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Invisible

Written by Paul Auster

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INVISIBLE



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I



I shook his hand for the first time in the spring of 1967. I was a second-year student at Columbia then, a know-nothing boy with an appetite for books and a belief (or delusion) that one day I would become good enough to call myself a poet, and because I read poetry, I had already met his namesake in Dante's hell, a dead man shuffling through the final verses of the twenty-eighth canto of the *Inferno*. Bertran de Born, the twelfth-century Provençal poet, carrying his severed head by the hair as it sways back and forth like a lantern—surely one of the most grotesque images in that book-length catalogue of hallucinations and torments. Dante was a staunch defender of de Born's writing, but he condemned him to eternal damnation for having counseled Prince Henry to rebel against his father, King Henry II, and because de Born caused division between

father and son and turned them into enemies, Dante's ingenious punishment was to divide de Born from himself. Hence the decapitated body wailing in the underworld, asking the Florentine traveler if any pain could be more terrible than his.

When he introduced himself as Rudolf Born, my thoughts immediately turned to the poet. Any relation to Bertran? I asked.

Ah, he replied, that wretched creature who lost his head. Perhaps, but it doesn't seem likely, I'm afraid. No *de*. You need to be nobility for that, and the sad truth is I'm anything but noble.

I have no memory of why I was there. Someone must have asked me to go along, but who that person was has long since evaporated from my mind. I can't even recall where the party was held—uptown or downtown, in an apartment or a loft—nor my reason for accepting the invitation in the first place, since I tended to shun large gatherings at the time, put off by the din of chattering crowds, embarrassed by the shyness that would overcome me in the presence of people I didn't know. But that night, inexplicably, I said yes, and off I went with my forgotten friend to wherever it was he took me.

What I remember is this: at one point in the evening, I wound up standing alone in a corner of the room. I was smoking a cigarette and looking out at the people, dozens upon dozens of young bodies crammed into the confines of that space, listening to the mingled roar of words and laughter, wondering what on earth I was doing there, and thinking that perhaps it was time to leave. An ashtray was sitting on a radiator to my left, and as I turned to

snuff out my cigarette, I saw that the butt-filled receptacle was rising toward me, cradled in the palm of a man's hand. Without my noticing them, two people had just sat down on the radiator, a man and a woman, both of them older than I was, no doubt older than anyone else in the room—he around thirty-five, she in her late twenties or early thirties.

They made an incongruous pair, I felt, Born in a rumpled, somewhat soiled white linen suit with an equally rumpled white shirt under the jacket and the woman (whose name turned out to be Margot) dressed all in black. When I thanked him for the ashtray, he gave me a brief, courteous nod and said *My pleasure* with the slightest hint of a foreign accent. French or German, I couldn't tell which, since his English was almost flawless. What else did I see in those first moments? Pale skin, unkempt reddish hair (cut shorter than the hair of most men at the time), a broad, handsome face with nothing particularly distinctive about it (a generic face, somehow, a face that would become invisible in any crowd), and steady brown eyes, the probing eyes of a man who seemed to be afraid of nothing. Neither thin nor heavy, neither tall nor short, but for all that an impression of physical strength, perhaps because of the thickness of his hands. As for Margot, she sat without stirring a muscle, staring into space as if her central mission in life was to look bored. But attractive, deeply attractive to my twenty-year-old self, with her black hair, black turtleneck sweater, black miniskirt, black leather boots, and heavy black makeup around her large green

eyes. Not a beauty, perhaps, but a simulacrum of beauty, as if the style and sophistication of her appearance embodied some feminine ideal of the age.

Born said that he and Margot had been on the verge of leaving, but then they spotted me standing alone in the corner, and because I looked so unhappy, they decided to come over and cheer me up—just to make sure I didn't slit my throat before the night was out. I had no idea how to interpret his remark. Was this man insulting me, I wondered, or was he actually trying to show some kindness to a lost young stranger? The words themselves had a certain playful, disarming quality, but the look in Born's eyes when he delivered them was cold and detached, and I couldn't help feeling that he was testing me, taunting me, for reasons I utterly failed to understand.

I shrugged, gave him a little smile, and said: Believe it or not, I'm having the time of my life.

That was when he stood up, shook my hand, and told me his name. After my question about Bertran de Born, he introduced me to Margot, who smiled at me in silence and then returned to her job of staring blankly into space.

