



FOREVER

A Picker/Connor Anthology

SCOTT
SOLOFF

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Scott Soloff

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Scott Soloff

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If you take all the blood from all your lives, it would fill all the oceans seven times over and then some...

Siddhartha, The Enlightened One

Part 1

Don't grieve. Anything you lose comes round in another form. Rumi

The young woman picked up the broom.

The dwelling was comfortable by the standards of the time. Four rooms, nearly twice the size of the average farm home; wood floors and an open hearth.

Nearly finished with the morning chores, the young woman swept the central room with the straw broom. Once completed, her mother suggested an early lunch before venturing into the village.

Seated at the family table, she slowly ate the hot porridge along with the brown bread and drank some small ale and quietly kept her thoughts to herself.

She could hear her younger sister playing some make believe game in front of the house.

When the food and drink were gone, she sat and stared into empty space. A short time elapsed and her mother approached the table. The older woman removed the wooden bowl; the pewter tankard and eating utensils. With an old cloth, she dusted the crumbs into her left hand and walked to the front door and brushed her hands clean.

The mother approached the young woman with a basket of fresh eggs. "Go into the village and give these to the baker. Bring home a fresh loaf of bread."

She stands and picks up the basket. Walking down the dirt path towards the village she hears her mother call to her: "Take your sister."

The younger sister was an anomaly. Red hair and bright green eyes. The only member of the family with such traits. The girl stands and rushes towards her older sister when called.

The walk is a pleasant one. This time of year the foliage is in full bloom; the temperature comfortable on the skin. From home to town is a leisurely thirty minute stroll.

Upon arrival, the younger girl becomes quite excited. The village square is bristling with activity. Stalls sprout up every morning for one sole purpose - that merchants and farmers may sell their wares and perishables. Men, women and children are everywhere.

The younger sister begs to remain outside while the other conducts her business with the baker. She is granted permission but is cautioned to remain in front of the bakery.

The young one remains rooted in her spot. Her eyes dart to and fro watching the ever changing scenery. People come, people go, some merely in transit while others pause to conduct some form of business. The air around her is crackling with sound and smells and activity.

Across the square she spots a man ambling. Huge with white hair combed back and a white beard and bushy eyebrows. With his broad back and tremendous hands he reminds the girl of a powerful woodland creature. A bear.

Struggling to keep step with the large man is a boy. Sandy blond hair; lean and pleasant looking. She cannot determine the color of his eyes from this distance. Perhaps a few years older than she.

The spell is broken with a touch of her shoulder. Bread in hand, the young woman urges her sister to move along. "It's time to return home. Before it turns dark."

Walking through the square, the younger one spots a flash of green. She pulls her sister towards a stall. An elderly woman has a display of pottery. Dishes and bowls mostly. One item stands out from the rest. A vase. One with a geometric design. It is made up of various colors. The predominant one; however, is green.

There are two points that set this particular vase apart from all others. First, the pattern. It is abstract. At this point in time no one would have considered such a radical departure in design. And second, the bright green color. No one in this part of the world, at least to this point, had the knowledge or where

with all to produce this spectacular shade in a piece of pottery. Some nameless potter, unknown to posterity, was experimenting with his craft. Whether or not any of his work survived remains to be seen.

The young girl was enchanted. Pulling on her sister's dress she implored her to purchase the vase. The young woman, who loved her sister greatly, produced a small coin and handed it to the woman selling the pottery. The elderly woman lifted the vase with two hands and gently gave it to the child. "Be careful," she said.

Walking through the square and delirious with joy her mood suddenly turned to despair. Three boys, bullies really, came running through the crowd. One, the leader, snatched the vase from the young girl. The boys, consciously tormenting the young girl, tossed the vase from one to the other. The girl, in the center was jumping up and down in a vain attempt to grab it back.

Without warning, something strange happened. Strange because the unwritten rule of village life was 'to mind one's own business'. The young man; the one walking with a bear of a man; the one with the sandy blond hair; appeared suddenly, his left arm shot out and grabbed the brilliant green vase.

