UNFOLDING

Jacob leans against my shoulder as we stumble through the night, my arm around his waist. He weighs so little that had I a tad more strength, I could easily carry him in my arms. Beneath my hand, his ribs feel stark and hard through the ragged cloth of his shirt. Neither of us has had proper nutrition for so long, we both are gaunt and wasted. Skin and bones, my wife would say.

At the thought of Émilie, despair wells up once more that she and I will ever be together again.

Low clouds scurrying above us reflect the glow of Paris over the horizon. In that dim light, streamers of gray mist swirl around us. The ground over which we stumble is churned with craters where artillery shells have burst, the muck roiled by boots, wagon wheels, and the treads of tanks. Crops may have once grown in the surrounding fields, but the war long ago obliterated them. The air smells of gunpowder and metal, but undergirding that is the faint aroma of loam.

Through swirls in the mist, a house looms up, its gray boards glistening. That the two-story husk of the building still stands seems a miracle, its rotting frame teetering on collapse.

We struggle onto the porch, fearing we may be shot at any moment. “Hallo?” I call.

No answer comes.

I call out in French. “Antoine sent us.” There is no Antoine; the name is the signal we were given.

From the glassless window comes a whisper. “Antoine is dead.” The counter sign.

“No,” I respond. “He lives with his Uncle Finney.” Again, a nonexistent person, but part of the code.

In the gloom on the other side of the window frame, shadows move against a dark background. Nothing more is visible. Twenty-five men may lurk there or five or one.

“Please,” I say. “My friend is hurt.”

A whispered consultation seems to take place between shades or it might only be the wind. Finally, a barely heard question comes. “What is wrong with him?”

“He was shot in the leg.”

Again the susurrus stirs. “No doctor is here. None for leagues. If he is wounded …”

“No,” I say hastily. “He’ll be all right. The bullet just grazed him. He’ll be all right if he can rest for a little while.”

Again another question: “Have you any food?”

“No,” I say. “We hoped you would have some.”

The length of the pause feeds my fear, and I begin to despair of even this slight refuge. At last, the voice, no louder than the rustle of leaves, tells us to come to the door.

We move along the porch, and I wince at each creak of the floorboards. The wooden door stands slightly ajar. Because my right arm supports Jacob, I push the door with my left hand. The hinges have had no oil in many a year, and a thin screech accompanies their swinging open. I

wince and pray no soldiers are close enough to hear.

Through the doorway I see nothing but darkness. Jacob stiffens. I understand his wariness, but we can only trust those within not to betray what scant hope we have left. We shuffle inside.

"Far enough." The voice wheezes, slurred and raspy. We stop. The speaker asks, "Who are you?" using the second person plural to indicate the two of us.

It is not our names the interrogator wants; those are of little significance. None of us bear much resemblance to the people we used to be. The question he asks is a deeper one. In truth, the question concerns our value. What he really wants to know is why they should help us. In my despair, I hesitate, but Jacob answers, his voice weak and feeble. "We are teachers," he says. "Professors from the Sorbonne." His words sound pitiful. They have lost the clarion ring they once had in his classroom; they no longer have the strength that lifted them to the back rows of the auditorium.

The unseen speaker scoffs. "What did you teach that could possibly be of any value in this place forsaken by all that is good?"

Jacob's muscles tense. "We teach languages," he says.

"Languages?" The scoff lashes like a whip. "What is the use of language when our country is overrun by animals?"

I've seen Jacob's face, boyish and pliant, solidify to granite hardness when provoked. If confronted in the classroom by such a question of value, his back would straighten and his stance would square. Now he replies with a dim hint of that old fierceness. "Language separates us from those animals. It gives us culture and meaning and value."

A different voice with more command comes from the darkness. "The enemy has a

language, too. And culture. Does that make them as valuable as we are? Does that excuse them for destroying our land? Burning our homes? Killing our children?"

"Of course not." Irritation colors Jacob's voice.

Our lives depend on placating our hosts. My friend's willfulness may lead us to grief.

As if realizing this himself, Jacob cools the fervor of his reply. "By speaking our language, we affirm our identity and repudiate theirs."

