

The Shoulder of Orion

by **K.C. Frederick**

I saw two planes collide over Detroit when I was a kid. I was in our back yard, where my father had covered a patch of dirt with concrete and installed a swing set. It was next to a lilac bush and, in my memory, the lilacs were in bloom. In most of my memories of the back yard, the lilacs are in bloom. I once buried my coin collection near the lilacs: there were Indian-head pennies, flying eagle pennies, even a large cent, bigger than a silver dollar, from 1818. I started collecting coins from the piles of change that showed up each night on our kitchen table, my father's leavings of the day's play in the numbers.

The coins were in a tin box that may have held tobacco once. Some of the coins I bought from dealers, and I think the hoard may have been worth a bit of money after a while, but all my later efforts to dig it up proved fruitless. Did the stuff just disappear?

I was near that lilac bush and it must have been spring with the fragrant purple flowers in bloom around me. The only other flowers I remember from that yard are the peonies that were always covered with ants. Maybe I was on the swing. To my right was a cyclone fence that looked into the alley, its concrete surface covered with broken glass that never deterred us from playing softball in its narrow confines, playing balls off roofs of what we called barns. The alley was also the place where the black rag-picker came with his horse-drawn cart. We called him the sheeney-man. He had a white beard and he was missing a hand, as I remember, but there's no way of verifying this.

If I looked in the other direction, I could see the church towering over the roof of our house—the brick wall of the church was what you saw when you looked out our front window. With the adjoining brick rectory and the large brick-walled yard where I'd go at night with my flashlight to get night crawlers, the church took up the entire block. On the other side of the block were the grade school, the high school, and the nuns' residence. The nuns, as I remember them, were always prophesying doom, God's

wrath inflicted on a faithless people. Maybe I was the only one, but I believed them. I was a lonely kid, so what God thought of me was important. I tried not to incur His wrath, but in case others did, I generally kept from looking at the night sky, since the nuns had made me aware that the stars could begin to slide out of place, the prelude to a cataclysmic demonstration of God's disfavor.

I have no way of knowing what I was up to on the day I saw the mid-air collision, but my memory is that I just happened to look up at the sky above Sam the barber's and I saw two silver planes crossing each others' paths, then something bright and glistening tumbling earthward. In my memory all this happens in complete silence. The day is warm, the sky is cloudless, there's the flash of silver, smooth motion followed by a fluttering fall, like the strip of cellophane you used to have to tear off of a pack of cigarettes. Silent, weightless, the world turned into a snow globe with only a single shining flake making its way slowly downward through the transparent medium.

The details elude me but I know I'm not making this up. My father took us later in the day to see the place where one of the planes crashed into a house. My father was a big man in the numbers then. A sharp dresser, he held himself a bit stiffly and was known for the big parties he threw at his place on Harsens Island, parties even the mayor might attend. This was before the cops raided our house, before the trial in which my father's lawyer persuaded him to separate his case from that of his associates, some of whom went to prison; it was before my father started drinking heavily, a behavior that would result in his losing the numbers and losing most of the properties he owned. He was in and out of rehab after that. Sometimes he saw bears in the house. When he was sober, he worked at low-paying jobs like being a night watchman for the city. He'd gone from the top to the bottom, driving to Hamtramck in his beat-up Ford (he left it unlocked in our street hoping someone would steal it, but nobody took him up on it) looking for a bargain on kielbasa or Silvercup bread. Having lost his high station, though, he didn't blow his brains out but soldiered on, a Polish peasant to the end. His capacity for survival was a remarkable lesson to me.

Though he was gregarious with his friends, he wasn't warm with his children. He used a strap on us, but he was less physical than his own father. Later he was too distracted to inflict severe discipline. When he was dying of lung cancer many years

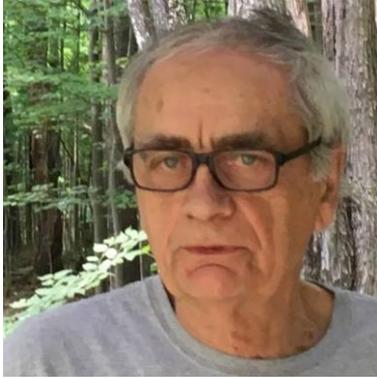
later, I wheeled him out to the back of the house that looked toward the alley, where every now and then a sound would come from the scrap yard near the railroad tracks, the protracted, unsettling shriek of metal scraping against metal. Did I was leaving soon for Boston, where I worked. It was likely we weren't going to see each other again. "I'm going to miss you," he said.

I've done a little Googling and I've discovered that there were two collisions of planes over Detroit in the spring of 1948, both on the east side, which would have been consistent with my memory. I would have been thirteen. The earlier collision seems the one I likely saw. The student pilot, I learned, was thrown from his plane, fell through a roof and a porch, and his body was driven into the ground. I didn't know any of this as a kid. I suppose our car dragged along with others past the scene, we may have glimpsed a part of the wreckage, certainly we'd seen the damage to the house, but all that's blurred, and I must reconstruct it. What I do remember is looking up to see a silent encounter in the sky, a piece of silver fluttering down toward the houses of Detroit, a distant, wondrous sight.

My family left the city long ago, but not before the neighborhood deteriorated precipitously. Today weeds come up from the sidewalks, there are lots of vacant lots, and many of the houses that remain are ruins. In the right mood, you could convince yourself that wolves roam there at night. The huge church has been empty for some time. Shorn of its statues, it was sold to some Baptists who couldn't afford to heat the vast spaces and sold it for peanuts to a developer. I wonder if the lilac bush is still in our back yard. Is it possible that a lucky kid will dig up my coins some day?

In Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* the replicant Batty, facing extinction, feels compelled to tell Deckard, his pursuer, "I've seen things you people wouldn't believe. Attack ships on fire off the shoulder of Orion. I watched C-beams glitter in the dark near the Tannhäuser Gate. All those moments will be lost in time, like tears in rain."

Indeed.



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