
Degans
at the
Gals
Station

ESSAYS

Thomas
Beller

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Degas at the Gas Station

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For Elizabeth, Evangeline, and Alexander

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From my place at table I would suddenly see through one of the east windows a marvellous case of levitation. There, for an instant, the figure of my father in his wind rippled white summer suit would be displayed, gloriously sprawling in mid-air, his limbs in a curiously casual attitude, his handsome, imperturbable features turned to the sky. Thrice, to the mighty heave ho of his invisible tossers, he would fly up in this fashion, and the second time he would go higher than the first and then there he would be, on his last and loftiest flight, reclining as if for good, against the cobalt blue of the summer noon, like one of those paradisiac personages who comfortably soar, with such a wealth of folds in their garments, on the vaulted ceiling of a church while below, one by one, the wax tapers in mortal hands light up to make a swarm of minute flames in the mist of incense, and the priest chants of eternal repose, and funeral lilies conceal the face of whoever lies there, among the swimming lights, in the open coffin.

—Vladimir Nabokov, *Speak, Memory*

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PRESS

Contents

I **The Misunderstandings**

xiii ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

- 1 Introduction: The Misunderstandings
- 15 The Frozen River, Part I
- 18 iPod on the Tracks
- 21 The Stuff of Life
- 26 *The Bad News Bears* and *Breaking Away*
- 34 The Kinks at the Garden
- 46 The Lost Glove
- 49 On Moving Out
- 66 A Visit to the Library
- 71 The Laundry Room
- 77 Us and Them
- 85 The Topographical Soul
- 89 Negative Space
- 99 The Purple Krama

DUKE

**UNIVERSITY
PRESS**



The Rights

- 107 Loose Teeth
- 111 Degas at the Gas Station
- 115 Thanksgiving Panic
- 121 The Pink Comma
- 127 How I Found My iPhone in New Orleans
- 134 The Two-Thousand-Dollar Popsicle
- 140 On Finding a Spot
- 146 Saying Goodbye to Now
- 151 Remembrance of Snows Past
- 160 Repeat, Memory
- 164 The Perils of Precocity
- 169 Drain You
- 173 Her Party
- 178 Napoleon on the Back Stairs
- 186 The Egg Cream in Mid-Manhattan, 1982
- 197 Somebody's Mother Is Waiting in the Lobby
- 203 That Time My Band Opened for Blur
- 209 Death of a Movie Theater
- 216 A Few Words About Jerry Stiller
- 220 Loitering with Intent at *Manet/Degas*
- 226 The Rights
- 237 Evacuation
- 243 The Frozen River (Reprise)

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PRESS

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Introduction

The Misunderstandings

One day, more than twenty years ago, I won a luxury cruise. I won by opening a fortune cookie at a party for a travel magazine. When the big tray of oversize fortune cookies was presented to my table, I had initially waved it away, taking a pass. Everyone around me took one, but I didn't want to engage in what I was sure was a charade. The young woman holding the tray was wearing the black pants and shirt of the catering crew; her face was pale and very smooth. She looked like Jim Morrison, I remember thinking, which I found jarring—Jim Morrison encouraging me to take the giant fortune cookie. I took one just to be agreeable and cracked it open along with everyone else.

I examined the slip of paper within.

"It says I won a cruise," I said.

I assumed this was a tease, and that I had won a *chance* to win a cruise. I looked at the young woman. Her face became blank and a bit soft.

"Wow. You won the cruise," she said in a stunned manner. It dawned on me that I had not won a chance to win; I had won.

Over a year went by without my taking the cruise. Part of the delay was a mild indifference bordering on contempt for the idea of a cruise, but mostly it was that there was no one with whom I especially wanted to go. Finally, I received a "use it or lose it" ultimatum from the magazine's marketing department.

