

WHAT REMAINS

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THE ANGEL WHO RELATES

It was a hot August day on Seneca Lake, right on the border bringing together the towns of Ovid and Romulus in central New York State, when a bulky, tall man of about six foot, three inches, eighty-five years of age, a savant by the name of Charles F., arrived at the sprawling campus of Willard State Hospital. The year was 1946. The emotions connected with the end of World War II were still fresh.

For someone like Charles, with a vivid life of the mind and a penchant for routine, Willard was an inappropriate place to end. A state-run hospital housing thousands of patients from an assortment of economic levels (mainly poor), one of its directors had once prophetically described it as being for

“the disoriented and dependent class, who require more than a simple home. Humanity should provide *humane* treatment for those who stumble. The well-being of our society in large part depends on the care these patients get. They should not be deemed expendable, for if they do the rest of us are to blame.”

How expendable—or how incurable—Charles F. was and exactly what he required in terms of treatment were up for discussion. For his age, he was extraordinarily articulate and capable of deep thinking, although at times he would be given to tantrums. He was also quite mobile. He must have led an admirable life up to that point, one defined

by a sharp, exciting mind in a state of constant engagement.

Where was everyone now, though? Did anybody care?

In the previous few years, more than at any other time before, Charles F. had gone through periods of darkness. They made him seem isolated, trapped in his own loneliness. One could say the war was partially to blame. He had been obsessed with it from the start. Not knowing about his relatives in Europe was a nightmare. Yet it was really all about age. Exciting thoughts still visited him, and he welcomed them wholeheartedly. Slowly, though, and regardless of how much he resisted, his world was clearly crumbling.

At the very least, the doctors at Willard agreed he was what psychiatry calls “a puzzling profile,” a patient whose symptoms are sometimes perfectly explainable and at other times are absolutely mystifying. He was disoriented, sometimes even childish, yet he was also clever, astute, incisive, and thoroughly endearing. He didn’t know anything about mental disorders. What he did know is that certain ideas, certain visions were clearer now than at any point earlier in his life.

A note in his medical dossier, dated a few weeks after Charles F.’s registration at the asylum and written by Dr. Sheldon Nuland, his primary caretaker

and eventually a friend, describes him: “Restless, at times making contradictory, rambling statements. Patient displays symptoms of anxiety, despondency, and hallucinations. He also has high blood pressure. But is likewise pleasant and composed and very rational. Or rather: he is spiritual. Patient has a deep internal life; he is in dialogue with angels.”

Charles F. didn’t think what he had with his visitor was a dialogue. In fact, had it been left to him, he would have preferred to describe it as a lesson. Why exchange words if what he experienced was of such beauty? He mainly listened—quietly, patiently, careful not to make a fuss.

Upon arrival at Willard, Charles F. made a statement. It was recorded by a staff member and placed in his dossier:

My name is Charles F. I got a good name. Never said a bad word about anyone. Never in trouble. I am here for nothing at all. I live in Jamaica. I went to the subway station house and they threw me out. I refused to go, so I spit on the floor, so they locked me up. I had a good name. I don’t drink. I don’t gamble. I got no place to go. I was a wealthy man but I lost everything. It wasn’t entirely my fault.

There is a plan for everything we do, a plan controlled by God. I am fifty years in America. Fifty. I got my papers at home. I just need to retrieve them.

He had three old suitcases with him. He cherished their contents. Those objects spoke to different aspects of his life. Eventually, they were taken away, although he regained access in a few weeks, once he settled in his room in Winslow Hall. Apparently, he didn't pack the suitcases himself; one of his daughters did. After the first week, he was frustrated not to be able to find his favorite pajamas anywhere. His Hebrew calendar was missing, too. All of this made him feel not only dislocated but upset.

And totally alone. Where was everyone he had loved? Why hadn't Miriam asked what he needed when she agreed to let him be taken to Willard? It would have been so easy. She was his daughter. Hadn't he raised her? Had he been a bad father? Even at the police station, he would have made a list for her. It wouldn't have been hard.

Like most other patients, Charles F. entered Willard through Barrett House, the main administrative building, on a hill above the lake. Over time, he moved a lot, being housed in the Southern and Northern Wings of Barrett Hall, as well in Valentine, Reiner, and Winslow. He couldn't have known it then, but his arrival coincided with the end of one

of the most stable periods in the institution's history. Only a few years later, a precipitous decline began, not only in regard to the medicines and other available items—iodine, syringes, and cotton puffs were scarce then, as they had been during the war—but in terms of the overall quality of life of the patients, doctors, and staff.

This worsening of conditions was connected in part to the priorities the nation set for itself now that soldiers were back from the front. Beyond that, views of mental illness and psychiatry were about to be shaken. Long-term care for patients in psychiatric hospitals was about to be tested as a concept. At Willard, Charles F. received a type of treatment that within a couple of decades seemed utterly anachronistic.

Although he arrived in an ambulance, he thought he could have come by foot. As he told everyone, "for a Polish immigrant who arrived at Castle Garden in Battery Park without a cent in his pocket, I was still rather together." Yes, occasionally he got out of breath. His arthritis was more than a nuisance; it felt to him like a calamity he needed to escape. Yet he wondered if there is ever a point in life at which humans do not suffer. To dispel the pain, he could count to one hundred in Hebrew. Or was it Polish?

