

# Jerome's Pillows

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# Jerome's Pillows

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To  
Mauricette Lubin  
with affection and admiration



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## Chapter 1

The pillows I'm propped on have been a blessing since Jerome, my house servant, presented them to me at the ceremony of my investiture as head-nurse of the Congo's Wembo-Nyama hospital on December 12, 1949. For more than a year, dear Jerome collected down feathers from the nests of Cameroon Scrub-Warblers, and using two lion skins purchased at the Leopoldville Central Market, he fashioned the pillows. He kept them in his room, waiting for the ideal moment to hand them over to me. They are the two most comfortable pillows in the world. I brought Jerome and the pillows with me when I returned to Tournai, the hometown in southern Belgium that I left fifty-five years before. I have been grateful for them both like no other gift.

Supported by Jerome's pillows, I give vent in my suite in Maison St. Jean, Tournai's nursing home, to my yearning to reach out to the world outside with what I tell myself is a unique story—a story that's neither narcissistic, nor prejudiced, nor a delirium, nor as people have told me to my face the story of an old nun—I prefer renunciant; nun was until recently a term of address for old people—weaving her regrets into redemption for a wasted unnatural life. Of course, in the grand scheme of time it's not an exceptional story; but it is—where it counts—in the tale of two simple nuns. People do not know an exceptional story when they hear one. No! They have to be told. It's hard work deciding things for oneself.

That's especially true if the story is a nun's. That makes me wish people were as patient as my notebook. You see, my notebook can bear everything and its opposite. Or as young Anne Frank said, *Papier heeft meer geduld dan mensen*; and it's true, notebooks have more patience than people.

In Maison St. Jean I write my notes about Mária and me one hour in the morning, and if I have had prior to 3 p.m. an evocative and heartfelt prayer with no interruption from my *friend* the “word,” I write one hour and a half more in the afternoon. In Maison St. Jean I debate with myself and my notebook what and how much I should tell, mindful that I'm subject to a duty of confidentiality, a sworn obligation not to disclose what might be injurious to my order.

What has freed me from the apprehension of going into the details of my life as a nun is that there's already a nun's story on library shelves in the most beautiful book I've read, the 1956 novel by Kathryn Hulme, *The Nun's Story*. Ms. Hulme's novel goes into the minute details of a nun's life; her daily routine from her first day as an aspirant to her final vows and well beyond, delving into every centimeter of a Belgian nun's journey into sisterhood until the moment she walks out of the convent into a world at war. So intricate is the journey Ms. Hulme tells that *The Nun's Story* reminded me, when I read it in a one-nightly swoop, of the kilometers of Priscilla's Catacombs, tunnels that run under Rome and the Basilica of San Silvestro that I visited in 1964. Even the nun's underthings are discussed in *The Nun's Story*. And, of course, the ubiquitous rules over which obedience reigns supreme are laid out in their full panoply and debated incessantly in Ms. Hulme's masterpiece. At my bedside, I consult it constantly as if it were my own journal, mindful that it's easier to talk about someone else than it is about oneself. If you're an outsider or live vicariously you can be obsessive with facts. An insider, on the other hand, must be particular, cautious, and even evasive when the need is sharp; especially if a beloved is involved. So what is left for me to tell? To my surprise, I find that talking about Mària makes it less painful to talk about myself. Fortunately, too, Ms. Hulme's novel abounds in the nun's self-denial and the convent's Machiavellian strategy to deceive life or as Ms. Hulme puts it, "her life against nature." That has given me the loophole I was praying for to tell Mària's story and mine without going into the minutiae of a nun's convent life and betray our vows. I figure that since Ms. Hulme has already covered in obsessive details all there is about a Belgian nun's daily life and more beautifully than I could ever do, out of shame, arrogance, or delight, and don't forget the inescapable fact of old age, I can be perverse—not contrarian—about divulging the indulgences Mària and I didn't deny ourselves. I can then turn Ms. Hulme's *Nun's Story* on end with the lives of two nuns who cheated the rules in favor of being true to themselves. Freed, therefore, from the apprehension that I'll divulge what I shouldn't, rather than focusing on the sanctum of sisterhood, I concentrate instead on the sanctum of Mària and me. Thanks to Ms. Hulme's novel, then, ours can focus on fashioning from an insider's experience a journey filled

with personal accounts, to bring knowing smiles from women or frowns from the bishops or both from whoever takes an interest in our story. But I don't delude myself, not really. No one will believe me, especially men whose posturing about women who do with women is self-serving. Nevertheless, I fear that telling the story of two young nuns doing blissfully in the manner of Stein and Toklas will be censored. However, my yearning to reach out to the world outside is compelling, and I persist, pressed by the inescapable fact of old age, dreading the loss of health trickling relentlessly out of my control; dreading more needing help from the staff that refers to me not as Sister Immanuel but as "*La Folle de Tournai*." So far, because they have a pointed eye on the bequest they expect from my estate, they say it behind my back; next week may be different. But I'm watching; not waiting stupidly to croak. My supreme fear is that I'll not do right by my beloved, or by the love story part of my history, or that I'll say too much and write a clunky hagiography of someone who isn't a saint. Or that I'll not tell my history's love story as it should be told.

