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KAKE

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VONNEGUT

MOTHER

NIGHT

"A SHAKING UP IN THE
KALEIDOSCOPE OF
LAUGHTER...READING VONNEGUT
IS ADDICTIVE!" - COMBEE

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MOTHER NIGHT

KURT VONNEGUT



DIAL PRESSTRADE PAPERBACKS

INTRODUCTION

THIS IS THE ONLY story of mine whose moral I know. I don't think it's a marvelous moral; I simply happen to know what it is: We are what we pretend to be, so we must be careful about what we pretend to be.

My personal experience with Nazi monkey business was limited. There were some vile and lively native American Fascists in my home town of Indianapolis during the thirties, and somebody slipped me a copy of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, I remember, which was supposed to be the Jews' secret plan for taking over the world. And I remember some laughs about my aunt, too, who married a *German* German, and who had to write to Indianapolis for proofs that she had no Jewish blood. The Indianapolis mayor knew her from high school and dancing school, so he had fun putting ribbons and official seals all over the documents the Germans required, which made them look like eighteenth-century peace treaties.

After a while the war came, and I was in it, and I was captured, so I got to see a little of Germany from the inside while the war was still going on. I was a private, a battalion scout, and, under the terms of the Geneva Convention, I had to work for my keep, which was good, not bad. I didn't have to stay in prison all the time, somewhere out in the countryside. I got to go to a city, which was Dresden, and to see the people and the things they did.

There were about a hundred of us in our particular work group, and we were put out as contract labor to a factory that was making a vitamin-enriched malt syrup for pregnant women. It tasted like thin honey laced with hickory smoke. It was good. I wish I had some right now. And the city was lovely, highly ornamented, like Paris, and untouched by war. It was supposedly an "open" city, not to be attacked since there were no troop concentrations or war industries there.

But high explosives were dropped on Dresden by American and British planes on the night of February 13, 1945, just about twenty-one years ago, as I now

write. There were no particular targets for the bombs. The hope was that they would create a lot of kindling and drive firemen underground.

And then hundreds of thousands of tiny incendiaries were scattered over the kindling, like seeds on freshly turned loam. More bombs were dropped to keep firemen in their holes, and all the little fires grew, joined one another, became one apocalyptic flame. Hey presto: fire storm. It was the largest massacre in European history, by the way. And so what?

We didn't get to see the fire storm. We were in a cool meat-locker under a slaughterhouse with our six guards and ranks and ranks of dressed cadavers of cattle, pigs, horses, and sheep. We heard the bombs walking around up there. Now and then there would be a gentle shower of calcimine. If we had gone above to take a look, we would have been turned into artifacts characteristic of fire storms: seeming pieces of charred firewood two or three feet long—ridiculously small human beings, or jumbo fried grasshoppers, if you will.

The malt syrup factory was gone. Everything was gone but the cellars where 135,000 Hansels and Gretels had been baked like gingerbread men. So we were put to work as corpse miners, breaking into shelters, bringing bodies out. And I got to see many German types of all ages as death had found them, usually with valuables in their laps. Sometimes relatives would come to watch us dig. They were interesting, too.

So much for Nazis and me.

If I'd been born in Germany, I suppose I would have *been* a Nazi, bopping Jews and gypsies and Poles around, leaving boots sticking out of snowbanks, warming myself with my secretly virtuous insides. So it goes.

There's another clear moral to this tale, now that I think about it: When you're dead you're dead.

And yet another moral occurs to me now: Make love when you can. It's good for you.

Iowa City, 1966

EDITOR'S NOTE

IN PREPARING THIS, the American edition of the confessions of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., I have had to deal with writings concerned with more than mere informing or deceiving, as the case may be. Campbell was a writer as well as a person accused of extremely serious crimes, a one-time playwright of moderate reputation. To say that he was a writer is to say that the demands of art alone were enough to make him lie, and to lie without seeing any harm in it. To say that he was a playwright is to offer an even harsher warning to the reader, for no one is a better liar than a man who has warped lives and passions onto something as grotesquely artificial as a stage.