"Suffering is good," he would repeat to himself. "It builds character. *Hazak, hazak, venit'hazek*—be

strong, be strong, and we will be strengthened. It is how every book of the Torah concludes, with the end of *Pekudei*. Suffering heals the soul. Suffering helps focus the mind.”

His Jewishness would ultimately save him, he believed. As far as he was concerned, he was at Willard only temporarily, just as he had been in the previous hospital. What was its name? He couldn't remember. The name “Willard” he couldn't recall, even though the word had a nice ring to it. Hadn't he heard that it was on the Seneca River, upstate? He had been to Syracuse twice, once to see a client. He and Leah had taken the children for a vacation that included the Erie Canal. He knew Seneca was a Roman philosopher. Wasn't he the author of *Naturales Quaestiones*, explaining the causes and secrets of how nature works? A friend had told him about it after reading a copy at the New York Public Library midtown branch.

Even though these comments were positive, Charles obviously preferred not to be at Willard. That's because he wasn't crazy—of that, he had no doubt. Other people were, but not him. He would leave the next day or the one after. Ida was about to return from Florida. He had promised to join her in the Catskills in early September, when it is less humid and the crowds are gone. He always kept his promises.

Charles F. never left Willard, though. Nor did his suitcases. At one time the nation's largest asylum of its kind, Willard swallowed him whole, just as it did the other 50,000 patients it housed in its 125-year history.

It wasn't solely his fault. Friedrich Nietzsche liked to argue that “in individuals, insanity is rare; but in groups, parties, nations, and epochs, it is the rule.” In broad strokes, culture was to blame, since it just didn't know what to do with people like Charles F. Are they still of some use? Hadn't the asylum's founders cautioned against finding such a population expendable? The mind is a volatile machine. When it works, it does so in predictable ways. But then, *boom!*, nothing makes sense anymore. What we call mental illness is just chaos.

At what point does our life cease to be ours? When do we lose control of it? Does it ever really belong to us?

Three months before his admission—three months and two days, to be exact—Charles F. found himself in Brooklyn. He couldn't tell exactly why. And at Union Street? He never used that train station. Was he on his way to Williamsburg to visit a

supplier? But he no longer had any. There must have been another reason.

Was he about to meet Ida Shanholtzer? Impossible. Not only was she with her cousin that day, her apartment wasn't in Gowanus but in Jamaica, Queens. What could she be doing in Brooklyn, too? It was all very strange. In fact, he preferred to walk places instead of taking the subway, partly because he could no longer afford it.

Disheveled and malnourished, sitting alone on a bench, Charles F. was wearing his old black pants, a white shirt, a heavy black winter coat, and a pair of broken leather boots. At some point earlier that day, he had a yarmulke on his head, but he had lost it. He kept repeating a few words in Russian. Polish? Or was it Yiddish? He couldn't distinguish between them anymore.

"You're demented, Papa!" Esther, his daughter, would say. "*Bonkers!* That's what you are. Bananas!"

He didn't know it, but it was the beginning of the end. The usual rush of adrenaline in the morning stopped him from realizing that his time was up, that fate had turned around and there was really nothing he could do. He was useless. Old and useless and empty of dreams that once moved him forward.

Every time another train stopped, the stream of passersby at the station ignored him. Until a young

lady, pretty and coquettish, maybe around twenty-five, with a French accent, stopped near him. She asked if he needed help. Did he? No, thank you. He didn't think he did. But had he actually responded? He wanted to tell her she was kind and compassionate and ask how her day was, but she was in a rush and no words would come out of his mouth. Inexplicably.

On her way out of the subway station, the young lady alerted a police officer, explaining that a rugged old man, sitting near the tunnel on a wooden bench at the end of the station, looked lost. Maybe he was a refugee from Europe? There were lots on the streets those days. He looked like a person who hadn't eaten a good meal in days, perhaps weeks.

On his notepad, the officer wrote down the time—11:18 a.m.—and scribbled a few words. Minutes later, he was joined by a colleague, and the two descended the staircase and made their way to the end of the station. After spotting the man, one of them gently put his right hand on the gun hanging from his belt.

They asked him a question, two, three. Because Charles F. wouldn't respond, they concluded he was deaf.

"DO YOU KNOW WHO YOU ARE?"

He spat on the floor, then kicked a garbage can. Babbling, his eyes lost in the light coming from the

other end of the station, Charles F. said he was in Gowanus, a few blocks away from the intersection of 3rd Avenue and DeGraw Street. He knew exactly where that was. He had simply forgotten why he had come.

If he needed, one of the officers said, they could take him home, to which Charles F. just laughed out loud and then started screaming. Then he stood up, visibly annoyed, and asked to be left alone.

He was from Jamaica, he said.

“You don’t look Caribbean.”

“Not the island of Jamaica. Just Jamaica. In Queens. And thank you, but I know my way.” In fact, he was waiting for a train to get back to the city. He didn’t want to be late. He had lots of things to do, and it was getting late.

