

Local Man Struck by Lightning Survives

By Nick Hayden

Richard Higgins was an old man, and he had always been old, except for one day, and that in his twenties. His childhood he fretted away in the monochrome of the Depression, worrying about the food he would not eat, the smiles his parents did not wear, the siblings that left on trains and never returned, worrying always about nothing; for everything he had, or thought one should have, was worked into the black and gray that predominate the pictures of that time, and was sacrificed to the endless, hungry lines and ever-bloating Hooverilles.

He toiled over the sea during the War, saw Paris in shambles, the great statues crumbled, the architectural triumphs desecrated, the ordered streets smashed by artillery. He saw the bodies piled high and buried thick in the camps, like logs chopped to fuel the fires of war. He returned home to Vienna to be greeted by the Mayor, to be paraded through the streets, and to watch the bright confetti rain down in his mind, seeing only the rain of ash from charred bodies and blackened blood.

He took a job as a reporter for *The Vienna Clipper*, writing twelve inches on old women making quilts and old men doing one more year what they had done every day of their lives, writing thirty inches on men found dead in their bathtubs and women found in other men's beds. Not a printed letter of news escaped the outskirts of Vienna, but reams of bleeding black print rushed into the office, and he sorted through it, grappling with the mundane masquerade of human endeavors, reading and reporting, outfitted in

black shoes and black hat, writing, gallons of ink issuing from his pen, and from his pen to his typewriter, and from his typewriter to the ceaseless presses, expelling the vast sum of human activities in ten pages daily, and while the pictures of the times turned to color, Higgins produced in black and white.

But of the thousands of bylines he amassed, of the miles of newsprint that marked the metronomic meter of his daily existence, of the news stories he authored, of the columns and interviews attributed to his name, the people of Vienna took no special notice except for one, and one in which his name appeared not in the byline, as a god dictating his creation, but as a player in the story itself. And the headline read:

Local Man Struck by Lightning Survives

He was old in 1950, at the age of 24, and like many old men, he disliked sitting on the ground. But he lay on his back in the grass of a hillside, his skin itching with imagined insects, which his mind, aware of its own deceit, ignored. He looked at his watch— deadline had passed two hours ago; the paper would soon be in mailboxes. That evening he would cover a local basketball game.

“What do you see, Richard?”

“Bags of water vapor.”

“Come on, use some imagination.”

“Cotton balls. I see cotton balls.”

She laughed. “Well, what would you ask them, then? Imagine you have an exclusive story with Mr. Cumulus over there. What do you say to him?”

“Nothing.”

“You’re no fun. You could ask how they float.”

“I can ask a meteorologist that. He has a degree.”

“Then ask them why they imitate so many shapes. Ask if they get sad when it rains.

Ask what they think when they look down at us.”

“Their shapes are given by other forces, and if they were ever sad, or ever concerned, it is a useless emotion, for they do only what Nature dictates.”

“As God wills, you mean.”

“Can I be done here, miss? Thank you.”

He had met Flora at the funeral of her grandfather, Alvin Johnson, the mayor who had congratulated him when he had returned from the war and who had arranged the parade, the mayor who for 30 years had appeased law-abider and crook alike, so that the first slept in peace as the latter nightly enjoyed his deceits.

The picture in the paper showed men in black trench coats and women behind black veils, huddled mourners beneath huddled umbrellas, a pastor in a black robe speaking words before the grave, and Flora, a pale face bright in the dark sea, caught in an moment of exquisite sorrow, like a fixed mask in a Grecian tragedy.

The pastor was young, with scruffs of a beard dripping with rain as he spoke of grace and the light of the world come to dwell with men, and of the mayor, his grandfather, now before that divine visage, shining like an angel. Flora watched him speak, like an

angel herself, one whose face is always upon His. Richard Higgins, writing shorthand notes in a soggy notebook, watched her, wondering if any of the drops that hit the ground were tears and, if so, how she could cry for a man who pleased everyone so that he could please himself. The flash of the photographer's bulb lit her face, and, in the morning, Vienna saw as Higgins had.