A split second later, the young man's right palm shoved the bully leader's nose into his face. Blood spurted everywhere. The young man turned in a circle slowly. His eyes blazing with challenge. For a brief moment, time froze. Fearing more blood, the three bullies, with tails between their legs, ran off.

The young man with the sandy hair turned to the little red headed girl. He took a step closer and placed the vase into her waiting hands. He smiled. She whispered 'Thank you' and noticed that his eyes were brown.

The man that reminded everyone of a bear touched the boy's shoulder. Without a word they turned and left the village square.

The young girl, the one with red hair and green eyes, never saw the boy again.

Part 2

Doctrine of reincarnation is neither absurd nor useless. "It is not more surprising to be born twice than once." Voltaire

Cobblestones. Fog. A cool gray mist.

The boy called Charlie ran down the street. "Good day to ya, Mister Trotter," he yelled at the neighborhood chimneysweep. Some moments later, "Evenin' Mister Thacker." Thacker was performing the daily ritual of lighting the gas lamps.

Charlie was making his way home. Nearly time for dinner. Father was expected back from one of his trips. The leaves of absence, perhaps one or two weeks, sometimes more, occasionally less, were always painful for the boy. He loved his father and missed him terribly when he was away.

There was; however, a bright side. Father always returned with a gift. It may be a toy or a puzzle; possibly a puzzle, once a musical instrument. A flute. The boy never learned to play but cherished it nonetheless. It sat in a wooden case stashed in the bureau among his clothes.

This evening was to be particularly exciting. His mother, a great beauty, had suggested to Charlie that she would share some good news when Father arrived home.

"Good evening, Sir," Charlie greeted his father in the parlor. The scent of meat pies wafted through the house. The boy put his hunger aside and ran to his father. The man bent down to hug his son. He patted the boy's dark brown hair.

"Come see what I've got for you." He handed the lad a small, rectangular box wrapped in paper and string.

Charlie ripped open the gift. The box was stamped 'Made in Germany'. Inside were three spun cups made of copper and a few crocheted balls and a magic wand with white tips and a slip of paper.

"What is it, Father?"

"A magic trick. I saw a magician perform it in one of the town squares. The thought crossed my mind that you might enjoy it yourself. You place the ball on an overturned cup and tap it with the wand and it penetrates solid matter. The paper will explain the secret."

The boy was delighted. "May I play with it now?"

"After dinner, son," the father replied kindly.

The meal was pleasant. It was nice having the family together, Charlie thought. Father shared the experiences of his trip. Mother looked radiant.

With supper finished and the table cleared and everything was washed and put away, the three of them adjourned to the parlor.

"What is the news, Mother?" He was bursting at the seams. Father was home, he had a brand new magic trick and now this.

"Charlie, you're going to be a big brother!"

Two Years Later

"What is wrong, Mother?"

Charlie had just come into the house. Mother was hunched over in the parlor sobbing. Her pain was so great that her chest was heaving. A creased piece of paper lay on the table before her.

Several minutes passed. Not a word was spoken. Charlie again attempted to get a response from his mother.

"Your father will not be coming home, Charlie. I'm so sorry."

His mother then sat Charlie down and explained the contents of the creased piece of paper. The details were sketchy but one fact remained clear: Father was dead. Something happened while on one of his business trips in a far away country.

Charlie sat perfectly still. For the longest time he was quiet and motionless and trying to absorb this new information. Finally, he jerked his head up. "Where's James, Mother?"

The baby, Charlie's little brother, was now over a year old. He was a precocious child with a sunny nature and sandy hair. Charlie loved his brother and spent time teaching him to walk and learn new words.

"He's gone too, Charlie."

Charlie was stunned. Mother took the time to explain everything to the best of her ability. The rich man from the big house up the hill was Father's employer. When word concerning Father's death reached him, he walked down the hill to talk to Mother.

The first thing that he discussed was Father's death. That; however, was not the shocking matter. The rich man calmly explained Mother's circumstances. Mother had little money and no resources. She now had to be responsible paying the bills and mouths to feed.

He told her kindly that he was in a position to help. The rich man's wife desperately desired a child. Unable to conceive, the rich man suggested that he and his wife adopt the baby with the sandy colored hair.

