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Back from the Dead

Written by Peter Leonard

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Back from the Dead

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For the Aisles

One

Freeport, Bahamas. 1971.

Hess heard voices, but had to listen carefully, tune into the sound before he realized they were speaking English with a British accent. He hated the British and pictured Churchill in a newsreel, pontificating after the war, the fat man with the cigar, his righteous tone more righteous after defeating Germany. Hess opened his eyes looking up at the white blades of a fan slowly rotating above him. He was in a hospital ward, an infirmary, the last bed in a big white room filled with beds, Hess on his back, a lot of activity to his left, Negro nurses moving about, checking on Negro patients. Everyone he could see had black skin. For an Aryan who believed in racial purity this was hell, God playing a cruel joke on him.

It hurt to breathe, his lungs were burning and he had a pain in his upper chest. He touched it and felt a bandage through the hospital gown. He noticed there were IVs in both of his arms, which were badly sunburned. His last recollection was floating in the ocean, hanging onto a wood plank that had drifted by, a piece of wreckage, bobbing in the water like a wine cork, for a day at least, until someone rescued him. He remembered being pulled out of the water but his memory was hazy after that.

"You're awake."

A nurse approached the bed. She had short black hair that fit her head like a cap, and the darkest skin he had ever seen, the dark chocolate color contrasting her big white teeth and crisp white uniform.

"How do you feel?" She was standing at the side of his bed, looking down at him. "My name is Camille. Are you in any pain?"

The wound in his chest itched. He scratched at it under the bandage. "What happened?"

"That's what everyone wants to know."

In a snapshot memory he saw himself lying on the black and white tiles of a kitchen floor, a hole in his chest, blood leaking out of him, feeling light-headed, sure he was going to die, Harry Levin, his executioner, standing over him. But how? He had killed Harry in Detroit, shot him point blank.

"Where am I?" Hess said.

"Freeport, sir. The Bahamas. You were delirious, near death when they brought you in. The good news, the salt water helped heal your wound. Salt's an anti-inflammatory, encourages the formation of connective tissue and blood vessels important to the healing process."

Nurse Camille took a thermometer out of an apron pocket, shook it and slid it in his mouth. "Under your tongue now. That's a good man." She held her arm up, glancing at the watch on her black wrist. "A fisherman find you floating in the channel." She pulled the thermometer out of his mouth and read it. "Temperature's down."

"How long have I been here?"

"Two days."

"What is the date?"

"Fifteenth of October." She paused. "What is your name, sir?"

"I don't know. Did you check my identification?"

"There was nothing on you when you were admitted. Nothing except the ring on your left hand. A policeman was by this morning. Would like a word when you're up to it. I have my rounds. I'll be back to check on you."

Nurse Camille moved to the bed next to him, attending to a gray-haired Negro man. Hess lay back staring at the fan, thinking God had spared him, brought him back to finish his work. He wanted Hess to kill more Jews. Hess thought of Eichmann saying he would leap laughing into the grave because the feeling that he had killed five million people on his conscience would be a source of extraordinary satisfaction. Hess could relate. Killing Jews had been immensely satisfying.

*

Day three. The trim dark-skinned man in a white short-sleeved shirt introduced himself as Inspector Johnson, Royal Bahamian Police. He held up his ID in a black billfold so Hess could read it. His full name was Cuffee Johnson. His ancestors had obviously been slaves that had taken their master's surname. They were originally from Africa, but where? He would have guessed Senegambia on the northwest coast where Portuguese sailors started the slave trade in the 1400s.

Inspector Johnson grabbed a chair that was against the wall, brought it over, positioned it next to the bed and sat, holding a notebook and blue plastic pen in his long black fingers. He had a wide mouth, a flat nose and dark serious eyes.

"Do you know your name?"

"I don't remember."

"Or where you're from?"

"No."

"Or how you got here?"

"I have a vague recollection of being pulled out of the ocean."

