



Beatrice
and Virgil

A Novel

YANN MARTEL



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Henry's second novel, written, like his first, under a pen name, had done well. It had won prizes and was translated into dozens of languages. Henry was invited to book launches and literary festivals around the world; countless schools and book clubs adopted the book; he regularly saw people reading it on planes and trains; Hollywood was set to turn it into a movie; and so on and so forth.

Henry continued to live what was essentially a normal, anonymous life. Writers seldom become public figures. It's their books that rightly hog all the publicity. Readers will easily recognize the cover of a book they've read, but in a café that man over there, is that . . . is that . . . well, it's hard to tell—doesn't he have long hair?—oh, he's gone.

When he was recognized, Henry didn't mind. In his experience, the encounter with a reader was a pleasure. After all, they'd read his book and it had an impact, otherwise why would they come up to him? The meeting had an intimate quality; two strangers were coming together, but to discuss an external matter, a faith object that had moved them both, so all barriers fell. This was no place for lies or bombast.

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Voices were quiet; bodies leaned close together; selves were revealed. Sometimes personal confessions were made. One reader told Henry he'd read the novel in prison. Another that she'd read it while battling cancer. A father shared that his family had read it aloud in the aftermath of the premature birth and eventual death of their baby. And there were other such encounters. In each case, an element of his novel—a line, a character, an incident, a symbol—had helped them pull through a crisis in their lives. Some of the readers Henry met became quite emotional. This never failed to affect him and he tried his best to respond in a manner that soothed them.

In the more typical encounters, readers simply wanted to express their appreciation and admiration, now and again accompanied by a material token, a present made or bought: a snapshot, a bookmark, a book. They might have a question or two they hoped to ask, timidly, not meaning to bother. They were grateful for whatever answer he might give. They took the book he signed and held it to their chest with both hands. The bolder ones, usually but not always teenagers, sometimes asked if they could have their picture taken with him. Henry would stand, an arm over their shoulders, smiling at the camera.

Readers walked away, their faces lit up because they'd met him, while his was lit up because he'd met them. Henry had written a novel because there was a hole in him that needed filling, a question that needed answering, a patch of canvas that needed painting—that blend of anxiety, curios-

ity and joy that is at the origin of art—and he had filled the hole, answered the question, splashed colour on the canvas, all done for himself, because he had to. Then complete strangers told him that his book had filled a hole in them, had answered a question, had brought colour to their lives. The comfort of strangers, be it a smile, a pat on the shoulder or a word of praise, is truly a comfort.

As for fame, fame felt like nothing. Fame was not a sensation like love or hunger or loneliness, welling from within and invisible to the outside eye. It was rather entirely external, coming from the minds of others. It existed in the way people looked at him or behaved towards him. In that, being famous was no different from being gay, or Jewish, or from a visible minority: you are who you are, and then people project onto you some notion they have. Henry was essentially unchanged by the success of his novel. He was the same person he had been before, with the same strengths and the same weaknesses. On the rare occasions when he was approached by a reader in a disagreeable way, he had the last weapon of the writer working under a pseudonym: no, he wasn't XXX, he was just a guy named Henry.

Eventually the business of personally promoting his novel died down, and Henry returned to an existence where he could sit quietly in a room for weeks and months on end. He wrote another book. It involved five years of thinking, researching, writing, and rewriting. The fate of that book is

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not immaterial to what happened next to Henry, so it bears being described.

The book Henry wrote was in two parts, and he intended them to be published in what the publishing trade calls a flip book: that is, a book with two sets of distinct pages that are attached to a common spine upside down and back-to-back to each other. If you flick your thumb through a flip book, the pages, halfway along, will appear upside down. A head-to-tails flip of the conjoined book will bring you to its fraternal twin. So the name *flip book*.

Henry chose this unusual format because he was concerned with how best to present two literary wares that shared the same title, the same theme, the same concern, but not the same method. He'd in fact written two books: one was a novel, while the other was a piece of nonfiction, an essay. He had taken this double approach because he felt he needed every means at his disposal to tackle his chosen subject. But fiction and nonfiction are very rarely published in the same book. That was the hitch. Tradition holds that the two must be kept apart. That is how our knowledge and impressions of life are sorted in bookstores and libraries—separate aisles, separate floors—and that is how publishers prepare their books, imagination in one package, reason in another. It's not how writers write. A novel is not an entirely unreasonable creation, nor is an essay devoid of imagination. Nor is it how people live. People don't so rigorously separate the imaginative from the rational in their thinking and in their actions. There are truths and there are lies—

these are the transcendent categories, in books as in life. The useful division is between the fiction and nonfiction that speaks the truth and the fiction and nonfiction that utters lies.

