

von Keltner

1

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## A LITTLE UNDERSTANDING

by

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Franz stretched his long legs carefully, unfolding his newspaper, thankful that his company had decided send its executives first class. The last few weeks had been stressful, and he was looking forward to the long transpolar flight to Chicago from Frankfurt to unwind a bit.

The dark haired stewardess lingered just a little longer than airline service strictly warranted. She eyed the tall, distinguished looking German wistfully. The scar that ran diagonally across his left cheek wasn't at all disfiguring, she decided as she offered him the newest magazines. Covertly she glanced at his hands. A silver ring on his left hand, but it didn't look like a wedding ring. A peculiar deaths head design, she had never seen before.

He smilingly declined the magazines, but accepted her offer of a drink. Scotch and water, light. As she handed him the drink, she bent over far enough to give him full benefit of her cleavage. His lips quirked, and he smiled as he took the drink. To her disappointment, he returned to his newspaper. She decided he must

be about mid fifties, but a very fit and young fifty-something.

Actually, Franz was nearer seventy than fifty, but good heredity and attention to diet and exercise kept him fit and healthy. He was aware of the flight attendant's interest, but she was a bit young for his taste. He returned to the article on Volkswagen that had caught his interest.

"She sure was giving you the eye, wasn't she?" The swarthy man sitting next to Franz offered as he ran a pudgy hand through his dark, tightly curling hair. The man glanced at the headline on the paper Franz was reading, "Volkswagen to open new plant".

Concealing his annoyance, Franz looked down at his seat mate. I hoped he wouldn't be the conversational type he thought tiredly. He smiled faintly, but didn't reply. Perhaps, he hoped against hope, he'll think I don't speak English very well.

"You interested in VW?" the man asked. Without waiting for Franz' answer he continued "I had a VW when I was in college. Best car I ever had. Kept it for years, then I had to get a bigger car when the kids came along. Boy, I hated to part with it. Say, who designed it, do you know?"

I wonder what he would say if I told him Adolph Hitler. thought Franz with an inward chuckle. Gravely, he answered, "I'm not sure who engineered the first models, but I believe Dr. Porsche was the design consultant for the overseas version." He took a sip of his scotch.

"Oh yeah? Like the fancy Porsches, huh. It was a great little car, though. Why, I used to get 35 miles to the gallon,

and..." the salesman continued extolling the virtues of the VW Beetle. At last he wound down.

Franz returned his attention to his newspaper. Evidently a bit miffed his seat mate continued. "Dr. Porsche, huh! Wasn't he the one who designed the ovens?" He laughed nastily.

Verdammt! Not again! Franz looked a bit frostily at the man seated at his left. "What ovens?" he said coldly.

"You know, the ovens you guys burned up all the Jews in." The man looked smug, waiting for Franz to squirm.

Franz waited a minute for his anger to subside. Then he said in a politely conversational tone, "As a matter of fact, I think he also designed the ropes you people use to lynch negroes, and the gasoline you burn black churches with." He ignored the spluttering of his suddenly irate seat mate as he pointedly turned back to his newspaper.

I suppose I shouldn't have said that, he thought wearily but I am so sick of this rudeness. Why start a conversation just to be insulting? A strange people, the Americans. One never knows what to expect. I didn't understand them the first time I came in contact with them fifty years ago, and I still don't. He stared out of the window, not really looking at the fleecy white tops of clouds which stretched for miles like a field of cotton quilting.

He thought back to his first contact with Americans...

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Franz hunkered down behind the spindly clump of beech trees.

The mud was starting to thaw, turning to a stinking slime overlying the still hard frozen base. A sullen rain trickled cold streams down the back of his neck despite the canvas tent square he had wrapped around himself for the little extra warmth it would provide. The raw wind cut through every pore of his threadbare uniform. The paper he had stuffed into his worn out boots was soggy with mud. He no longer noticed his aching hands and feet, they blended into the general misery of fatigue, hunger and pain which he had pushed aside for so long that it seemed a normal condition.

He wiped some of the mud from a grimy hand, then rubbed his crusted eyes. The attack had to come soon. The overcast sky that had protected them for so long was showing signs of clearing.

A low flying plane fired a few half-hearted rounds into the woods. Automatically Franz flattened himself, lacing his fingers over the back of his neck as if somehow his bare hands could deflect a machine gun bullet.

Off in the distance the Ami artillery began again. Franz raised his head cautiously, then heaved himself wearily to his knees. The remainder of his squad, the five survivors were all wounded, two of them seriously. He wormed his way over to the wet pile of leaves and twigs which served as shelter for the two troopers who were stoically waiting for death.

The closer one, a thin blond boy, a few months younger than Franz, was lying with his fists pressed into his belly, trying to ease the agony. He opened his eyes and smiled thinly at Franz.

"Today is my birthday!" he said urgently. It seemed very important to him that Franz knew that it was his birthday. "Today is my birthday!" He repeated.

Franz reached for something to say. I can't wish him a happy birthday, for God's sake. Aloud he said, "Hey, great. How old are you?"

