



Portraits¹

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Aunt Josie

For months on end they had worked for it.

The camping trip was a rising sun. Beaming and chock full of promises.

Cutting wood outside, cooking, eating, sleeping in a tent, making camp fires.

Then one evening Karl did not return.

The excursion into the big city clearly had been too tempting.

The boys knew all about it.

Gone abroad . . .

A good heist . . .

Spent the loot the next few days . . .

But the morning paper contained no item that could be linked to Karl's doings.

In the afternoon he returned.

Where had he been?

At Aunt Josie's.

Who might Aunt Josie be, then?

A new girlfriend.

Where had he found her?

In the evening, on the streets, at a corner, downtown.

How?

Well, easy. She had said, "You want some love? Come with me."

So . . . the boys understood . . . a . . .

Uh-huh, right.

And she had . . .?

Uh-huh, sure.

And he had . . .?

Sure, that too.

The counselors at the institution talked to him in private.

"I'm going again. As often as I can," Karl said right up front.

Why? they asked him.

Had the man in him suddenly been awakened, they asked themselves?

But . . . he was only sixteen, this quiet little Karl.

Why then?

Quietly and simply he explained.
"It's nice and warm there.
There's a gorgeous rug on the floor.
And the coffee is always ready."
Then he stopped for a moment, as if the next part of the explanation
had to be composed very carefully.
His look had no hidden corners.
As open as the spring sky.
"She said, 'I love you.'
Can I go back to the boys now?"
They said, "Go ahead. Goodbye, Karl."
And remained silent.

Car

No, no more driving a car.
It's tough to see children around five years old at play . . .
Or to meet a funeral procession . . .
Or pass the gate of a cemetery . . .
He calls all that "being tormented."

It has been more than fifteen years.
He should be over it by now.
That's what some people tell him.

56 "But," he says,
"Listen!
There are things no person can ever forget."

The bar had late hours.
He had money to spend.
Warnings were waved off.
He stepped into the car.
A new day had already started.
Children were going to school.
Including that little fellow, five years old.

Those frightened children's eyes.
"They are with me every day."
As is the funeral . . .
the inconsolable parents . . .
And he says,
"The punishment I got was too light,
but maybe the judge understood."
Eh?
"That I gave myself a life sentence."
No more driving.
No more drinking.
Never to a funeral . . .
It doesn't help,

"For children play wherever I turn.
Did you know that?"

Lonely

Robert had to become a tough guy.
"I'll teach him not to step aside for anybody."
His mother could tell what life was really like.
And she wanted everything out in the open.

Men, women, making money, cheating a bit, stealing skillfully,
lying, drinking . . .

"I know it all."

When Robert started to grow up, the whole business got a little
tougher.

With him, a strange element had come into the home.

"A weird kid." Why?

Sometimes he suddenly called out, "That's not true."

Problems in school.

He didn't understand the things he needed to.

Robert had to become a tough guy.

That's why they taught him to steal.

His slim fingers and lithe boy's body lent themselves perfectly to it.

His mother laughed cheerfully. "He knows how to do it."

After a few years Robert's heart refused to do what she wanted.

He returned the stolen goods.

That's what made him lonely.

"Robert is crazy," said his friends.

He became an exile.

He doesn't fit in the world beyond his mother and his friends either.

"Don't play with them," say the parents of well behaved kids.

So Robert is loneliness itself.

His file says, "learning disabilities and behavioral problems."

Two words are missing.

"Heroic self-preservation."

In times gone by

Do I live in an institution?

No.

Do I have a home of my own?

Yes.

Do I have children?

No.

"So much the better," he says, without explaining that opinion.

We're going for a walk, he and I.

"To talk a little."

That's his condition for walking, emphatically stated.

"My brain isn't very good, that's why I live here," he says, and in passing he pats the sign that designates the institution.

Then he begins to talk.

He tells me that I visited him five years ago, on Thursday, at two o'clock. I came, he still remembers, in a brown car, and he told me the make, and the licence plate, digit for digit.

I wore a brown jacket and a beige skirt.

My glasses had a green frame and I carried a brown briefcase with brass locks.

He asked me whether they were combination locks, and I showed him how they worked.

The weather was very good, and they had sauerkraut for dinner, which he hates, so the woman in the kitchen opened a can of peas, just for him.

Do I remember having been there that time?

Yes.

And my licence plate, my clothes, the weather, and the briefcase?

No, not one bit of it.

Eight years ago, he continues, he walked here too, on this same path. It had not been as sunny as today.

An uncle had visited him and taken him to the village.

The man had arrived in a blue Fiat. He still knew the licence plate, the color of the man's suit, the number of other guests in the pancake house, the color of the menu, the remarks of the waitress . . . he remembered all of it.

As if to round off the conversation the way he started it, he asks again as we approach the large building he lives in,

"You don't live in an institution?"

No.

"Do you live in a home of your own?"

Yes.

"Is that because your brain is okay?"

I tell him that I'm amazed that he can remember everything so well. I have never met anyone who remembers so much.

My praise leaves him untouched.

