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TRYING TO FIND RUDD

by Irving A Greenfield

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There was a history to how this particular story came into being. It began more than fifty years ago, but at the time Paul Hoskins didn't know it was a story. It was a question: what happened to William Rudd. He disappeared, vanished.

Paul was twenty-two then; and now he was closing in on becoming an octogenarian. In the years between he became an author; and looking for a story became a way of life.

Rudd's disappearance fascinated him. No, it wasn't an obsession. But it was there; surfacing out of the past like a restless spirit and demanding to be heard. Paul listened, but he could hear nothing until one Sunday, Father's Day, he heard Schubert's Adagio and Rondo in F Major for a Piano Quartet.

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It was Father's Day and a beautiful June afternoon. He and his wife, Alicia, attended a concert on the Barge. It was her gift to him. The Barge is a barge that was converted into an intimate concert hall. It offered exquisite chamber music played against a panoramic view of lower Manhattan as seen through a large glass window behind a small stage. Moored at the Fulton Ferry Landing, near the Brooklyn tower of the Brooklyn Bridge, it rose and fell with the heaving waters beneath it.

The pier adjacent to the Barge was a favorite place for wedding parties to have the special day memorialized, so there was a brisk traffic in about to be married couples. Paul watched them with the melancholy thought that the odds were against them. Few will have remained married for ten years, the others will have divorced. His bleak thoughts momentarily saddened him. But the splendor of the day and the laughter and loveliness of the wedding parties quickly dispelled bleak mood. Though at his age, he thought that it was impossible to look at the beauty of young people and not to wonder what the future held for them.

Alicia said she was going to see about the tickets. She reserved them the previous week and wanted to make sure they would have them for the concert.

He nodded and pointing to it, he said he'd be at the end of the pier.

"I'll meet you there," she answered.

From where he stood, the South Street Sea Port was directly in front of him across the East River. There wasn't much traffic on the river: a few pleasure boats, and a lone tugboat working a very large oil barge. Paul had always wanted to own a sailboat, but never got around to buying one. He could have, but there was always something more important to do with the money. The closest he ever got to owning one - - at least a third of one - - was when he and two friends considered buying a sloop named Sea Sprite. But part of her keel was rotten and that nixed the deal.

Alicia came alongside of him, and said, "Our seats are in the second row on the right."

"Good," Paul answered with a quick nod.

They strolled away from the end of the pier, and across the street where there was an Italian restaurant. Even for lunch it was pricy; for dinner, it would be more so.

Hand in hand, they crossed back toward the pier and decided to board the Barge. The program was all Schubert. The first piece was the Adagio and Rondo in F Major for Piano Quartet. The second consisted of nine diverse piano pieces. And the third piece, after the intermission, was the Trout Quintet. Altogether, it was the kind of program that Paul looked forward to enjoying.

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After he bought a glass of white wine for Alicia and red for himself, he spent a few minutes reading the program notes. But his thoughts were elsewhere, something was hovering in the background. Something he tried to bring into focus but failed to. The result was a growing uneasiness; a restlessness that seemed to coincide with the movement of the Barge as it pulled away from the pier or bumped against it in response to the flow of the water beneath it. He found himself thinking about William Rudd, Alicia's piano teacher when he first met her.

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Paul was eighteen when he met William Rudd. One Saturday afternoon he arranged to meet her at Rudd's apartment after her lesson. He lived in a large white building on West 72nd Street. His apartment was on the ground floor at the far end of a dimly lit hallway.

Before Paul reached the door, he could hear the sound of the piano. When he rang the bell, the music stopped.

Moments later, Rudd opened the door. He was tall and thin, with a sharply chiseled face, high cheek bones, and thinning blond or light brown hair, and blue eyes. Neither of them moved. They gave each other a quick once over. Though only eighteen, Paul had been a street kid; he already knew how the world worked. He was street smart and guessed that Rudd was queer.

Rudd smiled and so did Paul; they shook hands. Rudd's hands were big and his grip strong.

The room was very large; there were two concert grand pianos in it, a few chairs, a sofa, and coffee table. There were several signed photographs on the walls; pianists Paul guessed. Alicia and he sat on the sofa, while Rudd brought out a bottle of white wine, cheese and crackers from the small kitchen and placed them the marble top coffee table in front of the sofa. He sat across from them in a large black leather-covered chair.

Paul felt uncomfortable, as if he did belong there. This was something between Alicia and Rudd, the music. He couldn't read a note though he liked classical music, the kind that was played on the radio.

The conversation sputtered along.

Rudd wanted to know about Paul; he asked almost the same questions that Alicia's father asked, and got the same terse answers. He didn't like people - - even his parents - - asking him questions about himself. He told people as little as possible about his past, or even about what he was presently doing. He learned that sometimes you tell someone about yourself and the next thing that happens you're getting it back in spades, only it was not the way you told it. It's twisted.

"I was a runaway," Paul said, "and got to know something about people." The last part was for Rudd's benefit. Paul wanted him to know he knew what he was.

Rudd's response was a nod.

Later when Paul and Alicia were walking toward Broadway, Paul said that he didn't like the idea of her being alone with Rudd in the apartment.

She laughed and said she was safer with Rudd than with him. He was the proverbial *wolf in sheep's clothing*."

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One of the musicians announced a slight program change: the Trout Quintet would be the first played and the Adagio and Rondo would be the last. Though the change registered with him, it didn't matter which piece would be played in what order. He was still thinking about Rudd, and when the Trout began, he let the music surround him; isolate him from the now, and allow him to slip back into the then. ...

Alicia continued with her piano lessons, and Rudd even gave her voice lessons. She had a small but pleasant sounding voice. Now and then Paul would meet her at Rudd's apartment. One time, Rudd introduced him to Kevin, his companion, who was a younger and slither version of himself and more ethereal looking. He seldom saw him after their initial meeting.