Still, the custom, a set way of thinking, posed a problem, Henry realized. If his novel and essay were published separately, as two books, their complementarity would not be so evident and their synergy would likely be lost. They had to be published together. But in what order? The idea of placing the essay before the novel struck Henry as unacceptable. Fiction, being closer to the full experience of life, should take precedence over nonfiction. Stories—individual stories, family stories, national stories—are what stitch together the disparate elements of human existence into a coherent whole. We are story animals. It would not be fitting to place such a grand expression of our being behind a more limited act of exploratory reasoning. But behind serious nonfiction lies the same fact and preoccupation as behind fiction—of being human and what it means—so why should the essay be slotted as an afterword?

Regardless of meritorious status, if novel and essay were published in a sequence in one book, whichever came first would inevitably cast into shadow whichever came second.

Their similarities called for novel and essay to be published together; respect for the rights of each, separately. Hence, after much thinking on Henry's part, the choice of the flip book.

Once he had settled on this format, new advantages leapt

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to his mind. The event at the heart of his book was, and still is, profoundly distressing—threw the world upside down, it might be said—so how fitting that the book itself should always be half upside down. Furthermore, if it was published as a flip book, the reader would have to choose in which order to read it. Readers inclined to seek help and reassurance in reason would perhaps read the essay first. Those more comfortable with the more directly emotional approach of fiction might rather start with the novel. Either way, the choice would be the reader's, and empowerment, the possibility of choice, when dealing with upsetting matters, is a good thing. Lastly, there was the detail that a flip book has two front covers. Henry saw more to wraparound jacket art than just added aesthetics. A flip book is a book with two front doors, but no exit. Its form embodies the notion that the matter discussed within has no resolution, no back cover that can be neatly, patly closed on it. Rather, the matter is never finished with; always the reader is brought to a central page where, because the text now appears upside down, the reader is made to understand that he or she has not understood, that he or she *cannot* fully understand, but must think again in a different way and start all over. With this in mind, Henry thought that the two books should end on the same page, with only a blank space between the topsy-turvy texts. Perhaps there could be a simple drawing in that no-man's-land between fiction and nonfiction.

To make things confusing, the term *flip book* also applies

to a novelty item, a small book with a series of slightly changed images or photographs on succeeding pages; when the pages are flicked through quickly, the illusion of animation is created, of a horse galloping and jumping, for example. Later on, Henry had plenty of time to dwell on what cartoon story his flip book would tell if it had been this other type: it would be of a man confidently walking, head high, until he trips and stumbles and falls in a most spectacular fashion.

It should be mentioned, because it is central to the difficulties Henry encountered, to his tripping and stumbling and falling, that his flip book concerned the murder of millions of civilian Jews—men, women, children—by the Nazis and their many willing collaborators in Europe last century, that horrific and protracted outbreak of Jew-hatred that is widely known, by an odd convention that has appropriated a religious term, as the Holocaust. Specifically, Henry's double book was about the ways in which that event was represented in stories. Henry had noticed over years of reading books and watching movies how little actual *fiction* there was about the Holocaust. The take on the event was nearly always historical, factual, documentary, anecdotal, testimonial, literal. The archetypal document on the event was the survivor's memoir, Primo Levi's *If This Is a Man*, for instance. Whereas war—to take another cataclysmic human event—was constantly being turned into something else. War was forever being trivialized, that is, made less than it truly is. Modern wars have killed tens of millions of people

and devastated entire countries, yet representations that convey the real nature of war have to jostle to be seen, heard and read amidst the war thrillers, the war comedies, the war romances, the war science fictions, the war propaganda. Yet who thinks of “trivialization” and “war” in the same breath? Has any veterans’ group ever made the complaint? No, because that’s just how we talk about war, in many ways and for many purposes. With these diverse representations, we come to understand what war means to us.

