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The Accidental Agent

Written by Andrew Rosenheim

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The Accidental Agent

Andrew
Rosenheim



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IT WAS THE third week of Torts, and America was at war at last – though Nessheim knew his own war was over. He sat near the back of the large lecture room in Stuart Hall at the University of Chicago, trying not to yawn. The room was only sparsely filled, for enrolment in the college had declined dramatically since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor the year before.

The few law students remaining consisted of what Winograd, who sat beside Nessheim now, called ‘cripples, COs, and girls’. A charmless description which Winograd told Nessheim he felt entitled to make since he was himself classed 4-F and exempted on medical grounds. A beefy Minnesotan, he looked like perfect cannon fodder until he took an awkward step or two, and you saw that his foot was encased in a thick boot that had a specially built four-inch heel. ‘A run-in with a tractor,’ he’d explained. ‘They ought to call me 1-F since I’ve only got two feet and just one of them is fucked up.’

‘Mr Nessheim.’ The voice broke through Nessheim’s thoughts, and he looked up to find Professor Fielding staring at him.

After war had been declared the previous year, half the faculty had decamped to bear arms or serve the burgeoning needs of the government in Washington. Fielding was one of those emeritus professors persuaded to come out of retirement to fill these vacancies, but unlike others who were keen to step into their old shoes, he clearly resented the lame ducks he was now teaching. He had served in the final months of the last war

with the American Expeditionary Force in France and had mentioned this in the very first class, as if to distance himself from his non-combatant audience. Not that he looked like any kind of soldier: he was a dapper figure, smartly dressed today in a three-piece suit of sage-coloured tweed that had been tailored in a more luxurious peacetime era. He had a thick greying moustache that he stroked tenderly on the rare occasions he listened to a student.

Now Fielding went on, his tone a mix of insincere optimism and authentic impatience. ‘You looked a million miles away, Mr Nessheim. Where were you, I wonder? Guadalcanal perhaps, or North Africa?’

Pearl Harbor actually, thought Nessheim, though he wouldn’t have dreamed of saying so – his presence there, on the day the Japanese attacked, wouldn’t have been believed.

But Fielding was happy to continue on his own. ‘I acknowledge that the conflicts we engage in here may seem pallid by comparison, but this is the theatre of operations we have all been assigned to. So would it help, Mr Nessheim, if I repeated the question?’

It wouldn’t help at all, thought Nessheim, wondering how this was going to unravel. His written work so far had been well received, but in class he found his mind wandering. Fortunately Fielding was distracted by a new arrival. A young woman walked confidently down the far aisle of the lecture hall, heading for the seats at the front. Usually students who were late entered quietly, slinking into the back rows of the lecture room. But this woman made no effort to disguise her entrance, and her heels clicked like match strikes on the parquet floor.

She was a breath of fresh air in this stuffy balloon of a room, and somehow familiar too, although her

face was shielded by the angle from which Nessheim viewed her, and by thick glossy hair that fell back upon her shoulders – it was the colour of burnt honey. She wore an elegant overcoat the same colour as Fielding’s tweed suit, but of softer-looking, finer material. As she slowed down Nessheim caught a glimpse of her charcoal stockings and of well-shaped legs he was pretty sure he’d seen before. Winograd nudged him with an elbow, and said in a whisper that could have carried downtown to the Loop, ‘Catch a gander of that.’

At the lectern, Fielding looked suspiciously at this new arrival, for he didn’t like to be upstaged. ‘And you are, miss?’

‘Very late, Professor.’ Her voice was smoky and low. ‘Three weeks late, I know. But I couldn’t get a train from the Coast for love or money – all the soldier boys have priority. Heavens knows why. There ought to be a law against it.’

Even Fielding smiled at this, though briefly. ‘You’re going to have a lot of catching up to do, Miss . . . ?’

She ignored the question. ‘I know – I usually do, Professor.’ She sat down, having spread her coat out on the chair behind her and taken off her neat black gloves, then used both hands to push her hair back. Suddenly Nessheim could see her profile, and understood with a sudden awful clarity why she seemed familiar. She said, ‘Don’t worry. I always seem to get there in the end.’

When class ended Nessheim left quickly, ignoring Winograd’s entreaties to stick around. ‘Don’t you want to say hello to the new gal? You can’t leave her with Hobson the CO – he’ll bore her to death with tales of Quaker persecution.’

‘Got to run,’ said Nessheim tersely. From the rear

doors he turned and saw the late arrival talking to Professor Fielding. Remarkably, Fielding seemed to be chuckling. He looked beguiled.

Outside, Nessheim took a deep breath, walking out into a sky of surprising blue after days of lint-grey haze had seemed to portend an early winter. He was glad to get out of the stale air of the lecture room, where cigarette smoke drifted like low-level clouds beneath the high ceiling of the room. It had been unseasonably mild and the trees of the Quadrangle had been slow to turn, with only the faintest streaks of scarlet and yellow among their leaves despite it being the very end of October.

At the east end of the Quadrangle the street ran through pairs of tennis courts on either side. They were net-less now, requisitioned by the navy for drills. A small group of sailors stood at the street end of the high fence surrounding the courts, taking a break from preparations for the next day's navy parade along State Street – it was billed as the largest parade since the war began, with over 6,000 uniformed men and women expected. Fresh-faced, absurdly young, wearing their dress blues and white Dixie cup hats, they looked like the cast of a maritime musical.

