



Katja Kulin

The Second Man

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Prologue (January/February 1947)

In the New World

New York City

25th January to 13th February 1947

SIMONE

Since her arrival in the New World, she had been hectic, a dervish that spiralled incessantly through the streets of New York City. She wanted to make the most of her stay. Who could say if she would ever return?

How wistfully she had congratulated Sartre two years ago, when he had been invited to the United States to report on the American war effort! They had dreamed of making this trip together. As sceptical as one had to be about America and its political developments, it was after all the land of the liberators, and they both loved American novels and films, as well as jazz, blues and African American spirituals. On the face of it, life here seemed easier and freer for men and women alike. Now she would have the opportunity to separate myth from reality.

Although in recent years she had worked until her hands shook and had had to resort to taking Sartre's stimulants to combat her exhaustion, although she enjoyed increased popularity since her existentialist novel *The Blood of Others* and had published another book within a year, it still seemed almost miraculous that Philippe Soupault had been able to organise a lecture tour for her. Since emigrating to America, he worked mainly as a journalist and lecturer and had the best contacts with universities. So now she would be lecturing on the moral challenges of post-war authors for a good four months, attending dull but necessary business appointments, writing articles, giving interviews and, on the side, carrying out research for the essay she was planning on the role of women in society. She had already begun preliminary research last year, but the visit to America would certainly add interest and depth. Perhaps the American

woman was different from your average European woman. The response to her first lecture at Vassar College for Women had at least suggested this.

In her free time, she would meet friends who had emigrated, gather as many impressions as possible and, one thing was certain, not just trudge round all the usual sights like the average tourist, but really make the cities her own.

When she walked through the city in the first few days, along Broadway, Times Square, 42nd Street, she walked aimlessly and without committing it to memory. She occasionally said to herself 'This is New York!' but still she could not believe it. She was no longer in Paris, but she wasn't here yet either. She was living in a borrowed present, which she only recognised from Sartre's reports.

She made her journeys of discovery in taxis, on the upper deck of buses, sometimes on the New York subway, but preferably on foot, even if her feet did punish her for it at night, and, to the amazement of her French hosts, whether friends who had emigrated or officials, she liked to do so alone. For hours she also wandered through areas of which it was said you could drive through them by car, but you must not go there on foot. And if you did choose to take a risk, then you at least stayed on the major avenues and kept an eye on the nearest underground station in order to take refuge in case of danger.

By 'you' they meant her. But it became clear, as soon as she set foot in Harlem that the concerned advice of her hosts was absurd. It was not a starving slum where people might understandably have accosted her, but rather the image of an entire society in miniature, only somewhat more relaxed. The real problems lay elsewhere.

She took what was perhaps the most beautiful walk of her life so far along the banks of the East River, from the Queensboro Bridge to Brooklyn Bridge. Finding her way around as a pedestrian was not easy, but the challenge made it all the more enjoyable. The weather was mild, children and unfailingly friendly people sat on the shore, the scent of sea and spices drifted towards her in the gentle breeze. Lots of picture-postcard moments, and at the sight of the Battery, the park on the southern tip of Manhattan, through the latticework of the Brooklyn Bridge, in the sunset criss-crossed by seagulls, she actually wanted to cry.

It was visiting these places, the museums, restaurants and bars, alone, with her hosts and especially with locals, that set points of reference and allowed her to finally arrive in the New World. It also felt good not to be recognised here, a forgotten freedom that she enjoyed very much.

But it was the details, above everything else, that really made a place your own and that challenged all the expectations and habits that you brought along to a new place. In the hairdressing salon, where she didn't have to hand the hairpins to the girl because they were stuck to a magnet that she wore around her wrist. A whiff of magic wafted through the shop when the girl ran the magnet over her hair after drying it, removing the pins in this way. The details were in an orange juice, drunk in a shoeshine boy's hut, or mistakenly getting into an Express Train instead of a Local, in the way you ordered a coffee and ate a sandwich here. New York was understanding the magic of the nickel, wondering about drinks parties, and slowly acquiring a taste for Scotch because it didn't taste like iodine tincture here. And it was the smuts she had to wash off her face in the evenings because rubbish was burned in metal containers in the middle of the neighbourhoods.

During the two weeks she spent in New York, she experienced a process resembling enchantment, and she resolved to repeat this in every new city.