A shifting happens in the dark; a redistribution of weight disturbs the air. A feeling of agreement emanates from the gloom, almost as though someone has shuffled closer. If I believed in ghosts, I might say we seek refuge with hants, but what hunts us is worse.

The second voice continues. "We apologize for the rudeness. You must forgive us our caution. Anyone might be the enemy."

Jacob answers softly. "Of course."

"You are welcome here," the second voice tells us. "We can chance no light. We have no food or medicine. The courier is overdue, but if he comes, he will take you to the next post where they may be able to help you."

Footsteps move away from us. We follow, shuffling deeper into the house. The quality of the air changes in a subtle way from humid loam to dry plaster. The fetid breeze is replaced by stagnant air. Eventually the second voice says, "Rest here. Sleep if you can. Try not to dream."

I ease Jacob to the floor, his back to a wall, and I slide down beside him. Released of his slight weight, feeling safer than we have in weeks, my mind merges with the darkness, and I sleep instantly. No dreams come.

*

My sleep always passes without dreams, but my wakefulness sags under the burden of memories. That my recollections are of sunny, happy days makes the present all the darker and more depressing. When the sound of my son's laughter bubbles in my mind, I realize I've fallen awake, and in the gloom of early morning, a feeble smile creeps onto my face. To smile feels repugnant in this house, with these men, and I hate the smile, but one takes solace where one may.

I look to Jacob beside me, but he sleeps, so I glance round the gradually lightening room. Against the wall opposite slumps a shade shaped like a man—one of our hosts I presume. Glints flicker in unseen eyes. He has been watching us sleep. I would like to say he has been watching over us through the night, but his attention had probably not been predicated on any feelings of comradery and brotherhood, but on fear of treachery and betrayal.

The color of his hair in the early morning light tends toward a chestnut brown, but the strands are dark with grime and grease as if he hasn't washed it in too long a time. The tam-o'-shanter he affects may be an attempt to hide that fact, but, if so, it falls woefully short in its purpose. I say, "I would wish you a good morning, but I fear it will be a long time before any of us have another one of those."

His cantilevered smile tries to rise to a social level, but beneath the swoop of his bangs, his face, brown and weary, stays wary and cool. "Your French is good," he replies, "but it has a foreign tinge of ..." He ponders. "English. Are you British?"

"American."

He nods as if that should have been apparent. "Your friend is not, though."

"No," I say quickly.

Jacob doesn't snore softly so much as breathes loudly. His trust makes me feel

despondent. Inadequate. How can I keep him safe in such a monstrous world?

"No," I repeat more slowly. "His family has lived in Paris for generations. They were among those taken in July. He alone escaped."

The shadow man cocks his head to one side. "He is a Jew."

A month after the Nazis attacked France, they marched into a Paris abandoned by President Lebrun and others who should have been defending her. Two years later—the middle of last month—Jews were rounded up and sent to camps at Drancy, Compiegne, and Beaune-la-Rolande. Plus many others. And, of course, to Auschwitz. Ever since then, Jacob and I have been scurrying from one hole to another. "We are both teachers at the Sorbonne." Nazis hate the intelligentsia almost as much as they hate the Jews. Double woe to those, like Jacob, who are both.

Our new companion—with whom I would break bread had either of us any—scratches his scraggily beard, and I immediately wonder if he has lice. "The Philistines," he says, "closed the Sorbonne after the student demonstrations."

I shrug. "Though I admire the students and their enthusiasm, I rue their overenthusiasm."

The morning light strengthens. The features of our friend have a hardness about them as if chiseled from rock instead of molded from flesh. Beneath the locks of his dark hair, pale skin seems stretched thin over brittle bone, pulled taut and dried, like glaze on pottery. His olive-drab jacket, torn and grimy, hangs loosely on his frame. His brown eyes are bloodshot and sag with fatigue. "What did you teach?" he asks.

He uses the singular pronoun, meaning what do I teach, but I shunt the question aside by replying for both of us. "Jacob," I say, then pause when I realize I have compromised my friend's anonymity. I decide to plunge ahead as if the slip means nothing of import. "Teaches

Hebrew."

The man shifts. "I am Luc." He pulls from his shirt pocket the stub of a cigarette. "My associate says his name is Simone." From somewhere he produces a match which he scratches into a tiny flame and holds to the cigarette. After taking a puff, he stretches across the floor, holding out the butt to me.

