

The Little Princess

On the trail of 'The Little Prince'



Peter Frank Zuuring

Roy Harold Zuuring
In Memoriam
December 15, 1955 – December 10, 2010
I hardly knew you... But heard a lot about you
A modern day Little Prince
--- *Pure and Simple* ---

You may ask,
What do Vincent van Gogh and Saint- Exupéry's
Little Prince have in common.
Both have shown us a colorful world
filled with planets, stars, flowers and more.
They find wonder in the night sky and warmth in a summer day.
Their views fill our hearts.
My Little Princess has a journey of her own.
You too may pass her by, as enchanted feelings come and go.
Vincent, Prince and our Princess pass into the unknown.
A simple phrase is all they've left.
(Que veux-tu) (Voilà, c'est-tout) and (C'est comme ça)



To Be Continued...

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Foreword

It's the summer of 2009.

Recently a dear friend of mine charged me with a task – to reach out to the world by getting her manuscript and accompanying sketchbook published. Why she didn't do it herself will become clear as the story unfolds. In the course of one's life there are mysteries and coincidences that only become recognizable and clearer with age.

I became intimately involved in her fantastic tale as did my father. His celestial training as an astronomer and my expertise as an oncologist physician pulled us in. My father had rare blood and an enthusiastic personality to go with it. I am semi-retired doctor. I have continued to care for special patients with whom I have had a professional and personal relationship over the years. Our heroine's courage in defeating her leukemia brought us together. Over time we became good friends. Unfortunately my father died from Lou Gehrig's disease about the same time as she was first discharged. He left her a keepsake which she would treasure for years to come - a keepsake that hinted at the impossible.

Dr. Fazil Oz, Oncological Hematologist
Chronic Neoplastic Diseases Center



Introduction

My Notebook entry May 30

I've just returned from an exhausting, but glorious European holiday.

I have been on the trail of Vincent Van Gogh. After I saw his stirring 'Starry Night Exhibition', in Amsterdam's Van Gogh Museum, I decided to travel to the places where he painted and lived out his terribly tragic life. What particularly struck me was my last stop in Auvers sur Oise, just outside Paris. Here he painted furiously for a few months as black crows gathered in the wheat fields of his mind.

Failing to stem his recurring madness, facing the potential loss of his brother's support, and feeling he had nothing more to give, he decided to take his own life.

A half year later a distraught and weakened Theo also dies. The surviving family, realizing that Vincent and Theo were bound together in life, decided to move Theo's remains to Auvers so that the two brothers could be together for eternity.

The simple grave with two identical headstones on the North side of the cemetery deeply affects every visitor. The sadness of it all - even now tears come easily, just thinking about it.

Did you know that Theo received more than 600 letters from Vincent? They reveal his 'Lust for Life' and unusual struggle. Theo's wife collected, collated and published these in three volumes after Vincent's and Theo's death. I read them all. They are fascinating and reminded me strangely of Saint-Exupéry's 'Little Prince...' - something prophetic with stars, swirling colors, philosophical passion, misunderstandings and tragedy.



I think that all the activity and excitement of the last few months may just have been too much for me. Sadly I have been readmitted to my familiar hospital for tests. In remission for close to 36 years, my cancer may have reappeared. Without knowing for how long I'll be here, I feel weak and apprehensive as I may have to go through chemo once again. I recall my childhood days when I had my first bout. The knowledge and treatment then was you might say primitive but the friendliness and concern of the staff and my family made up for the unknown. Today technology has surely come a long way but it seems to me that operational cutbacks and apathy have bred isolation and loneliness. I need to do something. I want to keep busy and not think too much about 'what if...' I feel alone and yes, even afraid.

With this in mind, I must tell you a secret. Since my teenage years I have kept an extraordinary experience mostly to myself. From time to time, I tried to tell people around me but the tale

was too fantastic and well, just not believed. Sound familiar? To be honest I too have had my memory lapses and doubts about my adventure. Some of the people who followed my case more closely over the years may have reservations but at least they admit to the possibility of my tale. Other than that I have just kept quiet about it.