Something that would not be repeated, but which also helped to finally lift the Parisian heaviness of the last months, was her meeting with Dolores Vanetti, the journalist and actress with whom Sartre had

fallen madly in love during his trip to America. His infatuation had frightened her because even though *amours* were an integral part of the pact they had made in 1929, and their relationship had mostly been on an intellectual level for years, it had never been as serious as it was now. Sartre was still smitten; Dolores wanted to leave her husband and was probably already toying with the idea of moving to Paris permanently. And the fact that Sartre had dedicated the first issue of *Les Temps Modernes* to Dolores instead of her, although she had done all the work on it, had seemed like a betrayal. She had tried to hide her pain, but it was impossible to hide anything from the suspicious eyes of *la petite famille*, her inner circle of friends, many of whom she had known since their student days.

There was no denying it: she and Sartre had grown apart through long physical separations and their growing fame, which had made it impossible for them to work together or to spend time in cafés. They had grown vulnerable. This was the very reason why this woman had become such a nightmare, and this was why she had to take the opportunity to catch sight of her before Dolores headed off to Paris to spend time in her absence with Sartre.

They met for a drink at the Sherry-Netherland, and the phantom turned out to be a tiny beauty with dusky skin, who was at least as excited about the meeting as she was. They both made an effort to be civil; what lay beneath, at least as far as her counterpart was concerned, was still a mystery. But at the end of the evening, she was sure that this love affair of Sartre's would pass like all the others. While the reality of New York had enchanted her, Dolores had lost her magic in the face-to-face meeting.

Two weeks after her arrival in the New World, the city no longer belonged to Sartre but to Simone alone. Satisfied and full of anticipation, she set out to discover the rest of America.

One (February 1947)

Thirty-six hours

Chicago,
21st February 1947.

NELSON

Whenever someone asked him what had been the best thing about coming back from war, he answered that it was having a place to himself. That was true, but it wasn't the whole truth. He always left out the cherry on the cake.

In his third year in the army, the desire for privacy had become a fixed idea. At some point it had started with him hoping they would stay a while when his convoy stopped to set up another field hospital. Of course, they never stayed long. When I get back home, he told himself at every watch, I will stay in one place for the rest of my life. Doing one single thing. No more vagabonding. No jobs. Just writing.

It had been particularly bad in Mönchengladbach. They had taken over a Catholic hospital that looked like a megalomaniac's gingerbread house. St. Francis, he would never forget the name, because damn, it had been wonderful there. Except for the twelve-hour shifts, during which they dressed burn wounds, observed diphtheria lesions spread, listened to the coughing and choking of those hawking their infected lungs out of their chests, and kept admitting more wounded whose greatest misfortune was that their chests kept rising and falling, rising and falling.

But all this was normal and the same everywhere, yet everything else in St. Francis was different. There was a large kitchen with its own bakery, there were fresh eggs, and there were women. Nuns, fifty of them, but women, nonetheless. Just the sight of them changed everything. In their free time, the men played softball on the lawn in front of the hospital, at night, they swapped coffee and cigarettes for wine in the surrounding villages and let the dice roll.

No, none of them wanted to leave, but after forty-two days, the fun was over, and they moved on to Düsseldorf. The encirclement on the Ruhr was the only occasion where his medical team came close to artillery fire. Before that, he had only had to worry about being hit by the shot of a nervous comrade.

But it was the morning of the departure in Mönchengladbach that had etched itself into his memory more than the artillery fire. As he packed, he had been imbued with the same hollow sadness he had felt as a boy as he sat on the toilet on the first morning of the first day back at school after the summer holidays and wished back the past weeks.

And now, for a good year: two rooms in the Polish quarter, advertised quite honestly at the time. No heating, no shower, no light. But a kitchen, a bedroom and a toilet with a hand basin. Pure luxury. He'd organised an oil stove for heating and cooking, there was light now too, and he could shower elsewhere.

Otherwise, there was a table beneath the window, a bed, a desk by the wall with a typewriter on it, a sink with a water tap, and a steadily filling bookshelf. Making his own decisions about everything in this small world was still a privilege. And the best thing about it, the cherry that he kept from everyone, because he didn't want them to think he was a sissy: waking up slowly in the morning. No more wake-up call, no more falling out of bed and out of dreams at the same time, no saluting. And no roll call and 'Look sharp!'

Just a slow, steady emergence, until body and mind were on the same level, sometimes a short drifting away again into the shallows of a too-seductive dream, attempting to dream on, which he rarely managed. Then the opening of the eyes, the stretching of the limbs beneath the warm blanket, lying there for a while longer, letting his gaze drift through the room as if it were the first time, letting his thoughts run free until they formed themselves into a concrete intention that justified the decision to get up.

