



# The Conversion

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## One



**W**HEN ED AND I WENT TO STAY at the Auberge Birague, we certainly never expected to meet up with anyone either of us knew. Our habit was to take breakfast in the café and sit near a window that opened onto a flower box overflowing with nasturtiums already wilting in the sultry air. One morning several days after we arrived, a woman in a short-sleeved black shirt and beige linen pants entered the café and sat down several tables away from us. I noticed Ed watching her with laserlike curiosity. “My God!” he gushed to me in a whisper. “*I know* this lady.” She turned out to be Marina Vezzoli, an Italian writer he’d met at a literary festival in Chile. He got up and approached her, shoulders canted forward like a primary-school student cowering before his teacher. Extending his hand he said, “Hello, Marina, Edward Cannon. We met in Santiago. At the festival.”

She was around sixty, quite trim with tawny shoulder-length hair veined with gray. Her eyes were pale and thoughtful as she looked at him with puzzled reserve. But soon her face kindled

with recognition. “Ah, of course,” she said. “Forgive me. What are you doing in France?”

Ed explained that he had lived in Paris for ten years, that he’d just sold his apartment right across the street from the Auberge Birague, and that he and I were staying at the hotel for a couple of weeks before he left for America to begin a tenured teaching job at New York University. At this point Marina Vezzoli shot me a look of bemused curiosity. And then, for some odd reason, Ed launched into Italian.

After listening to a few awkwardly constructed sentences, Marina leaned forward, patted him gently on the hand, and said, “Why don’t you speak in English, my friend? It would be easier on both of us.” I winced for Ed. His midwestern charm was usually able to warm even the chilliest reception. As famous as he was, he was unaccustomed to having his own pretentiousness pointed out to him. Clearly stung, he straightened his six-foot-two frame, nervously raked his fingers through his longish, thick dirty-blond hair. He was fifty-nine years old, and if you’d seen him at a distance you might have mistaken him for an aging, slightly paunchy surfer. He returned to our table, flustered and embarrassed.

Genuinely bewildered, I said to him sotto voce, “Why did you . . . switch to Italian like that?”

“I don’t know why. Now I feel like an idiot.”

“Well, don’t worry. It’s not *that* critical.”

“Something is wrong here, Russell,” Ed warned me. “She acts as though she barely remembers me, but believe me, she does. We sat next to each other at dinner, as a matter of fact.” They’d spoken at length; he remembered one fascinating conversation in which Marina Vezzoli assured him that Henry James didn’t

really understand Italians. And then a few years after Santiago, Ed had served on a panel in Saint Paul de Vence discussing two Italian writers, one of whom came up and introduced himself as a friend of hers. “Now she treats me like a stranger,” he grumbled.

“Whose ego is as big as Mount Vesuvius.” I glanced over at the woman now perusing the *Corriere della Sera* while sipping a glass of freshly pressed grapefruit juice.

Ed went on with a bit more restraint. “Besides, I’ve told you all about her. She’s the one who wrote that wonderful novel that was made into the film we saw. The one called *Conversion*.” He leaned back in his chair.

“Oh,” I said. “So that’s who she is.”

As though perceiving that Ed and I wanted to gossip about her, the woman took a last bite of her toast, carefully folded her newspaper, and pushed back from the table. Nodding cordially at us, she left the breakfast room. I remember Ed watching her exit with an expression of pure reverence.

Our room at the Auberge Birague was decorated in blond Swedish furniture; it had tall glass doors that opened onto a balcony. Late in the night on the day we encountered Marina Vezoli, I woke up to a terrible pounding, to the smell of sweaty bodies, to the alarming realization that there were other people in the room besides us. Two men wearing black ski masks pulled down to their lips had burst in from the terrace. One of them held what looked like some sort of semiautomatic weapon. The other pulled out a long, bowed knife, the sort that might fillet a large fish. When I saw the first glint of the rifle’s muzzle, when I heard the menacing click of the magazine, I was paralyzed by one

desperate hope: that the gun and the man who held it would somehow just melt into fantasy and that I wouldn't have to die right there. "Stay where you are!" the gunman garbled in foreign-sounding French. As if we'd dare to counter them.

