

A Stranger, a Journey

Agnes has gone astray. She's alone, disentangled from her tour group. At first, naturally, she is alarmed. Tourists aren't meant to be solitary creatures. They're naked without each other. And she'd been lulled by the routine: breakfast of spongy croissant and weak coffee in Brussels, Marseilles, whatever city is next on the itinerary. Squeezed onto a tourbus and spurted out again, between bus door and museum door glimpses of crowded sidewalks, streets choked with cars. At the Museum the Monument the National Treasure she heard terms like *romanesque* and *flying buttress* and knew she should have paid more attention in school. Elbow to elbow they shuffled past the artwork, Agnes and the rest, comfortable in khaki knee-length shorts, T-shirts, walking shoes, they were almost indistinguishable, even to themselves. They'd managed to squirrel out of cubicles where buzzing fluorescent lights gave them low-level headaches all their waking hours. They'd scraped together money and vacation time and they were here for Beauty, damn it, they were here for Culture. They took photos of each other in clumps. At meal time they herded together into well-lit places with molded plastic seats and ate strangely familiar burgers. They compared postcards and souvenirs, "What'd y'think of that?" "Wow" and somehow it all got mingled, who said what, who bought what, Agnes offered her burger to the person next to her and felt like she was eating it herself.

Now they're gone, the others, rushed off oblivious to the Agnes-shaped void in their midst, and what a forlorn sight she is in her sensible shoes and her map-filled backpack. Alone at a riverfront park, oblivious to the charms of its gazebos and flagstone paths, too busy looking for a glimpse of the tourbus-- is that it, rounding a far corner? No, or surely that's it, barreling down the river. No. She is starting to feel wavery, she can hardly bear to think of herself in the singular.

In the absence of anyone resembling a tour guide, Agnes starts the monologue herself.

"As you all can see, this is a river."

That will never do. Tour guides know things like names of rivers, names of cities.

"Here we are on the banks of the--Seine." Much better. "In the lovely city of, uh, Paris. The Black Forest is nearby."

She hears a scornful male voice behind her:

"The Black Forest is in *Germany*."

Agnes can't believe her luck. A live European.

She walks around the park bench he's sitting on, studies him from different angles. He's pale. Young. An art student, perhaps.

A leather-bound journal appears in his hands. Yes, of course. Deep thoughts. Now if

only there were a contemptuous expression, perhaps some piercings.

A silver stud appears in his left nostril and a delicate gold hoop on his right eyebrow. Tendrils of green and brown tattoos snake down his forearms.

The art student runs his hand through lanky brown hair. He looks down at his journal and sees a pen-and-ink sketch of a spilled espresso and a poem about the meaninglessness of life. He is impressed.

“Should we talk about the existentialists?” Agnes says hopefully. “The nihilists?”

He winces. Americans. This woman in a flimsy dress wobbling around on stiletto heels, this woman spends her nights in speakeasies with gin-swilling gangsters, smokes long cigarettes, laughs at nothing at all. What would she know about philosophy?

Agnes has never felt so young before, so loud. Her limbs so long. She tugs at her drop-waist dress to straighten it, fidgets with long strings of beads. The high heels take some getting used to, but she manages to dance to jazz music all night, trades witticisms with young men who crowd around her. A man in a gray silk suit dances the foxtrot without spilling a drop from his wineglass.

A prince, Agnes decides. Royals are big on nightclubs.

“You should be wearing ermine and velvet,” she says.

“I beg your pardon.”

“I assume you have your peasants flogged if they misbehave?”

He frowns. He vaguely remembers, or feels he should, drafty ancestral estates, endless charity dinners. He drinks some more wine and feels better. He offers her the glass. “Have a sip.”

“Things are going to change drastically,” Agnes says as she shimmies through a one-step and a charleston. “At midnight I’ll have to rush away before the spell wears off.”

“It’s long past midnight.”

“At dawn then. I’m flexible.”

He can’t really be a prince. Not enough imagination. Maybe a businessman.

