

### The Tuba of Love

“So what do you think, Mr. Risser?” Gerhard Emmerich raised one thick eyebrow and looked at me. “The horn, it plays beautifully, no?”

I turned the tuba on its side to rest across my legs. The warm, lacquered brass pressed against the twenties in my pocket. “I’ve never played a horn like this,” I said.

“Few have.” Gerhard Emmerich half-laughed. “Fewer still can.” He stood at a small window and peered outside. Through the sliver not filled by his bulk, red-tinged leaves fluttered in the autumn breeze. “Playing tuba is not simply a matter of picking up the horn and blowing air into it. This we leave to other instruments. Played well, they sound beautiful, but they cannot compare with the immensity of the tuba truly played.” He turned to face me. Our eyes locked, but I felt like he was doing far more than looking at me. “Tuba is...a calling, yes? It exacts a price. Technique can be learned, and you’ve had fine teachers, this I can hear.” He narrowed his eyes. I was being scrutinized, contemplated. “But have you a pure heart?”

I became lightheaded, and my eyes performed their nervous trick of seeing everything in the room as vibrating. A potted geranium jumped from side to side, and the notes in the etude book on the stand were choreographing a new scene for *Fantasia*. A bead of sweat trickled over my ribcage as I tried to take a calming breath, but my

diaphragm felt like a sheet of plywood. My tongue, which minutes earlier had been so responsive as I negotiated a rapid passage in the key of D-flat, now felt thick and clumsy, reluctant to cooperate in speaking. “I love playing, Mr. Emmerich. It’s what I want.”

I pictured my parents at their kitchen table two years earlier, perplexed when I’d told them I wouldn’t study engineering, the major they’d “encouraged” me to pursue. Instead, I would major in tuba performance, something I’d loved since placing my lips to the silver-plated mouthpiece and blowing into a tuba for the first time in the sixth grade.

“Desire is powerful,” Gerhard Emmerich said. He lifted another tuba, a silver-lacquered model with rotary valves and elaborate scrollwork, and fitted a gold-plated mouthpiece in the leadpipe. “But more is needed. Much more.” He placed his lips on the mouthpiece, inhaled—his stomach expanding exponentially beneath his flannel shirt—and blew. The sound that came from the horn would be rich, round, buoyant, and alive. After he played a scale using a soft *legato* tongue, he played the opening bars of Gershwin’s “Summertime.” Eyes closed, face serene, he let the note fade that would have been the lyric “high” and slowly pulled away from the mouthpiece.

I carefully tipped the tuba on my lap on its bell. I had to have it. I slipped my hand into my pocket, and removed the bills; I had emptied my savings account, knowing I needed a professional horn. The Czech-made Cerveny had seen me through high school was fine for small ensembles, but it couldn’t produce the sound that cut through an orchestra or lay the broad foundation required by serious wind ensemble literature. This horn was ideal for that, and it was a steal at one thousand dollars. I’d traveled to Indiana a week earlier, to the showroom of the Woodwind/Brasswind in South Bend, and played professional horns with price tags ten times higher than Gerhard Emmerich’s asking

response of its piston valves, its impeccable workmanship, the versatility of the compensating fifth valve making it both a B-flat and a C horn. I unrolled the bills. “I have the money, Mr. Emmerich, but really—” I paused. My conscience would have it say. “You’re selling this horn for a song.”

Emmerich gagged and fine spittle propelled from his thick lips. “You think I don’t know this? The greatest tuba player of his generation?” A deep crimson tinged his face. Of course he knew it. He’d been the principal tubist in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for two decades, the only tubist to have won a Grammy for a classical recording, a founding member of The Infinity Brass, the inventor of training devices that had become the standard for developing musicians’ breathing technique—all before inexplicably disappearing from the music world twenty years before I sat with him in his cottage in the Apostle Islands. “Mr. Risser, for me, this horn exacted a price surpassing dollars.”