Higgins crossed his knee over his leg. "What is the purpose of the Alvin Johnson Memorial Fund?"

The pastor did not lean forward to emphasize his answer as his grandfather often had; he looked flustered, even by the simple question. His small office was bare, with only a crammed bookshelf and two creaking, uncomfortable chairs.

"My grandfather left a substantial fortune, but he declined to leave it, in whole or part, to his seven children. He dedicated it instead to the church. The elders of Saint Paul's Lutheran Church have worked long to determine the manner in which to distribute the funds, for my grandfather did not specify."

"Excuse me, but was Alvin a religious man?"

"He died a saved man."

"Is it possible that he left the money to this church in an effort to create a legacy for himself?"

"Sir, you came to write a story about the Lutheran school we are starting. This is not Chicago or New York."

“All cities, small or large, are the same.”

“That may well be, Mr. Higgins, but I will not continue to speak with you if you insist on making this my grandfather’s last scandal.”

“I apologize. My question stems from the basics of Christianity itself.”

“Really? I am afraid to ask, but I will. What part?”

“The depravity of man.”

“Good morning, Mr. Higgins.”

Higgins replied with a nod, but slowed as he passed the newspaper’s reception desk.

“You’re Flora Johnson. I saw you at your grandfather’s funeral several months ago.”

Flora smiled. “You have a good memory. It’s to be expected from a reporter, I guess. You’ve got the ‘who.’ Now, as for the ‘what,’ ‘when,’ ‘where,’ and ‘why,’ I think you can figure most of that out yourself, except the last. I’m a young woman, and young women often desire husbands.”

“What does that have to do with being a receptionist?”

“I’m guaranteed to meet a lot of people. Plus, I hear some of the paperboys are cute.”

Richard Higgins approached the altar, where Pastor Johnson oversaw the placement of Easter lilies. Higgins had learned to walk silently as a reporter, to observe closely and unobtrusively. The lady with the flowers saw him first.

“Your sister asked that I meet her here,” Higgins said as Pastor Johnson turned.

“So, she has invited you now.” He gave the woman some instructions, then stepped down to speak with Higgins. “What made you accept?”

“She is persistent.”

“That’s one way to put it.”

The two stood looking at one another, neither uncomfortable, but both sensing that more should be said.

“She often invites men to sit on the hill with her?”

“Always. Sometimes men, sometimes women, sometimes children. One a week since the snow melted.”

“Don’t you, as a pastor, find it an indecent thing for a young woman to do, especially when single men are involved?”

“If it were another woman, yes. I am not fond of it. But Flora is innocent and takes delight in the company and conversation, and I believe she barely notices if the companion is male or female. It is the men that concern me. I do not trust their innocence as I do my sister’s.”

Again, on some autumn day, they sat upon the hill outside the church, in a graveyard surrounded by a wall that separated them from the buildings of Vienna.

“Will you marry?”

“That is an odd question, coming from you, Mr. Higgins.”

“It is a practical question, economically.”

“Then I do not think I will answer it.”

“Come now, Miss Johnson. The money your grandfather left is barred to you and given to other people’s children. Your brother is poor, unless he prefers threadbare robes when preaching. Time passes, and you watch the clouds with the whole town, person by person. Personally, I enjoy the weather, time to time, but you must begin to live.”

“I like to think that I have been a small light to the people I have brought here, as they have sometimes been to me.”

“Let me rephrase my sentence—you must begin to make a living.”

“I work.”

“Women want husbands and children, Miss Johnson, not careers.”

“I don’t suppose you will marry, Mr. Higgins?”

“Life is cheaper and simpler alone. I like very few people, and those less as I get to know them better.”

“You like me, though, I suppose.”

“You are a silly, random, purposeless girl. But I can’t find a reason to dislike you.”

“Explain yourself, Mr. Reporter.”

“I mean, I find no deceit in you, no trace of jealousy, no pettiness or gossip, no mask, no hidden self. In all things I find such a lack of general selfishness in you that at times I suspect you to be a dancer in some club so clandestine that I have not yet exposed it.”