Now that I am here, with time on my hands and Vincent's example in my mind, I feel mysteriously compelled to record my adventure as well. I've been mulling this idea around for some years. For no apparent reason, I couldn't make up my mind or get started until now. Perhaps Vincent is guiding my way.

Funny isn't it, when circumstances change suddenly all sorts of strange coincidences pop up. Well for example - feeling Van Gogh's presence, or the fact that B612 was discovered by my Oncologist's father in 1909 exactly one hundred years ago, a kind of anniversary. And what about the fact that I am forty-four years old now as was Antoine de Saint-Exupéry when he disappeared, whatever that might mean?

Well, here's what happened to me...

A strange meeting

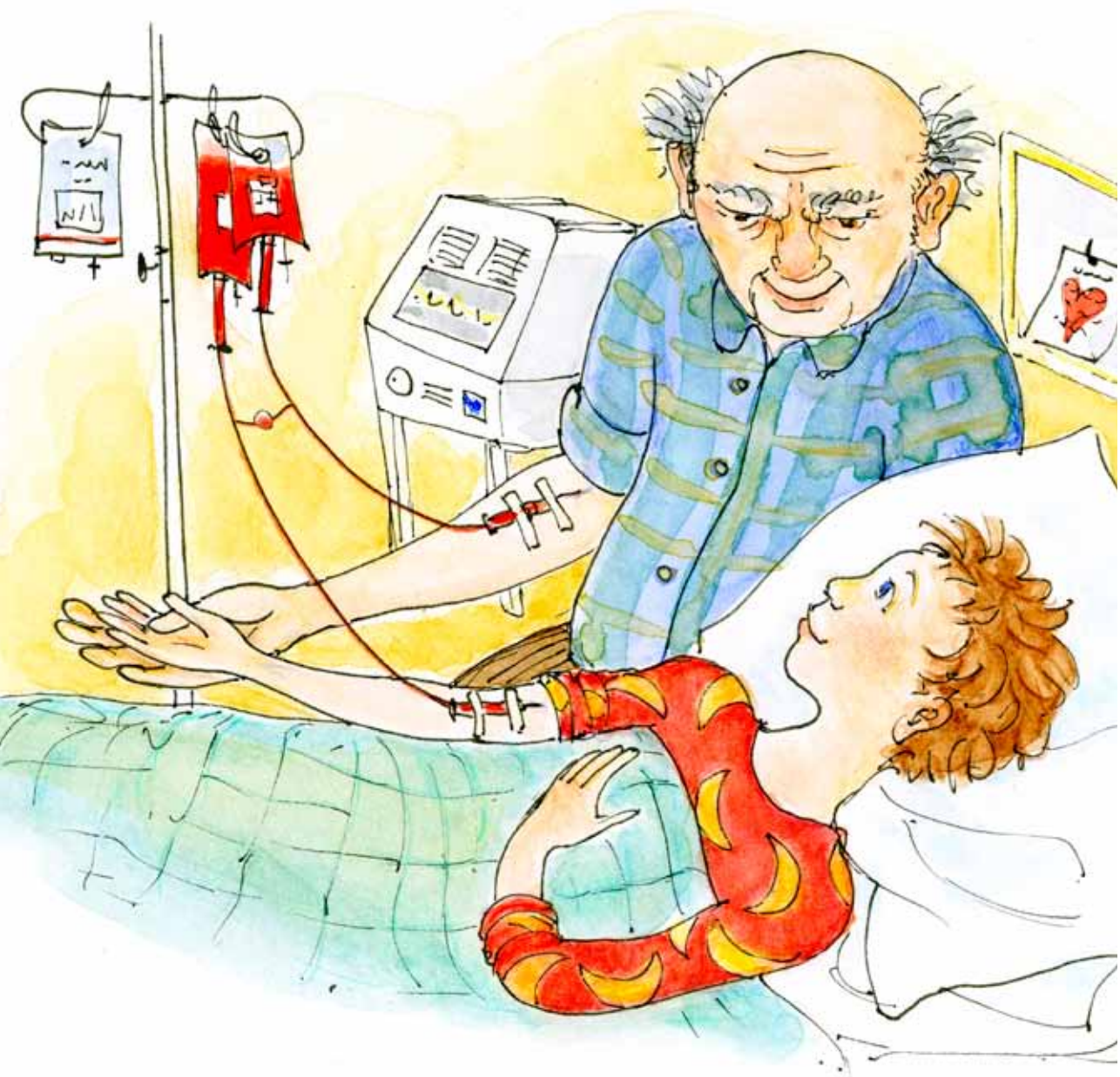
When I was eight I was diagnosed with acute leukemia and spent quite some time in hospital. It turns out that I have rare blood. In the small community where I lived eligible donors were hard to find. On one occasion, while waiting to start chemotherapy, I needed blood in a hurry. None was available. The blood bank knew of one donor who might consent but strangely he was often unreachable even very early in the morning.

