



STORYLANDIA

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The Distance Between Here and Elsewhere: Three Stories

By David Meischen

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The Distance
Between Here
and Elsewhere:
Three Stories

by
David Meischen

Crossing at the Light

Albert Decker and Grady Smith, July 14–15, 1965

Albert woke at 6:30, aware in the instant that it was Claude's birthday. He made up the Murphy bed he'd slept in since 1934 and folded it back into the wall, bands of summer sun along the seams of the closed window blinds suspending the room in a glow that brightened perceptibly as he stood watching. He shared the little apartment—and the package store below—with his mother, his days dispensed behind the counter, selling liquor to the locals, inhaling the dust they trailed behind them as they browsed these narrow aisles, five thousand miles from the one place he could imagine inhabiting. Still, each morning until Mrs. Decker woke—each morning was his.

After a quick breakfast of toast and jam, Albert fetched his cosmetics case from the cabinet beneath the bathroom sink and flipped the switch for the makeup lights he'd had installed around the mirror. He didn't like what he saw. He'd always enjoyed being slim, but the skin at his throat had begun to let go, a sag at his Adam's apple the brightness exaggerated. Before attending to his face, he unfastened the top shirt button and laid his collar open to the burn scar—like the negative of a shadow across the left collarbone—a private reminder of his mother's skillet, the frying grease splashed from it so many years ago that without the scar he might not credit memory.

He smoothed liquid foundation over the shadows beneath his eyes, still his best feature, set off by the wonderful lashes that Claude had so admired. He crimped them with his eyelash curler—no need for mascara—and then applied eyeliner, a thin, thin line of it. Finally, a dab of oily rouge massaged into the flesh of his cheeks until you wouldn't know it wasn't natural. Done, he leaned in and whispered his name, his breath fogging the mirror, whispered "Ahl-baïre," his voice taking on a French accent, the only way he had pronounced his name since Claude first spoke it.

Fingernails were next. Albert took the cosmetics case and moved to the kitchen table. Yesterday morning he'd removed the polish he'd been using for years—almost clear, with just a hint of pearl. Last night he'd filed and buffed his nails, then massaged the cuticles, making of each nail a perfect oval. His hands were lovely still, the fingers long and slender, the skin smooth, with a smattering of faint, hardly noticeable liver spots.

He'd wanted something new for a while. A hint of color, perhaps, something to brighten the days. Three weeks ago—with Claude on his mind, the approaching birthday—he'd turned a page in one of his mail-order catalogs and there it was, a translucent nail polish quickened by a blush of coral. Nothing flashy. Flashy wasn't his style.

Several months ago a stranger had come into the package store—wandered off the highway, apparently. Albert's life was Nopalito and its residents, the boundaries they had negotiated over the years. The women—some of them, anyway—treated him like one of themselves; others, like an errant child with

whom they had come to a grudging truce. The men were prone to smirks, the occasional wisecrack. Or clumsy silences, not knowing what to say or where to look. The children gave him a wide berth. His temper was legendary.

The stranger was something else again, a stunning specimen of a man, his cheeks darkened by the blue-black of four o'clock shadow, a way of carrying himself that said he was at home inside the body God had given him. Albert took in the boots, the hat, the fit of the man's khakis.

"Good afternoon," he said. "And welcome. You must be lost." He was used to his voice, long since inured to the transformations it effected in men's faces. The upper register came naturally to him—a lightness in his words, a whispery lilt.

"You sell rye?" the man asked.

"We do."

"Feels cool in here. Your air conditioner running?"

By way of answer, the condenser turned on, a pitch beneath the fan whirring from the unit in the window.

"Well, then," the man said. "I'm not lost." For a leisurely half hour he wandered the aisles, pulling the occasional bottle from a shelf and seeming to study the label before he put it back. Between times his eyes were on Albert. At the end, with a pint on the counter between them, Albert let his patience off its tether.

"Surely you know that staring is rude."

"Seems to me you're asking for it. Made up like that."

"I want to look my best. Same as you." Sliding his fingertips along a shelf beneath the register, Albert

flipped open the cigar box sitting there, and beneath an oiled cloth nestling in the box, touched his snub-nosed Smith & Wesson. The revolver's heft, its cold, smooth surfaces, heartened him.

