

MY THOUGHTS ARE FREE / NO ONE CAN CATCH THEM / THEY FLY ON BY / LIKE EVENING SHADOWS

March 3, 2009

Its been a quiet week on the Island, our hometown set here on the edge of the San Francisco Bay. A brace of daffodowndillys have sprung up by the old fence and it does look like crocus are croaking and the bright red of tulips is bulging up in wads of green. Yes, something is going on down there. Everything is drying out after the recent rains and, even though Der Governorator has declared a water emergency, everything is blooming and green.

As for disasters and emergencies we in California are all used to that. Its not welcome, but we are certainly used to it.

Had a few three pointers here, centered this morning along the Hayward fault and another one up around the Calistoga hot springs, just to remind everybody that the earth can decide any time it wants what it wants to do with us. First time you feel an earthquake, you think to yourself, "Gosh, a truck must have hit the building!" After that, you start keeping water in plastic jugs and several flashlights. Just in case.

Life is very uncertain. You never know where you will end up. Down at the Old Same Place Bar, Rolf was telling part of his life's story. How that happened,

resulted from a discussion about how all the illegals were leaving the Golden State right now because the work had dried up.

Rolf is, as he freely acknowledges, an illegal immigrant, and one who nearly lost his life in the process.

As he tells it, the story begins like this. He was on vacation with his mother and his father in Czechoslovakia, when his father got a message from someone back home in Leipzig. Seems the offices had been raided and Der Chef taken in for questioning.

Of course there had been some indications, some warnings previous to this. His father and mother had taken trips to places with little Rolf and they had stood there looking at the international border with its fences and arrays of impressive watchtowers and so on, and he remembered his father saying with sadness, "Not possible here."

The vacation there on the edge of the Hartz was a rare thing to be granted and they were thinking, as Rolf remembered, that when they went back it would all be over, everything would be different. Certainly after that phone call in the woodsy cabin, everything did change.

His Mutti would play a game in which she put tape over his mouth. At first he did not like that and only when Vatti put the tape on his mouth first, did he allow that. She smeared this cream on his face and that was fun, but then the tape and they ran about, playing hide and seek, importantly not making any sounds, and then the game was over and the tape came off.

And meetings with a man in uniform named Sergei, who wanted some things and seemed always nervous and keyed up.

Rolf did not understand until later that Sergei was sympathetic -- to a degree and amount paid -- and that he was a Grenzpolizei for the Czech army.

After the phone call things happened quickly and one night, they departed with Willy on an adventure. Willy was a neighborhood boy from a family Rolf and his parents knew well. He never ever learned how and why Willy had been with them. Except Willy was good at some games, like "jump the frog."

They met up briefly with Sergei who appeared dressed in uniform and carrying his sidearm. "It would be good if you had an *Opfergabe*," mentioned Sergei. "Something for distraction."

"There is no time," said his mother. "We have no one else."

"It will be difficult then." Said Sergei. "I need to find a reason to send the patrol around another way. See what you can do in the meantime."

That was the last that Rolf ever saw of Sergei.

In a strange place in the middle of the woods in the dark his mother put the creme on his face and then the tape over it. They were playing a game. Except his mother was crying as she put the tape on his face and he felt a little afraid.

Willy simply stood there as the tape went over his mouth.

With their mouths taped shut they went through the woods, moving by the light of the moon with the flashlight turned off, dropping down through a dry gulch filled with leaves and then back up again in darkness although his father kept the

torch in his hand the entire time until they came to a fence and the sound of generators.

His parents spent an awful long time examining this fence topped with razor wire until his father noted something in the dark.

First his mother climbed the fence and jumped over. She seemed to be avoiding something on the other side. Two wires strung there and passing through ceramic holders at the posts. Now Willy's turn. His father pointed out the two wires, motioning to stay away from them, then hoisted the boy on up to the razor wire.

Would a small child know about razor wire and what it could do to flesh? Would he know about electrified fences? Would he die there or set off an alarm? These things were questions that would not appear to Rolf for many years and then through papers left behind.

Willy plunged like a meteor to the other side, caught by his mother who slung him away from the fence.

Now his turn.

Somehow he sensed this was all more than a game and that he had better do this right. So he jumped with a mighty jump and nearly overshot the arms of his mother who grabbed him much too fiercely, or so it seemed.

After his father jumped over he wrote a note on a scrap of paper which he handed to his mother and which Rolf found and kept for years afterward.

This is what his father wrote: "Problem. This much too easy."

Although they did know know it then, they were in that place called by all *migrantes*, No Man's Land, the place that is owned by no country and so therefore that place which possesses no rule of law or human compassion.

They came to an open field. Just beyond was another fence and the true border. They looked and they looked but nothing could be seen moving in that field in either direction and nothing heard but the sounds of the night. So they moved across with caution, looking for trip wires or anything unimaginable. The problem is that they had no experience to tell them what to look for.

They passed by a post, some kind of pipe stuck in the ground, or so it looked, until the pipe spat fire and the sounds of firecrackers filled the air.

Rolf and his parents started running for the opposite side of the field, but Willy paused, an astonished look on his face as a white hot sensation went through his body.

