

Dear James—Excerpt

1

Dear James, she wrote in blue ink on a page of cream stationery.

It's been snowing all night and my lawn lies deeply buried. There's a round cap of snow on my birdbath, and all I can see of my wheelbarrow is the black rubber handle grips poking out of a mound of white. The snow was a foot deep when I got out of bed, and now at noon it's closer to two. I should have thought to put away the wheelbarrow. My garden hose lies buried until spring.

Agatha McGee wrote these lines at her desk in the sunroom, a small room facing south off her dining room. The blanched, unforgiving light falling through the eight close-set windows gave her forearm a chalky appearance as she pushed up the sleeve of her sweater to massage her arthritic right elbow.

Again this year Lillian and I are having a few lonely-hearts in for Thanksgiving—a holiday foreign to you? Lord knows I'm in no mood for entertaining, but I will put on my best hostess face and proceed, not only for Lillian's sake and the others', but also because as far back as I can remember, wisely or unwisely, I've striven to be predictable. Changeableness I've always equated with infancy or a disordered mind.

Agatha carefully blotted her spiky handwriting and turned the page of stationery facedown as Lillian Kite, her lifelong friend, neighbor, and culinary advisor, approached from the kitchen, where both of them had spent most of the morning. Lillian was a stout, red-faced woman of seventy years—Agatha's age exactly. Buttoning her quilted down coat tight to her throat, she came to a halt beside Agatha's desk and said, "I turned the oven way down and put the deviled eggs in the refrigerator. I'm going home and put on my party dress."

“What would I do without you, Lillian?” Agatha capped her fountain pen and watched Lillian wrap her head in a bulky knit scarf of her own creation. The colors were green, gold, and pink.

“Wow, look at it come down, would you!” Lillian drew aside the sheer curtain beside the desk, and the two women silently gazed outside, transfixed by the thickly falling snow, the first serious snow of the year, a soft, windless blur piling itself into deep layers on the angular rooftops and across the shadowless yards.

“Will they come out in this?” asked Lillian.

“The streets ought to be passable as long as the wind doesn’t blow.”

“Even the congressman—he’ll venture out?”

“He’d better. He practically invited himself.”

Myron Kleinschmidt, home for the congressional recess, lived down the street in a house as large and old and nearly as attractive as Agatha’s. Though not a customary guest at this dinner, he’d turned up yesterday at Agatha’s door with a bereft and invitation-expecting look on his face. All of Myron Kleinschmidt’s expressions were calculated, in Agatha’s opinion; his very posture seemed a pose. Over coffee in her kitchen he’d told her that his wife had stayed in Washington in order to help plan a gigantic prayer breakfast for congressmen’s wives. This was quite possibly a lie, thought Agatha; she knew Elena Kleinschmidt to be wholly without spiritual tendencies. He’d also hinted that if she’d care to come out of retirement for a few months, he had an important position to offer her in his next campaign for office. To this she replied as politely as possible that she’d have to wait and see who his opponent was.

“Don’t be surprised if he poops out,” said Lillian. “He was always the awfulest pantywaist.”

Agatha, amused to hear Lillian resurrect this obsolete term, went back in memory nearly forty years and pictured the pantywaist in her classroom. Myron had been a small, round-faced sixth grader constantly seeking her approval for his meticulous penmanship, his arithmetic solutions, his clean fingernails.

This winter marked the midpoint of his seventh term in Congress. Three times she’d voted for him; four times she’d preferred his opponent. “You must be very proud of him,” people habitually said to her, Myron being the only public figure among her former students, and her response to this was a noncommittal smile. She didn’t bother explaining that when she was a young woman her father had come away from several terms in the state legislature with a healthy skepticism, not to say cynicism, about politics, which he’d passed on to his daughter. How could you be proud of anyone devoted to a profession founded on compromise?

“Toodle-oo,” sang Lillian, letting the curtain drop and tying the woolly scarf tightly under her chin as she departed. “Back in a half hour.”