"You've got nerve," the man said.

"In a place like this"—Albert glanced from the face before him to the front window, the dusty edges of the town beyond—"I'd drink up all the profits if I didn't."

The stranger laughed out loud. "You're an odd one."

"I suppose I am."

"Gerald Hamilton," the man said, extending his hand.

"Ahl-baíre" Albert took the man's hand in his. "Ahl-baíre Decker."

Gerald Hamilton screwed his eyebrows into a question.

"It's a long story," Albert said. "Perhaps another time."

The man paid and left, his presence lingering as the afternoon slipped away, the gruff timbre of his voice rippling at the edges of hearing. It was the kind of voice that came to Albert sometimes in dreams. Odd dreams, these were, drained of motion, color, participants, reduced to the husk of a whisper in the dark, the prickle of whiskers at his earlobe. No words, at least none that he remembered waking.

The rare dream put him with Claude—the two of them at a sidewalk café near the Seine, a table between them and never alone, the cobblestone thick with strangers and their blurring words. Never did this clamor fade to the room on the Rue Saint-Jacques, as on the afternoon when Claude kissed Albert and led him to the bed, took off his clothes and touched

him, touched him all over, nibbling at the skin of his throat and chest, his stomach and thighs—the first time he had come unabatted by dreams or his own right hand. And that smell at the back of his throat, that smell drenching the shadowed room.

His nails painted and dried, a second coat put on and dried, Albert took the stairs to the floor below. He was still not used to the open stairwell—no door at the top to unlock and lock behind him as he went down to look at his roses, no dark to descend, no locked door to negotiate when he reached the bottom. Both doors had been removed to make room for the chairlift he'd had installed early in the summer, after Mrs. Decker had announced her imminent retirement from the package store, the town beyond. Her bones, she'd said, her declining strength. She'd let him run the business.

He was doing that already, as he'd taken pains to remind her. He tended the store and ordered more of what they needed, restocked the shelves and kept the ledgers in order. He'd taken over in the kitchen forty years ago, did all the necessary shopping. Mrs. Decker went out exactly once a week—and only with Albert beside her. Vanity forbade the use of her cane outside the apartment, so she linked her arm in his and slowly, maddeningly, they attended to her social requirements.

His days were given to the store; at breakfast and after closing time, his mother's company. Asleep, even—or waking in the night—he felt the weight of her presence a room beyond. The one time his mother took up the burden of herself was each afternoon after her nap, when she came downstairs to mind the store.

He'd had no intention of giving that up. He'd made phone calls, arranged for the chairlift to be installed. Mrs. Decker had the money, decades' worth of oil royalties collecting interest at the bank. When the crew arrived from Corpus Christi, he got out her checkbook and faced her down. While the lift was going in, he arranged to have the apartment repapered and engaged painters for the woodwork. They were almost done, their tools and buckets stashed in the backroom that led from the package store to the yard. Albert crossed through the clutter and let himself out.

There wasn't much of a yard—a wide flower bed that ran from the door to the storefront, a driveway paved with crushed rock, and the carport they'd added when Mrs. Decker turned fifty and bought the car that sat beneath it, a 1938 Bentley coupe.

The flower bed was ablaze with Albert's roses—a dozen hardy vines, tea roses all, chosen for color and fragrance. Each morning of their bloom, he visited the roses.

He'd started them a decade ago, some months after the rough encounter he'd had in San Antonio, the terrible thing he might have done by way of recompense. The first had come from Grace Hoffman, a cutting she'd given him on a visit with his mother, who hadn't wanted to leave him alone on a Sunday afternoon for fear he might harm himself in her absence. Mrs. Hoffman and his mother had wandered ahead of him, stopping to admire first one planting and then another.

Drifting, emptied out, Albert tipped his head to a cluster of blossoms and closed his eyes. In the moments that slipped away before he opened them again, he breathed among roses at the Tuilleries, a

scented breeze fluttering at his collar while somewhere ahead Claude and his mother practice their charm on each other.

“Good morning!” A voice came from the street—Grady Smith, approaching Albert where he stood among his roses. The boy was like a colt, all bones and angles and unbalanced grace. He never stopped moving even when he was standing still, never stopped talking. He had lovely, curly, honey-blond hair—shorter than it ought to be, but his father was in charge of haircuts.

