From Chapter 1

The last person in the world I wanted to know about was my father. I did not want to know if he had lovers. I did not want to know if he took diuretics. I certainly did not want to know if he liked to masturbate or if, even occasionally, he fantasized about teenage boys. It was of absolutely no interest to me if he cheated at bridge, or if his secret ambition was to become a ballet dancer, or if he had an obsession with women's shoes, or if he washed his body with lemon, or if he hit my mother (especially, god forbid, if she liked it). So when I was presented with twenty-four volumes of journals, each bound with a rubber band so old it was as brittle as the leather cover it held together, and was told "These are your father's, take them," I was less than enthusiastic. Especially since it was my father who gave them to me.

"These are your father's, " he said, "take them."

"Dad," I said, "You are my father."

He looked at me quizzically. His eyes were like aspic. Cloudy. Beneath which something obscure, unappetizing.

"Where's Karen?' he said.

"Karen is dead," I reminded him.

"That's not true," he said, "She was just here. I was speaking to her. Take these."

With his feet, he pushed the box of journals towards my chair.

"Alright," I said, "I'll take them. But I won't read them."

Then he turned away, and looked out the window.

"I'm waiting for Frau Hellman," he said.

"OK, Dad," I said. I had no idea who Frau Hellman was. Maybe someone from his childhood, or maybe his name for the lady who washed him.

After a little while I realized he had forgotten I was in the room. The space between us seemed to grow as if I were standing on a dock, and he were sailing away on the Queen Mary. I say the Queen Mary because he once actually did sail away on her, and I really was left behind, waving. Still, it was unthinkable that I would have a troubled relationship with my father. If I was not the perfect son, he was certainly the perfect father.

I reminded myself of that as I sat there looking at him drooling, his head lolling back like a toddler's asleep in his car seat.

"He's doing just great, isn't he?" the station nurse said. "We just love him!"

I held out the box to her. "Where did he get these? They weren't in his room before."

"I don't know. I think someone brought them."

"Who brought them?"

"He has so many visitors."

"He does?"

"You know how popular he is!"

Actually, I didn't know he knew anybody. I thought everybody he knew was dead. I thanked Nurse Clara -- her name was emblazoned on her ample, nurturing breast -- and walked out into the brutal Florida heat. The car was only a few steps away, but I might as well have been crossing the Amazon River. By the time I got there, my shirt was soaked, and my legs were sticking together. I turned on the air conditioning in the Caddy, but had to wait outside for the temperature to drop -- the car was an oven. In my arms was the box of journals. They weighed me down painfully. Finally I sank into the plush leather seat and let the frigid jets cool my face, my underarms. I tugged my shirt away from my body to let the air caress my stomach with its icy fingers. I sighed in relief. I put the shift in reverse, and pulled out of the spot. It's amazing how long a Caddy will last, particularly if you never drive it. Dad bought his in '78. I looked down

at the odometer. It had twenty-two thousand miles on it. And I had to admit it was comfortable, bobbing down the road on those marshmallow shocks, riding on tires of Jello. Like the kiddy-car rides he used to take me on before I graduated to the bumper cars and roller coasters. I recalled how I used to be embarrassed being seen in it, especially when my dad drove twenty miles an hour in a forty mile zone. But not anymore. His Caddy was now the coolest thing going, only he would never know it. As far as he was concerned we still had the 1952 Studebaker. If he kept regressing on schedule, in another couple of weeks he'd be curled up with a bottle in the back of his father's '23 Daimler.

I pulled out of the parking lot and turned onto Military Trail. All the roads in West Palm Beach County look the same. Six lanes. No curves. Fast food. And every few feet the entrance to some development. The Lakes. The Bonaventure. The Greens. Everything had a The in it. They liked the word The. They also liked the word at. The Villages at The Palms. The Fairways at The Willows. I turned left at The Turn at Lake Worth Avenue.

The box of journals was sitting there beside me, sort of the way Mom used to sit next to Dad, waiting for an accident to happen. But unlike her, they smelled bad -- musty and moldy, decayed. Well, maybe she smelled that way now, too, I thought. But I shook that away. I didn't know why my mind let such thoughts sneak in. I hated when that happened. But it was just part of being a comic. You always think funny. For instance, the box they were in -- I noticed it was a Cheese Whiz box. This made me laugh. This is what Father chose to contain his life's writings? I also noticed the logo was different than it was now. So it was a really old box. He'd been working at this a long, long time. Saving this stuff up, just for this moment. His patrimony. Since he had no money, maybe he thought I could get it published or something. Why would he think that? He ran a wallpaper store all his life. Who would want to read about that?

I was jolted suddenly, by someone honking the horn. I looked up and the guy passed me, making a fist. I glanced down at the speedometer. I was doing twenty in a forty mile zone. For some reason this did not strike me as funny -- and I stepped on the gas.

From Chapter 4

Heinrich Mueller joined the SS in 1939, largely because his cousin, Obersturmfuhrer-SS Hans Mueller, of Special Unit 4, had returned from the front, that is, from Poland, and told him he was a fool if he let himself be drafted into the regular army.