Judging by your age, Born said, and judging by your knowledge of obscure poets, I would guess you're a student. A student of literature, no doubt. NYU or Columbia?

Columbia.

Columbia, he sighed. Such a dreary place.

Do you know it?

I've been teaching at the School of International Affairs since

September. A visiting professor with a one-year appointment. Thankfully, it's April now, and I'll be going back to Paris in two months.

So you're French.

By circumstance, inclination, and passport. But Swiss by birth.

French Swiss or German Swiss? I'm hearing a little of both in your voice.

Born made a little clucking noise with his tongue and then looked me closely in the eye. You have a sensitive ear, he said. As a matter of fact, I *am* both—the hybrid product of a German-speaking mother and a French-speaking father. I grew up switching back and forth between the two languages.

Unsure of what to say next, I paused for a moment and then asked an innocuous question: And what are you teaching at our dismal university?

Disaster.

That's a rather broad subject, wouldn't you say?

More specifically, the disasters of French colonialism. I teach one course on the loss of Algeria and another on the loss of Indochina.

That lovely war we've inherited from you.

Never underestimate the importance of war. War is the purest, most vivid expression of the human soul.

You're beginning to sound like our headless poet.

Oh?

I take it you haven't read him.

Not a word. I only know about him from that passage in Dante.

De Born was a good poet, maybe even an excellent poet—but deeply disturbing. He wrote some charming love poems and a moving lament after the death of Prince Henry, but his real subject, the one thing he seemed to care about with any genuine passion, was war. He absolutely reveled in it.

I see, Born said, giving me an ironic smile. A man after my own heart.

I'm talking about the pleasure of seeing men break each other's skulls open, of watching castles crumble and burn, of seeing the dead with lances protruding from their sides. It's gory stuff, believe me, and de Born doesn't flinch. The mere thought of a battlefield fills him with happiness.

I take it you have no interest in becoming a soldier.

None. I'd rather go to jail than fight in Vietnam.

And assuming you avoid both prison and the army, what plans?

No plans. Just to push on with what I'm doing and hope it works out.

Which is?

Penmanship. The fine art of scribbling.

I thought as much. When Margot saw you across the room, she said to me: Look at that boy with the sad eyes and the brooding face—I'll bet you he's a poet. Is that what you are, a poet?

I write poems, yes. And also some book reviews for the *Spectator*.

The undergraduate rag.

Everyone has to start somewhere.

Interesting . . .

Not terribly. Half the people I know want to be writers.

Why do you say *want*? If you're already doing it, then it's not about the future. It already exists in the present.

Because it's still too early to know if I'm good enough.

Do you get paid for your articles?

Of course not. It's a college paper.

Once they start paying you for your work, then you'll know you're good enough.

Before I could answer, Born suddenly turned to Margot and announced: You were right, my angel. Your young man is a poet.

Margot lifted her eyes toward me, and with a neutral, appraising look, she spoke for the first time, pronouncing her words with a foreign accent that proved to be much thicker than her companion's—an unmistakable French accent. I'm always right, she said. You should know that by now, Rudolf.

A poet, Born continued, still addressing Margot, a sometime reviewer of books, and a student at the dreary fortress on the heights, which means he's probably our neighbor. But he has no name. At least not one that I'm aware of.

It's Walker, I said, realizing that I had neglected to introduce myself when we shook hands. Adam Walker.

Adam Walker, Born repeated, turning from Margot and looking at me as he flashed another one of his enigmatic smiles. A

good, solid American name. So strong, so bland, so dependable. Adam Walker. The lonely bounty hunter in a CinemaScope Western, prowling the desert with a shotgun and six-shooter on his chestnut-brown gelding. Or else the kindhearted, straight-arrow surgeon in a daytime soap opera, tragically in love with two women at the same time.

It sounds solid, I replied, but nothing in America is solid. The name was given to my grandfather when he landed at Ellis Island in nineteen hundred. Apparently, the immigration authorities found Walshinsky too difficult to handle, so they dubbed him Walker.

What a country, Born said. Illiterate officials robbing a man of his identity with a simple stroke of the pen.

Not his identity, I said. Just his name. He worked as a kosher butcher on the Lower East Side for thirty years.

