

Storylandia

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Collected Stories

by

Arthur Davis

The Man from Lahr

The small man standing in the doorway to my office could have been anybody lost in the maze of corridors that snaked through the medical building. A heavy, nondescript dark blue suit of unrecognizable style draped from his shoulders. A small rumpled brown bag about the size of a shoebox was nestled under his right arm.

“My name is Berger. Alfred Berger.” The accent was middle European. A coarse mix of German and French. He was trying to stand up straight, possibly to give an impression other than the truth of his probable seventy years.

“I’m sorry,” I said, straightening up my desk. “If you want an appointment, you’ll have to speak to my secretary tomorrow.”

He leaned against the doorframe. “Tomorrow may be too late, sir.”

I glanced at my watch. “Well, if it’s an emergency, Dr. Shelton Withers on the fourth floor works late on Thursday.”

Berger took in the citations, diplomas, and awards, the family pictures on the desk and along the sideboard, and the rows of medical texts. “I came to see you.”

“I’m really sorry,” I said folding some reports

into my case, “but I’m late as it is.” Helen was going to roast me alive. We were supposed to watch the second Kennedy-Nixon debate together. Having missed the first, which had already galvanized the nation and more than likely changed the history of politics, missing the second would be socially inexcusable.

Berger removed the package from under his right arm and held it out to me. “Please Dr. Russell. It’s very urgent.”

A friend in medical school once asked why I chose psychiatry. The answer came easily. It always had. I explained that I didn’t want to look at parts of a person, some viral assault, or hemorrhage or aftermath of a car crash. I wanted to ask him about why he wanted to leave his wife, take drugs, or why she wanted to end her life.

We were having a small dinner party and then watching the debate. “Mr...”

“Berger,” he said taking a cautious step forward. “Alfred Berger.”

“Yes, well, Mr. Berger,” I said dropping the folder on my desk. “If you can tell your story in five minutes, what’s on your mind?”

“Do you believe in magic?”

“I believe in the possibility of God, the necessity of miracles, the value of psychotherapy, and the predictability of my wife’s anger when I promise to be home and I’m not.”

Berger didn’t remove his overcoat and looked like he was born in his hat. He set the brown bag on my marble coffee table and pulled down the wrapper revealing the metallic top of a squat, clear glass jar about ten inches tall. Half a dozen holes were punched in the tin cap. He carefully lifted it from the bag and set in it the center of the table.

At first, I thought it contained the figure of a man. I was wrong. It was a man. He was bracing himself with both hands against the sides of the bottle and staring directly at me. He appeared disoriented. I quickly recalled my training and the frequency with which we can be overcome with collective hallucinations.

“He brought me to you.”

“What is it?”

He was surprised. “What does it look like?”

“I’m afraid I have no idea.”

“I was hopeful you would.”

There was no way to be graceful, so I acted more curious than dumbstruck. “Where did you get it?”

Berger removed the lid. The object—the man—in the container looked up but made no effort to move. “I don’t know his name. I don’t know much about him at all.”

“But you know he wanted to see me?”

“Maybe I should begin at the beginning.”

I picked up the phone and dialed. There was a signal I had worked out with Helen that gave notice that either I was in the midst of an emergency or she would have to trust me. I said. “There is a situation I need to resolve.” I had repeated that phrase twice before in my eighteen years in practice. Once when a patient confessed to having murdered his brother. But I never said it with more conviction than on this cold, windswept March evening.

“I arrived early this morning from Germany. I was a professor in the public school. I taught French and English. I have some family here. I wanted to see America.”

“Are you ill?”

“No. I lived in my village for sixty-eight years. My cousin, who is a pharmacist in the hospital where you work, told me to contact you.”

“You showed this to him and he suggested you see me?”

The animation in the bottle moved his head about, scanning my office.

“No. I asked him which doctor in the hospital he trusted most.”

“But you wouldn’t give me his name.”

“It’s hardly important now.”

“I agree, Mr. Berger,” I said.

“He is very real. He is just a man smaller than you or I. You must believe that what I have brought you is real.”

Berger didn’t evince symptoms of classical depression, exhibited no motor agitation, panic or anxiety attack. He was a tired old man on a mission and seemed to understand that it would be difficult for me to accept that simplicity. Berger extended his hand into the bottle and lifted the man out and set him on the marble table.

Nothing in my career could have prepared me for this other than my high school biology teacher, Ms. Ferraro, a taskmaster who demanded that, “a scientist should never be indifferent to possibilities.”

“I was shocked the first time I saw him too.”

“Which was?”