“Don’t forget your pickle fork,” called Agatha.

She heard the back door close, then the outer door of the enclosed porch. The aroma of turkey drifted through the house. The snow continued to fall. She sat imagining, not for the first time, how gratifying it would have been if Lillian were the sort of friend you could open your heart to. Lillian was a dear and virtuous soul, but she seldom spoke—or listened—from the heart. If I could talk to Lillian, Agatha mused, there’d be no need to write these readerless letters to Ireland.

She uncapped her pen and resumed.

This will surprise you, James—I’m going to Rome. It surprises me, for I’d never foreseen myself as a pilgrim. I always said let others tramp through the Vatican and kiss St. Peter’s toe of bronze, I’ll make my devotions right here in my dear little church in Staggerford. Let others join the crush in St. Peter’s Square watching for the pope to put his head out the window, I’ll draw my nourishment, thank you, from the sacraments as administered by Father Finn. Not that I haven’t known pilgrims who found the trip spiritually satisfying but I’ve talked to a like number over the years who confessed to being let down. Roman traffic is a threat to life and limb, they’ve said, and the Italians are loud and demonstrative and pretend not to understand English even while selling you something expensive. If you succeed in seeing the pope, they’ve told me, you’re too far away to make out his features, and he repeats everything in ten boring languages.

But there’s been a change in this old heart of mine, James, a change in this old head. Since last June there’s been an ill wind blowing through my life. For forty-eight years, as you know, St. Isidore’s Elementary was my station, my vantage point, my mooring. Now I have no station. I’m adrift. The days seem to double in length and the nights are endless. Each morning I’m out of bed in time for school with no school to go to. Evenings I feel so useless with no papers to correct that I’ve begun watching TV.

Have you ever been truly acquainted with gloom, James? There’s a rancid smell in my basement left over from the day last spring when my foundation sprang a leak and rainwater spread through the laundry room and storage room, collapsing cardboard boxes and soaking into the woodwork. The lingering effect of gloom is like that. It spreads and soaks in. I can’t get it out of my head that the closing of St. Isidore’s Elementary prefigures the shutting down of Christendom. I keep foreseeing the day when the church will be reduced to a few wretched old folks like myself

searching for a Mass to go to, and a few wretched and persecuted old clergymen like you, James, going around in disguise saying Masses in cellars. There's an ill wind blowing, as I've said, and the sturdy old vessel of my faith, afloat for seventy years in the safe harbor of St. Isidore's, is being tossed about on a sea of despair.

So I'm going to Rome.

You see, it was while thinking black thoughts like these one day last week—an unsettling day of warm winds and continuous thunder and intense self-pity—that the idea came to me. Hadn't I taught generations of children about the efficacy of the pilgrimage? Canterbury. Lourdes. Fatima. What right had I to be disdainful of shrines? A voice from somewhere spoke to me—the first hopeful voice I'd heard in months—and said I needed a landmark beyond St. Isidore's steeple. If I could see St. Peter's tomb and St. Peter's high altar, if I could see St. Peter's successor in the flesh and hear his voice (never mind what language) and receive his blessing, the vessel of my faith might be set on course again.

But it's not easy putting an idea into effect when you're depressed, and I probably would have done nothing about it if Father Finn, within twenty-four hours of this impulse, hadn't suggested that I accompany him on his brother's ten-day tour of Italy. His brother is a professor familiar with Italy and tour groups. I demurred at first, but Father Finn was rather insistent (as I secretly hoped he would be), and we're leaving the day after Christmas.

Agatha looked at her watch. It was time to change for dinner. She scanned her wardrobe in her mind's eye and decided to put on her bluish-gray suit with something colorful at her throat. She would wear her silver bracelet and her red enamel pin. She hoped that by the time her guests arrived, she would have somehow called up in herself a holiday kind of happiness.