In the summer of that year, Paul and Alicia became engaged, much to the consternation of her father who saw his future son-in-law as a poor choice with nothing substantial to offer his daughter. That Paul wanted to be a novelist only exacerbated the situation. Any professional would have been more acceptable. Because of his antipathy, their long engagement was difficult for Alicia, pulled as she was between him and her father. Just before the marriage was scheduled to take place, her father handed Paul a check for ten thousand dollars and told him to, "Walk away." Paul tore the check into four pieces and let them drop to the floor. The marriage took place, and six days later Paul was on his way to Fort Bliss, Texas, and eventually to Korea and a place nicknamed the Slot, where he had to fight to stay alive.

Though Rudd was invited to their wedding, he never showed, never even sent a congratulatory card.

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For twenty-four months the army owned Paul; and when he came back, he was not the same person he had been two years earlier - no one ever is after being combat.

Sometime after he returned home, Paul asked about Rudd. She'd mentioned him now and then in her letters.

She shook her head. "He's gone, disappeared without a trace."

Paul didn't pursue the subject. Knowing Rudd's whereabouts wasn't high on his list of priorities. He had to put his life back together. Find a job. Return to a "normal life."

In the fall, about four months after he was discharged, he was close to Seventy-second Street, and curiosity drove him to Rudd's door. He heard the sound of a piano before he reached. When he rang the bell, it stopped. The door opened, but not all the way; and he found himself looking at Kevin.

He recognized Paul.

"Go away," he said and started to close the door.

In instant, Paul turned mean, grabbed hold of Kevin's wrist and pulled him out into the hallway, twisting his arm behind his back. Thirteen months in combat had put something in him that wasn't there before. "I'll break your fucking arm if you move," he said in low, flat voice.

Kevin whimpered.

"What happened to Rudd?"

"I don't know."

Paul pushed Kevin's arm further up his back.

"So help me God, I don't know."

Disgusted, Paul let go of him and shoved against the half-opened door.

"Ask Alicia. She knows," Kevin shouted. "Ask her."

Paul was caught off guard. Before he could speak, Kevin was back in the apartment, and the door was slammed shut and locked.

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By the time Paul returned home, he found Alicia in tears. Her paternal grandmother - - a woman in her late eighties - - died. He gave Alicia as much comfort as he could, but it wasn't much. He'd recently returned from a place where he'd seen too many young men - - boys, many of them - - die. A few were his friends.

Whatever questions Paul wanted to ask Alicia about Rudd, got lost in the frenetic struggle of trying to make their marriage work. Two years had changed each of them. They had to get to know one another all over again. His nightmares didn't help; they frightened her. And he had developed a quick temper. He wanted to write, but Alicia wanted him to become a teacher. That difference made the both of them unhappy. She became an elementary school teacher while he was gone, and wanted him to teach High School English. He demurred. ...

When the music stopped, Paul was wrenched back into the reality of the present. It was the first intermission. He and Alicia left their seats and went up the steps to the upper deck where they were able to look across the river at Manhattan. Both of them enjoy the performance of the Octet and looked forward to the rest of the program.

Paul didn't think it was necessary for him to mention anything about his reverie to Alicia. He didn't want to risk the possibility of changing her mood. She was happy and thrilled by the music she heard.

The intermission passed quickly, but they were back in their seats before it was over. The Nine Piano Pieces were charming, and significantly shorter than the Octet. Paul was sure

that Alicia appreciated them on a different level than he did; after all she was a pianist. The second intermission was more like a pause between the piano pieces and the Adagio and Rondo.

As soon as the piano began its solo, Paul recognized it in a way he never had before. Had Alicia played it? No. He remembered having gone to a recital where Rudd had played it. He looked at Alicia; her concentration seemed to be exponentially more intense than his. For a seventy-year old woman, she was still very attractive. She had aged gracefully though she didn't think so: too many wrinkles, loose skin, and veins that showed. But Paul knew that aging, like careful craftsman, cut, twisted and bent people to his liking: sometimes with dignity, even majesty; and sometimes, hideously, bending and twisting until the individual no longer recognized himself.

Through the magic of memory Alicia once more became, the young woman he married. She was so startlingly beautiful that people turned to look at her in the street or whenever they entered a restaurant. She was not only physically beautiful, but she also possessed a kind of exoticism that men responded to and women envied . . . If she had a vanity, it was an odd one. She was very much aware of the tan she got during the summer. A day spent in the sun gave her a color, a glow that sometimes made strangers think she was a woman of color.

All of those thoughts passed through Paul's mind in an instant, and the next moment he knew what happened to Rudd. Kevin's words should have given him the clue fifty years ago, but life with its imperatives crowded in on him. Rudd became a memory that faded more and more with the passing of the years. But now by listening to the music and looking Alicia he was able to understand what Kevin had told him without using the words. Rudd fell in love with her and she with him, or perhaps it was only she with him. Either way, it was an impossible situation.

Rudd knew what he was. She was an aberration in his life. He couldn't risk destroying her, himself and his music. Perhaps they were lovers. Perhaps,

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The music ended. Applause filled the small concert hall.

Alicia turned to him and said, "That was exquisite."

He agreed.

She frowned. "Are you all right?"

"I know what happened to Rudd."

For several moments she said nothing. But the expression on her face and the light in her eyes were silent spokesmen of assent. It was as if she had been waiting all of these years for him to discover what she and Rudd had known. Then, she asked, "Does it matter to you?"

"Not after fifty-three years," he answered.

She took hold of his hand and brought it gently to her lips.

The Barge heaved up on the water; then like a great sigh of relief it slid into the next trough. ...