

ed pines on our path. “Stevenson’s greatest achievement was to use nostalgia dramatically—that is to say, he suppressed all personal emotion while using that emotion in serious fiction.” It sounded like Uncle Edward was reading from notes; he even consulted with the palms of his hands before continuing. “This use of the autobiographical into artistic impulse is an impressive achievement, and again, one which only Joyce has surpassed.”

He looked at me. “You see, I know Stevenson like nobody’s business.” He made a face, his voice climbing in a kind of wry self-deprecating exhortation. “And—I should. This is what I did for my life, for my job. You know that, don’t you?” He said all this as though he expected me to raise objections. When I didn’t, we marched on triumphantly, the wind favoring our course.

Then my uncle looked at his watch. For him, timing was everything. The warped asphalt path through the ice plants had finally led us back to the parking lot just visible over a sand dune. “I’m afraid I’m very busy this afternoon,” he said, charging over the dune. His sidekick followed suit. In the right conditions, Uncle Edward was capable of sudden, surprising maneuvers.

Paradoxically, given his ravenous censoring, I was not afraid sometimes to admit that I had not read or did not know certain things, because my uncle could even seem to admire ignorance in someone so young—especially if the young person were upfront about it. After all, his role in life had been to teach us swine. At the very least, it kept the conversation going. I would take one for posterity.

So at the ends of our visits, when he liked to give his “suggested readings,” I listened. We stood in front of his apartment building on California Street, his car safely ensconced in the underground garage.

“Have you read Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Travels with a Donkey*?”

In this case the right answer was “No.”

“No,” I said obligingly and honestly.

“Do so,” he said. “It records with remarkable vividness an experience which many of us have known.”

“Traveling with a donkey?”

“It’s about a journey Stevenson took in France, through the Cévennes, that damn nearly did him in,” my uncle said. “An extraordinary journey with—yes—a donkey. I find it profoundly moving.”

It was strange to be exchanging—or at least listening to—confidences from imperious Uncle Edward, even in the form of a book review. In fact, I found the process to be a little alarming. I wondered what I had done to deserve it.

“You see, I like to walk,” Uncle Edward said, almost helplessly, folding his hands together, then dropping them down. “Stevenson was an extraordinary walker.” He perked up. “I have that in common with one of the most marvelous writers the English language has known.”

“I like to walk,” I said.

He said, “I’m very pleased to hear it. I shall look forward to more happy times together—walking.” He gave me an almost sickly smile, the kind a warden might give to a model prisoner.

As usual, I hadn’t quite said what I meant to say. I’d been speaking metaphorically, or so it seemed on second thought. I didn’t find our communication quite as satisfactory as my uncle sometimes did.

We took our leave then, my uncle’s eyes misting over from his feelings about Stevenson—and perhaps because he believed he’d found, in me, a companionable creature, ambling by his side.

For my part, I gleaned that, when it came to literature and its readers and writers, it was hard to know where one left off and the other began. Or maybe I learned how a life lived through books could be put to use.

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