“Yesterday afternoon.” Berger carefully brought the jar onto his lap as though it was as rare as the miracle he had brought me.

For some reason I thought that, this man, this creature, was connected by some magic to Berger. That they had been together for some time and that their allegiance should not be questioned.

“And yet he makes no attempt to run or hide.”

“Does that surprise you?”

“It would be better for purposes of clarity and expediency, Mr. Berger, if you spent more time explaining how you came upon this man than trying to provoke my responses.” I was overcome with uncertainty and responsibility.

“I just thought you would be more surprised.”

“Where did you find him?” I was going to ask him where he had gotten him, as if Berger had stolen him from his rightful owner, though the thought of this creature existing, and belonging to anybody, was almost as difficult to conceive as the aberration itself.

“I’d rather not tell you now.”

“Not before you hear what I have to say.”

“Yes.”

“Me being the most trustworthy man your cousin could think of without knowing why you were asking him such a question?”

“I am not as bright as you, doctor, but that does not make me a fool.”

“In this country, you might have been better served by asking your cousin which attorney he would trust.”

“In my country, people put their faith in physicians.”

I got up and locked the door to my office. I was disturbed by the possibility of what Berger might have done to this creature to ensure such constrained behavior. And yet I was impressed with this man’s composure and determination, his concern and obvious compassion for his ward.

“You must tell me how you came upon this man. The truth if you want my help.”

That’s when I learned of Lahr, a small town

south of Baden Baden on the fringe of the Black Forest between France and Germany. His family was originally from Augsburg in southwest Germany near Munich before moving to Lahr when Berger was a child. The name Berger, as it turns out, was a convenient abbreviation of his real name that he preferred not to divulge. His story was as uncomplicated as his journey. His wife passed away two years ago. He had been forced into retirement the following year. With a small pension and a son in England, he wanted to do something with the rest of his life.

“I left my village this morning before it was light. I took a train to Baden Baden, and then one to Frankfort. Then a plane from Frankfort to New York.”

“When did you land in New York?”

“Two hours ago.”

“Can I get you anything, Mr. Berger?”

He glanced down at the creature on the table. “What are we going to do?”

“You mentioned something about magic.”

“Magic. Yes. I didn’t believe it, but this day I do. If it weren’t for him, I would have never made this trip.”

“Who is he?”

“I do not know.”

“Then where did he come from?”

“I don’t know that either.”

“Mr. Berger, I am trying to work this through with you. Please, concentrate.” I was going through periods of belief and denial. As soon as I took my eyes from the little man, I thought I was in the middle of a grotesque hoax. The moment I returned to him, I knew I was witness to what might be one of God’s great miracles. “Where did you first see this man?”

Suddenly the man began to move. Berger and I

stopped talking. The little man walked to the edge of the coffee table closest to me and stopped. He looked down at the floor and my feet below. He looked up directly at me. I could make out his eyes, his expression, which looked distressed, not frightened or fearful. I couldn't help wonder if the trip hadn't caused him some kind of internal injury, or removing him from his land, his home, might not throw him into a deep depression.

He turned from me and began to walk the perimeter of the table. His gait and balance seemed quite normal. Why hadn't he spoken, or made some kind of noise or gesture? Where were his parents? His family and children?

There had to be others. A world beyond imagination. A refugee from a nation Alfred Berger had stumbled upon. I was certain that this association was fairly new. Otherwise the temptation to speak to someone he trusted in his or neighboring villages might have been too strong to overcome.

What would P.T. Barnum make of this phenomenon? Whatever man could not understand he distrusted, and all too often wanted to destroy or steal for his own selfish gains.

This was no pigmy, no dwarf, or stunted midget. This was a biological phenomenon of the first order. A fully developed man only four or so inches tall with perfectly proportional features that had yet to acquit his intellectual capacities.

"Alfred," I said, leaning forward to press the point, "please, tell me where you met him. And, is he aware of what we are saying?"

"His name is Lobal. I call him that. It was my great grandfather's nickname. I don't believe he understands. I tried to speak to him several times."

There was also an anguish wrapped about what he had brought me. Alfred knew he had been given something rare. Something beyond his rationale or command. He needed help. Rather than trust who he knew, he would trust his instincts. I did not want to let him down. In such a short period of time, I felt as though both Lobal and Alfred had become my responsibility. “Alfred, is there some reason why you don’t want to tell me where and how you found him?”

He stared over my shoulder to the night and the street outside, squinting briefly as though trying to span the breadth of water and land that separated him from his native village. Where he was safe and secure. Where he had been overcome with wanderlust at an advanced age, when most men were settling their affairs.

