

I

EVERY MAN IS ALONE and no one cares a rap for anyone and our sorrows are a desert island. Yet why should I not seek comfort tonight as the sounds of the street fade away, seek comfort tonight in words? Oh, poor lost creature who sits at his table seeking comfort in words, at his table with the phone off the hook for he fears the outside, and at night with the phone off the hook he feels like a king, safe from the spiteful outside, so soon spiteful, gratuitously spiteful.

What a strange little joy, sad and limping yet sweet as a sin or a drink on the sly. What a joy even so to be writing just now, alone in

my kingdom and far from the swine. Who are the swine? Do not expect me to tell you. I want no trouble with those from outside. I do not want them to come and disturb my would-be peace and prevent me from writing pages by the dozen or the hundred as this heart of mine, my destiny, may dictate. I have resolved to tell all painters they are geniuses; otherwise they bite. And in general I tell everyone that everybody is charming. Such are my daytime manners. But in my nights and my dawns my thoughts are not constrained.

Sumptuous, O my golden pen, roam over the page, roam at random while I yet have some youth; wend your slow, erratic way, hesitant as in a dream, faltering but controlled. Roam on, pen, I love you, my sole consolation; roam through the pages which give me dismal delight and in whose squinting eye I gloomily revel. Yes, words are my homeland, words console and avenge. But words will not bring back my mother. Brimful though they be of the vibrant past drumming at my temples and distilling its fragrance, the words I write will not bring back my dead mother. That subject is banned in the night. Begone, vision of my mother living when I saw her for the last time in France. Begone, maternal wraith.

SUDDENLY, because all is tidy on the table where I write, and because I have a cup of hot coffee and a cigarette just lit and a

lighter that works and a pen that writes well, and because I am by the fire with my cat at my side, I feel a surge of delight so intense that I am moved – moved to pity for myself, pity for that childish capacity for boundless joy which bodes no good, pity for the pleasure I find in a pen that writes well, pity for this poor devil of a heart which would suffer no more and clutch at some reason for loving in order to live. For just a few minutes I bask like a bourgeois in a little oasis of comfort and order. But a sorrow lurks below, unremitting, unforgettable. Yes, it is grand to be bourgeois like them for a while. We love to be what we are not. There is no greater artist than a genuine middle-class lady drooling over a poem or going into a trance and frothing at the mouth at the sight of a Cézanne and pontificating as she jabbers in some jargon she has scrounged here and there with no inkling of what it means and nattering about mass and volume and proclaiming that red is so sensual. Sensual, my foot! I have lost my thread. Well, let's make a little doodle in the margin to conjure up ideas – a consolation doodle, a doleful little doodle, a dawdling doodle to be packed with decisions and plans, a dinky little doodle, a curious isle and a land of the soul, a sad oasis for thoughts that follow its curves, a wee-bit-crazy little doodle, neat, childish, docile, and filial. Hush, do not awaken her, daughters of Jerusalem. Do not awaken her while she sleeps.

“Who sleeps?” inquires my pen. Who but my mother – eternally.

Who but my mother – that is my grief. Do not awaken her, daughters of Jerusalem. Do not awaken my grief that lies buried in the graveyard of a town whose name I may not speak, for that name means my mother deep down in earth. Come, pen, flow free once more, be resolute, sober, and sensible, take up anew your task of enlightenment, steep yourself in willpower and do not make such long commas: that is not a bright idea. Soul, O my pen, be valiant and diligent, leave the dark land, cease to be wild, near-mad and possessed, morbidly stilted. And you, my sole friend, you whom I face in my mirror, hold back your dry sobs and, since you would so dare, tell of your dead mother with a fake heart of bronze, tell of her calmly, pretend to be calm, it may be – who knows? – no more than a habit which can be acquired. Tell of your mother in her serene manner, whistle softly to imagine things are not all that bad, and above all smile – never forget to smile. Smile to cheat in your despair, smile to go on living, smile in your mirror and at people and even at this page. Smile with your bereavement, which pants faster than fear. Smile to make yourself believe nothing matters, smile to make yourself simulate living, smile with the sword of your mother's death hanging over you, smile all your life till you can bear it no more, smile till you die of that perpetual smile.

