

The

Flight Portfolio

Julie Orringer



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This is a work of fiction. All incidents and dialogue, and all characters with the exception of some well-known historical and public figures, are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Where real-life historical figures and public figures appear, the situations, incidents, and dialogues concerning those persons are entirely fictional and are not intended to depict actual events or to change the entirely fictional nature of the work. In all other respects, any resemblance to persons living or dead is entirely coincidental.

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First Edition

For Ryan, Jacob, and Lil

Have you ever seen my face
In the middle of the street, a face with no body?
There is no one who knows him,
And his call sinks into the abyss.

—Marc Chagall

ONE

despise what is not courage

Gordes

There was, as it turned out, no train to the village where the Chagalls lived: one of many complications he'd failed to anticipate. He had to pay a boy with a motorbike to run him up from the station at Cavailon, ten miles at a brainshaking pace along a narrow rutted road. On either side rose ochre hills striated with grapevines and lavender and olive trees; overhead, a blinding white-veined sky. The smell was of the boy's leather jacket and of charred potatoes, exhalate of his clever homemade fuel. At the foot of the village the boy parked in a shadow, accepted Varian's francs, and tore off into the distance before Varian could arrange a ride back.

The streets of Gordes, carved into a sunstruck limestone hill above the Luberon Valley, offered little in the way of shade. He would have given anything to be back in Marseille with a glass of Aperol before him, watching sailors and girls, gangsters and spice vendors, parading the Canebière. The Chagalls had only agreed to see him on the basis that he not bring up the prospect of their emigration. But what other subject was there? The Nazis had taken Paris months ago, they were burning books in the streets of Alsace, they could send any refugee over the border at will. At least the Chagalls *had* agreed; that was something. But as he reached the house, an ancient Catholic girls' school on the rue de la Fontaine Basse, he found himself fighting the urge to flee. His credentials, if anyone examined them, amounted to a fanatic's knowledge of European history, a desire to get out from behind his desk in New York, and a deep frustration with his isola-

tionist nation. And yet this was his job; he'd volunteered for it. What was more, he believed he could do it. He raised his hand and knocked.

An eye appeared in the brass circlet of the peephole, and a girl in a striped apron opened the door. She listened, strangling her index finger with one dark curl, as he stated his name and mission. Then she ushered him down a corridor and out into a courtyard, where a stone path led to a triangle of shade. There, at a bare wooden table, Chagall and his wife sat at lunch: the painter in his smock, his hair swept back from his forehead in silver waves; Bella in a close-fitting black dress too hot for the day.

"Ah, Monsieur Fry," Chagall said, rising to meet him. The painter's eyes were large and uncommonly sharp, his expression one of bemusement. "You've come after all. I thought you might. You won't forget our agreement, will you?"

"All I want is your company for an hour."

"You're lying, of course. But you lie charmingly."

They sat together at the table, Bella on Varian's left, the painter to his right—he, Varian Fry, sitting down with the Chagalls, with *Chagall*, author of those color-saturated visions, those buoyant bridal couples and intelligent-eyed goats he'd seen in hushed rooms at the Museum of Modern Art. Bella filled a plate with brown hard-crusté miche, soft cheese, sardines crackling with salt; she handed it across the table, assessing Varian in silence.

"Had you been here a few days ago, we would have had tomatoes," Chagall said. "A farmer brings them up to the market on Thursdays. I'm sorry we don't have more to offer. The bread's a little hard on the tooth, I'm afraid, but c'est la guerre!"

"This is lavish," Varian said. "You're too kind."

"Not at all. We like to share what we have." He gestured around him at the bare yellow stones, the rough benches, the shock of gold-green hillside visible through an archway in the wall. "As you see, we're living a quiet and retired life in our little dacha. No one will bother us here at Gordes."

"You have a studio," Varian said. "You're still producing work. That's what makes you dangerous."

"Our daughter says the same," Bella said. "She's been saying it for

months. But you understand, Monsieur Fry—my husband's reputation will protect him. Vichy wouldn't dare touch us."

"With respect, Madame Chagall, I don't believe that for a moment. Vichy is subject to the Nazis' whims. And we all know what they're capable of. I've seen it myself. I was in Berlin in '35—sent by the magazine I worked for. My last night in town there was a riot on the Kurfurstendamm. The things I saw—men pulled from their shops and beaten in the streets—an old man stabbed through the hand at a café table—boys dragging a woman by her hair—"

"These things happened in Germany," Chagall said, his tone harder now. "They won't happen here. Not to us."