The child, he pointed out, would receive the best of everything in life. Clothes, education, job opportunities. He would want for nothing.

To sweeten the deal, the rich man offered Mother a job as a maid in the large house up the hill. Mother would be near her son and watch him grow into a man.

The only caveat: Mother could never tell the boy the truth.

Mother accepted.

Charlie sat. His hands folded in his lap. Trying to take this new information in. Finally, the only word that he could form was, "Why?"

The widow sat still and organized her thoughts. Then, after taking a deep breath, she began to explain:

"Charlie, you're a big boy. Perhaps it would be better to learn of these things now rather than later. The plainest way to put it is that there is evil in the world. Not just people doing bad things, but actual evil. A presence, an actual consciousness whose intent is to inflict pain and suffering upon the living.

"The physical manifestation of this evil is godless people. Men and women who possess no conscience nor empathy for their fellow beings, whose only concern centers around themselves. They do as they please, take what they want without regard to the welfare of others.

"More often than not, they hide behind the disguise of honest, God-fearing members of society. Nothing could be further from the truth."

That evening Charlie sat awake. His mind held no conscious thought. Instead, he was content to remain perfectly still and allowed his mind to process all that he had taken in the last twelve hours.

In the morning, still fully dressed and without thought of food, he walked purposely several blocks to the church. The building was empty and still and quiet.

For the longest time, nothing. Finally, the handsome boy with the dark hair began a conversation with God.

"I didn't know what to think at first. Honest, God. Mother told me about evil. It confused me. I sat wondering last night, 'How can evil exist in a world with God?' After much time had passed, it occurred

to me, and I could be wrong about this, that good and evil are the front and back of the same coin. God, could that be true? It doesn't matter really because I came to a decision. If there is really evil in the world, those godless people that cause pain and suffering and impose their will on others, then there must be a force to fight it.

"Well, God, I've made up my mind. That is exactly what I'm going to do. Fight evil, plain and simple. From this day on, and to be honest, I don't know how just yet, I am going to do everything I can to destroy evil. I am going to fight godless people and do whatever is possible to set things right for those that I find harmed.

"God, I don't know what you think about all this. You can help me or not. That's up to you. It really doesn't matter. I have made up my mind. No. More than that. Father once explained to me about taking a vow in order to accomplish things. Well, God, that is exactly what I am going to do. I am taking a personal vow. Not only today or next year or the years following. I promise you right here and now. I promise. I vow. I am always going to fight evil and destroy it. Forever!"

Part 3

I did not begin when I was born, nor when I was conceived. I have been growing, developing, through incalculable myriads of millenniums. All my previous selves have their voices, echoes, promptings in me. Oh, incalculable times again shall I be born. Jack London

"Trois as. Suppose que je gagne." Three aces. Guess I win.

The French country side is beautiful this time of year. Sitting outside of the tent at a makeshift table, my fellow soldiers at arms and I passed time with a time honored tradition, the redistribution of wealth. In other words, theirs to me.

Never in my long life (twenty years at the time of this story) have I encountered such a fine group of men. Good natured and friendly and brave. Proud to have them watch my back during battle. If they suffer from any short comings at all, it is their singular lack of talent at playing cards. I suppose that one could say 'Bad for them, good for me'.

"Messieurs, I must apologize for my rudeness. As much as I have enjoyed your company and taking your money, I must take my leave. Capitaine, I shall be riding into the nearby town. It is my intention to imbibe some good ale and perhaps to meet a young lady and enjoy her company. Would you care to join me?"

For reasons unbeknownst to me and possibly unexplainable with any form of logic, my Capitaine and I have become fast friends. Practically from the moment we first encountered each other. He is roughly my age; perhaps a year or two older, my height and close to my weight.

There are, also, some obvious differences. Our builds differ slightly. The Capitaine's appearance is more square while I'm built more like a reed. His hair is dark, nearly black. Mine, a sandy brown. And, perhaps the largest distinction in our appearance is that the Capitaine is handsome. Strikingly so. Myself, not a bad looking guy but not in his league. Not by a long shot.

