VIENNA AT NIGHTFALL

RICHARD **WAKE**

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MANOR AND STATE, LLC

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To Mary,
My true love, my best friend, you are the person who gave me my life.

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NOVEMBER 1936

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The American Bar on Karntner Durchgang is where we often began the night. It was all sharp angles and geometric patterns and dark wood and a green-and-white marble checkerboard on the floor. Masculine. It was a tiny place, a bar and three tables and not much else, including women. But it is where we drank Manhattans and got fortified for our pursuit of the aforementioned women, albeit somewhere else.

"The starting blocks," is what Leon called the place.

We hadn't gotten together, the three of us, in nearly two months, mostly because I had been traveling so much but partly because Henry had been occupied with a certain Gretchen, a porcelain doll, and a clingy one -- until she got a better idea of how Henry's family made its money. It wasn't the first time this had happened, and he shrugged it off quickly enough in what had become for him the time-honored fashion -- a bottle, a 48-hour monastic sulk, all better. Anyway, there we all were, two Manhattans deep.

"So where was this trip?" Leon always asked, mostly because he said he found my life in Vienna so dull by comparison.

"Dresden, Koblenz, and Stuttgart," I said, trying to suppress a smile, trying and not succeeding.

"Koblenz? Isn't that...?"

"Yeah, the Gnome." I couldn't help but grin.

I was a magnesite salesman, which is about as exciting as it sounds. My family owned a mine in Czechoslovakia. My father ran the business, and my shit of a younger brother sat at his elbow. I lived in Vienna and serviced 24 of our clients in Germany and Austria, visiting twice a year, about 120 days on the road altogether. My Uncle Otto, who taught me the business, kept a half-dozen clients in his semi-retirement.

Most of our clients were steel mills because of their blast furnaces -- magnesite is used in the lining -- and the furnaces were working overtime in Germany in those days. The little corporal had been very good for business. Most of the trips followed a familiar rhythm. I got to the place early in the afternoon, and a lot of the owners liked to have me tour the plant as they chatted and joked with their workers as if I cared whether they hated him to his face or only behind his back. Then we would go back to the office, where I heard his complaints about deliveries and such. Then I tried to get him to up his order by 5 or 10 percent -- 10 percent had become my standard ask of the German clients, 10 percent every six months, and I was getting it; Heil, etc. And then, when the work part was over, I took the owner out to dinner, followed by whatever, all on my expense account. Some were more interested in the whatever than others.

In Koblenz, Ewald J. Gruber owned the local steel mill. He was 5-foot-nothing, stooped over besides, 70 years old, impressively unattractive, truly believable as something you would put in your garden to ward off evil garden spirits and to be pissed upon by nervy squirrels. The Gnome.

But here was the thing about Ewald: he liked them young, and blonde, and tall -- really tall. I handled the introductions and, in exchange, I got my 10 percent order increase plus the funniest thing I saw on the trip: little Ewald and his 6-foot Brunhilda, hand in hand as they left the cafe.

"This time was a little different," I said. "This time he wanted two of them -- 12 feet of blondes, 5 feet of Gnome, no stepladder to help. I managed to make the arrangements with the girls, and when they left the cafe, I told them they had to do something for me. He walked between them, holding

each of them by the hand, and just at the door, they lifted him up and swung him through the air, both feet off the ground."

At which point, I reached into my breast pocket and pulled out the photograph that the bartender took that night -- the blondes, the Gnome, both feet off the ground. Leon spit out a stream of his Manhattan when he saw it.

"I can't believe you do this for a living," he said.

"Somebody has to."

We grabbed our coats and got ready to head to the Stardust, where there would be a band and some women and some dancing. It was a 10-minute walk, give or take, which was almost pleasant in November in Vienna if you were adequately fortified. Very quickly, we could see what looked like trouble ahead. In the late autumn of 1936 in Vienna, trouble tended to be accompanied by a swastika, and it was this time. Well, a little swastika: the government banned the party a couple of years earlier, which drove the Nazis underground, but they were still scampering in the dark. They didn't wear the full brown shirts with the red armbands anymore, just little buttons with the hooked cross.

Henry and Leon walked a little more quickly in the direction of the scrum on Lisztstrasse -- four or five knuckleheads, one holding a bottle, surrounding a single man, pushing him, yelling at him, taunting him. He was probably a Jew, or at least he probably looked like one. Leon was a Jew, and while we were still 100 yards away, I could see where this was headed as his pace quickened even more.

"Leon, let this one go -- there's five of them," I said.

"Fuck no."