His voice trailed off, and he studied me as he had when I first stepped into the cottage. After an uncomfortable silence, Gerhard Emmerich again gazed at the red leaves outside the window. He told me about his boyhood in Berlin—witnessing birth of this horn. He’d lived next to the shop of the tuba-maker Oscar Matzerath and spent hours watching him bend tubing, machine its valves, fit slides, lacquer, polish. I worried his nostalgia might exact a higher price. “This is a wonderful story, Mr. Emmerich, but I don’t—”

He sat up straight and his eyes burned through me. “When I was eight, Oscar Matzerath began letting me play his tubas, instructing me. I quickly learned scales and technique. We played duets during his lunch, opening the door of his shop to let our

music spill into the street.” A private smile smoothed the creases snaking from the corners of his eyes. He ran the palms of his thick hands over his thighs, as if touching something not there. “Oscar Matzerath—he was a good man, Mr. Risser.”

I felt myself smiling, too—and an inexplicable pride blossomed inside me. “This tuba is superior to anything I’ve ever played.” I extended the bills toward Gerhard Emmerich. “I’d be—”

He didn’t let me finish. He pushed my hand away and again studied me. I felt them scan the contours of my face, my chest, the gentle swell of my stomach beneath my faded UW sweatshirt. “No, Mr. Risser. I cannot accept your money. This tuba was given to me. Now, I give it to you. Play it as I could not.”

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I was practicing in the basement of the Fine Arts Building and paused to look at my watch—11:40. A liquid wisp of flute came through the air exchange vent. I sighed. There was no mistaking the sound—Melinda Hart, principal flutist in the wind ensemble and the most beautiful undergrad in the school of music, she of the shoulder-length hair moving with a life of its own, the flawless complexion, the slim waist and narrow hips, the shapely legs. Out of my league. I sighed.

Fighting thoughts of Melinda, I went back to practicing. I had time before the janitors chased me out. Marteau’s *Morceau Vivant* was on my stand, and I played the final twenty measures *vivace*. The mother of pearl-capped piston moved effortlessly beneath my fingers as I maneuvered the rapid arpeggios and the sixteenth-note septuplet figure built around an ascending E-flat major scale. The four-measure slurred chromatic figure beginning in measure 82 popped—the first time I’d ever been able to capture the

passage's pulse just right—giving me the perfect *crescendo* into the final three majestic measures. When I landed on the last note, a high G, the horn literally sang, the brass alive in my arms.

The note, one notoriously sharp on even the best tubas, was completely centered. I held a lengthy, ringing *fermata*. The painted cinder block walls, the textured ceiling panels, the black Manhasset stand, the battered upright piano in the far corner—all vibrated as the note trailed off. I smiled, silently thanking Gerhard Emmerich.

I heard the knock at the door. “I know, I know,” I said. I expected Dicky the Janitor to poke in his head and tell me to get the hell out, have a beer, and get laid like a normal college student. “I’m on my way out, Dicky.”

But when the door swung open, it was Melinda Hart. “Sorry to interrupt,” she said, “but I just had to find that glorious...sound.” Her eyes were distant, and her flawless skin was flushed.

“No, it’s okay,” I said. I swallowed hard. “I was about to call it quits.” I’d admired her from a distance for two years, attended her recitals, sitting in the back row so I could slip out unseen, embarrassed to attend the receptions where I’d have to eat finger food and make small talk. I feared bumbling receiving line introductions: “Hi, I’m Arnie Risser, and I wish I was the head-joint on your flute.” Not exactly A-List material.

“Please,” she said, “don’t stop.” She pushed back a strand of hair the color of honey that had fallen across her forehead and smiled vacantly. “Play for me.” My eyes started their vibrating trick. She pulled the blue scrunchy off her wrist, raised her arms, and slipped her hair into a ponytail.

In those moments our paths had unavoidably crossed that semester (1:32 pm Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays—I leaving Music Theory, she going to Advanced Composition), she'd never looked at me. I wished she had, allowing me to respond without my brain going into vapor lock, letting me manage a witticism that might make her smile.

