THE DANCE OF THE SYLPHS

I heard from Leisel Kurtz again this Christmas. Every few years she reaches out to me but I never respond even though she was my best friend all through childhood, until I was twenty-eight and went to Poland.

We lived two doors apart on an ordinary street in the Bronx. My yard was bigger, which was my only advantage over Leisel who had perfect blonde ringlets; a garden full of roses, lilacs, and vegetables; and an ample, aproned mother who baked cookies every Wednesday. Leisel's only sibling was an older brother, Rudolf, whom we called Rudy Boy, and who always wanted to play doctor with us. Mr. and Mrs. Kurtz were immigrants from Germany whom I assumed got out before the war, like so many of our neighbors.

I, on the other hand, was the oldest of six. My mother was a careless housekeeper, wonderfully indifferent as to my whereabouts, and she was an artist. Our house smelled of turpentine and linseed oil, instead of gingerbread and furniture polish. Guess where I spent most of my time, even though I had the bigger yard and Rudy Boy had a real stethoscope.

Our mothers were not friends but they were friendly. Neither had ever been in the other's house. Although she never said so, I knew my mother looked down on Mrs. Kurtz which I didn't understand. According to my calculations, Mrs. Kurtz won in every Mom category. Her linoleum floors were as shiny as sunlight on ice. Leisel had a whole drawer full of ironed hair ribbons, and another of pretty underpants. The Kurtz kitchen always simmered with good things, like donuts hot and crispy right out of the fat. Mrs. Kurtz canned fruits and vegetables, and made her own

jam. She knitted, quilted, crocheted, and darned. One winter she even knitted mittens for me, the kind that were attached by a long knitted cord that went through my jacket sleeves so I wouldn't lose them. It was a big upgrade, since I often had to use socks on my hands because my younger siblings would steal my mittens and bring them home sopping from the snow, if they brought them home at all. They were as careless as our mother. My time in the Kurtz house taught me that not everyone lived chaotically, that with the right person in charge, things could be orderly, tidy, and tasty.

There were two things, however, that made me slightly uneasy in the Kurtz house, aside from Doctor Rudy who could be dismissed with a simple, "Scram." One was Mr. Kurtz, who was smaller than his wife. He worked as an auto mechanic, and when he came home from the shop he sat in his chair in his undershirt and drank beer. The creepy part was his underarm hair. It was abundant, black and silky, and very very long. That's it. He never did or said anything untoward. It was just that hair. I was fascinated. During the summer when the fan was on in their living room, his underarm hair actually swayed like the seaweed in their immaculate fish tank.

The second unsettling thing, and the one that changed the trajectory of my life, was a large framed photograph over their sofa. My mother would have called it an art print. It was black and white and ethereal. In it, five young women were running like dancers across a foggy dewy meadow, their long hair flying out gracefully behind them. They were naked and looked to be more spirit than body, more airborne than earthbound. They fluttered uncertainly, like young birds pushed from the nest. The photographer captured all that youthful, quivering anticipation in a beautifully impressionistic image. If Edgar Degas had had a camera, he might have shot this. *Les Danseurs Dans Un Champ.* Being Irish Catholic, I was not accustomed to nakedness and

would glance furtively at the picture when Mr. Kurtz's underarm hair was not vying for my attention.

Leisel caught me looking at the picture and said, "You're as bad as Rudy Boy. He practically examines the naked ladies with his stethoscope."

"How come your mom has them hanging there, like that?"

"She likes it." Leisel shrugged. "I don't really like it but it doesn't bother me."

"I think it's a sin." It felt good to pass judgement on Leisel for once.

"She found it at a garage sale. It's worth some money. The people who had it didn't know it, so my mom got it cheap."

"I still think it's a sin."

At that point Mrs. Kurtz came sailing crisply into the room with fresh laundry for us to fold. "Vat's a sin?" she asked breezily.

"Joanie thinks that picture is a sin because the ladies are naked."

"Sin, yah? Maybe. But beautiful, yah?"

She laughed and looked at the picture with such intensity – and longing – that I wondered if one of the naked ladies could be her in a youthful, risky frolic. I couldn't tell. Everything was soft, the focus, the mood, and Mrs. Kurtz was anything but soft. She reminded me of a yacht.

In our senior year of highschool, our home room teacher announced a class bus trip to Washington, D.C. She said that if our parents couldn't afford to pay for it, to quietly let her know and she would try to find a sponsor for those children.

Leisel's parents were among the first to pay. My parents fell into that other shameful too-

big-a-ticket category, but I was determined not to be a sponsored child, and I had a magnificent inspiration.

