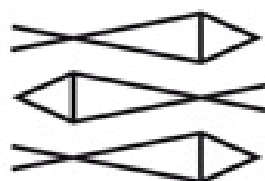


THE SEASON OF MIGRATION

NELLIE HERMANN







*The Season
of Migration*

NELLIE HERMANN

Farrar, Straus and Giroux

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For M. H. and for “entirely different” idlers everywhere

Though I fall ninety-nine times, the hundredth time I shall stand.

—Vincent van Gogh, November 19, 1888

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Prologue

September 3, 18

Petit Wasmes, the Borinage mining district, Belgium

Dear Theo,

It was quite a long time ago that we saw each other or wrote to each other as we used to. All the same, it's better that we feel something for each other rather than behave like corpses toward each other, so I am putting my hand to paper to reach out to you.

It's mainly to tell you that I'm grateful for your visit that I'm writing to you. The hours we spent together those weeks ago have at least assured us that we're both still in the land of the living. When I saw you again and took a walk with you, I felt more cheerful and alive than I have for a long time because in spite of myself life has gradually become or has seemed much less precious to me, much more unimportant and indifferent. When one lives with others and is bound by a feeling of affection one is aware that one has a reason for being, that one might not be entirely worthless and superfluous but perhaps good for one thing or another. It has been a quite a while since I have felt this way. A prisoner who is kept in isolation, who is prevented from working, would in the long run suffer the consequences just as surely as one who went hungry for too long. Like everyone else, I have need of relationships of friendship or affection or trusting companionship, and am not like a street pump or lamppost, whether of stone or iron.

Since my dismissal as lay preacher in July, yes, you are right, I have been waiting for something and I don't know what. You call this *idling*; I do not. You say I am not the same any longer; I say perhaps, but what man is? This time I am trying to do things right.

I have been wandering through mining country, a man in exile, a castaway, a snake wriggling out of its skin. I move between my room in Cuesmes at the evangelist Frank's house—with a bed and desk and a worn carpet on the floor—and the room where I write from now, the abandoned salon in Petit Wasmes, a few miles away, where the floor is dirty and the few chairs are strewn across the space. I prefer the salon to the furnished room; it suits me better, and I appreciate the notion that no one can see me. I walk the landscape, I sit by the mine, in the cemetery, in the open fields covered with soot, unaware of the time, guiding myself only by the movement of the sun. I carry stacks of paper and occasionally sketch on my knees, quick strokes of what I see. Often, after I have done so, I tear up the paper and let the wind carry the strips away.

Yes, this is what I have been doing, Theo, but it is not idling. I have been trying to be patient, to be calm, to make no sudden moves. I am trying to do things right this time, to listen, to hear, to see. Great forces are shifting in me; I must let them take their time. I have been riding the waves of these forces as if I were in the ocean: some nights, they cast me to the floor, where I weep into the darkness; other nights, they are calm, and I feel I can see the land ahead.

As I think back on your visit with thankfulness, our talks naturally come to mind. I've heard such talks before, many, in fact, and often. You said, "Do you not wish for improvement in your life? Plans for improvement and change and raising the spirits—don't let it anger you, but I'm a little afraid of them, because I have acted upon them before and ended up rather disappointed. How much the past has been well thought out that is, however, impracticable!

Improvement in my life—should I not desire it or should I not be in need of improvement? I really want to improve. But it's precisely because I yearn for it that I'm afraid of remedies that are worse than the disease. Can you blame a sick person if he looks the doctor straight in the eye and prefers not to be treated wrongly or by a quack?

And if you should now assume from what I've said that I intended to say that you were a quack because of your advice then you will have completely misunderstood me, since I have no such idea or opinion of you. If, on the other hand, you think that I would do well to take your advice literally and become a lithographer of invoice headings and visiting cards, or a bookkeeper or carpenter's apprentice, you would also be mistaken. Supposing it were possible for us to assume the guise of a baker or a hair-cutter or librarian with lightning speed, it would still be a foolish answer, rather like the way the man acted who, when accused of heartlessness because he was sitting on a donkey, immediately dismounted and continued on his way with the donkey on his shoulders.

But, you say, I'm not giving you this advice for you to follow to the letter, but because I thought you had a taste for idling and because I was of the opinion that you should put an end to it.

Might I be allowed to point out to you that such idling is really a rather strange sort of idling? It's rather difficult for me to defend myself on this score, but I will be sorry if you can't eventually see this in a different light. Idling? The word makes me crazy; I wish it were a tangible thing so I could light it on fire.

I went to visit our parents after you left here, just as you suggested I do. They were surprised to see me, Pa answering the door in his suit, Ma standing behind him in her apron, as if they were expecting a visit from a holy angel. I was a disappointment, as usual. It was oppressive to be there, everything in that house reminding me of earlier times, when we were brothers in all the senses of the word, and I kept thinking of you turning your back on me to get on the train to Paris. I left there after only a few days. Our parents handed me an envelope containing money, and they said it was from you, though there was no note. I have not touched the money—it sits in the desk in my room in Cuesmes—but I wonder about it. After a visit like we had, what could you mean by such a gift, and without so much as an acknowledgment of what has passed between us?

If I must seriously feel that I'm annoying or burdensome to you or those at home, useful for neither one thing nor another, and were to go on being forced to feel like an intruder or a fifth wheel in your presence, so that it would be better if I weren't there—if I think that indeed it will be so and cannot be otherwise, then I'm overcome by a feeling of sorrow and I must struggle against despair. It's difficult for me to bear these thoughts and more difficult still to bear the thought that so much discord, misery and sorrow, in our midst and in our family, has been caused by me.