As it happened, I had recently met someone for whom I wanted to do something impressive. I didn't know what, exactly. A gesture. When I called Elizabeth to suggest we take a cruise together and said I had one

D

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PRESS

picked out, I neglected to mention the giant fortune cookie. “I would like to invite you,” I said, as though I had bought a pair of tickets for us, or was prepared to. For many people, the idea of paying for a vacation is reasonable, even obvious, but for me, it was a kind of absurdity. I was in no position to buy tickets for a cruise; I was a freelance writer. When I traveled, which I sometimes did, it was on assignment, usually for the travel magazine at whose party I had won the cruise.

“A cruise?” said Elizabeth warily.

I played it straight. She agreed.

It would begin in Nice and end in Rome. We made plans to fly to Rome, travel through Italy, and spend a weekend with Don and Helen Meyers, old family friends who had a place in Saint-Paul de Vence. Then we would descend to the port in Nice and commence the cruise. Elizabeth insisted on paying for the Rome part of the trip. I didn’t say anything about the fortune cookie, again. Was this an example of bad manners? I am still pondering.

It was an intense time. We were brand new. We met at a wedding. She was friends with the groom. I was friends with the bride. It was the second time I attended her wedding. The first was to a close friend of mine, Rob Bingham, who had died six months later. There was a lot going on at that second wedding party, a lot of currents. I had glimpsed Elizabeth during the wedding but did not actually meet her until the afterparty.

By the time we got to Nice a couple of months later, we were on some kind of rocket. A matrimonial aura hovered over us. It felt meaningful that I was bringing her to Don and Helen’s place; I wanted to show this lovely woman to old friends of my mother and my late father. I suppose I was seeking their approval, though I didn’t think about it that way at the time. They were delighted with her.

Taking me aside on the first afternoon, Helen whispered, in her thick Viennese accent, “Buy her jewelry.” Their pleasure in Elizabeth was, I couldn’t help but feel, shadowed by a certain impatience with me.

Don and Helen were both psychoanalysts. Intellectuals. Also, Francophiles, as was the case with many of their generation who were in some way shaped by World War II. At some point in the 1980s, they

bought a glamorous villa overlooking the Mediterranean in the South of France.

The summer after college, I had rolled into their Vence house in a rather bedraggled state, having spent a couple of months traveling on my own in Europe. The trip culminated in a strange few days in the Greek Islands that ended with me getting off a boat in Athens with no money other than one random credit card that happened to have fallen out of my wallet just before I lost it along with my passport.

I finally made it to Don and Helen's place a week later, and they fed me and housed me for a couple of days, leaving me rejuvenated by the sense of shelter and the conversation. I was in good spirits when I got on the train to Paris and my flight home. Helen drove me down the steep mountain and came with me to the platform. The most vivid image of the whole trip might have been Helen in a white and yellow striped dress standing on the platform waving at me as my train pulled away while I waved back.

Don and Helen had met my father at the Columbia Psychoanalytic Institute, but Helen's connection to my father preceded their actual meeting—both of them were refugees from Vienna, though Helen came from a nicer neighborhood, she often added.

I knew enough, by the end of college, to sense that there was a special resonance about goodbyes in train stations in Europe if you were someone whose escape from Europe involved a train. Beyond that, I had a fleeting moment of seeing the scene through her eyes: Here is the son of her dear friend and colleague, who died about a decade earlier, going on the train to Paris and the rest of his life in better shape than when he had arrived a few days earlier. While she stood waving to me in her capacious yellow and white striped dress, and big sunglasses, and I waved back, I had the fleeting but pleasurable notion that I was going to be all right, in part because I thought whatever happened to me, I could always roll into Don and Helen's lives for a night or two to recuperate. I suppose I should mention that there was a long history of this, dating back to the day of my father's funeral, when I was nine. I spent that first night at their house. Sometime later, they bought the house in France, high on a

D

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mountain in Vence, with a pool and elegant cypress trees dotting the view of the faraway sea.