II

ON FRIDAY AFTERNOON, which for Jews marks the beginning of the holy Sabbath day, she would make herself beautiful. She would put on her solemn black silk dress and such jewels as were left to her. For I was open handed in my lighthearted adolescence and gave banknotes to beggars if they were old and long bearded. And if a friend liked my cigarette case, the gold case was his. In Geneva, when I was a student with wild black locks exalting my head and a heart that was ardent and sometimes crazy though tender, she had sold her finest jewels. She was so proud of them, poor darling; they were essential to her simple dignity as the daughter of notables of

bygone age. How often – and the jeweler always swindled her – had she sold some of her jewels for me, unbeknown to my father, whose sternness, which we feared, fed our complicity. I can see her now, leaving that jeweler's shop in Geneva, so proud of the small large sum she had got for me, happy, heart-stirring in her joy, happy to have sold her cherished ear pendants for me, her rings and her pearls, which were her caste marks, her honor as a lady of the Orient. So happy, my darling, walking with difficulty even then, already dogged by death. So happy to despoil herself for me, to ply me with banknotes which would flame and vanish in but a few days in my nimble young hands, quick to give them away. I took, wild that I was and wreathed in sunlight and not much concerned about my mother, for I had fine dazzling teeth and I was the loved though loving lover of this pretty girl and that fair lass and so on without end, infinite reflections in the mirrors of the castle of love. O curious pallor of my loves long dead! I took the banknotes, and I did not know, for I was a son, that those meager large sums were a sacrifice offered up by my mother on the altar of motherhood. O priestess of the cult of her son, O majesty too long unacknowledged! Too late now.

EVERY SABBATH in Marseilles, where I went from Geneva to spend my leaves, my mother would wait for my father and me to return

from synagogue with myrtle sprigs in our hands. When she had finished adorning her modest flat for the Sabbath, the flat that was her Jewish realm and her piteous homeland, she would sit all alone at the ceremonial Sabbath table, and ceremoniously would she wait for her son and her husband. Sitting perfectly still so as not to rumple her Sabbath best, excited and stiff in her corseted dignity – excited because she was smart and respectable and about to find favor with those she loved, her husband and son, whose momentous tread would soon be heard on the stairs; excited because her hair was well combed and gleaming with age-old sweet-almond oil, for she knew little of the arts of titivation; excited as a little girl at a prize giving – my aging mother would wait for her two aims in life, her son and her husband.

Seated under her altar, a portrait of me at fifteen, a frightful portrait which she thought admirable, seated at the Sabbath table where three candles glowed, at the festive table, first fragment of the realm of the Messiah, my mother sighed contentedly but a trifle wistfully, for soon they would arrive, her two men, the lights of her life. Oh yes, she thought happily, they would find the flat spotless and sumptuous on this Sabbath day, and they would commend her for its sparkling trimness, and they would compliment her on the elegance of her dress. Her son, who never seemed to be looking but whom nothing escaped, would cast a quick glance

at her brand-new lace collar and cuffs and, yes, they would surely receive his all-important approval. And she would be proud beforehand, would prepare in advance what to say to them, perhaps with some guileless exaggeration of the speed and skill of her domestic accomplishments. And they would see what a capable woman she was, what a queen of the household. Such were the ambitions of my mother.

She would sit there, brimming over with love for those near and dear to her, telling them in her mind of all she had cooked and cleaned and tidied. From time to time she would go into the kitchen, and her little hand with its gravely glinting wedding ring would give a few graceful, artistic but quite unnecessary pats with the wooden spoon to the meatballs simmering in garnet-red tomato sauce. She had plump little hands sheathed in smoothest skin, which I would admire with a touch of hypocrisy and a wealth of love, for her naïve pleasure delighted me. She was such an excellent cook, yet so deficient in all other skills. But, once in her kitchen, that spruce old woman was also a fine, resolute captain. My mother's gentle stirring in her kitchen, the caress of spoon on meatballs, O rites, wise, tender and dainty caresses, absurd and ineffectual caresses, caresses so expressive of love and contentment, which showed that her mind was at rest for all was well and the meatballs were perfect and her two men, so hard to please, would

approve them. O shrewd and simple patting that has gone forever, the tapping and patting of my mother smiling faintly all alone in her kitchen, her clumsy and majestic grace: majesty of my mother.