Just as he did an hour ago, he pats the sign in front of the institution and says,

"I remember what I don't have to remember.

You remember what you have to remember.

That's why you live in a normal home.

And I live here."

Then he takes me inside the institution.

It's been enough.

Fate has been discussed and nothing can change it.

Questions

What would you do if Jesus came in and you could ask Him for something?

A crazy thought, the boys observed.

Him coming here?

Not likely.

Then He would be confronted with them and their pasts.

And in those pasts are thefts, break-ins, muggings, and that sort of thing.

Entirely unlikely.

But . . . maybe He does want to come and visit everywhere.

For He is God.

Accepting that, that strange question continues to hang for the whole evening in the living room of the house for juvenile delinquents.

What would you ask of Him? . . .

Now that the possibility has become a little more real (He's not ashamed of anybody, the preacher had said), the list of wishes gets drawn up.

A motorbike . . .

A car . . .

Lots of money . . .

A different father . . .

A new mother . . .

Real stuff.

Jock doesn't say a thing.

As usual, he stares out the window.

Does he want to be that bird?

Does he long for other places he'd rather live in?

The book of Jock's dreams is hard to read.

He keeps it closed.

But now the boys want to know . . .

They need his answer too.

"Jock, Jock, what would you ask of Him?"

He reacts as if he's startled.

But he answers quite deliberately.

"Different thoughts . . ."

That's what Jock says.

Happy Birthday

"Did you have a nice party?" the one woman asks the other over a cup of coffee. Her answer doesn't come right away. As if a search is needed for a word between yes and no. She stays neutral.

"Yes, it was pleasant, but of course Dinah, my sister-in-law, had to bring John along again.

She refuses to see that we don't like to have such a weird boy in the house. She's stubborn, that one. John just has to come along."

What's the matter with John?
The description is crystal clear.
He has hardly any brains at all.
He rarely says anything, and sometimes he makes funny noises.
And he has a twisted mouth.

What all had happened that evening?
Dinah had let it be known the time before that she would not let John be put into the kitchen.
She was willing to come only if he could sit with the other visitors and not in the kitchen with the little ones.
"He's not a child," she had said.
But the hostess thought he was, even though John had been born thirty years before.
He sometimes acted just like a child.
That's why the kitchen.

To prevent a quarrel, she had put a piece of plastic on a chair in the living room and that's where he could sit this time.
Everybody was happy.
Is John not trained?

"Dinah says he is, but you never know, and I have expensive furniture."

Still, it had turned out to be a pleasant evening after all, except for the end.

The visitors had a glass of sherry.

John was offered lemonade.

"Why?" his mother had wanted to know. John loved sherry, didn't she know that?

The hostess said, "I can't take the chance."

That's when Dinah left.

"Come on, John, we're going home."

Why didn't she give him a sherry? the other wanted to know.

"I couldn't take the chance."

Had John done things that evening to make her think that a glass of sherry would cause problems?

No, he had only sat very peacefully, looking from one person to the next.

"But you never know! After all, he's retarded. But Dinah just won't see it."

"Something wrong with the coffee?" asked the waitress when she noticed the half-full cold cup.

"No, I couldn't enjoy it. But it wasn't your fault."

Sometimes I can really suddenly hate someone.

That woman who had her birthday yesterday, for instance.

Awareness

"Why did you keep me in?"

"I would rather not be alive."

"Could you do something about my head?"

These are the questions he asks his parents.

Herman is one of those mentally handicapped people who knows he's handicapped.

In church he sings to his heart's content, and repeatedly he tells all who hear that one day everything will be new again.

Better than ever before.

"Then I'll be as brainy as you are," he says with a voice filled with certain hope.

In his best moments he thrives on that prospect.

He sees himself as one in a long line of people who will meet God, and then live without handicap, forever.

Happier than ever before.

Does he see himself in the first row, caught up to the others who've been ahead?

No, his aunt should be ahead, he has decided, for she's ill and needs it very badly.

"I can wait a while."

Sometimes an impotent rage about what he can't do, about what blocks and hinders him, grabs him by the throat.

He will run to his room, step out of the window, and pace up and down along the roof edge.

"Then I lean against the wall and pray," his mother says.

Sometimes the doctor will prescribe drugs, but Herman's aversion to them is strong.

"Why?" the physician asked him.

His answer was a deep thought addressed to contemporary health care.

"When I take those pills I can't be who I am."

So he waits. For better times.

Alternately.

With patience.

In despair.

Tombstone

"Big boys don't cry," said the grandmother.

"Your mother is looking down from heaven and likes it very much when you get good marks," said the teachers.

"On Sundays we will go to the cemetery together and bring your mother flowers. She loved flowers. And in a few weeks we'll arrange for a beautiful tombstone to be put on the grave, with nice words on it," promised father.

The first few weeks they went.
The fourth Sunday it rained.
The fifth they were expecting visitors.
And after that the father had a date with a girl friend.
The flowers wilted in the garage. For Chris bought them every Saturday.
Maybe tomorrow for sure . . .
The nice words were never carved into the stone.
In the end the flowers were not bought anymore.
"Life goes on.
Your father is a man, Chris.
Later you'll understand.
We have to go on . . ."