"Let me speak to my friend at the consulate," Varian said. "Ask him to start a file for you, at least. If you do decide to leave, it might take months."

Chagall shook his head. "My apologies, Monsieur Fry. I'm sorry you had to come all this way in vain. But perhaps you'd like to have a look at the studio before you go—if you've finished, that is."

Varian couldn't speak; he could scarcely believe that a person of Chagall's intelligence, a person of his experience, could fail to see what he himself saw clearly. Chagall rose and crossed the courtyard to a set of ten-foot-high blue doors, and Varian got to his feet. He nodded his thanks to Bella, then followed Chagall across the broken paving stones. Beyond the blue doors was a long, high-ceilinged room with a wall of windows: the former refectory of the girls' school. Canvases lay about everywhere, and for long minutes Varian walked among them in silence. As well as he knew the painter's work, he had never seen it like this: in its pupal state, damp and mutable, smelling of turpentine, raw wood, wet clay. From the canvases rose ghost-like images: a grave-eyed Madonna hovering above a shadowed town, serenaded by cows and angels; crucified Christ wrapped in a prayer shawl, his head encircled by grieving sages; a woman kneeling beside a river, pressing a baby to her chest; clusters of red and white flowers rising like flames.

"It's no small matter to cross an ocean," Chagall said. "More can be lost than canvas and paint. An artist must bear witness, Monsieur Fry. He cannot turn away, even if he wishes to."

“An artist can’t bear witness if he’s dead.”

The painter removed his hat and set it on his knee. “The Emergency Rescue Committee mustn’t concern itself further with our welfare,” he said. “Save your resources for those who truly need help. Max Ernst, for example—he’s rumored to be in a concentration camp at Gurs. Or Jacques Lipchitz, my friend from Montparnasse. Who knows where he’s fled to now? Or Lev Zilberman, who painted those massive murals in Berlin.”

“Yes, I know Zilberman’s work. Alfred Barr fought to get him on our list.”

“You’re not entirely on the wrong path, then. Help Ernst, help Zilberman. Not me.” And he turned away from Varian, toward his canvases, toward the brushes and knives, the wooden boxes cluttered with crushed tubes of paint. “I’ll mention your name among our circles,” he said. “I know plenty who are eager to leave.”



Varian stumbled along the road toward Cavaillon, down the hill he’d seen through the courtyard arch. It would take him two hours to reach the station at this rate; another two on the train after that, and then he’d be back in Marseille, having made no progress at all. And what would he report to his colleagues in New York—to Paul Hagen, who directed the Emergency Rescue Committee, or to Frank Kingdon, its chair? That summer, when he and Paul and Ingrid Warburg and Alfred Barr and the others had compiled their list—two hundred artists, writers, and intellectuals who’d been blacklisted by the Gestapo and had no way out of France—they hadn’t imagined that their clients might resist being helped, nor that they’d consider themselves beyond Vichy’s reach. There were so many things they hadn’t considered; his life in France had become a process of discovering them, often to his embarrassment. It was a miracle he’d managed to get anyone out at all. There had been only twelve so far, a minuscule fraction of his list.

What he ought to do, he thought as he kicked stones along the rutted road, was to write his wife that night to say he was coming home. He’d confess—and what a relief it would be—that his work wasn’t going as planned. How had he imagined it would take a month,

one month, to find and extract two hundred endangered artists? He'd envisioned himself riding a rented bicycle through the countryside, rounding up refugees by the dozen, as if they'd be waiting in the lemon orchards with traveling papers in hand. He'd imagined that the consulate would contort itself miraculously to help him. But then the chaos of this place, the innumerable bureaucratic barriers, the cretins in the U.S. Visa Office, the resistance of the artists themselves. What a mistake he'd made, crawling out from behind his desk at the publishing house. How could he have presumed to take the lives of men like Chagall and Ernst into his hands when he had no idea how to manage them—no idea, even, of how to convince them they were in danger? Eileen wanted him home; she feared for his life. Her letter from last week had made that clear. Well, home he'd go. He'd write her at once; he'd write her as soon as he reached the Splendide.