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AFTER THE WAR

Delia lay in bed and listened and studied the French in the racket. Downstairs, Mr Rameau shouted, ‘Hurry up! I’m ready!’ Mrs Rameau pleaded that she had lost her handbag. The small bratty boy they called Tony kicked savagely at the wall, and Ann Marie who five times had said she could not find her good shoes had begun to cry. Mr Rameau announced his movements: he said he was going to the door and then outside to start the car; if they weren’t ready, he said, he would leave without them. He slammed the door and started the car. Mrs Rameau shrieked. Ann Marie sobbed, ‘Tony called me a pig!’ Someone was slapped; bureau drawers were jiggled open and then pushed. There were urgent feet on the stairs. ‘Wait!’ The engine roared, the crying stopped. The stones in the walls of Delia’s small room shook, transmitting accusations. Mrs Rameau screamed – louder and shriller than anyone Delia had ever heard before, like a beast in a cage, a horrible and hopeless anger. Mr Rameau, in the car, shouted a reply, but it came as if from a man raging in a stoppered bottle. There were more door slams – the sound of dropped lumber – and the ratchetings of gears, and with a loosening, liquefying whine the car’s noise trickled away. They had set out for church.

In the silence that followed, a brimming whiteness of cool vapor that soothed her ears, Delia pushed down the sheet and breathed the sunlight that blazed on her bedroom curtains. She had arrived just the night before and was to be with the Rameaus for a month, doing what her mother had called ‘an exchange.’ Later in the summer Ann Marie would join her own family in London. Arriving late at the country cottage, which was near Vence, Delia had dreaded what Ann Marie would think about a stay in London – the semi in Streatham, the outings to the Baths on the Common, the plain meals. She had brought this embarrassment to bed, but she woke up alarmed at their noise and looking forward to Ann Marie’s visit, since that meant the end of her own.

The cottage, Mr Rameau had told her proudly, had no electricity. They carried their water from a well. Their water closet (he had used this English word) was in the garden. He was, incredibly, boasting. In Paris, everything they had was modern. But this was their vacation. ‘We live like gypsies,’ he had said, ‘for one month of the year.’ And with a candle he had shown Delia to her room. He had taken the candle away, and leaving her in the darkness paused only to say that as he did not allow his daughter to use fire he could hardly be expected to let Delia do so.

The Rameaus at church, her thoughts were sweetened by sleep. She dreamed of an unfenced yellow-green field, and grass that hid her. She slept soundly in the empty house. It was not buoyancy, but the deepest submersion in sleep. She was as motionless as if she lay among the pale shells on the ocean floor.

She woke to the boom of the door downstairs swinging against the wall. Then she was summoned. She had no choice but to face them. She reached for her glasses.

‘Some people,’ said Mr Rameau at lunch – he was seated at the far end of the table, but she could feel the pressure of his gaze even here – ‘some people go out to a restaurant on Sunday. A silly superstition – they believe one should not cook food on the Lord’s Day. I am modern in this way, but of course I expect you to eat what you are given, to show your appreciation. Notice how my children eat. I have told them about the war.’

His lips were damp and responsive to the meat he was knifing apart, and for a moment his attention was fixed on this act. He speared a finger of meat and raised it to his mouth and spoke.

‘Madame Rameau asked me whether English people ever go to church. I said I believed they did and that I was surprised when you said you would not go –’

He had a dry white face and a stiff lion-tamer’s mustache. When he put his knife and fork down, and clasped his hands, his wife stopped eating and filled his plate. Madame Rameau’s obedience made Delia fear this man. And Ann Marie, the friend whom she did not yet know, remained silent; her face said that she had no opinion about her father – perhaps she chose not to notice the way he held his knife in his fist. Both mother and daughter were mysteries; Delia had that morning heard them scream, but the screams did not match these silent faces. And Tony: a brat, encouraged because he was a boy, pawing his father’s arm to ask a question.

Now something jarred Delia. The faces searched hers. What was it? She had been asked a question. She listened carefully to remember it.

‘Yes, my parents go to church,’ she said. ‘But I don’t.’

‘My children do as I do.’

‘It is my choice.’

‘Fifteen is rather young for choices.’ He said choices solemnly, as if speaking of a mature vice.

‘Ann Marie is fifteen,’ said Tony, tugging the man’s sleeve. ‘But she is bigger.’

The breasts, thought Delia: Ann Marie had the beginnings of a bust – that was what the boy had meant. Delia had known she was plain, and though her eyes were green and cat-like behind her glasses – she knew this – she had not realized how plain until

she had seen Ann Marie. Delia had grown eight inches in one year and her clothes, depending on when they had been bought, were either too tight or too loose. Her mother had sent her here with shorts and sandals and cotton blouses. These she was wearing now, but they seemed inappropriate to the strange meal of soup and cutlets and oily salad. The Rameaus were in the clothes they had worn to church, and Mr Rameau, drinking wine, seemed to use the gesture of raising his glass as a way of scrutinizing her. Delia tried hard to avoid showing her shock at the food, or staring at them, but she knew what they were thinking: a dull girl, a plain girl, an English girl. She had no religion to interest them, and no small talk – she did not even like to chat in English. In French, she found it impossible to do anything but reply.