He usually got up early, but today he didn't swing his legs over the edge of the bed until midday. A slight dizziness reminded him that it had been a long evening at the Polonia bar. He had had to comfort his buddy Wójcik, which mostly meant listening to him that was required, sentence by sentence and schnaps by schnaps, because it was a long story he had to tell.

The poor wretch had come home with his week's wages, proud, as he'd managed to make it home without taking a diversion that led to a gambling hall. And then his wife hadn't been home, she hadn't even left a message for him, and there was no dinner in the oven. The disappointment led Wójcik and his money back on the usual path, albeit from the opposite direction, which felt strange and tickled his brain in a peculiar way. However, it also brought him an unbelievable lucky streak when he rolled the dice, the likes of which he hadn't had in a long time or had actually never had before. Even more unbelievable was the fact that he stopped before it was over. He almost ran home, much prouder now than he had been a couple of hours before, but there was still no light on, and the sheets were still rumpled in the same way as in the morning.

'Whenever my wages were gone, the goddamn woman was there,' Wójcik had cried into his ear. 'And today of all days it had to be the other way around. What a crock of shit, huh?'

The question had been a rhetorical one, of course, and he had continued with his story without waiting for an answer, only taking the time to fish some salty pretzels out of the bowl and stuff them into his mouth.

This time, it was defiance that drove him back to the gaming hall, and it made him reckless until first his wallet and then his pay packet were empty. It was as clear as day that he couldn't go home now because his old lady was sure to be sitting waiting on the sofa with her hand open. So he had come here to drink away the money he no longer had.

A few schnaps later, Wójcik had suddenly gone quiet, stood there swaying for at least two minutes and then leaned over the bar and beckoned the landlord over. 'Can I say something, mate?' he asked.

Pawel, who was too good-natured to see what was coming, approached and leaned over with his ear close to Wójcik. 'Shoot, my friend.'

'I'd like to say something, I said.'

'Sure, just say it, go ahead!'

'But what should I say?'

Pawel's jaw dropped and he was about to stand up again, when Wójcik grabbed him by the collar. 'Bloody hell, what do you think you're doing, you bastard, ordering me to say something?'

This was the moment Nelson had been waiting for to intervene because the outburst had been circling over their heads the whole time like a hawk waiting for the right moment to swoop. He grabbed Wójcik by the collar and pushed himself between him and the bar, and Pawel's neck regained its freedom.

'See you tomorrow,' Nelson said with an apologetic look to the landlord, who just waved him away, and pulled the still bleating Wójcik with him.

Outside, the cold hit them straight in the face.

'Bloody hell, Wójcik, you've lost your mind,' he said after he had digested the blow. 'Taking it out on someone who's the least to blame for it and who lets you chalk up what you owe on the slate.'

But Wójcik has suddenly become unable to answer, too busy trying to stay on his feet. No wonder. So he had propped him up and taken him all the way to his house. No lights were on inside the flat, but when Wójcik finally managed to hit the keyhole, the light in the bedroom had come on straight away. Poor sod, oh dear.

On the way home he had thought about the fact that he ought to write down the events of the evening, if he had not already written about a very similar one in *The Neon Wilderness*. In the course of his research, he had squeezed the residents of the Polish quarter like lemons and had stacks of protocols. There were no new stories to be had from the Polonia bar.

Nonetheless, it was writing that made him get up that morning. He had kept his word to himself over the last year. The volume of short stories had just been published and the rough draft of his new novel was almost finished. The sparseness of these two rooms in West Wabanasia Avenue made a perfect writing retreat, that was for sure. He had made good progress, even if not much would remain of this first draft in the end.

After throwing a bit of water on his face, he brewed himself a cup of coffee while he smoked his first cigarette of the day and dissolved a spoonful of milk powder in hot water with a forkful of tinned meat for the tabby tomcat, whom he allowed to shelter in the stove during the icy cold nights and who caught a few cockroaches in return. He himself went without breakfast – a leftover from his flirtation with the stoics at university. But apart from that, asceticism was no longer an issue. He turned the stove on full blast and sat down in front of the typewriter.

Doubleday paid him sixty dollars a week in advance for this novel, ten more than he'd asked for. A good deal. It beat his lousy contract at Harper & Brothers for *Never come morning* by a mile, and they made no stipulations with regard to content either.

