

ROBERT CABOT

Life is Frozen Over

from the novella Touch of Dust

McPherson's Fortnight

Series One № 9

FORTNIGHT SERIES ONE, NUMBER 9

www.mcphersonco.com/fortnight.html

Copyright © 1999 by Robert Cabot

All rights reserved.

No unauthorized copying or distribution permitted.

Published in April 2020 by McPherson & Company,

P.O. Box 1126, Kingston, NY 12402

“Life is Frozen Over” is borrowed for this occasion from the author’s novella, *Touch of Dust*, in *That Sweetest Wine: Three Novellas* as published by McPherson & Company.

The cover patterns of the Fortnight series have been adapted from the tartan notebooks created by Waverley Scotland of Glasgow in association with Kinloch Anderson of Edinburgh: ([www. https://tinyurl.com/slxqebq](https://tinyurl.com/slxqebq)) and available in the U.S. from our sister company, Waverley West (www.waverleywest.net). This cover is **Cameron of Erracht** tartan, and is reproduced by kind permission of Geddes and Grossett, Ltd.

CONTENTS

Life is Frozen Over

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Life is Frozen Over

Life is frozen over, its only signs a few hurrying tracks blurred by the faint low sun, to be renewed by the moonlight. We turn into a gap in the hedge, half buried in the snow. The horse and I blow jets of steam, whipped away by the bitter sea wind.

The wind would hold us here in the land of hidden life, closing us off with sheets of snow blown from the fields, stinging, hissing around us...swept clean, stripped...coupled. We enter the winter woods, life reverses. The wind becomes but a high reminding sound, above, behind, beyond. The forest trunks lead on into a warm and silent world. Squirrels, woodpeckers, rabbits—the blood still stings in my cheeks. My gallant charger is a gentle palfrey, snorting away the frost—startling a deer sunning in an open patch, fleeting white flag. And we are beyond their reach, forever our own time.

I am greeted by his wild crushing welcome, sweeping me off my horse and hurling me into his hidden hut, by gulps of brandy, the fire roaring in the raised fireplace—hissing of green wood for the wind would disperse any smoke today and there is no danger—the sand sizzling on the parchment window, by his brushing aside the news I had for him of his trial.

I almost think he kept the fight up on purpose—they nearly killed him—so that he'd have an excuse to go into hiding...he loves it here so. And maybe I cheered him

ROBERT CABOT

on, though I was cowering near the door and terrified through it all. She was not pretty anyhow and he must have known how it would enrage her betrothed to dance with her like that—with the honor of a Guard's uniform to defend too, a rooster! But my friend is a savage bull! Set low, with short legs like bollards and a chest like a windlass on an ocean ship, and the men of the sea joined him and the landsmen joined the other, and from the cry "Rooster!" to uproar was an instant. Chair legs and bottles flew through the smoke and the orange glow of the oil lamps hanging from the rafters. Wine dripped onto my neck from the table where I was hiding. The windows rattled with the girls' screams of excitement and my friend's roars and the grunts and curses and crashes and the tumbling of bodies and furniture.

He loved a fight and he never quite killed or maimed anyone. So he is being tried in absentia with my father defending the empty dock.

A ham, a loaf, a bottle of brandy, two great blue cabbages and he already has a sack of potatoes—I add my booty. But all he needed was his knife, he told me... and his stories tumble out.

Those bedeviled ducks flew off this morning with the pond behind the hut frozen to their feet. His mistress the fox—the night was so cold she slipped into the hut when he had stepped out to make room for more wine, and was in bed with him till the next morning. Seagulls bring him herring already kippered for his breakfasts.