'We want you to enjoy yourself,' said Mr Rameau. 'This is a primitive house, or should I say "simple"? Paradise is simple – there is sunshine, swimming, and the food is excellent.'

'Yes,' said Delia, 'the food is excellent.' She wanted to say more – to add something to this. But she was baffled by a pleasantry she knew in advance to be insincere.

'The lettuce is fresh, from our own garden.'

Why didn't Ann Marie say anything?

'Yes. It is very fresh.'

Delia had ceased to be frightened by the memory of those accusatory morning noises. Now she was bored, but thoroughly bored, and it was not a neutral feeling but something like despair.

'Enough.' Mr Rameau emptied his glass of wine and waved away his wife's efforts to pour more. He said that he was going to sleep.

'I have no vacation,' he said to Delia – he had been speaking to her, she realized, for the entire meal: this was her initiation. 'Tomorrow I will be in town and while you are playing I will be working. This is your holiday, not mine.'

In the days that followed, Delia saw that when Ann Marie was away from her father she was happier – she practiced her English and played her Rolling Stones records and they took turns giving each other new hair styles. Every morning a boy called Maurice came to the cottage and delivered to the Rameaus a loaf from his basket. Delia and Ann Marie followed him along the paths through the village and giggled when he glanced back. This was a different Ann Marie from the one at meal times and as with the mother it was Ann Marie's submissiveness that made Delia afraid of Mr Rameau. But her pity for the girl was mingled with disbelief for the reverence the girl showed her father. Ann Marie never spoke of him.

At night, Mr Rameau led the girls upstairs and waited in the hall with his candle until they were in bed. Then he said sharply, ‘Prayers!’ – commanding Ann Marie, reproaching Delia – and carried his light haltingly downstairs. He held the candle in his knife grip, as if cowering from the dark.

One week, two weeks. From the first, Delia had counted the days and it was only for the briefest moments – swimming, following Maurice the breadboy, playing the records – that time passed without her sensing the weight of each second.

After breakfast Mr Rameau always said, ‘I must go. No vacation for me!’ And yet Delia knew, without knowing how she knew, that the man was enjoying himself – perhaps the only person in the cottage who was. One Sunday he swam. He was rough in the water, thrashing his arms, gasping, spouting water from his mouth. Pelts of hair grew on his back and, more sparsely but no less oddly, on his shoulders. He wrestled in the waves with Tony and when he had finished Madame Rameau met him at the water’s edge with a dry towel. Delia had never known anyone she disliked more than this man. Her thoughts were kind toward her own father who had written twice to say how much he missed her. She could not imagine Mr Rameau saying that to Ann Marie.

At lunch one day Tony shoved some food in his mouth and gagged. He turned aside and slowly puked on the carpet. Delia put her fork down and shut her eyes and tasted nausea in her own throat, and when she looked up again she saw that Mr Rameau had not moved. Damp lips, dry face: he was smiling.

‘You are shocked by this little accident,’ he said. ‘But I can tell you the war was much worse than this. This is nothing. You have no idea.’

Only Tony had left the room. He moaned in the parlor. And they finished their meal while Madame Rameau slopped at the vomit with a yellow rag.

‘If you behave today,’ said Mr Rameau on the Friday of her third week – when had they not behaved? – ‘I may have a surprise for you tomorrow.’ He raised a long crooked finger in warning and added, ‘But it is not a certainty.’

Delia cared so little for the man that she immediately forgot what he had said. Nor did Ann Marie mention it. Delia only remembered his promise when, after lunch on Saturday, he took an envelope from his wallet and showed four red tickets.

‘For the circus,’ he said.

Delia looked at Ann Marie, who swallowed in appreciation. Little Tony shouted. Madame Rameau regarded Tony closely and with noticeable effort brought her floating hands together.

Delia felt a nervous thrill, the foretaste of panic from the words she had already begun to practice in her mind. She was aware she would not be asked to say them. She would have to find an opportunity.

She drew a breath and said, ‘Excuse me.’

‘A German circus,’ Mr Rameau was saying. ‘I am told they have performed for the President, and they are at this moment in Nice. They have just come from Arabia where the entire circus was flown to perform for a sheik. They will only be in Nice for four days. We will go tomorrow. Of course, if there is any bad behavior between now and tomorrow you’ll stay home.’

‘Excuse me,’ said Delia again. To steady her hand she clutched her empty glass.