There wasn’t anyone the Smith boy wouldn’t talk to. Mrs. Decker’s word for him was *fresh*, by which she meant that somebody should have put a bit in the boy’s teeth by now.

“I’m on my way to work,” Grady said. “Spent the night at Granny Grace’s.”

“Mrs. Hoffman isn’t your grandmother.”

“She’s Janet’s. Janet got me invited. Her momma is my daddy’s sister—that’s how we’re cousins. Her daddy is Mrs. Hoffman’s son—he’s my uncle, but no, his mother isn’t really my grandmother.” The boy stopped and looked around, as if trying to get his bearings.

“It sounds confusing,” Albert said.

“Seems like all the folks I know in this town are either blood kin to me or blood kin to somebody I’m blood kin to.”

“I don’t have family here—anywhere, really, outside these walls.”

“When everybody’s kin, everybody knows everybody’s business.”

Albert smiled. “Now *that* I understand.”

“They mean well, though, the people who live here.”

“I’m not so sure.”

“Ralph—he’s my brother—”

“I know who your brother is.”

“Ralph says somebody ought to be driving that car.” Grady pointed to the Bentley, which had been a riddle for the townspeople since the day it arrived at the package store.

“Everyone has ideas about the Bentley,” Albert said. “What is your opinion?”

“My momma would wallop me for sass, but why don’t *you* drive it?”

“I never learned to drive.”

“It’s a crime, Ralph says, for a car like that to sit there and rust.”

“The Bentley doesn’t have a speck of rust. Our mechanic takes it twice a month. He checks the tire pressure and keeps it tuned—whatever’s necessary. He even takes it for a spin.”

“Who’s your mechanic?”

“Clayton Moore.”

“You should hear what Momma says about him.”

Albert was not surprised. Clayton Moore had made a second career of sniffing up skirts. Still, he was the best mechanic in the county, and Albert said as much to Grady, adding “The man has motor oil in his blood.”

“Sure is nice to look at,” Grady said. Then, as if recognizing the tug his voice had betrayed, he blushed to the roots of his hair.

“Yes,” said Albert. “I suppose he is.”

“Hey, what do you feed your roses?” the boy asked. “They’re about the prettiest I’ve seen.”

“Eggshells and banana peel.”

Grady put his nose to a whorl of petals.

“Mmmmm,” he said.

“They were chosen for their bouquet,” Albert told him, saying *boo-káy* instead of *bó-kay*.

Grady scrunched his brow. “I thought a bouquet”—he followed Albert’s example—“was a bunch of flowers, you know, picked and put in a vase.”

“The French use it to describe the scent.”

“Where did you get them? Your roses?”

“Cuttings. This one your Granny Grace gave me.” Albert pointed to the cluster Grady had smelled. “The rest came from Miriam Koehn’s rose garden. Rupert let me take the cuttings after Miriam passed.”

“Know what I heard? I heard Mr. Koehn wooed Granny Grace when they were young. Don’t you love that word? *Wooed*? Momma says he’d marry her this afternoon if she’d say yes this morning. Evelyn—she’s my sister, I guess you know that too—Evelyn says it’s ridiculous at their age, all that love stuff.”

A bee buzzed past Albert’s ear and dived into a rose.

“Can you picture it?” Grady asked. “Mr. Koehn kissing Granny Grace?”

“Kissing is private. It’s not for us to judge.”

“Would you kiss someone? Now? Ten years from now?”

“What a person feels inside,” Albert said, “sometimes that doesn’t change with age. The heart wants what it wants.”

He’d been seventeen that summer with Claude, thirty-two before a man touched him again—a young soldier in transit six months after Pearl Harbor—an exchange of glances in the San Antonio bus station, two minutes against a downtown alley wall at three in the morning. In the years that followed, when the

hunger was on him and would not be hushed, Albert took the bus to San Antonio perhaps a dozen times. He felt no shame afterwards on the bus ride south, but what happened with the men he met—it wasn't what he wanted. The driver always woke him when they pulled up to the stop in Nopalito. Stepping down from the bus, he had a rancid taste at the base of his tongue, and the least of it was that he'd taken a stranger's cock into his mouth.

