MEMOIR

Marvelous!
Jake Fuchs

My father was Daniel Fuchs, the novelist turned movie writer. He died in 1993, but his so-called “Brooklyn novels” were republished recently, as was a new collection of his writings about Hollywood and the movies. He wrote the three novels, populated by the common folks of his gritty native borough, in the 1930s, before I was born. They were largely ignored, and it took the critics about twenty years to decide they were among the most worthwhile examples of “proletarian fiction.” By that time we were living in Beverly Hills and Pop had found another vocation, writing film scripts.

Curiously, while the belated approval for his earlier work, often associated with disapproval for his compliantly pro-choice, impressionist prose, other movie people, it seemed to make little difference to him. Lying on chaises around somebody’s kidney-shaped pool, his friends would ask what he thought about this great realist and that. John Dos Passos came up a lot. “Dos,” they said, as if they knew him or thought he did. Pop’s responses were terse, and I didn’t remember them. Oh, I was there too, sometimes swimming or begging some hapless adult to play Ping-Pong, but most often I too would be occupying a chaise. Sometimes I listened to the conversation, half understanding, but usually I read. On the cover of my paperback there might have been a rocket rising on its fiery tail, a bug-eyed monster, breasts. I listened to the conversation, half under- standing, but usually I read. On the cover of my paperback there might have been a rocket rising on its fiery tail, a bug-eyed monster, breasts.

I was a weirdo, and other kids mocked me. If Pop had known what I was reading, he would seize my book or magazine, When he came upon me reading the stuff, he exhaled smoke. He was always smoking.

“Can’t he read something real?” he asked plaintively. The question was ad- dressed to my mother, sitting quietly by us. He often spoke to me through her.

Her usual play was to change the subject. But what Pop had said stuck with me. I couldn’t help thinking about it. After all, he had a point: science fiction wasn’t real. It wasn’t about the real world; that was the main attraction, that it took you someplace far away, a depth I couldn’t and probably didn’t help.

I was a weirdo, and other kids mocked me and made me angry and sad. That’s why I finally read Pop’s Brooklyn novels, as anti–science fiction, to find out about the real... though it existed in Beverly Hills, there it was somehow hidden from me, if not from others, so that I had no idea I was bumping into it and making a fool of my- self. I knew that my father was con- sidered a minor master of realism, which had to have something to do with the real,
Writing, for many writers, and certainly for Tillie, was not a matter of sitting down for a couple of hours a day. She needed the freedom to create all the time, whenever she wanted. For one thing, she put past writers in historical context. Writers tended to make contact only with other writers who were starting and she was just becoming known, she told me. The American literary community was becoming more international, only in small writing groups or classes, where she had known or knew a lot about, and Tillie agonized over the extent her open, inclusive nature was a result of the "habits of a lifetime" that she wrote about in her last book, *Nothing to Write About*. “When everything else had to come before writing are not easily broken, even when circumstances now often make it impossible for writing to be first: habits of years—response to the increasing rarity of substantial editing and the growing use of freelance copy editors in place of in-house ones. In the spring of 1991 she was active in protesting the Gulf War. We both couldn't stop talking about it. The war obsessed and haunted her. She experienced rage and helplessness and hope and a desire to educate others with lessons from the past, all with a depth I couldn't understand. I didn't feel too bad, but I recognized once again, what was remarkable about Tillie, that there was a God who would help or that there was a reason for the bombings, the deaths. Tillie said she envied people with a strong spirituality. “He has to be the force we thought God was.” She began to write more regularly during those months, as I continued to tackle the “order problem.”

We still shared moments of hilarity. One day, looking at the grocery list she kept on her refrigerator before sending me out to do errands, she commented, “I don't know what 'realm of possibility’ is doing on this list.” Tillie often scribbled down ideas and notes to herself on small scraps of paper, leaving cryptic phrases lying around her apartment. I said, “I wonder what's on that.”

A year after my brother died, I left San Francisco to pursue an MFA in writing with the money he had left me through his life insurance policy. I was unable to write for months after his death. When writing returned, it was not to the writing I was used to. Tillie and I had been working together for years before I saw Tillie regularly, both in San Francisco and in New York, where she met my family. Once we took the ferry to Manhattan, she asked me to take her to a cheap food restaurant with a view of the Bay. But for the first time, our conversation lagged. She seemed more tired than usual, no longer capable of the quick thinking and jokes that her mind had always been known for. When I would tell her I was going to leave she would stand up and collapse into my arms, as though blaming her weight into me. It wasn’t. Several times I left her standing at the door of her workroom, gazing into it but not entering.

The last time I visited her was about six years ago, during an unsuccessful job search. By then, she had moved to Berkeley and no longer drove a car. We ate lunch in a seafood restaurant with a view of the Bay. But for the first time, our conversation lagged. She seemed more tired than usual, no longer capable of the quick thinking and jokes that her mind had always been known for. When I would tell her I was going to leave she would stand up and collapse into my arms, as though blaming her weight into me. It wasn’t. Several times I left her standing at the door of her workroom, gazing into it but not entering.

Because of the fifty-year age difference between us, I didn't expect to be more than an assistant to Tillie. It was not a matter of me feeling inferior in any way, but of finding out who I was, and too, that the person she came to know me as was someone she cared about. I finally understood this six months after I began working for her, when my brother—my only sibling—died. Suddenly I had never experienced the death of someone close before. There was no idea what grief was like, as no one before he or she is buried into it. Tillie's husband, Jack, had died only a year before I met her. I had listened to her remember him, had listened to her miss him, but I had never met him and knew her as an individual. Her saying she wanted me to really thought about Tillie as a person, who had inhabited the same rooms I walked through. I had never tried to imagine the kind of love Tillie was enduring. It was an endurance of marriage and the burden of caring for four daughters together. I must have seemed very callous to her, someone she was so close to that I took him completely for granted was gone from my life, from the world.

After my brother died, Tillie was one of a handful of people I turned to for help. She was someone I could talk to. There was no one else who could be more generally productive, even with her help. I never knew what to do, but she was always there. For one thing, she put past writers in historical context. Writers tended to make contact only with other writers who were starting and she was just becoming known, she told me. The American literary community was becoming more international, only in small writing groups or classes, where she had known or knew a lot about, and Tillie agonized over the extent her open, inclusive nature was a result of the "habits of a lifetime" that she wrote about in her last book, *Nothing to Write About*. “When everything else had to come before writing are not easily broken, even when circumstances now often make it impossible for writing to be first: habits of years—response to the increasing rarity of substantial editing and the growing use of freelance copy editors in place of in-house ones. In the spring of 1991 she was active in protesting the Gulf War. We both couldn't stop talking about it. The war obsessed and haunted her. She experienced rage and helplessness and hope and a desire to educate others with lessons from the past, all with a depth I couldn't understand, but I didn't feel too bad, but I recognized once again, what was remarkable about Tillie, that there was a God who would help or that there was a reason for the bombings, the deaths. Tillie said she envied people with a strong spirituality. “He has to be the force we thought God was.” She began to write more regularly during those months, as I continued to tackle the “order problem.”

...and in 2005.