As Nessheim passed them, a cigarette stub came sailing through the hooped wire of the fence and landed at his feet. He stopped walking and turned to face the court, where the sailor closest to the fence stared at him without affection.

'Thanks,' said Nessheim, kicking the cigarette butt into the street gutter with the toe of his shoe.

'What's your excuse?' the sailor said. He was short and pug-faced, with shoulders suggesting a former wrestler who worked with dumb-bells to keep his shoulders wide.

‘Excuse me?’

‘You 4-F or something?’

‘You could call it “something”,’ said Nessheim.

One of the sailor’s pals began to sing, clutching his heart mockingly: ‘He’s 1-A in the Army and He’s A-1 in My Heart.’

Nessheim started to move on but the sailor said sharply, ‘You’re 4-F, I bet. Four is for ’fraidy cat and F is for fairy.’

Nessheim stopped and sighed. ‘Now there we were, getting along so well, and you have to go and spoil it.’

One of the other sailors laughed. Nessheim gestured at the separating fence. ‘Let me know if you’re ever allowed out of your cage. Then we could continue the conversation in private.’

‘You’d like that, I bet,’ the sailor sneered. ‘The private bit.’

This time Nessheim’s sigh was heartfelt. I am thirty years old, he told himself, not a school kid reacting to a playground insult. He stared hard at Pug Nose nonetheless.

‘Come on, Willy,’ one of the other sailors said. ‘The lieutenant’s calling. Break’s over.’

Pug-nosed Willy made a show of stepping back reluctantly from the fence. He said to Nessheim, ‘I’ll see you again.’ And then he gave a chicken-like squawk before turning to join his colleagues.

Nessheim walked away, trying to clear his head of the sailor’s taunts.

Being called a fairy didn’t bother him as much as being called a coward. He wasn’t avoiding military service; it was avoiding him. He had tried to enlist twice. The first time a phone call came in from Washington alerting the local Wisconsin draft board to his ropey medical history. His second attempt, made the previous

spring before he left Los Angeles, had also foundered, though this time because halfway through his physical his old concussion-caused dizziness had struck out of the blue. When they'd taken his blood pressure the systolic number had been over two hundred.

He liked Chicago, a grey city which sat on the shoreline of Lake Michigan but otherwise had no natural physical advantages; it had to build its own beauty and had done so in only seventy years or so, after Mrs O'Leary's apocryphal cow had knocked over a lantern and burnt most of the city down. He thought now of going over to Jackson Park by the Lake, six blocks away. But along the Midway, mile-long lengths of lawn sandwiched by boulevards that had been created during the 1893 World's Fair, he would see soldiers in drill formation, and feel again the inadequacy of his own civilian status. He had always had the advantage in life of sticking out – in a good way. In his football days he had even briefly been semi-famous. But now he stood out for the wrong reason – he wasn't in uniform, when every other able-bodied man his age was.

He turned at Kimbark and walked up to 57th Street, passing the large houses that lined both leafy sides of the street. The only local material had been prairie sod, so these residences were built in a bewildering variety of brick, stone and white pine lumber. At 57th a row of stores extended to Kenwood Avenue. They were busy these days, after more than a decade of Depression-era struggle, and outside the grocery store there was a line of customers; sugar had been rationed at the beginning of May and many were waiting to buy it, their ration books in hand. People had cash to spend, now that anyone could get a job, especially if they were willing to move – to California, where the airplane manufacturers were struggling to fill newly launched assembly

lines with anything on two legs; or to Detroit, where, as part of Roosevelt's 'great arsenal of democracy', the motor-car companies had rejigged their factories to produce weapons of every conceivable description.

Nessheim wondered how long the new exuberance would last. Until the year before, America had fought the war solely through its imagination; now the battles were real and bodies would soon be coming back. And although people felt flush, there wasn't a lot to spend it on – it was as if they had been given a windfall on condition they spend it all in a dime store. You could buy a new suit, as long as it was a single-breasted number without a vest and had fly buttons instead of a zipper (the metal saved could make casings for ammunition shells). But new cars weren't being made, and it was virtually impossible to find tyres for the old ones. Rationing of gasoline would start on December 1 in the state of Illinois, with coupon books to be issued, allowing four gallons per week. Daily advertisements in newspapers reminded the public that cars and tyres were national assets, exhorting people to contribute to victory by conserving vital rubber and metal to provide for tanks and planes. There were neighbourhood scrap campaigns and posters everywhere encouraging citizens to buy US Victory bonds.

A car drove past which he noticed right away – a new Packard Eight deluxe convertible the colour of late-picked cherries. The driver had the top up, a curving mogul of cream-coloured canvas. It must have snuck in under the wire before all of Detroit's car-making capacity was turned to military purposes. When Nessheim cut diagonally across the street he saw the red Packard slow down and stop. It sat double-parked for a moment, ignoring the soft toot of a car waiting behind it. As Nessheim moved north on Kimbark he heard it suddenly accelerate away.

