

A Blow to the Possible

by Matt Lubich

The Dodge Dart went into second with a slight grind as Gus Adacheck pulled out of the parking lot and into the late-morning Dallas traffic. Got to take a look at that, he thought to himself. Get Little Gus out there with him. Show him how you have to take care of a car if you expect it to run right. You have to be responsible. Take care of things.

So many lessons.

That's why he was taking the afternoon off. It wasn't every day the president came to town. Afterward, they'd go home and read about the presidency in the Encyclopedia. He didn't want to be like his father; a brooding presence behind the paper that disappeared at dawn, only to return in the darkness so full of an anger that Gus couldn't understand, but somehow felt a part of. At night, he looked at Little Gus and saw a sponge — soaking up every experience, every comment.

Tombstones are only granite symbols of a man's life, Gus thought as he changed lanes. Children, they were the ultimate epitaph.

It was like in Korea. He remembered how scared he was on the troop ship going over. He'd lie in his bunk with the flood of possibilities and scenarios of fear racing through his head. Then, he was there, with no time to do anything but react.

Sometimes he felt like he was still on that battlefield. Except now, instead of mud, the explosion of shells and screams, he was surrounded by slipcovers and the voice of Ed Sullivan. But the stakes were still the same: a human life.

So Gus would react. He'd go on instinct. Always aware of the

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landmines, but realizing that once you start across, you have to keep moving. He'd show little Gus things. Teach him things. Take him to see the president.

Before he could even brake the car to a halt in the driveway, Little Gus was out the door, barely inside the red jacket with the little baseballs and the word "Slugger" emblazoned on the breast. Gus winced at the sight of his son with one arm flapping empty. He could make sure the trim was painted, but how could he ensure that his son never had to go to war? What father/son outings could he think of that would ever prepare him for that?

Was this a New World? Were they really on the frontier of something better? If so, Gus could reconcile himself to what he had seen and done. If all the destruction has somehow created something finer, then even if he couldn't accept it, he could live with it. He wanted to believe. And he wanted to believe that if it did exist, he was somehow part of it.

Gus never dreamed, but he had dreams. The most common was that he was still over there. He'd gotten cut off from his unit, and with night falling, all he wanted to do is find a cave or an abandoned building in which to sleep. He wanders in the twilight. Coming around a corner, he sees the bodies. Apparently they had got caught in an ambush and had had nowhere to hide.

Gus begins to drag the bodies together. He finds a can of gas in an abandoned jeep and soaks them down. Stepping back, he throws a match onto the mass of blood and flesh and potential now lost. He prays. As the pyre begins to grow, the soldiers change into a dozen Little Gus', their uniforms becoming pajamas with cowboys and Indians....

Gus shook himself from these thoughts as he backed the Dodge down the driveway. He looked at his son sitting in the seat next to

him. God, he thought, one time it takes and you create yourself. But this time you have a chance to change things. As they started toward Dealy Plaza a flash of silver caught Gus' eye. In the sky a jet was slowly descending.

"Look, Gus, there's his plane, there's the president." The little boy looked out the window, squinting at the bright star in the sunlit sky. Gus wasn't sure it was the president's plane, but for his son, he wanted to believe in the possibility that it could be.

"See that," Gus said, pointing across the street at the concrete, quarter-moon shaped structure on the top of the grassy knoll. "They call that a pergola. It's something that climbing plants are trained to grow on." That's what I am, he thought to himself. Warmed by the noonday sun, Gus felt omnipotent. Little Gus looked up at his father, his eyes beginning to flicker with the excitement that was surrounding them.

"Perlola," he parroted.

"Close enough," Gus laughed, musing his son's hair. For a moment he lost himself in a daydream: the president would drive by, and even with the thousands of people along the motorcade route, Gus and Little Gus would catch his eye. He would lean over to Jackie. "That is what we're working for," he would say.

The sound of the police sirens brought Gus back to reality. It is a New World, Gus thought to himself. Maybe all the blood hadn't completely washed away the sins of him, and his father, and his father before him, but it was a start. Gus knew he had killed people's sons, but he had done it for his son.

The motorcade made the sharp left onto Elm. Sunlight bounced off the hoods of the cars, reflecting in the windows of the buildings. The sirens and the cheers blended together in a mosaic of sound of

fervent optimism that made Gus giddy with pride. “When the presidents drives by, wave at him,” Gus said to his son. “Maybe he'll see you and wave back.”

Gus could see the president. How young he looks, he thought. Presidents were supposed to be old, gray men, symbolizing old, gray ideas. But he was one of them...a man for a new, better and more promising time. Just as Little Gus raised his arm to wave, Gus heard the first pop. Oddly, his first thought was the time he had taken his son to the circus when he was three. He had bought him a balloon, and it had transfixed his son more than the lions and the acrobats flying through the air. When it suddenly popped, Little Gus didn't look upset as much as simply disappointed that the bright piece of color was nothing more than air contained in a fragile shell.

But Gus has spent enough time on battlefields to know what the sound really was. He winced as he watched the president begin to list toward Jackie. He wanted to believe that he was leaning over to tell her about the young father and son he'd just seen, but then the cloud of reddish mist quickly ascended above the president's head. Gus wasn't upset, as much as simply disappointed.

Around him, Dealey Plaza erupted into a whirlwind of screams, sirens and shouts. Somewhere, Gus heard someone say, “good.” He looked down at his son. He stood staring impassively at the motorcade beginning to speed away. Little Gus looked up at his father.

“Pergola,” he said.

Gus looked across the street, his eyes beginning to blur with tears. That's what we are, he thought to himself. We delude ourselves into believing we've constructed something for our sons and daughters. We stand resolute, but nature — man's true nature — slowly wears away at us until we collapse and the plants wither and die amid the

cracked and crumbling rubble.

Gus felt sick to his stomach. Angry that he had believed that it could be different. That the killing he had done was something more than just that. He wanted to tell Little Gus that he was sorry. Sorry for the sons he had killed, and sorry that the potential of life could be lost in a moment of madness. But mostly, he want to apologize to Little Gus that it would be his generation that would bear the brunt of all this. That they would be the pale echoes of these shattered dreams.

