

Josef Krebs

## BODY OF WORK

It was later that night and the church bell was sounding the hour as Mann climbed into the car he had intended to discard for winter along with his cigarettes. He was surrendering to his future the way a dog surrenders to a bath. He turned the key to the ignition, backed the car out of the garage, and moved forward along the road. It was a different part of the night right now; it was the blue-black-and-white period, the warm-streaked-with-chill time. He slowed as he approached the area where his initial stroll had been terminated and examined the nearby stationary vehicles and the windows of buildings across the way. Satisfied that he was unobserved, he parked the car and climbed out. He went to the stone niche and looked down over the barrier. The body remained, unmoved by man or tide.

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His eyes opened and above him was the large plaster circle. Some light was penetrating thick ochre curtains covering the closed windows that stretched from ceiling to floor in front of his now tilted head; daytime had started all over again, much to his disgust.

Why disgust, he didn't know. It was just the way he felt as his first conscious feeling of the day. The man had had no dreams as far as he knew, but he had read somewhere that he had, that in fact everybody dreamed every night, though most people often refused to recall. He believed that he slept too little to dream, plunging into and bursting out of deep sleep without stopping in the subconscious shallows long enough to put any dreams together or let them take him apart. He could be wrong, but it seemed a rational explanation of the fact that . . . he had had no memorable dreams since childhood.

Back then, he had dreamt of a crocodile's jaws closing on the globe, which always left him in a state of howling terror, so he didn't really mind missing out on that state of being which some would prefer to never leave at all. However, now it was light and his life was waiting to be put into motion.

Mann turned back the corner of the sheet and climbed into the day. His feet cringed at the cold floorboards that always managed to ambush the last of his bed-warmth. Quickly shuddering over to the wardrobe, he pulled on a shirt, sweater, underwear, slacks, socks, shoes. No thought

went into his dressing other than a wish to cover up as quickly as possible. It was autumn and survival was always his first concern.

Mann put some coffee on stove and sat down at desk. The papers on it were neatly organized in his mind but would seem an ill-assorted mess to anyone who cared to break into the room. He picked up pencil and began to sharpen lead. It wasn't lead of course, just graphite, but somehow the name had stuck which was fine by him. The point went several times before he was able to start his day proper, but this was all part of the process by which he filled a few empty sheets. If he was lucky. This day was at that point where smell of singed rubber roused him from his reverie long enough to take coffee pot off stove and pour himself cup of deep-brown bean drainings. The writer in him let it all cool awhile as he continued covering a yawning-morning page.

His first sip of dusty-musty brew drew the sides of his mouth into retreat. Rubbing enervating drug onto palate, with harsh brush tongue trying to fill mouth with memories, he examined the face. It was careless. Features all over. Familiar as ever. The ridge at bottom of eye-enclave climbed out onto cheekbone, rolling softly down hill into mouth. Skin was oily dry. Taught. Lips tight, layer of skin bubbling into non-living shell that wasn't part of him. Remains of cooling coffee, licked dribblings, oily smoothness sucked from his teeth.

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Mann climbed barrier, dropped down into the mud, not being quite so careful, coming close to landing on prone figure. He'd felt that shoe was beyond recovery ever since it had left his foot on earlier impact with the mud but he went through the ritual of searching, spending several minutes hunting on ground before taking the next unenviable and inevitable step back to the body.

Crouching beside it, he reached out and took hold of the hand that was reaching away from him. It felt human, not unlike the hand of a child who had been playing in the snow. Mann resisted the temptation to attempt to warm it with his own and instead picked up that other hand, a lifeless limb that lay across the corpse's heart as though death had caught this person in a last profession of faith. He raised the body to sitting position and took it in a brotherly embrace, pushing his hands under its arms and down the back to its belt. Mann pulled upwards causing corpse's upper torso to fall across his right shoulder and, raising it in a fireman's lift, carried it across to the wall.

Once there, he gently lowered the body and, pulling up his own sweater, exposed a girdle of rope about a half-inch in diameter he'd recently wound about his midriff. Uncircling coils, he looped a length around the chest of corpse and tied a lasso with slip knot. Gathering up remaining rope he looked about him for something that could serve as weight. The mud seemed to have engulfed everything so there was nothing

for Mann to do but remove another shoe, this time from the other fellow's foot. Mann tied shoe to the free end of the rope creating a makeshift bolas and, giving himself enough rope to get sufficient swing, began a slow pendulous arcing of it that rapidly developed into a circling which in turn became an expanding spiral. Choosing the right moment, he let loose rope into the sky. The satellite climbed, trailing tail behind. As it passed the upright pillar, shoe, finding itself at the end of its tether, dropped and doubled up about post and in momentum began to swing around it and into a new inward-moving spiral before quickly coming to a halt at that apex.