In a pause between stories, he suddenly gestures for silence. His hand slips to his side, draws out a long slender knife. With airless stealth and speed he slides soundless out the door—an instant later, the death scream of a hare. And he is back, wiping the knife on the fur, singing a bawdy song, swinging me into a jig,

ROBERT CABOT

kissing me farewell on my lips

The sandy snowy whites of the dunes cut by a ragged shadowed path leading up toward the center—my canvas. A great tree rooted there against the silver sky, reaching leafless, branches up and out over one's head and on, lost somewhere behind where the path too began, intersected by the black coursing line of the sea beyond. Near the intersection, half-hidden by the trunk of the tree, is that a hut, a trace of smoke blowing off the chimney? Through the door, open as if to welcome someone, is a glimpse of a fire. The wind is heavy and brown with sand over all, wrinkling the snow, curling it into miniature cornices, streaming through the branches, tearing at the sea. The light forces down through the wind, from the glowing sky, from the pale sun, no brighter than a moon but with a faint warmth, and is tangled and swept along.

The forest releases me, reluctantly, closes behind. The wind has dropped with the sun. Twilight is left without dimension, without color, without weight. And we are off at a gallop, at a belly-low run. My wild stallion flies us over the frozen marsh, the dunes, the hard-packed beach where the black sea still breaks... This nag, his mind is a bucket of oats.

We race down back streets and alleys to the shed in our yard. He's at the beer-barrel trough with long sucking swallows, nostrils bubbling. No more, or you will drop with cramps or burst with the swelling oats. Rub you down with a handful of hay... it still seems wrong to sleep standing up.

To be in our town again, suddenly, shockingly, it's like turning a painting face to the wall... Yet there are other pictures on the wall, and the room stirs softly with familiar town noises. Each picture is a window, to step in or out.

ROBERT CABOT

Out through my secret garden. In the half-dark, where the snow lies smooth in the shelter of the walls and holds a light of its own, where the trunks and bare branches of the fruit trees wait silently. Secret, I call it, because the garden and I, we tell each other secret things and call each other secret names. However many cousins and brothers and friends that may clatter or scuffle or crunch in the cold through this orchard and garden lot behind our house, there are always secrets that make it mine alone. A hollow in a fig trunk, a brick crumbled loose in the wall, a way the doves have of chuckling when I go by, a speck of mica in a border stone shining only at me. Always the same, always a comforting excitement.

Or back through my house. The dim musty hall, made expectant by the street noises, divides us, Father's office one side, where he will be stirring about in his dusty shelves preparing for Monday Court. And on the other, as if for me the walls were transparent, a complicated structure of lighted and dim rooms, supported against the black night by the trunk of the staircase, levels and half-levels, branching corridors, each part with its different mineness, its different time and sound and smell, its dangers and its safeties, its meanings and mysteries. Each with its bits of anger and tears and no-one-understands. Each with its guilts and confessions and forgivings. Each with its smiles and peace and excitement and reliability and unbearable impatiences. And for me, discoveries and revelations and a million leagues' distance from anyone.

On through to the final room, top of all, mine, with its pictures, its windows, its locks, its invincible bed in the darkness. A structure of people with me at the top, splendid and alone, or, if I choose, carrying my absolute power with me down into the structure. I can walk

ROBERT CABOT

back down the corridors, into other rooms, but no one can touch me—sometimes, always, if I wish it.

I can choose now, this winter evening: The rattling cobblestones closed behind clamped shutters. The grate already lit and the lamp turned up, the pine smell of turpentine and oil, my fresh wood panels and canvas stretchers. The cold look of the jug and the basin and the sheets turned down. My pictures dim and flat and closed, leaving their lights turned down, their hearts sleeping, until that time, perhaps in the morning light, when I, or even another if I were to permit it, should wake them. My books like a hundred doors, clamoring to be thrown open, tormented, eager, sometimes I cannot choose for days which one, they seem only to stay quiet when I am painting.

