

“J. Herman Kleiger's first work of fiction is a tour de force! This is a story of a man's journey through inchoate family conflict and confusion as a boy, the brutality and soul scarring of war as a young man, his subsequent descent into madness, and finally his resurrection through psychological treatment with a caring and brilliant therapist.” – *Barton Evans, Ph.D., Goodreads Review*

Prologue

How does one capture, in words, the life he has lived? Though I have spent much of my adult life narrowing my mind and distracting myself from writing this story, I knew the time would come that I would have enough courage to sift through my memories and endure the feelings that would become passengers on this journey. As the years pass with fewer things to command my time and attention, it becomes harder to avoid this moment. Alone in my study, I hear the steady ticking of the clock on the wall. I realize that the time is at hand for my story to begin.

PART I SPARROW

He who closes his mind to mysteries of beauty and sorrow is but a machine with moveable precision gears cased inside a cold metal hull.

~ Nicolai Keloskovich



chapter 1

The Watchmaker and The Dancer

When she entered the room, he turned away. I didn't know why, but children always sense these ripples, even when they don't understand them. I knew her colorful, flowing skirts and draping head scarfs and his dirt-brown tunics and oil-stained aprons. I listened to the strange song of her voice and the familiar gruffness of his commands. I studied her fingers as she moved dark-colored blots of ink around the table when he was not around and his as they maneuvered tiny pins and screws in the meticulous solitude of his workshop. I breathed in all that I knew but did not comprehend. The rhythm of my early years had a constant beat, always with the same inexplicable notes and chords.



Peeking through the crack of the door, I held my breath and watched the hulking figure hunched over a work bench, a tall boy by his side. "Hold the tool this way Chaim and be gentle like the balance wheel is a baby." My father could sound soft and kind when speaking to my older brother. "You don't want to over tighten the mainspring. Here, see the tiny jewels? Easy, gentle, my *bubelah*." Papa always called Chaim this name, which I thought meant "dearest child" or "favorite son."

I had learned long ago not to intrude. Asking "Papa, can I try?" instantly changed the softness in his voice to a familiar, unwelcome sting.

"Anton, no! Find your mama or go draw your pictures. This is for Chaim to learn, not for you. Now, leave us be!"

Sadly, why are the stinging memories the ones we carry from childhood? When Papa raised his voice and waved me away, I always did as he said. Papa could be so stern. Walking away from his workbench, I would return to draw my pictures at the table. There, I spent long afternoons drawing, sometimes hills, trees, and mountains, but always horses.

All my pictures had horses. I don't remember when I started drawing them. It must have begun with my nightmares, which were always the same jumbled images – moving in terror atop a great beast – darkened shapes in pursuit – furious clomping of hooves – snorting of a terrified animal – shrieks of pain – cries of baby. The fear was so real and gripping that I'd wake up screaming until Nadya or Mama would hold me.

"Shush, *Pidkya*," Aunt Nadya cooed.

"It's safe now, *Kicsi*," Mama would whisper.