A few minutes later, when asked what his name was, Charles F. said Ya’akov, as in the Bible, and like his brother in Europe. He paused. Yes, Ya’akov ben Yitzhok from Vitebsk, Belarus. He hadn’t heard from him since the beginning of the war. He hoped it was all fine. No tragedies. He surely didn’t want a tragedy.

“WERE YOU A SOLDIER?”

One of the officers could see a canteen under Ya’akov’s coat. But he looked too old to have been in the battlefield. Had he perhaps fought in World War I? Was he a refugee?

“Me? No, not me. My son Benjamin was. Benji.”

The other policeman pushed for more information about Ya’akov’s home in Jamaica.

“95th Avenue.”

“There is no such avenue. You mean 93rd Street, 157–42?”

“Yes, officer.”

“Are you Charles or Ya’akov?”

“Yes, Chaim or Ya’akov.”

In his notebook, the police officer wrote down the word *disoriented*. He insisted on referring to him as Chaim F. (In Hebrew, the word, also spelled *Haim*, *Hayim*, and *Chayim*, means life.) He scribbled “Mrs. Shanholtzer in Miami Beach, Florida,” whom Chaim F. kept now referring to. Finally, he wrote that it wasn’t Ya’akov but Chuck. Or Charles. That’s what the old man said his name was. Last name? Frankel, Franklin, Frankenhaimer? Not sure, so with a sense of disbelief, the officer simply wrote the initial F., which stuck for some unexplained reason. From this period on, people who knew Chaim simply called him F.

Close to noon, Chaim F. was transported to a police station on Bedford Avenue in Williamsburg. A few phone calls later, an adult about forty-five years old

showed up. His name was Mo, and he identified Chaim F., as in Friedlander, as his father, although it later turned out that Friedlander wasn't the right last name. Was the man not his son, then?

Mo said his father was divorced and lived with a girlfriend, Ida, in Jamaica, Queens. But the girlfriend no longer wanted him because he often experienced visions. She was scared of him. Mo said that once, while his father was shouting, he threatened to kill Ida. "He is demented."

Chaim F. was alone in a cell. Half an hour later, a daughter, Esther, a bit younger than her brother, also arrived at the police station, showing signs of being distraught. She said she lived in Brooklyn, on Avenue N, and worked in the can factory at the intersection of 3rd Avenue and 3rd Street. She had been waiting hours for her father to arrive. They had agreed to meet at 9:45 a.m. It wasn't uncommon for him to arrive late. But he always made it. Had he killed anybody? When she heard from Mo that her father was under arrest, she feared the worst. He was no longer capable of caring for himself. But he was very stubborn. And the family didn't have money for doctors.

Esther said her father talked of being visited by the Maggid. "I'm a proud confidant of the Maggid, the guardian whose actions make the universe pure." She didn't know what that meant.

"He is a devout man who loves stories."

Esther said he believed that God oversees all earthly matters but at times disappears—missing in action—for people to take control of their own destiny. She said Charles loved baseball, too. "It's therapeutic. Mickey Mantle and Joe DiMaggio but especially Ted Williams. The Yankees, the Brooklyn Dodgers, the New York Giants. He memorizes the statistics. Every single one. Who played who. Who was at bat. Who hit a home run in what inning and so on and so forth. Lots and lots of numbers."

She knew the police didn't have time to waste, but when the children were little, their father told them all sort of tales about the shtetl in Poland where their ancestors came from.

She explained, "His anxieties take control of him. On any given morning, he works up a sweat. He screams uncontrollably for an hour or so. Even the neighbors are scared. But then, when he's relaxed, he doesn't remember a thing. Not one . . ."

She said her father went by several names: Chaim, Chuck, Ya'akov, and even Ebenezer. But mostly Charles.

A psychiatrist was called. An hour later, he visited Charles F. in the cell. At this point, he was even more disoriented. "It is better not to remember the name of Leah's husband, since he was a conniver," he said. He added that he had been a legal resident of

New York City for sixty-five years. That was home; it would be forever.

The next day, Charles F. was transported to the Hudson River State Hospital, in Poughkeepsie, New York. The admission date was July 17, 1945. His dossier describes him as “senile.” It describes him as digressing “about his brothers in Europe, who might be dead but he doesn’t know it.” Since the sanatorium was full, he was soon deemed to be “transferable.” But no other asylum had available beds, so he needed to wait for several weeks.

Only later, when he saw in a newspaper that the Cincinnati Reds had beaten the Brooklyn Dodgers 10–4, Charles F. remembered that he had meant to buy tickets for a New York Giants game. He found out that on the day he went to the asylum on the river—what was it called?—is beloved Red Sox slugger Ted Williams had been offered \$500,000 to play in the Mexican baseball league. That’s a huge amount: half a million dollars. What can anybody do with so much money? He was proud to have seen Williams play a bunch of times. He loved the way he swung the bat, like a dancer in a ballet.

He had a few Williams baseball cards, which he had purchased a number of years before. One was often in his pocket. Why couldn’t he find it now? Was it stolen by one of the police officers? Is that

why they performed that uncomfortable search? Or did the search take place previously?