I cleared my throat and glanced at my watch, wanting to etch my memory with the moment Melinda Hart requested I play for her. 11:44. I picked up my horn, brought my lips to the mouthpiece, and breathed. Without thinking, my mouth formed the perfect embouchure and Louis Armstrong's signature piece, "Sleepy Time Down South," poured out of the horn. I wasn't a jazzer, but I filled the tuba with air as I dragged quarter notes and swung eighths. It was a rather standard rendition of the melody—and I had absolutely no control over what came from the horn.

On the edge of my vision, I saw Melinda smile and move closer. I was holding out an F with a wide vibrato when she bent toward me and placed her palm on my shoulder. "More," she said, her voice a half-whisper inches away from my ear.

I lurched. My tuba should have fallen off its perch, but it held fast to the chair. I couldn't stop. My breathing wasn't my own. My fingers automatically depressed the pistons and my lips varied the speed of their buzzing without my thinking. The improvisation on the melody now spilling from the horn was beyond my control. I felt Melinda's breath on my neck. I wanted to stop, wanted to do everything with her in that practice room I'd fantasized doing for the last two years, but I couldn't. I felt simultaneously thrilled and dirty, physically aroused but spiritually enervated, and so, so, so frustrated. "That's... perfect..." Melinda said, her voice rising.

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I crossed paths with Dicky as I left the building. He leaned the handle of his dust mop against the wall and shook his head. “Christ, Arnie,” he said, “you should’ve seen the flute girl when she left.” He chuckled and wiped his hand across his blue work shirt. “You hear anything funny going on down there?”

Thanks for adding insult to injury. “Nothing like that, Dicky,” I said. “Just practicing.” I needed a cold shower. Angry and embarrassed, confused and frustrated, the last thing I wanted to think about was Melinda Hart’s quick exit from the practice room without so much as a good-bye.

Dicky rubbed his nose and reached for a bottle of antiseptic spray. “Somebody’s smiling right now.”

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The next day, at the afternoon rehearsal of the Symphonic Winds, the memory of the practice room haunted me. As I warmed up in the back row with slurring exercises, I thought about the two years of watching Melinda from a distance, of the practice room, of my inability to act upon a blessing dropped in my lap by the gods. As she assembled her flute in the front row, As I warmed up, I tried to revisit my frame of mind prior to her coming to the room—hearing a wisp of flute from the vent, the satisfaction at hitting a perfectly centered high G. Nothing. My tuba produced the same rich basso notes, and I played the same passage from *Morceau Vivant* as Melinda chatted with another flutist. Nothing. A new frustration grew in my stomach. I started having difficulty breathing. During rehearsal, I blew a clunker on Nelhybel’s “Slavonic Dances” that brought the ensemble grinding to a halt. Kiki, the euphonium player on my left, punched my

shoulder playfully. “No sweat,” she said, wearing her characteristic smile. The director shot me a look that could strip wallpaper, then began talking to the clarinets about a thirty-second note passage. Kiki spoke to me in a low whisper. “Hey—that’s the new tuba, isn’t it?” She was smiling, a faint pink ring arching just above the cupid’s bow of her lip. “It has a beautiful sound.” I felt a pulse of warmth course through the brass and thanked her. Kiki was two years younger than me, already a great player, and probably the sweetest person in the band. She’d shown that sweetness the first week of rehearsals when she gave the entire low brass section cupcakes made from scratch—genuinely tasty despite having been baked in a battered dorm kitchen with second-hand utensils salvaged from the cupboards—and she never failed to exchange pleasantries with me. I looked back toward Melinda, feeling equal measures of frustration and absurdity.

“What kind of horn is it?” Kiki asked.

“A Matzerath,” I said.

Kiki raised her eyebrows. “Impressive,” she said. “I’ve only ever heard of them—I’ve never actually seen one.”