No such poetic licence was taken with—or given to—the Holocaust. That terrifying event was overwhelmingly represented by a single school: historical realism. The story, always the same story, was always framed by the same dates, set in the same places, featuring the same cast of characters. There were some exceptions. Henry could think of *Maus*, by the American graphic artist Art Spiegelman. David Grossman’s *See Under: Love* also took a different approach. But even with these, the peculiar gravity of the event pulled the reader back to the original and literal historical facts. If a story started later or elsewhere, the reader was inevitably marched back in time and across borders to 1943 and to Poland, like the protagonist in Martin Amis’s *Time’s Arrow*. And so Henry came to wonder: why this suspicion of the imagination, why the resistance to artful metaphor? A work of art works because it is true, not because it is real. Was there not a danger to representing the Holocaust in a way always beholden to factuality? Surely, amidst the texts that related what happened, those vital and necessary diaries,

memoirs and histories, there was a spot for the imagination's commentary. Other events in history, including horrifying ones, had been treated by artists, and for the greater good. To take just three well-known instances of artful witness: Orwell with *Animal Farm*, Camus with *The Plague*, Picasso with *Guernica*. In each case the artist had taken a vast, sprawling tragedy, had found its heart, and had represented it in a nonliteral and compact way. The unwieldy encumbrance of history was reduced and packed into a suitcase. Art as suitcase, light, portable, essential—was such a treatment not possible, indeed, was it not necessary, with the greatest tragedy of Europe's Jews?

To exemplify and argue this supplementary way of thinking about the Holocaust, Henry had written his novel and essay. Five years of hard work it had taken him. After he had finished, the dual manuscript was circulated among his various publishers. That's when he was invited to a lunch. Remember the man in the flip book who trips and stumbles and falls. Henry was flown over the Atlantic just for this lunch. It took place in London one spring during the London Book Fair. Henry's editors, four of them, had invited a historian and a bookseller to join them, which Henry took as a sign of double approval, theoretical and commercial. He didn't see at all what was coming. The restaurant was posh, Art Deco in style. Their table, along its two long sides, was gracefully curved, giving it the shape of an eye. A matching curved bench was set into the wall on one side of it. "Why don't you sit there?" one of his editors said, pointing to the

middle of the bench. Yes, Henry thought, where else would an author with a new book sit but there, like a bride and groom at the head table. An editor settled on either side of him. Facing them, on four chairs along the opposite curved edge of the table, sat an editor on each side of the historian and the bookseller. Despite the formal setting, it was a cozy arrangement. The waiter brought over the menus and explained the fancy specials of the day. Henry was in high spirits. He thought they were a wedding party.

In fact, they were a firing squad.

In the normal course of things, editors flatter writers into seeing everything that's wrong with their book. Every compliment hides a criticism. It's a diplomatic way to proceed, meant to improve a book without crushing its author's spirit. And so it started, after they had ordered their lunch and small-talked a little, the advance of the complimentary adjectives disguising imperative suggestions, like Birnam Wood moving on Dunsinane Castle. But Henry was a clueless Macbeth. He just wasn't hearing what they were saying. He laughed and waved their increasingly pointed questions aside. He told them, "You're reacting exactly the way readers will—with questions, comments and objections. And that's how it should be. A book is a part of speech. At the heart of mine is an incredibly upsetting event that can survive only in dialogue. So let's talk!"

It was the bookseller, an American bookseller in London, plain-spoken and nasal-sounding, who finally grabbed Henry by the lapels, so to speak, and forced his point upon him

clearly and roughly. “Essays are a drag,” he said, speaking, Henry supposed, of his retail experience on both sides of the Atlantic but perhaps also of his critical experience reading them. “Especially if you’re taking on a sacred cow like the Holocaust. Every few seasons a Holocaust book comes out that bangs on the heart chords”—that’s how the bookseller put it—“and goes planetary, but for every one of those there are crates of others that end up being pulped. And with your approach—and I don’t just mean the flip book thing—I also mean this idea you have where we’re supposed to throw our whole imagination at the Holocaust—Holocaust westerns, Holocaust science fictions, Holocaust Jamaican bobsled team comedies—I mean, where is this going? And then you also want to do it as a *flip book*, which is normally just a gimmick, in the same section as the joke books, and, I don’t know, it strikes me that your flip book might just be one big flop book. Flip-flop, flip-flop, flip-flop,” he finished, as the first course arrived, an array of tiny dishes with morsels of over-the-top delicacies on them.