He couldn’t say for sure. At any rate, the Ted Williams card was gone. This made him sad. Very sad.

Charles F. was admitted to Willard on Friday, August 9. He was cataloged as patient #76086. In total, he stayed there a bit less than four years, which can be divided into two chapters: before the crisis and after.

The first chapter opens with a thin, almost empty dossier that incorporates what doctors and nurses at Hudson River State Hospital had stated about Charles F.: that he was anxious. And maybe deaf, too. That when he talked, he often rambled, but he had lucid moments. Since he had complained of arthritis, he was also diagnosed with psoriatic arthritis, although it most likely was the garden variety osteoarthritis. The dossier contains transcriptions of interviews with doctors, reports of behavioral patterns, and addresses and phone numbers of family and other relatives.

In spite of his fragility, in the mornings he milked the cows. He wanted to be active. His body was old, but his soul was youthful. Willard was

known for its farm products. It included “the piggery” and “the hennery,” but dairy was the primary focus. The previous year, the milk production was 727,572 quarts and the next year, the average production per cow was 12,000 pounds of milk a year. Charles F. didn’t have experience with cattle. Even when he was a child, he had always lived in an urban setting. In spite of his age, he took to these tasks with enthusiasm.

With time, his dossier grew, in part because his diagnoses changed. The first doctor’s note written at Willard is dated August 10. It states:

Transferred patient. Hears but doesn’t listen. Erratic at times but very intelligent. Pleasant in the morning. Doesn’t seem to know he is a patient at Willard. Loves baseball. Can talk about it all day. Jewish. Has three suitcases, which he wants next to him. He spent time at Valentine and Reiner. And was at the Marconi men’s infirmary. Talks of his daughter Esther picking him up in the afternoon, or maybe after dinner.

Three days later comes a note from August 12:

Patient was said to be agitated in previous institution. He was pleasant now, cooperative, alert but

withdrawn. Emotionally he was cheerful. He was diagnosed with DEMENTIA.

He had suffered from radical mood swings and behavioral upsurges for years. People suffering from it were sent to Ward 5 in Barrett Hall, on the Northern Wing, where Willard’s most troublesome patients went.

Within a short time from his arrival, Charles F. changed locations again. Expectedly, the move increased his anxiety. At various hours of the day, he was heard shouting, “The Maggid is angry! The Maggid is mad!” Several nurses talked with him until he was relaxed. He told them the Maggid was an angel who could communicate with his brothers in Poland. He could even save them.

“*My* angel.”

In retrospect, of Charles F.’s journey through Willard, the most significant aspect is his relationship with Dr. Stanley Nuland, one of the chief psychiatrists and a researcher on extreme manifestations of dementia, who was also of Jewish background. In his mid-thirties, Dr. Nuland was married and had two children, a boy and a girl.

His wife, Leticia Lawler, was originally from Texas. They had met in Chicago. She worked at the Ovid County Courthouse.

Most of what is known about Charles F. at Willard comes from Dr. Nuland's notes. He had trained at the University of Chicago. He had published several papers in prestigious journals, including the *American Journal of Psychiatry*, about behavioral genetics and modern approaches to neurasthenics since Freud's early case studies.

While Dr. Nuland was intensely busy, with scores of patients to attend, his interactions with Charles F. made a strong impression on him. Charles F.'s hallucinations, according to him, were manifestations of deep thinking by the patient, and the staff needed to patiently understand their logic. He believed it counterproductive to look at every event related to dementia as outtakes of chaotic thinking. In religious patients, those incidents frequently contained the essence of the person's take on life.

They became well acquainted with each other. In their early conversations, Charles F. told Dr. Nuland that he was "a silent man." When pressed to explain what he meant, he said he made no claims to fame. He had started as a peddler. He built his own shoe store from scratch and had it for a long time. A block from Lombard Street. What street? A shame

that he could no longer remember. The store had made him wealthy, but then it all collapsed.

After the divorce, he was a boarder in Jamaica. He lived in several private homes. But then, Charles F. didn't remember how he lost everything. He spent a lot of time in the main waiting room of the Jamaica Railroad Station. He had been born in the Russian provincial capital of Vitebsk, where Marc Chagall was born, too, as well as Shloyme Zanvl Rappoport, better known as S. Ansky, the author of the famous play *Der Dybbuk*. Jews didn't move much then, unless they were looking to emigrate, but Charles F.'s family did wander around because his father had family in central Poland. He grew up in Łódź. Growing anti-Semitism. Some siblings had already moved, one to Palestine, several others to New York. He followed the latter.

Charles F. said he had four children: Benjamin, Mo, Esther, and Miriam. Benjamin died from poison gas years ago on the battlefield of Verdun, in France, in November 1916. Upon first arriving in America, he and his wife, Leah, had been helped by one of her siblings, a peddler. For a while, Charles F. sold merchandise in the Lower East Side. The family lived on Lombard Street. When he walked around with the goods for a few blocks, he could see the Williamsburg Bridge. He loved the bridge; on a clear day, it reminded him of Belarus.