There was more, much more after that, a good hour's worth of talk that bounced around aimlessly from one subject to the next. Vietnam and the growing opposition to the war. The differences between New York and Paris. The Kennedy assassination. The American embargo on trade with Cuba. Impersonal topics, yes, but Born had strong opinions about everything, often wild, unorthodox opinions, and because he couched his words in a half-mocking, slyly condescending tone, I couldn't tell if he was serious or not. At certain moments, he sounded like a hawkish right-winger; at other moments, he advanced ideas that made him sound like a bomb-throwing anarchist. Was he trying to provoke me, I asked myself, or was this nor-

mal procedure for him, the way he went about entertaining himself on a Saturday night? Meanwhile, the inscrutable Margot had risen from her perch on the radiator to bum a cigarette from me, and after that she remained standing, contributing little to the conversation, next to nothing in fact, but studying me carefully every time I spoke, her eyes fixed on me with the unblinking curiosity of a child. I confess that I enjoyed being looked at by her, even if it made me squirm a little. There was something vaguely erotic about it, I found, but I wasn't experienced enough back then to know if she was trying to send me a signal or simply looking for the sake of looking. The truth was that I had never run across people like this before, and because the two of them were so alien to me, so unfamiliar in their affect, the longer I talked to them, the more unreal they seemed to become—as if they were imaginary characters in a story that was taking place in my head.

I can't recall whether we were drinking, but if the party was anything like the others I had gone to since landing in New York, there must have been jugs of cheap red wine and an abundant stock of paper cups, which means that we were probably growing drunker and drunker as we continued to talk. I wish I could dredge up more of what we said, but 1967 was a long time ago, and no matter how hard I struggle to find the words and gestures and fugitive overtones of that initial encounter with Born, I mostly draw blanks. Nevertheless, a few vivid moments stand out in the blur. Born reaching into the inside pocket of his linen jacket, for example, and withdrawing

the butt of a half-smoked cigar, which he proceeded to light with a match while informing me that it was a Montecristo, the best of all Cuban cigars—banned in America then, as they still are now—which he had managed to obtain through *a personal connection* with someone who worked at the French embassy in Washington. He then went on to say a few kind words about Castro—this from the same man who just minutes earlier had defended Johnson, McNamara, and Westmoreland for their heroic work in battling the menace of communism in Vietnam. I remember feeling amused at the sight of the disheveled political scientist pulling out that half-smoked cigar and said he reminded me of the owner of a South American coffee plantation who had gone mad after spending too many years in the jungle. Born laughed at the remark, quickly adding that I wasn't far from the truth, since he had spent the bulk of his childhood in Guatemala. When I asked him to tell me more, however, he waved me off with the words *another time*.

I'll give you the whole story, he said, but in quieter surroundings. The whole story of my incredible life so far. You'll see, Mr. Walker. One day, you'll wind up writing my biography. I guarantee it.

Born's cigar, then, and my role as his future Boswell, but also an image of Margot touching my face with her right hand and whispering: Be good to yourself. That must have come toward the end, when we were about to leave or had already gone downstairs, but I have no memory of leaving and no memory of say-

ing good-bye to them. All those things have been blotted out, erased by the work of forty years. They were two strangers I met at a noisy party one spring night in the New York of my youth, a New York that no longer exists, and that was that. I could be wrong, but I'm fairly certain that we didn't even bother to exchange phone numbers.

I assumed I would never see them again. Born had been teaching at Columbia for seven months, and since I hadn't crossed paths with him in all that time, it seemed unlikely that I would run into him now. But odds don't count when it comes to actual events, and just because a thing is unlikely to happen, that doesn't mean it won't. Two days after the party, I walked into the West End Bar following my final class of the afternoon, wondering if I might not find one of my friends there. The West End was a dingy, cavernous hole with more than a dozen booths and tables, a vast oval bar in the center of the front room, and an area near the entrance where you could buy bad cafeteria-style lunches and dinners—my hangout of choice, frequented by students, drunks, and neighborhood regulars. It happened to be a warm, sun-filled afternoon, and consequently few people were present at that hour. As I made my tour around the bar in search of a familiar face, I saw Born sitting alone in a booth at the back. He was reading a German newsmagazine (*Der Spiegel*, I think), smoking another one of his Cuban cigars, and ignoring the half-empty glass of

beer that stood on the table to his left. Once again, he was wearing his white suit—or perhaps a different one, since the jacket looked cleaner and less rumpled than the one he'd been wearing Saturday night—but the white shirt was gone, replaced by something red—a deep, solid red, midway between brick and crimson.