"Lieutenant, go on ahead. If time permits, I would very much like to join you."

Not one to waste time, I gathered my winnings and mounted my steed and pointed the magnificent beast to the local town.

The journey was pleasant. My horse, the bravest I had ever known, ambled along enjoying the scenery as much as I did. The sky was bright blue without clouds and the trees provided shade from the sun and the yellow and blue flowers produced a subtle background fragrance.

For most of the trip my heart welled with joy. It would be almost impossible to pinpoint any tangible reason for such euphoria. Perhaps it was the sheer pleasure of merely being alive. True, life had been relatively quiet for a couple of weeks. Before that; however, my fellow troops and I witnessed pain and carnage and destruction on a level that no human mind should be able to tolerate.

And yet, here I was. Alive! Come to think of it, no mystery at all. Breathing and being upright was all the reason I required to be happy.

To my surprise, the town square, upon arrival, was quiet. On second thought, maybe no surprise at all. The close proximity of the battle, both in terms of time and local was sufficient reason to drive business off the street. It was safe to assume that the black market was thriving. Deals, in all likelihood, were being conducted in dark basements and back rooms, alleys off the beaten path and secluded barns.

"Some dark ale, my good man." Standing at the bar I nursed my drink, took in my surroundings and quietly enjoyed the calm between storms.

Some of the locals started a game of craps in the back room. One of their company graciously invited me to join in. How could I refuse? To everyone's chagrin, an hour passed and I had relieved them of most of their money. Honestly, I took no joy in this accomplishment. Nonetheless, I did keep their money.

Famished, the inn keeper managed to provide something edible. It seemed wise to head back before the night descended. And so I did.

My horse seemingly thought the trip back to camp should take less time. Hence, the increased trotting. Passing a farm house a few kilometers outside of town I observed something unusual. Actually, now that I stop and consider it, a few things were amiss. The first item of note was that there was no light coming from the main house. This time of day, surely the family would be home and some light emitted from the kitchen, at the very least.

Next, a dog with odd coloring was jumping about excitedly within a fenced in area directly in front of the family residence. An interesting note here: the animal was fairly large with black and tan fur, unseen in this part of the world. Leaping up and down, without pause, he barked continuously.

And finally, there was light being emitted from the barn. Now, if you are unfamiliar with life in the French countryside it is possible that this one fact would strike you as bizarre. The reality was that under most circumstances a situation such as this would seldom occur, if at all.

Curiosity getting the best of me, the horse and I approached the barn quietly and at a relatively slow pace as to avoid detection. Observing that the barn door was wide open, another oddity, I dismounted and cinched up my large companion. Employing what stealth I could manage, I approached the entrance to the barn and then entered. This is what I observed:

A woman in a flower print dress; on her back; in a pile of hay. She had bright red hair. The bottom portion of her outfit was hiked up over her waist revealing long legs and the absence of any undergarments. Her arms were pinned together over her head by the man struggling on top of her. Remarkably, she did not scream. Instead, and much to her credit, she struggled like a wild beast.

It was instantly obvious that the man was a soldier, like myself. Unfortunately for me, he held a higher rank. One of Colonel. He was breathing heavily through his mouth and trying to insert himself into the woman with his left hand.

"Pardon," I said while standing over the two of them. The woman must be given credit for her aplomb. For a brief moment her struggling stopped and with intense green eyes gave me a look that inquired about my sanity.

The officer, for his part in this drama, turned his head and instantly registering that I wore a uniform, barked an order: "Get out of here now."

"I don't think so, Colonel," I replied calmly. "If it's all the same to you, I believe that I shall stick around. Perhaps I can enjoy the ladies charms once you have completed your business."

He grunted, "As you wish." Now the woman gave me a look that truly suggested that I had gone insane. Not wishing to prolong this woman's ordeal, I removed my sword from its sheath; pointed the blade towards the ceiling and sharply brought the hilt down into the back of the Colonel's skull.

The blow to his head must have been sufficiently powerful, the man lost consciousness. With the tip of my boot I pushed him off the lady and rolled him onto his back. Being the gentleman that I am, I turned my back in order for her make herself presentable.

