

## Max and the Burning Bush

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At six o'clock on a chilly April afternoon Max Sturm became aware of a wild giggling, a reckless gabbling just below his second-floor window. The sound was not entirely alien, perhaps--children make many sorts of sounds--but it was strange enough to make him put down his mechanical pencil and go to the window, his mind still half-rooted in the sandy soil of water tables and offshore thermoclines. Topographic maps and computer printouts lay across his desk like plans for an invasion; but after a long afternoon his concentration was flagging, and he was more than ready for a small diversion.

What he saw down on the street did not especially interest him. A ragged band of girls were making their way along the sidewalk; there were five or six of them, all but one quite small. As they walked along they tumbled into each other, overcome with laughter, so giddy they could barely speak. Vaguely Max wondered what had set them off, wishing that the situation had proved more intriguing: for a few seconds their laughter had sounded like nothing he'd ever heard before, like something new on the face of the planet. But there is nothing new under the sun, as he himself frequently told people. The world, and especially the world of people, changes very little as time labors on; the brief pestilence of human culture is only a surface phenomenon, no more exotic, no more dramatic than a rash on the back of the hand. Nor did he find this point of view to be cynical: he was a scientist with a scientist's perspective, that was all. And not just any breed of scientist, but a geologist, a professional carefully trained to take the long view of a situation, the deep view.

It is desperately hard to impress a geologist. Gargantuan numbers, blunt masses, glacial crepitations are his stock in trade: a few million years of mammalian sputterings are puny next to the epochal events he studies daily. When the geologist overhears the historian pontificating on the "timetables of history," he smiles quietly, gliding across the eons with breezy grace. There is the

long view, and there is the *very* long view. . . But today all this only led Max Sturm to feel depressed, somehow, as he watched the gaggle of girls weave and stagger toward the corner, a tiny, inconsequential pocket of humanity enjoying a private joke; an epiphenomenon, to be sure, a statistical blip, but a far happier one than he was.

His gloominess was deepened by the sight of a large clump of soil heaped like a tiny volcano at the precise center of a sidewalk square. From sixty feet he analyzed its properties instantly, automatically: high clay content, low porosity, a steep metal gradient; a fairly low proportion of seasonal organic detritus. Shot through, no doubt, with the random debris of the city, with chunks of concrete, bottlecaps, condoms, wrappers and all the rest. Typical soil for the area, exactly the sort he struggled with in his own garden. There weren't many living things that favored it. This year he'd dug up half the front yard, moving the chysanthemums, the hosta, the tea roses out of harm's way, tired of coming home to find his blossoms clipped by strangers and Coca Cola draining poisonously into the beds. All that remained were the bushes; he'd even moved the rock garden to the fenced-in backyard, protective of his red granites and marvelous petrified branches, one of which had found its way through a basement window the summer before.

For years he'd striven to remain sanguine about life in the city. He understood perfectly well that in exchange for easy access to two world-class libraries and a symphony of equal stature he would be confronted from time to time with the unruly excesses of other people--with an unspeakable pounding emanating from certain passing cars, with broken windows and graffitied garage doors, even with the odd gunshot in the deep of the night. These were irritants a man could shake off, and one could take certain objective steps to assuage them. Over the years he'd been moved to install an alarm system, to mount safety bars over his basement windows, to erect a fence worthy of Sachsenhausen along the perimeter of the backyard--yet in those same years he'd done some of his best research, enjoyed the company of scholars from all over the world thanks to the city's great universities; he'd heard Elie Ameling sing the most charming lieder, had sat in rapture as his orchestra pored over Mahler and Dvorak, Handel and Wagner, had walked the lakefront at

sunrise hundreds of times. In short, he was willing to endure a bit of chaos in return for a bit of pure love, for an order of the highest sort.

Lately, however, he'd grown tired of the constant tension, the struggle to ignore the city's affronts. Somehow the breakup of his front garden, trivial as it was, had taken on a veneer of ugly symbolism: he'd spent his entire sixtieth birthday transplanting annuals, pulling in his tentacles, barricading the doors of his world, preparing for the long siege of old age. It was not a happy day: try as he did, he could see nothing in it but exhaustion and dread. By dinnertime he was so thoroughly upset that he climbed in the car and headed for the Gethsemane Garden Lot, intent on finding a small bush or tree he could plant in the ravaged beds, a modest newcomer who might make the day's work seem less desperate, less defeatist. It hadn't taken long to find what he wanted: there, all but glowing in the elongating sun, was a petite rhododendron in full and splendid bloom. Only two feet tall, it had an irresistible air of youth about it, and he fell in love in a heartbeat. On the way home the bright magenta blossoms filled the car with verve, lifting his spirits in just the way he'd hoped, and when it was safely in the ground Max opened a bottle of his best Rhine wine, able at last to relax and contemplate the fullness of his sixty long years on earth.

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But now Max settled himself on the chair by the window, letting his eyes wander along the sidewalk. He noticed, little by little, that the clump of soil he'd assayed from above was but one of several similar clumps, each describing a roughly circular blot on the concrete. It became clear that someone, or something, was leaving a trail, an earthy signature of some regularity. Max toyed with the urge to go and sweep them off the sidewalk, but an indolent mood had come over him, and for now he preferred to let them be.