On Thursday, October 17, Charles F., in the hallway of Marconi Annex, told Dr. Nuland that he worked in the kitchen three mornings a week. He also was ready to help with the garden in the spring. He had heard that Willard had just hired a new gardener, Gerineldo Márquez, who, when he was young, had worked as a fisherman in Veracruz, catching red snapper.

This reminded him that he had met Leah Lerner on a boat. A teacher's daughter originally from Podolsk, she was three years younger than he. They entered the United States through Castle Garden, eventually named Ellis Island, in 1880. The boat trip across the Atlantic, lasting over three weeks, was penurious. They ate boiled potatoes and drank hot water. There was not even salt on the boat. They didn't have medicine. A young man got pneumonia and after three days died on board. When he and Leah looked at New York City, they cried. He remembered having seen a photograph in newspapers in Łódź.

According to the dossier, around that time, in late October and early November, Charles F. seemed to be having a lucid period.

"I was twenty years old when I passed through Castle Garden," he told Dr. Nuland. "Mister Rutherford B. Hayes was the American president. I memorized the census: there were 50,155,783 people in the United States. Leah and I would be the 784th and

785th. The country's first telephone service was installed in New Haven. The Panama Canal construction was begun. And the first game of professional baseball took place, at the Polo Grounds, between the New York Metropolitans and the Washington Nationals. The Metropolitans won 4–2 in five innings."

Dr. Nuland usually met Charles F. in his office at Winslow Hall, on Stewart Road, not far from the morgue. The patient liked "the silence of the morgue." He found it suiting.

"I'm not deaf," he would say. "I can hear perfectly. And sometimes I can hear what the corpses say to me when I go by the morgue. They want me to pay attention to them. They have not yet departed. They are souls that are still with us. It takes eight days for the soul to abandon the body. Eight. In those eight days, people can still talk. They want their last thoughts to be heard."

"What do they tell you, Charles?"

"That death isn't the end. There's a period of waiting. Of reckoning. Even after the eight days, souls need to present their case before the Almighty. As in a court case. They need to prepare the paperwork."

He then changed the subject, saying he and Leah had lived in a tenement in the Lower East Side. At

first he worked in a sweatshop. Then he got a job as a tailor. He and Leah divorced in 1915, when he was fifty-five. He hadn't seen her for years. "She and her husband stole money from me," he repeated. He also mentioned that he had started having dreams in which he would see three of his older brothers. They looked as they did when he said goodbye to them decades earlier. They didn't smile; in fact, they looked unhappy.

A careful, considerate man, Dr. Nuland had a rigorous scientific mind, yet he never looked down on spiritual matters or saw them as manifestations of fanaticism. He had heard from a nurse that Charles F. prayed every morning. From the moment he arrived at Willard, even if he thought he would be leaving in a matter of days, he had kept his phylacteries in their own velvet bag, a prayer shawl in its special container, and a yarmulke. He had a Hebrew version of the Bible and three *Sidurim*, as the Jewish prayer books are called.

He always prayed in the morning and before going to bed.

On Saturday, November 23, during a small Shabbat lunch he organized, Dr. Nuland asked Chaim F. if he had been religious since an early age. The following transcription appears in his dossier:

CHARLES F.: Since I left Łódź. . . . Everyone was. My mother and father. My two brothers. It was a way to keep the devil at bay.

DR. NULAND: What could the devil do otherwise?

CF: Find how to enter you.

DR. N: What do you mean?

CF: Take control. Even when I stayed with Ida, I almost ran the risk.

DR. N: Who is Ida?

CF: My friend, Ida Shanholtzer.

DR. N: When did you meet her?

CF: I don't know.

DR. N: Where does she live?

CF: In Jamaica. 145-03 88th Avenue. We met before the war started. I sometimes forget my phylacteries bag there. I have to rush back to retrieve it before Thursday mornings, otherwise I can't pray. And without prayer, there is no lifeline. It ennobles the soul and safeguards against *Yetzer ha-Rah*.

DR. N: What is *Yetzer ha-Rah*?

CF: The Evil One.

DR. N: Has it done anything to you?

CF: No. I protect myself. I sing the liturgy.

In another conversation, Dr. Nuland asked him more about his faith. "I don't think what I do is dictated from above. We are responsible for our actions.

But the Almighty pays attention. He rewards and punishes.”

Whenever Dr. Nuland left work at Willard to return home to his family, he would think about his patients, particularly Charles F. He had empathy for him, maybe even affection. He reminded him of an old uncle on his mother’s side who lived in Los Angeles. Something about his demeanor, the way he walked, with his feet at an angle that made him look like a duck. In his childhood, the uncle had visited several summers. He would bring presents for everyone.

Dr. Nuland’s father was Jewish and his mother, Catholic. This had generated occasional tension between them. His father didn’t know much about religion, but he was attuned to the plight of Jewish fighters in British-mandate Palestine. He believed it important for Jews to get their own nation like everyone else, although he was against assassinations, bomb explosions, and other forms of terror in Jerusalem.

