Justine Dymond

Cherubs

WHEN THE COOK HEARD the American tanks and motor cars rumbling up the muddy road from the west, she ran out of the kitchen, through the courtyard, and past the barn, waving her apron, surrendering in delight.

This is what Béatrice tells us. In this moment that she tells us, we fear revealing any pride—those *Americans*, those Americans not unlike us, except separated by fifty-some years.

We think, Americans saved this house, St. Urbain, a mansion really. Tall ceilings, long hallways of rooms, a stone veranda with dancing cherubs atop its posts. A stretch of lawn that tumbles down to a pond and woods beyond. An estate. We think, the Americans—yes, the Americans!—saved the grandmother, the cook, and the maid, who stayed throughout the German occupation, *la grand-mère* who refused to leave the house, even when arrangements were made for all the children—Béatrice was nine at the time—to stay in Nancy. And the cook, forced to make meals for those stinking Germans—except the Austrian officer, always polite, always respectful of *la famille*—the cook now gloriously freed from her servitude to men who didn't even understand wine, who ate *coq au vin* as though they were animals thrown raw meat, with no appreciation for subtlety of sauce, the impeccable timing that renders the flesh tender.

We hesitate to smile at this. We do anyway—we know it's not us, *we* didn't personally save St. Urbain from the Germans, but Béatrice speaks as though those American soldiers, marching up the road, tired, hungry, scared, were our kin.

Béatrice says, The cook ran into the road, waving her apron at the American soldiers. See, *Maman* knew the Germans were gone. It had been a full night and into the next morning with no sounds of boots stomping overhead or voices shouting down the cellar stairs—those Germans voices that provoked shudders

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and tears in the maid as she and *Maman* huddled in the cellar. The silence was all they needed to know. The Germans had evacuated. Something else was coming.

When the cook ran out into the road waving her makeshift flag of surrender, the Americans shot at her.

This is what we feared—even if only in that smallest part of our consciousness that says, don't get carried away, chauvinistic pride is always easily deflated.

Béatrice laughs at this point in her story.

We laugh, too, but a different kind of laughter, the kind that expresses embarrassment, horror, shame at our own sense—however hesitant—of national pride. The Americans shot at the cook!

Then Béatrice is abruptly interrupted in her story by one of the cousin bridesmaids reminding her of something urgent, something we can't quite make out, but something to do with the banquet arrangements, musicians who need something, and Béatrice is whisked away, leaving us to absorb this shocking change in events—the saviors, the Americans, who shot at the cook.

Was she hurt? we wonder.

We look around us, at the cousins and uncles and aunts running around, preparing for the wedding, the reason everyone has gathered for the weekend, for Claudine and Max's nuptials. And we consider—in our despair about a story cut short—should we stop one of the other aunts rushing by? Who's she? Isn't that Claudine's cousin Bette? Would she know what happened to the cook?

We have to know what happened to the cook, and not just out of curiosity, not just to know the ending. It's a matter of national pride; we say this jokingly, of course.

Well, there *is* the grandmother, Béatrice's *maman*, Claudine's *grand-mère*, who is alive, who is here at the wedding, the matriarch of St. Urbain. She didn't die, wasn't shot by Americans. There is that. We must console ourselves with this thought for now, at least until Béatrice returns or we find someone else to finish the story for us.

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Everyone looks busy now. Bette is arranging the flowers on the tables outside one of the parlors where there will be dancing after dinner. The other parlor, across the marble entranceway, is where *Grand-mère* entertained *les américains* for coffee earlier that afternoon. She asked us polite questions. Where were we from? Did we like the goat cheese made in the local region? We sat on the edge of beautiful chairs, not elaborate, a bit worn actually, but nonetheless expressing a certain aristocratic class. We sipped the strong coffee as inconspicuously as possible. We smiled and wrapped our loose lips around pointed French words, inwardly grimacing at the sounds that emerged from our mouths.

The night before, Claudine's father, Jean-Paul, showed us the original Diderot encyclopedia owned by the family. Excitedly we watched as he took down a large volume from the bookcase in the parlor. Shouldn't it be kept in a temperature-regulated room? we thought, frowning, but not daring to say it aloud, remembering that we had to hide our gauche American ways, our obsession with the *right* way to do things, much like our obsessions with refrigeration, statistics, and showering.

Jean-Paul opened the encyclopedia and we flinched at the sound of the spine cracking. But we brushed this aside and oohed and aahed over the simplistic maps of Africa and America, the vast sweeps of earth Europeans thought of as savage lands, unpeopled, unsettled. We admired the columns of careful French cursive, the compiling of knowledge as though a thing of fragile beauty, vulnerable to thieves and natural disasters. We wanted to caress the pages with our hands, though we repressed this urge, and merely nodded in agreement to everything Jean-Paul said, even when we didn't understand.