He passed Ray School where the kids were all in class, and the sports field was empty. There were the remains of a Victory garden laid out in one patch of ground, littered by flattened vegetable leaves and loose string which had demarcated the rows that had been picked clean. At the corner he came to the small complex of four-storey buildings where he had his apartment. He was crossing the street, looking right, when he saw the same convertible cross 56th Street a block away, heading north on Kenwood. This time the top was down, but his view was blocked by the row of elms bordering the sidewalk and he couldn't see the driver.

Probably nothing, he told himself, though he remembered his drive east from California the previous spring. He had left LA after uncovering a web of Russian intrigue, fronted by an alluring but ultimately poisonous woman named Elizaveta Mukasei; he had been forced in self-defence to kill one of her henchman. Mr Mukasei was the vice consul for the Russian mission in LA, and now that the Russians were allies, Nessheim couldn't lay a finger on either of them – despite ample evidence to convict the pair of espionage and murder in more normal times.

There had been a night he spent en route at a motel in Nebraska; the following morning, twenty miles east of there, he realised he'd left behind a pair of shoes and had doubled back to fetch them. The motel clerk had said, 'Your friend catch up to you?'

'What friend?'

'Skinny guy with a fedora. He sounded foreign to me.'

'He must have been looking for someone else.'

'He described you good enough.'

'Did he know my name?'

'He didn't mention it and I couldn't have helped him there anyway – the register wasn't much help.' He

laughed and passed the big bound book across the shelf of desk. Nessheim had scrawled his usual illegible autograph – his name might have been Nussbaum for all the ink blur said. The incident had been unsettling enough for Nessheim to detour off Route 40 for a day, then take an extra day driving to Chicago. Since then there had been no reason to worry. He might have stood out, but the only people who seemed to notice were – like Pug Nose – men in uniform.

His apartment sat at the base of a long U formed by two flanking wings of brick. He turned into this small recessed courtyard and saw two men waiting by the entrance to his own tier, a good fifty yards from the street. One of the men, powerfully built and looming in army uniform, was pacing back and forth; the other, dressed in a black raincoat that had seen better days, sat huddled with his hands in his pockets on one of two low piers that jutted out at knee height from either side of the entranceway.

Nessheim thought briefly of turning around. He could go through the alley that led to the rear entrance to his apartment, where in his bedroom closet he still had his Bureau-issue .38. But if these guys had come to get him would they be waiting out in the open? To hell with it, he decided, moving forwards. He was just a student now.

The sitting man spotted him, then stood up, leaving his hat on the brick pier. He was shorter than the army man, but heavysset, with a biggish soft-looking nose, dark strands of receding hair, and a wistful expression on his face. No one would mistake him for military – for one thing, his shoes could use a shine.

‘Hello, Harry,’ Nessheim called. ‘Been waiting long?’

The man shook his head. ‘About twenty minutes, but it’s not that warm out.’

‘Give it a month and you’ll really feel the cold. We

had snow back in September. This is summer compared to what's to come.'

The man named Harry said to the other man, 'This is Special Agent Nessheim. Nessheim, this is General Groves.' Groves nodded curtly.

Nessheim said, 'Unless it's the Communist philosophy professor on the third floor, I reckon you're here to see me.'

'That's right,' said Groves. His steel-blue eyes gave nothing away.

'You'd better come upstairs then.'

Nessheim led the way into the building, unlocking the inner door of the atrium. He went past the front door of the janitor's basement apartment and up a carpeted staircase with a creaking mahogany banister. One flight up there was an apartment on either side of the landing. He opened the door to the left one, motioning Groves and Harry Guttman inside.

They all stood for a moment in the small hallway, then Nessheim took their coats and hats and hung them up in the hall closet. He pointed to the living room at the front. It was glowing softly from the light of the lowering sun.

'Have a seat,' he said. There was an easy chair he'd plucked from a yard sale down the block, a long grey sofa the landlady had thrown in, and a wooden kitchen chair.

Guttman took the sofa while Groves hesitated, then sat down as well, though he didn't settle, perching uneasily on the easy chair's front edge. Groves had a moustache that put Professor Fielding's in the shade, and an imposing frame – he was maybe an inch or two shorter than Nessheim, but much heavier. He would have played tackle on his high-school football team.

‘Nice place,’ Groves said curtly, looking around as Nessheim sat down on the kitchen chair. ‘Tidy.’

‘He grew up on a farm,’ said Guttman.

‘What’s that got to do with it?’ asked Nessheim. Guttman shrugged.

Groves was examining the bookshelves, which were half full, mainly with novels. He said, ‘I don’t see any football trophies. Guttman says you were all-American. Why not put the certificate on the wall?’

‘There isn’t one – it’s just an invention of the sports writers. I was second team, anyway. That doesn’t seem worth a shrine.’ The only relics were a bunch of newspaper clippings he’d given his mother, which lay in an old shoebox under the stairs of her house in Wisconsin. His mother had never liked him playing.

Silence filled the room awkwardly, like a semi-visible gas. What did these two want? Nessheim finally broke the silence. ‘I’ve got some cold beers in the icebox, and a warm bottle of Scotch.’

Groves started to shake his head but Guttman said quickly, ‘I’ll take a beer, thanks. General?’

Groves shrugged. ‘I’ll join you.’

Nessheim nodded and walked down the hall to the small kitchen.