Somehow, Dr. Nuland wished he himself cared about these and other Jewish issues. He felt closer to his mother’s faith. In fact, when he was a psychiatry student he didn’t like being recognized as Jewish by teachers when they went over class lists. Surely it would hinder his chances to advance professionally. Yet in all honesty, he felt admiration, even envy, toward

Charles F. Not only was he relatively robust, spirited, and on occasion even exuberant at such an advanced age, he showed a genuine connection with the spiritual world. Dr. Nuland wished he had a connection like that. He was happy in his career. His family gave him enormous joy. But he also felt too sheltered.

He was a scientist through and through. He liked observing human behavior, analyzing its patterns, explaining it based on his knowledge. All this was fine and a bit cold. He remembered the transcription of a sermon by the canon of Westminster Abbey, Frederick Lewis Donaldson, about the “seven social sins” afflicting modern man:

Wealth without work
Pleasure without conscience
Knowledge without character
Commerce without morality
Science without humanity
Worship without sacrifice
Politics without principle

Rev. Donaldson had nailed it: not to go through life like an automaton, you needed conviction, you needed integrity, you needed gusto.

Aside from genuinely wanting to know how Charles F. carried himself through the day, what

made him happy, and what annoyed him, what Dr. Nuland was after during their conversations, in part, was investigating who the Maggid was. In his own upbringing in Chicago, he had heard this term used in relation to a distinguished teacher. Maybe Charles F.'s reference was to a formative figure in his childhood. But the way it came out, the sense was mystical, in connection with a higher spirit. Whenever Dr. Nuland pressed the topic, Charles F. changed the subject.

One Friday in December, he finally talked to Dr. Nuland without subterfuges, saying that the Maggid was "the angel who relates." He added that the Maggid "also passes secrets on to me while I'm asleep. He makes me write without my knowing, as if I were a secretary. He asks me to take no pleasure in this world and wants me not to eat food, but I'm hungry so I disobey him."

Dr. Nuland pressed Chaim F. to make a fuller portrait of the Maggid. Charles F. demurred. But finding himself in a sudden trance, he said:

He is tall and his cloths are made of linen. His face is fire. He has enormous wings. Six in total, like the angel Isaiah saw. The wings are white and fuzzy. I feel the temptation to touch them but hold off. His face is feathery, too. Like a falcon. He enters

through the window. Or through the door. But he can trespass walls, since his nature is wraithlike. . . . He is like the angel guarding the Tree of Life in the Garden of Eden. Or perhaps like the three angels who visited Abraham after his circumcision. Or the one that stopped Abraham from sacrificing his son Isaac. But not like the angels that walk up and down Jacob's ladder and the one Jacob wrestled with.

These comments amazed Dr. Nuland and worried him. He had noticed that since Charles F.'s arrival at Willard, his state had improved. He became anxious less often. Probably the medication he was being given was appropriate. And the relationship with Dr. Nuland surely helped as well, giving the patient a sense of belonging.

But then the transcripts in the dossier change tone. Dr. Nuland noticed in the patient a proclivity to talk about "ethereal matters." Sometimes in the middle of their conversation, Charles F. would look as if he was distracted, absorbing energy from the sun coming through the window.

As always, Dr. Nuland scribbled some notes and inserted them in the dossier. In them, he stated that Charles F. became exhausted after their dialogue and would not talk any more. One of the nurses stated

that he slept for almost eighteen hours that night. He walked near the Willard cemetery and around the garden where tomatoes, lettuce, potatoes, carrots, and strawberries were planted by patients.

In the dossier, there is a transcript of another, more extensive interview that took place in mid-December of Charles F.'s first year at Willard:

DR. NULAND: Are you happy here?

CHARLES F.: I don't know if I feel happy. I want to go back to Jamaica.

DR. N: Are you unhappy?

CF: I don't know.

DR. N: Do you know where you are?

CF: At Willard.

DR. N: Do you know why?

CF: Because there's a plot. Some people want me behind bars.

DR. N: Why?

CF: I don't know.

DR. N: Do you feel downhearted?

CF: Yes.

DR. N: Who is the Maggid?

CF: A celestial being.

DR. N.: Does he visit you?

CF: Yes, he visits me.

DR. N: Can you talk about the Maggid?

CF: There's nothing to say.

DR. N: How does he look? What appearance does he have?

CF: (*Words in a foreign language.*)

DR. N: Do you sleep well, Charles?

CF.: I do.

DR. N: Do you dream?

CF: Yes.

DR. N: What kinds of dreams?

CF: In one, I am in my childhood house in Łódź, with my parents. This was long ago, before I came to America. I can't open a window in back. My mother was trying to help.

DR. N: You are from Łódź? I believed . . .

CF: No, from Vitebsk. But we lived in Łódź.

DR. N: Were you frightened?

CF: Yes.

DR. N: Did you wake up?

CF: Yes, I couldn't breathe.

DR. N: What did your mother look like?

CF: I don't know.

DR. N: Do you hear voices?

CF: Yes, sometimes. They speak to me.

DR. N: In English?

CF: No, in Yiddish. (*Words in a foreign language again.*)

DR. N.: I don't understand you.

CF: I came to America.