"And anyway," Hans had said, "everyone thinks you're head of the Gestapo already." He was referring of course to Heinrich Müller, the Chief of Gestapo, because of the similarity between their names. But Heinrich did not wish to be a policeman. So he signed up with the Waffen SS, thinking he would be a war hero. Instead, he was trained as an accountant, and attached to the Budget and Construction Office, but not in Berlin. He was given his silver Death's Head for his cap, had his rank raised to second lieutenant, and sent to do the books in Bergen Belsen. He was well suited for the work. He liked numbers. He also enjoyed the study of language. He spent his spare time reading English, and found, much to his amusement, that he had also picked up a great deal of the Jewish dialect as well, simply from interacting with the few inmates he had impressed into service as bookkeepers, and with whom he found himself conversing almost as if it were a normal day at the office. In fact, he took special pleasure in aping their ways and amusing his friends in the officer's club. -- the self-deprecating shuffle, the unpleasant sing-song cadence, the curiously convoluted logic. Still, he would never have considered this knowledge of Jewish worthwhile, for he could not regard it as a language. It was just a bastardized mixture of tongues. Just a joke to amuse his friends.

Two years later, he found himself transferred to the East, namely to the Majdanek Concentration Camp, near Lublin. The job was similar, but more depressing. By comparison, Bergen was a spa. For here the smell of burning flesh was constant, and in the blocks themselves the stench of excrement and rot overwhelming. It made him hate the Jew even more. He was lucky though. He rarely had to leave the relative comfort of the SS compound which was far across the highway. And in any case, his responsibilities were for Camp B, the labor camp, and not the other operation, to which, he decided, he had no connection at all. He worked in his office, taking his meals in town. Lublin was but walking distance, except on very cold nights. It was not that he agreed or disagreed. He saw its necessity. And in any case he was too busy to worry about it. There was so much to account for: clothing, jewelry, artifacts, furs. Plus the cost of new construction, of food, of supplies, which were, by the way, very hard to get, and even harder to keep track of. However, he could tell you exactly how to derive the utmost profit from a human being, given the cost of his ration and general upkeep, and taking into account his initial age, health, height, weight and national origin.

In 1945 Heinrich Mueller found himself back in Bergen Belsen when Majdanek was abandoned under pressure of the Soviet advance. It was there, in Bergen Belsen, in April of that year, that he was liberated by the British.

This occurred in the following way. Heinrich, sensing the end was near -- it was not a difficult calculation, after all -- starved himself for three weeks. When the day approached and many of the Germans fled, only, he assumed, to be caught and hanged, he instead shaved his head, exchanged his uniform for the rags-- which he carefully deloused -- of a dead prisoner, rolled himself in the mud, and waited. While he was lying there in a trench, surrounded by -- but not touching -- dead bodies, he had noticed that many of the prisoners had been tattooed with numbers. They had not done this at Majdanek, but he saw no reason to not to ice the cake. At night, he slipped back into the officers' compound, and with a needle dipped in ink, he tattooed a number into his forearm. He had copied the number from a corpse that had been lying next to him. Then he hurried back to the trench.

When the troops arrived, he crawled out from among the dead bodies, and was saved. They fed him a little Spam.

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They asked him who he was. He held out his arm.

No, they said, your name.

He looked at them with the blank stare of the walking dead. A young soldier walked up to him and took his hands. It's all right, he said in Yiddish. I'm Jewish too. What's your name?

He realized with panic that he hadn't thought of any name. They looked at each other for what seemed to him an eternity.

Heshel Rosenheim, he suddenly said.

It was the name of one of the Jewish bookkeepers from whom he had gleaned so many Yiddish words. It was the first name that popped into his head.

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He did not know if the real Heshel Rosenheim was alive or dead, but it really didn't matter --unless of course he ran into him. But other than Rosenheim and a few of his other kapos, there was almost no one who could recognize him. For one thing there were 60,000 prisoners here, and most of them had just arrived from somewhere else, spirited away from death camps farther east. He was in a position to know this, after all. He was the bean counter. So, he reasoned, he could be from anywhere. Who would question him? He thought about things now, about how things work out. For years he secretly despised himself for doing so little for the Fatherland, stuck in that office doing calculations. Yes, yes, he knew how important his task was -- still, he had only been a bürohengst -- a pencil pusher. But now, he realized with a kind of joy, he had actually been fortunate! And indeed he was pleased with himself. Pleased that he had had the foresight to stay away from the main camps, pleased that he had so little to do with --- well --- anything. For one thing, he wasn't the type to go out and shoot people. And he almost never frequented the brothel. The filthy Jewish women held little interest for him. And thus there were few prisoners, if any, who might recognize him. And those who could -- why they were almost certainly dead. As for Rosenheim, surely he was dead too. No one could survive that long. Such a thing would have been economically unfeasible.

In any case, his main worry right now was to avoid the Typhus that had spread throughout the camp. He kept to himself. He drank only from the army water tanks. And he watched carefully for every opportunity to help himself, staying as close as he could to the British soldiers. But something happened in those first two days that struck him as hilarious. The stupid British in their zeal to help these insects, these roaches, plied them with rations. The greedy Jews stuffed themselves with food, and soon were convulsed in the dirt, screaming their guts out, puking and shitting at the same time, and in an hour or so they were dead. They had eaten themselves to death.

But Rosenheim -- for that is the name he now knew himself by -- had starved only a few weeks, not a few years. His bowels had not yet shriveled to the size of a pencil lead. Nevertheless, he ate carefully, and sparingly. The British merely thought he was simply

too far gone to care about food.

They sent him to a hospital in Lübeck, and from there to a D.P. camp near Geringshof, in the American Zone.

Not surprisingly, he recovered his health more quickly than most.