ABYSSINIAN MAID

How a stolen painting led to reckoning with a family legacy

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November 1974: I answer the knock at my door to find a tall stately gentleman standing before me. A black beret covers his snow-white hair. The warm scarf wrapped at his neck disappears inside his coat, warding off the autumn chill. He points over my shoulder to the wall beyond and asks, "Where did you get that painting?"

The painting he points to is *Guitar and Listener*. The gentleman tells me his name is Barker Fairley. Although he is an eminent scholar, poet, essayist, artist, and critic, I don't know him. He tells me he is the painting's artist and also a neighbour who lives mere blocks away. Taking a different route for his daily walk, he chanced to see it through the window of my garden-level Toronto apartment at 198 Robert Street, just north of Harbord. I then see "FAIRLEY" in the bottom-right corner of the painting.

Barker Fairley working on *Abyssinian Maid*, February 1976.

Although I don't recognize the Fairley name, I do know *Guitar and Listener* is stolen. An acquaintance took it—maybe a year or so earlier—from amidst a stack of paintings stored beneath the basement stairwell of the Edward Johnson building, home of University of Toronto's Faculty of Music. He has finished his studies and is preparing to move back to his parents' home. He can't take a stolen painting with him. What's he going to do with it?

The soulful painting calls to the very core of my being. I love it at first sight. I offer to keep it without considering the morality of stolen property or even the possible repercussions. I, after all, did not steal it. My intense feelings for the work obscure any concerns about being an accessory after the fact, even though no money is involved.

Guitar and Listener, oil on board, 62.1 x 74.5 cm, is one of Barker's "Hayden Street" works. Completed around 1944, it is characteristic of his early style: high contrast, heavily outlined shapes filled with almost uniform colour marked by minimal modelling. The palette evokes blues music. The general scheme is simple, with only two dominant colours and very high tone contrast; the relationship of the blue-purple and yellow ochre is near complementary. The dark-indigo hues that clothe the figures are echoed in the table at which they sit.

The overall composition is balanced. A black, male blues singer sits at the left-side end of a table playing a guitar, eyes closed, absorbed in the performance of his song. The listener, a white woman, sits to his right; her left hand holds a glass that rests on the table. The darkness of the clothing and table stand out against a background painted in shades of ochre and other earth tones applied in broad, vertical strokes. This movement contrasts the horizontal lines in the table and guitar, and the diagonal of the figures' arms. The singer faces the viewer, while his companion, angled to face him, shows us her back-left side. His left elbow rests on the table as he plays. An equilateral triangle is formed in the centre by her left hand holding the glass, his left forearm, and the guitar neck.

Disjuncture exists between the two figures. Tension? They sit in close proximity to each other, almost touching. Yet neither looks at the other; they connect, seemingly, only through the music.

A serendipitous coincidence—the artist sees his painting on my wall through the window. Of course I insist that Barker take his painting, but he

Photo: Getty Images

adamantly refuses. "No, no," he says, "I don't want it. It is yours. You have come by it, and you appreciate it. I want to see this painting on your wall."

I understand why when he explains.

Commissioned by the University of Toronto, Barker Fairley paints a series of musicians with their instruments for the Faculty of Music. But his music paintings are not on permanent display. They only hang occasionally; more frequently, they are stored out of sight, which hurts him terribly. Although Fairley, an emeritus professor of German, had painted for many years, serious recognition for his art grew slowly. He is grateful to see his work enjoyed, particularly in full view from the street through a window. He would no doubt be upset if I truthfully disclosed that "storage" meant his paintings were stacked against each other, unwrapped, in a stairwell. But I do not tell him the truth. Instead, I lie. I tell him I found the painting in the basement of the Spadina Road house where I previously lived.

Over the next eighteen months I frequent the Fairley home at 90 Willcocks Street regularly to sit for him. He paints a small head portrait that sells and now resides, I think, somewhere in the Maritimes. Subsequently he begins a larger painting of me with my mountain dulcimer on my lap that he calls *Abyssinian Maid*, after Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." My first introduction to this poem is Fairley reciting it.

I adore Barker Fairley; sitting for him is a joyous pleasure. He and I are kindred spirits. His wife, Nan, feeds me tea and sandwiches. I sing him my songs. He is a consummate scholar who takes me, then a first-year undergraduate, seriously as we discuss my courses, assignments, and exams. We talk and talk about everything else—art, ideas, poetry. And we laugh, relishing our similar sense of humour. Fairley's kindness and warmth provides the paternal attention I need.

Fairley, for his part, is interested in hearing about my father—a musician, engineer, and polyglot whose story is no laughing matter.

Kopyczynce in 1908 is a town in the Austro-Hungarian Empire when my father, David Dietrich Auerbach, enters life there. He moves to Prague in 1928 to study mechanical engineering at the German Technological Institute. He supports himself playing violin in the city's many orchestras, and forms his own band to perform the Roma music he enjoys. He also works as a draftsman. All these extracurricular activities mean that he graduates after nine years, instead of the usual four.