My first impulse is fear that the smell could give away our position, but I take the cigarette, and suck on it greedily. What heaven! I breathe out a long stream of bliss. "I'm Jack." In my turn, I stretch across the floor, handing the cigarette back to Luc. The morning light shines on his grimy pants and tattered shirt. Beneath the sweet aroma of the cigarette, I smell his sour body, as he no doubt does mine.

A few moments pass. We share the smoke again. Eventually, Luc carefully tamps out the cigarette and restores the remnant to his pocket. He says, "So Jacob teaches Hebrew. What does Jack teach?"

I lean my head back against the wall and let my gaze wander up to the ceiling.

Luc says, "Jack hesitates to answer. Why?" When I say nothing, he goes on. "He would probably have no trouble admitting he teaches English, so it must be something else, something he feels uncomfortable sharing. What could that be? Does he teach ..." He pauses. "German?"

I draw up my right knee and lean my cheek against it. "My father is from Germany." To say those words makes my heart race. "He met my mother in Lyon. They married and he took her to Berlin where he taught mathematics. She applied to teach French at the university. After the Great War, they moved to the United States where I was born. After earning my teaching degree, I wanted to see the world. I wanted adventure, so I moved to Paris. A friend of my mother's secured a position for me at the Sorbonne. There I met the most wonderful woman

alive. We married and had a son. At the start of the Phony War, my father realized things were going to get much worse, and he insisted I bring my family back to America." My throat catches and we sit quietly for several heartbeats. "Instead," I say when I can go on, "I sent them on ahead, but stayed behind, planning to join them later. Unfortunately, things developed more quickly than any of us anticipated." I turn my head to look at my friend sleeping in the shadows. "Jacob and I had known each other since I first moved to France, and after things turned for the worse, I couldn't abandon him."

"And now the two of you hope to rejoin your family."

I shrug. "Hope is a baited word, drawing us away from reality."

"Cynicism is worse. It offers nothing in hope's place."

If I were to agree with him, any tattered impulse of civilization I have left would be rendered meaningless. "The word 'cynic'," I say, "comes from the Greek kynikos which means doglike. It was a nickname of the Greek philosopher Diogenes, a pun alluding to the gymnasium where he taught—the Kynosarges, named after the white dog that was companion to Herakles, to whom the school was sacred."

An expression more like a smirk than a smile crawls across Luc's face. "And that is relevant to our current situation how?"

It isn't so much the question itself as his attitude that rankles. His attempt to assign an empirical value to knowledge makes my teeth grind. "Truth has worth over and above mere circumstance."

"But that story is a myth, not truth."

"Myths are truth," I counter. "Truer than knowledge because where knowledge is tied to the specific, myths range over the universal."

"Would our friend Jacob agree that the myth of Aryan superiority is a universal truth?"

Luc's sophistication surprises me. Still, he errs. "You mistake a lie for a myth," I tell him. "Propaganda is manipulation, not erudition."

The shadows masking his face lengthen and expand, then fall together again, darkening around his eyes. He draws breath, but before he can speak, Simone slides around the jamb of the door, himself as much a shade as a man. Patchy growths of beard spring up with no particular order over his cheeks and chin. He glares at me, and at Jacob, then bends to whisper in Luc's ear. Luc sits upright; his slouching posture snaps into hard lines. More whispers pass between the two Frenchmen, then Luc turns to us again.

"Soldiers are heading toward the house." His voice again is low; he has learned to speak quietly at times such as this. "They are coming across the fields. Coming here. Needless to say, they are enemy soldiers." From a holster on his belt he pulls a pistol, a Luger.

"A weapon of the enemy." My tone, though whispered, conveys my disapproval.

Luc puts on a sardonic smile. "Taken from a dead man. I like the idea of killing Nazis with their own weapon. It seems poetic somehow."

The thought that he could hold off a squad of soldiers with only a pistol strikes me as too farfetched even for a zealot like him. He must have some sort of plan. "What will we do?" I ask.

"It is too late for us to get away." He hefts the gun, checks its ammunition. "We have a hidden place here in the house. Wake your friend, but make sure he makes no noise."

