

Robert Knox
from *Lost*

When the war ended and the army turned to keeping Europe safe for democracy and concert music, my father's under-strength regiment was posted to the Austrian city from which Mozart had sprung. Even in the hungry postwar winter of 1946, Salzburg churches lit candles and opened their doors for evenings of orchestral favorites or choral highlights. Programs printed in English told the city's military visitors that a concert of music by Haydn, Mozart, and Strauss would be performed on Saturday evening or a Sunday afternoon. The Vienna Boys Chorus came to town to sing in the concert hall, a sufficient number of Viennese boys having somehow escaped the Wehrmacht. These were the sort of musical programs that would have appealed more to my mother than to Dad. Yet to his credit, Dad trailed after his comrade in arms, Tom Dacy from Massachusetts, a college boy able to appreciate the culture of Europe.

C'mon, Al, we gotta find this place and hear the show. Mozart, Bach, Victor Herbert. This is great stuff!

Tom had left college to enlist and planned to go back when the army cut him free. Dad had left his job at the bowling alley, where he set pins and supervised other pin boys, a job he never talked about. His idea of the future seemed to extend only to marrying my mother. What did you do in the war daddy?, what did you do *before* the war daddy?, and what did you do *after*? were queries which drew equally little response from Dad. He had come from nowhere. From all we ever heard, Dad was invented when he married Mom.

Yet on the chilly streets of the old stone city that postwar winter over fifty years before, Dad rode sidecar and worked the map for his culturally ambitious buddy. Holding the street map printed for tourists, he said, "The way I make it out, Tom, we go down this Maria Theresa Avenue to the Plaza of the Hohenzollerns and look for the 'Little Emperor's Park.'" The GI's borrowed a jeep from the transport pool when they could get it or, more often, set off from barracks on foot while a gentle snow fell, an inch or two of powder already hushing the cobbled streets and turning stone plazas to blank slates. The candle-lit interior of the church or hall was chilly from power and fuel shortages. But the old men still played their instruments; the boys and the women sang.

Dad may not have known what he was letting himself in for when he buttoned his coat, turning a day uniform into formal wear, and set off alongside Tom, but he probably had a good idea of where he was going. *Turn left at the corner. There's supposed to be a power station on our right. Look out for that hotshot, Tom, he's going like the blazes!*

The carefully folded street map survived among the mimeographed regimental newspapers, playbills, concert programs, promotional brochures, plus a couple of photos of young men in pressed khaki standing shoulder to shoulder. Dad stuffed these souvenirs of war – so much bland, literate Army journalism, so many cartoons making fun of red tape and the GI's single-minded desire to go home – between the construction paper pages of an old, black, cardboard-covered scrapbook, red ribbon tying the binding together.

He had it ready to show me one weekend, out of the blue, when we came to visit. It was Christmas, and he was holed up as usual in the backroom, tilted in the reclining chair angle he had taken to skim through the years between retirement and eternity, a stiff dark man with a bland surface, poised between company manners and solitude. He did not get up – moving was uncomfortable by then – but offered the book with a vague gesture that marked his customary

embarrassment over the idea that he had done anything in his life that I would find interesting. I poked through the record of Dad's year in Europe, making up my side of the relationship, searching for the right terms for the occasional question.

We were a silent pair, Dad and I, playing endless hands of draw poker with time. *So what happened, Dad, when you came back to the states, after that winter in Salzburg?* The scrapbook gave no clues. A newspaper clipping reported the wedding of someone in the regiment notable enough to merit mention on the society page. A Christmas card came from Tom, but there were apparently no reunions.

One of Dad's newspaper clippings recorded the tragedy, months after it happened, which befell Dad's regiment (jarringly nicknamed the "Black Panthers") on its crossing from England. A German sub slipped into what was supposed to be safe waters and sunk a troop carrier with half the regiment on it on Christmas Eve of 1944. Rescue efforts from the French side of the channel were slow in coming. Almost all of the soldiers in the torpedoed transport perished miserably, uselessly, in the frigid water.

My father was not on that ship. Dad's descendants dodged another bullet when the now below-strength regiment was sent to the Nice triangle to keep a German garrison bottled up instead of being thrown into the Battle of the Bulge. Along the active front from Normandy to the surrender a year later, casualties were sickeningly high, especially among new units sent straight from training camp to the front. Boys went by the thousands from high school graduation to frozen graves in France and Belgium. You had better odds of making it home if you were posted to a quiet sector, waiting for the belligerents on the other side of the hedgerows to realize they had lost.

But one spring evening on patrol Dad saw a slim figure carrying a large rifle slip out from the hedges. When his thick corrective lenses told him the soldier's uniform did not resemble his own, he felt a black hole open inside him and filled it with learned motions, dropping to the ground to brace the BAR and only then releasing the safety and squeezing off the rounds. The enemy soldier dropped his rifle and ran. When their heartbeats slowed back down, the patrol investigated and found a German rifle with a bullet hole in the stock. Dad got to keep the rifle as a souvenir. We played with it as children, putting our fingers into the bullet hole.

The exploit of the souvenir rifle was the only war story we ever heard. Was the German soldier merely a skinny teenager looking for a way out of the war? A part of me thinks he was simply lost. Dad, I bet, knew just where he was.

I had always thought of Dad's war as a fortunate turn in his curriculum vitae: a great fulcrum of risk on which later rewards were balanced. The GI Bill paid for his night school degree. A government loan bought our house. Now I saw that the Army also gave him a winter in music-haunted Salzburg, tramping beside Tom among the elegant geometries of the city's carved stone blocks. I fingered the evidence: a Christmas concert in St. Thomas's Cathedral, selections by Bach, Pachelbel, Mozart's "Ave Maria," "Silent Night" by Schubert. It would be his only season in Europe. When the red tape of demobilization let him go back to America, that familiar land of bowling alleys and government loans, he announced to my mother he never wanted to leave it again.