The boy grimaced as another spasm racked his thin body. "I'm seventeen!", he said proudly. His eyes glazed and his mind wandered. "My father says I can have a motor scooter when I'm seventeen." He looked perplexed, then his eyes focused on Franz' concerned face. "I hurt, Franz. I hurt so bad." The last word came as a gasp, as he pulled up his knees to try to ease the fire in his belly. "I'm..." suddenly his eyes grew wide with surprise. "Mama..." he gasped, reaching out with his bloody hands, "Mama..." Blood gushed from his mouth, and he fell back into the shallow crater, his eyes wide and staring.

Franz looked for a moment at the body of his friend. His eyes were scratchy with tears he could not allow himself to shed. He closed the boy's eyes gently, and reached inside the bloody shirt, snapped the identity disk in half, and put the lower half of the disk into his shirt pocket, to be given to division headquarters if he ever got back. He buttoned his pocket carefully. The disk clinked gently against the four he had taken earlier in the day. He checked the other trooper. He was still alive, but unconscious. At least he isn't suffering, thought Franz as he started to inch backward.



A sudden burst of shell fire recalled him to his own dire situation. Franz dove for the dubious shelter of a fallen tree as shells began to fall closer to his position. He squirmed over to the MG42 machine gun, checking again the field of fire. He counted the belts for the fourth time. Still only three. He looked across at the other machine gun emplacement. Together they controlled the open field in front of them, at least as long as their ammunition held out. The other gunner held up his fist. Daumen drucken, Junge! (keep your fingers crossed, kid!)

Franz covered his eyes as a close shell burst sent a cascade of rocks and mud pelting down on him. An exploding shell deafened him. The barrage was walking forward, the tanks and ground troops should be coming into sight at any moment. His opposite number signaled. "They're coming!" The first of the ground troops came running, the low crouching run of the experienced infantry man.

Franz watched for the signal to fire. The lead gunner raised his hand. The enemy infantry were closing the distance fast. Franz watched intently, his hands gripping the MG42 fiercely. His fingers tightened on the trigger as the long awaited signal finally came. The fields of fire converged murderously, scything through the ranks of oncoming infantry.

A courageous enemy soldier stood briefly and lobbed a grenade. It bounced off the log on which Franz machine gun rested. Franz grabbed it and threw it back. It burst in midair, halfway between them. Franz fed the last belt into his gun. He held up his left hand, indicating that he was on his last belt, asking hopelessly

for more ammunition. Again he waited while the enemy infantry advanced. Finally, as the nearest soldiers were only a few meters away, he opened fire, sweeping his gun from side to side until it finally spluttered into silence. Franz grabbed his 98k carbine, sighting carefully, then firing as fast as he acquired targets. A barrage of tank fire walked forward over his position. He tried to burrow into the muddy turf as shell after shell hammered at the German lines. He felt a sharp blow on his left side. He dropped the gun he could no longer hold, his arm suddenly numb. He felt strangely detached. Death was certain now, there was no way out. He fumbled with his good hand for his last grenade. Before he could pull the pin, a shell fragment slammed against his steel helmet, sending him spiralling down into blackness.

Bright flames of pain shot through the darkness. Pain flashed down his arm and leg, racking through his body as two Ami infantrymen tossed him onto a pile of German dead in the back of a halftrack. Involuntarily he screamed. The Ami sergeant stopped. "Wait - this one's still alive. Put him in the other truck."

The sweating corporal paused, "Aw, hell, Sarge, he's near enough."

The swarthy sergeant considered, then shook his head slowly, "Naw, can't do that. Anyway, they said they wanted prisoners." Grudgingly, the corporal pulled Franz from the pile of dead and dumped him on the floor of the truck which contained a few wounded Ami soldiers. The corpsman glanced at him, then continued bandaging the arm of a moaning corporal. As far as he was

concerned, the damned Kraut could lie there and rot.

Franz drifted in and out of consciousness, sliding into a state of fevered numbness. He started to toss and moan. A kick from the corpsman silenced him. He slid over the edge into the welcoming darkness.

Franz was only vaguely aware when the truck stopped at the field hospital and he was dumped on the floor of the aid station. Casual hands pawed at his uniform, removing weapons and tearing off his SS runes and Iron Cross, fumbling through his pockets, stripping off his wrist watch. He felt as if it were happening to someone else. He was faintly glad when they finally left him alone.

I wonder how long it takes to die? he thought confusedly. What's taking so long...I'm so cold...I hurt...I need to piss... He tried to drag himself up. A passing orderly pushed him down again, not unkindly. "You ain't goin' nowhere, Kraut, just stay cool. We'll get to you sooner or later.

During the long day he floated in and out of consciousness, his thoughts disconnected, feverish. Should I try to escape? Where? How? He tried to puzzle out where he was. The Amis had set up the field hospital in what appeared to be a school gymnasium. He was lying in a corner, out of the main flow of activity. From time to time, hurrying orderlies entered a doorway a meter or so from Franz' corner. I guess it's a supply area. They seem to be coming out with piles of stuff in their arms. I wonder if there's an exit... He tried to ignore the flaming pain



in his side as he inched forward, freezing whenever he heard approaching footsteps. Almost there! He stretched out a bloody hand to catch the edge of the doorway to pull himself up. A steely hand caught his wrist.