I lay my hand over Jacob's mouth so he won't cry out. The stubble on his chin feels rough as sandpaper. "Jacob," I murmur.

His eyes snap open, then narrow.

"The enemy is coming," I say. "We must hide."

His pupils focus on me, and he nods. I pull back my hand.

Luc tells us, “Follow me,” and he slips away, glancing constantly over his shoulder. He doesn’t look at us, though. He looks through us, beyond us, to see if someone, if some thing is coming behind us.

In a small room in the back of the house, Luc squats next to an ordinary plank in the middle of the floor. Lifting it, he reveals a cavity beneath. He nods his head sharply, and Jacob lowers himself through the opening. I follow my friend, expecting little more than a chamber where the four of us can crouch. The space, though, is much smaller than even that. With barely enough room for us to lie flat on the earth beneath the floor, our noses almost graze the undersides of the boards themselves. The wood gives off the pungent scent of age. In the damp and mold, I smell years and lifetimes.

Simone comes after me; Luc is the last to slip in, and he pulls the loose board back into place, twisting a swivel to hold it securely. In the darkness, we all lie as still and unmoving as the dead—our lives depend on it.

For several minutes we lie here, the ancient house creaking above us while the scent of loam rises from the earth beneath us. I become aware of another smell. It is the smell my son made often during his first year of life, the smell of feces and urine. By turning my head from one side to the other, I determine the odor comes from Simone. He has soiled himself.

I know better than to complain. Under the circumstances, it is the least of our concerns. It is not important; it makes no difference. Depending on how long we must stay hidden, any or all of us might have to resort to the same indignity.

It may be that Simone’s embarrassment goads him into speaking. Or he may hope to distract us, to take our minds off the smell. Or maybe his memories have become too heavy for

him to bear alone. For some reason no one but he knows, he whispers, “My wife had a wooden foot.”

From the other side of him, Luc says, “Shh.” His reprimand is gentle, in no way scolding or rebuking.

For several minutes, Simone says nothing else, but then his whisper comes again. “Not just her foot. Half her leg. From the knee down. Her left leg.”

Through the structure of the house I feel a thud as the front door slams open, and boots stomp inside. I turn my head toward Jacob, but can see nothing in the darkness.

“Every morning,” Simone murmurs, “she would strap on her leg with bands of leather.”

This time Luc’s whisper is harsh, his French sibilant. “Be quiet!”

“She wasn’t beautiful.” Simone’s low voice sounds strained in that cramped space. “At least not to look at, but her hands moved with grace, and her laughter could have charmed lions.”

I scowl in his direction, willing him to silence. In the darkness, though, he can’t see my frown, and my fear, strong as it is, cannot quash his sorrow.

“I could never believe she cared for me,” he goes on. I imagine his soft words rising like smoke through the cracks between the floorboards over our heads, alerting those who stalk us. “But she did. She did love me. And I need her like shadows need light. Without her, I simply don’t exist.”

I had heard of a mother smothering her own baby to keep its cries from revealing the family, and I consider trying to find Pierre’s throat.

Before I can move, though, Luc murmurs, “That’s all behind you now. Forget the past. We’re living in the present, and you must hush.”

In the room above us, the door opens, and a pair of hard-soled boots strides across the floor. The death knell of their tread passes directly over our hiding place, and we all hold our breaths. Even Simone. The boots pause, then turn and leave the room. The door closes.

Simone immediately starts again. “I don’t want to live in the present,” he says in answer to Luc. “If I can’t be with her, then I don’t want to be at all.”

“But we do,” I hiss. “So shut up.”

On the other side of me, Jacob speaks softly. “The wind,” he says, “is neither hot nor cold. It only has a certain amount of energy to it. But me, I’m cold.” I feel him shiver violently. “So what does that tell us about the universe?” He pauses, then answers his question himself. “It tells us that only human beings bring value to the world.” His voice sinks even lower. “Without us there is no hot or cold, no good or evil. No past. No future.”

“Jacob,” I say. “Please. Be quiet.”

“Our brains,” he goes on, “create language, and language creates the world. Vayomer Elohim. And God is saying. And it becomes so.”

Luc whispers, “No good god would create such monsters.”