He left the bottle of Scotch alone, figuring he’d need the drink after this conversation, not before. He grabbed two bottles of Blatz from the refrigerator and opened them with a church key he took from the drawer of the kitchen cabinet. It felt stuffy in the apartment, so he opened the outer back door, leaving the screen door on its hook. He heard a scraping sound from down the back staircase, then another; he stopped for a moment and listened, then realised it must be the janitor moving his garbage cans.

Returning to the living room he found the two men

sitting in silence again. He said, 'What's this about? My mother phoned me yesterday and my father's long gone. So who's swallowed a fork?'

Groves took the beer from Nessheim and held it for a moment, his lips tight. 'I'll let Guttman begin.'

Guttman was shaking his head. 'Nobody's dead, and nothing's happened – yet. But we need your help.'

'I thought I was just a student now, Harry. I resigned, remember?' He had made it clear he didn't want a desk job at the Bureau's Washington HQ.

Groves said brusquely, 'Guttman told me you never took a BA.'

'That's right. I lost my scholarship.'

'What happened – you forget to go to class?'

Nessheim said sharply, 'I got hurt playing ball. You can't keep your scholarship if you can't play.'

'So how'd you wangle your way into law school without a BA?'

Guttman spoke for him. 'Chicago lets you in if you've done three years of college.'

'Is that so?' asked Groves without any real interest. He turned back to Nessheim. 'You've got to admit it's a pretty irregular billet. How much is tuition?'

'Three hundred seventy-five bucks a year.'

'You got some dough socked away?'

'Enough,' said Nessheim truthfully. He'd been well paid as a Special Agent.

'Sounds an easy life to me, even if the place is stinking with pinkos.' Groves gave a snort, his nostrils dilating like rubber.

'If you say so. I tried to enlist, twice in fact, but the army wouldn't have me. Would they, Harry?' he asked pointedly.

Guttman didn't reply. Groves took a deep breath and exhaled noisily, like a moose clearing its nose. 'All right,

let me explain. I've recently been appointed the head of a new military project. It's based in locations across the country – one of them is in Illinois. I can't go into details, it's top secret, but the project involves the finest scientific talent in the world.'

He paused – why? So Nessheim would nod, suitably impressed? When Nessheim failed to, Groves continued. 'It's all classified. Like this entire conversation. Is that understood?'

Nessheim looked at Guttman, who was nodding thoughtfully in non-interventionist mode. 'Sure,' Nessheim said slowly, damned if he was going to say 'sir'. 'I'm all ears and no mouth.'

'You know anything about physics?'

'I had a year of it in college.'

'How'd you do?'

'I'd never make a scientist, but I know more about it than he does.' He pointed at Guttman, who laughed: six months before, Guttman hadn't been sure what a physicist was. 'What is the project?'

'You don't need to know much about it. In fact, it's probably better that you don't. Leave it to the scientists.'

Nessheim wasn't a reader of comics, but you couldn't help but be aware of Flash Gordon and his fantastic gizmos and space rockets. 'Another secret weapon, huh?' Groves flushed slightly, so Nessheim knew he'd hit home. He looked at Guttman. 'Is it what that guy in California was talking about?'

'What guy?' Groves demanded.

Nessheim kept looking at Guttman. 'You know, Harry. The guy we saw last spring in Berkeley.'

Guttman said to Groves, 'Nessheim was with me when I saw Professor Oppenheimer on the Coast.'

'Why did you take him along?' Groves asked with obvious irritation.

Guttman said mildly, 'It's a good thing I did. We don't have to worry about his getting curious when he's already got a good idea of what's going on.'

'I guess so,' Groves said grudgingly. 'Do you know the Argonne Forest?'

'No.'

'It's about fifteen miles west of here. We have an installation there. The work is at a critical stage, but we've got some labour problems. Not everybody seems willing to help the war effort,' he added angrily. 'So we've moved it here to the university.' Groves took a swig of his beer. Despite his bull-like manners and appearance, he seemed uncertain what to say next. Nessheim saw no point prompting him. Either he had something to tell him or he didn't.

Guttman interjected, 'This project of ours is of interest to the enemy. We think they're running their own in parallel to ours.'

'The Japs or the Germans?'

'The Germans,' Groves declared. 'Your people.'

'My people?'

Groves ignored the sharpness in Nessheim's reply. 'Well, just how German are you?'

Nessheim shrugged. 'My parents were both born here. Their parents weren't. I thought by now I was American.'

'Guttman says you speak the language.'

'Not really. My parents spoke to each other in German, especially when they didn't want my sister or me to understand. Naturally I picked some up. But I understand it better than I speak it – my father discouraged that.' Nessheim's father had been eager to have his son assimilate in a way he never could.

'Were your parents Catholics?'

'No, Lutheran.'

'The scientists I mentioned – many of them come

from Europe, and almost all of those are Jews. Have you got any Jewish blood?’ Groves sounded a little anxious.

‘Not that I know of.’ He glanced at Guttman, who looked as if he was trying not to laugh. ‘I’ll keep looking, though, and let you know.’

Guttman said, ‘We believe the Nazis may have infiltrated the Argonne project, and that most likely it would be someone masquerading as a refugee. Probably pretending to be a Jew – there couldn’t be better cover for a Nazi.’