“I hear you,” Henry replied after blinking a few times and swallowing what felt like a large goldfish, “but we can’t always be taking the same approach. Shouldn’t the very newness of it, both in the content and in the form, in a *serious* book, attract attention? Won’t it be a selling point?”

“Where do you see the book being displayed?” asked the bookseller, as he chewed on his food with an open mouth. “In the fiction section or the nonfiction?”

“Ideally both,” Henry replied.

“Not going to happen. Too confusing. Do you know how much stock a bookstore handles? And if we have to worry about turning the book every which way so the right cover is facing out, we’ll never see the end of it. And where are you going to put the bar code? It always goes on the back cover. Where do you put a bar code on a book with two front covers?”

“I don’t know,” said Henry. “On the spine.”

“Too narrow.”

“On the inside flap.”

“Cashiers can’t be opening the book up, looking for it everywhere. And what if the book is plastic-wrapped?”

“On a little wraparound band.”

“They tear and fall off. And then you don’t have a bar code at all—a nightmare.”

“I don’t know then. I wrote my book on the Holocaust without worrying about where the fucking bar code would go.”

“Just trying to help you sell your book,” said the bookseller, rolling his eyes.

“What I think Jeff is pointing out,” interrupted one of Henry’s editors, coming to the rescue, “is that there are certain problems, practical and conceptual, with the book that need to be addressed. For your own good,” she emphasized.

Henry tore a piece of bread and furiously swiped at a tapenade made of olives that came from an exclusive grove of six trees in a remote corner of Sicily. He noticed the asparagus. The waiter had expounded at great length on the

sauce, its culinary sophistication, the refinement of its ingredients, on and on. By the sounds of it, one lick of the stuff and you had as good as earned a Ph.D. Henry stabbed an asparagus, wiped it in the pinkish drizzle and stuffed it in his mouth. He was too distracted to taste anything but green mushiness.

“Let’s take a different approach,” the historian suggested. He had a friendly face and a soothing voice. He tilted his head and peered at Henry over his glasses. “What’s your book about?” he asked.

Henry was thrown into confusion. An obvious question, perhaps, but not one that he could answer so easily. That’s why people write books, after all, to give full answers to short questions. And the bookseller had rankled him. Henry took a deep breath and collected himself. He tried his best with the historian’s question. But his answer came out in stammers and meanders. “My book is about representations of the Holocaust. The event is gone; we are left with stories about it. My book is about a new choice of stories. With a historical event, we not only have to bear witness, that is, tell what happened and address the needs of ghosts. We also have to interpret and conclude, so that the needs of people *today*, the children of ghosts, can be addressed. In addition to the knowledge of history, we need the understanding of art. Stories identify, unify, give meaning to. Just as music is noise that makes sense, a painting is colour that makes sense, so a story is life that makes sense.”

“Yes, yes, perhaps,” the historian said, brushing Henry’s

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words aside, staring at him harder, “but what’s your book *about?*”

A buzz of nervousness shook Henry on the inside. He tried another tack, to do with the idea behind the flip book. “Fiction and nonfiction are not so easily divided. Fiction may not be real, but it’s true; it goes beyond the garland of facts to get to emotional and psychological truths. As for nonfiction, for history, it may be real, but its truth is slippery, hard to access, with no fixed meaning bolted to it. If history doesn’t become story, it dies to everyone except the historian. Art is the suitcase of history, carrying the essentials. Art is the life buoy of history. Art is seed, art is memory, art is vaccine.” Henry could sense that the historian was about to interrupt him and he hurried along incoherently. “With the Holocaust, we have a tree with massive historical roots and only tiny, scattered fictional fruit. But it’s the fruit that holds the seed! It’s the fruit that people pick. If there is no fruit, the tree will be forgotten. Each of us is like a flip book,” Henry pursued, though it didn’t follow from what he was just saying. “Each one of us is a mixture of fact and fiction, a weaving of tales set in our real bodies. Isn’t that so?”

“I get all that,” the historian said with a trace of impatience. “But once again, *what is your book about?*”

To that third iteration of the question, Henry had no answer. Perhaps he didn’t know what his book was about. Perhaps that was the problem with it. His chest rose as he breathed in heavily and sighed. He stared at the white tablecloth, red-faced and at a loss for words.