"The police station is two blocks down -- let's just go get a cop."

"Fuck that -- the cop will probably help beat him up."

Leon was running now, Henry right with him, me a step behind. We got there, and there was a lot of yelling. Thankfully, no one was armed, especially after Henry de-bottled the one guy and smashed the schnapps against the wall. Leon was soon swinging with both fists, and Henry was

wailing on this one fat Nazi. I managed to identify the guy on the other side -- in bar fights, all kinds of group fights, there is inevitably at least one -- who had no interest in fighting, either. It is unspoken, but both of you know that neither of you is going to throw a punch. What tends to happen is that you each grab the other guy by the lapels, and shout a few indignant fuck-yous at each other, and if you play it just right, your jacket is minus a button, or maybe has an easily-mended tear along one of the seams. So no real damage is done, but you have a small sartorial badge of honor.

Which is how this one was going to end, that is, until one of the Nazis pried up a loose paving stone out of the street and brained Leon. It staggered him, and it cut him over the eye, and blood ran down his face and dripped into the gutter as he tried to steady himself on one knee. Henry found a stone of his own and, as he picked it up, a police wagon careened around the corner. Four cops piled out.

The Nazis ran. The cops did not pursue them. Instead, they stood there -- shiny helmets, green capes, superior attitudes -- and questioned us. Particularly this one scowling giant who smelled of beer, among other things.

"Let's see some identification, gentlemen."

"You've got to be kidding me," I said.

"Does he look like he's kidding?" said his sidekick, who was more normal sized except for his smirk, which was as enormous as it was well-practiced.

"They were beating up this kid, and we were rescuing him," Leon said, "and my head is bleeding, and you're --"

"You're a Jew, yes?" It was the smirker.

"Listen," Henry said, taking a step.

"Identification, now," the giant said, taking a bigger step. It was not a request.

So, identification it was, followed by our names being copied into one of those little cop notebooks with a leather cover, followed by a lecture about brawling in the streets, followed by a warning that it had better not happen again. In five minutes of talking the smirker managed to use the phrase "the

Jewish element" five different times. He was looking at Leon the entire time, never once even acknowledging the kid who was still sitting on the ground, head between his knees, cowering against a building. The cop probably couldn't tell that I had grabbed Leon from behind by the waist of his pants and his belt, to reinforce the importance of him not taking a swing at these guys. Leon knew this drill well, every Jew in Vienna did, but a little reminder never hurt.

Then it was over, the cops piling into their wagon and speeding off, their fun for the night now complete. As we got him to his feet, the Jew we were rescuing finally had a chance to say thank you. He was just a kid, not 20 years old. He could barely get the words out. He was so shaken. He had pissed himself but seemed fine physically. He said he was OK to get home.

Leon, though, was going to need stitches.

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Leon wasn't really cut severely, as it turned out. It was messy but not that deep. A nurse had taken a quick look and said a doctor would be with us soon. The conversation quickly turned to fights in the past.

"The first fight you ever dragged us into?" Henry asked.

"Moi?" Leon said.

"It was Caporetto," I said.

"You guys fought together in Caporetto?" the doctor said as he walked into the room.

Henry said, "We won, call it by the right name -- Karfreit."

"Nah, Caporetto sounds nicer," I said, turning back to the doc. "We fought in the battle, but the fight I'm talking about happened in a cafe near Caporetto."

This was in September of 1917, about a month before the Italians graciously ran like babies down the mountain as we chased them. Our army was resting and re-supplying, and we had a night free in Klagenfurt. We had learned over the years that Leon will fight about anything, for good reasons and bad reasons. Most of the time, though, the fights were for female reasons, which could be good or bad, depending.

We had only known each other for about a month. Leon talked a good game but, seeing as how we literally went days without even seeing a woman, it was all talk as far as we were concerned, until that night in The Falling

Leaf. It was a pretty prosaic name for a standard issue shithole, but the place did have the two prerequisites for soldiers on a night off in town: a lot of beer and a supply of giggling girls at a nearby table.

We flirted with all of the skill and energy that three 18-year-olds could muster, which is to say, more energy than skill. Henry and I devolved into what we believed was charming goofiness, and we got our share of laughs. But Leon played on a different level, a first division game. He zeroed in on the prettiest, and the blondest, and the least Jewish of the three, although to be entirely accurate, the closest any of these girls had come to a Jew was in the pages of Leviticus. He locked eyes with her and wouldn't let go, even when he was talking to somebody else. It was masterful.

