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THE PUZZLE MASTER

I first experienced the prickle of words, their sherbet taste on the tongue at my obstinate grandfather’s living room table. Every year during summer vacation, I was sent to my paternal grandparents in the Thuringian city of Gotha. My grandmother used to take me on the same monotonous rounds through the ducal orangery and on to Friedenstein Castle, and in the afternoon my grandfather and I would often walk to the train station (where I’d already been picked up arriving from Dresden—this being one of the tautologies of life in a small town). If we didn’t go to the station, or the freight yard with its curious cattle sheds, and if I hadn’t in the meantime managed to escape into the only good stamp shop in town, you’d most likely find us in the municipal park where I was always a little perplexed by a Doric temple and the statue of a sphinx situated on an islet in the park pond, for neither seemed to have any business there under the weeping willows, white pines, and ancient beeches. Even a statue of Goethe (indispensable in Thuringia) was there by the lime trees, complete with a line from his poem “The Park”: “What heavenly garden blooms in desert and waste …” Only twenty years later, while leafing through an anthology, did I first come across the ending of the poem, which now appeared in a very different, implacable light: “However, for your garden to become Eden / A happy person is missing, and peace on the Sabbath.”

I was happy then, holding on to my grandfather’s hand, or running ahead on our excursions to the same local attractions, content to be spending my days in the
manner of retirees. My reward was typically a brief outing in a rowboat, followed by the obligatory feeding of the swans.

This amazing man, who had worked as a cellarier in the former Cinzano winery for several decades after the war and who was said to have been the secret inventor of the German Democratic Republic’s only vermouth (ironically called ‘Gotano’), was suffering from severe lung disease in his old age. A broken man though he may have been, he was by no means frail and indulged in all kinds of minor eccentricities. Thus, at a certain appointed time in the day he would rewind all the clocks in the house, or get out all the knives and sedulously grind them.

Every afternoon, the large dining table in the living room was cleared, and he sat down to fold handkerchiefs from loose sheets of tissue paper, which he needed for his terrible coughing spells. No sooner had several white stacks of handkerchiefs been completed and put away than the climax of all his daily rituals commenced: the spreading of ledgers and notebooks. For my grandfather was one of those nameless intellectual workers to whom the daily newspapers owed their crossword puzzles. Dictionary words were his material, combinatorics his art; and he was apparently so good at it that throughout the entire country editors would order new crossword puzzles from him. He, who had spent many years as a prisoner of war in the Soviet Union and was opposed to anything that even remotely smacked of party cant or socialist propaganda, had no problem obliging a paper like the socialist Das Volk with weekend entertainment. He must have found grim consolation in the thought that he had succeeded in penetrating the dense thicket of warped editorials, pro-
duction record announcements, brotherly kiss propaganda shots, and skewed background accounts, and was anonymously supplying his readers with the only substance that really tempted them because it allowed them to think for themselves. Probably, this simple word game—5 across: German poet, admired by Karl Marx, author of “Loreley”; 6 down: blood-sucking monster in Romanian folklore—was the only true freedom in a society that had no freedom of the press. Every rag was vetted by an entire crew of censors. Not that he’d ever smuggle anything illicit into his puzzles—he was perfectly happy injecting the one percent of freely movable letters at his disposal into a textual landscape that was ninety-nine percent ossified. His words, too, were put behind bars; but at least you could watch them in isolation like rare animals in a zoo. Surprisingly, taken out of context they showed themselves in the most flattering, exotic light. This is how I got to know them all—composers and Olympic medalists, operas and orchids, Austerlitz and Pleistocene, the whole curiosity shop of fauna and flora—or rather: for the time being, I stored their names. Before I even knew it, my grandfather had ensnared me in a universal game of memory, one without cards, of course, and one where you had to bring your own images and symbols to the game. And there it was—that electrifying prickle, that appetite for words. Whenever I experience it even today I feel like Adam about to name every living creature ... In the beginning was the word, after all ... To this day, it makes me restless, jerking me out of the deep sleep of language. The individual ‘word-as-nerve-center’ in the great crossword of the unconscious—that’s what woke me up at a single stroke, making me receptive anew to the world and its myriad manifestations insofar as they
were accessible through language. It was the beginning of an unnamed excitation, which, I believe, led me directly to poetry.

We spent whole afternoons like this, bent over his ledgers, immersed in his template sheets with their hand-drawn, numbered grids that gradually filled up with vertical and horizontal letter sequences. I can still vividly sense the aroma of those creative hours in Gotha whenever I absentmindedly mumble words like ‘serval’, ‘ocelot’, ‘jaguar’, or ‘cheetah’ to myself.

He always began by scouring the weekly puzzle columns in the daily papers in search of new, unworn words. Sometimes we played the popular game of ‘City, Country, River’ as a warm-up exercise, and he explained to me, based on the cities, countries, and rivers I came up with, which of them I’d better avoid if I didn’t simply want to rehash the obvious. He always had a dictionary or encyclopedia handy, old and new atlases, Brehm’s *Life of Animals* ... What fun it was to delve into the names of regions and the arcana of etymology with him, and frequently he couldn’t help raving about that legendary German dictionary compiled by the brothers Grimm, which he, unfortunately, didn’t own, but which he highly recommended that I acquire when I grew up. From him I first heard the expression ‘to travel with your finger across the map’. He was a divinely inspired living-room-table traveler. Unreachable though Tigris, Thames, and Tiber may have been for us in reality—here one flash of inspiration was enough, a mere combination of letters, and there they were, magically conjured onto the sheets before us and flowing in all their glory. I still see his gnarled hand covered with age spots as it rests on one of the pages of an opened book (national colors, ships’ models, tropical butterflies), and

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