

## MEMOIR: THE COLOR ROOM BY JAMES GOEDKOOP

**Note: Pages are extracted from the middle of the story.**

*Summary: I was born into a prominent Dutch family. My parents moved to the United States in the early 1950s, during a decline in our fortunes. The shipyards had been destroyed by the Nazis, rebuilt but then, like a recovering patient with underlying conditions, died a painful death in front of us. My mother's father's wealth, of mysterious origins, was lost before my generation came of age. My brothers and I grew up in the Ramapo Hills of Rockland County, New York—a strange place, hardly a stone's throw from New York City.*

*This is from a chapter "The Color Room" which starts when I'm 18 but includes recollections as I experience them on my walk one winter day.*

On an early Monday morning, January 1973, age eighteen, I put a plate on the table and glanced towards the ovens, to see if anything was on fire. A ribbon of smoke, split from the white billows, slipped by the edge of the hood and rose to the ceiling. We had clobbered the hood from scrap plywood one whiskey fueled night a few years earlier. Teeth clenched, my father had driven the last fastener in the wall and stood back to appraise the work. He said, "Voortreffelijk," a complimentary Dutch term, and then snapped back into English, "Now, for the final touch." Standing on the Tappan gas range, black Goodyear-soled motorcycle boot right on the grill, my brother John's last session ended—not long after it began. He climbed down and swung the handle of the ball-pein hammer into my hand. "Here," he said, then added, "This is about the dumbest thing". We had pounded the surface into dimples—too deep in some spots, less in others but as we neared the end of the project, the little craters were uniform, like on a golf ball. My father raised his eyes in sardonic appreciation. My mother laughed in delight. We sprayed the cratered surface with Krylon bright copper.

## MEMOIR: THE COLOR ROOM BY JAMES GOEDKOOP

Powering the hood, a heavy black fan, a relic from a surplus vendor on Canal Street and thick with grease, not from its re-purposed life in our kitchen but from some former service, chirped like a hoarse bird with every slow turn. The two stoves sat side by side. They weren't for decoration. My mother used both ovens and all eight burners—gas for some things, electric for others. She cooked artful meals: Indonesian rijstaffel—a complex mix of delicacies adapted by the Dutch in colonial times; Boerenkool met worst—curly kale, mashed potatoes and rookworst; boiled beef tongue, pressure cooked artichokes, razor thin crepes, delicate almond pastry and many more.

But I could lay out a pound of bacon in the electric oven and have it done in no time. I sat on the kitchen bench, a utility piece well suited to the surroundings. It was a simple thing made of two separated beams that served as seating, supported by angled rough hewn legs, like a sideways shave horse. It was comfortable despite the gap, moreover, unlike any other seat, it allowed the sheath of a sizable knife to hang unimpeded between the stretchers without twisting one's belt loop. This bench was paired with a heavy farmer type table made of oak; its surface of three glued-up wooden slabs suffered deep gouges and random hacked-in designs from those knives. My brothers and I had twenty or thirty each. I preferred the Puma White Hunter 6377, bone scales, front and rear quillons.

Some years before, at Heymans' Army-Navy store in Suffern, a certain knife caught my attention. Behind the counter, Mr. Heyman, eyed me with suspicion. He and his twin ran the place. They were indistinguishable and equally ill tempered so, in any

## MEMOIR: THE COLOR ROOM BY JAMES GOEDKOOP

meaningful sense to a twelve-year old, it didn't matter which one it was. I lowered my glance and turned down the aisle, towards my brother John. Without need of words, he assessed the situation and came over to inspect the knife. The two of us shuffled around, backs to the counter, obscuring Mr. Hymen's view. John appeared suspicious of the quality. Gripping the handle, he viewed the blade with a concerned expression, flipped it and pointed to the stamp on the blade near the haft. In small letters, it said, "Made in Japan." He looked at me, shook his head, and then gestured to the knife he was holding. It said, "Made in Germany." Continuing his unbroken focus, he nodded.