"You were in the water a long time, more than twenty-four hours by the condition of your skin."

"Who found me?"

"A fisherman named Ousseny. He was cruising back with a net full of mahi mahi and saw you floating. Thought you were dead. Contacted the authorities and brought you here."

"Will you thank him for me?" He was thinking maybe this fisherman could take him back to Palm Beach.

Inspector Johnson took a handkerchief out of his shirt pocket and dabbed the perspiration on his face. "Do you know who shot you?"

"I don't remember anything."

"Your clothing had labels from the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, Florida. Does that ring a bell?"

"I don't know."

"The Palm Beach police are looking for a missing person, a salesman from Stuttgart, Germany. Disappeared three days ago. They found his abandoned rental car. His clothing and possessions still in his hotel room. Arrived the 30th of September, went through customs in Detroit, Michigan. Was issued a three-month visa."

Hess was thinking about the key to the safe deposit box at

SunTrust Bank. It was in his briefcase in the room. If they found the key and opened the box they would know who he was.

"The man who disappeared, Mr Gerd Klaus, was staying at the Breakers. He had purchased two shirts and a pair of pants in one of the hotel shops. Does any of this sound familiar?"

Hess shook his head.

"The description of this missing person fits you. Your color hair, about six feet tall, two hundred pounds. Are you from Stuttgart, Germany?"

"I don't know."

"Do you speak German? *Sprechen sie Deutsch?*"

Hess shrugged, furrowed his brow.

"Detective Conlin from the Palm Beach police department wants to talk to you. He'll be arriving tomorrow."

Cuffee Johnson picked up the chair and placed it back against the wall.

"Where are you from, Inspector?"

"Born here on the islands, Eleuthera. Why do you ask?" He came back to the bed, staring down at Hess.

"I mean your family, your great-grandfather or his father. He was a slave, wasn't he?"

"Sierra Leone," Inspector Cuffee Johnson said.

"Are you Mende?" Hess asked, guessing his tribe.

"Limba." He closed the notebook and slid it in his shirt pocket. "But can't remember your name, uh? I'll check on you tomorrow. See if your memory come back."

*

In the morning after breakfast, Hess lay on his back while Nurse

Camille sponge-bathed him. He studied her face as she washed his naked body. She did not seem nervous or embarrassed, cleaning a complete stranger. Hess had never thought of Negro women in a sexual way. They were savages, animals. But being near this nurse with her high cheekbones, dark chocolate skin and voluptuous figure was arousing him. Now as she moved the sponge over his cock, it began to get hard and she glanced at him and smiled.

"Oh, look at you." She smiled. "Feeling better I see."

He could understand how the slave owners he had read about would select certain girls and have them brought to their bed. "Are you married?" Hess said.

Camille shook her head.

"Why not? A good-looking woman like you," Hess flirting with her. Would have guessed her age at thirty-five.

She smiled. "I don't find the right man." It was obviously something that was on her mind, something she thought about.

"It is only a matter of time." Hess paused. "Do you know what happened to my clothes?"

"The police have them."

Of course. He was the victim of a shooting. The clothes were evidence. "Can you get me something to wear? I do not have money here, but if you trust me I will send it to you. Inspector Johnson said I might be the missing person who was staying at the Breakers Hotel in Palm Beach, Florida, and if this is true I must be wealthy. The Breakers is a very expensive hotel."

"I believe you." She smiled. "The condition you're in though, I don't think you're going to be leaving any time soon. Can you even stand up?"

"Let's find out."

She dried him and pulled down his gown. He swung his legs over the side of the bed, sat up, feeling weak, light-headed, Nurse Camille holding on to him. He slid off the bed, feet touching the floor. He tried to stand and his knees buckled, leaning into the bed until Nurse Camille reached him, pressing her body against his, trying to hold him up. "Want to dance," Hess said, their faces inches apart.

She smiled. "I'm gonna dance you right back in the bed."