If it were indeed so, then I'd truly wish that it be granted me not to have to go on living too long. Yet whenever this depresses me beyond measure, after a long time the thought also occurs to me: it's perhaps only a bad, terrible dream, and later we'll perhaps learn to understand and comprehend it better. But is it not, after all, reality, and won't it one day become better rather than worse? Sometimes in winter it's so bitterly cold that one says, it's simply too cold, what do I care whether summer comes, the bad outweighs the good. But whether we like it or not, an end finally comes to the hard frost, and one fine morning the wind has turned and we have a thaw. Comparing the natural state

of the weather with our state of mind and our circumstances, subject to variableness and change, I still
have some hope that it can improve.

There is so much that you don't know. This may be what hurts me most. It takes a person to
explain, but it takes another person to hear the explanation. If I have changed, it is because of what
I have been through here, and you make no effort to understand what that has been. In all the hours that
we spent together, how could you not have asked me about this place? How could you not have asked
for the story of what might have changed me?

I want to tell you the story of what I have been through here. I am tired already of the silence, but
you are not here to talk to, so I pick up my pen. It will take me a long time to tell you, and I am not
sure if I will be able to tell all of it properly, or if I will ever actually send this letter or any other
to you again, but tonight I am calling out: Theo! I am here! I am your brother, always, and despite how
you have hurt me, I want to reach you.

I feel a sun beginning to burn in my hands—something is growing in me that I must coax and
tame.

Your loving brother
Vince

PART I

1880

May 12, 12:00 p.

He walks. Cold water is pouring from the sky, and he tries to hear the rain falling around him, on him, trickling off the brim of his hat, over his eyes, through the hair of his beard, over his lips. He listens for each drop of water cascading against his skin, into the streams along the side of the road onto the crows sitting on the thin, bare branches of the trees. The knapsack that he carries is thin canvas, but it must be soaked through. He thinks of the letters tucked inside, tied together with a length of twine, and imagines the words on them turning to water and washing away. He knows he should worry about this, but he cannot muster the strength.

What is the sound of the rain? It is too overwhelming to be a symphony; it is a whoosh, a swallowing, a leviathan with open mouth and lifted tongue. He is inside the cold body of a devil made of water.

His hands are growing numb. He touches the sprig of ivy that he keeps in his pocket, and its contours are blurry to his fingers. They cannot see it, he thinks, his fingers are growing blind with cold. The shape of the ivy emerges in his mind; he sees it rise behind his closed eyes, but his fingers fumble against it clumsily. My mind is not yet numb, he thinks vaguely, and trudges on.

He is going to Paris to see his brother Theo. Theo, at long last, Theo who abandoned him, whom he hasn't heard from in nine months, since Theo visited him in August. Is that right? Is that where he is going? Suddenly he is confused. His feet are carrying him somewhere, but his mind does not know where. Who will be there at the end of this road; who will greet him when he arrives at his destination? Theo, Father, Angeline? He sees his father's top hat, resting on the table inside the parsonage door; Angeline's delicate hand, her long, slender fingers topped by nails blunted and dirtied by too many shifts in the mine.

He is walking through the rain; he will walk on until it stops. This is all he knows. He is somewhere near the border of France; he knows this because for a long time he was walking along the train tracks. Did he reach France today? Was that yesterday? He is walking. His life is collected in his footsteps; there is no past or future, only one step and then the next. He feels as if he has been walking on this road his whole life. The water has reached his feet through his boots; he wears a suit of ice water under his clothes.

He fights the temptation to lie down in the road. He walks on, a man made of water.

* * *

He wakes up in a bale of hay. A blanket that smells like a horse is pulled up to his chin. When he opens his eyes, he is first aware of the warmth. His body is shining heat; the center of him is a sun.

He looks around him: He is lying on a hay bale in the corner of a barn. A floor strewn with hay

sun is setting—a line of deep pink on the horizon. He looks around him with amazement: How the most ordinary things can be transformed by the whim of nature! The saddles and horseshoes that hang by the window have been softened and look like disembodied shapes, strange sculptures with no earthly purpose. He hears the beast breathing again behind the stall door.

What can he do to express his gratitude? He has nothing. In the pocket of his damp coat, which is draped on the bale that held the food, he finds a piece of paper still sodden with rain. He sits back on the hay bale and, lightly touching the paper with his pen so as not to tear it, he draws a quick sketch of the window, the saddles and the horseshoes surrounding it. It is an image, he thinks, of how man speaks to nature: how man has gone out to meet the world, how man has conspired to keep the world at bay. With quick, light strokes he sketches the outlines of what he sees, barely looking down at the page.

But when he finishes and inspects the drawing, he feels dismay that he has not captured it. Everything is flat to him, the window merely a square with six smaller squares within, the saddles and horseshoes simply abstract shapes with strange smudges of black. In his rendering there is no relationship between the objects, as he wanted. They are not in conversation; they are only sharing space—window in center, horseshoes on right, saddle on left. He looks from the drawing to the wall before him and then back again: He has been faithful to what he sees; he has even tried to capture the waning light on the leather of the saddle, the angle of fading sun on the edge of the horseshoe. Why doesn't it please him?

He is embarrassed by the drawing's crudeness, but it is all he has to give. Perhaps the man will see something in it that he cannot see; he hopes that it might be enough for the man to remember him with something other than the effort he has cost him.

On the paper, beneath the sketch, he writes, *Thank you for your hospitality and generosity. It was more than I deserve. Vincent van Gogh.*

* * *

His name is Vincent Wilhem, but he is not the first. His brother, who had his name, was born dead on the same day that, one year later, the second Vincent was born alive.

His parents heralded the second Vincent's arrival as a miracle—or so they were sure to tell him every year on his birthday, though he was never quite sure that he believed them. He was Vincent Wilhem, that was all—not the same one who died, but then again, who could be sure? Perhaps he was the same; perhaps the Vincent Wilhem who died was the Vincent Wilhem who lived; perhaps there were never two of them. His birthday was a death day, a time to celebrate a life and death that were, like death, understood from the earliest age, in many ways the same.