Familiar with Tolkien, I had a thin, double-edged dagger, like an Arkansas Toothpick, with transparent green plastic handles and imbedded designs like core swirls in a marble. I referred to it as the "Elfin Dagger." Joost had a huge Bowie of gleaming stainless. This knife (confiscated some years later by a State Trooper in New Mexico) featured a bulbous handle of wrapped rawhide. In terms of respect, it stood alone among our knives, not only because of its seniority and fearsome presence, but because Joost had filed it out from a piece of raw bar stock—blade, blood gutter and all.

There was an old wooden door made of solid planks, flat on the ground around back, near the porch. It must have sealed one of the furniture crates from Holland. John and I used it for mumble-peg, a game played barefoot. We were then eight or ten and he explained the rules of the game: He said, "Stand over there." We stood four feet apart. "Now, make a bet on how many times I can stick the knife between your feet." "Three," I

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said. He threw the knife. It stuck close to my left foot. “Now,” (as he jerked it out), “move your foot there and I’ll try again. If I can do it two more times, I win. If I hit your foot, you win. If you chicken out, I win.” We had few mishaps. I remember one—and it involved inexperienced friends, not my brothers.

A group of us were camping on the island. Things were uncontrolled: knives flying, whining in deflected, spinning trajectories when one sunk into my ankle. I thought, “goddammit, one of mine!” I looked over the campfire. The bastard didn’t even have his own knives. The single piece red-handled throwing knife, now imbedded in my ankle, was one of three: green, red and blue, coming from my matched set. The plastic sheath was ganged with staggered slots for quick retrieval and the jackass had that (which was empty) on his belt.

One summer, Joost designated an immense tree in the pine-woods as the “knife-throwing tree.” It was a two-stemmed white pine, perhaps five foot in diameter and we sent hunting knives, pocket-knives, hatchets, axes and tomahawks sailing into that tree. Bark, splinters and ricocheting weapons flew off in all directions. Joost then hung an immense log in front of the knife-throwing tree. The moving target swung like a pendulum.

In the pre-dawn light, I bit into my bacon sandwich and gazed out the window. Everyone was asleep. With saws, axes and hand tools, my parents had cleared an expanse of woods the size of a football field behind the house. I could now make out the heavy

## MEMOIR: THE COLOR ROOM BY JAMES GOEDKOOP

trolley cable crossing the field from the tree-house, the lake a hundred yards out, and beyond that the silhouette of the distant Ramapo Hills.

Standing up, I stepped backwards over the bench, loosened my belt, and rearranged the ten-inch knife so that the blade, within its leather sheath, was now tucked in my right rear pocket and hidden from view. With belt cinched and shirttails out, I was ready to address the day—much the same as I would address any other day. It wasn't any form of concealment or subterfuge, but one of discretion. Three months later, I would fly to New Mexico with the Puma.

Economy was full and I got bumped to first class. With the entire row to myself, I slipped my buckle pin, pulled the White Hunter loose and set it on the seat next to me. I looked up at the stewardess. She surveyed the passengers with one hand on her hip, the other on an empty headrest and in time, looked in my direction, expressionless. One eye, a little misaligned, suggested that she appraised something else—maybe the passenger behind, it was impossible to tell, but then, she shifted her attention to the seat occupied by the knife and giggled.

Buddha (the dog) sat on her window-height table watching for squirrels. I gave her a kiss, and passing through the entry-way, snatched my coat from the pile of old clothing, boots and artifacts, and stepped into the cold air.

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I preferred Camel, non-filters. That's what my father smoked. My mother had smoked Parliaments for a while but so not to create a bad example, quit when we were young. My father and I were in the living room. The fire was roaring. There were guests around but for a moment, the two of us sat uninterrupted, staring at the reflections of the flames on the polished surface of the marble table, glasses of whiskey. There was an odd wooden cigarette server from Japan with a lever actuated wooden duck that grabbed a short, standard non-filter. It made a springing noise, twanging like a haiku or something. I said, "Pop, I wonder, maybe it isn't a good idea?" I was seventeen then and thinking about quitting. My timing must have been bad or maybe it was the social context or maybe the bourbon. He frowned and said, "Heh" (a Dutch expression, or perhaps one unique to him), "All men smoke."