DR. N: I know. You are in America.

CF: Yes.

DR. N: Why do you pray? You pray in the morning and evening.

CF: I always do.

DR. N: Do you communicate with God?

CF: Always.

DR. N: What do you say to Him?

CF: I ask Him to take me home.

DR. N: And does God respond?

CF: Yes. All the time.

DR. N: What does God say?

CF: I will get home soon.

In the first week of December of that year, Charles F. made even more frequent references to the Maggid. Nurses and other patients heard about specific visitations he had experienced, mostly at night. When Dr. Nuland asked him if it was the Maggid who had come, he said it was a voice he listened to by day and a shadow that accompanied him at night, though the shadow could appear during morning prayer. The Maggid was teaching him secrets. He said these secrets came directly from Rabbi Joseph Karo, who wrote the code of Jewish law.

On one of his weekends off, Dr. Nuland, by then feeling quite close to Charles F., inquired among some friends from the Lower East Side about Rabbi Karo. He found out that Karo was a sixteenth-century rabbinical leader who died in 1575. When he returned to Willard, he was eager to talk to Charles F.

The dialogue they had was fruitful, at least in Dr. Nuland's view. The doctor learned that before he reached the age of thirteen, Charles F. had been enrolled in a yeshiva, a religious school. This possibly meant that his encounters with the Maggid were a link to that early period.

These types of exchanges recurred. Several weeks went by. Winter gave way to spring, and then came summer. Dr. Nuland again tried engaging Charles F. on the topic of the Maggid. But Charles F., who clearly was going through one of his most rational periods, had other ideas in mind.

In the dossier comes the episode titled "Bontsha."

Judging from the content, it seems as if by this point Dr. Nuland had almost totally surrendered all pretense of scientific comments about his patient. He surely was aware that other staff—doctors, nurses—would look at the dossier. Yet he isn't scientific anymore and, from the writing, doesn't appear to care about it. In the style, it is possible to detect a narrative breath with moments of evident creativity. There also appears a sincere thirst on his part to

learn about Jewish fairytales, as if, while listening, Dr. Nuland was becoming Charles F.'s pupil.

The Bontsha episode goes like this. One afternoon, Charles F. and Dr. Nuland walked near Gibson Creek in the direction of the power station and the fire house. Charles F. limped a bit. He complained of his joints, especially his knees. During the stroll, the patient, visibly exalted, suddenly recalled a legend he had heard a long time ago. It was in Yiddish and dealt with a man called Bontsha.

“‘Bontsha’ means silent,” said Charles F.

Throughout his entire life, Bontsha didn't speak at all. He didn't even cry when, during his circumcision, the *mohel* made a wrong move and the cut left a scar. He didn't say anything when he was abused in his first job and in all the subsequent jobs he had. When others abused him, he was silent. “Even when his wife cheated on him . . .”

He decided not to have children, since it would have required talking on his part. Improving his living conditions would also need some thought. So Bontsha died quietly, too.

Except that soon after he died, when Bontsha the Silent—*Bontsha Shveig*—made it to the heavenly chambers, he was received enthusiastically by angels and cherubs, by Avraham Avinu, even by the Almighty himself. The doors were wide open for him because he was a *Lamed-Vavnik*, one of the

thirty-six *Tzadiks* (just souls) every generation contains for the world to continue.

In heaven, the Divine Court evaluated Bontsha's action. He was praised for having had a pure soul, for never deviating from the righteous path, for retaining his faith even in the face of tragedy. Bontsha listened to the court argument for the defense but again said nothing. When it was time for the prosecution to make its case, he showed some anxiety, but not a squeak came out of his mouth.

“The Almighty, too, seemed to be waiting for the prosecutor's argument,” said Charles F. “It came in a mysterious way.”

He said the prosecutor announced that since Bontsha had been silent throughout his existential journey, the prosecution would also be silent.

At first bewildered and then overwhelmed with joy, the Divine Court concluded its evaluation by granting Bontsha any wish he had for the afterlife.

“He could choose even the wildest wish,” said Charles F. “Like being with his treasonous wife again.” He paused. “Do you know what he chose?”

Dr. Nuland said no.

“Everyone in the Divine Court was quiet. Bontsha looked around. He gasped and said: *Ta-ke?*”

“What does *Ta-ke* mean?” Dr. Nuland wanted to know.

“In Yiddish, the word means ‘really.’ So the Almighty too said *Ta-ke, ta-ke*, really, really. To which Bontsha responded: “Since I am granted any wish I want from Heaven, I want every morning to have baked bread with fresh butter.”

It was fortunate that the friendship between Charles F. and Dr. Nuland was quite solid by the time his crisis—what the dossier describes as “the suicidal fit”—took place, to the point that the doctor considered inviting the patient for dinner at his home one evening. That way he could meet his wife, Leticia. The more he thought about it, though, the more unsure he was on whether to invite him.

Might Charles F. have a fit? If he did, what would the children think? Would he need immediate help? He had invited two other patients a few months back, but their diagnoses were milder in comparison.

Dr. Nuland decided not to decide. He would wait and see how Charles F.’s condition evolved.