It is built into the very foundation of him: a wonder, a sensation he can never shake, the vague but sometimes nearly positive sense that he is already dead. He is a ghost in a human's skin. There are days that it feels like only a part of him has died, while the rest of him went on to live; other days it feels like all of him has died, and then a different him was born. And some days it feels like there has only been death, death, and always death, with no life to follow.

Every Sunday until he was almost ten years old, he went to the cemetery to look at the grave with his name on it. The whole family—his parents, Theo, Anna, Elisabeth, Wil, and he—would put on their worn black clothes and make their way out the rectory and around the back in a mournful group to the cemetery, where, if it was warm enough for her to clip them from her garden, his mother would stop at the creaking iron gate and hand each of them a small cluster of flowers.

Every Sunday, he'd hear his mother crying at the grave of Vincent Wilhem, and he'd hold back the

impulse to cry out to her, “Mama! I’m here!” His mother knelt by the foot of the grave, her skin growing even darker by the knees, and she clasped her hands before her and closed her eyes, her shoulders shaking with sobs that never failed to come. The five children stood behind her, their father next to them but with his mind in a far-off place. Only once, Vincent had cried out to her, and his father had put a large hand firmly on his shoulder. “It is not advisable,” his father said simply, “to disturb a mother’s grief.”

The tiny little gravestone spoke Vincent’s name, and the words of Luke 18, “Suffer little children to come unto me, and forbid them not: for such is the kingdom of God.” It was a quote that his father did not preach on but that they all knew by heart, a warning from a far-off place that had the power, sometimes, to make Vincent feel as if there were a hand tightening around his throat. He went over the page where the quote resided in his own copy of the Great Book so many times that he could picture the entire paragraph in his mind, but he was always perplexed by the meaning. Did Jesus really want tiny children dead when they came to Him? Vincent pictured a kingdom of tiny dead children, babies dressed in colorful nightdresses, tiny hands stuck in perfect tiny mouths, while groups of perfectly clean and proper older children in neckties and dresses lay together on clouds, all of them languishing under the golden throne of God, and he wondered if he should desire to join them. If this was the kingdom of God, a land of dead and frolicking children, what kind of kingdom was the one where his feet were presently standing, the low branches of the willow tree bending over his head?

Who was this Vincent Wilhem whom his mother cried for, and who hushed his father as he stood behind her, his large hand placed gently on her back and his head bowed? Vincent imagined himself as a dead baby, caressed by a silken bassinet in the Kingdom of God, bathed in the light of his parents’ perfect and everlasting and unshakable love. Was his mother crying for what was dead, or for what was alive? Could there even be such a separation? He never knew.

He was always happy when they left for home, so close but so far that it seemed an apparition. When they finally turned from the grave, it was like a curtain was being drawn over something he truly did not want to see.

How could a person who never lived have so much power? Vincent wondered, lying on his back in bed at night after a scolding, Theo sleeping soundly next to him under the checkered quilt. He imagined the look on his father’s face when he shook his fist at him. There was a moment, he was sure, when his father ceased to see him—it was a clearing in his eyes, a sharpening—when his eyes would harden to a tiny pinpoint and he was no longer seeing him as he stood before him, but the ghost of him as he lay under the ground.

His father never said so; if he thought of Vincent’s dead brother when he looked at him, he did not say. His mother, however, would frequently conjure the dead Vincent when she was upset with him, holding fast to his arm and reminding him of who the dead baby would have been: The first Vincent would have been obedient, and quiet, and ever-loving, and why not the second? How could he be so full of hate when the Vincent before him would have been so full of love? Always, then, she would repent. Almost as soon as the words had left her mouth, she would pull the living Vincent close, holding him fiercely, apologizing, insisting that she loved him and that he was special, so special, and that he was all that mattered to her. “You’re mine, you’re mine,” she would say, and rock him back and forth. At times she held him so close that he was afraid she’d break a bone.

Did he provoke his parents so he could make them see him? It is possible. Often it seems to him that his whole life has been an attempt to find someone who can see him, his blood and veins and his beating heart, the recesses of his bowels and the aching of his groin, all of him so terribly alive, so terribly unseen.

It reached a point where he was sure that he hated his dead brother, Vincent. He walked by the cemetery every day and felt that little grave calling to him; he squeezed his eyes shut and looked the other way. He loathed that grave, that stone, that body lying there, that life that had cursed him before he could even speak. Such confusion at that grave on those gray Sundays, standing on that damp cemetery ground beneath that willow tree! He loved his brother; he hated him; he was not his brother; they were one and the same. Baby Vincent was alive, he was dead—no, it was the other way around—Vincent Wilhem was alive and blessed, the baby was blessed and dead. He pictured the baby, his tiny body tucked in a box somewhere below their feet, his miniature hands permanently and for all eternity crossed in a perfect prayer, perfectly pious in death.

* * *

It is nearly dark now, a band of shrinking light on the horizon. His thin coat is still damp, and he thinks it might make him warmer to take it off altogether. Instead, he pulls it tighter around him and blows into his hands. It wasn't advisable (he hears his father's voice say the word) to leave the farmer's barn just as it was getting dark. But he couldn't face the man's kindness again. Eventually he would have had to answer for himself. And what sort of answer could he give? He knows how he looks, a mirage appearing on the horizon in rags and with darkened face, a shuffling shape moving slowly, inadequately dressed, improbably thin, across a stark landscape. He knows how he looks, how he seems; it is what people have been telling him his whole life.

He walks on, beginning to feel hungry again. He shouldn't have eaten that stew; it is when he doesn't eat that he feels the least hunger.