Father Brabant told us that Heaven looks kindly on love; I'm sure, however, that It does not on nuns who are not truthful.

Suicide is what links everything in the notes I have been keeping about Mária and me. God has willed that suicide, the word, pulsate through my mind like a drumbeat, rudely questioning me, "What is to be done when life is not worth living, ugh?" A raucous word suicide is. It keeps me awake nights, whispering life's foremost riddle in my head. Then, for weeks, as fickle as it is loud, Suicide inexplicably becomes eerily silent, leaving me to answer all by myself its question about life.

Suicide has been my loud and fickle companion since the day my aunt told me that my mother had taken her own life. I was eleven when she died but learned how only twelve years later, the day I became a nun, a renunciant.

August 17, 1945, a Sunday, late in the morning; it's overcast and sufficiently cold for the smoke from the chimneys to hang wintrily over the town and make the day surlier still. An hour ago I made the official, followed by the simple vows of a Perpetual Cross renunciant. Mária, ever since fourth grade, at my side, her Greta Garbo features more distinctive sheathed in her wimple, the Perpetual Cross garment that covers the hair and goes around the

neck and chin to differentiate the Perpetual Cross from the other orders. She's resplendent in the fulfillment of her dream to become a nun. She dazzles like an angel on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling in her fully professed promise to Almighty God in the presence of the Virgin Mother, heaven, and the townspeople crowding the pews of our magnificent 13<sup>th</sup> century gothic Cathedral of Notre Dame de Tournai. Mária's radiance brightens all of us newly vowed renunciants and, thanks to her, we glow.

Marching solemnly in ceremonial procession and gravely singing with all the passion of our hearts the *Veni Creator Spiritu*, we step out of the cathedral to receive congratulations and best wishes from the whole world, pleased for us and happy that the war is over. *Les sales Boches*, the Germans, have been defeated and have departed Belgium. Mária squeezes my hand at the sight of a group of head-shaved women, collaborators, all dressed in black standing to the left, far to the side. She will not squeeze my hand again that day. Unusual, too, are two African families standing not far from the women, as if for safety. The safety of kinship, I suppose.

My aunt had taken station outside, on the right side of the main portal, better to corral me, when the procession broke, and we fell in the arms of family and friends. Suddenly I felt her reach for the sleeve of my habit and pull as if for dear life. A tiny creature, as ever in black since my mother's death, she has an untoward expression on her dull yellow face.

I am clasping Mária's left hand. But Tantie, as I call my aunt, says that she needs to speak to me alone; she has something "personal" to tell me. Mária lets go of my hand and—reluctantly because it breaks my heart that she took her hand away so abruptly—I go with my aunt. And on this frosty Lord's Day in August; like a creature straining to expel a choking lump, she blurts out a speech on the steps of Notre Dame de Tournai, "Today you can know your mother did not die of typhoid like your father said. She committed suicide. You're the one who can save her now with your chastity and prayers. God in His mercy has given you preeminence for that purpose." Numb and like a character in a cartoon, I look left and right. I don't know what to say.

After lunch, she has her husband drive me in their old 1937 Peugeot to my mother's hanging site in the village of Forest-sur-

Marque across the border in France, where my mother had been a second-grade schoolteacher.

The tree is still there, looking injured or offended somehow, forlorn as an alien would, lost against the overcast span of the frayed sky on the outskirts of a park named for Marshal Petain. I advance toward it as if it were the Cross, and I kneel to pray to an Icon. I will look on this park as a clandestine memorial to my mother's end.

After a long while praying and staring at it, wondering what made her opt for this tree, my uncle, whom I call Tonton, points out that a branch has been cut. And switching to hand signals, as if to minimize the intrusion on the reverential silence and the sporadic wind, he explains that he amputated the tree at my aunt's urging and was fined ten thousand francs by the gendarmerie of Forest-sur-Marque that looked askance at the desecration of a park with the marshal's name. I wish Mária were here to tell me what to think, but I wasn't able to tell her that my mother had hanged herself.

To break the silence in the car on the way back to Tournai, my uncle, looking straight ahead, tells me, "No one was certain what caused your mother to do what she did back in 1934. I remember that she was distraught, very distraught, about your father absconding with that cousin from Lille. Your father was a mad philanderer," my uncle says in what for him is anger. "He was a real goat, if ever there was one," he adds. "It was his idea that you be told that your mother died of typhoid fever."