It was to this glamorous house on a mountain overlooking the coast of southern France—Nice, Cannes, and Cap d’Antibes—that I brought Elizabeth, for a couple of days before we embarked on our cruise. And it was there, surrounded by various shades of Matisse blue, that I asked Don and Helen a question about my father whose answer has resonated all the way into the pages of this book. I had not realized that it was urgent until the moment I asked it: “Why didn’t my father ever publish anything?”

My father, Alexander Beller, had been a psychoanalyst. This is a division of the medical profession in which literary production, though not required, is an indication of advancement, or at least ambition. Don and Helen had published articles and edited books. Why not my father?

I don’t know when my father’s lack of production as a writer started to bother me, but by the time of this visit, it had started to seem conspicuous. As a child, I knew my father wrote. When I woke in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, the trip from my bedroom to the bathroom took me past the entrance to his study, where he would invariably be sitting, bathed in lamplight, at the “French Desk,” as my mother calls it, an antique from another century with a smooth, subtly uneven surface of dark chestnut wood and curving legs, which my parents bought while traveling together in Europe sometime before I was born.

There he sat at this stately desk in the middle of the room, wearing his tortoiseshell glasses, a cigarette maybe smoldering between his fingers or in the ashtray, pondering his formidable Olivetti if he wasn’t busy emphatically stabbing at its shiny black keys. From this evidence, I knew that he wrote. I just didn’t know what.

At some point, many years later, when I was in psychoanalysis myself, I decided to try and find some of his writings. I was aware that many of his friends and colleagues had written articles, if not books, and assumed he had, too. But this was not the case. He’d never published anything, I discovered, which was particularly strange as there was a prize in his name at Columbia for best writing by a graduate of the Psychoanalytic Institute. This detail, in particular—giving a prize

for writing in the name of someone who'd never published—had come to seem . . . perverse.

It feels utterly remote now, the lost land of psychoanalysis, newly ascendant in postwar America, and now largely submerged beneath heaps of psychology and pharmaceuticals. But this was the world in which my father and his friends lived and worked. I know a few things about it, if only through osmosis. For instance, the time Don and Helen came to visit me at summer camp, which their son Andy also attended, and over lunch inquired about my dreams. I shared with them an image in which I was shooting baskets at a hoop, only instead of a ball, I was picking up and throwing globs of white foamy stuff that traveled from my hands uncertainly.

"This is clearly a dream about sperm," declared Helen. Her thick Viennese accent might have made such a proclamation funny, but my father had the same accent, so, for me, the effect was one of poignancy.

In that same conversation I mentioned climbing up and coming down a slide. Don, cheerful, gentle, and encouraging where Helen tended to be sharp-elbowed and blunt, explained to me in his broad American accent how things such as slides and roller coasters—things that go up and down—could be seen as sexual imagery.

Now I was a grown-up, bobbing up and down in their pool as I posed my question about my father: "Why didn't my father ever publish anything?"

Elizabeth was on a lounge chair just beyond the edge of the pool, as were Don and Helen. It was an odd angle from which to ask a question about my father and writing. But it gave the velocity of their response an added impact.

"None of us were publishing at the time your father died," said Helen. "We all started publishing a few years later."

At that time, in the early 1970s, they explained, there were all sorts of rigid hierarchies within the psychoanalytic community. There were insiders, and outsiders. My father and Don and Helen Meyers were all members of the Columbia Psychoanalytic Institute. This was the outsider group.

“We were intimidated,” Don said, “by the New York Psychoanalytic Institute.” That was the insider group. “We were, you know, terrified of the establishment. If he had lived a few more years, he absolutely would have started publishing along with the rest of us.”

When I say there was a matrimonial aura around Elizabeth and me, I mean that we were besotted, in love, in a state of fiery combustion, mostly in good ways, but also that I had the feeling of a new era about to dawn in my life. I had been in several relationships that had developed for some length, and even ripened toward marriage, only to move beyond ripe to be discarded. Sometimes I did the discarding, sometimes I was discarded, usually a bit of both. That I was hearing this information about my father’s silence with regard to publishing in Elizabeth’s presence only added to the feeling that I was entering a new world. The world of marriage and family. And how, from the perspective of this new world, I would begin to have some insights into the old world from which I came.