Back from the kitchen she would sit down again, demure in her priestly role as custodian of the home, content with her poor little respectable lot, which was solitude lightened only by the presence of her husband and son, whose servant and guardian she was. This woman, who once had been young and pretty, was a daughter of the Law of Moses, of the moral Law, which meant more to her than God. So there were no love affairs, no Anna Karenina capers. There were a husband and son to be guided and served with humble majesty. She had not married for love. A husband had been found for her and she had meekly accepted. And biblical love had been born, so far removed from my Western passions. The sacred love of my mother had been bred in marriage, grown with the birth of the baby I had been, and bloomed in an alliance forged with her dear husband against the harshness of life. There are whirling sunlit passions. But there is no greater love.

On a Sabbath which now comes to mind, she was sitting there waiting, exuding contentment, for all was in order and her son had looked very well that morning. She was concocting a plan to make him almond paste on Sunday. "I'll let it cook a little longer than last time," she said to herself. And on Monday, yes, on Monday,

she would make him a maize cake with masses of currants. Fine. Suddenly glancing at the clock and seeing that it was already eight, she was seized with panic and showed it too dramatically, for she lacked the self-control which is the property of peoples certain of what tomorrow will bring, who are accustomed to happiness. They had said they would be back at seven. An accident? Run over? Damp-browed, she went to check the time on the clock in the bedroom. Only ten to seven. A smile in the mirror and a murmur of thanks to the God of Abraham, of Isaac, and of Jacob. But as she closed the door of the bedroom her hand brushed the tip of a nail. Tetanus! Quick, the iodine! Jews are a little too fond of life. She was suddenly afraid of dying and thought of the nightdress she had worn on her wedding night and which they put on her again on the day of her death, the awesome nightdress locked up in the bottom drawer of her wardrobe, a terrifying drawer which she never opened. Despite her religion, she had scant faith in everlasting life. But suddenly the joy of living returned, for she had just heard the thrilling tread of her loved ones at the foot of the stairs.

A final glance in the mirror to remove the last traces of the powder which she put on in secret with a strong sense of sin on that festal day, a simple white powder made by Roger et Gallet, which I believe was called Vera Violetta. She ran to open the door, which

was secured by a safety chain, for one never knew and memories of pogroms die hard. Quick, make way for the entry of the two beloved. Such was the love life of my holy mother. Not much like Hollywood, as you can see. The compliments of her husband and son and their happiness were all that she asked of life.

She would open the door before they had time to knock. The father and son were not surprised when the door opened as if by magic. That was always the way, and they knew that their loving watchman kept a constant lookout. Yes, so much so that her gaze, ever probing my health and my worries, sometimes irked me. For some obscure reason I resented the fact that she scrutinized too closely and guessed too much. O holy sentinel lost forever! Standing by the open door, she would smile excitedly, dignified yet almost flirtatious. How clearly I can see her when now I dare to look: how living are the dead! "Welcome," she would say shyly, proper and formal, eager to please, thrilled at being nobly arrayed for the Sabbath. "Welcome. Peace unto you this Sabbath day," she would say. And with her hands uplifted and spread out like sunbeams, she would bestow on me a priestlike blessing. Then she would give me an almost animal look, vigilant as a lioness, to see if I was still in good health, or a human look to see if I was sad or worried. But all was well on that particular day, and she breathed in

the scent of the traditional myrtle we had brought her. She rubbed the sprigs between her little hands and inhaled their scent rather theatrically, as becomes the people of our Oriental tribe. She was so pretty then, my aged Maman who walked with difficulty, my Maman.

III

THE MEMORIES I have just called to mind are of the time when my mother was old and I was an adult disguised as an international official. I would go from Geneva to spend part of my leave in Marseilles with my parents. My mother was happy to see that her son, who had such a grand position with the Gentiles – her own highly exaggerated view of the facts – went with a good grace to the local synagogue on the Sabbath. I can hear her speaking to me.

“Tell me, my son, do you go up to the House of the Lord in Geneva as well? You should, really. You know ours is a great and holy God. He is the true God. He saved us from Pharaoh – it’s a

well-known fact and the Bible says so. Listen, my son, even if you don't believe in our God because of all those clever men – curse them and their figures – go to synagogue once in a while just the same. Do it for me,” she entreated sweetly. Actually, my participation in religious ceremonies even as an atheist was to her mind mainly a kind of insurance against the bronchitis from which I suffered each winter.