I remember my mother being bedridden off and on for a long time, as long as long is for a child of twelve. Doctor Lubin I think his name was came every evening to see her, mumbling that he thought that her immune system was in dreadful shape, using the term "out of kilter" to describe her immune system. But he wasn't sure. He suggested that my mother get rid of our two cats. It was a suggestion, a wild guess, he said. He wasn't sure. He had seen a similar case in Brussels where the family there also had cats. He discussed her condition with my uncle, a gynecologist, explaining that he didn't understand why the front lobe of my mother's brain seemed infected as if by a virus, causing the headaches, sore lymph nodes and pains in her limbs' muscles. (Virology was a new science.) He wasn't sure. He palpated my mother's breasts a lot to

ascertain her condition. He was seeking a cause. It could be in her breast. The day she died, she seemed well, however; drove me to school in the morning with no deviation from the way she always behaved on her way to Forest-sur-Marque in the little Simca car we nicknamed "Plume" after my favorite cat that had died the year before. (We loved that cat so much we had it cremated and put the ashes on a shelf with a vase of flowers in my room.) I don't remember my father being there. Sixty-six years after my mother died, I read in *The Acta Clinica Belgica* medical journal about suicides caused by degeneration of frontal lobes from toxoplasmosis. Had my mother really been infected by our cats with toxoplasmosis? "Had she had a firearm, I'm sure she'd have used it. It's simpler," my uncle adds offhandedly. "But perhaps she wouldn't have wanted to impose more inconvenience on us. She was a very considerate person, your mother was. But thank God she was found. One thing, I know, no question about it, being is unbearable if it's all your life has."

But she had me. How thoughtful was she about me? I meant nothing to her? I ask. I didn't say anything aloud; like that odd drumbeat in my head that I heard for the first time as my uncle and I were pulling out of the driveway earlier. By then the rain has started again. There is no wind. In Tournai, the rain refuses to let the wind in; and people pray for drought.

My uncle settles back into his customary silence, to let me unravel by myself the meaning of my mother's suicide. Perhaps because he knows how much the rain comforts me, he thinks the drizzle will do better than he can to ease my bewilderment. It is up to me to make sense of the day's revelations.

In my aunt's eyes, my mother had committed the fundamental sin. Whether she could not bear being alive because that was all her life had, my mother did wrong. By giving in to suicide, she did wrong. Now she needed no less than a personal renunciant to pray for the rescue of her soul. I was stunned, back there, on the steps of Notre Dame, confounded. I was not judgmental, thanks to God; probably because my aunt was the person who told me in that inflected voice she reserved for when she wanted to appear solemn. Mária and I hated that voice. Instead of judgmental, I felt a certain envy that I would not have been able to explain and spent a lifetime trying to understand. Envy! Envy toward an indepen-

dent-minded woman; perhaps “oppressed so hard she could not stand,” who arrived at a crossroad where whether life was or was not worth living confronted her. How long did she remain at that crossroad, pondering? Did she wait long? In prayer, I’m sure, for the terror of the noose to lift from her? However long she waited at the crossroad; however terrifying the noose was, her answer was no; life was not worth living.



Conscience and fear are appendages of the old, and I’ve wished since turning twenty that I could observe the world with a bit of the mind of an old woman, an old woman like the one I am now, writing these notes, supported by Jerome’s pillows; debating what to tell in light of what Ms. Hulme has already revealed and what Mária and I can live with. I was too pessimistic back then; too new to the sisterhood, when the three-syllable drumbeat began to bully an answer out of me. Fortunately, I was dutiful to my new calling and that’s what stood up to the drumbeat in my head like an Angel of the Lord and saved me from my rebellious and too pessimistic nature. The result is that I answered as my aunt did, Beethoven’s *Missa Solemnis* resonating in harmony with the drumming in my head. “Inquiring whether life is or is not worth living is a profession of doubt that defies the Trinity’s commandment—an act of insubordination to divine authority, a great sin.” And I never mentioned my mother’s suicide to Mária; I was afraid she’d think that my mother was mad. She had said often enough that I was, when finding me craving for something more generous than a kiss. That fear was reinforced and became embedded in my mind a couple of years later in Leopoldville, where the Brussels diocese had assigned us. A dysentery patient of ours, a French economist, committed suicide. After that, I couldn’t help thinking that my mother had been under the influence of a fatal mental illness as well. It’s when I moved to Maison St. Jean that I concluded that my mother had committed no sin, but by then I think it was a self-serving conclusion granted because I hope for an absolution for my own end of life.