His knapsack over his shoulder, he moves down the road, trying to hear the sound of his footsteps over the voices in his mind. *Who are you where are you going how did you get here. You are not the same any longer.*

1879

September 8, 7:00 p.
Petit Wasmes, the Borinage

Dear Theo,

I am having trouble writing to you. My thoughts are loud but disorderly; I write through a cloud of sadness and fury. *You are not the same any longer*, I keep hearing your voice say, and then a thousand other words jump in. I approach the desk with my pen and paper again and again, tearing up and starting to start to this letter.

When we last saw each other—that is, before your recent August visit—it was soon before I left Brussels for the Borinage; I expect you remember how excited I was, after all that failed study in Amsterdam and useless training in Brussels, to finally be on my way to mining country. It was December 18, just nine months ago, when I finally arrived by train from the capital, the fare paid with the last money Father had given me when we parted the week before. For most of the ride, the view from my window was of a long procession of fields and peasant cottages, the sky over all of them gray and uniform. I sat back in my seat and let the scenery soothe me, trying to let my eyes lose focus. Remember I told you about this technique for seeing when we were boys in Zundert? It is a way to become aware of the grandness and the breadth of the scenery; when I relax my eyes this way, the landscape grows and I can see all corners of whatever is before me—I can pay attention to the general sweep of where I am rather than to the specific details. It calms me, to pull back this way, allowing me to feel as if I am not myself but simply a pair of eyes, free to see things as they really are.

I was having trouble remaining calm. For days before I left Brussels I barely slept, waking nearly every hour with a knot in my gut, the feeling that I was late for something. It was a feeling not unlike how I felt as a child on the days leading up to Christmas, but with a heavier weight to it, not pure anticipation, but anticipation tinged with fear. It was the trip I had been waiting for, it felt like for my whole life, and here I was finally on the train, the distance shrinking between me and mining country.

The train car was paneled with dark wood, the air thick with cigar smoke coming from a gentleman across the aisle. It had the feel of someone's living room, warm and close, and was somehow pleasant despite being packed with people facing forward, many of them nodding off or chatting with the person next to them. From where I sat I could see the peaks of hats over the seats in front of me, round shapes and summits of felt and feathers sticking up over the lines of the chair backs. The winter sun streamed in through the windows; a few people had propped their coats against the glass to keep off the glare, but where the rays streamed in, I could see the cigar smoke rising through the light in slow, twisting waves. I remembered afternoons in the front room at the parsonage, watching specks of dust float up and travel through the angles of the setting sun, trying to trace the lines they made to make shapes and pictures. It was hot on the train, though the window was cold to the touch. I had stripped

down to my shirtsleeves.

I relaxed my eyes and saw the expanse of the country we were passing through. Two figures walked across a long field, one figure taller than the other, both of them in long black coats, tiny houses in the background on either side of them. I imagined that those two figures were the two of us and then I thought of you treading the floors of the Goupil gallery in Paris, that place where I was no longer wanted. I saw you, your mustache freshly combed, your shoes polished and gleaming, smiling while you shook hands with a woman in a long dark dress, the familiar images surrounding you and the gilded frames on the walls. It was a strange feeling, but in that moment I told myself we were both doing what we were meant to do.

The entry to mining country was marked by black pyramids of earth on the horizon and a layer of thick dark coal smoke that covered the light of the sky. The pyramids were perfectly shaped, clearly man-made, bringing to my mind the image of Egypt as we saw it in picture books as boys, yet even from a distance I could tell that these pyramids were less solid than stone. I turned to the man next to me, who had been silent since we pulled away from Brussels. “Black Egypt,” I said. This was the phrase that came to mind.

The man turned his watery eyes to me. He was brawny, tough and leathery, wearing a thick coat that could have been made from burlap and which must have been uncomfortably hot.

He grunted in approval. “Got that right.”

“What are the pyramids made of?” I asked him.

The man looked at me with surprise. “Coal slag,” he said, and then: “I suppose you’ve not been here before.”

I shook my head. I told him I was to be the new lay preacher in the Wasmes area, feeling a surge of excitement and doubt. I couldn’t believe it, Theo, it seemed so surreal—after a year of failed study for the theological degree in Amsterdam and then sitting through those dreaded, useless evangelical training sessions in that school in Brussels, wondering desperately why I needed to know Greek in order to bring the Gospel to those who needed it most, there I was! At long last, on my way to a new land, equipped with nothing but my two hands and the book in my knapsack. I felt that I was on a path I had chosen, despite the maneuvering Father had to do to get me there; this might sound silly to you but I was so much happier on that train than I ever had been traveling back to work at Goupil’s.

The man, though, made a noise like a snort in response to my statement, the sound someone makes when they don’t believe a word you’ve said, or when they want to laugh but don’t want anyone to hear. I looked at him to discover what he meant.

“Forgive me,” the man said. “I’ve lived in this place a long, long time.”

I got off the train in Wasmes and watched it pull away, curve round the track, and disappear. As soon as it was gone, a boy in a dark cap, tall boots, and tweed trousers and jacket stepped out onto the track with a shovel and began to tamp down the dirt that the train had displaced. I was the only person to disembark, and when the train was gone, the boy and I were the only people in the station. I pulled my coat tight around me; it was colder than it had been in Brussels.

I asked the boy on the tracks how I should get to Petit Wasmes, and the boy pointed in the direction of the only slag pyramid that could be seen from there, great and towering and black. His breath came out of him in short white clouds. “Follow the coal,” he said. I left him there with his shovel, wondering how many times a day the boy performed this labor, smoothing out the tracks for the next train to come through and deposit its one passenger. Noble, thankless work, to be sure.

