

The Kiss of the Art Gods by Dan Corbin

The Art Gods Dan Corbin frequently refers to in his frank, exuberant memoir, are as likely to smack him around as show him affection. He sees these featureless, invisible, somewhat distant entities as inexorable forces that inspire, drive, exalt, humble and, maddeningly just ahead of a major turning point in his career seem to abandon him. In that situation, however, as in others, the Art Gods were still working to lead him, serendipitously, to success and fulfillment.

This rich memoir is a tribute to the resiliency of the human spirit, and opens with an account of the devastating Christmas Eve flood of 1955 which injured, and extinguished so many lives. That event was the beginning of the end of the Corbin family's profitable agricultural enterprise as the ground in their peach orchard after the flood waters receded, looked like a "goulash" (in Dan's words) of debris. The damaged and dying peach trees had to be bulldozed, and with their destruction Dan's father began a slow descent into depression and alcohol abuse.

A dramatic moment comes as young Dan enters the living room of the family's rebuilt ranch house one sunny afternoon imagining what would have happened if he'd remained with his beloved dog who was left behind when the family evacuated. Would Dan and Sammy have ridden in together on the floating telephone pole when it smashed through the windows of their house almost destroying it, riding the pole as though it were a surf board? The vignette begins a thread that runs through the entire story--Dan's thirst for adventure and the free play of his vivid imagination.

That day, however, chaos and the impulse toward creation came together in the sunny living room when Dan reached for the family's newly replaced Encyclopedia Britannica, turned to the section on classical sculpture, was moved as he had never been before and first heard the Arts Gods call to him. The story then backtracks taking the reader through Dan's early life, his rambunctious childhood and rebellious, largely distressed adolescence. Even through this period of restlessness and dissatisfaction the Art Gods urged him on and he found mentors in his teachers and support from his flawed, but loving, parents.

The narrative may seem to meander, but you quickly realize there's an underlying cohesiveness as every event and encounter with family, friends, acquaintances, mentors, enemies, lovers or total strangers leads to Dan's ultimate success as an artist. Early on, being exposed to the hard work of maintaining the family's peach orchard instilled a strong work ethic in him and a sheer determination not to give up even when circumstances seemed almost hopeless, although he also stresses that luck played a large part in his career, as well.

When Dan was drafted in 1966 during the Vietnam War he narrowly missed being inducted into the Marine Corps, but instead was deployed to Frankfurt, Germany as a radio operator. Upon completing his service, he acquired a motorcycle and toured western Europe expanding his personal and artistic horizons. Dan returned to the United States where, under the GI Bill, he pursued a course of higher education at the University of California at Santa Barbara.

He speaks glowingly of this period in his life, the beauty of the Santa Barbara campus and the ocean and landscape. His instructors challenged him in a good way, becoming mentors who helped him perfect his skills and knowledge. The early 1970's was a time of upheaval and protest across the nation. Dan had a close-up view of the unrest in Santa Barbara, when an antiwar riot erupted and a branch of the Bank of America was burned to the ground.

Later Dan traveled to Hawaii where, along with his usual artistic pursuits, he tried to get accepted into the University of Hawaii's master's program. He was denied repeatedly and finally gave up on that dream. Along the way, though, he met a number of interesting characters including the young "Barry" Obama, sixteen at the time, who hung out at the Ala Moana shopping mall in Honolulu greeting visitors with handshakes and small talk. Dan observes that "Barry" seemed to be already practicing to be President of the United States at a very early age. You come away with the feeling, that in spite of being frustrated in his academic endeavors, Dan responded to the beauty of the islands and enjoyed surfing adventures with David, his Chinese American landlord.

If Dan's narrative sounds a bit dark and unsettling at times, it is leavened with humor along the way. Amusing moments often arise from interesting people he came in contact with. One of the most striking of these was his father's drinking buddy, Al Hopkins. Al had a gift(?) for flowery, slightly less than sincere rhetoric. Apparently thinking he would impress Dan's mom, Katie, Al delivered himself of this speech: "My greatest admiration is for people like yourself who has the blessings of a green thumb and brings flowers and prettiness to the world, enough beauty to save the cursed city of Bozrah. You brings the Lord's dance into this hard-cheddar world we all live in."

Katie was *not* impressed by this strange pronouncement with its biblical reference and dragged Dan's father into the kitchen to shout at him loud enough for Al and Dan in the living room to hear, "Don't ever bring that creepy bastard to this house again." Katie had turned the entire front yard of their home into a sprawling flower garden so that she could, successfully, exhibit cut flowers at county fairs. Al later proved to be truly creepy when he shared an unsettling and inappropriate confidence with Dan and then escaped with Dan's cherished hunting rifle.

The memoir wittily recounts youthful attempts Dan and his high school friends concocted trying to get their hands on alcoholic beverages. Lingered outside a liquor store they approached a young military man and enlisted his aid to buy them beer. The air man pocketed their money and they never saw him again. Dan finally put together an elaborate ruse which involved impersonating a homeless wino dressed in dirty, shabby clothing with "duck-hunting black grease" smeared all over his face for a truly filthy appearance and adding a boozy slur to his voice. So convincing was this disguise that the clerk sold him a gallon of Red Mountain wine plus a bag of potato chips and didn't ask for an ID.

Returning to more serious concerns, at one point in the narrative Dan explains what the Art Gods mean to him. To quote him: "I view the Art Gods as guardians of humanity. [They] use art as super-glue, bonding together culture and civilization...the Art Gods act as a natural force of

social evolution and change...I believe art is a manifestation of spirituality." As to where the Art Gods dwell he says, "I believe these gods reside in our bodies [and] in our minds...."

Toward the end of the memoir there's a bit of suspense when Dan, then living in the Bay Area, grapples with a dilemma his intelligent, beautiful, cultured, sophisticated lover, Diane, a successful lawyer, creates for him. She would like him to lead a more conventional life, to go into business with her. Will he betray the Art Gods? After much introspection, he decides in favor of the arts, although parting from her is as painful for him as it is for her.

The crux of Dan's story comes when he finally realizes something seemingly simple--the properties of a little-known art material, bauxite. Having left the Bay Area to relocate in Chico, he attends "Lassen State" and receives his master's degree at last. The last step in reaching the apex of his career comes when he opened up to mentors and takes advice. As a trusted professor, had predicted, changing his technique and using a new material proved to be the last piece allowing Dan to realize his artistic success. Being immersed with the artist in the course of his life through the memoir, you breathe a sigh of relief with him, for his hard-earned accomplishments.

The charm of *The Kiss of the Art Gods* lies in its simple but evocative language. If you lived through any of the events Dan recounts, you'll surely feel a sense of kinship with him. If you're an artist striving to find yourself and perfect your art, you will identify with him and enjoy his confidence. One of his strengths is his ability to recreate long ago conversations with such freshness and immediacy you can almost hear the speakers' voices and feel you know them.

Michele French 2016