Germs

Richard Wollheim

CHAPTER ONE

My Land

It is early. The hall is dark. Light rims the front door. The panes of violet glass sparkle. The front door has been left open. Now I am standing outside in the sun. I can smell the flowers and the warmed air. I hear the bees as they sway above the lavender. The morning advances, a startled bird runs fast across the dew. Its breast quivers, in, out, and its song scratches on my ear. Lifting my eyes, I see that the garden, and everything in it, moves. The flowers move, and the lavender moves, and the tree above me is moving. I am standing in the sun, my body is tipped forward, and I am walking. Walking I shall trip, and, if I trip, trip without a helping hand, I shall fall. I look above me, and I feel behind me, searching for the hand that is always there. There is no hand, and therefore, if I trip, or when I trip, and now at long last, the waiting is over, and I have tripped, and I am, am I not? I am falling, falling - and was it then, in that very moment when magically I was suspended in the early light, when the soft smells and sounds seeping out of the flowers and the insects and the birds appeared to be doing for me for a moment what the hand that was not My Land there could not do, or was it, not then, but in the next moment, by which time the magic had failed, and the path was racing towards me, that I did what I was to do on many later occasions, on the occasion of many many later falls, and I stretched out my hands rigid in front of me so that my fingers formed a fan, not so much to break my fall, or to make things better for me when I hit the ground, but rather to pretend, to pretend also to myself, that things were not so bad as they seemed, or disaster so imminent, and that this was not a fall but a facile descent through the air, which would leave me in the same physical state, clean, ungrazed, uninjured, that I was in before I tripped, and that the urine would not, out of sheer nervousness, pour out of me?

When I landed, a large rose-thorn, which had been lying in wait on the gravel path, most probably since the early hours of the morning when it had fallen from its stalk, confronted me, and met no resistance as it slid itself under my thumb-nail, and then, like a cold chisel, worked its way up into me, making its own channel as it went, until it came to rest on the pad of pink, quivering flesh that forms a cushion underneath the nail.

Cries of surprise, cries of pain, cries of outrage, resounded through the garden, and tore apart the morning serenity.

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Within seconds, someone, alerted to my absence, has run out of the house, and brusquely collected me up into her arms. Held with what was to be memorable pressure against the surface of a starched apron, I was hurried back, breastheight, along those few yards of path which my feet had just traversed in an outward direction. But now the sounds and smells that had lured me onwards were blotted out by the protective breast. And it was only when I was safely returned to the house from which it was made clear to me that I should never have escaped, and I was set down in the darkness, and the dank smell of the hallway rose up and blended with the sharp, chastising smell of the apron, that my senses slowly came back to me. And then it was the turn of oblivion.

Oblivion came down. It came down with a swish, with the great, heavy swish of velvet curtains suddenly released from the high gilded arch of an opera house, or an old music hall, stirring up as they fell the smell of sawdust aerated with the cold dusty draught that blew in from the wings and dried the nostrils. At school I knew that I differed from other boys in that I could recognize this smell, and they could not. It was familiar to me from early visits backstage with my father, which sometimes brought with them moments of excitement as well as the more usual embarrassment, as when, of a sudden, a troupe of eighteen-, nineteen-year-old girls, rushing off the stage, shouting to one another, "Darling", "Dearest", "Did you see him?" as they headed for their dressing-rooms, accidentally surrounded me, and I dared to hope that, as they drew themselves up on their toes, I might, by some mischance or some misunderstanding, brush against their strong, horselike bodies. But never so. It never happened. Forced to look down through artificial eyelashes, past cascades of ringlets stuck to their cheeks with sweat, and so eventually to take stock of my little boy's body, they reacted with a quick intake of breath, a "Tut" or a "Tss", and, then resuming their speed, swerved past me and on to their dressing-rooms. Into that brief gasp of theirs I read much. On the surface, there was surprise, surprise at my mere presence; below that, there was some desire, in a sisterly way, to protect me; then below that, there was shame at whatever it was about them from which I needed protection; and then, deepest of all, there was, I knew, their withering contempt for whatever weakness there was in me that made me need, or made them feel I needed, protection from them. Why, they wondered, was what was good enough for them not good enough for me? Whenever I recalled such moments, I noticed how a look of apprehension passed over my father's face as he turned from them to me, and then a look of relief as he turned back from me to them.

It was, as my reader will have guessed, a long, a very long, time before I succeeded in brushing against a woman's body.

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