“Yesterday, the day before I left,” he began in English that was less than natural. “I visited the grave of my wife. My Myiah. I fell to my knees and wept. I told her I wanted to do her memory justice. She loved me. She was the only person who believed in me, who did not judge me by my faults and weaknesses. She saw me as strong and wise. She was never far from my side. She was my life.”

The image of Helen giving birth to our first child materialized. It was as clear as the day it happened. The thought of not being with this woman was too impossible to bear. I watched the small man take his place in the middle of the coffee table next to the humidor as Berger returned to the story.

“I confessed that I could not make the trip. That I was going to return the ticket I had purchased. That was my third trip to my Myiah’s grave in a week. When I removed my hands from my face and opened my eyes, I noticed a small figure. At first, I thought

it was a salamander or twig lying on her grave. It was Lobal. He was sleeping on the top of the mound of earth.”

“Sleeping?”

“I don’t know what else to call it. He was wearing exactly what he is in now. He was lying on his side. I think his eyes were closed. At first, I did not notice him. It was only when I began to pray, to talk to Myiah aloud that he rose to his feet. He did not try to flee or hide. He just turned in my direction and looked up.”

“Quite remarkable.” Helen asked me not to use that expression. It was trite, too cumbersome for a natural response. It was pretentious. I caught myself as I was about to repeat the exclamation.

I never imagined myself a candidate for notoriety or celebrity, but the story that would be told of this small woodsman would be front page in every city and hamlet in the civilized world. What was going to happen to Alfred Berger and his trusted physician, Warren Russell, would rewrite history. There was no denying the thrill that rose within me.

“How do you communicate with him?”

“I’m not sure I do. He is not frightened of me. He did not resist when I picked him up from the cemetery. I gave him food and water. He points to his mouth when he wants either. He is not frightened of me and I have tried to be as gentle with him as I would be with a child.”

“Who else knows about him?”

“No one.”

“You’ve taken a great risk coming here.”

Berger tightened his body, a characteristic I knew which often prefaced an announcement. A declaration. “Yes. But I think I have chosen wisely.”

The phone rang. It was Helen. More concerned than displeased with the outcome of the evening. She had told the company that it was an emergency at the hospital. An hour had passed. She simply wanted to know if I would be able to join them for coffee. “I’m fine, I’m sorry I can’t be with you.”

“You’re a lucky man,” he said.

“Alfred, what do you want me to do?”

Without hesitation, as though he was as perplexed with his ward, “I don’t know.”

Alfred Berger, a brave, lonesome man taking his life in his hands, leaving his home—homeland—comes upon this man, a talisman—and makes it his mission to get them both to the new world. Quite possibly without this creature, Alfred might have backed out of his commitment. But where did the man come from? His health and safety were utmost in my mind. I would have to call two people. The head of psychiatry and internal medicine at the hospital. I would ask them here. This evening. To drop whatever they were doing and come to my office.

“Do you want me to keep him overnight?”

“I hadn’t thought about that.”

“Is he safe with your cousin?”

“They were very upset with me for leaving as soon as I arrived.”

“Did they say anything about what was in the brown bag?”

“There was some discussion. I know they were curious.”

I reached out my hand, slowly, as if I were approaching any strange animal. The small man moved toward my hand. His gait was less steady now. I was impressed and smiled broadly. I bent down, closer. “Hello.”

Arthur Davis is a management consultant specializing in corporate planning and reorganization and has been quoted in *The New York Times*, *Crain's New York Business* and interviewed on New York TV News Channel 1. He has taught at The New School University, advised The New York City Taxi & Limousine Commission on organizational reform, advised Senator John McCain's investigating committee on boxing reform, appeared as an expert witness on best practices in 1999 before State Senator Roy Goodman's New York State Commission on Corruption in Boxing, advised the Department of Homeland Security, National Protection and Programs Directorate and lectures on leadership skills to CEO's and entrepreneurs.

He has written over 130 tales of horror, dark fantasy, slipstream, science fiction, speculative fiction, crime, epic adventure, magical realism as well as literary/mainstream fiction. Since 2012, sixty have been published in forty online and print journals including *The Missing Slate* (Story of The Month), *Allegory*, *The Colored Lens*, *Crack the Spine* (Anthology), *Eunoia*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Front Porch Review*, *The Amsterdam Review* (Reading) and *Black Fox Literary Magazine*. A dozen more have been published as reprints, and "Conversation in Black" was nominated for the 2015 Pushcart Prize.