Later that day I woke up in intensive care with an elderly man sitting next to me hooked up to tubes and wires much as I was. If you remember the movie 'The Wizard of Oz' try to visualize the Wizard behind the curtain towards the end of the film. Well that is what he looked like - a little chubby, with hair sticking out the sides of a bald head, a kind face and friendly eyes. The weirdest thing was that he actually introduced himself as Mr. Oz. How far out is that?

"You must be kidding" I replied. Then I smiled and laughed weakly as we became acquainted.

He had a funny accent.

Usually blood donors never know the person who will receive their blood but in this case the doctors elected for a direct person to person hookup because of my condition. Even the fact that he had complications didn't matter as normal practices were pushed aside to save me. As his blood became my blood I just sat there quietly with him. He even held my



hand until the nurse said we were done. I thanked him as he was getting up. With a deep sigh he turned around and looked at me so intently that it even scared me a little.

All he said was, "Here's looking at you kid."
And off he went.

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*My visitor reveals
a chance meeting*

A few days later I was surprised to see Mr. Oz standing at Amy hospital room door. In his right hand he carried a single red rose wrapped in clear cellophane tied around with one of those split and curled pink bows. As he walked towards me he wedged a small book with a faded cover under his arm, as if he didn't want me to see the book – well, at least not yet. He looked older than I remembered from our first meeting.

"So, I see that you're still kicking," Mr. Oz said with a soft smile on his face. "Here's something to brighten your day." As he handed me the rose he continued saying, "Take care of her and she will take care of you," pointing to the flower with a mysterious smile on his face.

"And this too, is something very special," he said, showing the small book and putting it down on the bed.

He struggled to take off his coat and then awkwardly laid it over the back of my bedside chair.

“What do you mean, ‘She’ll take care of me?’” I asked.

A longer than normal pause followed without an answer. Then he just picked up the book and showed me the cover as he sat down on the end corner of my bed. I thought that move was rather presumptuous at the time, I mean sitting on my bed. After all I had a perfectly good chair for him to sit on.

The book cover showed a primitive drawing of a blond haired boy standing on a small planet. An active miniature volcano, a scattering of small flowers and a miniature tree were present on its surface. A tinted background showed other planets and some stars.

It was called ‘The Little Prince’ by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry.



Even though we had great visits I must tell you about some frustrating moments with my Mr. Oz, or Gokan, as he liked to be called. He would never let me handle the book nor allow me to read from it in my own hands. Instead he would read it to me in stages, taking it home with him after each session. As he read I saw that here and there certain pages were frayed as if they had been handled many times. The book was old and obviously treasured.

With delight he would show me Saint-Exupéry's drawings that accompanied the text. Strange markings and side notes covered some of the pages. These he would skip over rapidly as if he didn't want me to see what they were all about.

Sometimes I didn't understand him when his accent got in the way. He explained that he was from Turkey and I must be patient with his English. With pride he told me that he had made some important discovery as an astronomer. After finally being recognized internationally he was able to emigrate to further develop his ideas and better support his family.