*

Day four. Detective Conlin from Palm Beach handed Hess a GERD KLAUS, MIDWEST SALES MANAGER business card and said, "This company you say you work for has never heard of you."

"I don't know what you are talking about."

"Don't you?"

Conlin was sitting next to the bed in the chair where the slave inspector had been the day before, Hess propped up on pillows, studying him. Conlin was tall and lean, with receding hair combed straight back and a sunburned nose. He wore a light blue short-sleeved shirt and a blue tie with food stains on it, khaki trousers and brown shoes that needed polish.

"What were you doing in Florida?"

"I don't know that I was."

"Sure you were," Conlin said. "Staying at the Breakers. Positively ID'd by half a dozen employees." He paused. "Selling weed? Coke? Got in over your head. Got shot, dumped in the ocean. It's a miracle you're alive."

Hess glanced up at the fan.

"You've got another problem. Fingerprints that are all over your rental vehicle match the prints on the dead security guard's car, his weapon and flashlight." Detective Conlin placed his briefcase on the bed, touching Hess' leg. "You want to tell me what happened?"

"I don't remember."

"Quit playing dumb. We know you're our guy."

Conlin opened the briefcase and brought out a fingerprint kit. Picked up Hess' left hand and inked his thumb and fingers, rolling them onto a blotter. Did the same to Hess' other hand and when he was finished he showed the prints to him. "Not bad. See there—" He pointed. "All that good ridge detail. This should be a piece of cake." Conlin placed Hess' fingerprints in the briefcase, closed the top and placed it on the floor. "Same type and caliber weapon used on the security guard, killed a high-profile realtor a few hours earlier. And guess whose prints we found?"

Hess closed his eyes for a couple seconds. He was tired and weak.

"Don't fall asleep on me, Gerd."

When he opened them Conlin was on his feet, holding the briefcase. In his discount shirt and trousers Conlin reminded Hess of a man who sold carpeting or linoleum flooring.

*

A couple days later Hess could see a policeman in the doorway at the far end of the ward, a young black man wearing the official uniform. The white tunic, blue peaked cap, and blue

trousers with red stripes down the sides reminded him of a Royal Navy uniform.

Once the policemen arrived, sitting in the hall outside the ward around the clock, all of the nurses, including Camille, were less friendly, more businesslike. Nurse Camille had stopped flirting with him. She continued to check on him, take his temperature, bring him food and medicine and sponge-bathe him, but she seemed standoffish and distant. Hess was sure her sudden change in attitude was due to the fact that he was a suspect in two Palm Beach homicides. Word had undoubtedly spread.

Hess kept track of when the nurses made their rounds and when the police guard stepped outside to smoke, and when the guard walked down the hall to visit the nurses. He could hear them talking and laughing.

After the nurses made their late rounds, he would wait for the guard to walk outside, unhook the IV bag from the metal stand and carry it over his shoulder, walking around the dark ward, trying to get his legs back. At first he could only take a couple of steps before he had to go back to the bed. Now he could walk to the hall and back to his bed without feeling tired. Hess believed he had a few more days, a week at the most, before the doctor pronounced him fit, and he was transferred to the island jail.

He had been trying to think of a way to escape, somehow slip by the police guard and the nurses, when it occurred to him that the simplest, most direct route out of the hospital was right there. The window. If he could open it far enough, he could squeeze through and disappear. Hess could see cars

parked lining the streets of Freeport. The hospital had been a clinic until recently, and Hess' ward was on the first floor.

*

Dr Hubert W. Sparks studied the wound in his chest. He was a Negro, fit and trim like all of them, late thirties, calm demeanor. The doctor sat him up and placed his stethoscope on Hess' chest and back and told him to breathe.

"Lungs are clear."

Hess had had water in his lungs. Now the doctor inspected the gunshot wound in his chest, poking and prodding. "Stitches can come out tomorrow," he said, studying the sutured incision.

Hess said, "Where did you attend medical school, Doctor?"

