

# OTTO VON BISMARCK: THE QUICK AND MELANCHOLIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF ONE DEMENTED BASTARD

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**B**arabbas and I were born on the same day on a rainy afternoon on the Ides of November. My first memory of him would be five years later, when, in what I thought was a heroic act by a true friend, he bit my cousin for the simple audacity of taking a beloved wooden toy without my permission. The last time I saw him I was shipping off to the Korean War. No one objected more to my departure than that faithful canine. He died 2 weeks later. My mother said it was from sadness. I'd like to think it was old age. Old age is as good a time as any to die, especially if you miss someone. Now I can't even remember what he looked like.

I have a worn out picture of my parents, back when we still had the farm, and I stare at it for hours on end, expecting, hoping, wishing, to remember more about that small house on that gargantuan mountain in Wisconsin in which Barabbas and I, raced and wrestled and risked countless scoldings from my father. I think it was Wisconsin. I think it was a mountain. It doesn't matter much now; no one lives there anymore.

My parents were German, just like Barabbas and our car. I was German too—at some point. Now I'm just old and demented. And according to my roommate, what's his face, I seem to be taking too much space. I believe him. I feel like an oddly placed piece of furniture that everyone keeps going around, or bumping into, without ever taking the time to place it in its proper location.

These days memory is in short supply. As a teenager, getting lucky for me meant kissing some full-lipped red-head at the movies. Seven years ago it meant being able to find my car in the parking lot without having to request the aid of the National Guard. Now it means not soiling myself after having too much oatmeal while still remembering to call my nurse to clean me up. My brain used to be filled with plenty of wondrous information: like the name of my priest (always know the name of your priest just in case you decide to start dying unexpectedly and need an expedited extreme unction), or, the names of my grandchildren (those are the first recollections to go, on account that they are so many and all look alike), the names of my neighbors (I'm fine with forgetting these since they're bastards most of the time anyway), the names of my

pets (not remembering these didn't affect me much, as most animals respond to some form of whistling), and ultimately, my birth name. I was born Otto von Bismarck—no relation to the other Otto von Bismarck. Even during my birth I never cried. My grandmother decided to baptize me expeditiously on my fourth day of life fearing that the reason I was eerily quiet was because I was not interested in this world and would soon depart it. Her prophecy came true—only eight decades later.

About fifteen years ago some young clever doctor told me I was losing my memory. I could have told him that, sans the thousands of dollars' worth of tests, but everyone knows doctors are a bunch of crooks. I had been losing my mind for ten years prior to that anyway and they never noticed. No one did. So, I started taking all kinds of pills, which I didn't really want to take, on account of them being as useful as parachutes in submarines, but it seemed to make my children happy, so I took them. Things did not get worse for a while. Josephine and I vacationed with friends; visited my kidney doctor; traveled to Maine; visited my heart doctor; saw my granddaughter get married; visited my regular doctor. I deeply dislike visiting doctors. It keeps me up at night. Really! My wife passed away from this or the other as explained by the surgeon that last saw her alive. Doctors focus too much on diseases, so I never really knew. The only thing I know these days is that I miss my wife. Sometimes I forget her name and it breaks my heart.

Now I'm a guest in this new age purgatory with dozens of old demented bastards just like me, trying desperately to die, just like me. These young doctors and nurses put up a good fight, they really do, but they don't realize they are just stalling. We're winning. We'll always win. I just hope I don't take too much longer. I'm getting so old my wife in heaven might start to think I won't make it. ■