But then he met the married man, a successful businessman, from the looks of him—expensively tailored suits, lush silk ties, gartered socks. He was an older man, had a wife, grown sons, and grandchildren already old enough to be in school. Albert spotted him in the lobby of the Gunter Hotel—restless, casting about, clearly looking. He put himself in the man's path, had lunch with him, followed along afterwards to a lovely room upstairs. They had sex immediately, talked a while, and then had sex again. They talked the sun down, had room service for dinner, had sex a third time. As dark descended and the downtown lights blinked on, they talked some more. Albert never knew the married man's name. "Call me Bill" is what he said when asked. "I'll be back," he said as Albert dressed for leaving. "In a month. Please say you'll come." He put his arms around Albert from behind, put lips to his ear, whispered, "We'll have lunch," the promise of their bodies biding in the words.

Six times they had lunch at the Gunter. Six times they went to Bill's room afterwards. In bed, the married man was gentle—no roughness ever, no penetration. He wouldn't kiss or be kissed on the mouth. He would curl up behind Albert, reach around and touch him—nipples, belly, hips, the tender spots

below—take him in hand and whisper, stroking the while until he made him come, then turn and let Albert do the same. Bill trembled when they were in bed together, as if beneath his gentleness a desperate hunger ached untamed.

When they weren't making love, they talked, though no family names, no place names surfaced in the married man's stories. Albert observed no such caution. He talked about his mother, the package store, the residents of Nopalito. He showed Bill his scar and told him about his father. It wasn't that he lacked for conversation otherwise. His days were marked by words, but they were only sounds rehearsed to fill up space. And when his neighbors spoke to Albert, their eyes went here and there, vacantly. On the rare occasion when a gaze crossed his, he could see clearly that not one among the people with whom he spent his days wanted him to say a word about the life unfurling inside. Across a lunch table from Bill, though, or side by side on their long afternoons in bed, Albert felt that he was seen.

Finally, on the evening of the sixth visit, he found himself talking about Paris. He spoke of the cafés, the long walks, the delirium he'd felt eluding his mother and going out alone with Claude.

"So," Bill said when the story was over, "a boyhood crush. And you're still not over it."

"A crush."

"Puppy love," Bill said. "You were seventeen." His voice, his smile, had not changed. What came out of his mouth was cordial and affectionate as before.

"It was the one chance I had."

"Everyone has second chances."

"I haven't."

"But you were so young."

“Life gives what it gives. Life doesn’t care how old you are.”

On the street below, tires screeched and a horn honked. As the noises rippled into quiet, Albert wished he’d kept Claude to himself.

Bill got out of bed, slipped on his shirt, and walked to the window. He stood there for a while, his face lit up by the light beyond.

“Get out of that town,” he said, still facing the window.

“And go where?”

“Here.” Bill’s wave took in the city beyond the window.

Albert laughed out loud. He had been to San Antonio.

“Look at all these people,” Bill said, as if awed by the throng below. He turned back to Albert. “You could find someone.”

“I have.”

This time Bill laughed. He came back to bed and they made love again.

A seventh date was proposed and agreed to. A seventh time, Albert rode the bus north. A seventh time he arrived as planned. Bill wasn’t in the lobby. Albert had lunch alone in the dining room, willing a calm he didn’t feel, and then sat in the lobby until he felt conspicuous. He spent the afternoon on the street outside the hotel, walking to the corner, crossing at the light, walking back opposite the hotel to the Majestic Theater, where he stood beneath the marquee for a few minutes before retracing his steps to the hotel entrance. And then again. He’d made a pact with himself—that he must keep the hotel entrance in sight, that if he looked elsewhere for the space of a minute, Bill would choose that interval for his arrival

and would be inside the hotel by the time Albert looked back. If he looked away, he said to himself, he would never see Bill again.