A push. The hefty dead fellow fell forward and rope was pulled taught but held. Mann climbed past the anchoring corpse up to lip of the bank and pulled himself over. Having paused to recover, he hauled the dead weight up without loss of too much skin from its face. Mann then dragged cadaver into back seat of car, untied rope, put in boot, clambered into front.

Starting car's engine, Mann moved them off into the light mid-evening traffic whistling near-forgotten tune. His plan was to take the body far away from the damning evidence of his own lost shoe which would undoubtedly have been found during a police search of the area surrounding the body and eventually, inevitably, been traced back to Mann. Since he couldn't remove the clue from the body's proximity, he'd remove the body

from the clue. He'd take it to another part of the river that would equally well suit its condition and lung contents.

Everything would go back to being normal. All alright again. Not all, but . . . normal.

The tune, however, was soon interrupted by a blaring horn (French?). It sounded again and the reflection in the above head mirror showed a flashing blue atop the roof of a car. Inside it a seemingly disembodied hand was pointing, probably indicating that the man should stop at side of the road. Momentarily Mann gave vague consideration to acceleration but instead slowed vehicle down and brought it to halt as requested.

The police pulled up behind. An officer got out the passenger's side, put cap on, and approached. His companion remained at the steering wheel, seemingly disinterested in impending confrontation. Officer squatted down beside man's window so as to save bending into posture ungainly and uncomfortable. (Car was low.) Mann opened window and waited for a lifetime to begin.

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The sun was going down but he felt better, content with the workings he had got beneath belt. He was now charged in a way that sleep could not accomplish, ready to start his day outside. Pulling on old overcoat and battered hat essential in long London autumn, he set off, locking door in hole behind. It was just one flight of stairs to descend to street level,

not nearly enough really to give him any exercise when he ascended but, unlike those un-elevated parts of Paris, the distance from ground floor to apartment was not measure of a man's poverty. Still, a long, fast walk would burn off excess tension left over from his labor. Lovers argue, writers walk.

He headed for his favorite destination: The River. Lovers argue -- usually overhead in apartment above. Then, it was certainly good to get out and down to the river and walk along a bank in peaceful excitement that rose like ozone from its mother's pores. The sky was grey-blue, tinges of pink, the sun seeming to lose all its incandescence. Wasn't it much more likely that this elderly heavenly orb was cooling off for the night rather than restlessly moving elsewhere to tirelessly light someone else's day? That would be so . . . inhuman. But then again, Sun had every right to be so. It got here first. No, day and night, night and day were men's inventions, yet more reassuring illusions. But the Sun knew no routine. The Sun was irregular. Not part of a mechanical clockwork piece some would see it as. Constantly changing. Moving in expanding gyre, a spring let loose. If it were a timepiece, it would be the spring at moment of snapping. Through tension. Too wound. And he was heading down to River and that, too, was moving every which way whilst seeming to be still or lazing its way down to Sea in orbit around the sky and land. In truth, it was moving all over the place, pulled by the Moon

which in turn was being pulled about by the rushings of liquids in the body of womankind and the arguments of lovers.

Soon he reached the riverside, his step being quick and jittery, his insides soaked in caffeine and adrenalin of a writer in heat. His mind, too, twitched from thought to lamppost, walkers to lines, yellow to tarmac beneath his feet as he crossed road to be next to River on stretch of street that followed flow along -- man following nature.

The lampposts . . . were all pale blue. Against the sky's paler blue and pinks, they painted pretty picture. Around him air was warm like the glow of a day's work well done, burning off remaining chill of his morning. Cars passed him fast, shuttling off somewhere, people ready to start the day, the night for some being the day but in disguise and visa versa. Mud flats shone brown-grey khaki, not yet reflecting the lights of London, while incandescent illumination began to glow pinkish-orange now completing those lamps' imitation of sky, poor camouflage as Sun went down into the remaining river.

