

DOUGLAS COWIE
NOON
IN PARIS,
EIGHT IN
CHICAGO

myriad **m**[∞]

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Prologue

1981

THE ARTICLE APPEARED a few pages into the culture section. Nelson Algren, American writer, had died. Newly elected to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. On the bedside table stood a photo of the two of them standing in tall dune grass with a background of trees, she in one of the Guatemalan or Mexican dresses, he standing behind, both of them holding the oars to the little dinghy he liked to row around the lagoon in Miller. Next to the photo, a stack of his letters, the most recent of which had arrived in 1965, sixteen years ago. Almost as long as the time she'd known him. She read the article a couple of times and folded the newspaper closed. For twenty minutes or more she sat silently, clasping the newspaper on her lap. The younger Castor – 'Simone,' she heard him say in his nasal Midwest voice – would have cried now. Would have cried until Sartre – also now dead – gave her a large glass of whisky. She stared into the middle distance, not at anything, and looked at the photo. She'd felt old then, until she'd met him. She permitted herself a wry smile.

Later in the afternoon her sister phoned and said she was sorry. Don't be sorry, she replied. Are you not sorry? Hélène asked. She was not. He'd written so many terrible things about her after her memoir, even though it was now years

ago. No, she couldn't feel sorry or apologise. I can live my life without apologies. There's no use apologising or feeling sorry for the dead, anyway. She could feel sad, though, she admitted to herself. She touched the silver ring, turning it once around on her finger, and looked again at the photograph and stack of letters on the bedside table.

Part One

February 1947–January 1949

Chapter One

HE PROBABLY should've thrown out the beef stew a couple of days ago, but it hadn't grown any spores, so he lit the gas underneath it for the seventh dinner running. He shook the match and tossed it in the pail, and rinsed a bowl and spoon, wiping them dry with the flap of his shirt. Snowflakes danced on the gusts that rattled the fogging window. Maybe after he ate he'd go down to the Tug or, if nobody was there, the lockup. Something to do, anyway. He looked at the empty typewriter, the pile of letters behind it. Yeah, the Tug. Why not? No more work getting done tonight.

The stew wasn't hot enough yet, but its farty aroma had begun to fill the room. He placed the needle on the record and Roy Acuff started playing 'The House of the Rising Sun'. The phone rang.

He got it on the third bell. Acuff was asking for glasses to be filled to the brim. Whatever the voice was saying on the other end, it wasn't English she – he? – was gasping down the line. Not even Polish, he knew that much. He told the caller and operator they'd connected the wrong number and set the phone back in the cradle.

The stew started to bubble. Should've bought some bread on the way home from the Y. The phone rang again. Dammit.

He dropped the ladle back into the boiling stew and caught the second ring, Acuff now singing the only thing a rounder needs. More incomprehensible rasping: wrong number again. Back to the pot, a hint of something burning seeping into its scent. But before he could touch the ladle, the phone again. He ran the few paces, picked it up before it could holler again, Acuff telling his brothers to shun the house in New Orleans, and this time he didn't even listen or say anything, but dropped it back into the cradle and listened to the last chords of the song.

Half an hour later it rang again. He was halfway through a second bowl of stew.

An American voice said this is the operator and don't hang up. There's a party on the other end of the line who would like to speak to you. Please hold the line.

He shovelled another chunk of beef into his mouth and waited.

'Hello? Hello. I have obtained your telephone number from our friend.' Same voice as before, but now the woman was speaking more comprehensibly, or at least more slowly.

'Our friend?' he repeated, still chewing.

'It is Mary who has given to me your telephone number.' Mary G., that was it. He'd forgotten. 'I am visiting Chicago. She has said to me that Monsieur Algren knows Chicago.'

He looked at the fogged window, and the snow. 'I suppose Mary doesn't lie.'

'*Pardon?* I am sorry?'

'Never mind.'

He listened to the crackle of the line and wondered if the operator was having fun listening in.

'Perhaps you would like to come and meet me?'

'What – now?'

‘Yes, when you have some free time. Or tomorrow?’

‘No time like the present.’

‘I am sorry?’

‘I could meet you in half an hour or so.’

‘*Bon.* Yes, good. I am in Palmer House; I can meet you there, in the Little Café.’