For a moment, the swirl of embarrassment and exasperation melted away. I was able to breathe again, and when the full ensemble again played Nelhybel, I perfectly executed the passage I’d so badly massacred moments earlier. The director glanced over the heads of the rest of the ensemble to the back row and silently nodded his approval.

After the rehearsal, I saw Melinda in the hall just down from my locker and swirl of rotten emotions returned. I told myself enough was enough and attempted something I’d never done before—initiating a conversation with her. My palms felt like they’d been dipped in warm water, and my legs were rubber bands as I walked toward her. My voice



came back to me as though passing through cheesecloth. “Melinda?” I said. She fitted pieces of her flute into a velvet-lined case. “Uhhh, how are you?” I asked.

She didn’t bother looking up. She closed the lid of her case, and narrowed her eyes. “I thought I made myself very clear last weekend—my Yanigasawa is the only ‘flute’ I finger.”

I had no response.

Hearing nothing, she finally looked up. Vague recognition registered in her eyes. “Wait,” she said, “You’re the tuba who squawked on Nelhybel, right?” She laughed. “Sorry about what I said—crazy, stupid party at the Kappa house. Guys can be such pigs”

“Right,” I said, fear now creeping into me. She’d given me my chance. “I was just wondering... last night, in the practice rooms...do you remember...?”

“Practice rooms?” she said. “I wasn’t even in Fine Arts last night.” Her stand mate asked if she wanted to grab some dinner. “Sorry,” she said and walked away.

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I was angered, befuddled. I could still feel her warm breath, hear her voice, see her flushed cheeks. How could she not have remembered? Ironically, I also felt emboldened, and I hatched an experiment. The angel on one shoulder told me not to try it, the devil on the other won out: I took my tuba to the terrace overlooking the lake on the east end of campus, a perfect spot for people watching. I saw a young woman who sat three rows in front of me in mass com. She was a combination of Kaley Cuoco and Keira Knightley and wore yoga pants as though they’d been painted on. I was twenty, and Melinda, as beautiful as she was wasn’t the only person of the opposite sex who’d

aroused certain thoughts. I sat down in her field of vision, waved to her, pictured something that made me blush, and began to play. Again, the tuba took over. I tried to stop, tried willing my lips away from the mouthpiece, but I couldn't stop riding the wave of Boston's "More Than a Feeling." She looked at her friend, raised her shoulders, and hugged herself as though fending off a chill before she hopped off the bench. At that, the tuba let me stop playing. I stood and left.

Next, I walked to the pedestrian mall stretching away from campus and continued my experiment—outside a jewelry store, near the outdoor seating of a Mediterranean café, on the concrete steps of a fountain. In each case, the tuba took over; I was its conduit: "Going to the Chapel," "Brickhouse," and "Knocking on Heaven's Door" came from the horn. In each instance, I played for someone I'd admired from afar, unable to work up the nerve to even introduce myself. A smartly dressed clerk with an up-do, a perky redhead who'd once served me couscous, and a gothic chic who regularly leered at passersby all responded as my classmate had, releasing me from the tuba's grip.

The next day, tuba in tow, I sought out each of the women and willed myself to speak, just as I had with Melinda. I wanted to know if they'd seen me and my horn, had heard the eclectic repertoire the instrument channeled. Nothing. Mass Com ignored me. The clerk was downright hostile, poking her head out the door and ordering me to "remove that monstrosity from the premises." The waitress brushed past me with the gentle swoosh of her black-stockinged legs, and the gothic chic eyed my tuba as if calculating how many piercings one melted down and re-cast tuba might produce.

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In the weeks that followed, I changed. I went from being the tubist no one noticed to the scary-looking guy people deliberately avoided. I skipped classes, attending only my weekly private lessons and my ensemble rehearsals. I spent the rest of my hours lurking the practice rooms or walking the campus mall, pulling my tuba behind me in its wheeled case. I played compulsively. My skills, already considerable, became even more highly developed, but I couldn't appreciate the progress. I stopped thinking about where I'd get my next meal and instead wondered if anyone might ever break the bond that chained me, maddeningly, to my instrument. I stopped shaving. At some point, I even stopped bathing. I received official notice of academic probation from the dean's office.