"Where the hell do you think you're going?" Franz looked up into the annoyed face of an orderly. The burly corpsman dragged Franz back to his corner, ignoring the trail of blood he was leaving. "And stay there, Kraut!" The Ami kicked half-heartedly at the crumpled form. Franz bit hard on his lip, trying not to cry out. The corpsman started away, then turned. He squatted down beside Franz, picking up his wrist, taking his pulse. He looked into the boy's pain filled eyes. "I'm sorry, kid. I don't know if you understand me, but the Doc'll see you pretty soon. I can't give you nothin' for the pain until he checks you out. I'll get you a blanket, though."

The corpsman was back soon, and spread the coarse wool blanket gently over the young trooper. "Danke! T'ank you." Franz tried out one of the few English phrases he knew.

"It's OK, kid. Keep a stiff upper lip. You'll be OK." He patted Franz on th shoulder, awkwardly. The man moved off hurriedly.

Franz clutched the edge of the blanket. The pain was coming now in waves, tearing at him like claws. He knotted his fists in the heavy wool, and gradually the agony receded into a dull ache. Eventually he slept.

He was jolted awake by impersonal hands which stripped away

his blanket, opened his uniform blouse, and partly stripped him. The blood soaked uniform stuck to the wound. The corpsman pulled it loose with a jerk, starting the wound in Franz' side bleeding again.

The doctor bent over Franz briefly, sighed and looked up at the corpsman. "Yeah, well, prep him. I'll grab a donut and a cup of coffee. Call me when he's ready."

The bright light glared in Franz' eyes. He lay naked, tied down to the operating table. He shivered, both from cold and from anxiety. What were they going to do to him?

The doctor looked down at the slight boy contemptuously. "Some Superman! We'll see how tough you are, Kraut. I want to hear you beg! I'm a Jew! How do you like that, you Nazi bastard?" The doctor glared venomously at the young soldier.

What is he saying, I wonder? He's mad about something... I wish I understood better.... Franz closed his eyes, trying to brace himself. I'm an SS soldier. I will not cry out. He clenched his teeth, holding hard to the edge of the table, against the searing pain of scalpel and probe. I will not scream, I will not! His breath came in heavy gasps.

At last it was over. The doctor set the last stitches, annoyed that he had not been able to make Franz beg for mercy. The boy had stoically endured the process. He had not really expected that they would treat his wounds before they questioned him. Instead the surgeon had carefully removed the shrapnel fragments, suturing and cleaning each wound skillfully. It had hurt, of course, but he

had been able to bear it, he thought, as befitted an SS trooper. I'm glad it's over. Franz thought exhaustedly.

The doctor was still speaking to him. Franz strained to understand, but only caught a word here and there in the tirade.

"Don't you have any feelings, you Nazi scum? They'll probably shoot you, you know. What do you think about that? Show some emotion, damn you! Aren't you even human?" The doctor paused after the retoricat question.

Franz looked up at him, grateful for the treatment of his wounds. His English was very limited. Clearly the doctor expected him to say something. "Thank you, Herr Doctor" he rasped.

"How dare you mock me, you SS son of a bitch! You filth! You crud!" His face suffused with rage, he slapped Franz across his bloody lips. "You...you..." Then he looked at the bewildered expression on the boy's face, seeing him for the first time as a badly hurt youngster instead of as a faceless enemy. Reaction washed over him like an ice cold shower. My God, I struck a patient! Worse than that, I hurt him deliberately. I wanted to see him suffer. Just a scrawny kid, and I... He shook his head, trying to clear his chaotic thoughts. It had been a long, hard day. He turned again to Franz. He said slowly "How old are you, boy?"

Franz looked puzzled. The doctor repeated, "How old are you? Age? Wie alt, du?"

I wonder why he wants to know how old I am? Guess it can't hurt to tell him. It's not any kind of military information. Aloud

he said "Siebzehn und ein halb." The doctor held up ten fingers, then six. Franz shook his head, the man added a finger and Franz nodded.

Guilt overwhelmed the tired doctor. Some Mensch I am. Torturing a wounded seventeen year old. Maybe I should join the Gestapo. He turned to the nurse assisting him. He thought he read disapproval in her eyes. "Get a half grain of morphine, stat." Gently, he injected the pain killer. "I... I'll see you don't hurt any more, boy."

Franz last thought as he spiralled down into the soft, warm welcoming darkness was "I'll never understand Americans..."

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I'll never understand Americans, thought Franz as he was roused from his reminiscence by the pretty stewardess. He handed her the now empty glass and declined another drink. What a strange people. First they throw me in a pile of corpses, then haul me out and take me to the hospital. Then they treat me like garbage, and then the orderly was kind to me, gave me a blanket. First the doctor treats my wounds and then slaps me for thanking him. He seemed glad it hurt me, then he gives me enough morphine to knock me out for days... Franz leaned back in his seat. His last thought before he drifted off to sleep was, no, I'll never understand Americans.