

Excerpt from *The Sun in Mid-Career*

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They looked in on her, then retreated to wait, while Harvest House men and women, clinging to the corridor handrail or clutching aluminum walkers in their crippled violet-veined hands, inched toward them, apparently astonished by them. The place contained a permanent smell of disinfectant, rubber matting, and feces. A few inmates sat on bridge chairs in their doorways like village gossips and talked back and forth. The director, who was an old friend, and the day-duty nurse, whom Fran Gamble had got to know, stood by.

"The doctor stopped earlier. He said she's comfortable."

"Bless her heart," the nurse said.

Inmates glanced into Rose Weisshorn's room, then at the Gambles. An old woman in a pink wrapper paused before them; Anthony thought she was going to talk about his grandmother, but she said, "I got to get a message to my daughter. They cut me off from the outside."

"Write a letter," said Gamble's mother, interested.

"They don't permit it. I can't tell if the daughter's alive or dead. If you could get word they put me here, she will get word to the son in Los Angeles."

"Go back to your room, honey," the day-duty

nurse said, "or down to therapy."

They tried again, and this time the nurse bent over Rose Weisshorn and said distinctly, "Rose, look who's here." The old woman in the bed opened her eyes. Beyond her through the sealed windows could be seen a strip of brown lawn and a grove of nut trees dusty in the May drought; the sky hung heavy as stone.

"Here are Tony and Elizabeth."

Rose's twisted slippers stood toe to toe on her bed step. Her hands, nearly fleshless, stirred across the turned-back sheet. "I wish it would stop." She took Gamble's wife for her daughter and addressed her, her eyes seeking cloudily among them but always coming back to the younger woman.

"She hears music," Francesca Gamble explained to the nurse.

"I'm glad to know. I knew she heard something all right." She patted the old hands. Gamble's wife, Elizabeth, eased the covers at the old woman's feet. His mother sat down, put her bag on the floor beside her, and crossed her legs.

Rose said, "Alex." "Cheyne-Stokes respiration," Tony wrote a few days later. "His grandmother goes into it. Actual pauses in breathing, approx. 20 sec. per pause. Called 'rowels'? Oxygen tubes in nostrils...tank...attached jar bubbling as ox. goes through it. Dextrose fed into arm. Teeth out. Jaw sinks

and drops to one side. Breath like fire." He stood between the door and a frame-and-linen screen, crowding his notes onto the back of a bank envelope, glancing miserably at his subject. The heavy room door skidded from its stop, but the rubber hands tied to it muffled the blow. Blue daylight, hard as a mirror, sped by the dying woman's windows. Gamble's mother did not appear to mind the notes concerning her mother; constantly acquiring medical information, she often passed it on.

Rose lay on her side facing the door, knees drawn up, one hand on her hip, the other with a pad of gauze in the palm because she cut herself with her nails. "Odor of sour cologne," he wrote.

"She could come back to her regular respiration, or go on like this for days, then all of a sudden just sneak off. They sneak away. We keep an eye on them, but as often as not we miss it. Then we glance in and they're gone," declared the nurse. She was a portly woman, matte black, with brown flowers in the whites of her eyes. "She's just filling right up."

Gamble put it in his notes.

They waited in a common room that had conversation corners furnished with sling chairs and tables made of steel and glass. Most of the paintings were by the director, and when he appeared he found them looking at his work. He had brought along an old man in a flannel robe and stood with his arm

across his shoulders. "How do you find her, Fran dear?"

She said that she felt her mother was suffering needlessly. Why the oxygen? Was it really necessary?

"The doctor will be around. Ask him."

And when the pictures were praised: "Thanks, but I know a good picture." He steered the conversation. Did these younger Gambles know that his father had been a Lombard Street regular and been acquainted with Fran's grandmother in his youth--the whole family? "They called her Babushka, right? Banking socialists: the American dream. The Russian Revolution was fought in South Philadelphia. At least that's how it sounded at our house. My dad was red-hot right up until the Soviet-German non-aggression pact, then fell away. And Alexis. We all admired Alex so much. A great artist..."

How long had his father been dead?

"He hasn't been. He's right here"--indicating the old man, who was now silently weeping. "Senile dementia. He recalls little now." He asked the old man, "Why are you crying, Pop? Meet Fran Gamble, her son, and this lovely..." Her daughter-in-law. "I find," he went on, "that the men tend to cry and the women to laugh in old age. There's one"--a woman all but lost in a wing-back chair, smiling and nodding, beckoning to them with a finger. She looked cheerful. "Presbyophrenia." To Anthony Gamble: "No, I'm no

artist. I know pictures. Rem Levy, the dealer, started me. I had a gallery on Eighteenth Street for twenty-five years."

They waited for the doctor, and Francesca combed her Lombard Street memories. She remembered a fire nearby and shutters used as stretchers to bring out the family. They were living then in Babushka's house; her father had slept in one room, her mother with the children in another; to this day she had nightmares about the smoldering smell of wet char. Or had it happened while in another house? Charles Gold, the mad poet of Lombard Street--one of Rose's stories; the Oak Lane house for Fran's recuperation from rheumatic fever; a large dog there named Colonel, which had belonged to a neighbor, and Alex in a sailor suit reclining upon the dog in a brown photograph; everything brown and tan: the boy's brown silk bangs falling away from his eyes like a curtain.

Rose used to look with misgiving at Alex's button nose when he was in the tub: too small. She would pull on it to lengthen it, which she lived to regret. Though it was not told now, this was a story often told. Tony wondered, why in the tub? There was the story of a maid in another house a year or two later, a compulsive exhibitionist, of Alex and Fran hiding in a cupboard and then being locked into it by the woman. Stories about living in California, the influenza

epidemic of 1918...

Brown or iron-black photographs, boxes and steamer trunks filled with music manuscripts and with the letters, journals and books of Alex's dead wife, Eve, in the attic in Tony Gamble's house, which had been his parents and his when he was a boy.