“Now, tell me, eyes of mine, this job of yours in their International Labor Office, now, what's it called?” (“Attaché in the Diplomatic Division,” I replied. She beamed.) “That means, I suppose, that customs officials can't touch you? You pass through and they bow. What a wonder of the world! Praise be to God for letting me live to see this day! If your grandfather – bless his memory and may he rest in peace – yes, if your grandfather were alive, how pleased he would be! Because even he, the royal notary of Corfu, revered by all, why, even he had to open his bags at the customs. He was a man of learning; you would have enjoyed talking with him. Anyway, if you like, I'll make you some sesame-seed nougat tomorrow. Build up your strength, my darling, while you're back here with us. God knows what badly washed food they put on your plate in those top-class restaurants in Geneva. Tell me, my child, in Geneva you don't eat the Unmentionable, do you?” (Translation: pork.) “Well, if you do, don't tell me – I don't want to know.”

“And now, my son, mark my words, because old women give good advice. In that Division of the Diplomats you have a chief, I suppose? Well, if he sometimes gets a bit cross, don’t lose your temper, try to put up with it, because if you answer him back, his bile will rush up to his brain and he’ll hate you and God only knows what viper’s tongue he has and what dagger he’ll prepare for your back! Our people have to put up with things – that’s how it is. That hat does suit you.” Seeing my smile, she added with a sigh, “How could the pretty little creatures possibly resist that smile?” Ever partial, she gave me a fond, searching look, imagined my love life, and shuddered to think that I might stop a bullet from the revolver of one of those daughters of the Gentiles who were glamorous and clever but jealous and bold and when they got carried away by passion were in the habit of killing off a mother’s son in a couple of seconds on the slightest pretext. Absolutely deadly, those daughters of Baal, who did not shrink – so she had been told – from stripping naked in front of a man who was not their husband. Stark naked and smoking a cigarette! They were tigresses! “Tell me, my son, would it not be a good idea to pay a little call on the Chief Rabbi? He knows some nice, quiet girls who are wonderful housekeepers. You’ll be under no obligation. Just have a look, and if they don’t take your fancy, you can put on your hat and walk out. But who knows, perhaps God has destined one for you? You know it’s not

good for a man to live by himself. I could die in peace if I knew you had a good woman to look after you.” Faced with my silence, she sighed, strove to repel the vision of a revolver flashing out of the handbag of a half-naked tigress, and decided to trust in the Lord, the Almighty God of Jacob, who had saved the prophet Daniel from the lions’ den. Surely He would save me from the tigresses. She vowed to go to synagogue more often.

She was old by then, short and rather stout. But her eyes were magnificent and her hands were dainty and I loved to kiss those hands. I would like to reread the letter her little hand wrote from Marseilles, but I cannot. I am afraid of those signs which still live. When I come upon her letters I put them away again with my eyes shut. And I dare not look at her photographs, for I know that in them she is thinking of me.

“My son. I haven’t studied like you, but I can tell you that the love they write of in books is nothing but the goings-on of heathens. I say they’re playacting. They only see each other when their hair is nicely done and they’re smartly dressed like in the theater. They adore each other, they cry, they kiss each other on the mouth – it’s sickening – and a year later they get a divorce! So what happened to their love? When marriages start with love it’s a bad sign. Those great lovers in the stories you read, I wonder whether they would go on loving their poetess if she was very ill, always in bed, and if

he – the man that is – had to care for her like you care for a baby – well, you see what I mean: if he had to do everything for her. Well, I believe he would stop loving her. Do you want me to tell you what true love is? It's being used to each other and growing old together. Would you like peas or tomatoes with your meatballs?

“My son, tell me what pleasure you find in going to the mountains. What pleasure is there in watching all those cows with their sharpened horns and great big staring eyes? What pleasure do you see in all those rocks? You might fall, so where's the pleasure? Are you a mule to go climbing up those rocky places which make you giddy? Isn't it better to go to Nice, where there are gardens and music and taxis and shops? Men are meant to live like men and not among rocks and snakes. Those mountains are like a bandit's lair. Are you an Albanian? And how can you like all that snow? What pleasure is there in walking through bicarbonate of soda which wets your boots? My heart trembles like a little bird when I see the skis in your room. Those skis are the devil's horns. Putting yataghans on your feet is madness! Don't you know that all your skiing devils break their legs? They like it, they're heathen and thoughtless. Let them break their legs if they like, but you are a Cohen, a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses, our master.” At that point I reminded her that Moses had gone to the top of Mount Sinai. She was taken aback. That was obviously no

mean precedent. She thought for a while, after which she explained that Mount Sinai wasn't a very big mountain, that Moses had only been there once, and, what was more, he had gone there not for pleasure but to see God.