In the corner of our sunny foyer where she painted, my mother had an old dresser in which she kept her art supplies. I loved her photo tinting oils, and had luridly painted every picture in our family album. My Irish great-grandmother who had never left Erin's damp shores, now looked out at posterity with a Florida tan. Her husband sported a cerise shirt and socks. In the course of my depredations of ancestors and their impedimenta, I had gotten fairly good with the paints and learned restraint. Since class pictures in those reptilian days were only in black and white, I, *Joni La Colouriste,* would accept a modest fee for tinting photographs. I painted my own senior portrait and brought it to school as a sample. I worked out a price, factoring in time and supplies of paint and cotton wool. Everyone in the class suddenly wanted their portrait done in color. Once their parents saw my handiwork, they ordered more. My mother proudly referred to them as my commissions.

Mrs. Kurtz was so impressed with what I did with Leisel's portrait (at a discount of fifty percent) she not only ordered six more, she took the naked ladies off the wall and asked me to work on them, too. The fee she offered put me over the top on my fund-raising goal.

I brought my mother's paints to the Kurtz house to work there because I thought my parents would disapprove of the nudes. Also, I didn't want to be an occasion of sin to my younger brothers and lure them into proctology like Rudy Boy, especially Kevin who thought he might have a call to vocation. In secular patois, he wanted to be a priest.

I thought about the photograph before I painted it, its mood, its refinement. I would close my eyes and see the sylphs gamboling in the meadow. I tried to imagine who they were. What

were they thinking? Where were their mothers? Did they strip down naked on a dare? Were they cold? Embarrassed? Rebellious? Drunk? Drunk with freedom and youth?

When I began to paint, I chose a soft pink washed with lavenders and greys for the sky, a Northern dawn sky, tentative and weak. The distant trees in the background became, almost without my volition, somber and dark, the abode of unclean spirits, in contrast to the purity of the subjects. I painted the grass upon which the sylphs danced in hues of palest green and ocher, not yet struck by the coming sun. The skin tones of the sylphs gave me the most trouble. Every time I awarded them a little rosiness, it knocked the whole composition out of kilter and I'd swipe away the color. In the end, they looked appropriately ghostly, almost translucent, lightly touched with a whisper of cerulean.

Mrs. Kurtz couldn't stop gushing over the finished picture. I was quite pleased with it, myself. Once reinstalled on the wall over the sofa, it quietly dominated the room. Even beautiful Leisel faded into the background when she sat beneath it and said, "I hate to say it, Joanie, but I disliked it less before you painted it."

In those days, I always agreed with Leisel. "I know what you mean."

That photograph launched me. Mrs. Kurtz gave a tea and invited everyone she knew, including my mother, to view my work, which wasn't really, truly mine. What about the photographer, Degas -with-Nikon, who was getting no credit.

My mother, contrary to my worst fears, not only approved, but proclaimed me "gifted," and began to nudge me toward a career in art, which I found cringe-worthy because no way was I going to live like her. My lofty ambition was to be a crusading reporter and win the Nobel

Peace Prize.

I developed a small but respectable reputation as a colorist. People brought me all manner of old prints to tint, which largely financed my college tuition. Along the way, I shifted my career goal to Madison Avenue copy writer because that was the most lucrative and accessible writing job open to a woman in those days, and I was greedy.

By a circuitous route, too serpentine to recount, I ended up as a free-lance journalist writing articles about culture, food, and travel, which I illustrated with my own photographs, first in brilliant Fuji Velvia, and later in digital format. I was what *National Geographic* called a "double threat." My magazine and newspaper editors sent me everywhere from Antarctica to Zakopane. The latter is where my life changed – or at least in the general neighborhood – well, in the same country.

My travel assignment was Poland: Warsaw, Kracow, Czestochowa, and the mountain resort town of Zakopane. Along the way, I was to work in a sidebar on Auschwitz, although I didn't know how to put resort and extermination camp in the same story.

The day was suitably damp and miserable as I trooped through the infamous gates. *Arbeit Macht Frei*. The mood in the tour group was sober and respectful, with a thinly veiled sub-layer of rubber-necker excitement. I paused to frame the gates with my fellow travelers shuffling in, their backs hunched against the cold, just as those who went before them.

Once inside, everyone got very quiet. Some wept openly as we were paraded past exhibits of hair shorn from men, women, and children prior to execution; piles of eyeglasses; a room full of shoes: fine leather boots, wooden peasant clogs, baby shoes, shoes with braces. Everything was behind glass, sanitized, labeled, yet I could almost feel a force pressing against

the glass to get out, like a deceptively docile, caged beast, quietly licking its chops.

We marched obediently across a field to the gas chamber and crematorium. By the time we finally got to the photo gallery, I was relieved to confront the horror on familiar terms, black and white, one dimensional, distant – until I saw, in a display case, Mrs. Kurtz's sylphs. There they were, running in a meadow I now recognized as the space between the barracks and the gas chamber. It may sound overwrought, but when I took my next breath, it stabbed me. I looked again at the photograph I knew so intimately, at the sylphs, the embarrassing companions of my childhood, who got me on a bus trip to D.C., and put me through college. Who were you? Did you realize where you were going? Were you cold? Frightened? Wildly free for a moment?

I then addressed Mr. Degas-with-Leica: Did you get lucky and capture a spontaneous instant? Or did you stage the tableau, have those young women run back and forth until you got it exactly right, perfectly composed in your viewfinder?

