

**The difference between opera and life,
I'd noticed, was that in life
one person played all the parts.**

LORRIE MOORE, *A Gate at the Stairs*
(New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), p. 317.

Preface

In the summer of 1958, when I was growing up in Calgary, I was hired as a cub reporter by the editor of a local paper, the *North Hill News*. I was a sixteen-year-old Jewish boy. Although I didn't know it at the time, the editor, Roy Farran — a British war hero who would go on to become a member of the Alberta legislature — was widely suspected of anti-Semitic views and conduct, including the torture and murder of a sixteen-year-old Jewish boy in Palestine during the last days of the British mandate. The scenes that follow recall my relationship with this dashing, enigmatic man who, apart from my parents, has probably been the single most influential figure in my life.

That sounds like a memoir, doesn't it? Well, it is and it isn't.

Two stories are juxtaposed here. My remembrances of my early forays into journalism — Roy and his *North Hill News*, along with my adventures as founding editor of my university newspaper — run down the left side of the page. That much is memoir. But over on the right side is the kind of shameless fantasy that has no place in a self-respecting memoir. There I compose a Roy Farran out of other material — his novels, his memoirs (sometimes drawing on his words, sometimes using my own). The notes acknowledge my use of Farran's published writings, which I habitually paraphrase. Thanks to my flypaper memory, in the conversations I recall, I quote him verbatim — his voice filtered, of course, through five decades of dead flies. Other scenes and speeches are entirely my invention. On his role in the Jewish boy's murder, I've also drawn on David Cesarani's revelations in *Major Farran's Hat: Murder, Scandal and Britain's War Against Jewish Terrorism, 1945-1948*.¹

Given Roy's politics, there's a certain poetic justice in that allocation of space — my story on the left, Roy's to the right. But I'm looking for another kind of justice. I'm trying to weigh the conflicting aspects of that remarkable man's life, if only to renegotiate what he meant to me and how he influences me still. Nor

should we forget the sixteen-year-old Jewish boy whom Roy apparently killed — Alexander Rubovitz. His voice still needs to be heard.

Of course there is no balance to the page thus divided. I may have more words than Roy has now, but my life is a Popsicle-stick raft beside his Hokusai wave. And the young Alexander Rubovitz has the fewest words, the shortest life, yet he casts the heaviest shadow.

So on the left is my memory, on the right my fancy. But even memory refracts through the prism of imagination. I wonder whether any memoir can be entirely free of fantasy. For even what I am confident is an accurate memory may still harbour traces of subjective intervention. We are all stuck in our own perspective. Often our memory skews to what we'd like things to have been. Like our favourite mirror, our hindsight flatters us, or we prefer the funhouse distortion that catches our fears. Conversely, our imagination is fueled by what's real. Here my fantasy of Roy draws more on what I've been reading than on what I may have been smoking. Here each story, as well as the collision of the two, moves between those conventionally discrete poles: history and fiction. So this is not a memoir — or, rather, it is more than that. It's an experiment in the genre, one that not only admits but exercises the subjectivity in our memories.

In approaching this work, the reader is requested to set aside any usual expectations of a history, a novel, a psychoanalytic study, a confession. As its slender heft may suggest, what follows is more akin to the classical closet drama. In the three hours' traffic of the page, the interplaying voices — two main ones, a few supporting characters — address themes of memory, ambition and guilt, relationships and their influence, and responsibilities and how we rationalize them. Above all, the interwoven narratives explore an accident of history, in which an ordinary small life happened to engage with one much larger. For we are all living in some history — and who knows how many fictions. Finally, as in live theatre more than in prose fiction, the themes speak to the moment of performance as much as to the moment of the setting. The them, there, are also the us, now.

This work grew out of a short article on Farran, "Double Life," published in the June 2009 issue of *Alberta Views* (pp. 37-39). The present title fought off a spirited challenge from *Roy and I*. My two main characters are the object — not the agent — of my creative recollection.

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