He finished the stew and put the bowl and spoon in the sink. Palmer House. Fancy lady. Damned if he knew what the Little Café – Leetle Café, she’d pronounced it – was, though. Mary’s letter was in the pile next to the typewriter and he found it and reread it. Yes, she’d mentioned this Frenchwoman. Simone. A writer of some kind. Was Mary G. pimping? Him or her? Didn’t matter. He’d go find this Leetle Café and meet the frog. Something different from the Tug or watching the parade of addicts and thieves at the clink. Why not? He took his overcoat from the hook on the door.

There wasn’t much activity in the opulent and overlit Palmer House lobby, but at one end, past the concierge desk, the clusters of chairs standing on ornate carpets, past the lobby bar, was the entrance to Le Petit Café. He was still laughing as he pushed through the revolving door. There was not speaking French and there was not speaking French, but even at the lowest estimate there were chances with translation she could’ve probably taken. A few tables were occupied but only one of them by a woman on her own.

So this must be him, the blondish hair, grey wool overcoat – this must be Monsieur Algren. She lifted her hand and forearm in a tentative wave, and he caught it, nodded, his smile showing a couple of teeth, and strode to her table. She reached out her hand to shake as he dropped into the chair opposite. He wasn’t like the New York people, she could already see that; Mary G. hadn’t been wrong. They shook

hands and now he was taking off his coat, and already talking, but her English couldn't stretch to his rapid speech and Chicago accent. She nodded and tried to smile and pick out at least some of the words. His shirt was plaid and his wool trousers were held up with leather braces – pants, suspenders; she mentally Americanised her English. It made him look a little ridiculous, or anyway, different from the other men in the bar of the Palmer House. She interrupted him to excuse herself to go to the ladies' room. She didn't really need to, but couldn't think of another way to make him quiet.

Maybe I should shut up for a while, he thought as he watched her bustle out. Not even sure what I've been rattling at her, anyway. She was short, wearing a navy blue dress, her hair piled in an elaborate twist of a bun on the top of her head. Her fingernails were painted purple; he'd noticed that as they shook hands. A bow-tied waiter came over and he ordered two bourbons and a glass of ice. She hadn't come back when the waiter returned with the drinks. Be an expensive evening, in hourly rate terms, if she stays away, he thought.

But she returned. They each put a single ice cube in their drink, and she said *à votre santé* and he said *skål* and then he said something about Marseille and the war and she nodded but once again struggled to understand another word of what followed. She tried, but his pace was a sprint, and Marseille and war made her think of Paris during those years, and how they'd lived. But no – she watched his mouth as he talked, watched his blue eyes behind his round glasses, watched his arm wave the tumbler with its single ice cube bouncing against the side – no, Mary had made a good judgement: he wasn't like the New York people.

She told him, when he finally closed his mouth, or at least paused long enough to take a drink, that she'd been

in New York City since the end of January. She was giving lectures, and discovering American culture. She didn't notice him roll his eyes at that. But her hosts out in New York, they wouldn't take her to see what she wanted to see. There were places they told her weren't safe, and there were places they called slumming it, where, they told her, it was unfashionable or uncomfortable for them to go. So she had to go to those places on her own; she'd walked the Manhattan grid alone and eaten in drugstores and drunk whisky in dark and filthy bars. She'd told Mary she'd die of boredom in Chicago if it were to be more of the same: fancy dinners in fashionable restaurants, but only uncovering the real city on her own. She put down her empty glass and signalled the waiter for another round.

'I want to see the real city of Chicago,' she told him. 'Not just hotels with thick tablecloths.'

He knocked on the tabletop. 'The Leetle Café of the Palmer House seems real enough.'

She didn't get the joke. The waiter arrived with their drinks. *Santé; skål.*

'Why do you say *skål*?' she asked.

'My people are Swedish, on my father's side.'

She nodded. 'Mary said you know the neighbourhoods where the real people live.'

'Okay.' He drank his bourbon in one. 'Go get your coat and I'll take you someplace real.' She smiled.

She hadn't noticed the sneer in the way he said 'real'. He wasn't trying to condescend, he thought as he watched her cross the bar to the revolving door, but still. Whoever this lady was, she didn't know what she meant when she said real. Mary'd sent him a doozy all right. It'd be the Tug and the lockup after all tonight.