

## Where Mary receives her first impression of the New World

Jérémie was ill with an infection during the whole voyage which lasted seven days instead of five because of a storm on the Atlantic. I should have perceived those bad omens but I had nothing in mind but my arrival in New York. At last I was going to know America, a continent that I imagined clean, colorful and inhabited by people who on the main resembled movie heroes.

The ship entered the harbor when I was still asleep so that I did not see the statue of Liberty on my first voyage. What struck me as soon as my feet touched the American soil was the great number of black men among the luggage porters; on second sight I noticed the enormous bellies of the white immigration's employees. Where were my heroes with golden skin and narrow hips? All I saw around me were fat men with a pinkish skin and a benevolent look who spoke with no emotion on their faces and tall black men with long legs who laughed loudly showing all their teeth. Nothing here matched my expectations.

Later in the streets of New York I met with new surprises: a great number of buildings were made of red bricks, and that seemed strange to me. I had expected all constructions in America to be white for the simple reason that after the liberation of Paris G.I.'s were always commenting on the gloominess of the façades of Parisian buildings and monuments; also I was disappointed with the size of the skyscrapers, I had expected them all to be higher. On Christmas Eve 1951, New York showed itself to me as an ugly and graceless red city where I had no desire to settle.

On that very evening we took the train for Pittsburgh, an industrial and sooty city where Jamie's family lived. Faced with the latter's nervousness during our journey, I began to feel that the said family exhibited perhaps certain characteristics which were unfamiliar to me. Jamie was restless and impatient, and at one point, in a nervous voice, he said to me:

“You know, at table, my father may not let you serve yourself

first, he is not that well-mannered.”

So to calm him I answered:

“I married you, not him.”

As a matter of fact Schneider Senior, Tom, proved to be a rather nice and ordinary man. He looked like a lot of Germans whom I had seen in France during the war. His wife, however made me feel ill at ease. As soon as I saw her—and she introduced herself first—I judged her to be both narrow minded and dangerous. She gave me a long and highly disapproving look that brought Aunt Paule to my mind, that older sister of my father who watched over him and hated all the women who were interested in him.

Sarah Schneider had the typical face of American provincial women of a protestant denomination whom we saw in those days on the advertisements on posters or on television. Her hair with a mauve rinse had artificial waves visible under the straw hat sitting on her head; her body was fitted in a dark blue suit that seemed to have been bought in the Soviet Union, and her feet were well laced in a pair of shoes known then as “oxfords” resembling the ones I had seen on the feet of uniformed women in the American Army.

She kissed us keeping her body rigid, laughing with embarrassment, and her first words to her son after a separation of six years were: “My lands! What is that overcoat you’re wearing? We’re going to have to buy you a new one or the neighbors will talk.”

The highlight of the family, whom I met an hour later, was Aunt Leona, called Nonie; she was sixty five years old, tall and thin as a bean pole, had very red hair, and complained incessantly of headaches and fatigue in her limbs except on rainy days or snowy ones when everyone was, by force of necessity, confined in the house. On such days she felt fine and dandy. She was a spinster who had never been courted, but by compensation she was seen by a doctor every week.

Sarah and Nonie were sisters. They were both born on a farm in Tennessee to a Scottish couple. They had been Baptists all their young lives but had later converted to Catholicism. They were in

love with the Church, and viewed priests as superior men. Nonie went often to confession so she could murmur her sins in the dark, while Sarah, of a more extraverted temperament, baked cakes for the parish, and that gave her the opportunity to babble sweet nothings to the priest and his vicars. I saw her once engaged in a conversation with her parish priest, and I observed that she had short laughs, and hid her mouth behind her hand like a young school girl who would be courted by a beau.

Sarah and Nonie, besides loving the church, loved the dead. They were hardly ever out of funeral parlors, those American places where the dead are kept several days pumped with formaldehyde, dressed and made up. They gave the two sisters the opportunity to have a social life. Each evening they studied the obituaries in the local papers in order to find the name of some acquaintance, and at least once a week they found one. As soon as they did, they got their Sunday clothes out the closet and, exalted and trembling with anticipation, they took the bus to reach that place the Americans call a parlor for the very fact that parlor derives from the French *parloir*: a place where talks take place. And God knows that Sarah and Nonie talked. They talked of the deceased, of its relatives, friends and acquaintances, and of course such talks took place in the presence of the corpse lying in its box. I have been told that some funeral parlors have frescoes of woodlands on their walls; they often are run by Irish people, perhaps because the Irish are a joyous race that can look at death with a lighter heart than most as their famous wakes would seem to indicate.

One of my New York friends told me that he had once met the owner of a funeral parlor who had a university degree in taxidermy. She had shown him her golden book with photos of various corpses embalmed, the best being two snapshots—one before and one after—of a man who had shot his brains out. In the first the head was a mass of bloody flesh but on the second the whole head ensemble had been reconstructed with plaster, face cream and make up, the dead face looking glorious.

When Sarah and Nonie returned home from their necrophilic

visits they were very lively and laughed like young girls. I never saw them happier than when they returned from their weekly outings to the funeral parlor. The rest of the time they talked about their neighbors and tormented poor Tom, who actually seemed immune to their harassments. Calm, detached, Germanic, with measured movements and an indifferent eye to what was going on around him, Tom took care of his garden or performed his job as caretaker of Saint Philomena's, the church down the street.

Jamie's family, on the Schneider's side, had an Aunt Eleanor; tall and masculine in look but with a great sense of humor regarding the dead. She and her brother John loved to make fun of their sisters-in-law regarding their trips to the funeral parlor. John, who was as physically rugged as his sister spoke with mockery of priests and nuns and blasphemed each time he visited his brother Tom, just for the pleasure of shocking Sarah and Nonie who, he said, were: "licking God's ass." Both Eleanore and John were very funny and witty, and made mincemeat of the two religious sisters who acknowledged their sarcasms with tight lipped smiles.

In his family's atmosphere Jamie became a different man. He left the house early in the morning and went on visiting his old friends and university teachers leaving me alone to face his mother who made incessant remarks about the way I washed my husband's shirts or my baby's diapers, she also reproached me my encouraging my husband to remain an actor, the acting profession being, in her eyes, a disgrace. She would have liked her son to be a teacher or a banker. She got me to understand in multiple ways that I was not worthy of her interest, and that I was a lost soul since I did not attend mass on Sundays.

I understood quickly that Jamie feared his mother, and that he preferred to flee the house than meet her disapproving look. A real man, I said to myself, would defend his wife and would remind his mother that she had taken second place in his life. It was during that stay at his parents that I lost all respect for my husband. I insisted that I wanted to return to New York in order to be rid of in-laws for whom I felt no inclination. I preferred to face the huge red brick

metropolis rather than that assortment of Anglo-Saxons who for the most part had no humor. Two weeks later we were leaving for New York, and in future years I managed to see my in-laws rarely and never for more than a weekend each time.

Sarah resented my attitude, and under a pleasant and Christian mask that she must have bought in the same boutique as Aunt Paule, she hated me like the devil. I discovered years later the depth of her hate when reading a letter she addressed to her son. She was a very narrow-minded woman, obstinate and ambitious, who had invested all her hopes in a son who disappointed her, and she wanted to burden with the responsibility of her deception all the women who came near the son who had betrayed her dream.