"Your money! Your passports! Where!" snarled the other one with the knife.

I managed to tell him and he opened drawers, quickly scrambling through the contents. He turned back to me and took several steps closer, waving his dagger. "They're not!"

"I have them," said Ed, who was leaning up in bed on his elbows, looking typically angry at something not to his liking. It was as though he hadn't even registered the threat of the weapons.

From here on it all blurs, the order of things. I don't know if it was right then when one of them actually protested, "Wait, shit! Two men. *It's two men*," before Ed recklessly jumped out of bed. Standing there in a T-shirt and skimpy underwear, he started screaming in English, "Get out of here, you monkeys! Go fuck up somebody else!" There was a quick tirade in a language other than French, but then they actually listened to him. They turned and rushed back to the balcony and clambered out whatever way they had come in.

Ed and I sat on our twin beds in quiet disbelief, staring at the doors opening onto the slate mansard roofs of the place des Vosges. The curtains billowed as if in the lingering spirit of such an outrageous intrusion. "Are you insane?" I finally shouted at him. "They could've killed us!"

Collapsing onto the bed, Ed, looking befuddled, admitted, "I can't believe what I said."

"You called them monkeys. And they weren't even black!"

“By the way, that language they broke into, that was Albanian.”

“So what! They still could’ve understood English.”

He stared at me, blinking. “Of course, you’re right, Russell. But you should know me by now. What happens when I get angry.”

“Ed, you told them to fuck off,” I reminded him.

This most eloquent of poets, who could also be profoundly vulgar, actually laughed. And then I did, too—comic relief it must have been. It suddenly seemed as though the bizarre incident had never even occurred. The apoplectic yelling had attracted no attention, no knock on the door, nobody calling up from the lobby. The hotel had remained absolutely still. Could no one have heard the commotion?

“We’ve got to call down and tell them what happened,” I insisted.

“Okay, but wait a minute.” Ed swept the hair out of his eyes and peered at me. He was breathless. “You heard them say ‘two men’ right?”

I told him I had.

“They weren’t expecting to find *us*.”

I didn’t answer, trying to figure out why this might be significant.

“Don’t you get it, Russell? They were expecting a man in bed with his wife.”

“If that’s true then we’re doubly lucky they didn’t shoot us, the wrong people.”

“No, Russell. If they were hired or politically motivated, if they’d have done something to us, then they would’ve failed their purpose.”

“All the more reason to let them know downstairs.”

Ed looked distressed. “I don’t want to,” he insisted. “I just can’t deal with anything more tonight. They’ll insist on calling the police who will want to take reports. We’ll be up all night.” He hesitated. “They’re gone; they’re probably halfway across Paris by now. We can let the hotel know in the morning.” He paused again, seeming bewildered.

“What is it, do you think you recognize something about them?” I asked.

“No, no, it’s not that,” he replied. He got up and went into the bathroom and left the door ajar. “Not at all.” He remained there in complete stillness and finally I asked him if anything was wrong. When he didn’t answer, I walked over and found him staring at himself in the mirror. His eyes finally met mine. “Nothing’s wrong, I’m just getting some Xanax.” He reached for his shaving kit, opened a plastic cylinder and took out a one milligram pill that he divided equally and gave half to me.

I awoke the next morning from a very deep sleep. The room was profoundly quiet. Ed’s face looked unnaturally pale. I climbed out of my bed and went over to check. I ventured to feel his forehead. It was chill to my touch, winter cold; he no longer seemed to be breathing. This was as shocking to me as the appearance of that semiautomatic rifle just hours before. “It can’t be!” I said aloud. “He can’t possibly . . .” I told myself, cradling him in my arms like a child. I swept my fingers through his hair and softly whispered, “No, no, no,” as though my gentle reproach could make him breathe again.