We took all that knowledge to bed with us that night, tucked in with us in the narrow, sagging mattress, our room an old servant's *chambre* above the barn. It looked as though the room hadn't been occupied since World War Two, but that's okay, we tell each other, it was nice of Claudine's family to arrange accommodations. Maybe this is where the cook slept! Over the barn, planning the meals for German officers, grimacing at the thought of wasting precious hens and pigs and goats on the swine. Béatrice had said

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that the cook, though she could speak German—indeed, her father was German, refused to speak their language to the occupiers, forcing them to rely on the shaky French of one young assistant to the Commandant. But she understood everything they said, as she stirred soup in the kitchen, spitting and stirring, adding cod liver oil and rotting tomatoes. The next morning she watched from the dining room window, while she laid out bread and butter. The officers ran to the pine bushes lining the driveway. She cackled. She didn't care. Let them kill her, after they shit out their bowels. She'd be happy to die for poisoning Germans.

But the Germans didn't kill her. The *Americans* shot at the cook!

We wander toward the hallway, watch through the window as the caterer's helpers set up chairs and tables in the barn, where the reception will be held. There's a makeshift stage and flowers strewn along the tables. There are candles and white tablecloths. Earlier that morning we helped sweep the barn and the courtyard, move furniture and wash the windows—what they really needed was a new coat of paint. We did our part. We joined in and made ourselves useful. Now we feel a bit in the way, without a task, without purpose. Except to hear the end of the story. We head towards the stairway, hesitate a moment, hoping for a glance of Béatrice through the open kitchen door. We see an army of people chopping and stirring food, but no Béatrice.

Under the stairway is the door to *Grand-mère's* rooms. She is resting now, we've been told, saving her energy for the church ceremony. We climb the stairs, curving up and around to the second floor, a wide hallway with windows to one side, looking down on the courtyard, and rooms on the other side. We hear the murmur of activity behind the bride's door. We wish we could be there, to be one of the "chosen" to spend the few hours before the ceremony with the bride and groom, helping to pin dresses and rouge cheeks, to keep track of corsages and run the myriad last minute errands that always need doing.

But we are guests, we are *les américains*. We've been told to relax, to enjoy ourselves, to take advantage of the countryside and the early summer air. Instead, we turn at the top of the stairs

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and navigate the narrow hallway filled with bookcases and bric-a-brac and cross the wooden planks to our room. We decide to take a nap. We lie down, face-to-face, nose-to-nose, on the narrow mattress, huddling for warmth—it's chilly in the servants' quarters!—and smile, knowing we won't sleep, impossible to sleep with all the activity around us, knowing that a dozen people are working below us, and with the mattress so sagged, so bowed, that in minutes we are fidgety, our backs ache.

We are too soft, too accustomed to the comforts of the New World, too coddled. We laugh at our own fragility. How do the French do it? How do they stay so focused on what matters—love, life, ideas—when their mattresses sag and their rooms are dusty? We are clearly weaker, inflexible, unable to adapt. We don't admit it, but we could die right now for wall-to-wall carpeting and big, fluffy pillows.

What did this room look like when the cook lived here? We imagine a small dresser with a shrine to the Virgin, the cook waking early before sunrise, lighting a candle and saying a short prayer. She would have worn solid, leather boots, the kind that laced up, and she probably only had two changes of clothes. She would have used the kitchen sink to wash her face and then brew coffee. She'd have to feed the animals on her own, take care of all the barnyard chores since the stable hands had left to join the Resistance.

Yes, the Resistance! The cook longed to join the Resistance, but she knew that she must stay to help the family. In a way, she was a part of the Resistance, she would think to herself. She prepared *le petit déjeuner* for Madame and her maid, first. She knocked on the cellar door before clomping down the narrow stairs. She recounted to Madame what the Germans had been saying. They sound worried, she said. They say *die Amerikaner* often. They seemed to always be studying maps, rolling them up quickly when she entered the parlor with bread and coffee (just a little dirt added).

We think of the grandmother, so petite and frail now, her delicate ways. But to think she refused to leave the house while the Germans were here. She was brave! She was young and so brave!

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What would we have done? And with seven children, finally taken to Nancy, arranged by the Austrian officer, the one who was very proper and correct with the children, the cook almost regretted having poisoned his soup too. But what could she do?

We are restless. We need to know what happened to the cook. And where is the maid now?