Sparks looked at him quizzically. "What's this? You want to make sure the island doctor is qualified, has the proper credentials?" He paused. "I would say a man in your position should feel fortunate you're here. Don't worry, you won't have to suffer this inferior healthcare much longer. I understand you're going to be leaving us soon."

Sooner than you think, Hess wanted to say.

Two

"I want you to find Ernst Hess," Gerhard Braun had said when they were sitting across from each other in armchairs in the salon at Braun's estate, a room the size of a gymnasium. "He's disappeared. I would have too if an article like this had been written about me. Have you seen it?"

Braun was strange-looking: long face, big nose, eyes bulging out of their sockets, boring into him. He tossed an issue of *Der Spiegel* on the coffee table in front of Zeller.

Zeller nodded. "Quite an exposé. I have to say, I was surprised."

"About what in particular?" Braun blew a cloud of cigar smoke into the open room that drifted and disappeared.

"His alleged war crimes, although after seeing the photograph of Hess smiling in front of the mass grave, his guilt seems a foregone conclusion."

"Ernst Hess' orders were to kill Jews. He did it and did it well." Braun paused, placed his cigar in a crystal ashtray, and sipped his whisky. "His political career is finished. When, and if, Hess is caught, he will be prosecuted. But there is more to it than that."

There usually is, Zeller was thinking. He wondered what Hess had on Gerhard Braun. He knew Braun had not served the Reich in any military capacity other than supplying the

German army with weapons and ordnance. But whatever Hess had on him, Braun was concerned.

Zeller said, "Do you have any idea where he might have gone?"

"If I did I wouldn't need you."

"Any girlfriends, mistresses?"

"A model named Anke Kruger."

"Any hobbies, addictions, unusual proclivities?"

"I don't care if he has his way with goats," Braun said. "I want you to find him before the Nazi hunters and the Bundeskriminalamt do." He paused, picked up the cigar, puffing on it.

Zeller was intrigued. He sat, glancing at a Van Gogh framed on the wall—the *Portrait of Dr Gachet.* Zeller knew the painting. He had studied art at the university, tried to imagine what it was worth. "I read that it was lost during the war."

"Well evidently it has been found." Braun poured whisky from a decanter into a lowball crystal glass and handed it to him.

*

Zeller had been contacted by Horst Neubauer, an attorney representing Gerhard Braun, saying Herr Braun wanted to talk to him.

"About what?" Zeller had said.

"Herr Braun will explain everything. He will pay you five thousand Deutschmarks for your time. If you listen to his proposition and say no, the money is yours. If you agree to work for him, he will deduct it from your fee."

This is what Zeller knew about Braun. The only son of a wealthy industrialist, he had taken over the family business in

1942 at age twenty-seven after his father died of a heart attack. Braun had joined the Nazi party in 1934, believed in the cause but refused to wear a uniform, salute or click his heels. Working with Albert Speer and Ferdinand Porsche he retooled his father's factories to produce military vehicles for the Reich. Braun built tanks and tractors, and eighty-eight-millimeter anti-aircraft guns. At the high point of the war he had forty-seven factories and sixty thousand Jewish slave laborers from concentration camps, cranking out weapons. "Why kill them? Let's put them to work," Braun had said. His representatives went to the camps and handpicked the laborers they wanted.

After the war Braun was arrested by the Americans and charged with crimes against peace and crimes against humanity. He was found guilty. The judges on the tribunal sentenced him to ten years in prison on July 31, 1947. He also lost his factories, homes, art collection and money—over a hundred million Deutschmarks. Stripped of everything except his red-and-white-striped prison uniform, Braun was sent to Landsberg in Bavaria, where Hitler had written *Mein Kampf*.

That was before the Allies realized that getting Germany back on its feet required resources. They needed men like Braun, leaders to help restore industry. In 1951, John J. McCloy, high commissioner of the American occupation zone, released Braun from prison, returned forty million Deutschmarks in property and cash, and gave him control of ten of his former companies. Fifty pieces of art that had been confiscated by the Allies were also returned to him.

