

The time Mom met Hitler,
Frost came to dinner, and
I heard the Greatest Story ever told

a memoir

DIKKON EBERHART



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The Time Mom Met Hitler, Frost Came to Dinner, and I Heard the Greatest Story Ever Told: A Memoir

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PROLOGUE

I woke up.

It was Sunday. It was March. It was windy and cold on the coast of Maine.

I had no idea how to solve my problem.

“I guess I’ll try the church across the road this time,” I said to Channa, my wife. I sighed. “There’s got to be an answer. Somewhere there’s got to be an answer.”

Channa was still in bed. She was propped against pillows with a coffee cup and a book. She pulled the blankets higher. Her glance was affectionate but without anticipation.

“You go. I’m too shy.”

“Shall I need a tie, do you suppose?”

“This is Maine.”

I swung out of bed. The floor was cold. I hurried to dress—collared shirt but no tie. From up the road, the church bell rang.

“Tell me all about it,” Channa said.

“Back soon.” I bent and kissed her. “How long can one more church service take, after all?”

I went downstairs. I didn't see the children. Someone had eaten cereal and not cleaned up afterward.

I was too tense to eat.

I pulled on a winter coat and stepped out the door.

Watch out!

Here comes the Jew.

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

I am Adam Eberhart.

At least, that's who I was in utero.

Then, on the way to the hospital in Boston, my mother—who knew her husband well—asked my father one last time if he wanted to change his mind, to which Dad replied, “Well, if it's a boy, I guess we'd better name him after me.”

So instead of being Adam Eberhart—which is primary, euphonious, and individual—I became Richard Butcher Eberhart, son of Richard Ghormley Eberhart.

When I was brought home, Dad and our next-door neighbor were philosophizing upon the event.

“What will you call him?” our neighbor wanted to know.

My father was Richie to my mother and close relatives, and Dick to everyone else. So those names were used up. “How about Little Richard—but in Middle English: Diccon?” Dad suggested.

The neighbor, who was a Greek scholar, scribbled on a piece of paper, considered it for a moment, and then said, “The name

would look better, aesthetically, if you used the Greek *k* instead of the English *c*. Thus: Dikkon.”

And so it was.

Not a great name when you are in junior high. You can imagine the taunts. So I was Richard in seventh grade and Rick in eighth and ninth grades. Dad’s academic-gypsy life gave me the liberty to remake myself with abandon every time I changed to a different school. (I attended seven of them during twelve years.)

During my seminary years, people often misunderstood me to be “Deacon” Eberhart, which, while it led to a funny explanation, did little to affirm my sense of identity. During the 1970s, when I was living in Berkeley, the daikon (a Japanese radish) rose to prominence, leading people to wonder if perhaps *that* was how my name was supposed to be pronounced. (So you’ll know, it’s pronounced *Dick-On*.)

Try introducing yourself as Dikkon Eberhart at a noisy cocktail party. What people hear is aggressively German—Dick von Eberhart.

Later, during my career as a salesman, I discovered that my name was a benefit after all. Customers often forgot my name after a sales call, but they *did* remember that they liked to buy from that salesman with the strange name. They would call my employer. *Send me the guy with the odd name.*

During Shakespeare’s time, Diccon was a famous character in many plays about bedlam—madness. Diccon was used by many playwrights as a disruptive trickster, who stole and jabbered and kept the farce moving along, presumably to laughter and to ridicule from the audience. And in Shakespeare’s own *Richard III* that wicked king is called Dickon by his scheming supporters.

These were not the sorts of Dikkon I desired to be. When I was young, though, Mom introduced me to a different sort of Dickon—in Frances Burnett’s *The Secret Garden*. Burnett’s Dickon is a wild boy from the moors—yes, as he sometimes was in the bedlam plays—but here, Dickon is also a spiritual guide. It is Dickon who assists Colin and Mary in the secret garden and helps them to heal.

At last! Here was a namesake who was neither a bedlam trickster nor a humpbacked king who may have smothered his own nephews (and did, according to Shakespeare). A vast improvement. I must have read that salubrious book a dozen times while growing up.

During the years when separating myself from my father was a big issue for me, I used to long after that fellow Adam. I had almost escaped! Surely Adam would not have had any of the problems Dikkon had!

You see, my father was a poet, and he was very well received—indeed, famous—in America and England during the half century between the early 1930s and the late 1980s. My parents knew and were close friends with most of the poets who were publishing during those years—Robert Frost, Dylan Thomas, Allen Ginsberg, T. S. Eliot, W. H. Auden, Robert Lowell . . . the list is long. Most of these people were casual droppers-in at our house, largely, I believe, because my parents were cordial and were pacifists when it came to literary war.

Dad and Mom delighted in almost every poetical voice, regardless of who had recently snubbed whom, or whom the critics were making eyes at just then. The critics appoint themselves to be the door wardens to literary immortality—they hold the keys to what many poets want most. The struggle for

approval by the critics might simmer for years, as one group seeks to advance in critical attention against another group.