Though it's still a couple hours until the ceremony, we decide to dress. We've laid out our things, a dress, a pair of stockings, a once-pressed pair of pants, now a bit wrinkled from travel, a clean shirt. We dress, slowly, carefully, savoring the feel of clean, fancy clothes, the act of dressing, as though the entire day depended on it. We continue the story, reminding ourselves of what Béatrice has already said, trying to find a clue somewhere of what happened next.

The French had occupied the house before the Germans came. They were proper, very proper, with *la famille*. Most of the French officers camped in tents on the lawn, waking early to the sound of cows baying, udders engorged. The family confined themselves to the upper rooms and the kitchen, while the officers used the parlors for their headquarters. The family made a game of it, telling the youngest children that they were safe because the soldiers were with them.

When evacuation orders came, the commanding officer told Béatrice's father to leave, to get to Paris, to Nancy even. The Germans were coming. The father pleaded with *Maman*—now *Grand-mère*, but she refused. It was her family's house after all, and she could not abandon it. She thought of the banquets and balls her parents had hosted, when she was just a little girl before the First World War. She thought of her own coming out on the eve of that war, the shells that fell in the garden, the east wing conservatory one morning imploded by a German bomber. The family didn't leave then. They slept in the cellar then, the family and the servants who stayed. How could she leave now?

And so the family waited. The French had left, clearing camp as carefully as possible, leaving behind only holes from their tent pegs in the lawn. The family waited. They went about their usual business. Then one day there was a peculiar silence in the

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countryside. The children were sent to the cellar where they huddled with Father. *Maman* sat in her parlor, very still, very patient, and waited. The cook got down on her knees and scrubbed the kitchen floor. Again. She wanted to have this to do, she couldn't bear the waiting. The maid wept in her room above the barn.

Maman sat, listening to the sound of the brush's bristles against the stone floor, and beyond that, silence. With dusk came the first growl of engines.

We stand in the narrow passage between our room and the main hall, telling ourselves this story. On the bookshelf is a hodge-podge of things—board games, tools, broken ceramic, and a helmet. We are shocked. We've passed by this bookshelf already a dozen times at least since the morning. Why hadn't we seen it before? It is heavy, smaller than we imagined a helmet to be—more like a cap. Its greenness reminds us of algae, of another war, of swamps. Inside in thick black ink: Johnson. An American name. We imagine a black American soldier, on his first tour of duty, his first time out of the U.S.—heck! his first time out of Georgia. A hero.

Except, we must remember, the Americans shot at the cook.

Someone is coming up the stairs. We hear footsteps and then gradually a head of short, black and gray hair appears. We can't believe our luck! It's Béatrice.

As she reaches the second floor, she sees us standing in the passageway with the helmet. We sort of gesture at her with it, a kind of wave with the helmet. We are saying, Look, here is proof, here is what war leaves behind, what stories leave behind.

Béatrice nods and smiles, showing us what she has in her hands, a bridesmaid's dress made of light green organza. She is delivering it to the room where the bride is sequestered. But Béatrice's nod promises us she will return.

We are delirious with anticipation. We turn the helmet over and over. We try it on, its heaviness pressing down on the skull like memory. Like history. We laugh at our own profundity. We are Americans after all. We are supposed to scoff at the shackles of history. We can slough off history like a snake sheds its skin, leave it behind for others to worry about.

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And yet, here it is in our hands, solid, weighty, and green.

Béatrice gently takes the helmet from our hands, turns it over and says aloud, Johnson. We loved the American soldiers, she says. It meant coming back home with Father. It meant chocolate and chewing gum. We'd never had chewing gum before.

We think about chewing gum as though it were a brand new idea. We remember chewing it as children, swallowing countless lumps of gum hardened by endless chewing, and the fear that we would never digest it.

Yes, yes, we say, but what about the cook? What happened to her?

Béatrice flaps her hand and laughs. Oh, nothing. When the Americans were coming, they were scared and they shot at everything that moved. But once they got closer and saw it was just a lady with an apron, they stopped shooting.

We are certainly relieved—those scared American soldiers!—they didn't hurt the cook. But there is a small part of us that feels disappointed, the drama turned to comedy, to farce. Is it better that the Americans were scared, rather than fierce?

Why did this helmet get left behind?

That, I do not know, Béatrice says and turns, heads down the stairs.

We hastily replace the helmet and follow her, not wanting her to leave us once again in mid-story.

What happened to the maid and *Grand-mère*? Did they stay with the Americans?

Oh, yes. And the children, we all came back with Father. The American soldiers taught us baseball. I think, actually, they were quite bored.

