

EMIL

I first saw him walking on his hands. It was a Saturday on the kind of springtime morning grandfathers eulogize to their grandchildren – a vanilla scent, the mush of wet buds, a tumult of small, hidden birds and the watercolor green of new leaves. His face under a neat black plume was sketched in quick, hooked strokes. His eyes flickered from side to side.

He was new on the block. At least, I hadn't seen him before. Given the four or five neighborhood regulars gathered around him, he had already assimilated himself. Right away I didn't like him. He had arrived without warning, someone different from us both in the way he looked and the way he talked, and he had conquered our territory with special powers. He could do cartwheels, smiling at us over his shoulder.

The neighborhood gang at the age of ten was peopled by four girls, Rosalie, Gretchen, Nita and Susie, and three boys, Gary, Rick and me (Raymond). Emil became the fourth boy and he stayed most of the summer. He was older than the rest of us. We didn't know it then because he was shorter and very thin. I can picture him now.

Gretchen's mother and father spoke a mix of German and broken English. In 1953 many people in our Midwest city had strong accents. Though my father had no accent, he spoke German fluently. He would go to the train station after a phone call and speak German with people getting off trains and help them into cars or taxis or busses. Emil must have come into town that way. Sometime late at night. He was staying at Gretchen Wolf's house with his father, mother and two sisters. I felt a further insult. A possible rival. I sometimes held hands with Gretchen walking to school.

Emil's mother and father rarely came outside and then, it seemed, no further than the front porch. The father was short, baldish in a curly, black-haired oily way, with a middle-aged paunch and dark seepage melting downward from his eyes. The two sisters stood together, slender, with darker complexions. They seldom spoke. His mother stood silent in a drab apron. She appeared as a shadow behind his father's shoulders or stared with him through the curtains of the Wolf's front windows. They called the father "Franz" in a long sounding, sad voice, and the mother "Anna". I don't remember the sisters' names. Mrs. Wolf was a big woman who also always wore an apron and often

held a large wooden cooking spoon. Their house smelled of hearty soups and meats or fresh pastry. Mrs. Wolf talked to Franz and Anna in a low voice. Mr. Wolf, a butcher, nodded his head slowly when she spoke.

Emil could run very fast. He was, I thought, arrogant about his running. We would start our races at the Wolf's driveway near the stone wall that kept their front terrace from spilling into the street. A large crack drew a perfect straight line across the street at that spot, our starting and finishing line. The route ran the oval of an entire block, up a hill and down and up another hill and then dead flat to the finish line. Along the way were bungalows, two-story brick or stone houses, falling down garages, crooked trees pushing up slabs of sidewalk, narrow gravel driveways and vacant lots that allowed for cheating, short cuts and cross-overs. Emil didn't cheat, though at first we accused him of it. That's how fast he ran. We set traps to catch him and were disappointed. He would take off so fast he disappeared around the first corner before we were halfway there and then around the second turn and often out of sight.

The arrogance showed itself in this form: Emil takes the first and second turns, then hides out someplace, a shed or a tree. The pack pursues his invisible shape and, as it nears the last curve, we hear his ticklish laughter gaining, gaining from behind, then slowing, then gaining, cat and mouse, until within ten yards, head thrown back, the sneering, smart aleck smile cuts the corner of his face we can still see, and he speeds over the finish line, cartwheeling, walking two handed, one handed, somersaulting, then posing for the crowd, arms outstretched to solicit applause.

Emil could juggle too. Anything. Sticks. Rocks. Balls. More infuriating because juggling was exotic to us then. He beat us at basketball with the same small hands, two demons working the ball around us, passing it between our legs and zipping quickly around us to recover it himself, toying with us to the point of fury and confusion, to the point of wanting to shove him to the pavement, to the point of such exasperation, noise and name calling that Mrs. Wolf would appear on the porch with her spoon and we would back off and at the last moment he would shoot and cackle out loud, "Another two for the champion!" And after every victory – running, wrestling (slippery, quick, cunning), basketball, handholding and wrestling – he would jump to the top of the stone wall and proclaim himself: "Emil – I am Emil, champion of all champions."