“The brain,’” says Jacob, “structures and organizes experience which gives us right and wrong, language and time, truth and beauty, none of which exist independently.”

What Jacob is saying, he and I often discussed as we ate quiet lunches beneath the trees shading the Medici Fountain back when days had been sunny. Back then, Jacob would say there is no past—only memory. There is no future—only anticipation. Only now is.

There is no travel through time from present to future. There is no future. There is no past. Only the unfolding kaleidoscope of now. An infinite number of causes combine to produce this singular array of effects, and we sit at the center of the maelstrom, picking and choosing

which pieces we will use to build our own, individual worlds. Around us the World is endlessly changing, infinitely beautiful.

This is what he said on those bright days when light filled the world.

More boots return. They stop directly above us.

"Here," says a voice in German, harsh and guttural, the language of my father. "It sounds differently here than over there." A boot stomps the floor over our faces. "There is a space under here. Maybe this is where they hid their valuables." A knuckle raps on the boards above us. "Or maybe this is where the stink of their fear rises from." The voice chuckles. "Bring pry bars. Get axes. Let us see what hides beneath our feet. Let us bring light to dark places."

And they begin to pry apart the planking above us.

**

Five years ago, when I first arrived in Paris during the hazy-with-heat summer of 1935, I searched out the boarding house owned and run by my mother's friend, Madame Archambeau. They had known each other from childhood, and whenever Mother told stories about their exploits together, she could never keep her face serious or her tone even. That was the quality of their friendship: that taffy-pull of smiles and laughter, those unending, not to be denied grins. I had met Mme Archambeau only a couple of times, but her spirit had colored all of our visits to Paris. Now, when the door of her apartment opened to my knock, my being greeted by such a tall, jovial lady in a black evening sheath brought back a cascade of memories.

Where my mother's unfettered brown hair was streaked with gray, Mme Archambeau's towering bouffant blazed a furious red, making me think of a Brooklyn tenement on fire. It was

late—bells in steeples all across the city were tolling eleven—but Mme Archambeau took my face in her hands. “You have your mother’s eyes,” she said. The throaty bass of her voice rolled in waves mellow and husky. I had shaved that morning, but the day’s accumulation of stubble on my chin and cheeks embarrassed me. She said nothing about my scruff, but took my arm and pulled me into her flat.

“I’ve put you in number 5.” From the end table beside the door, she picked up a large key with a handle of baroque swirls and handed it to me. “The room is small, but comfortable, and should suit a young bachelor adequately. One meal is served every day in the dining room punctually at six in the evening. If you are late, it is assumed that you will be eating elsewhere. The board is taken up at exactly six thirty. Cigarettes and conversation may follow in the parlor till nine.”

The tiniest bit of a smirk was all I allowed myself. “Nine on the dot, I assume.”

She brushed some speck of fluff from my jacket. “It appears we understand each other perfectly.” Her modest smile petite, her French flowed with grace and charm.

The colors of her room were demure, the furnishings of old wood rich with the aroma of age and respectability. The simple design of the wallpaper had a few repeating swirls with occasional leaves and honeysuckle blooms. Next to one wall stood an upright piano, a huge birdcage beside it. In the cage sat the largest parrot I had ever seen. The ferocity of its stare and the size of its beak filled me with an ominous foreboding, and I promised myself never to be caught alone with the creature.

My hostess gestured toward her couch, a loveseat with a high back, topped with ornate designs, and crowded with pillows. We sat, the seat low and close, our knees almost touching. A coffee table with lacy ornamentation matching the sofa held a porcelain teapot and accessories.

She poured a cup and handed it to me. Hers she filled also and, using a pair of small, silver tongs, placed a single cube of sugar in hers with delicacy and precision.

"And how," she asked, "is your mother?" She sipped her tea.

We spoke of the family for a while, then of the differences between America and France, their food, their people, and their landscapes. I managed to stifle a yawn, but on the second one, Mme Archambeau smiled. "If you like," she said, "we can continue our chat later. Now I can show you your rooms."

I nodded. "If you don't mind."

She led me back to the hallway. Disdaining the bannister of the venerable staircase, she moved with a stately air that had little to do with the youngster of the stories I had always heard. I said, "Mother remembers your days together fondly."