Pouring Delia a glass of water, Mr Rameau continued, ‘I am told there is no circus like it anywhere in the world. It is lavish in all ways. Elephants, tigers, lions –’

‘I won’t go to the circus,’ said Delia. She was at once terrified and ashamed by what she had said. She had intended to be graceful. She had been rude. For the first time this vacation her French had failed her.

Mr Rameau was staring at her.

‘I cannot go to the circus,’ she said.

He pushed at his mustache and said, ‘Well!’

Delia saw that Madame Rameau was rubbing at her mouth with her napkin, as if she wished to remove that part of her face.

Mr Rameau had also seized his napkin. Stiff with fury he snapped the cloth at the crumbs of bread on his shirtfront. ‘So,’ he said, ‘you intend to misbehave?’

‘I don’t understand.’ She knew each word, but they made no pattern of logic. By not going – was that misbehaving?

He faced her. ‘I said that if there was any bad behavior between now and tomorrow you’d stay home.’

‘Oh, no!’ said Delia, and choked. Something pinched her throat, like a spider drawing a web through her windpipe. She gasped and drank some water. She spoke a strangled word, an old woman’s croak, and tears came to her eyes from the effort of it.

At his clean portion of table, Mr Rameau watched her struggle to begin.

‘I don’t go –’ The words came slowly; her throat was clearing, but still the spider clung.

‘Perhaps you would rather discuss this some other time?’

‘I don’t want to discuss it at all,’ she managed. ‘I don’t go to circuses.’

‘There are no circuses in England?’

‘Yes,’ she said. The word was perfect: her throat was open. ‘There are circuses in England. But I haven’t gone since I was very young.’

Mr Rameau said to his wife, ‘She has not gone since she was very young.’ And to Delia, ‘Have you a reason?’

‘I don’t enjoy circuses.’

‘Ah, but you said that you once went! When you were young.’ He smiled, believing he had trapped her. ‘You enjoyed them then?’

‘But I was very young,’ she said, insisting on the importance of the word he had mocked. ‘I did not know anything about them.’

‘The English,’ said Mr Rameau, and again he turned to his wife. ‘Such seriousness of purpose, such dedication. What is there to know about a circus? It exists purely for enjoyment – there is nothing to understand. It is laughter and animals, a little exotic and out of the ordinary. You see how she makes it a problem?’

Mrs Rameau, who had mistaken Delia’s gasping for terror, said, ‘She does not want to go. Why don’t we leave it at that?’

‘Why? Because she has not given a reason.’

The words she had practiced formed in her mind, her whole coherent reason. But it was phrased too pompously for something so simple, and as the man would have no reply for it she knew it would give offense. But she was glad for this chance to challenge him and only wished that her French was better, for each time he replied he seemed to correct by repeating it the pronunciation of what she said.

‘I don’t believe she has a reason, unless being English is the reason. Being English is the reason for so much.’

‘Being French’ – she was safe merely repeating what he had said: his manner had shown her the rules – ‘being French is the reason for so much.’

‘We enjoy circuses. This is a great circus. They have performed for kings and presidents. You might say we are childish, but’ – he passed a finger across his mustache – ‘what of those kings?’ He spoke to his wife. ‘What of those kings, eh?’

Ann Marie took a deep breath, but she said nothing. Tony made pellets of bread. Madame Rameau, Delia could see, wanted her husband to stop this.

Delia said, ‘The animals do tricks. People think they are clever tricks. A tiger jumps through a hoop. An elephant dances. The dogs walk on their back legs –’

‘We are familiar with the tricks,’ said Mr Rameau testily. ‘We have been to circuses.’

‘The circus people are cruel to the animals.’

‘This is totally untrue!’ His hands flew up and Delia thought for a moment that he was about to slap her face.

The violence in his motioning hands spurred her on. ‘They are cruel to them in the way they teach the animals to do tricks.’

‘She knows so much for someone who never goes to circuses,’ said Mr Rameau, and brought his hands down to the table.

‘They use electric shocks. They starve them. They beat them.’ She looked up. Mr Rameau showed no emotion, and now his hands were beneath the table. ‘They bind their legs with wire. They inflict pain on the animals. The animals are so hurt and afraid they do these tricks. They seem clever, but it is fear. They obey because they are afraid.’

Delia thought this would move him, but he had begun again to smile.

‘You are fifteen. You were born in nineteen sixty-two, the same year as Ann Marie.’

‘Yes.’

‘So you don’t know.’

‘I have been told this about the circus by people who do know.’

‘Now I am not speaking about the circus. I am speaking about the war. You are very concerned about the animals –’

She hated this man's face.

'– but have you any idea what the Germans did to us in the war? Perhaps you are right – the animals are mistreated from time to time. But they are not killed. Surely it is worse to be killed or tortured?'

'Some animals are tortured. It is what I said.'