He had wanted to write about the war when he returned from Europe, but it only glimmered faintly between the lines of the manuscript. A novel about the war could only be written while one was still in the midst of it, otherwise it slipped away faster than you could actually remember. Two months after his return, everything was gone; the war no longer concerned him. What did concern him was Chicago, the people in whose neighbourhood he now lived, the dregs of this burgeoning city. It was his job to flush it to the surface, even if people didn't like it or it led them to the strangest misconceptions. This was why *Never come morning* had been banned from the Chicago Public Library, but he didn't give a damn. Never again would he allow himself to be thrown off track as he had after the flop of his first novel about the Great Depression. At the time, it was nearly the end of everything. He now believed that book had rightly failed, but he also believed he could do a better job of it now.

He put a new sheet of paper in the machine and suddenly thought of *Bookie*, the little Italian bookmaker he'd met during his last three months in Marseille when he was waiting for his discharge from military service. In his mind, he called that time the gambling period. Damn good dice player. Sometimes they had joined forces and, whenever he got nervous, *Bookie* said: 'Don't worry, my friend, I have a golden arm.' It seemed a part of the war had survived after all, even if, in his novel, he had become a card-dealing veteran with Polish ancestors.

The sheet of paper was only filling up slowly. It was not long before the typewriter fell silent. He preferred to go back to the pages he had already written. The spaces between the lines and all the free margins were filled with corrections and notes, but he had not yet encountered a major problem. Frankie Machine was not doing a particularly good job of swindling his way through life and his dreams and ambitions were only pulling him down further, that much was clear. But the story was missing something. A clamp to hold it all together.

Half an hour and two cigarettes later, he gave up. He just couldn't damn well figure it out. It was probably best to bring forward his daily walk to the YMCA. It was only when he thought of nothing that a solution would often sneak in between the convolutions of his brain, and that seemed to be especially true when he was working on a punch bag. His sports bag was packed, he just had to chuck in some clean clothes. Tonight, he would know how to proceed, no need to be grumpy now, come on boy, let's go.

The little tabby cat accompanied him down the outside staircase but showed its true nature again as soon as its paws touched the street. Without a backward glance, it scampered off. The snow had been waiting for them both. Fresh flakes accompanied him on his way to the elevated railway.

SIMONE

Only thirty-six hours for Chicago! This wasn't enough time to get to know a city, or even confirm one's own prejudices, in her case those from gangster films like *Scarface* or James T. Farrell's series *Studs Lonigan*. This had been crystal clear to her since New York, and the mostly brief flying visits to the other stations on her journey had confirmed it. In the case of some of these cities, it didn't matter that much; in the case of Chicago, it would surely be criminal. And as it was almost half past two in the afternoon when she arrived, she'd gone straight to the Art Institute, spent two hours looking at the Impressionists and a little contemporary art, enjoyed a fabulous view of Lake Michigan from a terrace, and had then, accompanied by an icy wind, walked down Michigan Avenue. The skyscrapers here seemed more honest to her than

those in New York: massive, with hard lines, no Renaissance windows or Gothic spires. Overwhelmed by the possibilities, she had finally taken a taxi back to the hotel.

Now she was sitting in a room in the absurdly gigantic Palmer House of all places, which, with its bars and restaurants, at least three large halls and shops of all kinds was like a city in itself. A rich city. Every single corridor she went down smelled of money. This was certainly not only due to her heightened senses, as her own money was in short supply at the moment. So far, fewer lectures than planned had been secured, and her travel expenses had still not been reimbursed. The room had been rented for her by the consul, and presumably, in addition to the obligatory dinner, a city tour had been planned for the next day. But during her time in New York, she had already understood that the truth of a city could only be deciphered through its inhabitants. She started to feel restless. She wanted to experience something, not waste the coming evening.

To get as remotely close to Chicago as her previously favourite city, she needed a local. While she stared out of the window as if one would be flying by in an instant – she was on the 16th floor – she suddenly thought of zabaglione. Congealed zabaglione. Of course! She quickly jumped up and rummaged in her bag. It had to be there somewhere. There it was. The note with the two phone numbers.

On one of her last evenings in New York, Pearl Kazin, editor of Harper's Bazaar, for whom she had written an article on Sartre last year, had taken her under her wing and invited her to dinner at the home of her only French-speaking friend. What had seemed like a kind gesture had turned out to be pure torture.

Mary Guggenheim had been a kind of child prodigy, and that had become abundantly clear in the first half-hour. She had graduated from college at eighteen – special admission at fifteen, French literature – had then been a professional dancer with the Ballets Russes for several years, only to then turn less successfully to writing and finally, more successfully, to painting. During the war she had worked as a translator in the United States Office of War Information, and, while living in her exceedingly comfortable flat, which smelled of celibacy, she served a truly dismal meal and shared anecdotes. At the time, Sartre had met her too, but understandably she didn't share any stories about him in Simone's presence. But she must have said that he was incredibly charming.