Mrs. Kurtz would be shocked to know the origins of the garage-sale print she hung so prominently, lovingly in her livingroom; now in color, thanks to me. I had profited on this depravity. The blade twisted within me.

Most of the photographs in the Auschwitz gallery were taken on the day of the camp's liberation and the days following. Some, like the sylphs, were salvaged from the Nazi records which they attempted to destroy as they fled.

There was another striking image that I was sure was the work of the same photographer. It had the same delicate touch. In it, a lovely, sensuous woman, probably in her early forties, dark hair neatly upswept in the style of the day, sat perfectly poised and slightly haughty with a straight back and graceful neck, as if about to receive guests for tea, but she was naked, her

ankles were swollen, and she sat not in her parlor but on the edge of a bunk in one of the barracks.

Those two pictures spoke to me more than the heaps of belongings stacked behind glass, even more than the blackened ovens. Perhaps this was because of the sylphs, their familiarity, so entwined in my earliest memories. I could almost smell the donuts, hear the sizzle of fat.

My tour moved on to Birkenau, the companion camp to Auschwitz. Birkenau was not a museum with everything sanitized and catalogued. These buildings were derelict, surrounded by high grass, wild flowers and remnants of barbed wire. Obediently, our group filed into a former stable that had been converted to house hundreds of people, stacked to the ceiling in wooden bunks. The place reeked of sickness, urine, and death. The stench was embedded in the wood. We staggered back into the fresh air, almost gasping as we hurried toward the vans waiting to whisk us off to lunch. Who could eat? I had them drop me back at Auschwitz. I wanted to find out what I could about the sylphs. Was there a record of their names? I should at least know their names. My tragic benefactors.

In the museum archives, the photographer was identified as a guard, Arbeitsdienstfuherin Elke Roth. A woman. A member of the SS-Helferin, aides to the notorious SS. I turned the page to read more about Elke Roth and found myself staring into the eyes of Mrs. Kurtz. Even in her Nazi uniform she looked like a cookie baker, the knitter of my mittens. A slight smile softened the rigidness of her posture. Slap an apron over her uniform and she could be dispensing donuts to children again. And yet. And yet she hung that picture over her sofa in the Bronx. It hung there still. She liked it. Correction: she loved it. She took pleasure in it. She wanted to

remember. Every day.

She had probably taken her negatives with her when she escaped, and still had them, tucked away, hidden beneath her skeins, spools of thread, and balls of yarn. According to the record at Auschwitz, the fate of Arbeitsdienstfuherin Elke Roth was unknown. Except by me.

Mrs. Kurtz, knowingly, perhaps smugly, had drawn me into her web, watched me swell with pride, receive its worldly rewards. I, in my innocence, had participated. I felt a wrath usually reserved for family, and with familial nastiness I took out my notebook and wrote down the name and address of Elke Roth in the Bronx, dropped it in the donation box and went on to Zakopane. That's how I deal with things. My vengeful little action would never be enough expiation, and I had a limited capacity for fury. Also, I had a deadline. And now, so did Elke Roth.

I spent two weeks more completing my assignment in Poland and went on to spend a week in Moscow, cradle of star-crossed tsars, where caviar is as common as Cheetos.

When I got home to my Manhattan apartment, there was a tearful message from Leisel on my answering machine. "Mom passed away while you were gone."

Mom passed away. Elke Roth was dead. She lived a full life and apparently died in her own bed with her children beside her. How is that possible in a balanced universe? I couldn't bring myself to call Leisel. However, I did go to the funeral. I wanted to see Mrs. Kurtz go into the ground. I thought it would give me some satisfaction. Instead, I felt contaminated just being within spitting distance of her corpse. Leisel hugged me. "She's with Papa now." I didn't say I was sorry. There's something unfairly generational about our notions of evil. I just patted her back, knowing I would never see her again or I would deliver the mortal wound of truth.

Six months later, a package arrived with a note from Leisel. She was moving to Wyoming. “I thought you’d like to have the ‘sinful’ ladies.”

I buried the sylphs deep in my hall closet, behind the boots. Every time I grabbed my jacket or running shoes, they cried out to me. “Hey, remember us.”

They now hang over my desk. They remind me how cunning evil can be. It comes as what we desire. It’s often pretty, so we don’t hear the soft approach of its swaddled hooves until it’s too late and we are enjoying ourselves too much.

The sylphs in their numinous purity give me hope that there is an afterlife, a place where justice is finally meted out, monsters do not get to die in their beds, the names of murderers are erased, and the names of the innocent, whom they killed and ate, are remembered. The sylphs, whose names are lost and bones are ashes, remind me of my own cooperation with evil, the cosmetics I applied to suffering. Yes, I was naive. We almost always are in the face of the subtle enormity we’d rather not acknowledge. The naked sylphs of my childhood are still my benefactors. They humble me and keep me vigilant. I cannot look away. And neither could Mrs. Kurtz.