"It's all Greek to me," I said jokingly with a smile.

I had heard this expression used in jest at school. He suddenly looked askew. I had no idea then that Greeks and Turks weren't the best of friends.

Our readings continued. Of course I cried at the end of the story as most people do who have read it. Even Gokan had tears and shyly turned his head - perhaps not wanting me to see.

"Are you ok?" I asked. He blushed slightly and nodded.

As he closed the book I noticed a dedication on the inside back cover. Imagine, signed by the author himself. He wouldn't talk about it saying, "Time enough for that later."

I want to tell you that Gokan liked to come on a schedule, like the Prince's fox who thrived on anticipation and ritual.

My Mr. Oz wasn't well either and it became difficult for him to visit. When he did come, his son Fazil would bring and pick him up. Often Fazil had to support Gokan as he walked - or be pushed in a wheelchair.

The three of us would laugh about this and that but mostly our conversation turned on the 'Wizard' in our midst, his funny accent, habits, insatiable curiosity and zest for living.

One day Gokan didn't show up. I was so anxious and restless. I strained to hear the familiar footsteps announcing his arrival. I asked the nurse to keep an eye out for him and if he called to let me know right away. Some hours later Fazil looked into my room. Seeing that I was awake he entered quietly. Nothing was said but I immediately understood the look on his face. A lump rapidly formed in my throat and tears welled up. Both Fazil and I have been surrounded by death's presence albeit from different perspectives. However, when it hits close to home, we reacted like most people would. We cried, hugged, talked and quietly held hands for a time. Death is a mystery that eludes us in life yet is eventually revealed with crushing certainty. That afternoon Fazil and I created a bond that would keep him and I in touch for years to come.

Unexpectedly a few days later, just after Gokan's funeral, I was formally discharged. To my surprise my Wizard had arranged with my nurse to give me a letter and his beloved copy of 'The Little Prince.' Soon I understood why he didn't want to part with the book and why he treasured it as much as I do.

Gokan's letter was amazing. Even now, the thrill of reading it brings out goose bumps.

Here's a transcript:

'My dear, I hope you understand what follows. It's not really an 8 year old person's cup of tea but keep it with you and you will be happy you did... I'm sure.

I also owe you an apology. I never really told you about meeting Antoine de Saint-Exupéry although on several occasions I thought you had that figured out as you noticed his signature on the inside back cover of his book.

In 1941 I was asked to join an elite group of astronomers to develop star charts for night flying. With the war on, accurate navigation was the new frontier. Many pilots from around the world were at that New York conference, including Lindberg and Saint-Exupéry both of whom I met.

In 1909 I discovered a new asteroid. My findings were rejected by my peers until I represented my case some years later. I used some unusual mathematical equations which confirmed my being able to predict for example B612's presence and actually observing it 'in fact' thereafter. This method could now be applied to flight navigation and I gave a lecture to that effect. During the conference Saint-Exupéry introduced himself and told me he was an author and pilot. He wondered if he might use my discovery of B612 as the home planet of a young boy. A prince was to be the main character in a fanciful story about grown-ups losing childhood innocence and forgetting about things that really matter. I consented of course with pleasure.

He gave me a copy of 'Night Flight' saying with that funny French accent of his, "You might like it since navigation is rather central and very apropos, considering the conference we're attending."

Sometime later, in 1944, I happened to meet him again in

Sardinia. He was stationed there and in Corsica as a Free French reservist reconnaissance pilot. I was on a stop over from an Egyptian conference. He gave me a first edition copy of 'The Little Prince' saying it was published the year before in the USA. In it he thanked me for the way B612 was discovered, and signed it. I was so pleased to have it but sorry to learn that a few days after he was reported missing.

One day, I calculated recurring positions and times where and when B612 could be seen straight overhead. You shouldn't have any problem finding them.