One night early in the summer after the street lights blinked on Emil gathered us around him in a circle that had become our way of life. He held his fingers to his lips and pulled out a pack of ordinary playing cards, fanned them out, and made a sweeping motion around the group. "Pick one. Any card. I shall make a big trick for you." Gary reached for a card. He was tall and thin with a crew cut and would fall for anything.

"Ok, now. Remember that card but tell no one. You got it? You will remember? Then, here, put it back. You see now I am shuffling. You see I am shuffling the cards over and over. You see I shuffle the cards and I have not seen your card. Do you remember your card? Good. Ok, cut the cards. And again. And again. Good. Now close your eyes, all of you. The word is 'dragon'. Think it. Think it. Now say it."

"Dragon," we said.

"Ok. You can open your eyes. Look, I will tell you your card. Watch me."

Emil turned the deck face up. He lifted each card from the deck.

"Not that one. Not that one. No, that's not it," he said.

He went through the entire deck.

"What is this? Has a demon stolen your card? Susie, did you steal this Gary's card?"

"I did not."

"Gretchen?"

"No."

"You then, Raymond. It must be you who's stolen Gary's card."

"Not me," I said smiling, though I didn't know why.

"Let me ask you then, Raymond. What is that you are holding in your left hand?"

A shock punched at my heart. I had not noticed or felt anything. But there it was in my hand, a card, a King of Hearts.

"Aha. So we have us a thief here. A card thief. But the King of Hearts is a good one to steal, heh? Maybe you will get a kiss tonight."

The voice from the porch was another shock. It was one of the few times I heard Emil's father speak.

“Emil,” he shouted, sweating and flustered in a half buttoned white dress shirt with folded cuffs. “Emil, are you turning the cards? Is that what you are doing down there?”

Emil stood up, whispered something, and walked up the steps onto the porch past his father into the house. He never brought out the cards again.

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Nor did he steal Gretchen from me. Besides, I had lost interest in her. I couldn't wait to get up in the morning or finish sweeping the garage or raking the clippings from behind the lawn mower to race down the street to be with Emil. He was not my best friend, but he was no one's best friend. I could only think of him as a wizard, as some kind of wonder.

Not much was predictable about him except his smile, always there, always quick to tease and torment, his mouth cutting sharply upward in a quarter moon. His eyebrows seemed connected to his thin lips and lifted or lowered themselves as he spoke or grinned. Only a few times, the night of the cards and the night of the fireflies, did his smile vanish.

June is the month of fireflies in Missouri. We called them lightning bugs. Just before sunset, in the hazy dusk, their phosphorescent flashes begin to appear like mystical lanterns above the surface of the lawns. For two or three weeks, just after school is out and before the heat burns up the flowers, their legions illuminate the early evenings giving the childlike a new sense of amazement. Like sparklers on the Fourth of July or lights on Christmas trees.

The summer Emil was with us had not yet drifted into the hot disappointment and wiry grass of July, the weeds and crabgrass had not eaten through the fresh bluegrass turf, flowers blossomed and elevated hope and sexual ache. In other years we had chased the fireflies like dreams, caught them with a quick flick of the hand, a second baseman scooping up a ground ball, and tucked them into pickle jars with holes punched in the screw-on lid. We added grass, dandelions, droplets of water, nurtured these dreams until, like most plans and ideas, they died and the excitement of summer with them. Before this could happen, Emil intervened. We were sitting on the stone wall at dusk in the middle of June when someone, maybe it was Nita or the darkly quiet Rosalie, screamed

out, “Lightning bug!” Before Emil or anyone else could say anything we scattered off to our homes to create that year’s pickle jar pagoda and then waited on terraces for the next starburst.

That June would be different though. When Emil discovered we were out to capture fireflies, he hurried from lawn to lawn gathering us up by our arms, saying, “Come,” and “Sit here,” until the flock perched once again atop and around the stone wall. He was different, disturbed, the corners of his mouth disconnected from the strings that ordinarily jerked it this way or that.