At ten that evening, he walked to the bus station and boarded the last bus. He was surprised by his calm on the ride south. He assumed that Bill came to San Antonio on business, though he had no idea what the business might be or who Bill met with. Or where. He knew that anything could have happened to prevent Bill's meeting him today—a family emergency, a development at work that sent him elsewhere or kept him home. Hearing Bill talk, Albert would have placed him somewhere in West Texas, but he'd known better than to ask. It didn't matter. He couldn't cross over into the world Bill inhabited outside the room they had shared at the Gunter. It was likely that business would bring Bill back to San Antonio, but Albert had no way of knowing when, and he couldn't imagine Bill picking up the hotel phone, asking for a long distance operator, placing a call to the package store.

He had taught himself to live without hope, had cautioned himself against the surge of expectation he'd felt each time Bill set another date with him. On the ride home, as the bus pulled into sleepy towns along the highway, the face in the window frightened Albert—pale and glassy eyed, like someone bleeding inside. Home again, stepping off the bus, he was a hundred some miles south of the Gunter—and no way to get to where he'd been the morning before, approaching the hotel doors, knowing that just beyond, someone would be waiting.

By nine, Albert was done with his roses and back upstairs. He knocked on the bedroom door. While

Mrs. Decker made herself presentable, he prepared her breakfast—one egg, over easy, with toast and coffee. He opened the blinds, and morning sun lit up the dining table. He poured coffee for himself and, when she arrived at the table, sat opposite her.

His mother had turned into a fragile little woman. Her bones had gone brittle, her spine curved, so that when she walked she carried her head out front like a bird. She was a living study in what age does to a body—the wreckage. Her hair was the exception, thick and luxuriant, the color a variant of strawberry blonde she'd picked out of a magazine recently when she was in the mood for a change. It made her look like an aged tart, but it was what she wanted.

“Was that Grady Smith you were talking to?” she asked.

“How did you know I was talking to anyone?”

“That child is loud.” She nodded toward the window that overlooked the driveway. “What was he doing here?”

“He talks to everybody, you know that.”

“No need to encourage him. You'll never be rid of his nonsense.”

“I seem to be rid of most everyone.”

“You have a town full of adults. Grady Smith is not a wise choice.”

“By which you mean?”

Mrs. Decker spoke as if to the slice of toast she had dipped in the yolk on her plate. “This isn't San Antonio.”

“Don't,” Albert said. And the table lapsed into silence.

Not speaking had served them well at times, as with the trips to San Antonio she'd just alluded to.

Mrs. Decker had tended the store on the days he was gone; she hadn't asked about the purpose of his absences. Once, during the half year of his trips to see Bill, she had commented on the frequency of his days in San Antonio, but she hadn't pursued the subject. Even after his final excursion to the city—though he had limped into the apartment and gone to bed for days, though surely she had been beside herself with worry—she hadn't asked him to explain.

Sometimes now a day passed and not a dozen words between them. It was not the cure Albert would have prescribed. Still, this morning he watched his mother eat and didn't say a thing.

Her breakfast finished, she reached for a pack of cigarettes at center table and took out the first of her three cigarettes for the day, the only one she smoked indoors—an agreement reached between them years ago. The second cigarette came at shortly before two, just after her nap, the third, at closing time. Because Albert hated breathing smoke, she had both of these in the driveway. But the first one each day, the best of the three, the one she wanted most, this one she smoked at the table after breakfast.

Lighting up, she took a deep drag, held the smoke for a moment, and then exhaled.

"I know what day it is," she said.

Albert did too.

She put her cigarette in its groove on her ashtray and reached across the table. Albert took his hands off the table and put them in his lap.

"Your hair looks nice," she said. "I did a good job this time, don't you think?"

"Yes," he said. "It's fine."

His hair had been black before he started going gray. It was black now—but without luster, just inky

dye coating every strand. When he'd been young, people had reached for his hair, struck by its blue-black shine. Like bird feathers, Claude had said, touching it.

"Write to him," she said.

"We've been over this."

"What will you do?"

"It's too late for letters."

His mother looked as if she would slap him if she could. Raising herself slowly from the table, she plucked her cigarette from the ashtray. "What about this mess, then?" She took a drag and blew a burst of smoke toward a section of wall beside her bedroom door, where the papering job was not quite finished, the plywood surface covered with meshed canvas backing.

"We could tear this place down and build a real house," Albert said. "We have the money."

"You don't have a dime."

"The ledger downstairs says otherwise."