Mann came to a halt, in a niche where the railings turned abruptly, swinging out to circuit a flower "creation" -- a square cement-and-stone pool in which red petals had been planted like pretty maids all in a row in a row in a row as mankind attempted to take charge again, in spite of having given ground, thus far. He leaned down onto top of the railings. Up ahead was a bridge . . . to the other bank . . . to the other side.



The lights of vehicles moved along the length of it, dim lights in the half-light of the setting sun. He looked down over the railings and there was an arm, outstretched towards the water, vainly trying to reach the source of all life but failing to in its deadly deathly deadness.

Mann looked at it in its muddy grey brownness and it seemed to fit. Little waves slipping back from it, lapped against the docked and empty police riverboats across the way on the other side. Crystabel, one was called, Jemima the other. Strange names for the stocky bottles with their undeveloped masts fingering up, pointing from star to star as the hulls rocked from this side to that, cradled in the lapping, slapping waves. He stood upright, forearms aching from their contact with railings, stretched himself easingly, and moved on rubbing absentmindedly.

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"May I see your registration and license, sir?"

Mann took documents from inside pocket and handed over. Policeman examined and handed back.

"Do you know that your nearside rear side lamp is out?"

Mann thought for a moment. He smiled. The policeman smiled back.

"Also your farside rear side lamp."

"Oh! . . . It must be the wiring then. I noticed a bulb had gone out this morning and changed it but . . . stupidly, didn't bother to check . . . afterwards."

"Well, you can't drive with both back lights out. It's a danger to the public. They might think you're a bicycle." The policeman noticed the body in the back seat.

"He's all right?"

"Yes. Fine."

The deathly pallor of the body sat shrouded in shadow but its slumping spoke honestly of lifelessness.

Policeman took a closer look.

"He's sopping wet!"

"He fell into the pond. In a garden. At a party."

"Had too much to drink did'ee?"

"Yes. Much too much. He made a pass at the host's wife and she pushed him off. Into the pond. Now he's dead to the world."

"And did you have anything to drink, sir?"

"No, I wasn't at the party. I was just called in to take him home. He's my brother, you see. Never could hold his liquor."

"But he's white."

"Yes. But he's my brother. Different fathers."

The policeman wrinkled his nose, maybe catching the odor from the river-soaked clothes, and retired a little way.

"Well, you'd better get him home quickly then. I won't book you over the lights as you're on an errand o' mercy, but you can't drive any

further." The policeman glanced back at the body. "He'll be lucky if he doesn't catch pneumonia. He's already blue. I doubt if you'll find a taxi to take him in that state. I don't quite know what you can do."

"Well, I live close by. If . . . if you followed tight behind my car, your lights could do the job for both of us. After all, you know I'm not a bike and . . . it really won't be for long. Just five minutes."

The policeman thought for a while and eventually nodded.

"Alright then. Can't just abandon you. I guess one good turn deserves . . ."

"Oh, thank you. Thank you so very much."

"Move off slowly then and we'll tuck in behind you." The policeman strode back to his car. Again.

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The sun was down and he was restless. Agitated by a half-seen dream. Not a nightmare, but a daymare -- more disturbing. Mann got up from bed where he'd been thinking, staring at ceiling, wandering through memory, stirring into turmoil and losing any possibility of finding peace. He lit a smoke, old, stale, crackling-dry cigarette from packet long ago discarded. Nicotine left his tongue feeling frazzled, puckered. Mann opened window to get rid of memory but in doing so allowed the city to lurch into room. Mann closed window again but it was too late; he was breached.

His instincts led him to the door from whose hook he lifted a grey tweed jacket that he dutifully pulled upon himself. The man followed his heart through the door but held too long to handle making it hard to let go. Mann let go. Moving off along the corridor, down red carpet-covered stairs, across brown-black-and-white mosaic floor over thick, dark doormat sunk in brass-rimmed enclave, through thin inner door, solid outer door, he finally took the six steps that led down onto the street. And stopped. It was different. He couldn't tell how, exactly, but it was. He moved off again, heading nowhere in particular, except the river. (Accept the river.) He hurried through the chill and felt cold coming on, or at least a slight fever. It happened when peace and possibilities were pulling apart. He reached niche and halted. Looking over balustrade he saw that the river had receded disclosing its stomach and messy resting place. He climbed barrier and, not so much leapt as lowered and let go, to slip, to fall, to land deep in ancient silt. Balancing back, acclimatizing before turning at hip, he confronted and contemplated his adversity.