When the blonde got up to use the facilities, Leon immediately followed her. Henry and I were left at the table with our two new friends. It was clear that we were going nowhere with them, and would settle for a peck on the cheek at the end of the night and a pleasant nocturnal memory later on, but that was fine. Because Leon would have a story to tell, and it was the kind of story that we would get him to re-tell and re-tell, adding new details with each recitation, a new moan here, an extra fondle there. It is true that traveling armies are fueled mostly by manpower and horsepower, but the under-appreciated accelerant is sexual bragging. Just the week before, we had marched all the way from Wolfsberg to Volkermarkt, maybe 10 miles, without even realizing it, so enraptured were we by Corporal Friedhoffer's tales of the summer he spent working in a bakery with two twins from Steyr.

So it was all delightful until a man burst in the front door, looked around quickly, zeroed in on the two girls sitting with us and bellowed, "Where is she?"

In subsequent years, we would encounter this type of situation multiple times on a night out with Leon. Dozens of times, once or twice a year, easily. It would become a game for Henry and I. The guy came into the cafe, started looking around, got increasingly agitated when he couldn't find the female he was seeking, and Henry and I would make eye contact and give each other

a sign: one finger meant boyfriend, two fingers meant husband, three fingers meant father.

Three fingers were the worst. And although we hadn't yet developed the code, this first night was three fingers. He was not sober, and he was starting to pat the knife on his hip -- yes, the knife. The girls said that the lovely Heidi was in the bathroom and that they would go get her. We grabbed an empty glass from a nearby waiter -- who typically would have been highly offended by this impudence but who was very happy that someone else was taking care of the matter -- and our new friend sat down, the beer calming him almost immediately. The three girls were back in a minute, the blonde put back together sufficiently so that only in your imagination could you see where Leon's hands had been. The subsequent conversation was as awkward as you might expect, and Henry and I drank up and waved for the bill and started to grab for our coats. It was going to be a clean escape until we prepared for our final swallow, and everyone raised their glass for a farewell toast. It was then that the old man got this quizzical look on his face, and then the anger built in the boiler, and then came the accusatory shout as he pointed at the table: "Whose glass is that?" Followed quickly by, "Where is he?"

It was all instinct at that point: I grabbed the knife and Henry took a single swing at the old man that dropped him back in his chair. I literally threw the money at the waiter, and we ran. We ran all the way back to our camp, probably over a mile, where we found Leon waiting for us. As it turned out, our story was better than his.

The emergency room doctor who was stitching up Leon was laughing and shaking. Leon said, "Hey Doc, calm down. You sure you're OK to do this?"

"It's six stitches along your eyebrow -- my father was a butcher, and he could have done it. No one will ever see."

"Where was your father's shop?" I asked.

"Jokl's, on Fruchtgasse," he said. And then it all clicked in.

"Are you Karl Jokl?"

"Yes," he said, tying the final knot and snipping the suture with some tiny scissors.

Karl Jokl had been an assistant professor of surgery at the university. His name had been in the newspapers multiple times over the years, commenting on new techniques and such. He had even been a government minister for a time, advocating for pre-natal care for mothers. They built a lot of clinics when the Social Democrats where in charge. They were all closed by then, though. And now Jokl was stitching up a brawler on a Friday night, the only doctor in the place, with more brawlers undoubtedly to come.

He saw the question before it was asked.

"It's all they'll let me do now. I never had a private practice, you see -- I was always in academic medicine, and then I worked in the government. But when it came time for me to be a full professor, well, they call you into the office, offer you coffee and cake, and tell you that the professorship just isn't possible. You know, 'because of the current situation,' and they suggest that it's time to leave the university, except it isn't a suggestion. This is all I can do, the only job I can get, repairing street fighters on a night when no other doctor wants to work. I'm ashamed to admit that I was hoping you were more seriously hurt so I could have a chance to operate on you. So this is me, stitches on the Sabbath -- my mother would cry. She had been so proud. She cut out the first newspaper story that mentioned me and framed it."

Leon was seething, and Jokl patted him on the arm. "Stop," he said. "I have other options. I could go to Paris tomorrow and live with my cousin if only I didn't hate him so much. But he did make the offer, and I am thinking about it. But what about you, my friend? You will continue beating up Nazis in the street until you run into one with a knife?"

"I am a journalist," Leon said. "Die Neue Freie Presse."

"So you will try to tell the truth until they take the printing presses? It is hopeless, I fear, but it is our only hope. Truth."

Jokl hugged Leon, and then he was off to his next patient. Leon put his shirt back on and, miracle of miracles, there was no blood on it, and there was only one small drop on the sleeve of his jacket. He looked in the mirror,