'And André Breton was also with us, he made radio broadcasts during the French occupation, which were broadcast there daily, you surely heard some of them!' Mary told her as the three of them cleared away the main course which had consisted of burned meat and indefinable salty vegetables. 'He was a charmer, let me tell you! I think he really liked me. I was crazy about hats at the time, and whenever I came to the office with a hat box, he would call me over and insist on examining at the new hat.'

Men were easily mistaken about women. She herself, for one, couldn't stand Mary after she had asserted that women around the world didn't differ culturally, in fact they were practically the same everywhere. She had absolutely nothing to say about the special situation of women in America, instead she justified everything and anything with psychoanalysis. Simone mentally added her hostess to the list of reasons for extending her essay-in-progress on women.

She counted the minutes until dessert – it seemed endless because Mary had been in the kitchen for almost an hour trying to make a zabaglione, while shouting secrets from her ballet days through the serving hatch. Eventually they ended up with chocolates, and the evening ended on a happy note in other ways as well. When Simone mentioned where her journey would take her, Mary's reddened eyes suddenly widened. 'Chicago? I know a guy who'd show you around for sure. No-one knows the back corners better than him. We went to college together and I'd almost forgotten about him, but he wrote to me during the war and since then we've been a casual long-distance couple.'

'Why not?' she had answered but could only briefly interrupt the flow of speech.

'He likes to pretend he's a redneck, but he's a real intellectual, writer and a Communist. He's a bit of a hermit, has a lot of quirks and so on, but he has his moments. Wait, I'll write down his number for you.'

She had waited and, in addition to his, she had also received the number of an elderly lady that Mary had stayed with in Chicago at the time. Then she had quickly made her excuses, annoyed by one of Mary's indiscreet questions about Dolores in the doorway.

So this note was now her ticket to an evening that she could still make the most of. And it was clear which of the two numbers she had to give preference to at this time of day. Smiling, she sat down on the bed and reached for the phone.

NELSON

The YMCA was familiar to him. There was a shower here, which he lacked at home, and after an exercise session, it was open to all. Sometimes he came here to read or write, sometimes he went swimming, but nothing cleared his head better than pounding away at the sandbag.

Membership was free to all veterans on their return from World War II, and psychological counselling was also offered. He didn't need it. He had never been involved in warfare himself, and the last thing he needed was someone messing with his head again.

The facilities of the Young Men's Christian Association, an organisation that primarily cared for the body, mind and spirit of socially deprived young men, were one of the few constants in his life. In the past, when he hadn't been able to afford it, his sister had paid his membership fee. In 1931, during his years of wandering through the Midwest after graduating with a degree in journalism, he had worked for a time as a tutor at an institution in Milwaukee. Just one of his many jobs - he had done just about everything to keep his nose above water. Journalists weren't exactly what America was craving during the time of the Great Depression.

Changing rooms, he thought, were the sluices between worlds. After the dry cold of the street, the warm, humid climate of the tropics enveloped him in the sports hall; instead of air cleansed by snow, the spicy aroma of the jungle filled his lungs.

Like degenerate vines, the sandbags hung in several rows from the ceiling, interrupted by the gigantic drop-shaped maize bags. Almost every space was taken, even the wall cushions were taking a beating. There wasn't a man here who wasn't gleaming with sweat as if he'd been rubbed with bacon rind.

He knew some of the guys at the sacks by sight, they greeted him as he passed without losing their rhythm. At the back of the hall, two guys were sparring in the box ring, and old Baginski was making a group of boys throw punches in air to each side. The boys, between twelve and fifteen perhaps, were all taking it seriously, every one of them. In their gazes was a yearning for a different life; it didn't need to be a better one, not first and foremost, just different from what they saw at home every day. And for boys like them, the most likely place to find that was as a four-round boxer in the Marigold Gardens. College was not an option, and boxing was definitely preferable to the government job creation schemes.

He started with a few stretching exercises, listening to Baginski's instructions and watching the group perform. They did well with the twos and threes combinations, except for one hollow-cheeked blond boy, who kept getting tangled up with his long limbs that reminded Nelson of Popeye's girlfriend's spindly arms and legs.

‘Weight in the back leg on the jab!’ Baginski tried to do the impossible with his toothless mumbles. ‘That’s where the power comes from, Pimsky, not from your arm, how many more times do I need to say it?’ A little later, with a final admonition, he left the boy alone. ‘Take your hand back after each blow! All the way back, damn it!’