At 1:35 a.m. on Shabbat, July 26, almost a year after he came to Willard, the nurses on Ward #3, Barrett Hall, in the Southern Wing, where Charles F. was staying at the time, heard a loud noise in

his room. One of them rushed to it and opened the door as fast as possible. Patient #76086 was on the floor. He was only partially conscious. A few feet away was a wooden chair, which he had stolen from the kitchen the night before. In the fall, he had broken a leg. Blood was pouring from his forehead.

Charles F. had had a belt around his neck. It was the belt he had arrived at Willard with, which he often kept in one of the suitcases. He had tried to hang himself.

Dr. Nuland was befuddled. No matter how anxious he seemed, it had never crossed his mind that Charles F. could consider such an option, since for a devout Jewish man, suicide is against God’s order. He concluded that the patient had again lost all sense of self.

Dr. Nuland was told that Charles F. had had a seizure as he was rushed to Marconi, where the emergency room was.

Several nurses loosened his belt and shoelaces. A pillow was put under his head. He was turned to his left side. The patient Dr. Nuland saw when he arrived, though, was not the person he had been in conversations with. Charles F.’s color was ghostlike, and he was sweaty. He looked as if for hours he had been under a cold shower.

MAN DIGGING

Everything I have written about Charles F. is a lie.

I have never seen his medical dossier; actually, I don't even know if there is one anywhere. I don't know if he lived in Jamaica, if he got lost one day at the Union Street subway station in Brooklyn, if he was a tailor, if he had a wife or children and if one of them died in World War I; I don't even know if he believed in God.

There was no Dr. Sheldon Nuland either. He is a concoction, as is his attempt to humanize Charles F.

The same goes for Willard State Hospital. Although a real state mental hospital existed in that location, the real one seemed unappealing to me: too blunt, too unbending, too much like a movie set. The world is real, and we are bound to live in it. But nothing stops us from imagining an alternative world, less stringent, more malleable. I am not a historian. Therefore, I have not just imagined Willard, I have renamed every aspect of it: its buildings, its scenery, its staff. I am in full agreement with Ralph Waldo Emerson that fiction reveals truth that reality obscures.

Of course, a lie is not the same as an untruth. There's the truth of facts, the empirical truth. Then there's the truth of fiction, the artistic truth.

There was a Willard State Hospital, on the banks of Seneca Lake, right on the border between the Ovid and Romulus in central New York. Although in its history the institution changed names a number of times (it was originally known as the Willard Asylum for the Chronic Insane and finally as Willard Psychiatric Center), people mostly just called it Willard.

A certain Charles F. arrived in 1946 and never left the institution. I looked for anyone who knew him, to no avail. Yet he was as real as his hero, ball player Ted Williams. But Emma Bovary of *Madame Bovary* was real, as was Captain Ahab of *Moby-Dick*, and Colonel Aureliano Buendía of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Like these invented characters, whose internal life is often more tangible to us than the people who surround us, Charles F. was a stoic sufferer.

What remains of the man? Nothing. Or almost nothing. Just the three suitcases he entered Willard with. I have seen them with my own eyes. They are stored in big boxes in a labyrinthine warehouse in Rotterdam, New York. The warehouse belongs to the New York State Museum in Albany.

Each valise contains several objects, between six and eighteen. I've touched those objects, too. I caressed their surfaces to get a tactile register of the wrinkles time has exercised on them.

One of the suitcases is made of brown leather. The other two are black: one is a steamer trunk, with a mini-closet on one side and three drawers on the other; the third has an interior lining and, as the maker's statement guarantees, is "made of 3-ply veneer, vulcanized high-fiber." All three suitcases have straps and locks. At some point, there must have been a key to each of them, but those keys are no longer part of the contents and are lost.

How I came to Charles F.'s suitcases and the man himself is a story at once circuitous and serendipitous.

It happened as my own father was approaching death. Throughout his life he had been a charismatic and vital man with energy to spare. Short and slim except for the cute belly he developed in his old age, he was always on the move, talking to people, going places, exploring the world around him. He continued to exude energy into his mid-eighties, even when he knew, as did the rest of us, that his time was limited as a result of his declining health.

I loved him dearly.

Around that time, when he would go in and out of hospitals, the image of a man with wings came to me. Somehow I wasn't thinking of an angel, at least not at first. My father hadn't been an angel. He was a complex, contradictory man. The wings weren't a symbol of sainthood.

Even when my father was in his last moments in a medically induced coma and I was at his side, whispering comforting thoughts into his ear, I had the impression that should the nurses be able to turn him, I would have seen the magnificent wings: human-size, graceful, intricate in their feathery surface, with undulating tones of whiteness. If I wanted, I could have touched them with my fingers.

It is strange how, since then, whenever I think of my father's end, the wings insist on making an appearance. Maybe I didn't imagine them. Maybe he had indeed grown them on his back in his last few days.

Physically, Charles F. wasn't at all like my father. And his story couldn't have been more different, since my father wasn't an immigrant from Eastern Europe, like his own parents had been. Yet they shared a *joie de vivre*—the impetus to experience every moment in its full intensity.