And dreams plagued me. They began, simply, as replays of my experiences with the tuba, but they grew progressively stranger, culminating with the nightmare of a secretary in the dean's office. In it, she applauded my performance, a rousing version of "Big Rock Candy Mountain," and with a wag of her index finger summoned me. Finally, blessedly, the shackles had been unlocked. I tipped the horn on its bell, rose from my chair, and approached her. She stood up and let her scoop-collared blouse fall over one shoulder. I leaned in for what I presumed would be a kiss, and her lips begin to part—but they kept parting, stretching wider, rounder, taking on a golden sheen. Her head became the bell of a tuba, and in a swift motion, its circumference encircled my head, suffocating me. I jerked awake, my sheet tangled around my neck, my head throbbing.

Dicky the Janitor grew worried. "Christ, Arnie," he said as he chased me out of my practice room, "I keep telling you to get out of here. This isn't healthy. Find some co-ed who catches your eye, feed her a couple of cold ones, and let nature take its

course.” He leaned on the handle of his dust mop and shook his head. “You look like one of those crazy shits who stands on the street corner handing out religious fliers.”

Even Kiki the euphonium player was troubled. At rehearsals, she never failed to smile, but I could see something else in her eyes, too—concern and worry, though I couldn’t fully grasp their magnitude. She tried talking to me. “Is everything okay, Arnie?” she asked. “You’re just not yourself. There must be something I can do.” When I lost nearly twenty pounds in three weeks and my clothes began hanging from me like empty sacks, Kiki brought me cookies neatly tucked into Ziploc bags. I managed a curt “thank you” to her for the cookies; they were the only thing I bothered eating anymore. Nothing she did, though, could shake me from my stupor—not the smiles or concern in her eyes, not the carefully chosen words, not even the cookies. I may have even felt a degree of guilt, but it didn’t fully register. All I could manage were mumbled excuses, how music theory was kicking my tail, how I was getting over the flu, how the guy living across the hall constantly played his music so loud the walls shook and the RA didn’t do a thing because music guy was also his supplier. Kiki wasn’t convinced, though. “You’ve got me concerned, mister.”

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When I’d responded to the post on the bulletin board in Fine Arts earlier that fall, I had no idea that the world’s foremost tubist was the owner of the horn advertised. I’d started listening to Gerhard Emmerich’s recordings at the suggestion of my high school band director, the first person to recognize my future in music. As I grew more serious about music, I emulated Emmerich—tried to match his sound, his flawless technique. I also learned that he had disappeared from the music world the year I was born, a

disappearing act that actually found its way into wire service reports due to its oddity. As the Associated Press reported it, the Chicago Symphony was nearly through Gershwin's "American in Paris" when Gerhard Emmerich stood up and, holding his tuba in front of him as if he might contract a disease, walked off the stage, never to be heard from again.

He wasn't surprised by my second visit. He let out a "hrrumph" as he opened his door for me and the tuba. "Sit," he said, motioning toward a wooden chair in front of a music stand.

I opened my mouth, but Gerhard Emmerich didn't let me speak. "Wait," he said. He walked to the stove, picked up his teapot, and poured steaming water into a mug with the string of a tea bag dangling over the side. "Would Mr. Risser like some tea?" I told him I would. He paused to look at a picture on the sill above his sink, then placed the mugs and picture, face-down, on a serving tray. He brought the tray to the coffee table, placed another chair by me, and picked up the tuba that had been standing on its bell next to his couch. He handed it to me. "Here," he said, "you will play. The music on the stand."