"Excusez-moi," she said to me after rising to her feet. "That was mighty brave of you, er..."

"Lieutenant," I said.

"Oui. As I started to say, that was very brave of you, Lieutenant. Merci, merci à vous!"

"Mademoiselle, where are your people?"

"In town. They shall be returning shortly."

In my attempt to be chivalrous and an arbitrator of justice, it is just possible that I created a potential problem not only for myself but the family of this young woman. You see; once the Colonel regained consciousness, he would track me down and in all likelihood, execute me.

Unfortunately, it would not end there. A troop in his command would return and burn this property to the ground. In the process, the inhabitants of this farm would end up tortured and eventually murdered.

There was only one conclusion that I could come to. "Please turn around," I said.

I thrust my sword into the chest of the Colonel. "I'm sorry, Mademoiselle. It was the only solution that could protect both of us." I pulled the sword out; wiped it on the officer's coat and returned it to its rightful place.

"No need to apologize Lieutenant. I would have done the same if you had not."

"Please have your people take care of this when they return."

I turned, retrieved my horse and headed back to camp.

"How was your adventure?" asked the Capitaine upon my return.

"For the most part, uneventful Sir. I did manage to part the locals from their hard earned money."

Returning to my tent I lay on my back, closed my eyes and quickly left this world for others which held no pain or suffering or bloodshed.

The following morning, without much surprise, I discovered that a search party had been sent in search of the Colonel. My immediate duties prevented me from leaving camp. I bided my time until late afternoon.

Because the whereabouts of the Colonel were still unknown, a serious inquiry was launched. Investigative officers systematically began to interview everyone regarding their activities during the previous twenty-four hours.

Two men entered the tent where I was working with the Capitaine. "Lieutenant, please account for all of your activities from yesterday until the present."

Before I could speak the Capitaine interrupted. "He was with me the entire time."

The inquisitor gave my superior officer and friend a hard look. "The entire time?"

"Except for sleep, yes. As for that, you can certainly question the men that occupy his tent."

Strangely enough, that seemed to satisfy the investigating officer. He and his partner left.

"Permission to take a few hours leave, Sir?" I asked the Capitaine.

"Permission granted."

As I was about to take my leave, my friend still had one more thing to add. "Lieutenant, whatever it is that you are involved in, please don't get caught."

"Yes, Sir. I have no idea what you're talking about, Sir. Thank you, Sir." And, with that I left.

My horse found its way back to the farm house without any guidance. I tied his reins near the water trough and made my way to the family's residence. As I got nearer the building, the dog with the odd coloring ran over. He sat down directly in front of my path. Looking up at my face I got the distinct impression that the animal was attempting to tell me something.

Like an idiot, not knowing what to do, I stared back. When I didn't say anything, or perhaps because I did not say anything, the beast leapt up and knocked me on my ass. It then proceeded to lick my face profusely. Strange, that!

A man, medium in height with a powerful build acquired from years of working the land, passed through the front door. He approached, gave the dog an order and pulled me up with his hand.

"Let's walk," he suggested.

Heading towards the trees at the edge of the property he said, "Young man, what you did yesterday was either very brave or very stupid. In either case, I am in your debt."

"Probably a little of each. The body?"

"No one will ever find it," came his reply as he pointed to a pen that housed a dozen or so hogs.

I lifted my right eyebrow in surprise expecting to hear more. However, as far as the farmer was concerned, that was the end of that topic.

He invited me to join the family for dinner. At the same time he hinted that his daughter looked forward to seeing me once again.

How could I refuse?

"My family is grateful, Lieutenant."

It was early evening. Darkness was upon us, the only illumination being the moon and stars. The young woman and I strolled around the farm for hours. Sometimes talking, sometimes enjoying the silence. The dog with the odd coloring remaining at my side the entire time.

"What are your plans, Lieutenant?"

I told her that another campaign was being planned now. Other than that, I or no one else had a clue as to when the fighting would end.

"Will you return when the war is over?" She stared into my eyes. What I saw there was a question, some sadness perhaps and most important, a sliver of hope.

"Will you wait?"