Nessheim decided this was going nowhere fast. He said impatiently, ‘I’ve got mid-terms coming soon and lots of studying to do, so are you going to tell me what all this has got to do with me?’

Groves said, ‘We need to find this guy if he’s there.’

‘Don’t look at me. I’m no physicist.’

‘Yeah, but you were FBI, you’re experienced, and we’re moving the project about three blocks from here.’ Groves went on, ‘I gather you were undercover once.’

Nessheim tried not to look at Guttman. Hoover hated agents going undercover; Nessheim’s time spent doing just that had been entirely unauthorised – he’d been an undercover “undercover agent”.

‘That’s right,’ Nessheim said quietly.

‘Infiltrating the *Bund*.’

‘Yep.’

‘Did you use a different name?’

‘You mean an alias?’

‘Yes, that’s exactly what I mean.’

‘It was Rossbach.’

‘Why aren’t you using it now?’

‘Why should I? I’m not undercover; I’m not even *over* cover. I’m in law school.’

Groves ignored this. It was clear that he had already

decided what Nessheim was going to do, even if Nessheim himself didn't appreciate that. 'Could you use it again?'

Nessheim considered this, then shook his head. 'Not in Chicago. I know people from before.'

'Ah. The famous football star.'

'That's not what I meant. There are people who will have heard of Rossbach. I wouldn't want to run into them using that name.'

'Former *Bund* members?'

'That's right.' The German-American *Bund* had disbanded when war was declared; that didn't mean the former members had abandoned their allegiance to the Führer.

Groves suddenly thumped the chair. He had come to a decision, which seemed to mean they had all come to one. 'Then Nessheim it's got to be. No big deal. Hopefully it's never going to matter either way. Not if you succeed.'

Nessheim looked at Guttman, but his old boss retreated to pursed-lips mode, his eyes fixed on the far wall. 'Succeed at what?' asked Nessheim.

'Deciding if there is a spy inside the project here and then finding him.'

'Who says I'm going to try? I've told you, I'm no longer with the Bureau.'

'Don't you want to help your country?'

'I tried enlisting – "my country" didn't want to know.'

'We can't all be heroes. Look at me – I thought I was getting a military posting, and instead . . .'

Instead I'm talking to a nincompoop like you – this seemed to be the implication. Nessheim said, 'I think you'll find if you ask Harry here that I've done my bit and then some. And I won't work for Hoover again.'

Groves stared angrily at Nessheim. His cheeks had

puffed out like muffins, and his mouth was as contorted as a corkscrew; he seemed half a second away from an explosion. But when he spoke his voice was measured. 'I report direct to the White House about this.' Groves pointed at Guttman and added, 'And so does he.'

So the Bureau wasn't telling Groves *or* Guttman what to do. The President was. Which meant forget Hoover; forget his sidekick Tolson for that matter. Neither was part of this. 'And I would report to . . . ?' asked Nessheim, telling himself it was only a theoretical interest.

Guttman cut in quickly. 'Me,' he said. 'But you're used to that.'

'And you don't talk to anyone else about this, got that?' said Groves, waving his forefinger like a baton. 'Except for the head of the project. We've just seen him. He's an Eye-talian, a physicist named Enrico Fermi – he won the Nobel Prize. But not another soul.'

'Not even –'

'Not even anybody, unless the President himself shows up here in his wheelchair. You can forget the normal chain of command.' He paused, then added, 'Harry can give you the dossier we've prepared.'

Nessheim shook his head. There was no point misleading the guy, even if he was annoying. 'You don't get it. I'm not an agent now, I'm a student.'

'For Christ's sakes,' said Groves, exasperated, though even now he didn't raise his voice. 'You can be a frigging law student any old time.' His voice softened just a touch. 'We're not asking for a lot. Just an hour or two each day to keep an eye on things. You can still go to class.'

'It doesn't work like that and you know it.'

Guttman added, 'It should be over by Christmas. We're talking two months maximum.'

‘And what if it isn’t?’

Groves threw up his hands in frustration. ‘Where’s the can?’ he demanded, standing up quickly. Big as he was, there was a lithe, cat-like quality to the man.

‘Down the hall on the left.’

Nessheim waited until he heard Groves stride down the hall and shut the bathroom door. ‘Harry, I just want to say how sorry I was about Isabel.’

‘I got your letter. Thanks for it.’

Nessheim had spent hours composing the simple sentences, ripping up draft after draft in case he sounded too formal or too mawkish or somehow insincere.

‘Are you okay?’ he asked.

Guttman nodded slowly. ‘Yeah, I’m all right.’ He added flatly, ‘Life’s just kind of different now.’ He could have been talking to himself, thought Nessheim, feeling the man’s loneliness. But he also sensed Guttman didn’t want any more condolences about his wife. He nodded towards the bathroom and said, ‘What’s this all about?’

Guttman replied without inflection. ‘What it sounds like.’

‘You trust this guy?’ asked Nessheim, his own scepticism undisguised.

Guttman smiled wanly. ‘There isn’t much choice. The President thinks he cuts the mustard – that’s what matters.’

‘He doesn’t seem wild about me.’

Guttman shrugged. ‘Probably because you’re not his idea. I don’t think he believes we’ve got a problem – he’s got Military Intelligence crawling all over the place.’

