnacled moorings got exposed like old scars.

I lie back into the water and tell my son to do the same.

He struggles at first. The water keeps going into his mouth, or he starts to sink, but then I get him to relax. I tell him to pretend he is the lightest

thing on Earth. He starts to get the hang of it. Then we just look up at the clouds together. Big, layered pearly puffs rolling out like a never-ending honeycomb high up in the stratosphere. In the back of my mind I worry about the hammerheads and the white tips, but I don't tell him that. I just hold his hand tightly. I just breathe in and out.

GUATEMALA

GUATEMALA IS A country in Central America bordered by Mexico, Belize, the Caribbean and the Pacific Ocean. It has an estimated population of 16.6 million people, 8,327 species of poverty, and seventeen pelicans with some form of depression. When you see it you think to yourself, "This is Guatemala." You don't say it out loud. You just think it. You also think about jaguars and volcanoes and other kinds of non-depressed pelicans. You think about shitty whisky. You think about hotels where they still wear white jackets. My son's rare diseased brain is in Guatemala although Guatemala's rare diseased brain population is at present unknown.

"This is Guatemala," I say to my son when we arrive in Guatemala.

EL PAREDON

HERE WE ARE in the waiting room of Guatemala.

I am at a train station in a phone booth overlooking the ocean. The sky is blue except for one massive cloud like one of those wall-sized paintings you find in a nice public library.

I call my wife.

I want to tell her what is happening, but I don't know how.

"Hello?" she answers.

The feeling (love? something similar?) she had for me before the thing with the diagnosis is somewhere else now, underwater maybe, or floating in the clouds over Machu Picchu, disoriented, lost. You maybe never know when the feeling first goes away, but when it does you can never get it back no matter how good looking you are, or how much money you have tied up in RV parks in Tennessee, or even how many times you talk to her about Tom Cruise without laughing. You could say, "I want to move to Oslo with you," and she would answer, "On the computer," which will make you wonder whether or not you took life seriously enough. Did you laugh when she suggested bi-weekly family budget meetings? Did you talk about the capital gains tax in a focused, yet casual way at dinner parties that made other people simultaneously fear and respect you?

"Is that you?" she says.

I tell her I still love her, but not out loud.

She sighs, and hangs up.

WEDNESDAYS

ONCE YOU SLEPT next to your son in bed wondering how he would die. What hospital room? Would he stop breathing while looking at you? Would his hand sort of grab your hand while looking just over your shoulder at the light or some section of sky out the window? He was born the same way you were except there's too much blood in his head and that means

you might not be able to have Thanksgiving together when you're older. It means there's a part of you that nature will exploit.

Everything will be different one day, you think. No family. No Guatemala. No ice cream on the boardwalk at dusk in Maui.

The hospital will sound like a forest.

Your loved ones will talk like glaciers.

You will have on a World War II documentary while putting on pants in the late afternoon and then stop in the middle of putting them on.

"This is life," you will say to yourself, eating a half-smooshed avocado as dive-bombing Stukas light up the black-and-white ford behind you.

CARY GRANT

I MEET THE woman from 99th and Madison on the twelve o'clock train to Antigua. We order lunch.

"But are you glad to be here?" she asks. "I'm glad to finally be here. I think I hate everyone back home."

"Why?" I ask.

"They always look scared, but pretend that everything is OK. You ever notice how scared everyone looks?"

"Are you scared?"

"A little."

I try to kiss her, but she says, "Not right now. I'm too distracted. This whole thing is very distracting."

"OK," I say.

The porter comes in with two steaming trays.

I pay the porter.

We eat trout amandine and drink Gibsons.

“Do you think Dr. Haas will be there?” asks Katherine, playing with her cocktail onion.

“I hope so,” I say.

“Sometimes it doesn’t sound real.”

“Nothing sounds real if you think about it.”

“Are you scared?”

“Sort of. I used to be more scared because all I was doing was thinking about it and not doing anything. Now I’m doing something.”

She sits next to me and orders another drink.

“Where’s your son and that friend of yours?”

I tell her they’re sleeping, but I can’t sleep for some reason so I’m here instead.

“You’re lucky to have a friend with you, a partner,” she says.

“What about your husband?”

She laughs a little into her drink as she looks out the window, then she stops laughing and breathes out slowly while looking at the clouded sky.

PLACE OF FLOWERS

VOLCAN DE AGUA, also known by the Mayans as Hunahpu, or “place of flowers,” is a stratovolcano that towers 12,340 feet above the Pacific coastal plain to the south and the Guatemalan Central Highlands to the north.

The volcano dwarfs the nearby landscape, it's northern apron spreading out black-green like the great bruised pyramid of Giza.

Volcan de Agua is popular with coffee growers on its lower slopes and above the cloud line is often frequented by fathers and mothers and their sons whose brains are trying to kill them.

If your son was dying you would go there, too.

The only other places you would go are 99th and Madison, or your water-logged backyard to crawl into the bushes and never come out again.

But those places are hopeless.

Those places have nothing to look forward to except for barberry stickers and squirrels, the smell of heated canned corn and people who haven't showered in three days, weeping next to vending machines.

Volcanoes look out at the world in every direction as if saying "hello" to everyone at once. Volcanoes are like the host who spins in the front hall with the overcoats and a bottle of bubbly. They're quite welcoming for something that has the potential to fry your face like Fontina.

It's good to remember the best time of year to ascend the volcano is whenever you're there.

Lava doesn't care about things like seasons.

Jaguars, monks, your friends and relatives. None of them give a shit either. They have their own lives and your tragedy is just a random news bulletin to ruin their breakfast, or trip to Disneyland.

You and the volcano are on your own.

You will be the only one to see his little socks for the last time.

You will be the only one that decides what song should potentially be the last one he ever hears.

Volcan de Agua is where we are now.