She stepped up on her toes and kissed my cheek. "Yes," she whispered into my ear.

I turned, mounted my horse and headed back to war. The dog never left my side.

Six months later the war ended.

I returned to the farm.

The woman with the red hair and green eyes had waited.

We wed.

Part 4

I died as a mineral and became a plant,

I died as a plant and rose to animal,

I died as an animal and I was Man.

Why should I fear? When was I less by dying?

Rumi

"What's next, General?"

The war was over. Point in truth, it was only technically over. What still lie ahead were months and months of cleanup and reconstruction.

It was the end of April. I was driving the General. At the time of this story, we were passing through a German city. Along the way we encountered a jeep with some newspaper reporters. A female reporter hailing from New York inquired about the whereabouts of the concentration camp believed to be located at the city boundaries. I told them two things: The precise location was unknown and that at this point in time the camp was not, as yet, occupied by any Allied troops.

"Lieutenant, let's find that camp. Maybe we can figure out what's going on."

We took a road that Army Intelligence had indicated where the camp may be. Along the way we encountered a railroad track. On the track rested a significant number of box cars. It was possible to see into the interiors of the cars due to the fact that the doors were open. Dead bodies were stacked in the railroad cars.

We stopped the jeeps for a closer examination. The corpses obviously had suffered from starvation. Nothing but skin and bone. To add insult to injury, it was also abundantly clear that these people had suffered from severe beatings. A number of the prisoners had been shot in the head.

I stepped away from the railroad car, bent over and puked.

The General then ordered us back to our vehicles. "Take us up the road," he commanded.

Within a short period of time it was possible to observe the camp. This is what we saw: Ten feet high barbed wire fence. There was a dirt road which ran parallel to this fence. Approximately every forty or fifty yards stood the guard towers. Beyond that, not one but two additional fences, also barbed wired. Maybe half a dozen yards between each. Those fences were covered with fine mesh.

"Stop," the General barked. We were now situated several hundred feet from the entrance to the camp. Walking towards us was a German soldier. He carried a white flag.

I drew my sidearm as he approached.

"I wish to surrender," he stated in perfect English.

At this point, the General stepped forward. "How many inside?"

"Several dozen," came his reply. "Still armed. They have been ordered not to shoot."

I saw the General stare at me. The two of us had been joined at the hip for a couple of years now. From the instant that we had met I knew that I liked this man. One could detect in him several admirable qualities. Over time, we developed a deep friendship. Well, as least as close as a soldier can be to a superior officer.

The General turned his head and addressed the German. "How many prisoners?"

"Hundreds. Maybe more."

"Okay. Have your people come out. Tell them to surrender their weapons."

The German soldier returned to the inside of the compound. The next set of orders was directed to me:

"Line them up here, Lieutenant. Collect their weapons and secure their hands behind their backs. Send the Major back to round up the infantry. Get them back here as soon as possible. Have them take charge of the camp."

I was impatient and decided not to wait. Walking into the camp I looked up and saw German soldiers in the tower. I ordered them to come down. A dozen soldiers came down. I had some privates relieve them of their guns and restrain their arms.

I walked further into the camp. There was not a human being in sight. Directly in front of me was a black building. Suddenly, people started to come out into the daylight. Prisoners. Thin; filthy and weak from starvation. No, 'thin' is not the right word. Skeletal.

Some rushed over to me. Several attempted to shake hands. Many of them touched me. Men cried.

If I didn't act immediately the entire situation would result in chaos. I walked back to the entrance of the camp to tell our soldiers to come in and guard the prisoners.

Once everything was in hand, I resumed walking around the camp. I came upon a large yard. Here I saw piles of clothes stacked up. I walked into a building to inspect the interior. A sign on the wall was marked 'Showers'. Shortly thereafter I discovered that it was actually a gas chamber. The Germans employed them to conduct mass murders. I also found four very large ovens. These cremated the bodies.

I continued walking. Between several of the buildings I came upon piles of bodies. Some with as many as fifty. All starved; skeletons pressing on skin, most beaten.

I returned to the front of the camp. One of the prisoners was speaking rapid fire German to one of our boys.

