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Morningside Heights: Fragment of a Film

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MORNINGSIDE HEIGHTS: FRAGMENT OF A FILM

George used to say we all need an hour a day to meditate. He lived alone next door to a woman who played Schubert’s Marche Militaire on the piano, and a man who grew flowers on the fire escape.

That was summer 1946 when George’s brother returned from Germany with a German wife and two adopted children. Picture them in George’s living room sleeping on cots, eating Cornflakes, speaking broken English to the tune of Schubert’s Marche Militaire through the walls: there is a photo of Roosevelt over the radio, and the unmistakable cooking-smell of an old apartment even when nothing is on the stove and the windows are open, as George is opening them now, looking out at something in his backyard: although it is morning, it is already so hot that leaves are literally dropping from the trees. Heiss, says George to his nephews,

*ist sehr heiss.* . . .

Now, as if a film had stopped, picture him frozen in gesture, speaking high school German forever, his mouth caught in a grimace with heiss, his eyes wide-open, intensely blue.

By 1951 one of the German nephews would be dead of scarlet fever; the others would return to Germany, and George would move uptown where he himself would live only four more years and die in a car crash. But in August 1946 picture him in his pajamas by the window with his adopted nephews—smiling slightly, strangely, his lips about to part, his eyes about to blink as he focuses. . . .