And with that Béatrice scurries into the kitchen, leaving us at the bottom of the stairs. We consider the kitchen, but now that we've dressed we don't want to risk spills and stains. We turn the other way and walk towards the veranda. The sunlight dapples the marble hallway and children burst suddenly from doors and around corners, chased by older cousins or frazzled mothers. We smile in our distraction, hoping we will be stopped and spoken to, but no one approaches and we pass through the hall and the doors to the veranda.

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The veranda stretches across the front of the house. At its center, where we stand now, stairs lead to a gravel driveway and then to the lawn. Stone cherubs twist and frolic along the veranda railing, frozen in movement. We touch their faces, chipped and pockmarked by weather and wear, their stone skin warmed under the sun.

It's a beautiful day for a wedding, we say to each other and skip down the stairs, holding hands, feeling ourselves young again, like children, escaped from adult concerns and tasks. We run across the driveway, gravel flying out behind our shoes, and across the lawn, down down down to the edge of the pond.

Out of breath, we stop and turn around, look back at the mansion, now spread out against the sky like a patient etherized… yes, yes, we could be in an earlier era, when people drank champagne out of shoes and Americans flocked to Europe. If you squint your right eye, we say, to erase the car parked at the side of the house, it could be just as it was then. We could imagine buggies and horse-drawn carriages coming through the gates and across the driveway, stopping at the veranda stairs, discharging their well-heeled passengers for tea, for dinner, for a ball.

From where we stand on the lawn, hands, like a military salute, shielding our eyes from the sun, we see a flutter of movement behind a second-story window. The bride and her bridesmaids. The groom and his groomsmen. The preparations continue, time continues. We can look back, squinting into the sun, but what can we see, blinded, the story half-known, our desire, like children, fierce and fickle?

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After the ceremony, we are driven back by a kind cousin and his wife. Scrunched in the back seat of the car, we listen to them exclaim about the wedding and we contribute what we can. Claudine was magnificent, so beautiful and serene. Max—Max in a tuxedo! What a laugh! Who would have guessed we'd ever see the day? And *Grand-mère*, in the front pew of the church—the huge, austere church with its stone arches reaching so far above us that voices got lost and never returned from that spacious heaven. *Grand-mère* so tiny and in her element. And the

grandchildren—in costumes! they made their own costumes!—when they were called to the altar, they came marching like a parade of jesters and merry pranksters. Such formal elegance, such irreverent fun at the same time.

As we offer these observations and listen to the cousin and his wife, the car turns into the long private road, shaded by poplars, leading to St. Urbain. Up ahead we can see the stone gates, but not the house, so thick are the woods and so long is the road. It's as though we were approaching again for the first time. When we pass through the gates and St. Urbain appears close and large, we feel the coolness of the poplars' shade, and a surge in the stomach that can only be described as love. Everyone is silent in the car, only the crunch of rubber tires on gravel, and then, slowly, the faint, ethereal sound of a piano playing somewhere in the house.

Everyone gathers on the veranda stairs, with champagne flutes and snippets of food—bruschetta and stuffed mushrooms. We stand and chew, murmur things like, What a day! How beautiful they were! Do you remember when...? We wait for the newly nuptialed to arrive, and after about an hour, as the sun starts to move further west, cutting a sharp line of shadow across the driveway, we hear the sounds of laughter and wheels coming through the gates.

They arrive in a horse-drawn carriage, and we exclaim at how it is exactly as we had imagined it in another era. Small children, children of cousins, are lifted up and into the carriage with the couple. Everyone wants a turn. Everyone wants to be like the bride and groom, at the center, at the focus of attention, or at least to be in the viewing range of such royalty.

Someone hands the bride and groom glasses of champagne while they are still in the carriage. The best man presents a toast. He is in a wheelchair that has to be lifted up and down the stone steps. He will tell us later that he was in a car accident, paralyzed from the waist down.

The toast said, we raise our glasses and sip our wine. From behind us there comes a sound like a wave crashing onto a rocky shore, and then fluttering whiteness bursts around our heads. First there are shrieks, and then laughter and murmurings, as the

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doves fly above us, bank and turn as a group, and then circle around the house out of sight.

The champagne tingles now inside our heads, and after the releasing of the doves, we are ready to witness anything. What's next? Will there be elephants and tap dancers? Acrobatics? Fire-eaters? We would be very impressed by sword swallowers, we agree. Yes, anything that involved ingesting fire or weaponry. Wouldn't it be great if more weddings were like circuses? Bride and groom would undergo intense trapeze training before declaring *I do* in the air. Now *that* would be devotion, not merely spectacle.