I was familiar with the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, having been employed there, very briefly, during a high school summer. The job involved boxes of books. The chief librarian, who was new, had just taken over from the just-retired chief librarian, Liselotte Bendix Stern, who was my step-grandmother.

Lilo had met my grandfather, the psychoanalyst Max M. Stern, at the New York Psychoanalytic Institute. My mother’s father was a brittle, tall German of some formality whose writing was, and remains, well represented “in the literature.” I both can and cannot imagine their courtship in the context of his use of the library, which was just a few blocks from where he lived and practiced psychoanalysis. When I was seven, they married. When I was fourteen, Lilo retired. Her replacement made every effort to be tolerant of the step-grandchild of her predecessor, whom she’d hired to unpack all of these boxes. But the whole thing lasted only two days. I unpacked a box of books but put them on the wrong shelf. Or had I failed to unpack some other box of books? It is all a somewhat hazy blur.

When I returned, many years later, to the New York Psychoanalytic Institute, it was as a supplicant. I wanted to be taken on as a patient by a training analyst at a “sliding scale.” It was like applying to college or graduate school, except one had to advertise in particular not one’s

triumphs or small aptitudes but the ways in which one was flawed, self-impaired, and in need of help. The whole thing was quite arduous, though perhaps a necessary preparation for psychoanalysis itself.

Once I got in and underway and a couple of years had passed, I decided to go to the New York Psychoanalytic Institute to see if my grandfather or father had published anything I could read. Which is when I found the many articles and reviews by my mother's father, Dr. Max M. Stern, and even a book, posthumously published, over which he had labored the last few decades of his life. *Repetition and Trauma*, it was called. Looking up his writings in the *Psychoanalytic Quarterly* of the 1950s and '60s, I discovered a voice much more droll than the severe Germanic voice of the man I thought knew. Meanwhile, I found nothing by my father.

My father, Alexander Beller, born and raised in Vienna in the shadow of the Prater and its famous carousel, had a lilt in his voice that I recognized as irony long before I knew what the word meant. He was warm. Distracted, preoccupied, often absent while at work, but warm and loving when he was around.

My maternal grandfather, Max, born and raised in Frankfurt am Main, Germany, did *not* have a lilt in his voice. Nor did he seem at all warm. They were very different people. But—strange as it is for me to put it this way—they were the men in my life.

My father died of cancer when I was nine and he fifty-two. My grandfather died seven years later, at eighty-two. Later in life I learned from my mother that the two men had never got along very well, and simply accommodated one another. Perhaps, during the seven years of my adolescence when my grandfather was alive and my father wasn't, I may have embodied that conflict. My grandfather and I didn't speak for two of these years, after a huge fight at his house. I had cursed (at Passover). He had told me not to. I invoked freedom of speech. Not in his house, he said. Then I'll just leave, I said.

Back and forth. Never did we break into chuckles over the absurdity of it all. Stern. Could there have been a more appropriate last name? The severity of that round forehead, that lean face, accentuated by a white goatee that echoed the medieval wood carvings and German ex-

D

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pressionist art filling his apartment. Just thirteen at the time, I became tearful and finally stormed out of his apartment. My mother, her face thin-lipped and severe, followed behind, lending me tacit support.

The living room of my grandfather's Park Avenue apartment was the stage on which our family visits unfolded, and at its center was a round table that spun, like a giant lazy Susan. Pouring tea as we faced him on the nubbly brown couch, we would gently rotate the table for careful stops at West, South, East, and, finally, North. But what if one had been . . . less careful? Our teatime visits existed in tension with my temptation to spin the table when it should not be spun.