"What is she saying, Private?"

"I think that I'm going to be sick, Lieutenant. This shit is unbelievable. These people, the Germans, they're monsters."

"Private, what did this woman tell you?"

"One of the guards slammed her baby's head into the wall. Actually, swung the child by its leg."

I turned to look at the woman. I spoke no German, and to the best of my knowledge, she did not speak English. It did not matter. "Who?"

She walked over to the line of German soldiers we had restrained. The woman lifted an emaciated arm and put her finger on one of the German guards.

I walked over and forced him to his knees. Taking my gun from its holster, I pointed it at the German guard's head. I began to pull the trigger. A shout from the crowd stopped me.

Emboldened by the scene taking place in front of them, another prisoner stepped forward. He also spoke German, rapidly, rushing to get his story out. The private repeated the story in English for my benefit. This man's son was killed with a bullet to the brain. Again, I looked another tortured soul in the eyes and asked, "Who?"

And, again, this prisoner, like the first, walked over and pressed a bony finger into a guard's chest. I grabbed this one and forced him to his knees. Before I could do anything else, the scenario repeated itself several more times.

An hour later there were sixteen German soldiers lined up, arms behind their backs and on their knees in the hard, brown dirt. There was nothing to think about. My duty was clear, there were no second thoughts. I walked up to the first soldier in line, drew my sidearm and pointed directly at his head.

As I was about to pull the trigger I heard a very loud, authoritative 'Stop'. The General, of course. He walked over to me and ordered that I holster my weapon.

"What's going on here?" I repeated to him everything that I had just learned. Over the course of relating all the horrid details, his face grew heavy.

"You don't want to do this, son." He turned to a private and told him to bring him two of the confiscated Lugers. A luger holds eight rounds.

"Lieutenant. You do not want to do this," he repeated. "It will leave a dark stain on your soul. In this life, it will not go away, nor will you be able to remove it. Please, for the sake of our friendship, allow me."

"And, your soul, Sir?"

"No need to worry about me, Loo. I took a personal vow a long time ago. One might say in another life. My purpose in this world is to fight Evil, to eradicate it whenever it crosses my path. It is my mission; my soul will not be tainted."

I passed him the two loaded Lugers. The General walked up to the first German soldier and dispatched his soul to Hell with a single shot. This was repeated seven more times. The empty gun was passed to me. The General then repeated the entire process with the remaining eight war criminals. This time, he stuck the gun in his belt.

The survivors cheered.

Part 5

If you're really a mean person you're going to come back as a fly and eat poop.

Kurt Cobain

"May I help you, Sir?"

The woman behind the desk made it abundantly clear that her only reason for living was to assist me. At least, that was what her smile suggested. In return, I smiled back.

"I have an appointment at two o'clock with one of the curators."

Under my left arm, wrapped in brown butcher paper was a small, but masterfully executed oil painting. My purpose in visiting the museum was to have it authenticated and stamped with an official seal of approval. That way, it would fetch a much higher price.

The woman behind the desk checked the log on her computer. "It appears as if you are early. By a half hour, it appears. Would you care to walk around until she can see you?"

I said yes and asked if she would be kind enough to send my painting up to the curator's office. With that taken care of I set out to explore the museum for the next thirty minutes.

My exploration began by walking up the stairway in the center hall. Arriving at the second floor, I turned right and proceeded down a long hallway lined with glass display cases. Walking at a leisurely pace with no particular destination in mind, my eyes scanned the cases paying no special attention to any one item.

Suddenly, without any obvious explanation, what can best be explained as a magnetic pull stopped me dead in my tracks. My head turned to the right and a flash of brilliant green caught my eye.

There, sitting in the middle of the display amongst several pieces, was a vase. The design was geometric in nature with the predominant color being an unusual shade of green. Below the object, as with all the items on display, was a card with a brief description of the object. It read as follows:

Vase circa 1300-1400 A.D.

English countryside.

Atypical geometric design for time period.

Use of this shade of green previously unknown.

Artist: Unknown

Interesting. But why the attraction. Certainly outside my area of expertise. I specialize in antiques post 1700. The hair on my arms was raised and my skin tingled. Curious.