Lying on mud bank was figure, about six foot two inches in length, of not too much weight, dressed in loose black trousers, dark checkered shirt, brown jacket. It was thin of face and aged about forty years, but Mann could not be certain having dropped a good twelve feet from objective to avoid landing upon it. He uprooted his feet from mud, one at a time, and trudged to the head of the body, careful to maintain tenuous balance.

Leaning forward over empty face he padded hand over each breast before moving inside jacket. Wallet was worn and redundant: no money, credit cards, licenses, or papers that could put identity to their bearer. Mann replaced wallet and retired two paces to think.

Police stations were like hospitals -- once in you could never be sure of coming out. Mann turned and trudged back to looming wall. It took many attempts and tears on flesh and clothes for Mann's hand to reach iron post of balustrade. At first unable to raise himself higher, but eventually scrambling made a shoe drop off, allowing toes to find hold so Mann could pull himself up over lip of river's barrier. Accepting loss of shoe, Mann limped away from encounter, a little bowed and cowed.

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With corpse over shoulder and smile on his face, Mann gave a last wave to the policeman and closed front door. Climbing the stairs as quick as burden would allow, he re-entered his studio. Mann placed body on floor, thought, thought, crossed to window and cautiously looked out onto street below. Police car was gone or at least nowhere to be seen. Mann went to bed and lay down to recover strength and equilibrium.

He got up again, went back to the body, and dragged it by arm to tub in corner. Tub had once been part of a bathroom but Mann had developed a dislike for enclosing self in such small space and seeing no reason for the division had knocked walls down. Lifting body up and heaving it over

side of tub he let it slide down inside. Mann ran cold water over face of the bather and watched while level of water rose around it. Body floated a little because of gasses accumulated in guts and stomach but Mann got most of river dirt from its clothes by hosing down and forcing it under several few times.

Pulling plug, he went over to refrigerator and, while bath water drained away, began to empty contents onto floor. Mann lifted out dripping corpse and transported it 'cross room, over to fridge.

He had to fight against an on-setting rigor mortis, but Mann managed to fold body at knees and waist and, with a strength hitherto untapped, forced its concertina'd body into such a small enclosure. After few minor adjustments of feet, he closed fridge door on corpse, returned to bed, undressed with closed eyes, and went sleep.

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Mann did not wake 'til midday and then spent a time lying on back thinking about dream he might have had or would likely have had or would likely soon have at some time in near future. It concerned girl and a man. Mann was carving a piece of wood while the girl leaned on his bare shoulders. She stood there, behind him, telling him how to carve, what his next cut should be, what she saw in the wood. The gouge tool in his right hand slips, cuts into palm of his left hand and blood begins to pour from wound, trickling rapidly up wrist and arm, defying gravity. She

takes gouge from his hand and sticks in her own left palm and returns it him and takes up previous posture, leaning on his back. She continues instructing him; he resumes his carving, getting blood all over his tools and wooden doll he is cutting out. Blood from her palm runs down his chest from his shoulder. Not a dream, just a thought. Not a thought, just a feeling. Or maybe an idea. Maybe not his. He sat up and saw soggy food on the floor beside the fridge. Swinging feet over side of bed, he padded over to fridge, pulled open door, and stood for time holding handle frowning. He turned and closed the door and went to get dressed.

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It was later that night and the church bell was sounding the hour as Mann climbed into the car that he had intended to discard for the winter along with his cigarettes. He was surrendering to his future as a dog surrenders to a bath again and. . . .

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Having cleaned mess from the floor and put usable food in sink of had-been bathroom, he went back to fridge, turned control inside to Full, and closed door. Mann sat down to work. He wrote as he had never written before, it was all good and flowed without any pressure from writer, he wrote through day and most of the night that followed and in morning he

read aloud all that he'd written and it still sounded good. He sat down to work with joyous heart and did so for the next two months.

Three months later book was published.

His previous manuscripts had elicited fine collection of rejections from some of the . . . most highly thought-of publishing houses in England as well as a less impressive collection from less well-established firms. But this manuscript was accepted by the first editor he had sent it to and had thereafter sold briskly.

His second book was equally well received and the third and forth. Yet the sudden success did not go to writer's head. He continued living an identical lifestyle, residing in same room, writing under the same pseudonym, and driving same old car. The only addition to his life was a second refrigerator, for he was soon tired of eating the contents of tins and found that birds nibbled at whatever he left on the window-sill to keep fresh.