The living room had a plush cream carpet, paintings on the walls, and a good many ancient artifacts from Greece and Rome in alabaster white—a head missing some of its nose, a female body, curvaceous and tiny, missing everything but the torso. But it was the African art, those fierce, forbidding masks, that best reflected the atmosphere of severity that surrounded my grandfather, along with the almost petrified, reddish wood sculpture of a large Virgin Mary extracted from a medieval church somewhere in Europe. This leaned slightly back toward the wall, in the corner of the living room behind the stereo equipment, which was itself piled on a side table at the end of the long brown couch on which he alone sat.

We reconciled when I was fifteen, my grandfather and I. He came into the foyer much more stooped than I remembered him, lifted his head up, and then further up, his bright blue eyes looking shocked and, I guess, delighted at my height, which I got from him, possibly the only time I ever saw him express delight. He brought me over to the glass vitrine in which small ancient artifacts had been arranged in rows on the shelves. Every time I visited, he said, I could choose one to take home. I scanned the shelves, trying to calculate the most valuable one, but then I gave in to a more basic impulse and chose a small metal figure of an enraged warrior shaking a stick in the air. A trinket that at the time felt like a triumph.

My parents had married in this apartment. My father was forty, nearly ten years older than my mother. After the wedding he walked six blocks to his office on East Seventy-Fourth Street. It was in a neighborhood where all the shops were prefaced by the word *Carlyle*—Carlyle Photo, Carlyle Chemists, the Carlyle Hotel—and saw some more pa-

tients. Their honeymoon took place the following weekend, when they drove down to Washington, DC.

I report these forensics almost as an act of pantomime in which I demonstrate that the raw data of facts and dates give only an illusion of intimacy with a time and place, while mainly achieving a kind of narcotizing effect on feeling or understanding. Like a narcotic, the facts are addictive, once you get used to dealing them out and using them.

The difficulties between Alexander Beller and Max M. Stern, in fact, predated my father's discovery of Dr. Stern's daughter.

Psychoanalysts, as part of their training, must be analyzed by a training analyst, and my father was to have his future father-in-law as a training analyst. My father spent a session on my grandfather's couch. The relationship did not take. Afterward—he must have stood up from the couch and left the apartment, thinking he would never return—he sought out a different training analyst. But a few years later he returned and got married in that very apartment, in the living room, just down the hall from the waiting room and the office with its ill-fated couch.

I wonder what my father felt when he returned to that address with Max M. Stern's daughter on his arm, to stand under a chuppah in the living room, a doctor getting married to a doctor's daughter. A psychoanalyst marrying the daughter of a psychoanalyst. A member of the Columbia Institute of Psychoanalysis getting married to the daughter of a member of the New York Institute of Psychoanalysis.

Years after my visits to the library where my step-grandmother had once worked, and where I had, too, for a couple of days, and years after that scene in the pool in the South of France—years, in fact, after Helen had died—it dawned on me that in seeking out an analyst, I had gone to the place associated with my grandfather, the cold one, and not to the place associated with my own beloved father, sanctified in the way that fathers who die too young are, at least at first, for their survivors.

I rushed with this question to Don, this time on dry ground, in the city. Had I betrayed him?

"Not at all," he said. "Your father and Helen were both snobs. They would have wanted you to go to the New York Psychoanalytic Institute."

It wasn't this fact, or *only* this fact, that assuaged my worry and unburdened me, but the humor and warmth with which it was conveyed. Which was just like him. Late in his life, Don came to a party for my J. D. Salinger book as a kind of guest of honor. His aunt Fritzi had been best friends with Salinger's older sister, Dorothy. Fritzi had brought Don along to meet her when he was a psychiatric resident in the hopes he might have some insight for Dorothy about her troubled younger brother, Jerry. Amid this crowded book party, Don took a seat in a grand old chair in the corner, whereupon the host rushed up to him and said, "Oh no!—You can't sit in that chair!"

"Why not?" Don said.

"Because . . . it's not long for this world."

He shrugged. "Neither am I."