During your convalescence I was so pleased with your interest in astronomy. No doubt the Prince's story kept you going. I wanted to encourage your belief since it gave you strength. If you are reading this now it means you are better and it has served its purpose. It is a wonderful story and in time you might see it as it was meant to be - a reminder that only what can be felt with your heart is important, not what you see. I believe that's what Saint-Exupéry intended.

My dear, you have been in my heart, yes even literally so, since we met some months ago. I see you smiling... Yes, I miss you too.

I hope you'll treasure, as much as I have, my very special signed first edition copy of 'The Little Prince'. Forgive me for keeping it from you this long.

Think of me from time to time, will you?

*With much love and affection,
Gokan*

*Rose bushes and a
terrible loss*

My family moved to the country. Grown-ups always think that fresh air and quiet speeds up recovery. I am not sure whether it has any effect at all but moving did give me a chance to appreciate roses and sunsets.

Mother knew that I loved the Prince's story and his love for a special Rose, so she and I planted a large rose garden for my pleasure and, I might add, to give me something to do. Parents are like that, right?

I learned one important thing about roses. For those of you who have read 'The Little Prince' do you remember that Prince was worried about the danger of Flower's thorns? I agree that if there is only one stem, thorns don't provide much protection. However, a rose bush usually has many stems, growing very close together, making the thorns very effective, as my scratched arms can attest.

Our property backed on to a farmer's field. Alternatively soya beans and corn grew there. At the edge of the field ran a small stream with mature maples standing stately in a row along its bank. Stream and field were separated by an access lane for machinery. I liked it so much that I asked my father to build a small bench just to sit there and take it all in.

Something happened a few years after our move. I was enjoying Indian summer and the view when I heard a rustle in the ripe corn some meters away. While keeping very still and



barely breathing, a beautiful red fox slowly appeared. She looked left and right, then with hardly an effort, leaped gracefully into the tall grass at the base of one of the maples by the stream. Her thick red tail was nearly as long as her body. I was so excited I could hardly contain my curiosity. You noticed of course that I said 'her.' That's my fertile imagination and maternal instinct coming to the fore.



The next day at about the same hour she was back. This time she looked me straight in the face for some moments and then just walked across the lane as if she owned the place.


I told my parents about it.

"You be careful. Foxes have rabies so stay clear," said my father with conviction.

"Now don't you go thinking that your fox is somehow special. They're everywhere and farmers kill them if they can, especially if they are raising chickens," added my protective mother.

"And by the way, this isn't 'little Prince' territory so leave it alone, you hear?," mother proclaimed with some concern and obvious overtones that needed no answer.

Well that fox kept coming and coming and I moved my little bench closer and closer to that field - ignoring my mother's caution all the while. I felt special as we became friends. She just looked at me and sometimes sat back on her haunches and seemed to enjoy the sunset as much as I did.



A few days later just before our usual time, as the sun was low on the horizon, a shot rang out in the corn and then another. Soon our neighbor appeared in the lane holding the body of my fox by the scruff of her neck and said with a grin of satisfaction, “It’s been here everyday and finally I had a chance to bag it. I stalked it real good. Even found its pups earlier today at the base of that second maple, down by the stream, and drowned them.”

“Nice looking critter don’t you think?” he said admiring my now dead companion in his hand.

As you can imagine I was beside myself and balled my heart out. I ran up to the farmer and started yelling at him saying everything and accused him of murder and more. Kicking him in the shins I added hysterically, “She wasn’t hurting anybody. She just came to be with me and you killed her. I’ll never forgive you. I hate you. I hate you. You’re mean. She wasn’t doing anything,” as tears rolled down my cheeks.

“You killed her babies too. How could you. They didn’t do a thing other than being born baby foxes. You’re a heartless bastard. I hate you,” I screamed uncontrollably not knowing how such words ever left my mouth.

That was too much for him. He grabbed me roughly by the arm and dragged me to our back porch. My mother took me in her arms and had her say with the farmer about the danger of firing



guns when he knew children were about and was it all so necessary. I can still remember my mother's comfort and the complete turmoil in my mind.