Flora laughed a little. “I wish to marry,” she said then, softly. “You have described

your image of me. I've been looking for the same in a man.”

The day that Mr. Richard Higgins, *Clipper* reporter, became young was April 12, 1952. He was driving home from an interview with a couple married 80 years. The sun was setting, and the light crashed over the thick burlap of oncoming clouds. He took a country road from the house to State Road 7, heading to the Main Street office to type his story. The trees were pregnant with the buds of leaves.

The red brake lights of cars lit the road before him, and he slowed and stopped. He pulled his car to the side of the road, put it into park, and turned his notebook to a new sheet. Car crashes always made the front page. He donned his hat and jogged up the line of traffic to the accident.

A small Volkswagen Beetle sat crumpled against the front of a Chrysler Windsor, the Windsor enclosing the other like a vulture surrounding a carcass with its wings, one foot upon the body.

Cars stopped even as the police began to wave them on, men left the wheel, and crowds drew close to death—as if Freud, claiming that all men longed subconsciously for death, was right, and that when a man stood upon the edge of a cliff to look into its depths; or when a man held his breath beneath the waves until he could no more; or when a man starved himself because he did not believe he deserved the pleasure of food, he acted upon the same desire that drew the men to the crash.

It was an unspoken rule that no pictures were to be taken, but questions must be

asked, for a death was news no matter where it occurred. The chance that the driver of the Beetle had survived—a miracle, considering the vehicle's condition, but a better story—was dispelled by the laconic officer who answered Higgins questions. Traffic was moving again, slowly, pausing, like mourners at a funeral, and Higgins, in his dark trench coat, talking to the officer, struggled to retrieve facts. But the police said that the family must be contacted first.

It would be a few inches in tomorrow's paper.

Rain pounded against the windows of the newsroom, but Higgins, alone and hammering the keys of the typewriter, illuminated by a single lamp, heard only his own pounding.

He finished the anniversary story and began to write up the accident. He waited for the telephone call from the police department to provide the final details. He gave them a half an hour—he could rewrite the story in the morning before it was taken to the typesetters.

The phone rang. The night's work was complete.

Higgins walked through drenched streets gleaming from the light of street lamps. He walked past his car, down block after block, until the rain soaked his clothes and dripped from his hair. The wind, growing stronger every block, shivered through him.

Lightning flashed in the sky, and the steeple of Saint Paul's stood black against its

brilliance. Higgins continued toward it. The gate to the cemetery was open, pressed against the wall by the wind, and as he entered, his shoes sunk in the mud and thick, wet grass, and the whole hillside seemed to run with a torrent of water.

He paced down the hill, then up the hill, then down again partway, looking from side to side. He stopped suddenly, looking around wildly. He removed a notepad from his pocket and flipped it open, just as he had so many times, and his mouth opened and did not close, but he continued to look around, searching and not finding, finding nothing but the rain that soaked him, the wind that tore him, the darkness that closed in, and the lightning, time and again lighting the scattered graves, accompanied by the toll of heaven's bell.

“Why?”

The rain and the wind wrestled over the word, and it was lost in the brawl. The lightning fell, illuminating the skeleton of trees, and the name “Alvin Johnson” flared into being on a nearby grave. Higgins saw it as he spoke the word and a fury seized him. He whirled about, maddened, searching still, growing more agitated as he whirled, and he found no rest.

“Clouds!” he screamed, and the rain and the wind, at his tone, did not touch the word. “Tell me the reason! Do you know? You look down, you watch us everyday, like guardians—like spies. But you don't lift a finger! Why did Flora die? What was its purpose?”

Higgins waved his flimsy notepad at the sky, the ink upon the pages washing away.

“You can’t answer. I know you can’t. I said it before. You don’t move yourselves. The whole earth turns and turns, revolving, the sun revolving, the whole universe revolving around some cosmic center, moving without purpose, but for God. Where is he? God, answer me! I have my paper. I have my pen. Speak and answer the accusations that revolve around you! I’ve seen them every day of my long, dark life. Look! Here lies Alvin Johnson, swindler, crook, adulterer, panderer, hypocrite—how many of the rings of hell will he fill? For ninety years he wasted his life and others’, for thirty years he desecrated this town, gilding the tree and digging up the roots. But Flora! Oh, no, O God, she can’t survive two decades in the world!