But back to Provence, if you'll indulge me. For it was here, bobbing up and down in Don and Helen's swimming pool with the entire coast of France spread out below us, all of the Mediterranean it seemed, the incredible blue of the sea melting into the blue of the sky, and Elizabeth my not-yet-bride-to-be comfortably nearby, that I resolved the question of my father's publication, or lack thereof, which really was a question about his silence. Which, in turn, was another way of lamenting the fact that he had died too soon, had not seen me grow, had not been able to help with that, had not seen the long period of adventures and misadventures come to this most satisfying juncture, and now was not present to gaze upon Elizabeth and myself as we were set to embark on, among other things, a cruise. This is when Don mentioned, as though in passing, that as a kid I used to walk backward.

"Why?" I asked.

"No one knew," said Don.

Sometimes unrelated facts, purely for the timing of their arrival, feel paired: My father was publishing no more nor less than any of his peer group when he died; it's just that he died young. And when I was little, I walked backward.

This small biographical fact seemed, if not significant, then ripe for metaphor. What did it mean? That I was contrary? That I had been born with a genetic propensity for nostalgia? For looking back at the landscape that I had just left, as opposed to the one I was about to enter? That I was a descendant of such people? One generalization

about the Jewish diaspora, after all, is that there is a lot of looking back, along with a lot of escaping and fleeing.

What does it mean that a kid walks backward? Does it mean that I preferred not to know where I was going? That I had—*have*—an innate need to make things complicated? Was it sheer contrariness? Any of it was plausible. All of it. I asked my mother, who stated flatly that none of it was the case to begin with. Never had there been such backward walking.

Was she in denial? Or were Don and Helen, those beneficent figures of my youth, being in some way malevolent, or at the very least careless? I let this paradox simmer for a while, circling back to it now and then, asking my mother again from time to time. Who knew? Perhaps her take on it all might have changed since the last conversation.

Maybe there was no walking backward, just as maybe there would be no meaningful metaphor if there were. But I have to say, I like it, because it made sense to me that a child who enjoys walking backward would one day grow up to be a writer who draws from life, who writes books about the very act of looking back.

Many of these essays recount confrontations or predicaments that a more cautious person would have avoided. They were written over a period of time during which I got married, and we had a child, and then had another. Concurrent to these events, I moved from New York City to New Orleans, with a pit stop in rural Virginia. All of it normal enough on the face of it, yet within each one of these episodes, I found my way to the sort of Clouseau-esque fiascos one usually dodges with a little foresight—again, not a strong attribute in a kid who may have liked to walk backward.

One often fails to grasp how much a friend, lover, or family member has affected you until they are gone. It turns out that this is true of places as well. Many of these essays are propelled by a kind of separation anxiety. From a city, a neighborhood, an apartment, and also from possessions with which one may be separated only to be reunited.

Losing things is a big part of life, but so is finding them.

The walking backward riddle lingered on until once, when I brought it up yet again with my mother. After her affirming, yet again and with utter confidence, that I had never made a habit of walking backward, she added, “Unless it was in baseball or something like that.”

This is when I remembered that five days after my father's funeral, I had my tenth birthday party under the auspices of Don and Helen, who had organized a baseball game. Some other kids, older kids, who were children of other psychoanalysts, were also present. I have a dim memory of it having been nice, a fun afternoon of feeling special, as one would want a kid to feel on their birthday, even though there were so many ways that being special could now be construed as a bad thing, for I was now part of that special province of the fatherless.

And it suddenly came to me, if dimly, that during that baseball game I may indeed have run the bases backward. I won't say I recall doing it. But it suddenly seemed plausible, something at the edge of memory.

The riddle was solved. There was no riddle. So I *didn't* walk or run backward as a matter of course; nor was there a habit to which one might trace a significance. On the other hand, I may have done it once. Enough to register memorably for Don and Helen. A kid running from home to first base backward in those exciting moments after smacking the ball good. And from first base onward, moving forward but looking back and . . . oh, it's almost too easy to say, or maybe it's too difficult, finding his way home.

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