The author with her father on Protestant Cay, July 24, 1955.

Photo: Mary H. Auerbach Rykov

Europe for Jews in the 1930s becomes increasingly dangerous. My father's mother and younger brother flee to Palestine in November 1938, likely after Kristallnacht, the two-day pogrom of broken glass that further shatters an already fragile existence in the entire region. His father, once a court clerk, is sent to work camps. No record of my grandfather, Chaim Hirsch Auerbach, exists beyond his 1943 stay in the Auschwitz-Monowitz infirmary and the Kopyczynce memory book of victims housed in Jerusalem's Holocaust Museum. As the noose tightens around the throats of Europe's Jews, many commit suicide. Instead of joining his family in Palestine, my father remains in the Prague he has come to love.

April 8, 1939: Mere weeks after Nazi occupation, my father flees Prague for Poland and Romania with the help of Hermann Field, an American Quaker working on behalf of the British Czechoslovak Refugee Trust Fund. He foregoes safe passage to England and participates in the Polish Underground before volunteering with the Czechoslovak Army. He signs on at Agde, France in October 1939 for the purpose of serving the Czechoslovak air force with an automatic firing device he invented specifically for aerial warfare. He trains for air service but is sent instead to ground battle.

June 3, 1940: After the German air force bombs Paris, my father's army contingent evacuates to the grounds surrounding Cholmondeley Castle in Cheshire, England. He and over three thousand other men remain camped out at Cholmondeley for months; they are in limbo—not allowed to serve and not allowed to work. His November resignation letter bitterly enumerates his unacknowledged and voluntary contributions to Czechoslovakia, including the music he composed for and played with the army orchestra. He fails to comprehend that a refugee Jew—particularly one with a despised German surname—is deemed unworthy to serve. My father receives an honourable discharge in November from the Czechoslovak army as corporal, and signs on as fifth engineer with the *Finanger*, a Norwegian tanker sailing under the British flag.

May 4, 1941: *Finanger* departs Falmouth harbour and sails south, unescorted, through the escalating Battle of the Atlantic carnage. En route to the Caribbean, my father loses the fourth digit of his right hand in an engine-room accident, which causes him to disembark in Curaçao for medical treatment. *Finanger* proceeds north without him, first to New York City and then to Halifax. While returning through the North Atlantic—heading back south to Curaçao—*Finanger*,

separated from convoy ON(S) 67, is torpedoed, shelled and sunk by U-boat 158 in the early hours of March 1, 1942. All thirty-nine aboard are lost at sea. My father loses a fingertip, but escapes again with his life otherwise intact.

My father's merchant marine photograph from 1941 depicts a gaunt face with haunted eyes. He works in Curaçao for two years, first on a Shell Oil tanker and then as a public-works surveyor building roads and runways. He sends his firing device invention to the American government. They respond by recruiting him.

July 27, 1943: David Dietrich Auerbach lands stateless in San Juan, Puerto Rico, with his violin, academic transcripts, and army papers. He works in postal censorship until the end of the war, translating intercepted mail using the thirteen languages he speaks and reads. He adopts the name Alexander George Rykov to memorialize friends and because he does not want a German surname.

While on holiday in Los Angeles, my father meets Ellen Epstein—the Toronto-born daughter of Russian immigrants—on a blind date. Her parents having recently died, she has moved there to be closer to relatives. Whirlwind courtships aren't uncommon in this postwar era. Theirs lasts three weeks. They marry on September 14, 1948. My mother follows my father to San Juan, where he joins the United States Navy engineering department; furnished housing is provided, along with opportunities to advance. Soon after arriving, Ellen meets Norma Topp, a Toronto native who has also recently married and moved to join her San Juan-born husband, Bill.

Puerto Rico is a refuge for my father. He loves the people—a proud amalgam of Taíno aboriginals, Spanish conquistadors, and African slaves—and their island. He believes his new name will enable a new life with relief from the memories that would otherwise continue to embitter him. But unaddressed trauma persists. Although safe now—a happily employed and married American citizen—his holocaust horrors do not subside. My mother is vicariously traumatized by night terrors that cause my father to thrash around, strike out, and scream in languages she cannot understand.

April 6, 1953: My parents name their Puertorriqueña daughter Maria Helena to memorialize my mother's mother, Maram (a contraction of the Hebrew Miriam), and Helena, my father's favourite aunt—a nurse who died with her patients at the front. The name also invokes the popular 1932 song by Lorenzo Barcelata, *Maria Elena*.

My father is promoted. He learns, in his capacity as chief engineer, about an attempt to defraud the recently established Commonwealth Government of Puerto Rico. A South Carolina contractor, Leonard D. Long—relative of infamous Louisiana governor Huey "Kingfisher" Long—and the former regional director of the Federal Housing Authority, Frederick D. Carpenter, are constructing shoddy public housing. My father and his colleagues can see from the construction plans that these buildings would topple with the next hurricane to blow through the island. He makes numerous trips to Washington to testify against the developers.

Barker Fairley listens and asks questions.