"What you have you got from me. All of it. The roof over your head—"

"My hours are recorded."

Mrs. Decker turned her back and took up her cane. Reaching the mantelpiece above the stove the original builders had set into the wall and framed in like a fireplace, she turned and cast a steady gaze at him.

Albert was angry but sure of himself. His mother was a formidable opponent, but facing up to her over the chairlift had changed things between them. He wasn't sure she knew that yet.

"You'll get nothing from me," she said.

"You have five days to think so."

Mrs. Decker faltered. Clearly, he'd confused

her. As if to buy herself time, she took from the mantelpiece a little porcelain bluebird he'd given her at Christmas and seemed to study it.

"This is Wednesday." Albert poured calm into his voice; he knew that would further unsettle her. "Before the week is out, I will tally my hours. I will figure an hourly rate. I can even adjust for inflation. Monday morning I will have a bill for you. You will write me a check."

By way of response, Mrs. Decker threw the porcelain bluebird at him.

Albert caught it. *Reflexes*, he said to himself. *Luck.*

His mother crossed to the unfinished section of wall, rustled at the edges of the meshed backing and pulled a section of it loose. "Finish it yourself," she said.

Carefully, he set the figurine on the floor, put his foot on it, put his weight down, crushing it, and ground his heel. Crossing the room, then, he calmly took the stairs down, took up the remaining roll of wallpaper from the clutter the workers had left, and walked to the burn bin out back, a little pen he'd constructed of hardware cloth held up at the corners by electric fence posts. Setting the roll of paper atop the cardboard liquor boxes discarded there, he lit the pile and watched it burn.

When he got back upstairs, his mother was at the table lighting a cigarette. Two freshly stamped out butts lay in the ashtray.

Albert walked to the whatnot that stood where his bed folded into the wall. He took up his wallet, his keys, and turned back to her. A thin stream of smoke rose, curling from the cigarette at her fingertips.

"I'm going to the ice house," he said. "Is there

anything you want?”

“I miss bacon,” she said, tapping ashes into the tray. “Get me a few slices of bacon.”

For so long, his life had revolved around his mother, an unspoken memory of how they came to be alone together, leaving his father behind. That was in early winter just after Albert turned ten. They had moved to a new farm in Hempstead County, Arkansas, not far from Hope. Josiah Decker was an itinerant farmer with a fondness for liquor and cards. Albert knew little else about the man who had sired him—nothing about how his parents had met, how a man swayed by whim, by volatility, had lured Ermalee Brown away from her elderly father, his respectable north Texas roots.

It was cold the day things got out of hand. They had butchered the day before, and wisps of smoke curled from the smokehouse against a slate-gray sky. Albert was in the kitchen with his mother preparing supper when the door opened and his father stepped in from the porch.

One of his moods had taken Albert, a moonstruck giddiness that lifted him trembling like a kite.

“Daddy,” he said, breathless, dancing in place, “we made shoo-fly pie. Momma let me help.”

“What have I told you?” his father said. “Get a hold of your voice. Don’t jump around like that.”

“You mean like this?” Albert did a wild imitation of himself, his hands unleashed, airborne. He meant no disrespect. It’s just that he was happy. And as his mother often remarked, he had a short memory for disapproval. Something else too. He’d begun to learn at school that it was fun to flaunt himself.

David Meischen has been honored by a Pushcart Prize for “How to Shoot at Someone Who Outdrew You,” a chapter of his memoir, originally published in *The Gettysburg Review* and available in *Pushcart Prize XLII*. *Anyone’s Son*, Meischen’s debut poetry collection, is new from 3: A Taos Press. A lifelong storyteller, he received the 2017 Kay Cattarulla Award for Best Short Story from the Texas Institute of Letters. Meischen has fiction, nonfiction, or poetry in *Copper Nickel*, *The Evansville Review*, *Salamander*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *The Southern Review*, *Valparaiso Fiction Review*, and elsewhere. He has served as a juror for the Kimmel Harding Nelson center for the arts; in the fall of 2018, he completed a writing residency at Jentel Arts. Co-founder and Managing Editor of Dos Gatos Press, Meischen lives in Albuquerque, NM, with his husband—also his co-publisher and co-editor—Scott Wiggerman.

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