Zeller tilted his glass and rotated it, the whisky coating the sides. He sipped the amber liquid, tasting spice and nuts, in-

tense citrus, lemon and orange and then hints of vanilla and roasted coffee. "Remarkable. What is it?"

"1926 Dalmore. What if this was your job, making the best aged single malt in the world? How satisfying, I would imagine."

*

First Zeller called Fuhrman, an old friend, who worked for customs and immigration. Zeller had used him on occasion, to locate high-profile defectors. This time he asked Fuhrman to find out if Ernst Hess had been on a flight leaving Germany in the past three weeks.

"Leaving Germany for where?" Fuhrman said.

"South America." It was conceivable Hess had been in contact with former Nazis who had escaped prosecution after the war. "I would try Rio, Buenos Aires, Santiago, Lima, and maybe we'll get lucky."

"Any flight to South America would probably make a connection in Lisbon, and then fly non-stop. You're talking about a lot of flights. It's going to take time, and it's going to cost you."

A few days later Fuhrman reported back, saying he had checked the airline manifests of every flight from Germany to a South American city since September 20th. Hess' name did not appear. But Hess could have chartered a plane or chosen another mode of travel. Zeller asked Fuhrman to check with charter aircraft companies and ship lines.

*

Next on Zeller's list was Hess' mistress, Anke Kruger. She was a former model and looked it, five ten, long blonde hair, wearing skintight blue jeans and a revealing brown tank top, breasts loose under the soft fabric. Anke lived in a posh apartment building near Leopoldstrasse in Schwabing.

"A glass of wine?" Anke said.

"Well it is five o'clock, isn't it?"

She went to the kitchen, poured two glasses of white wine, brought them to the salon, handed one to Zeller standing at the window, watching the action on the street below.

"Would you care to sit?"

"This is fine," Zeller said. "I've been driving for three hours."

"I will tell you what I know." She sat on the windowsill, long legs in black knee-high boots angled to the floor. "But it's not much."

"How long have you known Herr Hess?"

"About three years. Ernst hired me to work at a Hess AG airship exhibition. I was a model at the time. We became good friends. Later when Ernst and his wife separated we became romantically involved. We had fun, spent a lot of time together. It was serious, we talked about getting married, having children."

"When did you last see Herr Hess?" He heard a horn, glanced out the window. It was rush hour, cars creeping by on Leopoldstrasse.

"I know exactly, it was the third of October. My birthday is the fifth and Ernst was telling me he had something special planned. I could tell he was excited, but then I did not hear from him again for ten days."

"What was his excuse for missing your birthday? What did he say?"

"He had something to take care of. An emergency. He had to leave town, and apologized."

"Was this before or after the article in *Der Spiegel*?"

"At least a week before."

"Where was he calling from?"

"He didn't say. But listen to me," Anke Kruger said. "I know this man. He did not do these things they said in the magazine."

She obviously didn't know him well enough. "Is there anything you can think of that will help me find Herr Hess?"

Anke shook her head.

*

Zeller arrived at Hess AG the following morning at 9.30. Gerhard Braun, a member of Hess' board of directors, had contacted the manager, Herr Rothman, and explained the situation. Rothman was expecting Zeller, escorted him to Hess' office, and told him to take his time. If he needed anything, dial extension 12.

"I'll want to speak to Herr Hess' secretary."

"Ingrid Bookmyer. I'll ask her to stop by."

Rothman walked out and closed the door.

Zeller studied the room, which was ten meters by seven and a half, with a wall of windows that looked out at the concrete landing area. He watched a Zeppelin, skinned in silver, rise hovering above the tarmac, engineers in white shirts and dark trousers, making notes on clipboards.

He looked around. The furniture was custom-designed in light-colored wood. Hess had a big desk with a credenza behind it. On the paneled rear wall behind the conference table were