I think I told you some about Wasmes, where the train let me off, when you were here, but I don’t think you were listening. I will tell you again: Wasmes is made up of a few streets of redbrick

buildings streaked with dirt, cobblestones, a church, a meeting house, a prison with crumbling brick. It is the home of the mine administration, the foremen and managers, so close to the miners but world away. The miners live in villages at the bottom of a long hill down from Wasmes, and they rarely make the climb up to the town. As I walked through Wasmes that first time, I noticed the strange vacancy of everything—only a few people crossed the streets and no one noticed me, the curtains were pulled in most windows, and flowers crumbled in hanging window boxes. The haze of coal smoke made it seem as if night were falling; the black was so thick, I felt I could take hold of it with my hand and pull free a piece. What light there was came through the thick black in slices as if through arrows, and I thought of Heaven, of all things that cannot be understood, hidden from mortals behind a cover of impenetrable smoke.

My knapsack over my shoulder, I made my way to the house of one Jean-Baptiste Denis. The regional evangelical committee, on which sat Pastor Pieterszen, whom I had gotten to know in Brussels, had secured me lodging in the Denis home—perhaps Father told you this? Jean-Baptiste Denis is a baker, and one of the most fortunate men in the congregation of Petit Wasmes. His house is the only brick building in town, and sits at the crest of the hill leading down into the mining village.

At the house, Madame Denis was waiting outside for me, in a scarf and knitted wool hat, dusting soot out of the door frame. When she saw me, she clapped her hands and exclaimed, “Monsieur Vincent! You are here!” I was stunned at her warmth, never having received such a greeting from my mother and father, or perhaps anyone else ever before. Madame Denis is a large woman with glowing red cheeks, and her brown dress under her apron was marked by a purple flowered print. I wanted to fall right into her arms, but I restrained myself, giving her a tip of my hat instead. “You must be Madame Denis.”

She curtsied and replied, “So I must!” sweeping her arm across her body and smiling. “Welcome! We have been looking forward to your arrival. How were your travels? Did you come too terribly far?”

I assured her the trip was just fine but that I was relieved to have arrived. “Well, we’re relieved you’re here, too!” she declared, and with a gesture of her arm invited me into the house. “Come on in,” she said. “Welcome to your new home!”

Inside the house the air was warm and thick with the smell of baking bread, a most welcome and delicious smell. Madame Denis removed her scarf and hat and hung them on a peg by the door; then she led me through the large kitchen-bakery, lined with wooden shelves packed with jars of all sizes, all touched with a fine film of flour and containing all number of ingredients. I glimpsed a stack of wooden mixing bowls piled high in the sink, a hook with a handful of different-colored aprons by the door, and a fire burning in the hearth on the other side of the room. Outside the kitchen, we went through a hallway and climbed a short set of stairs to a room that she declared was mine, a small space under the eaves with a drastically slanted ceiling. I entered the room so timidly, I was almost on my toes; I could not have imagined anything more suitable. It reminded me immediately of the room where our sisters used to sleep in the house in Zundert, their neatly made beds under the slanted ceiling, and I thought of the giggles we used to hear coming from there at night when we lay in our bed, do you remember? In the room at the Denis house that was to be mine, there were also two beds pushed into either corner of the room, which had no door, only the stairs leading back down to the kitchen. Small wooden tables sat next to each bed, and wooden chests at the base of each bed. Against the wall there was a handsome chest of drawers. The wallpaper that lined the walls was a floral pattern, but it was tasteful and not oppressive.

“I hope it’s all right,” said Madame Denis, behind me, watching me take in the room. “You will be

sharing this room with our son Alard. That's his bed there"—she gestured to the bed in the far corner neatly made. "He is eight, and he's a good boy. Very quiet and thoughtful, he's the wisest man in the house." She smiled and winked at me. "Or perhaps he was, now that you are here." She added, "It will be no trouble to you, I am sure, none at all."

Alard's bed had a blue bedspread pulled across it, quilted in panels of differing shades—the bed that was to be mine had one in red of the same pattern. Everything was so neat and tidy, so perfectly presentable, I could suddenly feel the dust on my clothes from the long journey, and thought I would so sully the bed if I were to lie on it. "Of course that is fine," I told her. "I look forward to meeting him."

"Yes," she said, "he is out playing now with some friends, I think—I have trouble keeping track of where they go." She leaned against the door frame, watching me put my suitcase down next to the bed—I wanted to put it on top but feared that the valise would make a mark on the spread. "Most of the boys his age," she began, and then seemed to hesitate. She looked at me, as if surprised—she had started her statement too soon and now wished she could take it back. "Well," she said, looking down, wiping her hands on her apron, as if that were to be her last word on the subject. Then she must have decided to continue. "Most of them have started to go down into the mines to work. Alard doesn't have to because his father is not a miner, but it means he has a lot more time to himself these days."

I was silent, watching her, wondering if she would say more. For a moment she seemed strained, unsure what to say next, and then she recovered. She smiled at me again. "But that's enough talk for now," she said. "I'm sure you must be tired from your journey. Why don't you settle in and have a rest before supper, which will be in just a couple of hours. The bathroom is just next door, and you should feel free to use anything you see. This is your home now."

She turned to go, and I felt a flash of panic to be in that room alone. Of course I should bathe, have a rest, be presentable for supper, but I was too restless. The thought of lying in that bed with the red quilt in my present frenzy of excitement was unthinkable. I needed to see what surrounded us, what kind of place I was standing inside.

I called Madame Denis back. I asked her if it might be all right for me to go out and explore the landscape a bit, rather than rest. "I am eager to see this place," I explained. "I have been wanting to come here for so long."

She seemed surprised and a little puzzled but was gracious nonetheless. I left my suitcase next to the bed and followed Madame Denis back down the stairs and outside once more. A few steps from the house, she pointed out the way down to the village and the mines, a long path that wound down the hill. I thanked her and walked quickly down the path toward the mine. I could sense her looking after me for quite a while, but I did not turn back.