July 24, 1955: Vacation photographs on Protestant Cay, Christiansted Harbor, St. Croix, USVI, show a laughing tourist family from Puerto Rico—the parents take turns posing with their two-year-old daughter. This vivid dream of Protestant Cay will recur throughout the daughter's childhood before it fades to memory:

> *The front room of a beach cabaña, surrounded by sand and surf, has a kitchenette with a refrigerator, table, and chairs. The back room is a bedroom.*
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> *A babysitter arrives as the parents prepare to leave for dinner. The young girl doesn't want them to go. She is put to bed. Desperate, she cries and tries to run out after them, but a barking dog frightens her. She watches from the bedroom window as her parents walk down the beach towards the ocean.*
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> *At the water's edge she sees them step onto a raft with three walls, open at the front like a theatre set. A surreal chandelier hangs, Dali-esque, suspended from no ceiling. Beneath the chandelier, a table is set for dinner. He pulls out the chair for her. When both are seated, the raft floats slowly out to sea.*

I am the two-year-old Maria Helena left behind on Protestant Cay. My mother affirms that we did vacation there. And although there was no dog, a babysitter stayed with me when my parents went out for dinner on the fourth evening of our visit. The holiday ended abruptly that night when at dinner my father suffered a coronary embolism. This time, he does not escape. My mother blames the stress from the court case for his untimely death.

My father dies, unaware the case will eventually succeed. My father rests in the first adult grave in the Jewish section of Puerto Rico's Bayamon cemetery. His bronze marker reads "Alexander George Rykov" in English, "David ben Chaim" in the traditional Hebrew, as well as Rykov with "(Auerbach)" in brackets in modern Hebrew.

We lose Navy housing after my father dies. My mother and I move to the familiar warmth of Norma and Bill's home. But my mother's Spanish isn't fluent; and without my father, she wearies of perpetual summer, longs for the seasonal lilacs and apples of her native temperate zone. After a year she returns with me to Toronto, where the snow I experience for the first time sparkles with a deceptive beauty, cruel and cold. With her parents gone and other relatives aging or busy with their own young families, my mother never receives the support she needs to work through her grief. She copes through the years with increasing alcohol consumption that morosely salts the pain of my own paternal loss.

As a schoolgirl I ask questions about my father. In the concentration camp liberation photos my mother thinks I'm old enough to witness, heaps of discarded limbs blur with naked skeletons bunked wild-eyed. Knowing how my grandfather died and what my father narrowly escaped, my personal grief

merges with collective grief. I act out the trauma playing hide-and-seek games as Anne Frank in hiding. Even during my twenties, unresolved grief hangs like swollen clouds that can burst unpredictably and without notice.

Barker Fairley paints this essence into *Abyssinian Maid*. I concur with critic and biographer Paul Duval that Fairley's expressionist portraits are instinctively interpretive. Fairley comes to know me well during our time together, rendering my twenty-something-year-old self in *Abyssinian Maid*. But he doesn't finish because in the summer of 1976 I move west to British Columbia. Since I don't know where I'll end up or how long I'll be gone, I beg him to take *Guitar and Listener*. I don't return this painting to the Faculty of Music lest it end up back in the stairwell for someone else to steal.

Barker Fairley accepts *Guitar and Listener* in safekeeping, telling me I may have it back at any time. I don't understand that he promises me a sold painting that is not his to give. But he is my revered elder, and I believe him. Relieved that the painting is safe with him at 90 Willcocks Street, I become busy with my life and do not contact him again. Barker Fairley dies ten years later.

I am Barker Fairley's Abyssinian Maid who grows up with the spectre of death on her shoulder.

Grief is unique and personal, and it can be collective. Ubiquitous and inclusive: nobody lives a life devoid of grief. For the gift of love, we must suffer the debt of loss in gratitude for having loved and been loved. Nothing can assuage this pain. Rather, we must make time and space to live grief fully, honouring it in ourselves and—as best we can—comforting and supporting others as they grieve. We have no choice because the pain we neglect or stifle only festers and grows stronger.

The intensity of grief ebbs and flows like a tide that dims with the distance of time but never disappears entirely. Grief spirals back, returning to bite again, sometimes unexpectedly and with shocking intensity. But our death-defying, youth-worshipping culture provides no models for dealing with emotional pain. Instead of attending to pain and learning—exploring, listening—we instead deny sadness. Or we medicalize it.

I disappear like Coleridge's vision, and Fairley never completes *Abyssinian Maid*. I assume he had painted enough with me to be able finish painting without me. I am wrong. But speculation about what *Abyssinian Maid* might have been, had he finished it, is unnecessary. This painting remains—complete as unfinished—to remind us that life can be a perpetual artwork-in-progress. And one that, should we choose to live it as such, welcomes what chance and opportunity present with each new interpretation, improvisation; each new layer of paint.

N.B. Barker Fairley's musician paintings now permanently hang on the Edward Johnson building walls. I hope *Guitar and Listener*—the one that got away—will one day join them there.