Mme Archambeau paused with one foot on one step, the other on the lower, looking up to the top of the stairs. "Memory," she said, "like copper, tends to acquire a patina of verdigris with age. And we all know." She looked back over her shoulder. "Verdigris is poisonous." She turned away again.

Having no idea how to answer such a statement, I said nothing.

We reached the second floor. The stair decanted in the middle of a hallway. To the left stood two doors and to the right stood two more. Mme Archambeau led me to the last door on the left and inserted the key. "Your comings and goings," said she, "are your own concern." The door opened silently on well-oiled hinges. "Your stayings, however, fall under the jurisdiction of the house." She again looked over her shoulder at me, one of her delicately penciled eyebrows arching, making sure I understood her meaning. When I accepted her conditions with a nod, she led me into the room.

"First rule: no ladies of the evening."

She flipped a switch on the wall, and an elaborate fixture of electric lights depending from the ceiling flared overhead. Most of the floor space was taken up by a double bed with an ornate oak headboard. The bed was covered with a quilt of elaborate pattern.

"Friends may stay overnight, providing they are quiet and present themselves respectfully in the common areas." The emphasis she gave to the word copines left no question as to exactly what kind of friends she meant. "I don't appreciate fraternizing with the opposite gender, but it will happen regardless of rules, and I would rather it take place without juvenile twitters and scurrying in the wee hours."

A single window with a set of lacy drapes looked out onto the brick wall of the neighboring house.

"Second: no smoking in your room. Too many fine old homes have burnt to the ground because of careless habits."

On a stand to the right of the door sat a porcelain basin and beside it a water pitcher hand-painted with marigolds.

"Third: discussions of religion and politics are considered to be in very poor taste, even in the parlor late at night. Fisticuffs have been known to break out over careless words."

A chest of drawers stood in the center of the wall on the opposite side of the door.

"Fourth: no pets. No dogs. No cats. No hamsters."

A thought came to me and I couldn't resist uttering it. "How about a lemur?"

Her eyes narrowed slightly. "I don't know what a lemur is, but I dare say no."

"Not to worry," I assured her. "No lemurs here."

The steadiness of her gaze assured me her interest had not been aroused in the slightest.

“The communal bathroom,” she said, “is at the end of the hall. Tidiness is assumed. Everyone is held accountable.”

I cleared my throat. “Of course.”

“You’ll have to excuse my bluntness, but I’ve found that young men sometimes assume a certain cavalier attitude in their physical hygiene and social deportment.” Again the eyebrow arched.

I almost gave a slight bow, but realized that might be going too far, so I merely nodded. “I understand.”

“You expect your luggage to arrive soon?”

The suitcase in my hand I hefted. “I prefer to travel light. This is all I brought. A couple of changes of casual clothes. Now that I’m here, I plan on buying suits and other necessities.”

“Very good.” She opened the door of the closet. “Here you may hang your things. Let the wrinkles fall out as much as they will. I have an iron and ironing board if you wish to borrow them in the morning.”

I nodded. “Yes,” I said. “I would appreciate that.”

“Then I will leave you to get as much rest as you can.” She touched my shoulder in a gesture I found authentic and comforting. “It’s good to see what a fine young man you have become. The friendship of your mother is one of my greatest treasures.”

The ease with which she skirted the issue of her earlier comment alluding to the poison of memories gave me pause, but I said only, “I look forward to living here. When will I meet my fellow residents?”

She moved toward the open door. “Tonight. At dinner.” A look of thoughtfulness flickered around her eyes and settled on her mouth, pursing her lips. There was something more

she wanted to say even though she conveyed the impression that she would rather say nothing at all. “The boy in the room across the hall teaches at the Sorbonne, also.”

Though the term ‘boy’ rankled, I manfully ignored it. “Oh? Do you know what subject?”

She hesitated. “Hebrew.” This, then, was the topic she had wanted to avoid. Her reason for mentioning it now, I gathered, was to keep me from being surprised later at supper. Her unspoken reference to conditions in my father’s homeland congealed in the air between us.

“Good,” I answered with a mild tone. “It will be interesting to have someone with whom I can discuss languages.”