“You want light, don’t you? You want salt? I’ve read your press release. But it’s a lie. I find one shred of goodness, genuine goodness in this great slough of humanity! You have abandoned us! Call down fire on the cities as you used to. Call down the unquenchable fires of heaven on the murderers, the thieves, the warmongers, the bigots and slanderers, the endless number of wicked men that swarm the earth. They live in filth and wash their face in public. Show me five righteous men! Burn the whole damn world! But Flora...!

“Talk to me, you coward. Do you hit and run? Is the expanse of heaven a fortress against us, are the angels your army of publicists? Heal a dog, kill a child, is that your plan? If I give them babies, they’ll forget the old and dying? Alvin never did so well. Oh, what emptiness you have tried to cure—depression? Cue the sunrise! Lost a job? Start the singing birds! War and disease and hate? Read Psalm 23!

“Answer me, I demand you! Or will you remain silent, encourage me to read a passage in your Bible? Words, words, words! It’s nothing—I’ve bled millions, and they pass into the fire and disappear. Anyone can make a drunk a saint in five inches and expose a pastor in a police blotter. Speak to me! I wait. The whole earth waits. Defend the death of Flora Johnson—show me a reason—confess your wrongdoing. I am your judge and jury! Show me the reason the good die and the evil—oh, I am sick with the stuff I cannot write—they cover the earth like a flood. Speak, O Great and Merciful God! Make your excuses! There is but one God, and he in heaven, hidden away, killing son and mother and friend, slaughtering even himself! Damn you, God! Damn you to hell!”

Pastor Johnson knelt alone before the altar, praying, when the lightning struck. The shadows of the church disappeared; the golden cross upon the altar burned with light, and it filled every crevice, pressing forcefully through the closed lids of Johnson’s eyes. He opened them, blinded for a moment, and heard a cry of pain.

The darkness had returned when he reached the window, but other lances of light lit the sky, and in the graveyard, between the tombstones, lay a man.

Pastor Johnson ran outside, sliding clumsily down the muddy hill. A circle of ash surrounded the man, and his eyes were open, naked, the brows and lashes burned off, but his face was soaked with tears and rain. Johnson, kneeling beside him, gasped.

“R...Richard? Richard! Can you hear me? Can you speak?”

Richard Higgins’ wide eyes turned to him and focused, and a profound recognition

filled his eyes. “Pastor...it was so beautiful. It hurt, but...but I...dear God....”

“What?”

Higgins struggled to breathe, but he continued to talk, forming each word with effort.

“He didn’t say anything. He didn’t say...a word.”

“Here, let me help you. Can you move?” Pastor Johnson touched his shoulder, and Higgins grasped the hand urgently.

“I saw it, James. I saw it. Do you understand? Even after that, even with...he let me....” Higgins sobbed.

“What did you see?”

“His face. He showed me his face.”

Richard Higgins grew old again after that night, as a man who must endure a trial indefinitely. He went often to see Pastor Johnson, and they became good friends, and Johnson was perhaps the only man to see Richard Higgins cry—and Higgins did so often, whenever the fallen world seemed too heavy a weight to bear.

He wrote with a renewed fervor, seeking stories of the depths of hearts reborn, and writing columns when given the chance. Many who did not know him, feared him, for he knew that it was better to lose a hand or an eye than to sin, and his rebukes were harsh. But those who knew him—and the numbers grew year by year, uncounted—knew him to be a man of wisdom and deep hope. And though he never knew it, and would never have let it be spoken, when he died, and the people came, and Pastor Johnson, now retired,

preached, it was said that men had looked upon Higgins and had glimpsed some terrible, wonderful thing, and that many could not look away and had been drawn to Higgins and into his friendship. And this, Pastor Johnson declared, as they stood about the grave, was the face of God.

(The End)