As Nelson fetched a skipping rope from the equipment shelf, old Baginski caught sight of him and rolled his eyes.

‘So, pay attention, especially those who are not the brightest,’ he turned back to his students and put himself in position. ‘Now here comes the fiver.’ Baginski demonstrated every stroke of the combination in slow motion while he continued to speak, the second time round in real time. ‘Jab, jab, cross, hook to the body, hook to the head. The first three take the opponent’s guard to his head, then you have to take the body shot or the guard goes down, and the next hook hits home. Follow my lead: one, one, two, three, three. Got it?’

And off they went. Nelson did a hundred jumps a minute to warm up, and he also wanted to see how the boys got on with the complex combination. Quite a few of them had problems with the rapid shift of weight on the hooks. Baginski was merciful. As an old hand, he knew that the exercise had to take the long way round through habit on the way to mastery. He gave them a couple of minutes and then joined him with a wink.

‘Look at them, mate,’ he said, pulled out a box of chewing tobacco from his shirt pocket, tapped it three times on his elbow, flipped open the lid and stuffed a generous pinch under his upper lip. ‘A bunch of losers, except one. On the outside, the Baldy. I’ll take him to the Gardens; I’ll be his manager. I’m gonna make a fortune off that one, the boy is a goldmine! A wild animal. A bit of technical training and I’ll have him where I want him.’

He’d noticed the Baldy too. Good body tension, the blows powerful, but controlled, determination in the eyes. For him, the dream of a little escape into the boxing ring might become reality.

In contrast to him and the other boys, Baginski himself had already experienced too much to feel any desire or even to understand any desire that wasn’t for money. In rigged fights, he’d allowed his inner organs to be beaten to haggis for a few dollars for many years. How stupid that his liver and kidneys hadn’t taken the precaution of removing themselves like the bridge of his nose. It lay flat and smooth in his wrinkled face in front of the small mound on the tip of his nose as if it had been ironed by a steamroller.

He agreed with Baginski. With a little patience he would surely dig all the gold out of the boy that was in him. After the last word, he increased to a hundred and forty jumps a minute.

Baginski got the message and left him alone. ‘That’s it, you’ll see!’ and turned around once more before showing the boys a new combination.

A little later, he put the rope back and hoped that no-one else would talk to him. Time for the punch bag.

On the way home, he made a detour to Seven Stairs on Rush Street. By now it had become unmistakably clear that today was not a good day for bright ideas. Perhaps it was at least a good day for expanding his book collection.

His stomach growled, so he took a pickle from the barrel next to the door and held it up so that the shopkeeper could note it down.

‘Don’t you ruin my books with that thing, Nelson!’ he said from behind the counter.

‘I’d rather swallow it whole, Stu. You know me.’

Stuart Brent was a difficult man, but the fact that he cherished, cared for and defended his books like a mother hen had won him over the first time they met. The shop was tiny, the neighbourhood not exactly literate, but Stu had come up with quite a few ideas since opening the shop a year ago. In January, he'd thrown a party to celebrate the release of *The Neon Wilderness*, had beaten the big drum and served the numerous guests coffee, salami and apples. Hard to believe that this marketing genius had really miscounted, as he claimed, when he gave the business its name. In truth there were eight steps leading up to the entrance. But it was a good story, he had to give him that.

'And? Get anything good in, Stu?' he asked after finishing the last bit of pickle.

'Are you kidding? I only got good stuff, if you don't mind! But I've got something that I think you'll be particularly interested in. Came with yesterday's delivery.' He reached behind and presented the book to him on his outstretched palms like a jewel.

His mood improved by a few degrees when he read the author's name. He had adored Malaquais ever since he read his magnificent war diary. 'So, they finally translated *Planète sans visa*? Sold.'

Stu grinned with satisfaction and wrapped the book for him.

In the El, as he liked to call the Chicago Elevated, he read the first few pages and looked forward to continuing his reading in the evening. First, however, he needed to make himself something to eat and get in a bit more work. He had a surprising appetite for latkes, and perhaps he was just using the dish, which required elaborate preparation, to postpone staring at a blank piece of paper. No matter.

The onions were chopped, he was grating the third potato when the phone rang. He leaned over the bowl. As always, the most inopportune moment. For a moment he considered letting it ring, but then he rinsed his hands under the tap, wiped them on his trousers and answered.

'Hello?'

SIMONE

She had interrupted him; she could tell that by the sound of his voice. And wasn't it, if she thought about it carefully, presumptuous to barge into a stranger's life, to disturb him in the expectation that he would throw off his plans for the evening for her and be more concerned for her welfare than his own?