‘Do *you* think there’s a problem?’

Guttman looked him in the eye, which Nessheim knew was a good but not infallible indicator that he was telling it to you straight. ‘I just don’t know. Odds are not, but it’s a risk we can’t afford to take.’

‘And this project – you’re telling me that Director Hoover doesn’t even know it exists?’

‘Yes, that’s right,’ Guttman said, looking slightly ill at ease. He added defensively, ‘It’s not as weird as it sounds. Everything’s being run under the military’s control. Military Intelligence has always been stand-offish – the Bureau never gets a look-in, no matter how hard Hoover tries. We got South America as a sop for that.’

Nessheim nodded reluctantly. ‘All right. But are you going to tell me what I would be supposed to *do*? Stand around waiting for an egghead to say “*Heil Hitler*”? It’s not like I can pretend to be a scientist – I’d stick out like a sore thumb.’

‘Fermi’s got some ideas for that. He’ll tell you, and I’ll leave it to you to use your judgement.’ Guttman shifted uneasily on his seat. ‘We’re not asking a lot, you know. Just a couple of hours a day, like the General said. Chances are there’s nothing to be found, but I’ll feel a lot better if I know you’ve had a look. I’d want you to trust your instincts – *I do*.’

Nessheim said nothing, refusing to be flattered.

Guttman reached down and opened his briefcase, then took out a black box file. ‘This will get you started. It’s got the relevant background info, including the personnel files. Fermi’s team isn’t that big, maybe a dozen scientists who know enough to do it damage. The rest are minor players, though there’re a lot of them.’

‘And the Bureau isn’t involved?’ When Guttman gave a slight nod, Nessheim said, ‘I’d be on my own?’

Guttman paused. ‘I’ve got you local support at the Field Office here, but the SAC doesn’t know about it.’

Nessheim asked, ‘What’s the support then?’ He realised he was being drawn into the details of how he’d be operating, but decided he might as well humour his old boss.

‘Tatie.’

‘I thought she’d transferred to D.C.’ Along with a million other single women, seizing the opportunities provided by the war.

‘Nope. Maybe she heard you were here.’

Not Guttman, too, thought Nessheim, remembering his colleagues ragging him.

Guttman went on. ‘She’s expecting you to make contact. As for the Lab, Fermi will give you access to what you need. If he doesn’t, or if he can’t for some reason, then call me.’

‘What about Big Boy here?’ He gestured towards the bathroom.

‘If the General wants info from you, give it to him. But if he doesn’t ask, don’t tell. Keep me posted, however – every week or so. But no written reports. Telegrams or phone are best – you’ve got my other number at home.’

‘And at the office?’

‘So long as I answer the phone when the switchboard puts you through. Or Marie in a pinch.’ Guttman added, ‘She’s the only one who knows I’m here.’

Nessheim nodded. Guttman was never one for prescription; that was the good thing about working for him. On the other hand, it often meant prolonged periods of bewilderment, especially at the beginning of an assignment.

‘So can I count on you, Nessheim?’ Guttman averted his eyes from the younger agent, looking towards the hallway instead. Nessheim heard the biffy flush and the water run in the bathroom basin. When Nessheim hadn’t answered, Guttman added, ‘I’d offer you more money but technically you’re on leave.’

‘How’s that? I quit, Harry. You had my letter of resignation.’

‘Did you ever get a letter back accepting it?’ he asked.

Before Nessheim could respond, Groves was standing in the wide doorway. He didn’t sit down again. Looking at Nessheim he said, ‘Are we all set?’

Nessheim said, ‘I’ll let you know. I need to think about this.’

Groves looked at Guttman as if the Bureau man had failed his assignment. He turned back to Nessheim. ‘You got more questions?’

‘No,’ said Nessheim, who actually had about a hundred of them, but none that Groves would want to answer, or that Guttman would answer in front of Groves. ‘Like I said, I’ll let you know.’

When they’d gone Nessheim sat down on the hard kitchen chair, watching out the window as his odd pair of visitors marched away towards Kimbark Avenue, Groves striding as if on parade. Nessheim thought about what had just transpired.

Law school was hard. How could he keep up with the workload if he was engaged in a wild goose chase on the other side of the Quadrangle? For he figured that’s what it was – a hiding to nothing, searching for an infiltrator who didn’t exist. Nessheim had ample experience of Bureau suspicions that proved entirely unwarranted – arguably, Hoover owed his longevity in his post to an ability to generate false alarms. And the briefing (as usual when it came from Guttman) seemed as clear as mud. Nessheim was supposed to inveigle his way into a wartime project he couldn’t understand – and, according to Groves, wasn’t allowed to either.

Nessheim hadn’t been a student for almost ten years; it hadn’t been easy re-entering a world where you had to read so much (and so carefully), think clearly, and write so much. Especially since he was entered in a

wartime course that would see him graduate with a JD in two years instead of three. The University of Chicago had been reluctant to accept him for the accelerated programme, but he had tested well in the exams they made external applicants take. And done well so far in his coursework; he'd had straight A's at the end of his summer quarter. No one could fault his commitment.