But he was still speaking. 'Of course, one hears how bad it was for the Jews, but listen – I was your age in nineteen forty-two. I remember the Germans. The Jews tell one story – everyone knows this story. Yes, perhaps it was as bad for them as they say. I don't speak for other people – I speak for myself. And I can tell you that we starved. We were beaten. Our legs were tied. And sometimes for days we were left in the dark of our houses, never knowing whether we would live to see the light. It made some people do things they would not normally do, but I learned to respect my parents. I understood how terrible it must have been for them. I obeyed them. They knew more than I did and later I realized how dreadful it was. It was not a circus. It was war.'

He made it an oration, using his hands to help his phrases through the air, and yet Delia felt that for all the anonymity of his blustering he was expressing private thoughts and a particular pain.

Madame Rameau said, 'Please be calm, Jean. You are being very hard on the girl.'

'I am giving this young girl the benefit of my experience.'

Still the woman seemed ashamed, and she winced when he began again.

'I have seen people grovel to German army officers, simply to get a crust of bread. It did not horrify me. It taught me respect, and respect is something you do not know a great deal about, from what you have said. The Jews tell another story, but remember – it was very bad for us. After the war, many people forgot, but I suffered, so I do not forget.'

'It might be better if we did not go to the circus,' said Madame Rameau.

'I don't want to go to the circus,' said Ann Marie.

Tony had already begun to protest. 'I do! I am going!'

'Yes,' said Mr Rameau and struck his son affectionately on the shoulder. 'We will all go to the circus. The tickets are paid for.'

Delia had resolved to say nothing more.

Madame Rameau said, ‘The girl does not have to go, if she would rather stay home with me.’

‘If she wishes to stay at home she may stay. So we have an extra ticket. You will come to the circus with us, my dear.’

‘I am not sure I want to go.’

‘You will go,’ he said promptly. ‘We will all go. It is what our English guest insists upon.’

Madame Rameau reached for Delia but stopped short of touching her. She said, ‘I will leave some soup for you. And a cutlet.’

‘No need for the cutlet,’ said Mr Rameau. ‘She never eats much of what we give her. She will only leave it on her plate.’

‘You won’t be afraid to be here alone?’ Madame Rameau was close to tears.

Mr Rameau answered for Delia. ‘It is the animals who are afraid! You heard what she said. She will not be afraid while we are away. She might be very happy.’

His white face was a hard dull slab when in the flower-scented twilight, and just before taking his family away to the circus, he stood in the doorway and said, ‘No matches. No candles. My advice to you is to eat now while there is some light, and then go to bed. We will not be late. Eight o’clock, nine o’clock. And tomorrow we will tell you what you missed.’

He sounded almost kindly, his warning a gentle consolation. He ended softly, but just as she thought he was going to lean forward to touch her or kiss her he abruptly turned away, making Delia flinch. He drove the car fast to the road.

Delia ate in the mottled half-dark of the back kitchen. She had no appetite in the dim room, and the dimness which rapidly soaked into night made her alert. The church bell in the village signaled eight; the Rameaus did not come back. At nine she grew restive. It was less dark outside with stars and the moon in ragged clouds like a watch crystal. The windows were open, the sound of distant cars moved through the hedges, the trees in the garden – it was a trick of the dark – rattled dry leaves in her room.

She wondered if she were afraid. She started to sing and frightened herself with her clear off-key cry. She toyed with the thought of running away, leaving a vague note behind for Mr Rameau – and she laughed at the thought of his panic: the phone calls,

the police, his helplessness. But she was not young enough or old enough to run. She was satisfied with the stand she had taken against him, but what sustained her was her hatred for him. It was not the circus anymore, not those poor animals, but the man himself who was in his wickedness more important than the animals' suffering. She had not given in. He was the enemy and he was punishing her for challenging him. Those last coy words of his were meant to punish her. She went to the doorway to hear the church bell better.

At midnight she anxiously counted and she was afraid – that their car had been wrecked and the whole family killed; afraid of her hatred for him that had made her forget the circus. It was too late to remain in the doorway, and when Delia withdrew into the house she knew by the darkness and the time how he had calculated his punishment. She saw that his punishment was his own fear. The coward he was would be afraid of the thickened dark of this room. It took her fear away.

So she did not hear the car. She heard their feet on the path, some whispers, the scrape of the heavy door. He was in front; Madame Rameau hurried past him, struck a match to a candle and held the flame up. He was carrying his son.

'Still awake?' he said. His exaggerated kindness was mockery. 'Look, she is waiting for us.'

The candle flame trembled in the woman's trembling hand.

'You'll go next time, won't you?'

Delia was smiling. She wanted him to come close enough in that poor light to see her smile.

He repeated his question, demanding a reply, but he was so loud the child woke and cried out of pure terror, and without warning arched his back in instinctive struggle and tried to get free of the hard arms which held him.