She’s hungry and there isn’t a mass-produced sausage-and-egg breakfast sandwich in sight. In a small dining room with linen tablecloths and walnut ladderback chairs she eats thick-sliced bread and black coffee. The businessman sits down next to her, reaches for the bread on her plate and slathers it with butter and honey. He has grey eyes tilted like a cat’s, Slavic cheekbones but a German-sounding accent. He would know about the Black Forest.

“There are only two stories in the world,” he says, “and they get told over and over. A stranger comes to town, and Someone goes on a journey.”

A drop of honey is clinging to his lower lip. Agnes leans forward and gently licks it off.

“Quite right,” he says. “It’s the same story.”

But the sun comes up and in the morning light he can see she’s not a flapper at all, how could he have mistaken that homespun skirt, that weathered face? This woman has broken sod and built a house by herself, raised a dozen children. She can chop down trees, plow fields, she can study the sky and tell you when a cyclone is coming.

Agnes feels stiff and dusty. Still, she hopes the tourbus won’t find her and take her away. She’s not tired of this place yet, she doesn’t want to go back home to tumbledown wooden houses, flat roads straight as a pin. Here everything is made of stone and mortar and stained glass and ivy. When you die, forget the wooden crosses on the lone prairie, you end up in a cathedral, you lie carved in marble on top of your own tomb.

She walks with the businessman along narrow streets that curve and dip. They sit at outdoor cafés and eat pastries at glass-topped wrought-iron tables.

“I’ve always wanted to ask about the Indians,” he says. “Wasn’t there some way to come to an understanding with them, instead of that vicious grab for territory?”

“This from the people who brought us the Hundred Years War, the Inquisition, the death camps?”

They feed pigeons by a statue of a famous poet. They give money to a picturesque beggar.

“What about slavery?”

“What about the slave trade to begin with?”

They admire several hundred frescos and mosaics. Agnes begins to wonder where the thatched cottages are, the enchanted forests. They tour a castle. “Why don’t people live in these things anymore?” Agnes asks the curator, a stout, grey-haired woman in a sturdy wool suit. She has enormous blue eyes that bulge out as if in warning. Agnes starts to feel uneasy and the curator nods toward the archway of the great hall. *Be bold*, it says, carved in the marble: *Be bold, be bold, but not too bold*.

“Look at that,” Agnes says to the businessman.

“What?”

By the time they reach the turret Agnes is as cold and damp as the stones of the castle wall. “There’s nothing charming about dungeons,” she says, but the businessman has disappeared. The gray-haired curator is dusting a suit of armor.

“The Black Forest used to cover all of Europe,” she tells Agnes.

She and Agnes go for a beer to the pub the bar the tavern next door. The American is exquisite, the curator thinks, watching Agnes rest her cowboy boots on the scarred oak table and whittle a piece of wood with her pocketknife. This woman has roped steer, prospected for gold. Her eyes have the squint you get from gunfights at high noon.

“Do you miss the tornadoes?” she asks Agnes. “The blizzards?”

“We got tired of that.” There’d been one too many ramshackle wooden buildings falling apart in high winds. One too many nights at the saloon ending in bottles shattered over heads, chairs splintered across backs.

Agnes wants to see briar roses and nightingales. She wants to visit the Juniper Tree.

There’s only one place to find these. Agnes takes the others with her when she goes. She turns the art student into a dimwitted Hans and sends him off to seek his fortune. The businessman/prince, she decides, is now a woodcutter. He sells loads of firewood at the backdoor of the castle, he rescues little girls and their grannies from hungry wolves. What to do with the curator? Agnes hesitates. She’s not mean or beautiful enough to be a wicked stepmother, though without her in the story you lose the decapitations, the poisoned fruit, the hideous retribution afterward. She could make her a blowsy queen dowager, waiting by the window for her enchanted children to be restored to her. Or better, a fairy godmother to remove the spell from the goose girl, help Aschenputl pick lentils out of the hearth.

It’s sunset and time to leave town. Her muscles are wiry and aching. She straps a six-shooter to her hip, people glimpse her out of high windows and nervously slam their shutters. Her boots ring out against the cobblestones and yet at the same time kick up swirls of dust as she picks out the faded path toward the Black Forest.