The tension which held her body rigid dissipated. Her features eased. “Yes,” she agreed. “That will be good. Your mother never mentioned which subject you would teach. So, you will be teaching English, then?”

“No. I’ll be teaching my father’s language. German.”

She blinked once. Then her eyelids fluttered. Her nostrils dilated. “That should prove.” She paused. “Interesting.” I had expected such a reaction. In early August the year before, Paul von Hindenburg, the aging hero of the Great War who had twice been elected President of the German Republic, died, and Chancellor Adolph Hitler consolidated his own office with the office of President, giving himself the stature of dictator. The National Socialists were growing in strength, and with Hitler’s inflammatory rhetoric, all of Europe waited tensely to see what the man would do.

Ordinary citizens such as Mme Archambeau could only stand and watch as the powers of the world wrought bedlam and anarchy around them. They could only wait for the new shape of the future to coalesce and hope they could survive whatever it would bring.

As she stood on the threshold of the room looking back at me, her slight smile had a

subtle shade of bitterness. “Then I leave you to settle in.” She stepped out into the hallway, but paused. “And please. No lemurs.” She closed the door, and the sharp reports of her heels moved away down the hall.

*

My week of travel across half the globe had drained me of energy, and the thought of a cool shower and a long sleep answered a need which had saturated my muscles and marinated my bones. I slung my suitcase onto my bed and clicked open the latches, but a tentative knock sounded on my door. Thinking my landlady had remembered something she needed to tell me, I opened it.

A slight young man stood in the hall. He wore a green velvet jacket with the tip of a red handkerchief showing in the pocket, and dark blue pants. His shirt was the color of old ivory, and his thin black tie hung askew, well off the perpendicular. He wore shoes that were dual tones of light brown and dark brown, and had a sporty moustache. His shiny hair, dark black, was slicked down, and his smile scintillated. He was the archetypal bopper.

“Hey, cousin. What’s buzzin’?” he said in a perfect American drawl.

I laughed uneasily, taken aback that this apparition might be a fellow countryman. “Hey yourself, pardner.”

“I’m afraid,” he said, reverting to French, “that’s the extent of my English.”

Relieved, I tossed off a shrug and said, “I can teach you more.”

“I’d like that. I’m Jacob Pierre.” He pronounced his first name with the French Zh rather than the J of English or the Y of Hebrew.

We shook hands. “Jack.” I made sure to use the American pronunciation. “Qibbet. ‘Q’ with no ‘u’.”

“Jack?” His expression showed some little consternation, as if the concentration to get the articulation right pained him.

I nodded. “Perfect. And ‘Pierre’ is your last name? Like ‘Peter’?”

“Actually, it’s ‘Pierre’ like ‘Stone.’ Peter comes from the Hebrew for ‘stone.’”

The reminder in etymology pleased me, and I smiled. “Of course. ‘On this rock, I build my church.’ One of the few recorded times Jesus made a pun.”

“One of the few? I’d say the only.”

“You’re probably right. We’d need to consult an expert in Middle Eastern society. As far as I know, very few first-century peoples indulged in word play.”

“That’s probably just because our records are so scanty. May I come in?” He caught himself immediately. “Unless you’re going to sleep. You must have had a hard day of travel. I can come back tomorrow.”

I made a not-serious frown. “No, no, no. Come in. Come in.” At the same time I gave the invitation, though, it rankled having to invite this stranger into my new home which I had only just now entered myself. I was tired. Not just after the trip, but because of the trip. My mother and I had made many jaunts to Paris, but this time was different. This time I was by myself. I stood on the threshold of my own life, a new life. I was staring full in the face of what might turn out to be sheer folly.

I felt wretched because I wanted to talk to someone about the miracle of having the mass of the entire planet between where I was at the moment and where I had been all my life, but at the same time, I wanted to be alone. Dizzy with fatigue, I yearned to sleep, even if I had to lie on

a bed of nails to get it.

Taking a deep breath, I fought down my annoyance, stepped aside, and said again, "Come in. Come in," as if insisting Dracula himself cross my threshold. "There are plenty of hours till dawn."

Jacob flashed a sly grin. "That's a great attitude because I want to invite you out on the town."

Now my frown was serious. "At this time of night?"

"That's exactly why this time of night was invented." He grabbed me by the elbow and tried to pull me into the hall.