The tuba was an oversized orchestral horn, a newer model like those I'd played at the Woodwind/Brasswind showroom. I looked over the music—the overture to Wagner's *The Mastersingers of Nuremburg*. Not a piece I'd played, but one I knew from recordings. The tuba line moved throughout, a procession of broad, *allegro* eighth notes, and featured several octave jumps. I played beautifully, filling the horn with air, negotiating the octaves with no difficulty, building a steady *crescendo* as I effortlessly approached the high E-flat above the staff, a note rarely found in tuba literature. Gerhard Emmerich halted me as I drew the trill in bar 247 to a close with a perfectly executed

mordent. “I’m not surprised,” he said, picking up his mug. “Please, set the horn down. Your playing is skillful. Now drink,” he said, handing me the tea. “It opens the lungs.”

I sipped, then spoke. “Mr. Emmerich, you must know why I’m here.”

“Of course,” he said. “The wild hair, the stink, the troubled eyes.” He shook his head. “Twenty years ago, that was me.” He studied me with the same gaze he’d used when I first visited him.

“But why didn’t you tell me?” I asked. My body tensed. “If you knew—”

“But I didn’t know,” he said, trailing off. “I hoped...I still hope...” He set down his tea, picked up the picture frame from the serving tray, and handed it to me. It was a black-and-white photo. “This man,” he said, nodding, “is Oscar Matzerath, the maker of your tuba. The woman with him is his wife, Henrike.”

When Gerhard Emmerich spoke their names, the heavy, German-inflected syllables possessed a physicality. I studied the man’s features. His nose was small and his eyes were shaded by a heavy brow. His jawline was square and powerful. A shock of unruly hair sprouted from his scalp. His mouth was broad, and if ever a man had muscular lips, it was Oscar Matzerath. Henrike smiled at him in the photograph with a warmth that transcended the decades.

From his seat, Gerhard Emmerich studied the picture also. “A story.” He pressed his fingertips together and studied the hardwood floor. “One night, after closing his shop, Mr. Matzerath asked me to accompany him. He carried a stool over his shoulder and pulled a wheeled tuba case at his side. We walked for several blocks, past shops and homes, until we came to the checkpoint. The Berlin Wall had not yet been built, but the city had already been cordoned. Mr. Matzerath placed his stool on the cobblestone,

nodded to the guards, and opened the case. The tuba he removed,” he said, “is your horn.”

I pictured my tuba. “If you were a boy when this happened, that horn is at least forty years old.”

“Older, even, than that,” he said. “Oscar Matzerath built your horn when he met Henrike in 1935.”

I couldn’t believe it. I’d seen older horns over the course of my search. Even those that had been loved showed their age—solder joints bleeding into brass, discoloring the metal. Scratches, dents, and character marks. My horn was flawless.

“Mr. Matzerath sat on his stool near the checkpoint and played that evening—Strauss, Mozart, Bach, simple folk melodies. His music was sweet, sad, and possessed something indefinable. He played for one hour, then stood. He blew a kiss for the breeze to carry over the razor-wire, put the horn back in its case, and returned to his shop.”

Something caught in Gerhard Emmerich’s throat. He wrung his hands, leaned back in his chair. A cold breeze blew through the open window, and the bare tree limbs outside the cabin groaned in the late November air. Finally, Gerhard Emmerich resumed the story of the Matzeraths—how a young woman named Henrike had once delivered stollen and kuchen to Oscar’s shop from the bakery where she worked; how her first delivery had been made the day Oscar Matzerath began to work on the tuba; how he’d known, when Henrike stepped through the door of his shop, she would become his bride. In the weeks that followed, Oscar continued working on the tuba—and ate much kuchen and stollen. He called the horn “der tuba zur liebe,” the tuba of love, a horn he could never bring himself to sell.

Palpable absence of sound hung between us. “I shouldn’t have this horn,” I finally said. I looked at the case. My stomach churned as though something alive were struggling to escape.