She waved the sheets of stationery in the air, drying the ink, and then she read what she had written. It met with her approval, the handwriting legible, the phrasing clear. She added her signature, blotted it, and then carefully tore the letter in two, tore the halves into fourths, tore the fourths into eighths, and let the pieces flutter into the wastebasket. Since returning home from Ireland three years earlier, she'd written perhaps a hundred letters to Father James O'Hannon, continuing a habit formed during their days as soul mates, but she never put any of them in the mail.

A late-morning trickle of hot water gurgled through the rusty radiators of the Morgan Hotel and woke French Lopat out of a bad dream. It was the same old dream about war—babies and young women dead in a village—that French had been dreaming for ten years or more. He uncurled himself from around his pillow, and as he lay on his back, shivering and waiting for the dream to evaporate, he remembered, with an unfamiliar twinge of cheer, that today was Thanksgiving. He'd be warm all afternoon.

He threw off his heavy pile of covers—the top layer was the shag rug off the floor—and pulled on his socks. He crossed the cold, rippling linoleum to the window, raised the tattered shade, and looked down on Main Street. Snow had been falling all night apparently, for the ruts of passing cars were deep in the street. He squinted through veils of falling snow and read the digital clock in front of the bank: 11:15.

Searching through the heap of clothing on top of his dresser, he found his best shirt, red and blue flannel, and his best pants, black polyester. He pulled on his pants and carried his towel and his razor down the dim hallway to the bathroom, where he switched on the light and gazed for a minute at the tall, sad-eyed man in the mirror, wondering if people he met on the street sensed the damaged spirit behind the dark, bony face. “Nothing wrong with you a good long rest won't fix,” the medics had told him. “Almost a year of duty and not a scratch—thank your lucky stars.” Coming up on ten years and still resting, French told himself as he filled the sink for shaving, and because this thought amused him, he smiled at himself in the mirror and opened a painful crack in his chapped lower lip.

Despite his haggard, unlovely appearance, French Lopat was photographed hundreds of times every summer, and his face was featured in countless photo albums across the United States. It was a rare tourist traveling U.S. 71 north to the Minnesota lakes who didn't stop at the information center in Staggerford and there encounter French sitting near the door—outside in good weather, inside in bad—wearing a feathered head-dress and a beaded leather vest and permitting himself to be photographed with strangers. DON'T TOUCH THE INDIAN, said a sign on the wall behind him. Small children were his most common companions in these snapshots, but he also posed with fishermen, honeymooners, and retired couples. Never with Indians. Sometimes in the fall there were hunting parties with guns. Now and then a carload of teenagers from Minneapolis with

funny haircuts. Once he was photographed with the lieutenant governor and his wife, and another time with an entire wedding party dressed in their gowns and tuxedos. The bride that day was such a beauty that French never forgot her. Nor would he ever forget how drunk the lieutenant governor had been.

French seldom changed his expression for the camera. He'd learned over the years that it was only sentimental old ladies who wanted him to smile. Almost everybody else seemed to prefer—indeed, seemed entranced by—his natural expression of stone-faced seriousness. Some travelers became so absorbed that they actually bent forward and examined his face like a page of fine print, and what they read there they misinterpreted—French was sure of it. How could they possibly know that they were looking upon the dispiriting effect of a war in southeast Asia? He could tell from their questions that they chose to see instead the silent endurance of the American Indian through seven generations of abuse. “Does the Bureau of Indian Affairs do you more harm than good?” “Is the American Indian Movement still a viable organization?” “Do you live in a tepee?” To these and all other questions, French responded with ten or twelve syllables of a language none of the tourists understood.