"A quiet and surly little boy," the guests said to one another at the wedding.
"They'll have a lot of trouble with that one . . ."
In the house of detention the psychiatrist knew all about it.
"A not-worked-through mourning process," he said.
"I'm so embarrassed," said the stepmother.
"A child in prison. A burglar!
I've always thought he was a creep."
That's the way society talked about Chris.
And Chris was quiet.
Till his neighbor came to visit.
The same one who taught him to ride a bike, and who always let him help when the hedge needed trimming.
"You save your allowance. I'll come and collect it once in a while.
When you're finished here, we'll go and buy something together.
You and I.
Long-time friends."

When his time was up, the neighbor stood at the gate.
As if the matter could not wait a moment longer, he marched beside the boy.
With great purpose. More certain now than ever before.

Two weeks later the two of them went to the cemetery. Inspecting whether the tombstone had been placed properly . . .
Taking flowers along . . .
The neighbor took off his cap,
Straightened up, looked at the grave, and said,
"You be proud of your son, mother!
He stole for you!
Nothing to be ashamed of . . ."

After which all the birds burst out in song together.

Caressing

She is a young girl like thousands of others.

He is a spastic boy like hundreds of others.

But in this room at the institution something very special is taking place.

With the back of her hand, the attendant is caressing the cheek of the little boy.

Very carefully.

How tenderly two people can be in tune when one wants to give pure goodness to the other.

When one wants to meet the depth of the other.

With her other hand she rubs the knee drawn high up to the chest in spasm.

Between them stands a cassette recorder linked to the boy and to the girl by means of wires and headphones.

The world around them is temporarily absent.

A miraculous contact between these two!

Wordless, by way of the recorder.

Their listening together and the language of her hands express the solid bond between them.

The spasms his muscles experience at times seem to cause him great despair and fear.

The constant search for something that will relieve such children has yielded a small improvement.

A cassette tape with all kinds of sounds and melodies!

James Ward and James Last, lofty church organ tones, joyful youthful voices that sing out life's energy . . . it's all on the tape.

Some relax when they hear the plucking sounds of a stringed instrument . . .

Others, when they listen to the tones of a flute . . .

Ah, but not only the sounds . . .

Also the hands of another are necessary to shrink the force of that which made the spasm.

He's a spastic boy like hundreds of others.

She a young girl like thousands of others.

And yet, in this room, it is different than in others.

There are no words.

But more is spoken here than elsewhere.

Balcony

Did I have a mother?

Yes, but she passed away.

Was she a real mother?

What is a real mother?

That's someone who cares for you, watches over you, feeds you, and

provides a hot water bottle in your bed when it's freezing cold.
Aha, then it was a real mother.
But everyone has had a mother, right?
It's true, she explains, but not all mothers are real mothers.
She didn't have a real mother. That she knows for sure.

The story is short.
The woman next door has told it to her.
And it's really true. For when she asked her mother later whether
the woman's story was true, she was told it was.
"Cause I didn't want you."

What happened then?
The story is short.
And it is told in a rapid snarl.
When it was fifteen degrees below zero, the mother put her baby on
the balcony without blankets.
"I was supposed to freeze to death."

Where is the mother now?
That she doesn't know.
"Somewhere . . ." and she waves toward unspecified horizons.
Then she stands up.
In truth, she forces me to share a dramatic moment.
"Listen . . ." she says.

It seems as if at this point, right now and not a instant later, she will
call for revenge against all those who are part of the society to which
she, unwillingly and without joy, belongs.
"She thought that I would die. But I'm still here." And after minutes
of silence, she shouts, "I'm still here and I want all of you to know
that."

Then she sits down.
And appears to freeze up.
But she lives.
And she wears a dress with flowers.

Can't hack it

"I can't hack looking at something weird." she says.
Her husband nods in agreement, "Me neither."
When she was expecting her second baby, she said to all who wanted
to hear, "I'm sure it's a crazy child."
The obstetrician in the hospital carefully told her, "Your little girl
has some problems."
He told her about the obvious physical handicap.
And there might be a mental handicap as well.
Then the mother said, "I don't want something like that. I can't
stand weird things."

She went home with her little suitcase only.

"They didn't try to understand me."

The children's aid, too, reacted differently from what she had expected.

There were no legal grounds to take parental authority away.

They were in excellent health. The house was large enough.

Income clearly sufficient.

The officials refused to accept the fact that the child was not welcome and would be better off removed from the parents' lives.

"I would die of embarrassment to be seen in public with something like that."

The institution the child is placed in has a mother on staff.

She takes home the thing that isn't good enough for the parents' mansion.

The little girl accompanies her everywhere.

Visiting, on holidays. "Look, this is our Tina."

Tina never, ever, thinks there would be anyone not able to accept her the way she is.

You know, she should be congratulated every day.

For not living with her parents.

Strange, isn't it?

Note

1. Selected from Stilma, L. (1986). *Portraits*. (L. Heshusius and A. Peetoom, Trans.). Oakville, ON: Mosaic Press.