I snatched at the door sill. "Wait a minute." I tried to think of something to say, anything. "I've got to get a jacket." Any kind of an excuse. "I need my hat." Any reason not to go.

"Bosch. The night is perfect. Warm and dry. You don't need a jacket or a hat or your wallet. I'm paying for everything tonight." His sideway glance, off-kilter and loopy, promised a memorable evening. "You better take advantage of this offer because it might not come again in our lifetime."

Fatigue weighted my limbs like concrete, but resisting the demand of my new housemate was impossible. "Where are we going?" I sighed.

He grinned outright, full-toothed and face-wide. "To baptize you in the fire of the greatest city on Earth so your soul may ascend into Heaven." His sincerity made me expect a trip to the Cathedral of Our Lady, but instead the taxi he stuffed me into wove down blocks of brightly lit avenues and across a bridge spanning a dark turbulence I guessed was the Seine. Finally, we turned onto a dark, narrow side street and stopped in the middle of the block at an establishment fronted with a façade of yellow wood and plate-glass windows.

"This?" I asked as we debarked. "Here?"

His laughter rose. "This, my friend, is Harry's New York Bar." He stepped behind me and pushed me through the doorway.

Jacob's glee raised his hectic energy even higher. For me to have told him that my mother and I had come here many times before would have bordered on petulance, so I let him have his fun. Inside the long, high building, smoke from dozens of cigarettes, cigars, and pipes swirled and eddied in the crowded space. On our left stretched the bar itself. Behind it, the wall was covered with shelves full of every kind of liquor. Along the front stood stools, each with a weaving body perched on it and many more jammed in between. Beyond the end of the bar, the room continued, filled with booths, every table overflowing with patrons, the noise of all the gabbing a ruckus out of Bedlam.

Jacob maneuvered his way through the crowd to the bar. The bartender, who looked to be not much older than myself, greeted Jacob by name and asked if he wanted his usual. He nodded, then said, "And one for my guest." I started to protest, but Jacob waved me to silence. "This is my treat. You can buy next time."

The barman sat our drinks in front of us. "What's this?" I asked. The shot glass was filled with red and garnished with celery.

With a lilt of pride, Jacob said, "The original Bloody Mary."

"An American drink?" I filled my voice with scoff.

He returned my mocking. "For shame," he said. "Have you no reverence for history? When I say the original Bloody Mary, I mean the prototype. The first. The standard by which all others are made. The Bloody Mary was conceived and birthed here in Harry's Bar."

I sipped. The blend of flavors—tomato, Worcestershire sauce, horseradish—set my

mouth aflame. “This is good,” I agreed, “but I’ve always heard that it came from the 21 Club in New York City. From Henry Zbikiewicz specifically.”

For a moment, Jacob seemed nonplussed that anyone had facts to dispute his version of the world. “Bosch.” He held himself straighter. “It was right here.” A downward thrust of his forefinger emphasized the location. “Fernand Petiot. Right here. Right behind this bar. Tomato juice and vodka. Spur of the moment. Later he added salt, lemon, and Tabasco sauce to give it more of a kick.”

When it became apparent how much store Jacob set by the tale, I couldn’t help needling him. “And you have this on what authority?”

“The best. Pete is my godfather.”

“Pete?”

“Fernand. Everyone calls him Pete. He moved to Ohio a few years back. Maybe you met him?”

I shook my head. “It’s a big country.”

Jacob quirked his mouth into a semi-grin and sipped his drink. “Last month,” he said, “I spent an evening here in Harry’s bar talking to Sinclair Lewis.” When I said nothing, he added, “And the week before that, to Hemingway.”

What do you say to a statement like that? Hemingway hadn’t been in that bar for five years or more, I knew, but Jacob, as did everyone, needed to present himself in the best possible light. Who was I to nay-say him? “Did you teach them Hebrew?” I asked. It was only prattle, of course, but nothing else came to mind.

“No,” Jacob replied as if it had been a serious question. “They didn’t come here for what I could teach them.”

Tired by the effort at banter, I finished my drink. “Can we go home now? I really need to rest.”

Jacob swirled his glass. “All right.” Disappointment soured his voice and his visage.

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