We follow the other guests as they follow the couple up the veranda stairs and through the house to the courtyard. We are going in for dinner. There will be more wine. There will be a long buffet table of food, deli meats displayed in the form of a peacock—yes, a peacock!—and cheeses and salads and, of course, long batons of bread, hard crusty baguettes that we will devour as though we have never eaten before. There are speeches and skits, singing, jokes, more speeches, voices slurred. And then, as we are imbibing another glass of wine—no use counting anymore, we lost count a while ago—we hear the strains of familiar music and a warm prickly sensation creeps up our backs, the body's knowledge, before the brain, that we are being watched. The music's familiarity wakes us from our gluttony before we consciously recognize the tune, and when we look up everyone is grinning at us. They are playing "The Star Spangled Banner." Flushed with embarrassment, we grin back and then affect little waves, like Miss America on her float, acknowledging the loyalty of the masses.

It's not *spankled* banner. *Spangled* banner.

The couple next to us argues in English tinged with French vowels. And with that distraction comes relief. The music fades and everyone is invited back to the buffet table for fruit and more cheese and chocolate.

Outside the barn, it's now dark. We've been eating and drinking for hours. We feel properly medieval in our dedication to feasting. Guests are speaking and laughing louder, as they meander through the courtyard. Someone has started playing music in

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the house and candles are lit all along the walkway and into the house. But the air feels marvelously fresh and we linger outside, wobbling around the side of the barn.

We walk up to the road behind the barn, where the cook ran, waving her white apron. There is a tree just there, across the road, magnificently fat, its leaves rustling like a Victorian lady's underskirts. We turn toward the west. Fireflies blink across the dark. We can barely make out the reach of the road, we strain to see its horizon. The cook would have seen the soldiers coming, an indistinguishable mass of men, and then, here—we point to the tree, she would have fallen flat at the crack of gunfire. Would she have yelled? Would she have called out, Nous sommes les français! Or would she have lain still, just waiting, her heart pounding, until the soldiers came so close that she could smell their sweat and hear their breathing? She would have heard the harsh nasal of an American soldier ordering her to stand up. And then once on her feet, her apron flung forgotten on the ground, she would have smiled and kissed the first soldier she saw. In her machine-gun French, she would have scolded them for shooting at her and taking so long to save them. The soldiers would relax, pull out cigarettes and slump into the grass beside the road, thankful for a moment's rest. A lieutenant who studied French in high school would be pushed forward to speak with the cook, and studiously she would listen to his questions, his confusion of words, his youthful fear as he asks, Where are we? Only, to the cook's amusement, he is asking her, *Qui sommes-nous?* Who are we?

The cook would clap him on the shoulder and laugh, saying, *Mais, bien sûr, vous êtes les américains!*

There is a sharp whistling sound and then a crack. We turn pale—what is that? A moment of non-sound, as though the air were sucked away, and then a fountain-spray of colorful light beyond the house. We head back across the road and through the courtyard. Everyone else is moving towards the house. More fireworks shoot off, one twirling and twisting like a snake, and then crack crack crack as they explode above the house.

Guests crowd on the veranda, the bride and groom, too, standing in the middle of the group like queen bees surrounded by

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worker bees. We are all looking up, our necks stretched up to the sky, its infinite backdrop. Our eyes reflect in miniature the streams and bouquets and twinklings of fireworks. We are hushed, we are awestruck, we are humbled by this god's display of power.

It is like July 4th, is it not? Béatrice says. She is next to us, looking up into the sky.

It is, we agree, but we don't want it to be. We want it instead to be like this, like a wedding, like champagne and chocolate, deli meats shaped into peacocks, cooks who refuse to speak German, *mamans* braving occupation, and the faces of each other in the light of sky.

Béatrice beckons us over to the far end of the veranda. She puts her hand on a stone cherub's head, her thumb tracing a concavity.

She speaks and we push closer, tilting our heads to hear her better.

Vous voyez? You see these missing pieces? The American soldiers were so bored, she says. They had nothing to do all day but wait and wait.

We are stunned. We are speechless. Then there is a rush of popping and whistling, and the fireworks burst in a grand finale of noise and color. We look up and up and ooh and aah.

When we look down again, the guests are moving back into the house. There will be music and dancing well into the dawn, the bride and groom will slip quietly away to sleep, also the *grande-mère* and her memories. Only the drunken few who deny the end of things will linger, clinging to each other, smiling wearily, picking at the ravaged buffet.

We won't want to give up either. And so we will stroll along the gravel driveway in the misty sunrise. Beside us, the bullet-ridden cheeks and arms and legs of the cherubs will stay frozen in their postures of flight, enduring beyond even this.

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