An editor broke the awkward silence. “Dave has a point,” he said. “There needs to be a tighter focus in both the novel and the essay. This book you’ve written is tremendously powerful, a remarkable achievement, we all agree on that, but as it stands now, the novel lacks drive and the essay lacks unity.”

The waiter arrived, Henry’s constant saviour during that catastrophic lunch, bringing a new dish, the pretext for a change of topic, forced gaiety and grim eating, until another editor, or the bookseller, or the historian, felt the professional urge—and perhaps the personal one—to take up his or her rifle, take aim at Henry, and shoot again. That was the whole meal, a blundering lurch from the frivolity of over-refined food to the dismemberment of his book, Henry quibbling and squabbling, they reassuring and wrecking, to and fro, back and forth, until there was no more food to eat and nothing left to say. It all came out, wrapped in the kindest words: the novel was tedious, the plot feeble, the characters unconvincing, their fate uninteresting, the point lost; the essay was flimsy, lacking in substance, poorly argued, poorly written. The idea of the flip book was an annoying distraction, besides being commercial suicide. The whole was a complete, unpublishable failure.

When at last lunch ended and he was released, Henry walked out in a daze. Only his legs seemed to be working. They set him off in an unknown direction. After a few minutes he came upon a park. Henry was surprised at what he found there. In Canada, where Henry was from, a park is

usually a sanctuary of trees. This London park was not like that. It was an expanse of the loveliest grass, a symphony of green. There were some trees, but they stood very tall with high branches, as if they were mindful of not getting in the way of the unbridled grass. A round pond gleamed in the centre of the park. The weather was warm and sunny and people were out in great numbers. As he wandered about the park, Henry awoke to what had just happened to him. Five years of work had been consigned to oblivion. His mind, stunned into silence, sputtered to life. *I should have said this. . . . I should have said that. . . . Who the fuck was he . . . ? How dare she . . . ?*—so the shouting match in his head went, a full-blown anger fantasy. Henry tried to call his wife, Sarah, in Canada, but she was at work, her cell phone off. He left a rambling, heartbroken message on their voice mail.

A moment came when the tense muscles twitching in Henry's body and the emotions seething inside him came together and spoke in unison: with his fists clenched in the air, he lifted a foot and stamped the ground with all his might, at the same time letting out a choked-up sound from his throat. He hadn't consciously decided to act out like this. It just happened, a snap expression of hurt, fury and frustration. He was near a tree, the soil around it soft and bare, and the impact of his foot-stamping was thunderous, certainly to him, and a couple lying nearby turned his way because of it. Henry stood, amazed. The ground had trembled. He had felt the reverberations. The earth itself had heard him, he thought. He looked up at the tree. It was a giant

tree, a galleon with its sails in full rig, an art museum with its entire collection on display, a mosque with a thousand worshippers praising God. He gazed at it for several minutes. A tree had never before been so soothing to him. As he admired it, he could feel the anger and distress draining from him.

Henry looked at the people around him. Lone individuals, couples, families with children, groups; of every race and ethnicity; reading, sleeping, chatting, jogging, playing, walking their dogs—people varied yet at peace with one another. A peacetime park on a sunny day. What need was there to talk about the Holocaust here? If he found some Jews amidst this peaceable gaggle, would they care to have him gore their beautiful day with talk of genocide? Would *anyone* care to have a stranger come up to them whispering, “Hitlerauschwitzsixmillionincandescent soulsmygodmygodmygod”? And hell, Henry wasn’t even Jewish, so why didn’t he mind his own business? Everything is context, and clearly the context was wrong. Why write a novel about the Holocaust today? The matter is settled. Primo Levi, Anne Frank and all the others have done it well and for all time. “Let go, let go, let go,” Henry intoned. A young man in sandals walked by. *Flip-flop, flip-flop, flip-flop* went his feet, like the bookseller’s damning conclusion. “Let go, let go, let go,” Henry intoned.

After an hour or so, he made his way to the edge of the park. A sign informed him he was in Hyde Park. The irony struck him. He had entered the park like Mr. Hyde of

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Stevenson's tale, deformed by anger, wilfulness and resentment, but he was leaving it more like the good Dr. Jekyll.

