

## YOU KEEP LIVING OR YOU DON'T

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*Alexander Maksik*

When I was in high school I read Ernest Hemingway's *A Moveable Feast*. Nothing I'd read before had so hypnotized me. Nothing had so seduced me. I was seventeen years old and living in Ketchum, Idaho.

I read the book for my Senior Seminar, a class taught by my father (then the headmaster of the school I attended) and a teacher I loved and admired named Tom Johnson. By then I'd read some Hemingway. *The Old Man and the Sea*, nearly all of his collected stories and *The Sun Also Rises*. I know now that I didn't understand much of what I read. Not really. Not the way you do when you're older. But when I read *A Moveable Feast* I felt something change. It was among the first of very few books that altered my perception of the world.

You don't always know why a book moves you. But something takes hold, you give in to it, you fall. And once you're taken, you begin to hold the book differently, you think about it when you're away from it, you look forward to returning to it, you're terrified you'll lose it, and you don't want to finish it. Hemingway's memoir took me; nothing I'd read before had captured so clearly a sense of place, a sense of time passing, the urgency of desire and of a sensual life.

Tom Johnson was overweight. He drank a lot of Scotch and smoked Marlboro reds. He wore a dark beard and his black hair pushed back. He was brilliant. Knew everything. He used to challenge us to find words in the dictionary he couldn't define. I don't ever remember being successful. He seemed to have read more than it was possible to read in a lifetime. He loved the theater and produced extraordinarily ambitious plays and musicals in what was then a tiny and decrepit theater. I still remember his production of Moliere's *The Imaginary Invalid*.

*The Imaginary Invalid* in that beat-up old jury-rigged theater high in the mountains.

He belonged in New York. In Idaho people spent their lives outdoors. We were skiers, mountain-climbers, hunters and kayakers. We ate energy bars. But I'm glad he wasn't in New York. I'm glad he was there, reading my short stories, coughing his hacking cough, standing outside in the snow, his nose red, shivering, smoking his cigarettes.

Above all, what reading *A Moveable Feast* did was make me long to live a different life. It made me ache; it made me somehow certain of my future. Perhaps not my immediate future, but a future beyond the one I could see directly in front of me. It made me want to live a certain way. It made me yearn. And it was Tom, who said he liked my writing, and who stood so clearly outside the town's culture, who lived in the face of all those ruddy-faced outdoorsmen, who served as a kind of link between Hemingway's life and my own.

Hemingway wrote of a life of drinking, of smoking cigarettes, of late nights in cafés surrounded by artists, of a world inhabited by people who wanted to make paintings and write novels. Hemingway introduced me to Paris and gave me a vision of the city, which has never left me. Hemingway gave me a world where, while you stood on the corner of boulevard Montparnasse and rue Delambre, Jules Pascin waved you over for a drink. Pascin at a table with two sisters, both models, one "very dark, small, beautifully built with a false fragile depravity. The other . . . childlike and dull but very pretty in a perishable childish way . . . not as well built as her sister, but neither was anyone else that spring."

I dreamed of living a life like that. Where you knew famous painters and their models, where after writing in your apartment all day long, you'd find them drinking in cafés and whoever had money would pay. It was a world where Pascin said before you left, "Good night, *jeune homme*. Sleep well."

That was what I wanted. That freedom. That purposeful purity of life.

And so I pledged secretly to myself: I will live in Paris. And Hemingway and Tom Johnson made me believe I would.

When I first came to Paris I was twenty-five, Hemingway's age when he knew Pascin. I came as a tourist only for a few weeks vacation from a job that meant nothing to me. I rose on the escalator

out of the station at the Luxembourg gardens and there was Paris. And it was precisely as I'd hoped it would be. It took my breath and held me.

I bought an ice cream cone from a woman at the gates of the gardens. Raspberry. The only word in French I knew I could say well.

*Framboise.*

I ate it on the steps looking down on the pond where children sailed toy boats. It was a breezy summer day, high clouds floated past, and, as Hemingway might write, I was happy.

Years later I returned again as a tourist. I was with two friends in Montmartre when we were caught in a sudden rainstorm. We ran dripping wet into an empty café and stayed there most of the afternoon. I kept floating away from the table, seeing us three bustling into the café, the rain pouring down outside, sitting there talking, laughing, drinking wine. I was happy there. And I promised myself again that I'd live in Paris, this time before I was thirty.

Why before I was thirty? Because Hemingway had. Because he'd famously said to a friend in 1950, "If you are lucky enough to have lived in Paris as a young man, then wherever you go for the rest of your life, it stays with you, for Paris is a moveable feast."

I thought as long as I was still in my twenties I'd have done it; I'd have been a young man living in Paris.

And so I did. I moved here when I was twenty-nine years old. I woke up on a cold November morning and was thirty. That night I walked across the Pont Neuf with my girlfriend. It was raining. We shared an umbrella. We were returning from dinner at a restaurant on the Place Dauphine. There'd been chestnut ice cream for dessert. I'd turned thirty in Paris. I was in love. Light reflected in the Seine. I could barely breathe for being so full of that night. The world felt absolutely my own.

Of course, the fantasy of a life is never the life. You get older. You fail. People die. People disappoint you. You make mistakes. You suffer for your indulgences. You break your heart. The pleasure of the new dies and you find that you're a man living alone in a city. In the world.

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On June 5th, 1930 Pascin slit his wrists, and when he didn't die, he hung himself from his door. On the wall in his own blood he'd written, "Adieu Lucy" to Lucy Ventura, the love of his life.

Tom Johnson died of a heart attack in the summer of 1996.

And on this day, July 2nd 1961, many years after he'd lived in Paris, Ernest Hemingway killed himself by placing the butt of a double-barreled shotgun on the floor of his home in Ketchum, Idaho, leaning over and resting his forehead against the barrels and pulling both triggers.

Hemingway's house in Ketchum remains as it was when he died. He's buried in the town's cemetery. I've always felt indebted to him. I live in Paris because of him. His writing has taught me more than any other writer's. I've been to that house. I've looked out the windows, seen the views across the valley and walked in the hall where he died. When I discovered that it's the anniversary of his death, I felt an unexpected and intense sadness, something physical.

You keep living or you don't.

In *A Moveable Feast* Hemingway wrote of Pascin, "He looked more like a Broadway character of the Nineties than the lovely painter that he was, and afterwards, when he had hanged himself, I liked to remember him as he was that night at the Dôme. They say the seeds of what we will do are in all of us, but it always seemed to me that in those who make jokes in life the seeds are covered with better soil and with a higher grade of manure."

Not long ago I was eating dinner with my girlfriend on the terrace of Le Select on the boulevard Montparnasse. An old man was sitting next to us, drinking alone. He was well dressed though his clothes were threadbare. He kept a cane propped against his hip. His white hair was combed neatly. We offered to buy him a drink; he smiled at us brightly and accepted. We talked for hours. He was once an artist. He had shows at important galleries in the city. His work was shown at Le Dôme. We became friends, the three of us.

That evening after we said good-bye, my girlfriend and I walked slowly home along a quiet side street away from the café. It was beautiful out, warm and breezy. We held tight to one another. Something had changed between us; we were better for having met Jean-Pierre Duval. From time to time the three of us meet at Le Select for a drink. He always wears a jacket and he always carries a cane.