* * *

From the base of the hill the Denis house sat on, off to the west was a landscape of sunken roads, hills, meadows, and brief patches of woods, all of it practically overrun with cottages, crisscrossing over and against one another in winding lanes that seemed to have no order at all. There were blackthorn hedges and occasional gardens, gnarled and twisted trees, all of it covered with a layer of snow and over that, everywhere, the omnipresent scatterings of soot. Off to the eastern side of the hill was a vast field, a giant black pyramid and two smaller ones, and nestled among them, the machinery of the Marcasse mine. This was no painting, Theo; I had stepped into one of God's own masterpieces.

How can I describe it? It was a squat beast, an evil-looking thing. There were a few long buildings and two chimneys, and then, extending from the tops of two of the buildings, giant iron frame-like structures like the skeletons of twisted church towers, exposing on the inside their wheels and ramps.

and thick cables and ropes. I had seen a picture of a Belgian mine in the same geography book that told me about the Borinage—remember I showed that to you in my fit of excitement? But seeing with my own eyes was quite a different thing. The mine was terrifying, awesome. It was dark and powerful and loomed up out of the landscape like some magnificent mythical metal minotaur. Looking at the landscape, the trees dead and nearly dead, the ash heaps, the hills of discarded coal, the huts collapsing into one another, the thick smoke pouring from the chimneys and blocking the sun, I nearly fell to my knees. What was I doing in this place? The sound from the mine was a clanking and banging and a general roar. I was far, far from Zundert now, from home, from you, my brother. I watched the mine and it seemed to come to life; it turned and shifted, and a quick horror came over me: This was what I was to minister to, this beast was what I had come here for! But no—I was here for those poor souls who worked inside of it.

And where were the people? There were very few figures about, save for the few I saw moving around the mine buildings, pushing carts and pulling levers, their breath visible even from where they stood.

I had made it to the bottom of the hill when a bell rang three times, and soon after, men began to stream through the gate. Black men. Their clothes, their necks, their faces, their hair, all was black—too black even to draw an arm across a brow and leave a smudge. Only their eyes were white, and they squinted and held their hands up against the sun, so painful, I imagined, after hours underground with only the occasional dull lamp to see by. It was eerie, those triangles of white in an otherwise-uniform sea of moving blackness; the whites of their eyes looked like fresh and unnatural grubs, like they were not attached at all but could leap clear out of their sockets and land on my skin. The bodies blended together as they moved by; it was like one giant and throbbing black creature was on the move, a creature with a voice the sound of a crowd, a creature that trailed a cloud of dust and breath.

There were children in the crowd, their clothes tattered and worn, some of them wearing hats. A few of the miners looked at me, the white eyes landed on me and lingered, but no one ventured to find out who I was. The image that they made as they passed through the gate was so striking that I felt my voice had been stolen away. The monster moved on, through the gate and over the lane to the other side, dividing and depositing its limbs on the paths and cottages. The village came to life, doors opening and closing, voices rising and exclaiming, dogs barking, and all the while the black monster moving across the lane and dissipating, breaking apart, discarding its unified form and becoming once again what it really was, more than a hundred humble souls going home.

Soon I became aware that a miner had stopped and was watching me while the rest of the crowd moved by. Our eyes met; I tried to make out something that would distinguish this one person from the rest. It was the strangest thing, Theo, to be looking at a person and be unable to see any distinguishing features, to be unable to see what an individual actually looked like! But slowly, as I gazed at the miner, I became aware with gradual amazement that it was in fact a woman—a girl, perhaps; I couldn't tell her age, though she was nearly as tall as I am. Something about the quality of her gaze marked her, the way her eyes were soft as they watched me, curious rather than confident about the way that she blinked rapidly, and then about the sweep of hair that disappeared under her cap. She stood watching me for one more moment, our eyes locked, and then she turned without fanfare and moved toward the village. My suspicion was confirmed by the slight sway to her hips as she walked away from me.

* * *

Supper that first night was in the Denis kitchen at the thick wooden table, the largest table to be found

anywhere in the village. All three of the Denis boys were there, along with Jean-Baptiste Denis, the baker, his wife, and two guests: Paul Fontaine and his daughter Christine. Christine was engaged to the Denises' eldest son, Karl, and the Denises thought I should meet her father, Paul, who was a foreman at the mine and lived in Wasmes, though he grew up in Petit Wasmes and had worked in the Marcassat mine for many years. He had a lung disease and could no longer stand the work down in the mine. "But still, Monsieur Vincent," Jean-Baptiste said in his booming voice, a marvel of unself-consciousness, "despite his promotion, he is still a good friend to the miner." He clapped Paul on the back, and Paul blushed at his plate. "Which is a lot more than can be said for many others who have been promoted," added Karl, across the table.

"Yes," Jean-Baptiste went on, "more than once during a strike Paul has been the only person with any influence on the miners; they will listen to nobody, they will follow no one's advice but his, and he alone is obeyed in the critical moment. Don't be shy, Paul," he said, with his hand still on Paul's shoulder; "it is true. We have seen it happen."

Paul continued to blush while Jean-Baptiste spoke about him. He was not a large man, Paul, but I found him commanding nonetheless, a confidence exuding in the way he moved and in his ease. His eyes were circled with dark, the skin beneath them sagging in ripples like the movement of mud; his cheekbones, however, were sharp and defined, chiseled as if out of rock. His daughter was fair and quite beautiful, resembling Paul only in her nose, which was shaped with the same slight curve. She sat quietly next to Karl and, once the meal started, she ate lightly while the rest of us shoveled it in. Her cheeks had a lovely flush, in the warm kitchen, and I thought silently that Karl was a lucky man. Then I thought of the woman I had seen at the mine, and wondered what she looked like when she was not covered with coal dust. I kept seeing the image of her, standing before me with that curious gaze, even as I sat there in the warm kitchen.

