

SEATED REFLECTIONS

BRIEF SYNOPSIS: As a young man, William thought he followed his passion when opportunity arose. It is not until years later, when he visits a site of his past, that he fully accepts the truth.

1993

William tightened his coat around his chest, shielding himself from the eye-watering briskness of Birmingham's February. The cold sucked the air from his lungs, lungs that were accustomed to many years in the New Mexico heat. He stopped along the pathway. The bench was still there.

It was different than what he remembered. The golden wood had been replaced by black iron. William took a seat, letting his knees recuperate and heart calm down. The roar of traffic carried through the winter English air, without a cloud in the sky to stop it.

With his arthritic hands, William reached into his jacket and took out the letter, reading the bold heading of the event. "Birmingham University wishes to invite you to an afternoon reception honoring the legacies of Frisch and Peierls." He placed the invitation back in his pocket.

1940

It should have been the end of William's junior year at Birmingham University. The onset of The War switched scholarly focus from education and coursework to advancement and research, and Birmingham University was no exception. So when Otto Frisch asked him to be on a special committee leading "a secret project that would contribute to the war efforts", he couldn't be happier. Not only would this fulfill his lifelong dream, it was also his ticket from the true throes of battle. He just could not imagine killing a man.

William left the meeting relieved and elated. He pedaled his Alexander Rocket past the confines of campus through Cannon Hill Park. The park was the largest in Birmingham, and although out of his way, William enjoyed the ride. Several ducks waddled across the path and down the soft hill leading to the pond. William always scanned the water surface, hoping one day he would see a swan. Several people were walking across the arched bridge towards their lunchtime picnics or to sit in the spring sun for tea. A few were leaning over the side, dropping morsels of bread or crackers for the insatiable ducks.

William's eye caught the blue blur in his path too late. He swerved off the path, unable to control his bicycle before the water stopped his momentum. As he was uprighting himself, a hand gently helped him to the grass. The girl in the blue dress with white polka dots introduced herself as Agnes, and William tried to formally introduce himself as best he could with wet trousers and sloshing shoes.

The chance meeting proved to be another highlight of William's day. Agnes repeatedly apologized, and William wanted to tell her it was completely his fault. He had another idea however, and told Agnes he would forgive her if she would meet him the next day at the same time and place, under drier circumstances. Agnes agreed.

1941

William and Agnes met at the park for lunch almost every day. On days when William's mind seemed elsewhere, Agnes urged him to share his thoughts. He wanted to tell her all about the M.A.U.D. Committee, how Frisch and his colleague Peierls were genius yet mad, and how his research with Frisch on uranium-235 could possibly end the war. He never could.

At the end of winter, William was offered another opportunity to further his research at Columbia University in The States. The Americans were only allowing British researchers into the country, and William was one of the few from his lab who fit the bill. He wanted to tell Agnes how exciting it truly was, but couldn't manage to give her the news. He wanted to savor their happiness and not taint it by

their upcoming separation. William held it from Agnes until after he packed his suitcase.

He told her he loved her. He promised to write letters as often as possible, and swore he would come back for her. He kept his promise over the summer. Agnes was reluctant to respond at first, but warmed to his romantic words. As fall approached, research at Columbia was intensifying. The role of deuterium oxide was being examined through a barrage of experiments. All involved were sworn to secrecy, but rumors spread about the politics behind obtaining heavy water and the implications of the bomb. William became enveloped in the work like the others, and consequently Agnes heard from him less and less.

1942

Thanksgiving meant most Americans were at home with their families. The thought crossed William's mind to take the long weekend and write to Agnes, apologizing for not keeping good on his promise. Instead, he was phoned and subsequently visited by two men from the United States government. On the following Monday, William packed his suitcase for an undisclosed destination. After a brief tour of the base, William knew he would not be returning to England.

1993

William's eyes watered as he stared at the pond, thinking of the excitement and horror of working on The Manhattan Project. It was supposed to be the greatest opportunity of his life. He had thought he was clever, escaping the violence of war. Instead he had aided in the worst massive destruction of WWII. His thoughts moved to Agnes, her blue dress with the white polka dots. Choosing The Project ruined her. It ruined them. It ruined him.

Again he unfolded the letter and read further down. "We would be pleased if you would say a few words on your experiences working with Otto Frisch." He thought about the lab at the university. It was wrong. Columbia was wrong. Los Alamos was wrong. It was all wrong. He thought he chose the love and passion of his life, but he was wrong. Today he wasn't going to get it wrong.

William stood, holding the armrest of the bench for support. He walked over to the waste basket and dropped the letter in. He sat once more on the bench, scanning the surface of the pond for a swan.