Insecurity manifests itself in very different ways in each person. She spoke even faster than usual when she made her request. 'Please excuse the interruption, my name is de Beauvoir, is that Mr Algren? I am just passing through. I got your number from a mutual acq...'

'You've got the wrong number,' he interrupted her with a statement that didn't wait for confirmation. There was a click. He'd hung up!

She had mentioned his name, hadn't he understood her? Her English wasn't that bad, her previous hosts had praised it highly. Very well, next time she would try to speak more slowly. This time, however, she didn't manage to say anything at all.

'Wrong number!' And he hung up again.

How could anyone be so impatient? She hung up but kept her hand on the receiver. The old lady would certainly be easier to deal with, even if the evening was likely to lose some of its excitement. So she dialled the other number on her slip of paper, but no-one answered. Frustrated, she threw herself back on the bed.

She fought the inner turmoil that was now spreading through her by spending the next half an hour working hastily on an article about the problems of women's literature for *France Amérique*, which she needed to send off soon anyway. The telephone lurked in the corner of her eye. Eventually, she put the pen down so vigorously that a few drops of ink spilled from the tip. No. She really wanted to go out with this man tonight, if he didn't want to, then let him say so! But at least he could hear her out.

This time round she asked the telephone operator for help.

'Please be so kind as to hold the connection for a moment, Miss de Beauvoir from France would like to speak to you.' The velvety authoritarian voice actually made the miracle happen. He was so kind.

As she reintroduced herself, she forced herself to speak slowly and clearly, and mentioned Mary Guggenheim right at the beginning. 'I'm giving a talk in Chicago and I'd like to get to know the city first,' she got down to the nitty-gritty still uninterrupted. 'Mary said that there was no-one better suited to help me than you.'

When he spoke now, his voice sounded more accessible, but she could barely decipher the meaning of his sentences. Americans spoke a different English in each city, each person seemed to have particular habits; she had to learn the language anew with each person she spoke to. She only understood bits and pieces that she worked out for herself somehow.

Of course, now he remembered, Mary had written to him about her, and yes, he could show her a lot of things, everything that she wanted and didn't want to see, things that certainly couldn't be found in a guidebook.

She peered over to her own, which was lying in wait on her desk after having been studied and marked. 'That sounds quite wonderful, thank you for taking the time. Where should I come to?'

Suddenly he proved himself a gentleman. 'Nowhere. I'll pick you up. What hotel are you staying at?'

'Palmer House.' She remembered that there was a café attached to the lobby. 'We can meet at the Little Café.' Actually, it was called Le Petit Café, but she preferred not to confuse him with French.

'Palmer House,' he whistled through his teeth. 'A luxury shack. Seems to me they pay you very well for your talk. I'll be there in half an hour.'

She decided not to respond to his comment. 'That sounds wonderful. I will be carrying a copy of the *Partisan Review* so that you will recognise me.'

Algren must have been more than familiar with the magazine; he had probably had some of his texts published in it. She herself had fallen out with the editors at a party in New York; it had really irked her how they'd shot down Hemingway, Steinbeck and basically all contemporary writers in flames, despised naturalism and clearly wished for the return of classicism. When things got political, she lost her appetite, because of course they hated Stalinism with an intensity that only former Stalinists could. As liberals, they toed the line of the Red Scare blithely spread by the American press so strongly that she had quarrelled with them until everyone in the room had sweat on their brows. The next time they met, still embarrassed, they had outdone each other with pleasantries and kept the conversation focused on more innocuous matters.

Algren snorted, toned it down with a laugh. 'Well, if it suits you. See you then.'

She hung up and got up. The man did indeed seem, as Mary had suggested, to be quite an oddball. It only occurred to her now that to meet a stranger also always meant risking an evening of consummate boredom or pronounced malaise. In spite of this, there was a tingling feeling of anticipation in her guts. Should she get changed? She didn't have much with her, a skirt, a couple of blouses, a pair of ancient trousers; she mostly just wore what she was wearing right now: a woollen dress, the top high-necked in

navy blue with a small stand-up collar, the floor-length skirt in large blue and brown checks. It had been all the rage in Paris and had cost accordingly. The Americans with their short skirts regularly stared at her with their mouths agape in amazement. It was the right outfit for tonight, so she didn't change.

He kept her waiting. Tense, she paced back and forth between the lobby, the bar and the café patio – she must have done it at least four times– kept an eye out both inside and out, although she had no idea what Algren looked like. Then she suddenly heard the words '*Bonsoir, mademoiselle de Beauvoir*' recited like the world's shortest poem. With her back to him she absorbed the shock, put a smile on her face, then turned. Algren stood before her, grinning broadly, a head taller than her, wiry, in a thick jumper with a scuffed leather vest over it.