"Will you say grace for us, Vincent?" Madame Denis asked me, and I did so happily. The meal was rabbit with rosemary and potatoes and asparagus, simple food prepared simply. When we raised our heads and began to eat, Madame Denis said, "I don't know, Paul, but if I don't have a good feeling about this Monsieur Vincent. I daresay he will bring something good to Petit Wasmes as an evangelist." She was smiling at me, and I smiled back at her with a grateful nod, but when I looked at Paul, he was shaking his head. He quickly looked up from cutting his meat, hoping I hadn't seen that gesture; when he saw that I had, he flushed.

"I am sorry, Monsieur Vincent," he said. "You will have to excuse my manners and my skepticism. It has been many years of the same thing here in this valley, and many kind souls like you have come to try to help us. I am just not sure anymore what there is to be done."

I wasn't sure how to address this statement. "Can you tell me more of what you mean?" I said. "I must know all I can about conditions here."

Paul shook his head again, chewing and swallowing his food, and I was sure I saw a change in his eyes, an assertion of sorrow that swept down the inside of them like a shade. "Conditions are not good, Monsieur," he said. "For me, okay, they are not bad, I always have food for my family and I no longer need to go down into the mine, which is a daily blessing. I became a foreman when I was twenty-nine, about fifteen years too late for my lungs, unfortunately. But I live in a brick house and we are never cold. For the miners, it is a different story. They struggle for everything. And though the belief in God is of course important, and can make a man keep on longer than another man who does not believe, I am afraid you will find that often the word of God cannot be heard in a place like this." He paused and then said again, "Forgive me."

Silenced, I chewed for a few moments, thinking. The food was so tasty, it was distracting, the taste

buds rejoicing while the mind pondered in difficulty. I hadn't eaten anything all day. I had been so excited to arrive—instead of food, I ate the sky, those coal pyramids across the horizon, that woman miner standing at the edge of the crowd. No one said anything, though Madame Denis looked at Paul with a hint of distress that he would challenge the newcomer so soon.

I took in the room, the eight of us around that table, the three Denis boys next to one another in gradually ascending height, then Karl's fiancée with her flushed cheeks, a porcelain doll at a table of bears. I saw the wooden frame of the kitchen, the table laid with plates of food and pitchers of drink, the clock on the wall looking at us like a sun on a landscape, Madame Denis at the head with her apron still on, her wonderful girth surpassed only by her husband's, at the table's other end. It was an image of fellowship, of abundance and joy, but it was not an answer to Paul's statement.

Finally, I spoke the phrase that was repeating in my mind. "When I would comfort myself against sorrow, my heart is faint in me."

"Isaiah?" asked Paul.

"Jeremiah eight eighteen."

Paul smiled mildly and nodded. "Yes," he said, "that is just it." Soon after, he was racked by a fit of coughs, accompanied by the gurgle of liquid deep in his chest, and had to excuse himself to go to the yard and spit numerous times into the hedge.

* * *

After supper, Paul took me down into the village. He wanted me to meet someone, he said, an exemplary miner whose name was Charles Decrucq.

In general, Paul explained as we made our way down the hill, no one told the miners when a new lay preacher was on his way, but they would not be surprised at my arrival and I should expect them to be skeptical. For years, evangelists had been popping up in their villages, ducking into their huts with eyes full of pity and speaking to them of the kingdom of Heaven and the nobility of their suffering. But whoever came soon went, and because of that the general attitude in the village would be one of skepticism, not of the teachings that were offered so much as of my very presence, of the idea that I could be there to stay.

Could I be here to stay? I wondered quietly. The evangelism committee had given me a three-month trial period. Was it possible that I could succeed? I dared not even think of it, for what would happen if I did not? I had failed at everything else.

Yes, do you think I don't know it, Theo? Do you think I don't feel the weight of my failures like a monster on my back? I was desperate, Theo, desperate for this trial to work, not only because I didn't want to disappoint you and Father and everyone else all over again but also because this time I thought I might really have a chance. You knew how desperate I was, didn't you? And do you not think of that in your judgments of me now?

Charles Decrucq was a commanding man, not unlike, I thought, our own father. If fate had made our father a miner, he would have made a good one; I could easily imagine him there, with a different family, and many sons more thick-blooded than you and I. Always upright, never complaining or downhearted, never particularly striving or eager to move beyond the community radius: Our father has the qualities of an ideal mining man.

Paul told me that Charles had worked in the Marcasse mine for thirty-three years already, and he was only forty. I thought of the children I had seen that afternoon coming out of the mine, and then again of the woman stopped on the edge of the crowd. How old was she? We were making our way to the cottage, winding through the huts on what were barely paths, so close were they to the doors and

windows of houses, hands and faces disappearing as I glanced at them, plain curtains swinging close. Chickens scampered away from us, dusty gray feathers lingering after the frantic scurrying bodies; a goat tied to a post stared after us with a serious expression. A pair of mangy dogs cautiously approached, sniffing at our pants to see if we were carrying food. The sun was almost set, and the remaining light made everything seem sharper, the angles of the wood, the soft green-brown moss on the slanted roofs, the gnarled limbs of the blackthorn bushes, tree branches holding empty birds' nests tipped with snow. The landscape made me think of a print I had already put on the wall next to my bed in the Denis house: do you know Maris's *Washerwoman*? A woman bent over her washing in a crowded country lane, surrounded by chickens, a pig, a few ducks, and a young girl looking on.

I was overwhelmed by what I was seeing and could barely take in what Paul was saying: Decrucq was the man who could tell me everything I needed to know. His wife had worked in the mine with him for many years before they were married, hauling the coal away from the seam where Decrucq and his men were working. This was generally what the women did in the mines: haulage. She was twenty-seven now, and hadn't been down in the mine since their second child was born.

