

Dancers
on a
Dark
Street

Raoul
Felder

Other Islands Press

OTHER ISLANDS PRESS

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Maud

Hope Junction is not quite a town and cannot be found on any map. It is a spillover from the town of Hope. Hope is situated in Hamilton County and is about forty-nine miles north and west of the city of Schenectady. According to the 2010 census, Hope had a population of 403 people. Hope Junction's population is too small to be counted in any census. The Junction, as we who live here call it, is down a gently sloping hill and less than a half of a mile west of Hope.

Except for the two stores in the Junction that sell most of the things that we need on a day-to-day basis, we go to Hope for everything else, including, if we need them, the police and the

firefighters. I am one of the few people who lives in Hope Junction; I live there because I can't afford to open a business and live in the town of Hope. Sometimes I think of those of us who live here as people who have run out of *hope*.

I own a hardware store and live in a room above it that is accessed by a staircase wound around the outside of the building. The only other commercial places in town are a sort of general store a few yards down the road that sells everything from toothpaste to sweaters, and then across the road, there is Maud's, and this is what my story is all about.

End of Excerpt

New York Nocturne

The streets in the part of New York where I stood were cobblestone, and worn so smooth that now, rain-slick with splashes of color, they seemed to reflect the kaleidoscopic lights of the city. The early darkness and the chill from the cold rain that came in fits and starts were what made certain kinds of women think that it was time to unpack their fur coats from storage, and made certain kinds of men remember their mortality and the fact that the seasons of their own lives were spinning by without so much as their putting a mark on the passing days. Attempting to ward off such an ignominious fate, I had recently traveled from the University of Akron—a pale attempt at the duplication of stereotypical New England colleges, where in winter the snow first caressed and then slept on branches of campus trees and the roofs of faux-colonial buildings, transfiguring the scene into the stuff of Christmas cards—to New York City, where imagination lived side by side with a reality I'd planned to experience once leaving the insulating sanctuary of my college.

End of excerpt

Mr. Potts' Secret

If people came in different colors, Albert's would be gray. In my four years at the firm, five minutes after I nodded a greeting when passing him in corridor, I could not conjure up in my mind a realistic image of his face or of what he wore. Nor did I know anything about his personal life—whether he had a wife, alive or dead, what he did after work or weekends, where he lived, what his politics were. I didn't even have a fair sense of his age or ethnicity. But that's really the point, isn't it? Albert's dead. They say he had been working late and, after everyone else had left the building, he suffered a heart attack and the night cleaning people found him. His dying did not create a ripple in our stream of day-to-day business. It did, however, occasion an interoffice memo from Mr. Ellington, our boss. It began, "It is my unhappy task to inform the firm that Albert Potts passed away last night. Albert was a loyal and valuable part of this firm for forty years. Whenever a member of our little family passes away, we are all saddened." The authenticity of the sentiments that engendered this memo was diluted by the fact that, when I put the memo away in my

stack of other memos that I had saved as source material for my novel, I observed it was virtually

the same as a memo sent out by Mr. Ellington six months ago at the passing of our sclerotic messenger boy Benjamin, aged seventy-four, who died after sixty years of service at the firm and who, like Gunga Din, is undoubtedly continuing his servitude in the great hereafter.

End of excerpt

Dancers on a Dark Street

It was the fifth day of a midsummer heat wave: one of those days when the air seems to stand still, an almost solid thing laden with the faint, almost fruity smell of garbage and decay; when the heat seems to settle on the sidewalks and roadways, while your shirt is sweat-plastered against your back before you've walked a block, and everyone you see moves slowly. Even the tough kids are too sluggish to play their street games; the city's newspapers show photographs of

eggs frying on sidewalks and the headline is simply a number: the highest temperature of the previous day, in bold print.

On this day, after the sun had departed with its usual yet unnoticed majesty, the cooler evening air released the captured heat trapped in the pavement of McKibben Street, and it rose in slow wisps of vapor that made the air above the street seem to shimmer. At night, the people kept the windows open to receive whatever vagrant night breeze might make its way into the neighborhood.

End of Excerpt

The Crab and the Shtumer

A Love Story

The doctor said it was caused by a childhood nutritional deficiency, but he was a very old doctor and to every complaint brought to him, he nodded his head and stroked his chin and plied his wares in a neighborhood that attracted neither young nor first-class doctors. But Ezra believed his affliction was more providential such that the alignment of planets deciding the affairs of Man created his destiny. Or, maybe, it was just bad luck—the one commodity that he possessed in abundance—that made him as helpless as a cockroach in a kitchen. He did not believe in God, and certainly not in a personal God, but as he became middle-aged he sometimes looked upward at the sky, circumscribed by the tops of tenements or clouded by coal smoke from chimneys and blamed his misfortune on a conspiracy of the Divine. Sometimes, he believed he simply thought too much about these things and just said to himself: “The best part of me ran down the side of my father’s leg.” Living in an age of science, he was partial to the latter postulation.

End of excerpt

A Small Death in Germany

The bus, built before the war by the Opel Company, was purchased by the city of Berlin to be part of its public transportation system. It previously had honorably served the army by carrying the soldiers of the beaten Wehrmacht in their defeat, ever eastward. Now, in its final incarnation, battered and dented with several windows missing, it wheezed and coughed its way from Zurich to Berlin.

The four passengers sat in their winter coats as far away as possible from each other, while the black and empty windows that no longer possessed panes appeared as carious teeth gone missing against the dark night. The cold November winds blowing through the windows presaged the imminent arrival of the usual nasty German winter; although, the four passengers on the bus accommodated winter as merely another irritant to add to their lives. All four, that is, except for one younger man who looked ill at ease.

End of excerpt

Whimperings of Fall

He hated fall. It was a time of things dying or preparing to die: for men of a certain age, a funereal celebration of the inexorable passage of time; for some women, a desperately driven gaiety, the unpacking of furs, a new wardrobe, a roster of charity events and opening nights. He thought it was a bit like the Mexican Celebration of the Dead or, at least, whistling in

the dark.

He hated to end things with women, and he usually did it badly: arguments in the rain, angry confrontations on the steps of brownstone houses, cowardly telephone calls and even more cowardly hang-ups. He had known it all: the shouted accusations and counter-accusations, the slamming doors, the flung china, the threats and, of course, always, the crying. To him, ending an affair was like a kind of death without mourning. The French speak of *la petite mort*, but, he thought, it should more properly be the appellation affixed to the ending of the mess rather than its most pleasurable aspect.

End of excerpt

Pale Lady

She looked at me with eyes sadder than Times Square the morning after New Year's Eve.

The chair she sat in had been sat in by ten years' worth of grifters, con men, hustlers, and swindlers; the guilty who hired me to prove their innocence; the occasional innocent who probably would be found guilty no matter what I did; and the outliers who stayed so long at the party they were lucky if they remembered to leave.

Today must have been Fancy Lady Day. The first one had a face made out of the mold a popular Fifth Avenue plastic surgeon used on every over-forty, over-rich, over-idle woman who lived in the magic rectangle—Fifth Avenue on the West, Park Avenue on the East, Eighty-Sixth Street on the North and Fifty-Seventh-Street on the South—and wandered into the doctor's office, leaving behind fifteen thousand dollars and her wrinkles.

This one wanted me to follow her boyfriend, an aspiring actor (but temporarily a waiter), who was thirty years younger than she. She didn't quite trust him, and wanted to make sure she had made a sound investment in his libido with her lawyer-husband's money.

End of excerpt