

Early Moldenke

An Excerpt from Motorman

By David Ohle

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The adolescent Moldenke's mind was airy, a dirigible loosed from its tethers. Sometimes his wanderings took him to a sun-choked acre of grasses and weed where a snow of pollen lay yellow on the ground. A warm, southwesterly breeze always blew there and lapped at his stringy hair arrangement, lulling him into a state of reverie. He felt no pulse during these periods and was only dimly aware of his body.

On the acre were the ruins of a lambing barn. When he stood inside it, he felt an uplift of spirit and sensed the ghostly presence of new-born lambs. A trace of the wild odor of old dung lingered the stale air and the blinding light of three suns poured in through the half-gone roof.

The silence of the hill was disturbing, sometimes giving way to the aura of a labored breathing, the sound of a single lung in distress. Then, on a cue from no visible source, a creature with mudded claws would seem to spit bloody clots from the surrounding weeds. Moldenke found that if he put both hands in his pockets and turned away, the crouching hulk lost interest and trotted off.

At one time Moldenke enjoyed the oncome of winter. He greeted it with a flourish of ritual activity. He was most comfortable when beset by the shivers. He loved to hear twigs snapping underfoot with icy reports. The air was never quite still enough for Moldenke's comfort until it was heavy with frost or wet with sleet. Whenever he awoke to fresh snow, he rushed out to piss his name in it. As the years succeeded, these rituals went on. He noted the date of the last leaves falling from the orchard's Tung oil trees. He recorded the changing angle of sun's light as their bright disks passed along the parlor wall above the mantle board. He made a note of wind speeds and precipitation and became addicted to radio weather reports. Relief flooded through him every season when the last evidence of green was gone, when the fur of the potting-shed mice thickened. Then he would light his k-heater, take down blankets from the closet, and snap in the storm windows.

Once, in winter, his father came to him and said, "Puff out those cheeks, Son. Imitate a blowfish."

"Why, Daddy?"

"You've begun to look like a gopher. I'm curious why."

Moldenke obliged, puffing out his cheeks as far as he could.

"I know it's not the cold you like so well, it's the defensive pleasures you derive from seeking warmth within the cold, a juvenile quest of some kind, and a pitiable one at that. I've got you pegged. I know the story. Quick to cocoon but slow to grow. I hope you'll devote more energy to maturation from now on. Your mother and I will not be holding your hand forever."

When summerfall came, Moldenke greeted it with dread. He watched the earth dry out and crack in repeated patterns, saw flocks of green birds returning from the Fertile Crescent. He stepped over surly grasshoppers baking and buzzing in the stifling heat.

It was on just such a day that his father came into his room and said, "A mock war has broken out. We just heard word of it on the radio. It's very dicey. No one knows what's really going on over there, or over here for that matter. So your mother and I are sailing tomorrow aboard the Titanic, past the Cape and around the Horn, as far from the warring factions as we can get."

"What about me, Daddy? What happens to me?"

"Seems like joining the mock army would be the decent thing for a lazy lad like you to do. Do it. Enlist tomorrow. Your mother said to tell you toodle-oo, and that she'd send you cards with regularity."

After the mock War seemed to be over, the army let Moldenke go. He found work as a blood boy in a gauze mill outside Kodak City, a klick or two from the L.A. limits. He started low and remained there, sure that safety embraced felicity on a mattress of obscurity. He knew that vertical activity invited dazzling exposure, and that to seek is to be sucked. He recognized loneliness as the mother of virtues and sat in her lap whenever he could. He practiced linear existence and sidewise movement, preferring the turtle to the crane, the saucer to the lamp. He enjoyed the upstairs and chafed at going down.

At age twenty-one, Moldenke suffered an inflammation of the heart that severely damaged the muscle. He was told by the family physician to prepare for a life of inactivity, difficult breathing, extreme weakness and sexual inadequacy.

"We'll find a specialist," his mother assured him. "This one's a quack and a coward. There's a daring surgeon on every corner if you go to the right places."

Among those daring surgeons was Dr. Randolph Burnheart, an old inamorato of Mrs. Moldenke's. His practice was at the corner of Cherry Lane and Arden Boulevard, in a three-story mud-block building painted red and white. A small herd of ten or twelve sheep were kept in a coral under a tin-roofed lean-to that projected from the rear of the building, providing them shade from the burning suns. The lean-to also prevented their seeing Eagleman's moon at night, which, for reasons unknown, panicked them.

Arrangements were made and Moldenke was taken in for implantation. His mother and father, fearful as they were of a bad outcome, elected to vacation in the south for the duration of the surgery and the post-operative recovery.

"See you next spring, Dinky boy, God willing and the cows come home," his father said.

"We'll think of you every moment, Son."

"And we'll pray, too," his father added without conviction. "Keep in touch if you make it."

Moldenke wasn't alone in his room very long when Dr. Burnheart and a nurse came in. The Doctor was a man of forty or so with a weathered face, bright blue eyes and grizzled beard. He was already dressed in surgical garb.

“Ready, fella?”

“So quick? I’ve only been here a few minutes.”

“Now, now. No sissy stuff from you. Do it, nurse.” The nurse pressed a chloroform-soaked gauze pad over Moldenke’s nose and mouth, quickly putting him into a semi-conscious state.

His next moment of awareness came when he lifted his heavy head and looked down at his bandaged chest.

Dr. Burnheart stood at his bedside. “All done. You’ve got four sheep hearts now, helping the damaged one pump blood and eager to be doing it. In a few weeks you’ll be stronger and more robust than you ever were. Yes, they beat fast. That can be annoying. Patients have complained of feeling like a walking clock. But it passes. Not to worry. And you can expect an initial period of giddiness and boundless energy, which may diminish over time. Any questions?”