A few times Paul had to stop to cough and spit; the sound of Paul's coughing was like the sound of a large animal coming awake in a thick swamp. The cough bent him over, and I could see his back heaving through his canvas coat. I fought the instinct to put my hand on Paul's back as he coughed. He spit dark liquid from his lungs that landed on the ground like dollops of mud.

Finally Paul stopped before a house and knocked on the door. A man answered, stripped to the waist, the top half of him clean and the bottom half still wearing his filthy mining pants. He was huge and looming, filling the whole doorway; there was a streak of dirt on his arm, but otherwise his skin looked well scrubbed, pink and fresh, though it was marked all over by scratches and scars. On his right side where his ribs should have lain flat, there was a jutting lump that I quickly drew my eye from. When the man saw Paul, his face broke into a wide grin.

"Why look who it is!" he boomed, "Paul Fontaine! To what do we owe this honor?"

I blushed at being announced so completely to the whole neighborhood, but Paul grinned just as widely as Decrucq and clapped him on the shoulder. "Decrucq!" he bellowed. Volume, apparently, was a feature of this community. "It has been far too long."

They stepped into the house and Paul introduced me. Decrucq shook my hand. His grip was formidable and I could feel my bones roll against one another; I resisted the urge to massage my hand afterward. Inside the hut, it was warm and dim and smelled like mud and potatoes; it is a smell common to all the miners' homes, and though it overwhelmed me at first, I soon became used to it. It took a few moments for my eyes to adjust. Hannah Decrucq appeared from somewhere in the depths of the room and shook my hand, as well. She wore a faded dress and a night bonnet that had once been white but was now a light gray. She looked exhausted, her face sagging as if the skin were being pulled from below by a heavy hand, and I wondered if she were unwell. She was only two years older than I was but looked as if she had lived three more lifetimes.

We sat at the table by the stove, which was glowing pleasantly and heating the room. Hannah put the water on to make coffee. My eyes were clearing and I noted two beds in the back of the room, one of which was presumably full of all three sleeping children. Something moved beneath the bed—a snort and a shuffle and a flicker of shadow—but I thought it rude to point or stare. I learned later that it was the Decrucq's goat.

"I was just having my bath," Decrucq said. "Would you mind if I finish it up before we talk? If I wait too long the water will be cold, and there's no sense heating up a whole other tub just for my bottom half."

There was a half barrel near the stove that was filled with water. “Monsieur Vincent, I hope I will not offend?” Decrucq gestured to the barrel. “Of course not,” I replied. I was surprised and refreshed by Decrucq’s boldness. All flesh is insignificant, after all, and all of us equal in God’s eyes; naked or clothed we stand the same. Nonetheless, I thought Uncle Jan would squirm in such a moment, and that thought almost made me smile.

Hannah Decrucq sat with us at the table while Charles stripped and squatted over the tub. The wind was picking up outside, and the sacking between the wooden planks of the hut strained and flapped. It was quite pleasant inside, the room warm and faintly lit, the children asleep in the corner, the sound of the water sloshing in the tub as Decrucq plunged his hands in with the soap. I felt myself relax, and a kind of peace came over me. I always loved being in the miners’ homes—during the Bible meetings that I held weekly, or when I went to visit the sick or those in need of good words. In the dim light from where we sat, it almost looked like Decrucq still had on his pants, so strong was the contrast between his washed top half and his unwashed lower. “He will bathe in front of anyone,” Hannah said with a smile and a shake of her head.

“Normally my Hannah does this part for me,” Decrucq said, smiling, bending over his legs, and scrubbing vigorously. “She got spared the job tonight because we have company.”

“Well, I think everyone’s glad for that,” said Paul, laughing.

Hannah brought us cups of steaming coffee, and by the time she sat back down with us Decrucq was done washing. He dried himself vigorously, scrubbing his body almost as hard with the towel as he had with the soap. He went to the back of the room and returned in a pair of dry trousers, carrying a candle, which he set on the table between us. He had a pronounced limp, his right leg dragging behind him, as if it were lazier, somehow, than the rest of him; when he sat down, by the light of the candle, I noticed a patch on the side of his head where the hair was stripped away and a rough scar protruded like a mountain range.

“Well, Monsieur Vincent, if you wish to learn about the Borinage, you’ve come to the right place,” he declared. “Perhaps Paul has told you, but I am the man that the mines cannot kill.”

I looked at Paul, who smiled and shrugged. “I thought it better that he hear it straight from you,” he said to Decrucq.

“Ah,” said Decrucq, “well, it’s true. Long after all these other mining men are dead, I’ll still be here. I’ll die when I’m old and tired, from something simple, like a cold.”

We were all silent.

“I saw you admiring my head, this here?” Decrucq angled his head toward me and pointed at the scar. In the flickering candlelight it looked savage and cracking, bulbous and yet somehow delicate, as if it were being eaten by insects from the inside. “I got this one when the pit cage dropped. We were going down one night—it was the night shift—thirty of us in the cage, and after a meter or two something just snapped and we went down. Thirty-one meters we fell. Everyone dead except me.” He gestured to Paul. “Fontaine doesn’t like to hear that story.”

Paul shook his head, his face pained. “That was a horrible day,” he said.

“Anyway, this here?” he gestured to the lump bulging from the skin on his side. “Firedamp explosion. Threw me against a coal car. Three men dead. Broke three ribs. Never had ’em set right after that. They’re okay, though”—he patted his side lovingly—“don’t give me too much trouble. My leg, though, that’s another thing.” He held his thigh, gripping it tightly, massaging it. “Crushed when the cell I was in collapsed around me a couple years back. Trapped for five days, could barely breathe. Two men dead. No one could believe it when they finally dug me out, that I was still alive. Right, Hannie?”

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