Or perhaps I choose when the spring tides wash silently up the canals, rising in the marsh grasses, floating me on with light sighs and touches under a sky ringing with the thousand bells of the first invisible peepers. Or when the seagull's scream cuts the icy air over the dunes. Or when his fist swings banging down and my heart stops and blackness closes out their sneaking eyes—in pity or scorn or superiority—and the food turns to rotting wood. When my mother holds me to her and laughs gently and talks of clay feet and Icarus—and talks of a divinity. When, after years of meaningless piano routine, music flows from some hidden source through my flashing fingers. When, after nothing, with no warning and no routine and no impinging, my colors open magic windows about me.

Always there is my room. It holds me alone, it never fails me...

Do they know I'm even home yet, or will they wait for the evening test? Perhaps they sensed a draft of colder air, a change in the street sounds filtering in,

ROBERT CABOT

but I know I avoided all the creaking planks and the squeak in the garden gate and I kept Mother's puppy from yipping at me. It is our great game, enforced with a memory of a willow-wand whipping, but rewarded with Mother's chatter and stories. The start is the dinner bell, the finish is Father's golden watch.

I sting still from the cold, my lungs ache, my heart is trying to catch up. But I am ready. The woolly rug is warm in front of the grate. I stretch out, sketching on my sheets of newsprint. Lines loop out from a central point, like petals of a strange flower. But I have no flower in mind. What is it? Only my hand knows. Long clear loops swell out, fall back, repeat, overlapping. Shaded and blurred with specks and splinters from the bit of charcoal.

From the stairwell, looping out through the house, the dinner bell begins its summons. Quick, to be there by the seventh! Mind not to bang the doors or thump the ceilings and stairs! As I dash, I spit on my fingers, rub off the soot with the inside of my tight-stuffed pocket. Slow now, just before the dining room, to a respectful walk. We are all there, standing behind our chairs, when he comes in, tucking his gold watch back into his waistcoat.

If we start with special care, silent with the soup, elbows tightly to the side, idle hand closed and resting on the table's edge, no reaching, passing first, sitting from the hips as if the chair had no back, all the little tortures they've invented, if nerves don't get started with their snapping and buzzing and tangling from the heads of the table—then perhaps she will tell us more of her story.

I watch her from lowered eyes, not to be noticed, and wish away the electricity which can spark so and make you shiver like death—please, please, please! He

ROBERT CABOT

is in his courtroom shadows, the candlelight is gentle, look through and see what you see. You touch your napkin to your pale lips, Mother, reach for the cameo which is always there on your breast, fingering lightly. Those are the signs. Now. How will you start? Go on, tell us, tell us about when you were little, or when we were little, or the joking professor, or the time you first left home, or when you met father, or the time you got candied apples every day for a month from the costermonger before your father found out that you had been charging them to him.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A veteran of many of the campaigns of World War II, ROBERT CABOT received degrees from Harvard College and Yale Law School, served for ten years in the Marshall Plan and foreign aid programs in Italy, Thailand, Sri Lanka, and Washington, D.C., and resigned from the foreign service in protest over U.S. policy in Southeast Asia. After living for many years in Italy and Greece, he repatriated and has since worked with intentional communities, the citizen diplomacy movement, environmental and social change projects. His writing may be characterized as impressionistic and composed of vignettes woven into narrative tapestries, and often elegiac. His first novel, *The Joshua Tree*, was published in 1970 to wide acclaim. This was followed by *That Sweetest Wine: Three Novellas* in 1999 and *The Isle of Kheria* in 2012. *Time's Up!—A Memoir of the American Century* was issued in 2020. Cabot is a fellow of the National Endowment for the Arts, the McDowell Colony, the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, and the Ucross Foundation. Cabot lives on Whidbey Island, Washington, with his wife Penny.

The Joshua Tree, <https://tinyurl.com/y864bckx>

That Sweetest Wine, <https://tinyurl.com/y8y4t7wc>

The Isle of Kheria, <https://tinyurl.com/y8ww9u2c>

Time's Up!—A Memoir of the American Century, <https://tinyurl.com/yda6d6xd>

ROBERT CABOT