Oh, well. I figured it must just be one of those mysteries in life that held no rational explanation. Not being one to dawdle, I moved on.

Walking slowly, taking all the time in the world, I passed some interesting rooms. Recreations of medieval life, the Renaissance period and various pieces from the Far East. And paintings. Lots and lots of paintings. About fifteen minutes into my meandering, I came across a large room dedicated to the weapons from various wars.

There were guns and swords and rifles and knives and uniforms. Everything imaginable that was employed in the art of warfare from Europe and the States. One of the items in a display case caught my attention in the same way as the green vase.

Hair on the back of my neck and arms rose. My skin tingled. The object in question was a sword. Odd that. Once again, it fell outside my area of expertise. And, I disliked weapons in general. Still, there was an unmistakable attraction. The card under this item read as follows:

Sword circa 1800

French Calvary

Armée de Réserve: Formed in secret by Napoleon

Led by him personally during the Italian campaign of 1800

Culminated in the Battle of Marengo.

Fascinating. Absolutely fascinating. My reaction, I mean. Swords, French or otherwise, who gives a shit. I made a mental note to ask my Uncle about these bizarre experiences. He's been around quite a long time. Perhaps he had an explanation.

If you think that it stopped there, you'd be wrong. Before the clock struck two, it occurred one more time. Of all things, a German handgun. I bent over slightly to read the card:

German Luger circa 1940-1945

Issued to Nazi Soldiers during World War II

This particular weapon is rumored to be one of two used to execute 16 Nazi guards during the liberation of the first concentration camp uncovered by the American Allies.

Whereabouts of the second gun is unknown.

Documentation: Material from booklet produced by the U.S. Army.

Nazis. I hate those guys. This information was very cool. So what? Why this compelling attraction to this handful of historical objects. Perhaps I'll never find out.

It was time to attend the meeting.

I headed towards the curator's office. On the way, I passed a gallery that displayed only post-Impressionist painting. Alas, a subject dear to my heart, but now was not the time. So, I continued walking.

Then, something very odd happened. That feeling, you know the one that I've been referring to. The one that occurred with those various items, the one involving my hair and the tingling. Yes, that one. It stopped me dead in my tracks. It was real and tangible and acted as a physical force.

I turned back. Standing outside the gallery entrance, I looked inside. Standing there, with her back towards me was a woman. The woman was looking at a painting. Her hair was bright red.

I walked into the gallery and up to the painting and stopped next to the woman with red hair. Her eyes remained fixed on the painting. Neither of us said a word.

If I thought earlier that my physical responses to those objects was bizarre, well, let me tell you, now my reaction was off the charts. In addition to my previous symptoms, I now had a throbbing head and a dry mouth and itchy palms. Not to mention the fact that I was tongue tied. Never a problem in the past, mind you.

Finally, after some time had passed, I thought I found a way to break the ice.

"Like this painting, do you?" Okay, maybe not so clever.

"Yes, very much," she told me, without, I may add, taking her eyes off the picture.

"It's a forgery."

For the first time, she turned towards me. What struck me most were her green eyes.

"Don't be silly. Of course it's not a forgery. What would make you say such a thing?"

Vincent Van Gogh painted 'Mountains at Saint-Rémy' when recovering from a mental collapse in the town of Saint Remy.

"Because I own the original."

This wasn't a line to pick-up a pretty girl. Truth be told, years ago my father stole the original and bequeathed it to me in his will. That; however, is another story for another time.

"That simply is not possible." Those beautiful green eyes gave me the most quizzical stare. She offered to shake hands. "I must apologize. Perhaps we can continue this conversation on at another time. I'm one of the curators here and have an appointment, eh, right now as a matter of fact. I'm Penelope Kelly Ann Lane. My friends call me Kelly."

We shook hands.

"And, you are Mister..."

"No mister. Just Picker."

About the author:

Mr. Soloff is an antique dealer, accomplished story teller and is married to a beautiful woman. He claims to never use foul language, smoke, drink or stretch the truth. Charming to a fault, he is moderately well liked by small children and dogs.