Henry realized then what answer he should have given the historian. His flip book was about having his soul ripped out and with it, attached, his tongue. Wasn't that what every Holocaust book was about, aphasia? Henry remembered a statistic: fewer than two percent of Holocaust survivors ever write about or testify to their ordeal. Thus the typical approach of those who do speak about it, so precise and factual, like a stroke victim who's learning how to speak again and who starts with the simplest, clearest syllables. For his part, Henry now joined the vast majority of those who had been shut up by the Holocaust. His flip book was about losing his voice.

And so Henry left Hyde Park no longer a writer. He stopped writing; the urge left him. Was this a case of writer's block? He argued later with Sarah that it wasn't, since a book had been written—two, in fact. It was more accurate to call it writer's abandonment. Henry simply gave up. But if he did not write, he would at least live. A stroll in a London park and an encounter with a beautiful tree at least taught him that useful lesson: if you are pitched into misery, remember that your days on this earth are counted and you might as well make the best of those you have left.

Henry returned to Canada and convinced Sarah they needed a break and a change of scenery. The lure of adven-

ture won her over. In short order, she quit her job, they filled out papers, packed up their things, and moved abroad. They settled in one of those great cities of the world that is a world unto itself, a storied metropolis where all kinds of people find themselves and lose themselves. Perhaps it was New York. Perhaps it was Paris. Perhaps it was Berlin. To that city Henry and Sarah moved because they wanted to live to its pulse for a time. Sarah, who was a nurse, got a work visa and found employment in an addictions clinic. Henry, a resident alien, a rightless ghost, went about filling the parts of his life that were now empty of writing.

He took music lessons, reviving memories (but, alas, few skills) of playing as a teenager. He first tried his hand at the bassoon, but the double reed and the crazy arrangement of the finger holes defeated him. He returned to the clarinet, whose emotional range, from the riotous to the stately, he had not suspected when he was younger. He found a good teacher, an older gentleman, patient, intuitive and funny. The man told Henry that the only native talent needed to play music well was joy. Once, when Henry was labouring on Mozart's clarinet concerto, the teacher interrupted him and said, "Where's the lightness? You've turned Mozart into a heavy, black ox and you're ploughing a field with him." With that, he picked up his own clarinet and produced a burst of music that was so loud, clear and brilliant, a wild storm of gyring notes, that Henry was stunned. It was an aural version of Marc Chagall, with goats, brides, grooms and horses swirling about in a multicoloured sky, a world

without gravity. Then the teacher stopped playing, and the sudden emptiness in the room nearly sucked Henry forward. He looked at his own clarinet. The teacher must have seen the expression on Henry's face. "Don't worry," he said. "It's just a question of practice. You'll be there in no time." Henry got back behind his black ox and plodded on. His teacher smiled and closed his eyes and nodded, muttering, "That's nice, that's nice," as if Henry's ox had taken flight.

Again capitalizing on buried youthful knowledge, Henry signed up for Spanish lessons. His mother tongue was French, and the good fortunes of his childhood, his being the son of roving Canadian foreign service officers, had led him to learn English and German with complete fluency. Only Spanish had not fully fit into his brain in those young learning years. He had lived in Costa Rica as a child for three years, but had attended an English school. On the streets of San José, he learned the outer form of Spanish, its colour, but not the canvas that supported it. As a result, his pronunciation and idioms were good, while his grammatical knowledge was not. He sought to remedy this lack by taking lessons with a dreamy Spanish graduate student who was doing a Ph.D. in history.

That Henry had chosen to write in English raised a number of eyebrows in his native land. It was, he explained, *un hasard*. If you go to school in English and in German, you learn to think in English and in German, and then you naturally start to write in English and in German. His first creative scribblings—highly personal efforts never meant

to see the light of publication—had been in German, he told bemused journalists. Its crunchy pronunciation, clear phonetic spelling, secret-code grammar and architectural syntax endlessly pleased him. But as he grew more ambitious, he explained, it became patently absurd for a Canadian writer to be writing in German. *Das ist doch verrückt!* He switched to English. Colonialism is a terrible bane for a people upon whom it is imposed, but a blessing for a language. English's drive to exploit the new and the alien, its zeal in robbing words from other languages, its incapacity to feel qualms over the matter, its museum-size overabundance of vocabulary, its shoulder-shrug approach to spelling, its don't-worry-be-happy concern for grammar—the result was a language whose colour and wealth Henry loved. In his entirely personal experience of them, English was jazz music, German was classical music, French was ecclesiastical music, and Spanish was the music from the streets. Which is to say, stab his heart and it would bleed French, slice his brain open and its convolutions would be lined with English and German, and touch his hands and they would feel Spanish. But all this, as an aside.