“You must know this,” he began. “The fireflies are not always your ‘bugs’. Sometimes the fairies fly among them. This is so they can visit the earth and not be noticed. It is dangerous, dangerous, do you hear me, to chase the firefly. Have you heard the wind howling? Have you heard it crying? Because a fairy is imprisoned and is wailing to the darker spirits to set him free. If you should catch a fairy by mistake, god help you then, and the devil too.”

“What will happen?” Gretchen, blond, a slimmer version of her mother, asked. But Emil didn’t know or couldn’t say.

“Just leave them alone,” he repeated. “Just watch them, ok? Take my word for it.”

When we had agreed to leave the fireflies free to light up our summer nights, Emil smiled again and we played our unusual games, maybe red-light-green-light or hide-and-seek, another of Emil’s virtuoso performances. He never went very far but rarely was seen. As I tried to sleep I could see again the fear in Emil’s eyes. In the nightmare that followed, we were standing on a hill in the light of the full moon. The wind was so violent that grit stung my face and eyes. Emil kept coming toward me until I jumped from the mattress awake and wet and unable to cry out.

There were other times I couldn’t get back to sleep because of Emil. The last images of him catch me now, absent-minded. I want to end his bitter chapter of my boyhood.

As the summer moved on, Emil became our Pied Piper, leading us with his eyes and quicksilver grin. When we built our downhill racer for the soapbox derby, he designed and improvised. Our materials were poor and we lost due to inadequate wheels

and axels, but we had a proper racer that year. In baseball, he emerged as our pitching ace, substituting fastballs for the curve, mixing his pitches, mastering the art of change of pace, throwing a pitch that fluttered like a will-o'-the-wisp. He quick pitched a half instant before the batter settled in the box, but the batter swung anyway, puzzled that the ball had already smacked the catcher's glove. When Emil batted, he drew walks, until the irritated hard-baller on the mound shot him one down the pike so he could turn his bat over as quick as a deuce and guide the ball off kilter between first and second where no one stood. It always seemed to roll into the heavy grass and by that time Emil slid laughing into third.

We didn't race him anymore. We raced him against the other neighborhoods for money. Emil taught us how to lay one down. Nickels and dimes. Emil became the banker.

In those hot, close summers when no one had air conditioning or television or marijuana or cocaine, it was better to be outside as late as possible. Inside or on front porches, the adults did a lot of arguing. When the fighting ended wrong, they beat us. Maybe it was too hot to make love or maybe the times were hard. I remember a lot of religious talk that, today, I would recognize as arguments over dogma. There was a lot of dogma then, and lemonade.

The Wolfs never seemed to fight. Franz and Anna sat slightly behind them on their front porch while they made ice cream and poured home brew. On their terrace above the stone wall we could lay back and try to name the constellations. Emil seemed to know them all. Screen doors opened and slammed shut. Arguments grew louder, then more distant. Someone laughed. I suppose, thinking back, it was too hot to be in this world at all. Even with an attic fan we tossed on our sweat soaked sheets and scratched inflamed and bloodied mosquito bites.

One of those nights before our parents shouted us home, among the slamming of doors and the angry, far away voices and their recriminations and the sounds of someone sobbing hopelessly, we were lying on the terrace at the Wolf's, ready for sleep, but in the final moments of thinking out loud, as though in a huge bed. I lay next Emil. It seemed the right time to ask.

“Emil.”

“What?”

“I want to learn to card trick.”

I had been thinking about this for a long time.

“What card trick?” he yawned.

“The trick you showed us. Gary’s card.”

“Ach nein,” he said. “That was not a trick. That was magic. You cannot learn magic.”

It is surprising to me now that he would discuss magic. His father was not out of earshot. Perhaps it was simply his somnolent state.

“Come on. I’ll give you something. I want to know,” I began to whine and plead.

“I don’t know how to teach it. I must tell you. It cannot be taught.”

The other children had gone home. I had heard my parents calling, I was determined not to move until a contract had been made. Suddenly, I could feel a shift in the humid air. Emil stirred from one side to the other.

“One thing,” he said, “I remember one thing. If someone will give up everything he owns, there is a small chance. Just a little chance. No promises.”

“A small chance of what?” I was truly puzzled.

“Of magic. But I cannot give it to you. I cannot teach it. I have no powers.”