Nor did French understand it. Arnold Ulm, executive secretary of the Staggerford Chamber of Commerce, assured French that what he memorized each summer was an authentic Ojibway message, and although French spoke it with conviction, he had no idea what it meant. Further, he held no opinions about the Bureau of Indian Affairs or the American Indian Movement. He'd never lived in a tepee; indeed, he'd never lived among Indians and was not acquainted with any of the Ojibway people from the nearby reservation who came into Staggerford to shop. He was not even certain of his Indian ancestry, but his skin was dark enough to convince non-Indians. He was unambitious enough to work for sixty dollars a week from the middle of May until the end of September. During the off-season, when the information center was locked and the windows boarded up, French collected a biweekly unemployment check amounting to half his summer pay.

Having shaved, he carefully combed his thinning hair straight back from his high forehead and then returned to his room. He put on his moccasins, his flannel shirt, and his faded red stocking cap; then he slipped into his snug plaid sport coat and his long black overcoat. The stocking cap he had fished, with permission, from the lost and found box at the Hub Cafe. The sport coat and overcoat came from the Salvation Army store. Every second summer the Chamber of Commerce supplied him with a new pair of moccasins.

Downstairs in the dusty lobby he found Grover, the clerk, arranging a meager display of gum and candy bars on the registration counter.

“Snow,” said French.

“Lots of it,” croaked Grover, a man so stooped and hollow-chested that his suspenders stood away from the front of his shirt. “And it ain’t over.”

The lobby was dimly lit by a pair of table lamps. The woodwork was black with age, the flowery colors in the drapes and wallpaper had long ago faded to a uniform gray, and the buffalo head mounted over the radiator had a cobweb hanging from its chin whiskers. Grover was perfectly bald.

“Cold, too,” French elaborated.

Without raising his eyes from the candy and gum, Grover told him, “Not so bad—twenty-two.” Like French, Grover was a war veteran who had chosen to live out his life in the Morgan Hotel. Grover’s war had been against Hitler, his wounds caused by shrapnel. His room was on the ground floor, number 2, behind the stairway.

Bracing himself to go out, French crossed the lobby to the glass-paneled door, but didn’t pull it open. Watching a woman in high boots cross the street, he noted her clenched, frozen look as she waded through the snow. Chilled by the sight, he retreated to the radiator to store up some warmth. He said, “Colder tomorrow, I suppose.”

“Always colder, the day after snow,” replied Grover.

Pressing his backside into the radiator and feeling heat soak into his coat, French said, “Had that dream again.”

“Hmmm,” said Grover.

“Gets me down.”

“Hmmm.”

French liked to linger in the lobby when Grover was on duty. A calm, patient man, Grover. As often as you cared to tell it, Grover would listen to the story of the worst twenty-four hours of your life. He seemed to understand how it could happen that between one midnight and the next, in a hot, steamy land halfway around the world, a pall could settle over your days and make nothing but sleep and idleness seem useful anymore.

“I’m invited out to dinner,” French said with a humble little chuckle.

“I know it,” said Grover. “Miss McGee’s.”

“How’d you know?”

“It’s Thanksgiving, isn’t it?”

Grover's memory always amazed French, who never recalled from one year to the next how Grover spent his holidays.

Grover finished arranging his candy display. "They say she ain't herself."

"So I hear."

"You seen her lately?"

"Nope."

"Never changed her storm windows?"

"Not this year. She never called me."

Grover shook his head sadly. "It's the school closing down did it."

"Yup," French agreed.

"Everything's changing."

"Yup."

"Come summer, this here will be all tar, where we're standing."

"I know it," French grumbled, sorry to be reminded that the Morgan was scheduled to be demolished next June to make room for a parking lot. This was one of several developments aimed at keeping downtown Staggerford a viable trading center. Installing public toilets in the basement of the city hall was another. Still another was the renaming of Main Street and Fifth Street, which intersected at the stoplight. The signs at each corner now said RODEO DRIVE and FIFTH AVENUE, though no one called them that.

Grover came out from behind the counter and crossed the lobby to his favorite chair. "I hear she's going to Rome," he said.

"Who?"

"Miss McGee."

"Rome?" French doubted this.

"Rome," Grover insisted. "To see the pope."