But he also knew his interest was stirred by what Guttman and Groves had said. The simple fact was that law was not only difficult but often remarkably uninteresting. For the first time in months he felt excited about something, and it certainly wasn't Fielding on Torts. Yet having rued for years the abbreviation of his education, and the removal of any prospect of a legal career, how could he admit that the realisation of this long-held ambition was actually proving so much dreary smoke?

Goddamned Guttman, he thought, half-angrily, half-admiring the older man's ability to work on Nessheim's susceptibility to adventure. He got up, thinking he could use a whisky now. Maybe he should play the 78 he'd bought the day before from the new record store on 53rd Street – Billie Holliday singing 'Until the Real Thing Comes Along'. That would calm him down.

But as he walked through the hall towards the dining room, he saw a car through the back window, parked in the alley that ran between 56th and 55th Streets. It was the red convertible again.

He had been taught by Guttman never to believe in coincidence – and it had stuck, even though he was a law student now, not an agent. He went back to the bedroom and drew the Smith & Wesson .38 from its holster hooked on a hanger in his clothes closet. Returning down the hall, he stopped in the dining room, standing

on the little round rug which, like a rolled-out pie crust, extended beyond the circular table. He slipped out of his shoes, then tiptoed into the kitchen, aiming the gun at the open back door. As he inched his way carefully into the kitchen, slipping the safety off, he felt foolish more than scared. But he had felt that way before and almost been killed as a result. Then he saw the figure sitting on the back stairs.

It was the woman from the law school. She was perched on the second step, with her skirt covering her knees and her hands in her lap. She looked incongruously elegant in the surroundings – like a princess visiting the palace kitchens. Looking up, she seemed unalarmed by the sight of Nessheim holding a .38 in both hands.

She said, ‘I know things ended badly between us, Nessheim, but I didn’t expect you to carry a grudge this long.’

He lowered the gun and exhaled, half in exasperation, half in relief. ‘You shouldn’t sneak around like that, Stacey. You could have got shot.’

‘I wasn’t sneaking around. I was waiting for your visitors to leave.’ She stood up, smacking dust from the backside of her coat. ‘Are you going to ask me in, or do you always entertain on the back porch?’

He sighed and lifted the hook off the screen door. As she came through the door he saw an envelope in her hand. ‘I found this on the mat,’ she said, handing it to him.

When he put it on the little pine kitchen table, she said with the bright curiosity he remembered so well, ‘Aren’t you going to open it?’

‘It’s the paper boy’s bill.’

‘Oh,’ she said, disappointed. ‘There I was thinking it would be in invisible ink. You being a G-Man and all.’

‘My least favourite phrase. How did you know where I lived?’

‘I have my methods, Nessheim.’

Then it came to him. ‘You drove here?’

She nodded. ‘You know me. I like the great outdoors best from behind a wheel.’

He laughed. ‘You’ve got a pretty fancy car.’

It was Stacey’s turn to look surprised. ‘How do you know?’

‘That was you in the Packard Eight. The first time, on Fifty-seventh, you had the top up. Then on Kimbark you had it down.’

‘It seemed a clever disguise.’

He shook his head. ‘Don’t drive a car the colour of a fire engine if you’re trying not to be noticed.’

She didn’t reply, but walked through to the dining room, looking at the textbooks and notebooks stacked on the table there. When he came in to join her she walked quickly along the corridor to the front hall, where without so much as a by-your-leave she opened the door to his bedroom. Taking a step inside she stopped and surveyed the room, while he stood in the doorway behind her. Thank God I made the bed, he thought, looking over her shoulder at the spartan room. It held a night-time side table, a small closet, a maple dresser for clothes, a couple of planks he had set up on bricks for the books of his late-night reading – a mix of what his mother called ‘proper books’ and the paperbacks being produced for the military which Woodworth’s sold illicitly on 57th Street – and the bed, an old iron one, with a white candlewick bedspread pulled tight across the blankets.

Stacey turned to leave the room. ‘I can tell you haven’t had a lot of company here, Nessheim.’

‘Why’s that?’

‘No girl worth her salt would spend more than a night in a room this bare.’

‘I must have been waiting for you to fix it up.’

‘I thought you had a girlfriend in Washington.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘I don’t know.’ She walked past him into the hall, then turned into the living room and went and sat on the sofa vacated by Guttman. Nessheim stood in the open doorway and looked down at her. ‘I suppose you want a beer.’

She shook her head, and her hair swayed easily on her shoulders. ‘I’m off the sauce these days.’ She waited a beat. ‘Unless you’ve got some Scotch going?’

‘You haven’t changed.’

He went to the kitchen and poured them each a good stiff inch, then filled the glasses half-full from the sink faucet – the water was cold and hard here in Chicago, almost good enough to substitute for ice.

When he came back he found her lying with both legs up on the sofa. Her head was propped against a cushion she’d rearranged at one end. He gave her the drink, then sat in the soft chair and looked out the window. It was getting dark; in the courtyard the shadows were fading to black. ‘Chin chin,’ he said, raising his glass.

‘Cheers,’ she said, lifting the glass and taking a long pull. She nodded her approval and pointed vaguely at the walls. ‘I was expecting a bachelor’s slum, but this is kind of nice – bedroom excepted. Too bad. I was hoping you’d need me to clean the place up.’

‘You mean, you’d send your maid to sort it out.’

‘I’ve given up Drusilla for the duration of the war.’

‘You let her go? After all these years?’