The post was a motion-sensor activated machine-gun.

Willy went down into the weeds of the field.

From the north they could see torchlamps blazing as Sergei's patrol diverted through the gulch below.

Looking back, Rolf remembered seeing the figures coming out of the far woods with blazing machine-guns to stand over a small, dark figure there.

They came to a fence and crossed over quickly and soon encountered several armed men outside a shack. One of them shouted, "*Staatgrenze! Wer kommt?*"

His father stripped the tape abruptly from his mouth, shouting, "Asylum!
We are escaped!"

Then came the name by which he and his parents would be named for the next ten years.

"Die sind Fluchtlinge! Mach bereit!"

The efficiency and experience Rolf saw then was impressive. A battery of men appeared out of seemingly nowhere and arranged themselves with rifles pointing back the other way to provide covering fire. Should others appear out of the woods. But Willy did not.

In the following years, he owned a special status as "*Fluchtlinge*", until the Berlin Wall came down, and then he and several million others passed from the status of "refugees" to that of disreputable "*Oestlinge*", an Easterner from the bad part of town that only wants a handout in hard times. An entire nation reduced to second cousin status overnight. His mother never forgave herself for what had happened to Willy.

When his father died of a heart attack, he and his mother tried to return to what had been the "Eastern Zone", but no work was to be had and no one wanted to know them or they could not find where anyone lived anymore. For a while they lived in Berlin in the Charlottenburg district until the living subsidy provided by the government, once intended to encourage people to live in the old walled city, ran out and then it was just like living in the Eastern Zone again.

His mother grew grayer, listless and stopped caring about how she looked. One day, she was standing beside him on the Eisenstrasse bridge not far

from the Treptower Park S-Bahn station. There was a new statue there rising right out of the river Spee called "The Molecule Man". The statue is of three men struggling with one another, swiss-cheesed with holes and standing some thirty feet above the water's surface. They were looking down at the river and the train tracks and she said this was not a good place to be. He turned to look toward the statue and then, quite suddenly, she was gone.

So there he was, all alone on the bridge. For a while he lived with in various *Einstandsbesetz* communes, abandoned buildings that had been taken over by students and young radicals. He lived by stealing and after a quick snatch and run, he found he had ownership of an American Passport and a number of travelers checks. And so that day, he gathered a few things into a satchel, said good-bye to his Leninist-Maoist-Stalinist friends, who were really far nicer than the real thing in his experience, and took the S-Bahn to Templehof where he bought a 1-way ticket for California, USA, where he fully expected to join either a cowboy outfit or an Indian war tribe. There in the wilds of the American West. In those pre-nine-eleven days, he breezed through customs and threw the passport into a trashbin after cashing out the rest of the traveler's checks.

At the airport he met a band of hari krishnas, whom he mistook for a tribe of savage Comanches. It was not until he saw a punk with a purple mohawk and leather jacket that he realized that the Wild West was probably a good deal different from the movies.

A smattering of French, Russian and Czech along with poorly developed secretarial skills proved to be lousy attributes for success in this Wild West. With such a background it was inevitable that a fellow like himself would hook up with Andre and Marlene's household of social deviants and misfits. Walking along one day in San Francisco he noticed three tough characters who clearly had intentions of seriously messing with an attractive woman wearing a short skirt and carrying a handbag. That woman was Suan leaving work at the Crazy Horse where she worked as a stripper on the odd night or two.

Those three may have been tough for Fremont, or Hayward or even San Francisco, however Rolf had been surviving on the edge in places like Berlin, a massive metropolis of some five million people, and nothing had been easy ever since. He was no longer a small *Knabe* in short pants. He quickly made short work of the first one by breaking the man's thigh bone with a sharp kick, then pretty much turned the other fellow's face into some humanoid form of hamburger.

As for the third, Suan maced him before firing off three swift kicks to the man's crotch.

It was all quite satisfying.

Suan, ever observant, lit a cigarette and noted Rolf rummaging through one groaning man's pockets. Instead of turning tail to run as far from this debased scene as possible, which is what most people of common sense are inclined to do, Suan saw this as an opportunity for conversation. The man with

the hamburger face sort of bubbled and burbled as he slumped against the brick wall and bled all over himself.

Somewhere far off a police siren informed them all that there was, indeed, a police force in the City and it was doing something, but that something was somewhere else.

Just another typical evening in San Francisco. Two strangers becoming good friends.

So that is how Rolf came to join the little household on Otis and stop living purely by petty larceny. Suan got him the one job which did not require credentials or a social security number. Even strippers pay taxes, but doorman to the Pink Poodle Cabaret is one capacity that demands nothing except that a man be able to handle himself and ably roust folks inclined to let their concupiscence get too rowdy. Scream and shout all you want, just don't break the furniture and keep your hands to yourself, or on the street you go.

So there they all live in that one bedroom cottage, some twelve men and women and dogs and cats, in the one place each has found, if not happiness -- should such an alien emotion be even possible on this crappy earth -- then at least love and understanding and some companionship. As the old monk said to the doctor, "*Solamen miseris socios habuisse doloris.*"

And that is the way it is on the Island. Have a great week.