Literary battles can be fierce, but some of them provide us with great one-liners. For example, when I was young, debate had been ongoing for decades about the value of what is called *free verse*. Writers of free verse avoid conventional structures of poetry such as rhyme and meter and punctuation and any set length of line. Instead, they write their verse in open form anywhere on the page and believe they have creatively freed both themselves and their readers from stodgy old constraints in favor of greater beauty and inspiration.

One of Dad's friends, Allen Ginsberg, was often looked upon as a master of free verse. Several times I heard Allen proclaim his allegiance to free verse. But another friend of Dad's, Robert Frost, came up with the best line. Frost said that writing free verse is like playing tennis without a net.

Granted, many a young man has a father who looms large in his life, particularly in his early life. I became aware of Dad's professional success later—the prizes, the awards, the laureateships, the honorary degrees, his many books, etc. What I was aware of as a boy, however, were his passionate words themselves—their hot rhythms and their vibrant inflections.

Dad was an ardent lyricist. When Dad read his poems aloud (or rather *sang* them, as I thought it), his particular words, in their particular order, seemed to me to have hung in the air forever, indelibly, from the moment of Creation itself. This impressed me mightily. In our living room, or from a stage somewhere, there came cosmological and literary perfection, and it was modeled for me by my dad.

If I had been a different boy (if I had been Adam, for example),

my life would have been easier. For if I had been a different boy, I might have aspired to be an astronaut, or a quarterback, or an FBI agent, or something else—certainly not a poet! But in my soul, I knew that I was like Dad. I, too, was a word-smithing guy.

And Dad . . . well, Dad cast a decidedly long literary shadow.

From the day I was born, from the very giving of my name, I had been molded as a literary artifact. Perhaps that moment with Dad and our Greek-scholar neighbor was like what happened in Eden when God paraded His newly created creatures before Adam to get their names.

What shall we call this new thing, and why? That was the question God asked of Adam.

Adam said, *It's a dog! Because he is loyal and brave and will fight for us.*

Dad (and his friend) said, *It's a Dikkon! Because he shall absorb his father into his very soul on the chance that one day, like a chrysalis, he may emerge from his cocoon with his own wider and radiant wings.*

I was—at once—positioned for literary potential, yet at the same time saddled by Dad's own literary achievement. It was a weight under which I would stagger and chafe for decades.

Without intending it, my father and his Greek-minded friend had sentenced me to a lifetime of worry and self-doubt. I could never claim victory in the war I launched against myself to defeat that doubt. I was much like another Greek, the mythical King Sisyphus, who was sentenced by Zeus to spend eternity pushing a giant boulder up the side of a mountain, only to have it roll back down again each time the boulder was just inches from the top.

Growing up, I sat at our dining table with literary “gods”

beside me, and I passed the peanuts to them at cocktail parties. I delighted to run in my imagination, to catch up with their quick talk and with their perfected allusions. I was aware that I was not *of* them, yet I observed that my parents delighted in them. I thought that someday I might word-smith, too, and then I would be *of* them.

They impressed me, not because of their literary renown—I was indifferent to that because they all had literary renown in the same way that they all had faces or feet—but because of their oddities.

The seemingly delicate poet Marianne Moore excited me with her baseball interest—and was chosen later to throw out the first pitch during the 1968 baseball season at Yankee Stadium.

The urbane southern poet Allen Tate delighted me when he argued at length with Dad about the language of human sexual intercourse. Is it *always* making love (Tate's view) or can it legitimately be described as . . . well, a word with an *f* (Dad's view). Vital info for me at fifteen!

The Majorcan poet, novelist, and mythologist Robert Graves—in the States to assist the filming of his Roman novels *I, Claudius* and *Claudius, the God*—who declined to discuss with me his experiences in World War I, and wanted instead to laugh with Mom and Dad about the unhappy fate of his bohemian grocery store—he was amusing both for his erudition and for his mouse-skin cap.

The tweedy Sir Osbert and the long-nosed Dame Edith Sitwell—she with the diamonds as big as ice cubes on her fingers—excited my imagination. Though brother and sister, they were my first knight and lady. Dame Edith asked novelist

Evelyn Waugh to be her godfather when she converted to Roman Catholicism. The author of *Brideshead Revisited*, Waugh was a favorite of mine.

Angular Ted Hughes and pretty but strained Sylvia Plath were, after Plath's suicide, the protagonists in a literary and feminist furor over the contents of Plath's roman à clef *The Bell Jar*. I remember Hughes, not Plath, although I probably met her because she was a Cambridge-based, literary-minded, Smith College girl not unlike my mother, although eighteen years her junior. What I do remember is my parents' concern for them at the incautious shortness of time between their meeting and their marriage—only four months.

Encounters like these were endless, but I could empathize with poor old King Sisyphus. It's no small task perpetually breaking bread with greatness, trying to keep up with greatness's chatter, but coming up short of it time and time again.

Greek mythology also tells us that King Sisyphus was guilty of murder.

For years, I believed I was too.

Here's what happened.