‘Of course not. But she only comes once a week now.’

‘A sacrifice, I’m sure. For her, I mean – she must miss the dough.’

‘I pay her the same amount.’

‘That’s big of you.’ He paused, then said, ‘So what are you doing back in school?’

‘A girl’s got to eat.’

‘I thought that’s what they had men for.’

She looked at him with cool eyes. ‘I tried that. It didn’t take.’

He wasn’t sure what she meant. There was always a man in Stacey’s life; once it had been Nessheim. ‘Don’t tell me you’re hard up now.’

‘I’m not.’

‘So why law school? To help the poor and defenceless?’

She looked at him with the studied calmness that meant she was getting annoyed. ‘Nessheim, I know you think I’m a hypocrite, a rich girl toying with the poor for amusement’s sake. But would it really be better if I thought I *deserved* to be rich?’

‘That sounds familiar,’ he said and took a long slug of his highball. It tasted soapy to him. ‘So now that you’ve found me, is there a purpose to your visit?’

‘Ouch,’ she said very quietly, but he didn’t look at her. She said more brightly, ‘You haven’t got a smoke, have you?’

‘I don’t smoke,’ he said with annoyance. ‘You must be thinking of another guy. Is it that hard to keep track?’

‘I’ll let you count,’ she said with a shrug, though he could tell she was still cross by the way she was trying not to show it. They sat in awkward silence for a moment, then she gave a small sigh and said, ‘You’ve changed, Nessheim, though I’m not sure it’s for the good. What happened?’

‘What didn’t happen? I was in the FBI for eight years, Stacey.’

‘Funny that, I never saw your name in the papers. You didn’t shoot Ma Barker, now did you?’ She gave a

playful laugh, trying to make things light again. ‘I bet you never shot anyone.’

Stacey saw the look on his face. ‘Oh, Jim, I’m sorry. I was being stupid, wasn’t I? And you’re still connected to the Bureau, aren’t you?’

‘Nope. I resigned before I came back to Chicago.’

‘Then what were those two VIPs doing here?’

He shrugged and got up from his chair, and stood with his back to her, gazing out of the window. He didn’t want to look at her. Her face wasn’t flawless – she had a small curve to her nose, a dot of a mole on one cheek, one eye that was greener than the other, and little, slightly prominent teeth that she’d always complained were squirrel-like. Yet Nessheim thought she was the most beautiful girl he’d ever known. She’d also been the funniest, sexiest, most *alive* woman ever willing to take up with the likes of him. But then she’d done a bunk and left Chicago, returning three months later with a deep tan and a new boyfriend. Nessheim, whose spirits were usually high, had felt pancake flat for a year. More than a year, actually.

It was dark outside now. ‘What do you want from me, Stacey?’ He kept his voice down and was trying to sound detached.

‘I’m three weeks behind, Nessheim. That’s a lot of Torts. Somebody’s got to help me catch up.’

He still wouldn’t look at her; that would be fatal. ‘Hire a tutor.’

‘How much do tutors cost?’ There was that familiar bounce to her voice.

‘With you, more than any tutor can afford.’

She laughed at the jiggled logic. ‘I had someone in mind, but he’d need to tell me the going rate.’

Nessheim snorted. She was playing him like a fish

too small to worry about if it didn't take the bait. 'What if he says no?'

'Be positive. You mean what if he says "Yes"? That means nobody at school finds out he's with the Feds.'

He didn't bother to deny it again, for he was suddenly overwhelmed by the return of old feelings. He had forgotten the extent of his desire for her. It was not only physical desire – simply being with Stacey had eclipsed any other happiness he'd known. He'd once made the fatal mistake of telling her that. 'Even more than football?' she'd replied, her sarcastic tone running like a piano scale across his feelings. His declaration of love reduced to schmaltz, he'd had sense enough not to go mooning on, and had merely bandied back, 'Well, maybe not football.'

Now he found himself moving to the sofa, and Stacey pulled up her legs to make room for him at the far end. Was she serious? He told himself that's why he needed to look at her face, though when he did he found her eyes laughing at him. But there was a hint of warmth, maybe even generosity, he hadn't ever seen before, and it almost took his breath away, since he thought he'd learned not to hope for anything from her.

'Okay?' she said in a whisper, and he nodded despite himself. She swung her legs off the sofa and leaned forward, and he waited for her to make the first move, trying to restrain the impulse to take her into his arms.

But she only kissed him on the forehead, once, lightly, while he closed his eyes. 'I'll see you soon,' she said, still in a whisper. 'I'm kind of glad I found you.'

By the time he opened his eyes she had gone. He heard the screen door slam in the kitchen, and when he roused himself and walked to the rear of the apartment, he only caught the quickest flash of her, heading towards the alley and her car.

The Accidental Agent

He stood in the kitchen for a minute, resisting the temptation to go out on the landing and watch her. He noticed the envelope she'd picked up and tore it open, idly wondering how much the newspaper bill would be. Two bucks? Four? He couldn't remember when he'd last paid. He was surprised to find no calculations on the piece of paper which he unfolded, a piece of onion-skin typing paper. There was one typed line, and as he read it he suddenly felt a chill, warm as it was outside:

*Welcome Home, Herr Rossbach.
We know where you are.*