Henry also joined a respected amateur theatre group. Under an inspired director, the group took its endeavours very seriously. Those were some of Henry's fondest memories of the city, those weeknight rehearsals in which he and his fellow amateur actors slowly brought Pinter and Ibsen and Pirandello and Soyinka to life, leaving their lives at the door and becoming, as best they could, someone else on-

stage. The fraternity among these dedicated thespians was priceless, and the reaching for emotional heights and depths, for experiences that were vicarious but powerful, was highly instructive in the way great art can be. With each play Henry felt he had lived an extra life, with its attendant portion of wisdom and folly.

After their move, it happened on a few occasions that Henry awoke in the middle of the night, tiptoed out of the bedroom to the computer, and summoned his book onto the screen to wrestle with it. He shortened the essay by half. He hunted down rogue adjectives and adverbs in the novel. He reworked some scenes and sentences over and over. But no matter what he tried, it was still the same doubly flawed book. In a few months, the fruitless urge to revise and resuscitate went away entirely. He even stopped replying to emails from his agent and editors. Sarah suggested gently that he was perhaps depressed. She encouraged him to keep busy. And though this is jumping ahead—and telling an entirely different story—Sarah in time became pregnant and brought into Henry's life a first child, a baby boy, Theo. Beholding him, astounded as he'd never been before, Henry decided that his son would become his pen and by force of being a good, loving father he would write a beautiful life story with him. If Theo was the only pen Henry ever wielded again, so be it.

Still, art is rooted in joy, as his music teacher had pointed out. It was hard after rehearsing a play, or practicing a piece

of music, or visiting a museum, or finishing a good book, for Henry not to ache for the access he once had to creative joy.

To keep himself busy, Henry involved himself in a last venture, one that took up more of his daylight hours and in a conventionally more serious way than any other, and this was his work in a café. Actually, it was a *chocolatería*, which is what caught his attention in the first place. Coffee was also served, and it was good coffee too, but The Chocolate Road was primarily a fair-trade cocoa cooperative that produced and retailed chocolate in all its forms, from white to milk to dark, in various degrees of purity and in a wide range of flavours, in bars, boxes and hot-chocolate powders, in addition to cocoa powder and chips for baking. Their name-brand produce came from farm cooperatives in the Dominican Republic, Peru, Paraguay, Costa Rica, and Panama and was sold in an increasing number of health food stores and supermarkets. They were a small but growing business, and their *chocolatería*, which was half chocolate mini-market, half hot-chocolate establishment, was their headquarters. The place had a nice feel to it, with an embossed tin ceiling, rotating art exhibits, good, usually Latin music and a southerly exposure so it was often lit up by sunlight. As it wasn't far from where Henry and Sarah lived, Henry often went there to read his paper and sip on rich hot chocolate.

One day he saw a sign posted in a window: **HELP WANTED**. On impulse, he inquired. Henry didn't need a job, in fact he couldn't work legally, but he liked the people at The Chocolate Road and he admired their principles. He applied,

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they were intrigued, they agreed that he would be paid in shares, and, lo, Henry became a small shareholder in a chocolate concern and a part-time waiter and general helper. Sarah was amused and puzzled; she chalked it up to Henry doing research. Quickly his self-consciousness at serving strangers vanished. In fact, he enjoyed being a waiter. It was a moderate form of exercise and it allowed him to observe briefly but constantly the behaviour and dynamics of people, whether solitary drinkers, couples, families, or groups of friends. His hours at The Chocolate Road went by pleasantly.

To complete the picture, Sarah and he adopted a small puppy and a kitten from an animal shelter, neither of them remotely purebred, just bright-eyed and vigorous. The first they named Erasmus, the second Mendelssohn. Henry was curious to see how they would get along. Erasmus proved rambunctious, but easy to train. He often came with Henry on errands. Mendelssohn, a lovely black feline, was a more retiring creature. If strangers visited, she disappeared under the sofa.

That was the life Henry and Sarah constructed for themselves in that great city. They thought they would live there for a year or so, an extended holiday, but they weren't inclined to leave after the first year, nor after the second, and then they stopped thinking about when exactly they would leave.

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