The laughing girls were crossing Rockwell now, probably heading for the low-rise public housing project a few blocks to the west. The old building was bursting with kids, and on summer

weekends he could sometimes hear their din even over the roar of the air conditioner. As his neighbors--his white neighbors--so often reiterated, the neighborhood was changing. In the early 1960's, when he'd bought his house from Irma Beethoven for twenty-seven thousand dollars and a solemn promise not to uproot her rosebushes, Leland Avenue was still a bastion of old German families who viewed the recent influx of Greeks as the onslaught of an invading army. His own German was still good enough to follow their malicious gossip, but he wasted little time in fretting over it. It had been no different in Bavaria during his boyhood, when the Slavs arrived to work in the factories and fields. Bigotry was universal--this was certain--and the older people got, the more frightened they became. He felt an old man's fear growing in himself now: it was one of the horrifying things he fought lately, one of the forces which had driven him to buy his pink rhododendron, to renew his world. Yet another bold-face indictment of the myth of human progress, of civilization. When the city began converting several nearby sixflats into public housing two years before, the very same hue and cry went up--the outsider speaking not Russian or Greek or Turkish this time, but Spanish. Little changed; there was nothing new under the sun. The language of the invader, his music, his dress were surface phenomena; the deep structure, the real dynamic, was race hatred and fear of the unknown. The Mexicans and Hondurans of his own neighborhood were only the Jews and Nubians of Pharaoh's Egypt. He saw it as clearly as an equation.

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What was it, exactly, that stirred Max from these ruminations? All the next week he would turn the events over in his mind, feeling for the nub, the tiny irregularity that had shaken him awake. There was the fading laughter of the girls, of course; perhaps its gradual evaporation suggested the idea of a scene change to him, as in the theater the fading of the lights signifies the end of an act. Or perhaps it was only the solving of a trivial puzzle, the automatic application of a lifetime's rational habits to the situation at hand. Whatever the case, at a certain instant Max

spotted yet another clump of soil in the sidewalk and realized exactly what had happened. Surging up from his chair he threw the window open and leaned far out over the eaves, peering down the street at the rag-tag laughing girls.

His instincts were on target: across the intersection, a few hundred feet away now, the girls had stopped and formed a loose-knit ring, giggling and squealing at one another as they plucked and threw handfuls of delicate magenta blossoms from their captive rhododendron bush. When he'd first spotted them, his line of sight was such that their bodies must have hidden the prize from view; but now, with a clear view down the sidewalk, there could be no mistaking it. The poor uprooted bush sat canted to the left, crucified atop its miniature Golgotha of rotten soil. They were murdering it, sacrificing it, tearing out its beauty faster than he could comprehend it all. The sight of it threw him into a state of panic, then into shock.

Later Max would not remember bolting from the house and falling on the porch: Kruse, the old German across the way, saw it happen and went off to call the emergency squad, assuming somehow that the professor would not be able to get up. But in the mean time Max was on his feet again, pounding down the sidewalk and waving his arms, the clumps of sloughed soil passing below like fallen soldiers, the blare of a car horn making a brassy battle cry. He may have been shouting; this too would be lost to memory. Max hadn't moved so quickly, hadn't felt so sure of himself, in as long as he could remember.

Before he'd reached the intersection one of the youngest girls spotted him and sent up the alarm. The little hunting party scattered in all directions, squealing, racing, chattering in high-strung Spanish, fleeing from their trophy like jackals from a lion's kill. Only one was left behind: an older girl, obese in her skin-tight green pants, who took a few lethargic steps and ground to a halt, despairing of escape. Turning, she rooted herself next to the half-stripped bush and threw her head back with a cocky flip, watching the old professor bear down on her.

What the hell are you doing! he shouted, stumbling in for his final approach. What the hell kind of person pulls a perfectly good rhododendron from the ground and walks off with it?

The girl only stared, lowering her head a bit.

What. . . I. . .

Now that he'd stopped running, the professor's wind left him. Despite the coolness of the evening, sweat bled through his white button-down shirt, forming a vaguely continental stain across his chest. His white hair stood up like a shield, rearing back from a puffy red face. Sullenly the girl waited for him to catch his breath, putting her hands on her hips, cocking a huge thigh toward the street.

If you think you can just steal a. . .uh!

Max doubled over, the pain slicing through his chest in a steely wave, the heat rushing to his brain like a dash of molten lead. *Madre de Dios!* cried the girl, dropping her head. And then Max was on the sidewalk, crossing his arms over himself and groaning, the pain tearing him in two, the sweetish pink of his rhododendron filling his head and sickening him, alarming him, terrifying him. . .

When the paramedics ran over--for old Kruse's call had not been wasted after all--they found Max writhing on a bed of loose earth and flaming pink blossoms, a middle-aged man in delirium and pain, his white shirt smeared with patches of magenta.

Save her! he managed to gasp: Save her!

Confused, the paramedics looked up at the terrified girl who stood over them, scanning her for some hidden injury, some occult complaint, even as their hands unbuttoned the older man's collar and began to massage his heart; but there was nothing to be seen, nothing beyond a natural fear and a strange shyness, a preoccupation they had no time to investigate. They had their hands full in trying to save the life that lay before them, rolling and clutching itself like a soul afire. One of them broke out the oxygen mask and snapped back the elastic band, preparing to bring it down over the professor's bluish lips.

*Save her*, the stricken man cried at the moment the mask went on, his tongue heavy in his mouth, and through the slowly relenting pain managed to wrap his fingers around the stem of his wayward, lovely, brightly burning bush.

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