Gerhard Emmerich ignored me. “Once they were married,” he continued, “Mr. Matzerath played for his Henrike at the end of each day. During the war, it was one of their few joys. The times were hard and further complicated by rumors. Henrike was said to have gypsy blood.”

He paused, focused on something I couldn’t see. “I once asked him why I had never met his Henrike.” He drew a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Mr. Matzerath said, ‘She is gone. I play at the checkpoint because my Henrike, I can only hope she is on the other side.’ The Nazis had taken his wife. It mattered not to them that Matzerath tubas played to the glory of der Fuhrer in the Berlin Philharmonic. It mattered not that he offered whatever money and valuables he possessed if they would leave his bride with him. It mattered less that theirs was a pure love.

“After the war, Mr. Matzerath heard that some of those who had been freed from labor camps settled in East Berlin. This gave him hope. Mr. Matzerath couldn’t enter the Soviet quadrant and hadn’t the means to discover whether Henrike was there, but he had his memories and he had der tuba zur liebe. So every night, he played the music that made her smile, hoping she was on the other side, able to hear his love.”

I didn’t know what to say. Embarrassed and ashamed, a torrent of guilt poured out of me; I sat in Gerhard Emmerich’s cabin and cried, my elbows anchored to my thighs as I leaned forward, my cupped hands bracing my head which suddenly felt as though it weighed a thousand pounds. Eventually, the tears stopped. I was able to look



up. The stories of post-war Berlin echoed in my thoughts, and finally, they compelled me to tell Gerhard Emmerich of my experiences, my desperation, my surreal dreams.

He nodded. “You play like a master, but in matters of the heart, you show your age.” He paused, weighing his words. “So did I.” He looked at me now—into me, really, his probing gaze alive and urgent. Gerhard Emmerich told me how he’d come to possess the tuba—that it had been shipped to him in Chicago, accompanied by a letter from Oscar Matzerath stating that if he was reading it, Oscar Matzerath had died. The letter explained that he wanted Gerhard Emmerich, his student and friend, to have the tuba—to play it in the Chicago Symphony Orchestra. For his horn to be played by Emmerich, he’d written, would make not only him, but also, he was certain, his Henrike, happy. The letter also cautioned him—the tuba had absorbed much through the years and needed to be played with care and caution. Gerhard Emmerich opened a wooden cigar box on his coffee table and removed a piece of paper. “This,” he said, “is the letter.”

He handed it to me. “I will translate,” he said, pointing to the final lines. “It reads: ‘Remember: love, by its nature, is pure. What we sometimes call love is not love at all. It is tainted by selfishness and desire and becomes impure. Its wounds are deep, injuring the object of our affection—’ here, he paused, “and ourselves.”

My ears burned. The churning in my stomach worsened, and I felt both the chill of absurdity and the fires of shame as the letters on the page danced and a parade of images flashed through my mind.

Gerhard Emmerich placed the letter back in the box. “You have no doubt heard the story of my departure from the stage?” he asked.

I nodded. My teeth felt mossy against my tongue.

“Now you know,” he said. “In my hands, this tuba cut me, deeply and profoundly.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why wish this upon me?”

“This tuba need not be your curse. In youth there is hope.” He stood. “Come with me. You must see something.” He led me to his bedroom and asked me to stand before the mirror. He placed the picture of Oscar and Henrike Matzerath on his dresser. “Study your reflection well.”

As I did, I felt a merciful release. For the first time, I smelled my own acrid scent, felt the dirt that had worked into my skin, but inside, I was free. In the mirror, I studied my small nose, my heavy brow, my wide jawline. And when I focused on the shock of hair on my head, my mouth opened and I watched my muscular lips. An image of Kiki the euphonium player flashed in my thoughts. I glanced down at the photograph. A voice in my head whispered, *Meine liebe*, and I tasted the hint of cookies as I licked my lips. In the mirror, Gerhard Emmerich stood behind me. He smiled, humming the sad, sweet melody of a German folk song.

**END**