And, now that I've said that about lying, I will risk the opinion that lies told for the sake of artistic effect—in the theater, for instance, and in Campbell's confessions, perhaps—can be, in a higher sense, the most beguiling forms of truth.

I don't care to argue the point. My duties as an editor are in no sense polemic. They are simply to pass on, in the most satisfactory style, the confessions of Campbell.

As for my own tinkering with the text, they are few. I have corrected some spelling, removed some exclamation points, and all the italics are mine.

I have in several instances changed names, in order to spare embarrassment or worse to innocent persons still living. The names Bernard B. O'Hare, Harold J. Sparrow, and Dr. Abraham Epstein, for instance, are fictitious, insofar as this account goes. Also fictitious are Sparrow's Army serial number and the title I have given to an American Legion post in the text; there is no Francis X. Donovan Post of the American Legion in Brookline.

There is one point at which my accuracy rather than the accuracy of Howard W. Campbell, Jr., can be questioned. That point is in [Chapter Twenty-two](#), in which Campbell quotes three of his poems in both English and German. In his

manuscript, the English versions are perfectly clear. The German versions, however, recalled from memory by Campbell, are so hacked up and smeary with revisions as to be illegible, as often as not. Campbell was proud of himself as a writer in German, indifferent to his skill in English. In trying to justify his pride in his German, he worked over the German versions of the poems again and again and again, and was apparently never satisfied with them.

So, in order to offer some idea in this edition as to what the poems were like in German, I have had to commission a delicate job of restoration. The person who did this job, who made vases out of shards, so to speak, was Mrs. Theodore Rowley, of Cotuit, Massachusetts, a fine linguist, and a respectable poetess in her own right.

I have made significant cuts in only two places. In [Chapter Thirty-nine](#), I have made a cut that was insisted upon by my publisher's lawyer. In the original of that chapter, Campbell has one of the Iron Guardsmen of the White Sons of the American Constitution shouting at a G-man, "I'm a better American than you are! My father invented 'I-Am-An-American Day!'" Witnesses agree that such a claim was made, but made without any apparent basis in fact. The lawyer's feeling is that to reproduce the claim in the body of the text would be to slander those persons who really did invent "I-Am-An-American Day."

In the same chapter, incidentally, Campbell is, according to witnesses, at his most accurate in reporting exactly what was said. The actual death speech of Resi Noth, all agree, is reproduced by Campbell, word for word.

The only other cutting I have done is in [Chapter Twenty-three](#), which is pornographic in the original. I would have considered myself honor-bound to present that chapter unbowdlerized, were it not for Campbell's request, right in the body of the text, that some editor perform the emasculation.

The title of the book is Campbell's. It is taken from a speech by Mephistopheles in Goethe's *Faust*. As translated by Carlyle F. MacIntyre (New Directions, 1941), the speech is this:

I am a part of the part that at first was all, part of the darkness that gave birth to light, that supercilious light which now disputes with Mother Night her ancient rank and space, and yet can not succeed; no matter how it struggles, it sticks to matter and can't get free. Light flows from substance, makes it beautiful; solids

can check its path, so I hope it won't be long till light and the world's stuff are destroyed together.

The dedication of the book is Campbell's too. Of the dedication, Campbell wrote this in a chapter he later discarded:

Before seeing what sort of a book I was going to have here, I wrote the dedication—"To Mata Hari." She whored in the interest of espionage, and so did I.

Now that I've seen some of the book, I would prefer to dedicate it to someone less exotic, less fantastic, more contemporary—less of a creature of silent film.

I would prefer to dedicate it to one familiar person, male or female, widely known to have done evil while saying to himself, "A very good me, the real me, a me made in heaven, is hidden deep inside."

I can think of many examples, could rattle them off after the fashion of a Gilbert and Sullivan patter song. But there is no single name to which I might aptly dedicate this book—unless it would be my own.

Let me honor myself in that fashion, then:

This book is rededicated to Howard W. Campbell, Jr., a man who served evil too openly and good too secretly, the crime of his times.

KURT VONNEGUT, JR.