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## And Variation

Jim Krusoe

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## And Variation · *Jim Krusoe*

1

All he wants is to live in a little apartment with a wiener dog named Klaus. That's not too much to ask, is it, he asks, thinking how happy he'd be with a place of his own to come home to every evening and a little wiener dog yapping at his ankles, him with a can opener in his hand about to open the can of dog food with a picture of a happy dog on its label as he waits for his TV dinner with the picture of a man on its label to heat through. "Now Klaus, just be patient," he'd say, and Klaus would be patient, and then he'd get Klaus's food and then his own, "Food for a Hungry Man," and the two of them would sit down on the couch and watch TV. But instead here he is, in a cast-iron cooking pot all by himself, water up to his neck and surrounded by savages—charming, intelligent, even sophisticated, but savages anyway—and never mind how they dragged this heavy pot through miles of jungle or threatened him till he got in it. Cannibals? Possibly—but really, who ever heard of boiling even a chicken for soup without first evisceration? So where did they get the idea of cooking him this way? One possibility it occurs to him might be that book of cartoons he left out last night. But is that so odd? Wasn't it after *The Sorrows of Werther* hundreds took their lives all over Europe, and didn't thousands of young men hitchhike across the United States after reading *On The Road*? He notices there seems to be some kind of bug walking along the edge of the pot, a bug about the size of a darkened baby's tooth, that's walking around the edge of the pot trying to find a way out. Around him the natives seem mostly relaxed, certainly not vicious or bloodthirsty in any way, but more like old guys hanging around a gas station waiting for the oil in their cars to be changed, and the insect, possibly a beetle of some sort, appears to have given up, or at least paused for a moment, as if its tiny nervous system has gotten the message that continuing this way is not going to help. What kind of bug is this he wonders. Possibly some variety of a lady bug, though his knowledge about beetles is narrow, the most vivid recollection being, ironically, Kafka's, as Gregor Samsa tried to hide beneath a sheet so the cleaning lady wouldn't see him. Now this bug moves, then stops again, and he has the urge to pick it up and toss it off somewhere where it will be temporarily safe. But what good would that do, because it would only

wind up being blown into the fire, or, avoiding that, be eaten by a bird, of which, he's noticed there are plenty of all kinds, especially vultures. Tears, he thinks. So many tears.

2

All he wants is to live in a little apartment with a wiener dog named Klaus. Is that too much to ask for? Well, probably yes. Suppose, for example, everyone wanted to do the same. How many little apartments can there be? Certainly, he's read, in Russia and elsewhere people are living six or eight to a room, to say nothing of the people in his own country who have to sleep out on the streets at night. And if everyone wanted a wiener dog how many would that be? And then, if they all were named Klaus, how would people keep them separate? If you called one then they'd all come running, and if you said, "Sit, Klaus," then they'd all sit down at once until you released the ones you didn't want to sit in the first place.

But right now he's hungry, so he'll just have to pull on his coat and tie and go to "Robert's," that swanky French restaurant where he's known to everyone, from the waiters to the busboys, as "The Mystery Diner," a solitary individual who shows up at odd hours in his tux and tie, to sit alone and brood over some mysterious sorrow in his life. Mysterious, that is, to all but Monsieur Robert himself, who knew him back when they were both in the Foreign Legion, both singing Legion songs, doing Legion things, eating terrible Legion food, back before Robert became a famous chef and his friend, now known as the mysterious diner, came down with the strange disease he picked up at a convention in Philadelphia.

"Klaus," the mystery man broods, "such a nice name."

3

All he wants is to live in a little apartment with a wiener dog named Klaus, or maybe Gretchen. "Ah," he sighs, so *this* is what his former dreams of glory have turned into. Where was the famous one-eyed aviator he had sought to become when he was younger? Where was the junk bond king? Where was the painter who cuts off his ear and mails it to a waitress he's seen at the coffee shop the other night? Gone, he thinks, terribly gone.

Suddenly there's a knock at the door, and when he opens it he finds a woman, a real bombshell, who's smiling at him and carrying a briefcase. "Hello," she says, "my name is Gretchen, and do you know that you can have the knowledge of the world at your fingertips for less than the cost of a pack of cigarettes a day?"

He wishes he smoked, and invites her in. She's selling encyclopedias, and as he drinks in her sculptured nails, her long elegant legs, her swan-like neck, her downy arms, her aristocratic feet, her swelling breasts, her tiny sea shell ears, her fine-spun hair, her aquiline nose, her gleaming teeth, her piercing gaze, he finds himself signing a contract for a complete set, plus free yearly updates for the next ten years at no additional cost plus access to a free research service for all his research needs. Gretchen leaves, her scent lingering in the room, and the next day the encyclopedias arrive, crisp and beautifully bound, full of color illustrations and transparencies. He opens one, at random, to the section on "burial."

Burial, the encyclopedia says, is "to deposit a body in the earth," and then it proceeds to a list of places where we are entitled to be buried and whose responsibility it is to bury corpses we may just come upon by accident in daily life, such as shipwreck victims, bodies from plane crashes, motor vehicle accidents, electrocutions, heart attacks, strangulations, and so on.

Essentially, the encyclopedia says, the responsibility is ours.