Curiously, my first impulse was to turn around and walk out without saying hello to him. There is much to be explored in this hesitation, I believe, for it seems to suggest that I already understood that I would do well to keep my distance from Born, that allowing myself to get involved with him could possibly lead to trouble. How did I know this? I had spent little more than an hour in his company, but even in that short time I had sensed there was something off about him, something vaguely repellent. That wasn't to deny his other qualities—his charm, his intelligence, his humor—but underneath it all he had emanated a darkness and a cynicism that had thrown me off balance, had left me feeling that he wasn't a man who could be trusted. Would I have formed a different impression of him if I hadn't despised his politics? Impossible to say. My father and I disagreed on nearly every political issue of the moment, but that didn't prevent me from thinking he was fundamentally a good person—or at least not a bad person. But Born wasn't good. He was witty and eccentric and unpredictable, but to contend that war is the purest expression of the human soul automatically excludes you from the realm of goodness. And if he had spoken those words in jest, as a way of challenging yet an-

other anti-militaristic student to fight back and denounce his position, then he was simply perverse.

Mr. Walker, he said, looking up from his magazine and gesturing for me to join him at his table. Just the man I've been looking for.

I could have invented an excuse and told him I was late for another appointment, but I didn't. That was the other half of the complex equation that represented my dealings with Born. Wary as I might have been, I was also fascinated by this peculiar, unreadable person, and the fact that he seemed genuinely glad to have stumbled into me stoked the fires of my vanity—that invisible cauldron of self-regard and ambition that simmers and burns in each one of us. Whatever reservations I had about him, whatever doubts I harbored about his dubious character, I couldn't stop myself from wanting him to like me, to think that I was something more than a plodding, run-of-the-mill American undergraduate, to see the promise I hoped I had in me but which I doubted nine out of every ten minutes of my waking life.

Once I had slid into the booth, Born looked at me across the table, disgorged a large puff of smoke from his cigar, and smiled. You made a favorable impression on Margot the other night, he said.

I was impressed by her too, I answered.

You might have noticed that she doesn't say much.

Her English isn't terribly good. It's hard to express yourself in a language that gives you trouble.

Her French is perfectly fluent, but she doesn't say much in French either.

Well, words aren't everything.

A strange comment from a man who fancies himself a writer. I'm talking about Margot—

Yes, Margot. Exactly. Which brings me to my point. A woman prone to long silences, but she talked a blue streak on our way home from the party Saturday night.

Interesting, I said, not certain where the conversation was going. And what loosened her tongue?

You, my boy. She's taken a real liking to you, but you should also know that she's extremely worried.

Worried? Why on earth should she be worried? She doesn't even know me.

Perhaps not, but she's gotten it into her head that your future is at risk.

Everyone's future is at risk. Especially American males in their late teens and early twenties, as you well know. But as long as I don't flunk out of school, the draft can't touch me until after I graduate. I wouldn't want to bet on it, but it's possible the war will be over by then.

Don't bet on it, Mr. Walker. This little skirmish is going to drag on for years.

I lit up a Chesterfield and nodded. For once I agree with you, I said.

Anyway, Margot wasn't talking about Vietnam. Yes, you might land in jail—or come home in a box two or three years from

now—but she wasn't thinking about the war. She believes you're too good for this world, and because of that, the world will eventually crush you.

I don't follow her reasoning.

She thinks you need help. Margot might not possess the quickest brain in the Western world, but she meets a boy who says he's a poet, and the first word that comes to her is *starvation*.

That's absurd. She has no idea what she's talking about.

Forgive me for contradicting you, but when I asked you at the party what your plans were, you said you didn't have any. Other than your nebulous ambition to write poetry, of course. How much do poets earn, Mr. Walker?

Most of the time nothing. If you get lucky, every now and then someone might throw you a few pennies.

Sounds like starvation to me.

I never said I planned to make my living as a writer. I'll have to find a job.

Such as?

It's difficult to say. I could work for a publishing house or a magazine. I could translate books. I could write articles and reviews. One of those things, or else several of them in combination. It's too early to know, and until I'm out in the world, there's no point in losing any sleep over it, is there?

Like it or not, you're in the world now, and the sooner you learn how to fend for yourself, the better off you'll be.

Why this sudden concern? We've only just met, and why should you care about what happens to me?