Having said this, he rolled to another side, seemingly asleep. I could barely detect the back of his tiny, pointed head.

“I don’t own much,” I said. “I can give you my box, my baseball glove, any of my toys.”

“What’s in the box?”

“Things I have saved. Some money.”

“How much money?” he asked, not moving.

“I don’t know exactly,” I answered. I knew though. Down to the dirtiest penny.

“Bring it then. Bring the money. I don’t need the box. Let’s see what I can do for you. I don’t know any magic.”

I sat up. “Don’t go to bed yet,” I said, shaking him heartily. “Don’t go to sleep. Ok?”

“Ok,” he whispered

My old cigar box was hidden in a large closet off a bedroom I shared with my three brothers. I often hid there, sitting in the darkness, becoming a friend of the dark. To get there without being seen – my parents had called again – I had to cut through several yards and crouch along a row of spirea bushes, then up the back steps through the sun porch. The sun porch had two doors, one leading to the kitchen and the other to a small hallway between the kitchen and a downstairs bedroom. If I could get through the bedroom, I could sneak down another hall to the stairway that angled to the second story. I could hear my brothers and sisters on the front porch. My father and mother rocked the front porch swing, made a creaking sound. Since the house was dark, I snuck easily to the closet, removed an old sock full of coins from the box and was quickly back out into the night.

Emil took the money, said something about meeting him at the dungeon, an abandoned, sagging garage on the other side of the block and disappeared into the Wolf's house.

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Running home made me almost feverish. My face flamed with humidity and excitement. My mother cooled us off in two's with a quick bath, apple juice and ice cream. My sleep came without dreams. When I woke, I felt dread. I had given Emil all my money.

I don't know exactly why I needed to know the trick. It had obsessed me all summer. I could make money with it for one thing. I could be famous at school. Girls might be drawn to me. Maybe I could be magic. Maybe I would have the power Emil seemed to have.

After breakfast I left the house without asking permission or doing chores. The day would be hot again but the air wavered cool and breezy then. I felt I had left the old and familiar. The light drifting through the tall, thick elms looked strangely bright. My skin crawled and prickled. I went to the dungeon, pulled back one side of the half hinged door and waited. Bugs crisscrossed the patchwork of cracked and displaced cement. Grass and weeds stood upright through the fissures. Cars came and went. Voices sounded in the distance. The trees caught and shook the wind. I might have napped, crouched in one corner, a conspirator waiting for a message.

Yet, Emil did not come. He may have forgotten or his father may have had him help with the yard or sweep the Wolf's basement. Yet, I felt I could wait no longer. His absence fed a growing panic. I had to find him.

Mrs. Wolf smiled kindly when I knocked on her door. No, she said, he was not there. No, she said, he was not coming back. No, she did not know where he had gone. She knew nothing about the money or the magic trick. I later learned Emil's family had moved overnight. I must assume Emil knew about the move in advance. Maybe not. I will never know for sure. As no one will never know anything for sure. Whether there is real magic or just trickery. Real trust or just lies.

So Emil became a regular in my thoughts and dreams. That first night, stunned and nauseated, I beat and tortured him in as many ways as I could imagine. Liar! Thief! Cheater! I could see him laughing at me, tossing my money sack up and down in his hand, his circus mouth shooting into an all-knowing grin. I forced his thin dark neck into the half moon of the guillotine, watched with joy as the black struck the spinal column, as his eyes bulged in surprise, his tongue hung forward. I flogged him until blood ran down his entire body. I hacked him with a machete into tiny pieces. I carved out his grin and stomped it into nothingness. I flailed him over a spit and relished his screams.

At that age, the only one I could think of was myself. I would think about being special and self-important. I wanted to know things nobody else knew. I wanted to impress the other kids on the block. I became bitter and resentful because I had cheated and lied to. I didn't know anything about killing but deeply hated anyone who cheated me so badly I wanted to kill them.

But then again, at that age, Hitler was only a name I had heard in adult conversations. I knew nothing of the Resistance or Dachau or the Red Army. I didn't know that some of the Nazis had escaped and were still searching for Jews and gypsies to kill. I had never imagined the ashes of a gypsy boy like Emil spinning on the wind.