'In great desperation, I sought out your 'Leetell Café', but I had no idea you thought so little of my French. Shall we sit down?'

A little puzzled, she apologised. 'Oh, I'm sorry, I just wanted to make it easier for you. Yes, with pleasure.'

He escorted her to a table. 'That's all right. In addition to those three words, there are maybe thirty, maybe even three hundred more, but then we've reached the end of the French road, so your kindness was almost appropriate.'

She couldn't quite follow what he was saying, but now at least she could use his expression to help her interpret. His laugh said he was joking, and in case that wasn't enough, he also let his eyes do the talking. He looked confident and a little imposing, but the impression was broken by his unsteady gaze, which flitted left and right behind his round spectacles, as if he needed something to hold on to in this situation.

Algren ordered drinks and she began to talk, telling him about the long, bumpy flight, about New York and dreadfully tedious parties and dinners, the mostly dull night clubs with bad jazz, her impression that American consisted mainly of upwardly mobile gentlemen with no interest in politics; she went from one thing to the next, and wondered why he didn't intervene at any point.

'Well, all in all that sounds pretty good,' he finally said noncommittally and toasted her. Then she knew that he understood her words even less than she did his.

'You were in France during the war?' she asked, giving him what he needed. Now he could talk and gesticulate and wasn't in any hurry to stop; the words flowed out of him like a twelve-bar blues song, and she sometimes even managed to follow.

Her understanding: he hadn't fought, but had been some kind of medic, stationed in the Ardennes for several months following Operation Overlord, then in Marseille, waiting for his discharge from military service, dealing on the black market by day, playing poker for money at night. He avoided the question of where she had been during the occupation of Paris, what she had done during this time, and she was not unhappy about it.

She liked to look at him while he spoke. With his sandy widow's peak and the narrow, gently curved nose, he looked like a cross between Robert Mitchum and Kirk Douglas with a soothing touch of Harold Lloyd. All at once she became aware of the missing tooth that she hadn't had replaced since her bicycle accident. First it had been down to a lack of money, then time, and finally a sense of necessity. Now she tried to hide the gap when she laughed about something she suspected to be one of his jokes.

It was only a small table that separated them, but as the words flowed, they had both moved close to the edge, upper bodies bent forward, forearms resting on the tabletop. Attraction, she thought, was a true word. And she wanted to know more about him.

‘Why did you become a writer?’

‘The dishwashing jobs were all gone.’ He laughed, then turned his glass in his hand for a while and seemed to be weighing something up. ‘You know, people are different, no one is like anyone else, but all are good at fooling the rest of the world. People lie and cheat all the time. That made me unspeakably angry. When I was in my early twenties, that’s when it started. I want to show everyone, every single person who they really are. Do you get that?’

At least she understood enough to answer something appropriate. ‘That is no small ambition. I am dying to read your books, one just came out recently, didn’t it?’

‘The next one will be better, wait for that.’

Was he embarrassed? ‘Why wait when I can read one now?’

The twinkle that had been in the corner of Algren’s eye all along disappeared. ‘So you really want to read it?’

‘Definitely.’

He jumped up, stretched out his arm, hand, index finger. ‘Then wait here.’

Surprised, she watched him disappear into the lobby. The immediacy of his reactions made her like him even more. No, the evening was certainly not going to be boring.

Algren returned a few minutes later and moved his chair a little closer to the table than before as he sat down. ‘I’ve made some calls. The book will be ready for you at reception by noon tomorrow.’

‘Thank you, that’s very kind.’

‘But now: you want to get to know Chicago. What would you like to see? The middle-class jazz places are no better here than they are in New York, I better say that straightaway. It’s too late for the slaughterhouses, the tourists are crazy for them.’

So he had understood some of what she had said. ‘I’m glad you mentioned it, I’m sure I don’t need to hear more of the same. Otherwise, I’d like to put myself completely in your hands.’

He arched his eyebrows and pursed his lips appreciatively. ‘You have courage, Miss, and it will be rewarded.’ He finished his drink and placed a couple of coins on the table. ‘I’ll show you an area that I’m sure you won’t have the opportunity to visit again in a hurry. You can only find the real Chicago if you look at its seamy side. But are you really up for it?’

‘I am ready when you are’ she said, got up and took his arm, which he held out. A mild electric shock jolted up from her hand to her shoulder. His scratchy jumper must have become statically charged.

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