I didn't go back to that bench ever again fearing that I might befriend another fox and have to live the experience all over again. It was bad enough being responsible for one fox family's death.

I thought, "Taming sure didn't work out for me - so much for the real world."

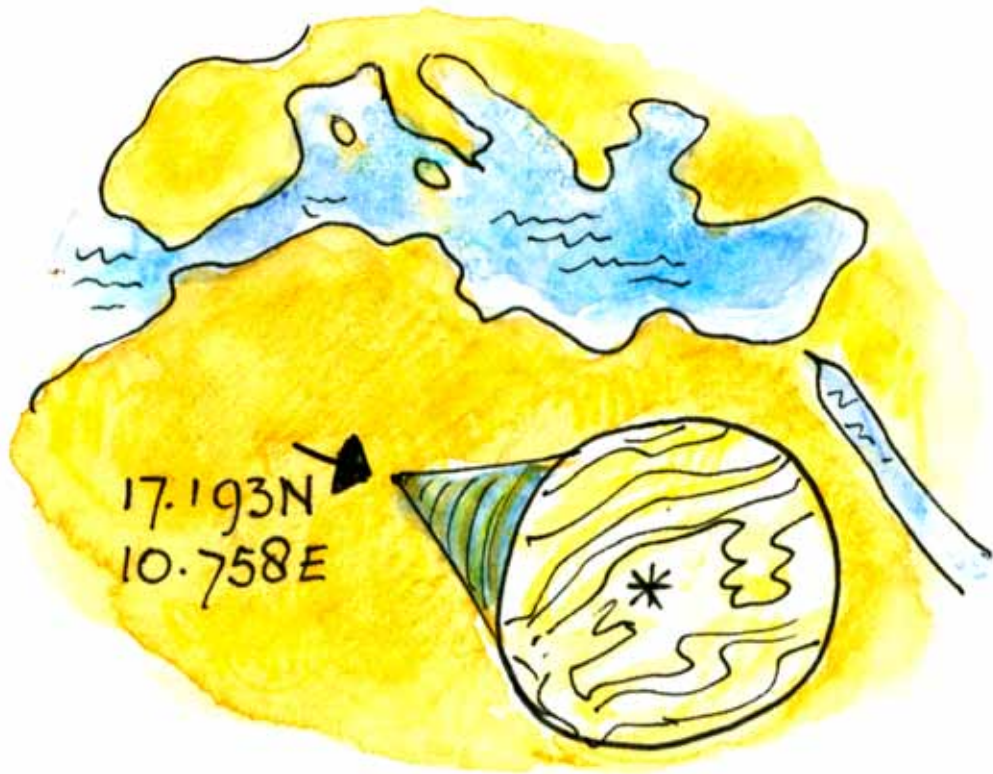
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*A special invitation
to nowhere*

On my 12th birthday I received Fazil's card right on time. As usual it started with a bit of an update on his research activities. After all I am a cancer survivor and perhaps more keenly interested than most in case of a reoccurrence. Then, after his salutations and congratulations he added something completely unforeseen and amazing.

Every summer Fazil lead an expedition into different severe climate regions of Earth in search of plant life that could survive and thus might have some special curative properties. That year's inhospitable place was to be the Sahara.

We talked often about Gokan and the Prince during my



annual remission checkups at the hospital. He recalled as I did that in the Sahara there is supposed to be a spot a thousand miles from any civilization where B612 might be sighted – at least according to the calculations of his father. You will recall that several of these were recorded in his copy of ‘The Little Prince.’ So why not combine a look for B612 with his hematology research. Why not indeed! If my parents agreed I could join the expedition for 3 weeks. You can’t imagine how excited I was.

My parents knew Fazil well and trusted him implicitly. The incident with the fox still plagued me. Periodically I showed signs of depression that just wouldn’t let up. My mother thought it would be good for me to get away - a change of scenery might help.

About this time early teenage symptoms caught up with me.